

Ramón Espejo Romero

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Electronic reference

Ramón Espejo Romero, « Negotiating Transcendentalism, Escaping « Paradise » : Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Vol 5, No 1 | 2010, document 5, Online since 28 June 2010, connection on 04 January 2015. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/8467> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.8467

Publisher: European Association for American Studies
<http://ejas.revues.org>
<http://www.revues.org>

Document available online on:
<http://ejas.revues.org/8467>
Document automatically generated on 04 January 2015.
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Ramón Espejo Romero

Negotiating Transcendentalism, Escaping « Paradise » : Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

- 1 The purpose of this paper is to explore the way in which Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) reflects a dialogue between the novelist and Transcendentalism. Such a dialogue would moreover shape the rest of his career as a writer. Being a fiction writer, Melville uses several of his characters to offer his conclusions, and specifically the traits of their different personalities and their respective outcomes in the novel. These characters are Ismael, Ahab, and Bulkington. Captain Ahab is a living embodiment of the terrible consequences of Transcendentalism when and if taken too literally. Its undeniable allurements are embodied in the elusive yet mystifying Bulkington. However, Melville's (ambivalent) stand about the Concord movement is best gleaned from a character who stands at the center of his reflection on Transcendentalism. Let us call him Ishmael. Like the eyes of the whale, which can simultaneously receive two different (even conflicting) views of the same reality, or the leviathan's whiteness, an apparently colorless crucible of all colors and meanings, Ishmael will expose a highly idiosyncratic form of Transcendentalism. It is unorthodox, contradictory, and far from the dogma that Transcendentalist writing appeared to construct (or some insisted it did). But in being unfaithful to "mainstream" Transcendentalism (meaning what is often thought of as defining Transcendentalism), Ishmael is closer to its genuine spirit than any other character in the novel.
- 2 Difficult as it is to say what *Moby-Dick* is exactly about, my starting point is that it is very much about Transcendentalism. I might be taking things too far, but it seems obvious that Milton R. Stern was wrong when he affirmed decades ago that

[t]hematically, Melville was out of keeping with much of the mainstream of thought in his own times, which popularly and philosophically for the most part emphasized an untrammelled individualism, free from the restrictions of the past (4).
- 3 It seems clear that Melville was perfectly aware of major intellectual trends in his age, although critics have been divided as to how he specifically interacted with Transcendentalism. Howard P. Vincent says that "*Moby-Dick* is a satire of New England Transcendentalism" and also "a criticism of American social and ethical thought, a condemnation of brutalizing materialism, and an affirmation of the dignity and nobility of Man" (8). However, how can Melville satirize a movement which contained a profound criticism of American social and ethical thought, condemnation of materialism, and vindication of the dignity and nobility of Man, when these are things which, in Vincent's opinion, Melville is also commending in the novel? This is just an example of how unfocused critical assessment of Melville and Transcendentalism has often been.
- 4 Special attention should be paid to the work already done on the Melville-Emerson connection. Among Melville's reading, which Milton M. Sealts extensively documented in the 1960s, Emerson's essays figured prominently (see also McLoughlin 171-173). The novelist attended one of Emerson's lectures in 1849, and then wrote an often-quoted letter to Evert Duyckinck sharing his impressions:

I was very agreeably disappointed in Mr. Emerson. I had heard of him as full of Transcendentalism, myths and oracular gibberish . . . To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible, tho' to say truth, they told me that night he was unusually plain . . . I could readily see in Emerson, notwithstanding his merit, a gaping flaw. It was the insinuation that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions. These men are all cracked right across the brow. (qtd. Freeman 58)
- 5 This letter establishes a pattern of simultaneous embrace and rejection of Transcendentalist ideas. It also noted the gap between "the Transcendentalist ideal and the real" (Williams 12),

