幻實人間：Narcissus, Ahab 與大鯨

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摘要

生命的幻影，儘管難以言詮捉摸，卻絕非鏡花水月，無痕無力。透過完美的投射，幻象補全了生命裡缺殘的存在，與真實以同等力道共存，嘲弄地展現人類正是自斨成瞎的 Oedipus，是傷殘累累的漁夫王 Ahab，一生命定不全和不完美，而永恆無解的人類與他的存在之謎，亦因此更加迷離。大鯨曰白曰黑，既善又惡，能愛能恨，忽雄忽雌，一直就泅泳於人類歷史之旁，且遠且近，在真實與虛幻間，曖昧翻攪，見證人類的現在與過往，並且預言人類的未來終是反覆不止的盲目、欠缺、矛盾與殘傷。不管是幻是實，是水仙花或大鯨，是 Narcissus 或 Ahab，吾人所見所知俱是浩瀚宇宙中的迷離原子，神祕冷漠，聽憑命運任性地推轉它「恐怖極樂」的轉輪，惹起無盡驚嘆與磨折，迴響謎惑與爭辯不止。

關鍵字：幻象、徵兆、自戀

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Phantom or Symptom: Narcissus, Ahab, and The Whale

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Abstract

Ungraspable and hardly explicable as it is, the phantom of life is not the least incapable nor “intangible.” With its perfect projection, the phantom image complements the deficient existence of life, co-exists with the substance in equal power, ironically manifests the incurable insufficiency and imperfection of human fate as the self-blinded Oedipus/the maimed Fisher King Ahab, and double mystifies the eternally insolvable myth of human and his existence. The Whale of both white and black, good and evil, love and hate, male as well as female has always been swimming as far as near alongside human history, turns and tosses its ambiguities between the real and unreal, testifies the human present with his past, and prophesies human future of repetitive blindness, lack, conflict, and wound. Phantom or symptom, flower or whale, Narcissus or Ahab, all that we see and perceive are but enigmatic atoms of the universe whose mystery and indifference indulge the wayward fate and its wheel of terror-joy to turn and incur incessant excitement and torment as well as echoes of puzzle and debate.

Key Words: phantom, symptom, narcissism

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But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (Moby-Dick, Chapter 1, 14)

Attempting to pinion the spiritual theme of Moby-Dick as “a battle against evil” where “[t]he White Whale is evil, and Captain Ahab is warped by constant pursuit until his knight-errantry turns into revenge,” E. M. Forster soon relentlessly topples himself, pronouncing that “even if the symbolism is correct, it silences the book” (240). Forster vows, “Nothing can be stated about Moby-Dick except that it is a contest. The rest is a song” (241). However, as Robert Buchanan chanted in 1885, “Long as the White Whale ploughs it through,/The shape my sea-magician drew/Shall still endure, or I’m no prophet” (91), the possessed readers have since the first release of Moby-Dick been reluctant to silence themselves. To the resounding whale symphony of Melville’s “Divine Tragedy,” elite scholastic harpooneers far and wide, no less than Pequod’s heroic crew of “United Nations,” have been gallantly fighting and striking their target aiming to add their multi-tuned resourcefulness.

Moby-Dick is to Raymond M. Weaver, for instance, “a great opium dream” with the theme of “the hunting of Moby-Dick, the abhorred white whale, by the monomaniac Captain Ahab” who “piles on the whale’s white hump the sum of all the rage and hate of mankind from the days of Eden down” (146). John Erskine intuits the pervading “man’s love of nature” (243) in the novel, and the whale is “the image of the sea,” which is “the image of nothing but itself”—the “vastness of the sea” (244). John Gould Fletcher sees “pure allegory” in Moby-Dick, with the White Whale as a symbol of “strangely beautiful—power of evil” (250). Thomas Woodson finds in Ahab “the naked dramatic identity of creative and destructive impulses within the human soul” (444). John Wenke relates Moby-Dick with “the ungraspable phantom of life”—the ontological and epistemological mysteries evoked in “that story of Narcissus” (520). David S. Reynolds views Melville’s emphasis on the White Whale “as part of a growing fascination with monsters of all varieties” (526). With Hershel Parker amusingly narrowing down to domesticity that Melville “embodied some of his domestic comforts, compromises, and tensions in Moby-Dick” (545), Edward F. Edinger (475) extends that Moby-Dick is “both black and white” drawing on “the Chinese T’ai Chi T’u” (太極圖) as symbolizing the reciprocal relationship between two opposites.

