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MELVILLE, AN EXISTENTIAL HUMANIST

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Religious crisis stands out as one of the main experiences in nineteenth century American life. The reasons which account for this phenomenon were, among others, due to the new scientific discoveries (technological advances and the theory of evolution), economic changes (which brought the transformation of a rural society into an industrial and urban one), and biblical criticism, though the answers varied greatly. America witnessed not only the emergence of new religious groups [1] but also the expansion of Protestantism under distinct forms as new territories were annexed or colonized, both at home and abroad. Its most important effect was to emphasize the concept of a personal Christian faith.

Herman Melville, who had received his religious education according to the Dutch Reform Church, saw his beliefs shattered especially when he started his maritime career. His travels to the South Seas put him in contact with pagan cultures and their different religious conceptions as well as with missionaries, who will become his first critical target.

All critics agree that Melville had come to hate the harshness and cruelty of a Calvinistic God, but do not coincide in Melville's final response to his unbelief. In 1949 Henry A. Murray's analysis of *Pierre* showed Melville as a man who had become an atheist. His loss of faith was explained by examining the relationship of Pierre (Melville) and his father, because "the image of God was generated out of early idealizations of the father." [2] Thus, when Pierre (Melville) discovered his

1. Such as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.

2. Henry A. Murray: "Introduction to *Pierre*", *Pierre: or The Ambiguities* Hendricks House Inc., New York, 1962, p. XLV.

father's evil, his trust in God declined as well. Though the word "God" was used, He was not present. The final conclusion was that there was no moral, for it was impossible to reconcile this world with one's own soul.

In his introduction to *Melville* (1962) Richard Chase spoke of Melville's romantic nihilism, assuring that "Melville spent a lifetime in an unsuccessful pursuit of a . . . moral conception that would make some sense out of the bewildering inequities, injustices, and ambiguities which form the context of human action and human motive", adding that Melville's "religion" must be finally called something like "skeptical humanism." [3]

A new interesting suggestion was made by Martin Leonard Pops, in *The Melville Archetype* (1970) when he stated that "in Melville God never answers those who, like Ahab, would force his secrets; or, like Pierre, would ask for signs; or like Bartleby, would expect those signs revealed" [4] -which would account for the silence of God. He also mentioned the absence of God in *Battle Pieces*.

In *American Literature: The Makers and The Making* (1973) we were told that there were moments in which Melville considered all the questions regarding the knowability of God as meaningless, "that there simply was no rational order in the universe, nothing to believe in, nothing to either worship or hate, only a vast universal blank." [5]

Similarly, G. M. Sweeny in *Melville's Use of Classical Mythology* (1975) remarked Melville's advance towards the twentieth century for in his work "the Creator is departed . . . and all that remains in this foreshadowing of Eliot's *Wasteland* and *Fitzgerald Valley of Ashes* is Nothingness." [6]

A different view was given by Stanley Bodwin in his article "Melville's Crossing in *Bartleby the Scrivener*" (1979). According to him, Melville was determined "to undercut the Victorian and melodramatic sensibility that either blunted or denied the terrors of death and the loss of faith." [7] Thus, in *Bartleby* the underlying tragic sense of the story was "the loss of faith in resurrection, the Christian faith that in Christ there is the promise of eternal life . . . loss which left man alone, helpless against the reality of death." [8] However, he recognized that Melville asserted resurrection in *Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!*, although not in a Christian sense, for it just denied death while exalting life.

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3. Richard Chase (ed.). *Melville* Prentice Hall inc. Englewood Cliffs. New Jersey. 1062, p. 7.
4. Martin Leonard Pops. *The Melville Archetype*. Kent U.P. Kent O.H. 1970, p. 128.
5. Cleanth Brooks et al. (eds.). *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*. Vol. I. Saint Martin's Press. New York. 1973, p. 814.
6. G.M. Sweeney. *Melville's Use of Classical Mythology*. Rodopi. N.V. Amsterdam. 1975, p. 139.
7. M. Thomas Inge (ed.). *Bartleby the Inscrutable*. Archon Books. Hainden. Conn. 1979, p. 178.
8. Ibid., p. 185.

Although Maria Uhjázy in her work *Herman Melville's World of Whaling* (1982) agreed with some previous critics by regarding Melville's world as a morally blank universe and that the chase "to strike at what he believed to be beyond the pasteboard mask of the White Whale was void, pointless and futile," [9] she also added enlightening issues. Thus she pointed out that Melville did not deny the existence of a divinity although that divine power would be "morally indifferent, unrevealed and unknowable to man." [10] But since the existence of a deity does not necessarily imply our belief in it, she concluded that "With no more faith left in the manifest destiny of the United States than in divine providence, Melville never lost confidence in the "kingly commons", "the meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways from all the ends of the earth," [11] statement which intended to emphasize Melville's humanism.