- which Melville would explore more fully in the novel with which he astonished American readers two years later. The remark that Melville, while admiring Emerson, did not see himself as at all oscillating in his “rainbow” (Bryant 69) is well known too, as is the scribbling on the margins of a copy of Emerson owned by Melville, specifically next to a passage on the essential goodness of men: “God help the poor fellow who squares his life according to this” (Stern 12).
- 6 The different stand Emerson and Melville take towards the existence of evil (whose reality the latter was fully and painfully aware of) has too often been used as evidence of Melville’s anti-Emersonianism. But Melville may have disagreed with Emerson on that or other issues, while not necessarily rejecting all of his thought. As a matter of fact, he was not the only one to respond critically to Emerson; even some of his declared followers, like Thoreau, did. For John B. Williams, Emerson was not surrounded by “little Emersons” but rather by “an odd collocation of resolutely-defined figures who shaped their careers as much in reaction to Emerson as in emulation of him” (34). That is the reason moreover why we still consider the age of Transcendentalism one of the most fruitful in American intellectual history. Similarly, it is important to bear in mind that Transcendentalism was profoundly contradictory and thus impossible to contain within the narrow bounds of a simple definition; as a matter of fact, Vincent finds it difficult to characterize beyond saying that it was “a protest against usage, and a search for principles” (154). A movement that regarded individualism as the supreme value and rejected rationality should not be expected to have, in spite of that, a homogeneous outlook. Not even individual members of Transcendentalism felt constrained to hold on to ideas they had entertained in the past. Emerson wanted to know, somewhat proudly, why one had to “drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself: what then?” (“Self-Reliance” 136).
- 7 One of the first critics to investigate the Transcendentalist element in Melville was Perry Miller, who, in a lecture read at Williams College at the *Moby-Dick*’s centennial celebration in 1951, and later re-written as the article “Melville and Transcendentalism,” pointed out a connection between Melville and the Transcendentalists while also admitting that Melville never fully embraced Transcendentalism. While Nina Baym considered Emerson as the most important influence over Melville (Williams 6), both Charles Feidelson in *Symbolism and American Literature*, and Harry Levin in *The Power of Blackness*, argued that Melville contributed some skepticism to Emerson’s self-assurance (Williams 7). Other critics have addressed Melville’s connection with Transcendentalism. McLoughlin, for instance, analyzes the different “gams” in the novel as comments upon the Transcendentalist subtext. That between the Pequod and the Albatross “suggests both the difficulty of communication between the self and the outer world and the essential enigma of nature”, and that with the Town-Ho is an endorsement of self-reliance, since it “portrays Moby Dick as an agent of God’s justice in destroying the mate Radney and ending his tyranny over Steerkilt, a rebellious, self-reliant seaman” (85). From a different perspective, Steven Gould Axelrod has suggested the convenience of pairing Melville and Emerson in the teaching of American literature as both of them are more interested in the process of thinking than in whatever results might come from it (68).
- 8 Only two full-length books have so far taken up this subject, and both are relatively recent: John B. Williams’ *White Fire: The Influence of Emerson on Melville* (1991), and Michael McLoughlin’s *Dead Letters to the New World. Melville, Emerson, and American Transcendentalism* (2003). Williams surveys Melville’s fiction up to and including *Moby-Dick*, but has a limited scope; his aim is mostly to demonstrate that Melville’s view of Transcendentalism in general and Emerson in particular was not only based on a reading of the latter’s works, but also on the newspaper discussion of Emerson’s lectures and essays. Whether to praise or satirize it, Transcendentalism was often discussed in the circles Melville frequented and in the magazines and newspapers he used to read, as well as in his conversations with Hawthorne. McLoughlin’s focus is broader. His book revisits the novels already analyzed by Williams but continues the exploration throughout the fiction that followed *Moby-Dick*, which acts to him as a hinge between the initial phase in Melville’s career, in which he heartily followed Transcendentalism, and the post-*Moby-Dick* one, in which he grew more

and more critical of that movement, as revealed by his indictment of self-reliance and the disastrous consequences it entails for characters such as Ahab, Bartleby, or Pierre. McLoughlin also provides the only existing annotated bibliography on the Melville-Emerson connection (171-174). His main conclusion is that

any accurate consideration of the Transcendentalism in Melville's art must ultimately account for the dynamic nature of literary influence, which moves through time in patterns of attraction and repulsion, ranging in emphasis between the poles of original interpretation and critical reaction. (9)

- 9 He thus discourages any "pro-Emerson" or "anti-Emerson" approach to Melville's fiction.
- 10 The successive moves within Melville's literary career can be seen as a dialogue between the writer and Transcendentalism. It is well known that he at first enjoyed popular success with novels such as *Typee* or *Omoo*, sea narratives that amused, and sometimes shocked, American readers, but which definitely established his reputation as a writer. The following novels, still pre-*Moby-Dick* ones, slightly departed from the "adventure" pattern, and met with more moderate success. Melville discovered that the further he strayed from established literary conventions and patterns, the less successful his writing was, and concluded perhaps that following one's path rarely meets with the applause that Emerson's lectures never failed to draw. In all probability, these notions were prominent in Melville's mind as he was conceiving and executing the one that would be hailed (posthumously) as the peak of 19th-century American fiction and a masterpiece of world literature. But *Moby-Dick* is Melville's attempt at testing the validity and scope of Transcendentalist ideas, not only as an abstract or intellectual problem but as a necessary step in figuring out his future career. No matter how inspiring (or otherwise) the topic was for his readers, Melville's exploration of the concept of self-reliance and how self-reliant one could afford to be was enormously relevant for himself at that juncture. Was he to play it safe so as to insure recognition (and sales), or was he to take to more daring and uncertain paths, even if that alienated a substantial part of his readership? *Moby-Dick* was both the vehicle and reflection of such debate.
- 11 What will happen if one models oneself entirely on Transcendentalist principles? What consequences will result from being oneself at all times? Who defines that "self" and how can the degree of faithfulness or unfaithfulness to it be measured? Is it a moral obligation to truly be who one is? Captain Ahab, who clearly concluded with Emerson that "if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil" ("Self-Reliance" 134), is one of Melville's tools for answering the questions above. F. H. Jacobi, the German philosopher, had already been quoted by Emerson in "The Transcendentalist" as saying that he was

that atheist, that godless person who . . . would lie as the dying Desdemona lied . . . would assassinate like Timoleon . . . would commit sacrilege with David . . . For, I have assurance in myself, that, in pardoning these faults according to the letter, man exerts the sovereign right which the majesty of his being confers on him. (100)