Indeed one can hardly be quieted, but is stirred and haunted by the deadly fated
attachment between Ahab and his mysterious Whale relentlessly pushed before one’s eyes scene after scene. The “funny” sight where the British Captain Boomer with a whale bone arm and the American Captain Ahab with a whale bone leg “shake bones together” (Chapter 100, 364) makes one laugh bitter tears and reminds one of a Chinese saying “lang pei wei chien”（狼狽為奸），meaning committing crime together (T’su Hai (辭海), 1890). Pei（狽）is a kind of wolf-like animal which has very short arms (forelegs) and has to cling to wolf’s (lang 狼) legs when walking. Without the wolf, Pei loses its capability (T’su Hai (辭海), 1891). This also reminds one of the lion and the jackal—Stryver and Sydney Carton, the sly, exploiting lawyer and his sickly but able assistant in Charles Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities (Chapter 5). Ishmael seems to mean that in their persistent chase of the whale, all that is left of these two skippers is but skeleton, that they have to meet by the basest, barest, saddest, and the most blood-curbing way and shape. They almost seem to meet in death. Though both captains are wounded by the same Whale, Ishmael notices different responses from them. Boomer admires “what a noble great whale it was—the noblest and biggest I ever saw” (Chapter 100, 365), but “No more White Whales for me; I’ve lowered for him once, and that has satisfied me” and “he’s best let alone” (Chapter 100, 368). Ahab, on the contrary, with his blood “at the boiling point” roars “Avast!” and heads toward east immediately where the Whale is spotted, for “that accursed thing is not always what least allures. He’s all a magnet” (368).

As Woodson points out that to dismiss Ahab as a madman, a Satan or a Byronic egotist is too simple. On recalling all the circumstances, Ishmael gets the epiphany that the Fates or Providence drew up the “grand programme” for tragedies, comedies, farces, etc. “a long time ago,” which he can now see were “cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased free will and discriminating judgment” (Chapter 1, 16). When Moby-Dick draws to the end, Melville through the novel and its hero or non-hero Ahab, “a true child of fire” (Chapter 119, 417), seems to defy the “unprincipled” God/Fate (Chapter 127, 432) to “breathe it [the fire] back” (Chapter 119, 417), and preserves Ishmael the illegitimate child and outcast (“Genesis” 16, 17, 21, The Old Testament).

Commenting on Ahab, Woodson mentions that Walt Whitman “sometimes felt the force of an Ahab-like narcissism,” and “Thoreau knows what it feels like to be an animal, or a fish, or a bird,” but “only Ahab knows the ultimate emptiness on the other side of the mirror” (453). In the very first paragraph of his narrative of Moby-Dick, Ishmael observes that “almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me” and if you do not believe it, just “Look at the crowds of water-gazers” “fixed in ocean reveries” (Chapter 1, 12). For Ishmael, it is “still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned” (Chapter 1, 14).
This study struck by the steadfast affiliation between Ahab and Moby-Dick as well as Ishmael's observation on human hectic love of water tries to investigate Moby-Dick and establish its theory as such: that Ahab is Narcissus at old age who did not die prematurely, that the Whale is Ahab's own image reflected in the water, that all Ahab’s whaling struggle is to embrace his own watery image and an endeavor for self-fulfillment, and that the image or phantom is itself the symptom and substance.

Now let us take a closer look at the most-widely known Narcissus legend assorted by two versions slightly different in the ending (the Lass’s ending is the most popular and corresponds with Ishmael’s statement of Narcissus):

The hero . . . was a beautiful lad, whose name was Narcissus.  His beauty was so great, all the girls who saw him longed to be his, but he would have none of them. He would pass the loveliest carelessly by, no matter how much she tried to make him look at her.  Heart-broken maidens were nothing to him.

So Narcissus went on his cruel way, a scouter of love.  But at last one of those he wounded prayed a prayer and it was answered by the gods: “May he who loves not others love himself.”  As Narcissus bent over a clear pool for a drink and saw there his own reflection, on the moment he fell in love with it. “Now I know,” he cried, “what others have suffered from me, for I burn with love of my own self—and yet how can I reach that loveliness I see mirrored in the water? But I cannot leave it.  Only death can set me free.”  He pined away . . . fixed in one long gaze.  (Hamilton 87-88)

[Then] As he bent forward, fascinated by his own image and trying to embrace it, he fell and drowned in the pool.  (Lass et al. 175)

They say when his spirit crossed the river that encircles the world of the dead, it leaned over the boat to catch a final glimpse of itself in the water.

The nymphs he had scorned were kind to him in death and sought his body to give it burial, but they could not find it.  Where it had lain there was blooming a new and lovely flower, and they called it by his name, Narcissus.  (Hamilton 88)

Kaja Silverman explains Jacques Lacan’s Mirror theory that

between the ages of six months and eighteen months, the subject arrives at an apprehension of both its self and the other—. . . of its self as other.  [ . . .]  [The child sees] for the first time, its own reflection in a mirror.  That reflection enjoys a coherence which the subject itself lacks—it is an ideal image.  (344)
Peter Barry explains that, “the child sees its own reflection in the mirror and begins to conceive of itself as a unified being, separate from the rest of the world” (114). This means only by means of the mirror, can the child get a complete view (frontal at least) of itself, for otherwise, the child can see only partial body of itself (its limbs, trunk from the breast down, but not its head and neck). Nonetheless, Lacan hypothesizes that “[t]his self-recognition is . . . a mis-recognition” and self-alienation because “to know oneself through an external image is to be defined through self-alienation” (Silverman 344). Furthermore,

As a consequence of the irreducible distance which separates the subject from its ideal reflection, it entertains a profoundly ambivalent relationship to that reflection. It loves the coherent identity which the mirror provides. However, because the image remains external to it, it also hates that image.