A new insight concerning Melville's treatment of religion and divinity was provided by Bainard Cowan in *Exiled Waters: Moby Dick and The Crisis of Identity* (1982), particularly in the chapter entitled "The Carnivalized World: Discovery of the Body". By paying attention to carnival festivities in which the abuse of God is not an ontological attack but "a strategy of exaggeration to make the world habitable and return human nature to itself" -attitude which not only implied a victory over mystic terror of God, but also a victory over the awe inspired by the forces of nature, and most of all "over the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden," [12]- Cowan realized that Ishmael's awareness that "all men live enveloped in whale lines" produced his liberation from the terrors of the whale and taught him a new perspective on the "business of death." [13] Melville's subversion, then, consisted in his intention to regain man's body part and his humanity.

Another critic, Tom Quirk, in *Melville's Confidence-Man* (1982) defined that book as antireligious, nihilistic, infidel, cynical of both man and God. Furthermore, he even affirmed that it showed a movement towards a humane and feeling skepticism that Unamuno had described as the tragic sense of life of "those who, though urged by the need they have for it to believe in another life, are unable to believe" [14]; assertion which coincides with what Nathaniel Hawthorne had stated

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9. Maria Uhjázy, *Herman Melville's World of Whaling*. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1982, p. 140.

10. Ibid., p. 137.

11. Ibid., p. 171.

12. Bainard Cowan, *Exiled Waters: Moby Dick and the Crisis of Identity*. Louisiana State U.P. Baton Rouge, 1982, p. 117.

13. Ibid., pgs. 118-9.

14. Tom Quirk, *Melville's Confidence Man: From Knave to Knight*. Univ. of Missouri Press, Columbia, 1982, p. 150.

about Melville, when he wrote that "he could neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief," [15] and that would account for Melville's tragic sense.

According to the previous interpretation Melville's attitude towards religion could be regarded as that of an agnostic, an atheist or an skeptic. It is my intention to present a new insight using both Melville's works and letters.

Melville was one of the few writers, if not the unique among his contemporaries, who denounced that religion was being used to defend specific ideological interests such as imperialism. In fact, he criticized the evil consequences of the Christianization process in *Typee* and *Omoo* in such a way that the theme which underlies them both: "appearances are deceptive" could be well applied to religion too, since its helpful purposes were delusive, for they destroyed the natives' customs and personality. Illustrations for this are numerous. Let's take some examples:

> Among the islands of Polynesia, no sooner are the images overturned, the temples demolished and the idolaters converted into nominal Christians that disease, vice and premature death make their appearance. [16]

Furthermore,

> Let the savages be civilized, but civilize them with benefits, and not with evils; let heathenism be destroyed, but not by destroying the heathen. The Anglo-Saxon have extirpated Paganism from the greater part of the North American continent; but with it they have likewise extirpated the greater portion of the Red race. Civilization is gradually sweeping from the earth the lingering vestiges of Paganism, and at the same time the shrinking forms of its unhappy worshippers. [17]

Likewise, we could read in *Omoo:*

> The hypocrisy in matters of religion, so apparent in all Polynesian converts, is most injudiciously nourished in Tahiti, by a zealous and, in many cases, coercive superintendence over their spiritual well-beings. [18]

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15. Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The English Notebooks*. Randall Stewart ed. Modern Language Ass. of America. New York. 1941, p. 432.

16. Herman Melville. *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*. Jay Leyda ed. *The Portable Melville*. The Viking Press. New York. 1952, p. 267.