- 12 There is not a great distance between such words and Ahab's:

I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here . . . while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights . . . Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee. (616)

- 13 The Gothic undertones of all such passages in *Moby-Dick* should not obscure the fact that Ahab is not paying homage to the Devil of Christian mythology but rather claiming the status of a God himself. His, in Captain Peleg's words, "ungodly, god-like" character (176) is the result of an excessively blind application of Transcendentalist injunctions to respect natural inclinations and be consistent with one's inner urges. But that always poses a danger for other people. Ahab becoming a God also to his crew has the tragic results that readers of *Moby-Dick* are perfectly familiar with. These results indict Ahab's peculiar assimilation of Transcendentalism. Such a radical respect for one's own self may only be valid if it is not permitted to invade other spaces beyond the self. But how easy is that to accomplish? Is it possible to be a God only to oneself? Melville tries to answer these questions through another character in the novel: Bulkington.

- 14 In his "Introduction" to *Moby-Dick*, Harold Beaver regards Bulkington as "a thumbnail sketch of the Emersonian hero" and as a "virtuous and self-reliant transcendentalist, dedicated to the solitary search for truth"; Beaver then refers to Ahab as "Emerson's transcendental philosopher turned satanic" (32). Bulkington makes a brief appearance in chapter 3, "The Spouter-Inn," where he is already referred to as someone who "held somewhat aloof," a fact which his being so tall underscores; he is then described as a formidably strong man, very popular with his comrades and yet gloomier than them (107-108). Chapter 23, "The Lee Shore," tells us that, in spite of having just disembarked from another vessel, Bulkington enlists right away on the Pequod, the sea acting as a magnet to him. According to Walcott, throughout *Moby-Dick* there is "a symbolic opposition of land and sea, according to which the land stands for safety, security, conformity, orthodoxy, and so on, while the sea stands for the hidden, the secret, the half-known world where the other side of reality is shown and where alone one may find the full truth" (qtd. Barrio Marco 124). Bulkington is then attracted to a sea which is in the novel the Transcendentalist haven in which, paradoxically, all of the crew, including Bulkington, will perish. All but one, that is. The island of Nantucket, with its sand plains and so deep into the sea that clams are said to adhere to the furniture, serves as the reader's rite of passage into the world of the Pequod. It is presented as the capital of the oceans, its inhabitants dominating the watery world. Thus, it stands as a metaphor of the isolated, self-reliant, independent man, who is a lord to that portion of the globe, the sea, where freedom and individuality are only possible, and where communion with Nature is absolute, even while one sleeps: "[A]t nightfall, the Nantucketer, out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walrus and whales" (159). His sleep is accompanied by the sea and its creatures, whether the more benign walrus or the dangerous whale.
- 15 Bulkington's communion with Nature is as full as the Nantucketers', and, unlike Ahab, he does not see brutality and destruction in it. But Bulkington's reading of Transcendentalism, even if superficially more peaceful and harmless, is equally devastating for himself: his Transcendentalist quest for completion and knowledge, and his challenge of assumed ideas, those "wildest winds of heaven [religion] and earth [social norms and custom]" (203) which threaten to dash him against a deceptively safe coast, destroy him. Nevertheless, through this character, Melville concludes that it is possible to undertake a harmless (except for oneself) Transcendentalist quest for free thought. Where Ahab was a God, Bulkington is only a "demigod" (203), however. But Melville is far from proposing Bulkington as a valid Transcendentalist model. As a matter of fact, like Ahab, he is also indicted, though more sympathetically, as the solemn yet skeptical question "Know ye, now, Bulkington?" (203) reveals. Where has that knowledge taken you? Has it given you anything worth having? Was it all really worth it? These are probably questions that the novelist had in mind. Bulkington's death may be glorious and heroic but it is death all the same, and it is hard to conceive of a philosophy of life that only offers death as the result of its application.
- 16 Everything so far would seem to confirm the view that Melville is indicting Emersonian self-reliance, and all of Transcendentalism by the same token, as essentially selfish, pointless, bleak, and often harming to others. The path towards freedom and a complete acceptance of individuality may be worth following, but the destination one intends to approach is hardly the haven one probably had in mind. In other words, the dream is more than likely to result in a nightmare. Such a contradictory situation is best gleaned when Ahab confesses to feeling "damned in the midst of Paradise," as "[g]ifted with the high perception," he now lacks "the low, enjoying power" (266). We would all feel "damned" in the midst of such "Paradise" as his personal reading of Transcendentalism has created and where, despite the enlarged vision resulting in that "high perception," everything beyond the self has vanished, one has completely embraced what one is, intuitions reign undisturbed by logic, and no enjoyment is possible as sensory gratification has been ruled out. But if the ultimate aim of Transcendentalist voyages was such a joyless enlightenment, they are probably, in Melville's opinion, not worth taking. However, Melville's dialogue with Transcendentalism does not conclude with that utterance. Such a statement is only the starting point for another journey, one in which Melville will attempt to find some other way to pursue Transcendentalism, one definitely not leading to