This radical oscillation between contrary emotions in respect to the same object characterizes all of the relationships of the imaginary order. As long as the subject remains trapped within that order, it will be unable to mediate between or escape from the binary oppositions which structure all of its perceptions; it will fluctuate between the extremes of love and hate toward objects which will undergo corresponding shifts in value. Moreover, the subject will itself be capable of identifying alternately with diametrically opposed positions (victim/victimizer, exhibitionist/voyeur, slave/master). (344, emphasis mine)

Now let us compare and see some identical similarities between Narcissus and Ahab.

**Comparison between Narcissus and Ahab**

**Desperate Lack on the Land**

Narcissus does not see his ideal image until he bends down at the clear pool mirror of water. Ahab is never seen by Ishmael on the dry land; even when the ship sails out into the sea, he hides himself in his cabin and only appears more and more frequently on the deck when Pequod comes near the domain of Moby-Dick. Both of them experience the blank lack on the land.

**Lively Target in the Water**

Both the youth and the old man see their animated targets in the water. Narcissus seeks his pool of water all over the world for his own image reflection, whereas Ahab searches “in every sea of the world, but it is precisely in the ‘Pacific,’ in the heart of noonday calm” (Fletcher 250) where the water is quiet as a mirror that Moby-Dick is found.
Oppositional Emotional Extremes

Both Narcissus and Ahab are the kind of being Ahab terms as “a true child of fire” (Chapter 119, 417), and both are wrapped up in their extreme love or hate of the target. Narcissus burns with his painful and impossible love, and Ahab stands a “volcano” (Chapter 99, 359) “moody stricken” with “a crucifixion” and “mighty woe” (Chapter 28, 111) from his inextinguishable hate.

Alternate Identification with Diametrically Opposed Positions

Both of the lad and the senior appear to be both the victimizer and the victim, the voyeur and the exhibitionist, the master and the slave. As the victimizer stalking after the prey for a peep, the lad and the old man would force for the exhibition of the target, drive themselves unrelentingly to the water, and exhibit themselves right there. In their merciless pursuit, they seem to be the master that takes the action, but actually they are driven like slave by their pursuit of excessive love and hate.

Mad Possession and Consumption by the Pursuit

As Narcissus is fixated by the loving image in the water “in one long gaze” of the self and pines away, Ahab is spellbound with the hateful target of the whale “at the ends of the earth” (Chapter 52, 204). When nearing his target, Ahab never rests, shaves but is seen standing “still” “day after day, and night after night” (Chapter 130, 438) and only eats in the open air. Ahab’s proud resolution of “fixed purpose is laid with iron rails” on which “I unerringly rush” (Chapter 37, 147) without an obstacle, like the trip by Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Celestial Railroad that instead of reaching the Celestial City at lightning speed, plunges with thunder’s vehemence at equal haste to the edge of the River of Death.

Stubbornness, Prejudice and Pride

Narcissus scorns all maidens’ affections and would only “burn with love of my own self” reflected in the water which can never be embraced. Ahab’s Moby-Dick has to be white, has to be the gigantic monarch in the depth, and has to be degrading and evil. The captain appears moody with “dissatisfaction, or impatience, or despair” when Stubb’s catch is a whale “with its black hull” and not Moby Dick, “his grand, monomaniac object” (Chapter 64, 248).

Selfishness

Both the youth and senile captain care about their own desires only, and are cruel to others. Narcissus in his beauty of appearance insists on and quests his own perfection and exclusion, but shuts out all other fair ladies and possibilities. Ahab in the possessed pursuit
of his personal goal neglects the safety of the whole ship and crew, pulling others toward excessive danger and denies humanistic help to another Nantucket whaler The Rachel to search for their missing sons. Both lock themselves in their selfish selves as well as in the water.

**Treble Blindness**

Narcissus is blind to his own innocence, arrogance, unpleasant character, and inconsiderateness/cruelty to others. He is blind to others’ good, beauty and love. And he is blind to the truth: the water image is but his projected reflection, not an entity. On Ahab’s part, he is blind to his own arrogance, evil, ugliness, and cruelty; blind to others’ need, right, and welfare; and blind to the truth: Moby-Dick of rival severity is but “one grand hooded phantom” (Chapter 1, 16), an image in the water which should be ideologically neutral unless arbitrarily defined.

**Incapacity to Grasp Life’s Unconditional Meaningfulness in Rational Terms**

On “The Way and the Life,” Joseph Campbell cites a Buddhist concept about life that “[w]hat is demanded of man is not . . . to endure the meaninglessness of life; but rather to bear his incapacity to grasp its unconditional meaningfulness in rational terms” (424). The Greek lad must grasp the ungraspable. The American captain must have the meaning of his life conditioned. Instead of Buddhism’s “benevolence without purpose” (413), Ahab’s meaning lies in “malice with purpose”—the pursuit, capture and destruction of Moby-Dick.

**Violence of Attack and Love of Capture**

The moment Narcissus’ initiative fingers touch the water to embrace his image, he raucously breaks and destroys the completeness, harmony and peace of the water as well as his own image, and he does this out of a love of capture. Ahab’s global hunt of Moby-Dick and the fierce sea battles are only lucid testimony of his vicious attack and also love of capture.