17. Ibid., pgs. 266-7.

18. Herman Melville. *Omoo: A Narrative of the South Seas*. L.C. Page & Co. Boston. 1944, p. 203.

His next work, *Mardi*, presented a more general approach to the religious question which included biblical criticism as when he referred to the episode where Jonah was swallowed by the whale. Here Melville clearly rejected any orthodoxy and established various similarities between pagan and Christian religions and mythologies, intending to show the foolishness of defending one devotional system upon the others, especially when terrible persecutions or even "saintly wars" have been declared on their behalf. Nevertheless, considering that God need not be linked with any established church, Melville undertook the task of examining man's personal relationship with God, which reopened the question of faith. It is not by chance the excessive frequency with which the word "doubt" appears throughout the text: "I am dumb with doubt"; or, even worse, "I doubt my doubt [for]... the undoubting doubter believes the most." [19] Man is depicted as a restless unbeliever and God as "the everlasting mystery" [20] who does not answer man's prayers. We should, however, consider the fact that doubting can be regarded as a way of existence, for man "is in" doubt. This would be some sort of liquid reality where man cannot hold upright and falls, reminding us of a maritime landscape, a sea of confusion, opposed to land certainties - inherited as religion is. And it is precisely this "being in doubt" that makes man look inside and get hold of something fixed but personal as well. Still, Melville's interest in religion cannot be denied for he continues making references to the contemporary scene, as when he compares *Mardi* with a Mormon [21], or when he describes Mr. Adler, a German scholar as being Coleridgean for:

> he accepts the Scriptures as divine, and yet leaves himself free to inquire into Nature. He does not take it, that the Bible is absolutely infallible, and that anything opposed to it in Science must be wrong. He believes that there are things "out" of God and independent of him -thing that would have existed were there no God: such as that two and two make four. [22]

In *Redburn* Melville insisted on the fact that "every one in this world has his own fate intrusted to himself." [23] Again, God seemed not to care about human affairs.

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19. Herman Melville. *Mardi and a Voyage Thither*. New American Library. New York. 1964, p. 283.

20. Ibid., p. 528.

21. "Driven forth like a wild, mystic Mormon into shelterless exile". (Letter to Evert Duykinck, 1850). Hay Leyda ed. *The Portable Melville*. op. cit., p. 395.

22. Herman Melville. "Journal of a Voyage from New York to London, 1849" (Jay Leyda ed. op. cit., p. 388).

23. Herman Melville. *Redburn*. Northwestern U.P. Evanston and Chicago, 1964, p. 220.

His next book, *White-Jacket*, continued in this line of thought stating that "the chaplains who can most help us are ourselves"; that "in our hearts we fashion our gods"; and, therefore, "we are precisely what we worship. Ourselves are Fate". Thus, instead of analyzing the secret of God, he is telling us to look within, for "There are no mysteries out of ourselves". No one is responsible for us, "therein each man must be his own saviour." [24]

We can appreciate a change in Melville's approach to the mystery of God which coincides with the preparation of *Moby-Dick*. In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne in April, 1851, he not only writes: "and perhaps, after all, there is *no* secret", adding a bit further that the word *God* is the *hangman*. [25] Moreover, when he refers to crossing the frontiers to Eternity, Melville did not mention the soul, but only the Ego, thus asserting the independence of man's soul to both God and the Devil, as well as its desacralization. In fact, in another letter to Hawthorne he not only affirmed that "knowing you persuades me more than the Bible of our immortality", but he also added that "I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper and that we are the pieces." [26] It is evident that Melville was subverting contemporary notions and beliefs by using blasphemous expressions or giving *Moby-Dick* the secret motto of "ego non baptiso te in nomine..." and not feeling guilty for it.

In *Moby Dick* Melville scrutinized a new mystery, the great whale, as if it were the symbol of God -being both inscrutable and unknowable. The whale served many purposes. On the one hand, it enhanced the impossibility of man's communication with God, since man has never or very slightly understood animal language. On the other, it is known that man tends to project all his anguish and fears on frightful unconquerable monsters. However, the whale's bisexuality provided us with a new vision as well as with a unifying element which had been left out previously. Its masculine aspects included: having an intellect, a reasoning power, and a great physical destructive force. Certainly, the word God stood and stands for a patriarchal religious sense which is based on masculine traits such as power and wrath, where tenderness, mercy, and unconditioned love are not embodied. Therefore, it seems as if the whale only shared the feminine negative features that are usually represented in the White Goddess as Terrible Mother. It could be inferred that Melville wanted to critisize the Western tendency to defend a masculine God despising the female traits which should be found in a *human* religious system. For both man and woman form humankind. However, the

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24. Herman Melville. *White-Jacket*. New American Library. New York. 1979, pgs. 160, 329, 408-9.

25. Jay Leyda ed., op. cit., pgs. 427-8.

26. Jay Leyda ed., op. cit., p. 454.

whale-God could not be killed. The answer we are given to the matter of life, death, belief and faithlessness rests in our own acceptance of secrets and of our limits to comprehend those issues. We are also told to substitute our interest for the future by paying greater attention to everyday realities and mutual love in a humanistic friendship. Melville also seemed to imply that to be isolated from the human community is worse than being isolated from God. In other words, incommunication among human beings is far more terrible than God's silence.