such “paradise” as Ahab has created. In chapter 94, “A Squeeze of the Hand,” Ishmael already warns us that the greatest happiness may not reside in having the greatest thoughts or ideals but in enjoying the simplest of pleasures. Such thought was triggered by his pleasant squeezing of the whale’s sperm, an activity that would be meaningless for Ahab (or probably Bulkington), bent as he is upon “loftier” pursuits and “deeper wonders” (176). But, after all, to enjoy the world one must first experience it through the senses, a possibility that Ahab seems to have denied himself: when he tells the carpenter what his ideal man would be like, he insists that he would have “no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains” and is devoid of eyes, having only “a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards” (582). And how is such an ideal man to enjoy what surrounds him if he cannot even see it? Yet, it is Ishmael’s, who can enjoy the squeeze of his colleague’s hands or the contemplation of a tranquil sea, that Melville posits as a more fruitful reading of Transcendentalism, a less literal one to be sure, but one which allows our narrator to survive the tragedy of a ship sunk by a more literal exegesis.

17 It is probably useful to insist that Ahab resembles much more than Ishmael the “hero” that Emerson seemed to have in mind in his essays. In “Self-Reliance,” which, as McLoughlin has noted, Melville read months before writing *Moby-Dick* (79), Emerson welcomed the “self-helping” man resulting from the application of his ideas in the following terms: “Welcome evermore to gods and men is the self-helping man. For him all doors are flung wide: him all tongues greet, all honors crown, all eyes follow with desire” (146). Ahab certainly fits that description better than Ishmael does. It is him whom all tongues do greet, as his mostly unquestioned leadership shows. Ishmael is unable to explain the captain’s allure: “How it was that they [the Pequod’s crew] so aboundingly responded to the old man’s ire – by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs . . . would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go” (286). Emerson would explain that “evil magic” as the attainment of complete self-reliance, and would have applauded gestures such as Ahab’s casting of his pipe into the sea or the destruction of the quadrant as they imply a total commitment to his true nature (by refusing to contain his wrath through the pipe or to follow a reasonable course through the quadrant). Both are also gestures allowing instinctive behaviour to take over, as insisted upon by the Transcendentalists. Ahab has moreover unusual mental strength and a wealth of experience. His long-time seclusion in the remotest seas has led to independent thought and complete self-reliance. Part of his knowledge has come from Nature, as he is said to have received “all nature’s sweet or savage impressions fresh from her own virgin voluntary and confiding breast” (170), such “voluntary” revelations evincing a deeply Thoreauvian communion with it. As a good Transcendentalist, Ahab has received everything that Nature has volunteered and is also familiar with the Transcendentalist injunction to wait for revelations from Nature and not actively seek them. His lethal distrust of the white whale seems to place him far from the more sympathetic attitude of Thoreau, however. He has written the whale into an allegorical enemy and it is to be sure an unexpected reading of Nature (from one who is so close to Transcendentalism in most other aspects). On the other hand, in constructing Nature as text, Ahab is being faithful to Transcendentalist positions, the same from which Thoreau could write that “[e]very morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself”; he went on to textualize “the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn” as “itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air” and “a standing advertisement . . . of the everlasting vigour and fertility of the world” (62).

18 The character in *Moby-Dick*, however, who most resembles Thoreau, or, as McWilliams would put it, “the self-created character of Henry David Thoreau” (12), is obviously Ishmael, representing as he does “el hombre insatisfecho de sí y del mundo, que busca y deambula de un lugar a otro, exiliado voluntario en pos de respuestas incontestables y de paraísos perdidos” (Barrio Marco 121). Both the character/narrator of *Moby-Dick* and the celebrated author of *Walden* adopt “similar personae” (Van Nostrand 114-5): dissatisfied with their lives so far, for reasons neither of them leaves very clear, both moved to new surroundings, and in both cases such a move involves water. Both were probably desirous of a peep at

the everlasting, the unfathomable and the ungraspable sublime, a confirmation that life was more than they knew it to be. Resulting from the lack of a satisfactory life and consequent psychological imbalance, both Ishmael and Thoreau often change the moods in which they come before us: now they are joyful, now moody, now melancholy, now ironic or gloomy. Both are solitary beings, which often leads them to engage in silly dialogues with themselves, dozens of examples of which can be found in *Walden* and *Moby-Dick*. Sometimes, though, both Thoreau and Ishmael reach out to other beings, a lumberman in Thoreau's case, Queequeg in Ishmael's, and readers in both. Since the famous opening of *Moby-Dick* and its narrator urging the reader to call him Ishmael, he will address his readers almost as often as Thoreau addresses his:

Some of you, we all know, are poor, find it hard to live, are sometimes, as it were, gasping for breath. I have no doubt that some of you who read this book are unable to pay for the dinners which you have actually eaten, or for the coats and shoes which are fast wearing or already worn out, and have come to this page to spend borrowed or stolen time, robbing your creditors of an hour. It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live, for my sight has been whetted by experience. (5)

19 It seems clear that Thoreau's project is not to retreat from society for good, and he has not forsaken human connection. Unlike Ahab's, Ishmael's thoughtfulness is not an obstacle for him initiating fruitful bonds with people like Queequeg either, or patting his readers' back heartily every now and then.