**Action and Reaction**

Narcissus’ watery reflection never acts. Only until its original takes the initiative assault and intrusion, does the water with the image react and drowns Narcissus in its depth. Likewise, Ahab’s Whale never seeks the captain, not even after three days’ bloody encounter on the sea where he is seen “sailing in the contrary direction” to the ship “pursuing his own straight path” (Chapter 135, 465). Starbuck cries, “Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him” (Ibid.). It is only when Ahab “darted his fierce iron, and his far fiercer curse into the hated whale” both of which “sank to the socket, as if sucked into a
morass,” did the whale roll spasmodically and suddenly “canted the boat over” (Ibid. 466). In Ahab’s swallowing vengeance fire, Moby-Dick can not be a lesser presence.

**Unquenchable Chase as a prison of doom**

While Narcissus is in unredeemable quest of the Untouchable mysteries of beauty in himself, Ahab is Melville’s version of Hawthorne’s Ethan Brand who has been “all over the earth” (325) in search of the Unpardonable Sin, but finds the very Sin of doom is his Unquenchable Unpardonable quest in himself. Narcissus’ and Ahab’s possessed search likewise leads them to nothing but a prison of doom in themselves.

**Inability to Live and Let Live**

Narcissus and his beautiful reflection extinguish the moment he touches the glossy water, and after intimate encounter with Moby-Dick, Ahab is strangled by his own harpoon line and both he and the Whale disappear. Both the youth and the old man are unable to live and let live through good, love, charity, and “soft feeling of human” (Chapter 38, 148), and Ahab has completely disregarded Moby-Dick’s right of living in his ocean. In a secretly coded message, Ishmael comments that though he loves “to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts,” he is “[n]ot ignoring what is good” and considers “it is but well on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in” (Chapter 1, 16).

**Turbulent Death in the Water**

Narcissus falls and drowns burning with his fiery love in his bosom. Old Ahab wants Moby-Dick to die before he does. With flaring hatred Ahab flings and terminates himself in the sea. Both die in the wild plunge, splash and turbulence.

With the exception of the different appearance and nationality, so many similarities are shared between the old man and the youngster that one can not but suspect that the young Greek, almost two millennia old, in his eternal quest has traveled to America, that his love of the alienated image of self has oscillated more to hate, and that these two humans are actually one person at his two different ages.

So Ahab is old Narcissus. Then if young Narcissus sees his youthful self in the water, what does old Ahab, “an independent lord” now (Chapter 130, 439), see in the water?

**Ahab and His Watery Image**

**The White Whale’s Whereabouts (Tai-Hsien Liang, 109)**

The jolly, glad captain of the Bachelor has “only heard of” (Chapter 115, 408) the White Whale, but does not believe in him at all, and he and his crew have never seen the white
monster. Ahab believes and hates the brute with all his life and death; he sees him and leads his men to him. Fletcher notices that “it is precisely in the ‘Pacific,’ in the heart of noonday calm” (250) where the water is serene as a mirror that Moby-Dick is sighted. It is also then when Ahab like Narcissus can see his own image clearly in the water. Ethan Brand sees the Unpardonable Sin in the blank canvas, and so does Ahab what is in his mind or what he is in the seawater.

The Maimed Fisher King vs. the Maimed Fish King (Liang, 110)

With the loss of one leg, Ahab is the maimed Fisher King, while Moby-Dick with a harpoon stuck on his hump is the maimed Fish King. Ahab has whale (bone) with him, and so does Moby-Dick human (harpoon) in him.

Old Soul and Isolation (Liang, 110)

Aged huge male whale is “a lone whale” of “old soul” in “secludedness and isolation” (Chapter 88, 330). The leviathan Moby-Dick appears “an isolated thing” (Chapter 133, 447); he is then presumably old. Ahab is old and fares his path of “desolation of solitude” (Chapter 132, 443). Both are old in isolation.

Ahab’s False Leg and Whale Move (Liang, 109)

In his own free will, Ahab chooses whale bone instead of wood or other material for his false leg. Equipped with the ivory false leg, Ahab makes himself a half man, half fish creature of his own creation rather than from God’s Genesis. False as it is, the leg made of whale jaw exercises lively, real and vital functions enabling Ahab to move around freely in his unique “whale” way in the world as Stubb once whispers to Flask that Ahab must have gathered “the entire ship’s company” to witness the great “pedestrian feat” by his whale “walk” (Chapter 36, 141). False as it is, the whalebone leg propels Ahab’s advancement and liberates Ahab from his human inability (to walk) with “whale power.”

Ahab’s Head vs. Moby-Dick’s Head (Liang, 111)

We may say now that Ahab has transformed into a whale with a human head. However, even his head bears identical semblance to the White Whale. The whale has “all crows’ feet and wrinkles” (Chapter 100, 365), and Ahab complains of a seam that “has worked down into the bone of my skull—that is all wrinkles” (Chapter 113, 403). Ishmael in Chapter 133 again depicts the White Whale shows “vast, involved wrinkles” on his head with “the glistening white shadow from his broad, milky forehead” (447). As to Ahab, Ishmael testifies being “so taken all aback with his brow,” for “It flashed like a bleached bone” (Chapter 29, 114). When scheming, estimating, calculating, and speculating Moby-Dick’s
hideout, route, its way of fleeing, resisting, and attacking, Ahab is not only doing whale walk; he is thinking on the whale’s part, is doing whale thinking, and doing whale talk with himself and his crew. Ahab is himself inside out the Whale.