Pierre, his following work, was concerned precisely with silence and void. Apart from exposing the hypocrisy of Christian morality, evident in the gap that exists between actions and creeds, Melville presented a world in which God was silent. Interpreting silences has always been a difficult task, for it not only allows different opinions but it also creates ambiguities thus hindering communication. Furthermore, Melville rejected the possibility of getting a voice out of silence - for the philosophers who assert to have understood it, he stated, have failed to account for certain realities and have fallen into idealism. Besides, he added, there would always appear a new philosophic system showing new lights into the matter. Melville's main focus consisted in drawing our attention towards "Silence . . . the Only Voice of Our God" [27]; "That Profound Silence, the Only Voice of Our God." [28] It is worth pointing out that it was in this book where Melville posited that the mature soul was the one which had attained independence from both the world (society) and the deity (religion). We should also bear in mind the fact that whereas Melville had been continuously referring to man's "inner secrets" which, though contained in himself, are kept secret from himself, he was, at the same time, suggesting that there probably were no secrets at all, as this paragraph from *Pierre* hints:

> By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we spy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid -and no body is there! -appallingly vacant as vast as the soul of a man![29]

We are led to think that since the silence of God is unsurmountable and the is soul finally shown to be void, man is left to fill that vacuum as best as he can, if he intends to overcome that lack. According to Melville, neither religion nor philosophy could help man to achieve it, therefore, the unique outlet consisted in establishing a new type of communication, with ourselves and with humanity.

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27. Herman Melville. *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*. Hendricks House Inc. New York, 1962, p. 239.
28. Ibid., p. 244.
29. Ibid., p. 335.

Man's failure had lain in excessive spiritual concerns, forgetting about his most immediate bodily needs. Man, he suggested, should communicate with others not only through words, but through gestures and touch, as a means of expressing his affections.

Nevertheless, the most terrible problem appeared when man became isolated from other human beings, as Melville's tale "Bartleby, the Scrivener" revealed. Bartleby's silence was highly significant, for it alluded to man's incommunication to man which led to a helpless state and to suicide. By contrast, the tale of "Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!" presented the fruitful outcome of a humane relationship, although it depicted an uncommon situation. God continued to be absent, as in "Benito Cereno." However, for Melville, religion still seemed to "trade with the fears of man" as in "The Lightning-Rod Man."

Melville's most evident destruction of certainties and impossibility of communication appeared in *The Confidence-Man,* which makes us readers get the impression not only of being duped, but of the impossibility of finally distinguishing truth from lie, and therefore, of knowing whether we should trust Melville. At the same time, the need of believing in something, though it be a fake, is felt. What is important, then, is becoming aware of it. For we should not, at least, deceive ourselves. This book, then, posits the question whether literature, as religion and philosophy, is also a lie. Melville seemed to indicate that we should consider literary texts as a device which analyses the truth of lies and the lie of truth.

It is, indeed, possible to think that the author in this case has taken up God's role and got hold of his silence. As a matter of fact, Melville's *silent* period after the publication of *Pierre* is well known. His failure as a successful writer was to a great extent caused by his rejection to write what the reading public demanded, but in doing so, he had to stop communicating with them. The void that increased between Melville and his readers was, in part, due to his conception of art. He used his texts to revolt against the world -as a means of denouncing all its ills (industrialization, imperialism, etc.)- and against God as embodiment of patriarchal power. According to him, man had to become independent from both the mother country -the family-, and God. That is, he had to get rid of inherited ideologies. The void produced by that attitude brought new fears, but Melville was brave. In fact, commenting on Madame The Baroness of Staël-Holstein's quote that "atheism does not shelter us from the fear of eternal suffering", he wrote: "If we assume the existence of God makes eternal suffering possible, then it may justly be said that Atheism furnishes no defence against the fear of it." [30]

30. Jay Leyda ed., op. cit., p. 602.

It is clear that Melville had decided to choose new paths regardless of the dangers this could bring. The solution he posited consisted in emphasizing man's relation to man in mutual respect. Thus, he can be regarded as an existential humanist who cared mainly for the present -as mariners used to do-, more concerned with being than with knowing. After all, Melville seems to suggest, God, as life, may consist in that void which man must fill every day. Since we are condemned to exist, we should, at least, live as "humanly" as possible, caring about other human beings, defending the unfortunate, and paying attention to our bodily needs. This feature, in my opinion, would account for Melville's "modernity".