20 Nevertheless, and in spite of the similarities above, Ishmael and the Thoreau of *Walden* also differ from each other in important respects. Ishmael, for one, does not heed the Transcendentalist insistence on laying aside books and traditions, stemming from Emerson's conviction that "[t]he centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul . . . and history is an impertinence and an injury, if it be anything more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming" ("Self-Reliance" 141). Whether in the etymologies and extracts at the beginning of the novel or the intertextual games throughout it, Ishmael makes clear that he is heavily indebted to those who dealt with his subject before him. The result is a novel where one easily gets lost in the "unshored, harborless immensities" (227) of so much erudition and learning, the traditional boundaries between different discursive practices (of law, linguistics, or science, to name only a few) being constantly blurred. Ishmael certainly does not feel that the past is an "impertinence" or detects a conspiracy in the intellectual wealth accumulated over the centuries, and such position would constitute a first aspect of his (and Melville's) argument with Transcendentalism: rather than denounce the castrating potential of authoritative voices, Ishmael concludes that it is possible to empower oneself through them. The specific strategy by which he retains control of the narrative consists in handling such voices of authority ironically, and thus creating a distance or space where they can be contested. Use the past, and do not let it use you, seems to be Ishmael's response to Emerson's assertions, while probably agreeing with the need to "[i]nsist on yourself; never imitate" (148), also set forth in "Self-Reliance." Ishmael's project is innovative, and yet respectful with his literary heritage. He leaves from Nantucket, the starting point for New England's whaling industry, and a reasonable kind of departure for one who attaches such an importance to one's roots. But then Nantucket is just the threshold of a journey that, as intended, takes him to confines (geographical, mental, experiential, sentimental, emotional, literary) he had never visited and for which books had not completely prepared him.

21 Alluding to Emerson, Melville said in 1849 that he loved "all men who dive" (McSweeney 10; author's emphasis). Ishmael is also made to believe in the Transcendentalist (and neoplatonic) contention that reality is only partly (if it is that at all) what our senses are capable of perceiving, and declares that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher" (540; my emphasis). The verb lurk apparently implies that the meaning which is to be extracted from everyday occurrences is not easily or immediately available but can only be got after considerable exertion. This is the idea that underlies Emerson's contention that "the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind" ("Nature" 16) or Thoreau's minute scrutiny of his Walden surroundings, ones where he

declared he was to “live deep and suck out all the marrow of life” (63), since “we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us” (67). Thoreau would also subscribe to Ishmael’s positing of man’s soul as an endless landscape to seek out and discover, though one usually neglected and “parched” by the paradoxically “dead drought of the earthly life” (602). Ordinary life is often empty and deadening, suffocating, but every now and then men may walk those landscapes of the soul and feel “the cool dew of the life immortal on them” (Melville 602). This is akin to the Thoreauvian emphasis on spiritual concerns being the immortal part of man: “In accumulating property for ourselves and our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal” (69).

22 Both Thoreau and Ishmael use the material world as windows into their own selves, even if Melville’s character is more aware than Thoreau of the limitations of such a method. Ahab also tries to use Nature for the same purposes, but he is unable to let meaning flow smoothly and imposes on it only one possible text. He does not really listen to Nature, or at least to everything that Nature has to say. But how is he to know himself (or anyone else) in Nature, or let it disclose who he truly is, when, like a ventriloquist, he has silenced its voice and allows it just to repeat the same (violent) sentence over and over again? And it is a sentence that Nature has uttered (after all, it can indeed be brutal and violent, and Ahab has lost a leg to *Moby-Dick*). Sadly for him, it is not the only sentence that Nature can utter. Others may be comforting, soothing, invigorating, or inspiring. Towards the end of chapter 68, after noting how the whale preserves its warmth even in very cold climates, Ishmael declares: “Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it. Be cool at the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole. Like the great dome of St Peter’s, and like the great whale, retain, O man! in all seasons a temperature of thine own” (414). Readers are asked to preserve their individualities even if surrounded by unpropitious conditions. In other words, external pressure to change what we are or be what we are not should be resisted at all times. That was a “text” suggested by the peculiar anatomy of the whale, which makes it possible for the animal to keep warm regardless of conditions outside. While Ahab can only impose meaning, Ishmael reveals greater capacity to really listen to, closely observe and make sense of Nature in a more balanced way. He reminds us of the passage where Thoreau tells his readers that “[w]e should be blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influence of the slightest dew that falls on it” (213), and reads the way in which the grass never fails to benefit from a gentle rain, no matter how dry it was yesterday, as an invitation to enjoy and live in the present. Not all readings of Nature are cheerful, however. Much as Thoreau realizes how often men hazard their chances of present enjoyment because of the past getting in their way, Ishmael realizes towards the end of the paragraph quoted above how difficult it will be for man to follow such advice and truly be himself: “[H]ow easy and how hopeless to teach these fine things!” (414).