**The Whiteness of the Whale**

Ahab is a native of Nantucket. Ishmael never explicitly reveals Ahab’s ethnicity, but if Ahab were not white, Ishmael would have particularly stated as such, like “three Long Island negroes” aboard the “glad ship of good luck” (Chapter 115, 407) of the Bachelor. More dawning evidence presents itself when the black Pip asks that his hand and Ahab’s hand be riveted together, “the black one with the white, for I will not let this go” (Chapter 125, 428). Therefore Ahab should be a white American. On his reflection on whiteness, Ishmael recognizes that there is “a certain royal pre-eminence in this hue,” a “royal standard” “of dominion,” which applied to “the human race itself” gives “the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe” (Chapter 42, 163).

Leo Strauss on persecution and the art of writing observes that to prevent social ostracism and government persecution, a writer has to indicate “his views on the most important subjects only between the lines. Such statements... do not usually occur in the... very conspicuous place” (32) and the real opinion “is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of passages” (30). The few simple sentences Pip and Ishmael say as quoted in the previous paragraph secretly tell a complicated long history of white superiority and supremacy.

Scattered covertly in the novel, Melville’s sympathy with Negroes or colored people can still be sensed and spotted in the humorously satiric passages. For example, Ishmael describes his close comradeship with Queequeg, which other fellow sailors “marveled that two fellow beings should be so companionable; as though a white man were anything more dignified than a whitewashed Negro” (Chapter 13, 60). Another scene sees the “gigantic Daggoo” with “snow-flake”-like Flask perching on him, “sustaining himself with a... barbaric majesty,” and “the noble Negro” proves that “The bearer looked nobler than the rider” (Chapter 48, 191).

As Ishmael’s black justice is elusive in secrecy, Ahab is openly and loudly white, and his white pride is such that he can never bring himself down to the level of dueling with something that is not his equal, something that is not white. The family of Marquis St. Evremonde in “their pride bitterly resented the younger brother’s [the younger Marquis’] having crossed swords with a peasant, and that peasant a boy” because it “was highly degrading to the family, and was ridiculous” (*A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens 322). So would Ahab feel if he did not charge on a white whale. Ahab is white. The Whale is white, and must be white. What is more, the enormous whaling fleet around the world is owned by the
countries dominated by white people: The Great Britain, the United States, the British
colonized Australia, the British colonized New Zealand, etc.

In a Hamlet style soliloquy, Ahab asks, “Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts
this arm” (Chapter 132, 445). Ahab equals himself to God, thinking that God makes him do
what he does, and what is in him is God. And God is “the Holy One that sitteth there white
like wool” (Chapter 42, 164). And the whale—Moby-Dick has “milky-white head and hump”
(Chapter 100, 365) and Mocha Dick “was white as wool” (Reynolds 574).

To explore even deeper to find exactly what Ahab sees in the water, this study excavates
“an idiot boy” Pip, “to whom no one pays attention” (Fletcher 250). The short small black
Pip from the French colonized Antilles declares himself “missing,” and keeps asking “if ye
haven’t fished him up here, fisherman” (Chapter 125, 427). Well bloated in his white
arrogance, Ahab generously offers his captain’s cabin to “be Pip’s home,” for he feels
“prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor’s” (Chapter 125,
428). Following Ahab’s white lead/rule to the sea, Pip finds himself missing. Crying
sadly he asks the dying Queequeg to find in his coming death Pip/the original on the land in
the “sweet Antilles” (Chapter 110, 397).

With Pip keeping talking and clinging to him, Ahab is seen proudly annoyed by his
“White Man’s Burden” (Hall 242, Figure 4.8; Kipling, Poems 444), “If thou speakest thus to
me much more, Ahab’s purpose keels up in him” (Chapter 129, 436). To this, sarcastic as
well as miserable to the ear, Pip replies, “use poor me for your . . . leg; only tread upon me,
sir; I ask no more, so I remain a part of ye” (Ibid., 436), and “Oh, master! master! I am . . .
downhearted when you walk over me. But here I’ll stay” (437).

Earlier before this conversation, Ahab asks, “And who are thou, boy? I see not my
reflection in the vacant pupils of thy eyes” (Chapter 129, 437). However Ahab feels, “Thou
toucheat my inmost center . . . tied . . . to . . . my heartstrings” (Chapter 129, 428). As Pip
says he “jumped from the whaleboat” (Chapter 129, 427), this study fears that Pip is more a
hollow phantom than a fool, and he is “missing” the moment he plunges in the water to
embrace his own image/ideal as well as the white lead/white trample of the Western
imperialism and colonialism. That is why Ahab can not see his reflection in Pip’s empty
“phantom’s eyes.” Or Ahab has receded into a phantom too blank to be reflected? Or
Ahab and his black burden have both corrupted to be vacant phantoms?

Captain Peleg portrays Ahab as a “grand, ungodly, god-like man” who has “been used to
dereper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales”
and “Ahab of old” “was a crowned king” (Chapter 16, 76-77). So to conclude from the
above, what does Ahab see in the water? The White Whale. The White Whale who is the
white Ahab himself of even “mightier, stranger foes than whales” (76-77)—Ahab’s own
Image projection and Phantom—“his own mysterious self” the magician’s glass or the
For both Narcissus and Ahab, the desperate pursuit in the water is the helpless desire of
the alienated self for self-fulfillment. Lacan (Silverman 340-55) traces back to the story
Aristophanes tells in Plato’s The Symposium for his hypothesis of loss and lack as the birth
of desire for self-fulfillment. The complete androgynous primeval man was cut into two by
Zeus and either half of mono-sex has since experienced “the desire of one another” for
“reuniting our original nature, making one of two” (The Symposium, Plato 15). So “Each of
us when separated is but the indenture of a man, having one side only like a flat fish, and he
is always looking for his other half” (15). For Lacan, the above situation is the “first
loss . . . at the moment of birth” (Silverman 342) which causes the desire of biological
fulfillment through sexual unions with the opposite sex. The second loss and lack is first
felt by the child at the mirror stage when it discovers its self in the mirror—its mirror
reflection—as the coherent and ideal “other” that it lacks and has henceforth been looking for
it within the mirror. We humans thus try “not only to discover what we are, but what we can
never hope to be and hopelessly desire” (Silverman 350). Therefore what Narcissus or Ahab
suffers is the perpetual desire and hunt from the fated lack for an ideal completeness of
previously postulates that a child’s emotion toward its coherent identity in the mirror
“fluctuate[s] between the extremes of love and hate” (Silverman 344). Extending from
Lacan, we may say that if Narcissus did not die in search of his beautiful young self, he
would one day become old Ahab. If Ahab did not seek and meet Moby-Dick on the sea, he
would still be a mutated Moby-Dick in someone, in some situation on the land.

On the precipitate death in the business of whaling—“a speechlessly quick chaotic
bundling of a man into Eternity,” Ishmael vows, “But what then? Methinks we have hugely
mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on
earth is my true substance” (Chapter 7, 41). One equivalent definition for “shadow” in
Merriam Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary is given as “phantom” (880-881), and
part of the meanings of “phantom” is “something existing in appearance only, or a
representation of something abstract, ideal, or incorporeal” (1080).

Plato’s cave allegory in Republic advises humans to ascend upwards and see the truth in
the sunlight because the shadow created from the fire in the cave is false and deceiving.
Ishmael apparently thinks the other way round, especially in the scene where Tashtego
“dropped head foremost down into this great Tun of Heidelberg” of the whale head and
almost drowned (Chapter 78, 288), for Ishmael later on jokingly satirizes that he wonders
“How many . . . have . . . fallen into Plato’s honey head, and sweetly perished there” (Chapter
78, 290). Notwithstanding, in his acute agitation aboard a ship whose try-works “laden with
fire, and burning a corpse” like hell rushing and “plunging into that blackness of darkness”
(Chapter 96, 354), Ishmael is seen hailing Plato’s sun:
believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp—all others but liars! (Chapter 96, 354)

However, Ishmael, ever bewildered as well as enlightened, never seems solidified in his opinion of light/shadow, life/death or the real/unreal, for he questions the authenticity of his free will and suspects that the “whole universe” is a “vast practical joke” (Chapter 49, 195), and that human fate is “unwaning woe” (Chapter 87, 326). Melville nevertheless is by no means alone in his baffled despair. The contemporary English dramatist Harold Pinter, for example, affirms clearly that “there can be no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing . . . can be both true and false” (Vol. 1, 11).

Miles Coverdale in The Blithedale Romance echoes Ishmael that life “seemed to have no more reality than the candlelight image of one’s self” (Hawthorne 100). In The Marble Faun, the narrator finds truth in portrayal representation that “Artists are fond of painting their own portraits” and “there are autobiographical characteristics . . . traits, expressions, loftinesses, and amenities, which would have been invisible, had they not been painted from within. Yet their reality and truth is none the less” (Hawthorne 49) than the genuine object of the portrait itself. Miriam, in her self-portrait “in like manner, had heart-knowledge [of truth] into her own portrait” (49).

Dickens in A Tale of Two Cities describes a scene where Charles Darnay is tried:

Over the prisoner’s head there was a mirror, to throw the light down upon him. Crowds of the wicked and the wretched had been reflected in it, and had passed from its surface and this earth’s together. Haunted in a most ghastly manner that abominable place would have been, if the glass could ever have rendered back its reflections as the ocean is one day to give up its dead. (71-72).

Darnay is self-possessed and calm before a bar of light shoots across his face, and he looks up. When he sees the glass “his face flushed, and his right hand pushed the herbs away” (72). He then turns his face where Lucie and her father Dr. Manette sit.

The image in the mirror, though a false/unreal illusion, in its function of enlarging/enhancing the awareness of existence of the prisoner himself and the surroundings as well as the sense of participation is no more false than truth is true. Otherwise, the prisoner may enter a mentally numb state, and is unconscious of and disinterested in the trial/punishment. To bring his full senses to his wretched situation, the mirror collects the light/truth with concentration and magnitude of thunder and lightning, and the phantom
image the mirror reflects is truer than truth to the prisoner.