23 From the very outset of the novel, Ishmael displays a rare thirst for knowledge, which may well remind us of Ahab’s, whose declared foe, the white whale, contains all meanings within its whiteness. It is moreover a symbol of Ahab’s quest for total knowledge, one eagerly engaged in, as “unless you own the whale you are but a provincial and sentimentalist in Truth” (445), but one that can only result in utter frustration and the seeker eventually sucked down by such whirlwind as his eagerness has provoked. Who can know all? But for Ahab, only when Truth is whole, only when it is spelt with a capital letter, is it worth seeking. Ishmael seems at times fairly close to Ahab’s obsession, refusing to leave anything out, however trifling, and calling for

Vesuvius’ crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. (567)

24 But, unlike Ahab, Ishmael is often happy to accommodate to the reality of imperfect knowledge. Many chapters end with an exhausted Ishmael, more than ready to settle for half, and who asks readers to complete whatever task he began: "If then, Sir William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant's face in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can" (455). Sometimes he has to conclude that in his investigations of the whale, "[d]issect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not and never will" (487). But Ishmael is not gloomy at such moments; on the contrary, he is happy to be at least engaged in a process which is giving him so much. In Thoreau, such failed quests often ended in bitter disappointment, as is the case with the ending of the section "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors": "There too, as everywhere, I sometimes expected the Visitor who never comes . . . I often performed this duty of hospitality, waited long enough to milk a whole herd of cows, but did not see the man approaching from the town" (183). His quest for that symbolic "visitor" has only resulted in sadness and frustration. But not only Ishmael has to settle for half; more orthodoxly ambitious (epistemologically speaking) Transcendentalists like Ahab or Thoreau have to. But they are pained to have to do so (Ahab simply refuses), while Ishmael is not. It is not healthy to expect too much knowledge from the world of nature, Ishmael seems to contend throughout the novel, and such a notion would be a second aspect of his (and again Melville's) argument with Transcendentalism.

25 Every true Transcendentalist needed to feel moments of communion with the Oversoul, that mystic force that bound all living things together by means of invisible ties, which, for brief spells, were somewhat made visible. Upon spying an albatross, Ishmael is awed and confused:

Through its inexpressible, strange eyes, methought I peeped to secrets which took hold of God. As Abraham before the angels, I bowed myself; the white thing was so white, its wings so wide, and in those for ever exiled waters, I had lost the miserable warping memories of traditions and of towns. Long I gazed at that prodigy of plumage. I cannot tell, can only hint, the things that darted through me then. (289)

26 Right away, Ishmael leaves it clear that he had never read Coleridge's poem. It is, quite simply, the coming before a strange, alien nature (having lost the memory "of traditions and of towns"), which shows him things that, because of their profusion (the whiteness of the albatross suggests the simultaneous presence of all colors and meanings), he cannot successfully translate into words. It is impossible not to feel that this is akin to what Ahab feels before the white whale, though he responds differently. In chapter 35 of the novel, significantly entitled "The Mast-Head," we are offered a new glimpse of the Oversoul or "soul pervading mankind and nature" (257), which implies a loss of personal identity and the crossing of temporal and geographical barriers. It is now represented by that "mystic ocean" to which the narrator abandons himself, going through the kind of experience which, in Emerson's view, caused man to become "a transparent eye-ball" and to be nothing yet to see all ("Nature" 6). Seductive as such disembodiment undoubtedly is, Ishmael has, however, one final remark to make: "But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch: slip your hold at all: and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever" (257). Were Transcendentalists listening? Just in case, he stresses that the message is mainly intended for them: "Heed it well, ye Pantheists!" (257).

27 The whole sequence above seems a rebuke of the Transcendentalists and their excessive idealism: too much abandonment and communion with Nature may result in drowning (both literally and symbolically, just as Ahab drowned, or lost his balance, long before he actually drowns at the end of the novel). Shortly before, the narrator had ironically deplored the disastrous consequences, for business, of enlisting "sunken-eyed young Platonists" for whaling ships, boys or men who, perhaps influenced by Transcendentalism, were too introspective and removed from the materiality of the whaling business:

[Y]e shipowners of Nantucket! Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unreasonable meditateness; and who offers to ship with the

Phaedon instead of Bowditch in his head . . . your whales must be seen before they can be killed; and this sunken-eyed young Platonist will tow your ten waked round the world, and never make you one pint of sperm the richer. (256)