Plato denies shadow/phantom its legitimacy. But is shadow really so trivial, insignificant, irrelevant, insubstantial, and totally as well as negligibly untrue? Plato wants mankind to reject shadow/falsehood and ascend. So Ralph Waldo Emerson ascends, transcends and becomes, as he claims in “Nature,” a “transparent eyeball” breathing with the universe. The problem is: This universal eyeball may see everything, but does it and can it see its self?

When immersed in the whole universe/being, one still gets lost in one’s feeling in the absolute being, because as an ancient Chinese poet Shu Shih (蘇軾) laments in his poem “T’i Hsi Lin P’i” (題西林壁), “All unseen is the real view of Mount Lu / For my being in this mountain so good” (不識廬山真面目/只緣身在此山中). Hawthorne utters his distrust on the vision of the “transparent eyeball” of the “Giant Transcendentalist” in “The Celestial Railroad,” mocking it as a “huge miscreant, that neither he for himself, nor anybody for him, has ever been able to describe them,” because the vision is “ill-proportioned” “like a heap of fog and duskiness” (239-240). He comments that the Transcendentalist “shouted . . . in so strange a phraseology that we knew not what he meant, nor whether to be encouraged or affrighted” (240). How can and what does the transparent eyeball see in “a heap of fog and duskiness”?

The ugly “duckling” bred among ducks and grown up into a majestically beautiful swan can never clearly and precisely sense its physical transformation as well as mental metamorphosis unless it sees its changed self reflected in the water as other—“a unified being, separate from the rest of the world” (Barry 114) and the rest of the ducks. Mixed with the species of duck, all the swan sees are ducks and it identifies itself with ducks. The fulfillment of its self-knowledge and reality comes only when it catches the sight of its limpid reflection in the water. Likewise, when a man shaves himself or when a woman grooms herself to fulfill his/her quest of a better self, he or she achieves it by the revelation and testimony of his or her reflection in the mirror/water or other people’s enlightening advice. A doctor can see his patient’s head, open the patient’s skull and operate on his brain, but a doctor can never see his own head, let alone operate on his own brain.

Man can never see his own true face, the whole truth of himself, even though he is out of the cave and sees everything in the sunlight. As Campbell maintains, “Oedipus, self-blinded, is equivalent to the Maimed King—and, as Freud has shown, all of us are Oedipus. For this there is no cure” (424). This is the human fate and lack—never able to fully see and recognize himself. If Plato says, never mind, just feel it in the sun, then without the view from the eyes, man “feels” through smell, sound, and taste, and he is still “groping incompletely.” A blind man cannot see but imagines incompletely in the darkness; a handicapped Ahab can only lead his crusade and pursue his manly perfection on his false leg and stand. Besides, if man does not have to see, then why should he bother to get out of
the cave, for he can feel as well below within the grotto? So Plato must mean for man to "see" especially in the light. For Ishmael who wants "to see the world" (Chapter 16, 69), he seems to mean to see everything—both phantom and substance, including shadow on the ground and reflection in the water.

Fortunately and unfortunately, man can never part with his own shadow/phantom. It is the concurrent and parallel company/record of all solid existence (concrete witness in ethereal form) in life and in death (before the substance extinguishes into ashes). Man’s shadow/phantom is the substantial proof and projection/testimony of his true being. Either the self-blinded Oedipus or the maimed Fisher King is cast forever in the shadowy phantasm.

Ahab who would "strike the sun if it insulted me" (Chapter 36, 144) would not succumb to fate. On “The Turning Wheel of Terror-Joy” (405), Campbell tells of a fable in the Hindu Panchatantra, in which the magician “Terror-Joy” let those who came to him get a reward appropriate to their nature—either joy or terror. Campbell explains that “The Maimed King’s wound and the agony of the revolving wheel are equivalent symbols of the knowledge of the anguish of existence as a function not merely of this or that contingency, but of being” (424). The hidden religious import of this fable, according to Campbell, is betrayed in the term “Terror-Joy” which means “the exhilaration or bliss . . . of what is awesome or terrible . . . an oxymoron fiercer than . . . ‘bitter-sweet’” and:

only the one whose greed was truly boundless who achieved the boon of bhairavananda: that experience beyond the bounds of knowledge, purpose, and value, which is learned with a terrible joy “at the still point of this turning world”. . . . (415)

Defying his fate and seeking to complement his lack, Ahab must have fully savored his “Terror-Joy” at the height of the drama of Man vs. Whale.

While Narcissus and Ahab exercise their irreversible chase, the reflected illusions, the phantoms mirror and reveal the truth of life in the beautiful perfect insulation or hideous maimed elimination and are as real as the lovely White Flower by the quiet pool and the fierce White Whale in the rough ocean. J. E. Cirlot registers the symbol of whale as follows:

Symbolic of the world, the body and the grave . . . , and . . . as an essential symbol of containing (and concealing). [. . .] Nowadays . . . the whale seems to have acquired more independence as a symbolic equivalent of the mystic mandorla, or the area of intersection of the circles of heaven and earth, comprising and embracing the opposites of existence . . . (350)

Edinger as mentioned previously sees both black and white in Moby-Dick. God’s whale of unspecified hues and species, which swallowed Jonah and spitted him out again, seems to
speak God’s forgiveness and mercy. As for Ishmael, the survivor and storyteller of the bloody man-fish fight seems to hint a whale of hermaphoditism.