- 28 As Michael Paul Rogin convincingly argues, Ishmael may, at the mast-head, see “all”, but fails to see whales, which is why he was up there (110). In Bryan Wolf’s opinion, his is in that instance “an extreme version of Emersonian innocence, a state of mind that expands consciousness only by diminishing the material world and the dangers it contains” (147). Nonetheless, it is a mistake, in my opinion, to conclude that Melville rejects the communing experience in itself. Vincent quotes Melville’s sarcastic assessment of such an idealistic communion with the Oversoul by referring to a similar insistence on the part of Goethe: “Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. ‘My dear boy,’ Goethe says to him, ‘you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must live in the all, and then you will be happy!’” (qtd. Vincent 152). However, immediately afterwards, Melville claims that such a feeling of communion may be temporarily valid and rewarding. Similarly, in the episode above, Melville sees jeopardy only when such communion threatens to remove all connection with the real and obscures the risks often inherent in Nature. This could also be regarded as a third aspect of Melville’s argument with Transcendentalism. Abstractions are necessary and useful, and so it is to feel disembodied from time to time, and alive to other lives and Life as a whole. But it would be a mistake to let such feelings separate us from reality. Once we let go of the real, a potentially nurturing experience is rendered useless, dangerous even. In chapter 96, “The Try-Works,” Ishmael has an epiphany of sorts and realizes how crazy it is to create ghosts, to yield to irrational hallucinations, though Stern probably makes too much of the character’s warning “look not too long in the face of the fire, o man!” and uses it as proof that Melville is farther from Transcendentalism (247) than he actually was. But it is true that such a passage alerts us to the danger of abandoning reason, which is always inherent in Transcendentalist reveries.
- 29 A fourth aspect of Transcendentalism alarms Melville: excessive self-absorption, which may throw us into an irreversible state, particularly if we lack the necessary mental equipment. This is eloquently illustrated by means of Pip, who, in chapter 93, “The Castaway,” loses his sanity after having been left alone at sea for a good many hours, enduring “[t]he intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity” (525). Richard S. Moore considers that chapter as Melville’s response to Thoreau’s project of isolation (56). But, in my opinion, what happens to Pip is a result of his own mental weakness. Unlike Thoreau, he is just a boy and has not chosen isolation; therefore, he lacks the mental strength needed to face the moment when his “ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably” (525). Moreover, also unlike Thoreau, he does not possess an intellectual or philosophical background allowing him to read the experience profitably and to make sense of that “horizon,” his horizon of consciousness, which kept enlarging without him knowing how to accommodate to its changing shape. Thus, it expands “miserably,” i.e. with disastrous results, bringing him misery and not Transcendentalist joy. But it cannot follow from it that all projects of self-retreat (by adult, willing, intellectually prepared individuals) are going to have the same results. Rather than condemning Transcendentalism, Melville is again interrogating it: What happens if a weak mind tries to swallow larger truths than he can possibly digest, such as those “strange shapes of the unwarped primal world” (525), or the mass of timeless impulses, instincts, intuitions and human universals which Pip had never encountered before? Madness is the obvious answer. Afterwards, “Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs” (525) and begins to see that God of Nature that was manifest in every one of its creatures: “He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad” (525). Pip discovered indeed the divine principle in himself and Nature, but, sadly enough, it just led to ostracism and incomprehension. Then, it is affirmed that “man’s insanity is heaven’s sense” (525-6), that is, that Transcendentalist revelations may drive us crazy, though only, I would like to add, if we lack the tools, the age, the strength, or the will, to come to terms with them.
- 30 Transcendentalism is systematically read in the novel as a cutting edge, a sort of thin line separating self-fulfilment from madness, joy from sorrow, meaning from meaninglessness.

Pip's episode is only one more example of the danger inherent in a philosophy that seems to be able to give one moments of extreme existential joy, but also the utter hopelessness with which it curses Ahab or Pip. Similarly, in chapter 96, Ishmael was on the brink of becoming another Ahab, bringing disaster upon his fellow sailors, when he was about to lose control of the ship and his own mind by the same token. In the Epilogue of the novel, Ishmael is also "drawn towards the closing vortex" of the maelstrom about to sink the *Pequod*, "[t]ill gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst" and he was "liberated" (687). Ishmael got dangerously close to the point in which the two other Transcendentalist "heroes" of *Moby-Dick* (Ahab and Bulkington) and the martyrs of an unimaginative reading of Transcendentalism (the rest of the crew) tragically ended their journeys. But he is saved by the upward thrust of a more idiosyncratic Transcendentalism, one that does not make him unhappy. Unlike Ahab, he is not "damned in the midst of Paradise"; rather like the whales in the "Grand Armada," he affirms of himself that "while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy" (498). But, in order to reach such a Transcendentalist haven and benefit from it in terms of his personal and experiential growth and of his ability to delve into reality in search of its "marrow," he had to undertake an arduous, but finally successful negotiation.

- 31 Resulting from such a negotiation is a prominent use of humour, which was rare in Transcendentalism, but which, as Edward H. Rosenberry in *Melville and the Comic Spirit* has argued, is a very important part of the novel's epistemology. When referring to the most trivial of thoughts, Ishmael can say, tongue-in-cheek, "I devoted three days to the studious digesting of all this beer, beef, and bread, during which many profound thoughts were incidentally suggested to me, capable of a transcendental and Platonic application" (557), thus poking fun at Transcendentalism itself. However, McLoughlin is, I think, wrong in regarding Ishmael as "the new post-Transcendentalist man, whose ultimate ironic detachment will become a commonplace pose for the new 'hero' of the 'realistic' novel" (69). The irony of the novel does not come from Ishmael's self-conscious ironic detachment but rather from the author's ironic rendering of Ishmael's over-serious approach to his task as a narrator. He is often laughable because of his (initial) ill-digested Transcendentalism, as displayed in those passages in which Ishmael earnestly tries not to leave out even the most trivial aspect of the whale's anatomy, thus coming dangerously close to the sucking vortex of literal Transcendentalism and total knowledge. But it will be precisely as he becomes capable of reading Transcendentalism more creatively that the irony will be left behind. Ishmael's idiosyncratic Transcendentalism also allows him to engage in an emotionally and intellectually fruitful relationship with Queequeg that a more literal approach to Transcendentalism seems to preclude, as Ahab's and Bulkington's conspicuous loneliness heralds. For a spell, Ahab finds his own Queequeg in Pip, but their liaison is doomed from the start by the kind of Transcendentalist journey in which Ahab has embarked. It is also true that shortly before the final chase begins, Ahab tells Starbuck: "[S]tand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God" (652), thereby implying that human contact is likely to give us more than any Transcendental quest, and thus confirming the validity of Ishmael's agenda. But Ahab is too far into his mad quest to be able to harp on such a fleeting perception for long.
- 32 Ishmael is the only Transcendentalist hero in *Moby-Dick* who is finally able to transform ideals into a source of happiness and growth, and, by that token, make them worthwhile. Ishmael wants to know and, above all, he wants to know himself; but he does not think that the attainment of such knowledge justifies the use of whatever means. He also finds out that it is man's lot to resign himself to live with whatever knowledge he can reach, and should not aspire to know everything. Beyond that, he is able to see that human relationships are also meaningful, that knowledge by itself and without a further goal makes very little sense, that isolation and communion with Nature may be only valid for a while (and as long as one is fully prepared to cope with them). In other words, he does not incorporate Transcendentalism uncritically but after having negotiated his own Transcendentalist agenda, absorbing such aspects as could serve him and discarding the most irrational, selfish and radical ones. Melville

seems to be thus attacking the Ahab-like stereotyped view of Transcendentalism, the surface reading of what was a very sophisticated philosophy but probably also easy to reduce to a few over-simplified notions. Ishmael's survival is an urge to be faithful to the spirit of Transcendentalism, not to its letter, and thus build our own philosophy of life (inspired rather than dictated by Transcendentalism). Aware as I am of the number of interpretations for Ishmael's survival that already exist, I would like to propose one more: his final triumph, aside from giving him the chance to transform the story into his story, validates his personal version of Transcendentalism, and indicts alternative ones (Ahab's or Bulkington's). Thus, at the Epilogue, we become, with Ishmael, "pragmatic idealists left revolving on the edges of Ishmael's maelstrom, staring into the vacant suction of Ahab's political and philosophical idealism" (Bryant 71). This is an Ishmael-like novel, a compromise novel, with the action and adventures of a thrilling sea narrative and yet with the philosophical inquiry Melville was engaged in at the time. Such a combination will moreover characterize Melville's future career. He indeed wrote works which "se fueron haciendo cada vez más profundos, más psicológicos, más metafísicos y enrevesados, en definitiva más trascendentes y complejos" (Barrio Marco 121), but never failing to give his readers amusing stories. Unfortunately, Ishmael's pragmatic idealism served him better than his creator's would serve him, judging by the sad story of Melville's post-*Moby-Dick* life and literature.

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Ramón Espejo Romero, « Negotiating Transcendentalism, Escaping « Paradise » : Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Vol 5, No 1 | 2010, document 5, Online since 28 June 2010, connection on 04 January 2015. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/8467> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.8467

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Abstract

By reviewing the critical literature on Melville and Transcendentalism and then undertaking a close reading of *Moby-Dick* (1851), this paper argues that the novel reflects, among other things, an ongoing debate between the novelist and Transcendentalist philosophy. While in later works, Melville seems to express a more robust condemnation of the Concord movement and its dangerous idealism, *Moby-Dick* occupies less firmly-defined territory. The Transcendentalist urge of an Ahab to be himself is a counterpoint to Ishmael's more idiosyncratic deployment of self-reliance, communion with the oversoul, and various other concepts easy to trace back to Emerson or Thoreau. The conclusion seems to be that a negotiation is necessary if Transcendentalism is to be heeded at all, precisely the kind of negotiation Ishmael undertakes throughout the novel, one which spares him from the maelstrom created by a more radical approach to self-acceptance and self-fashioning.

Index terms

Keywords : Henry David Thoreau, literary influence, Melville, Moby-Dick, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Transcendentalism