Campbell tells that only people “who are themselves dark, brutal, and passionate of heart” can “truly recognize” the gods representing “the dark, brutal, implacable aspects of nature and of human nature” (415). Ahab sees the “inscrutable malice” and “hate” (Chapter 36, 144) in the White Whale and declares “God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death” (Chapter 36, 146). Narcissus with his illusion moves the nymphs in their lovelorn bitterness as well as pitiful kindness. Ahab with his illusions likewise excites the Pequod crew in their oath and bond of pity as well as violence and revenge. When God’s whale is indiscriminate in its color, is concealing, containing and conforming to God’s love and mercy, human with his ignorance and arrogance creates his own whale of obstinate and discriminative white, self-assertive, exclusive and rebellious with hate and terror.

Melville pleads that whiteness leads to both “the great white throne” where God “sitteth . . . white like wool” (Chapter 42, 164), and “that pallor of the dead” whence “the king of terrors” “rides on his pallid horse” (Chapter 42, 166). Hence the whiteness does not guarantee holy divinity, nor must the white Moby-Dick promise brutal fatality. Both the narcissus and the Whale are life of God’s creation for this “wonder world,” and they are of neutral traits in their rightful field and naturalness respectively. They are not preoccupied with rejection or destruction, unless through the “position” of one’s mind, which, as what Michel Foucault explains about his discourse, projects an image, makes sense of and interpret the phenomenon in a certain situation.

When Ahab goes down with his ship, ambition and anticipation, evil and devil are all concealed, and “an oily calmness floats out from the east, and the sea is still . . . leaving smooth water behind” (Chapter 9, 49), the reader cannot but wonder if such “whaling trip” or “whaling battle” as Ishmael tells really happened. Is it what the Ghost of Christmas says, “These are but shadows of the things that have been” (A Christmas Carol, Dickens 34)? Or is this a Rip Van Winkle’s dream and what Ishmael sails and toils through is the unfathomable ocean of humanity that sets astride both the positive and the negative, the Yang (陽) and the Yin (陰) universes (both “life” and “death” of Captain Ahab’s cruise by his “live and dead feet” (Chapter 118, 412), or the “black” and “white” of opposing principles in the Chinese T’ai-chi-t’u), the real and the unreal, declaring its unmistakable phantom and symptom through ambiguities?

While “humbugging” the ghost and hell as hallucination of “all of my own creation” (Carol, Dickens 24), Dickens’s Scrooge assures us as Melville’s Ishmael does that ghost and hell are as solid and real as “an undigested bit of beef . . . mustard . . . cheese . . . underdone potato” (Dickens 24), or “an undigested apple-dumpling” (Melville, Chapter 17, 82). In this age of technology and information of ours, TV news announces, relays, re-presents and
repeats the “truest happenings” of genuine substance whenever and wherever required. Through the versatility of cyber link, we can even have official meeting and talk on the phone with the image of our interlocutor clear on the screen of a computer monitor. Though just an image transmitted, re-presented, and re-represented through layers of media, the image is viewed and treated as a “real” person and is “acting” on behalf of and “as” the exact certain person. In such case, the entity is the illusion and the illusion “must be” the reality as we acknowledge the authority and legality of both the original and its re-presentation.

Ungraspable and hardly explicable as it is, the phantom of life is not the least incapable nor “intangible.” With its perfect projection, the phantom image complements the deficient existence of life, co-exists with the substance in equal power, ironically manifests the incurable insufficiency and imperfection of human fate as the self-blinded Oedipus/the maimed Fisher King, and further mystifies the eternally insolvable myth of human and his existence. Like the “pleasure-dome” with its reflection in the water in “Kubla Khan” (Coleridge, p. 685), Moby-Dick, in its solid book form and literary life is both entity and illusion, both the concrete embodiment and the reflective reality of human truth, epitomizing the unmistakable, tangible human existence. The Whale of both white and black, good and evil, love and hate, male as well as female has always been swimming as far as near alongside human history, turns and tosses its ambiguities between the real and unreal, testifies the human present with his past, and prophesies human future of repetitive blindness, lack, conflict, and wound.

As Ishmael boldly asserts in his clear consciousness, “we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance” (Chapter 7, p. 41). Phantom or symptom, flower or whale, Narcissus or Ahab, all that we see and perceive are but enigmatic atoms of the universe whose mystery and indifference indulge the wayward fate and its wheel of terror-joy to turn and incur incessant excitement and torment as well as echoes of puzzle and debate.

Note

1 Moby Dick is addressed both as “she” and “he” as, for example, on page 446, chapter 133 where Ahab on his look-out calls out twice, “There she blows!—there she blows! A hump like a snow-hill! It is Moby Dick!” and later gives orders to chase the whale, “He’s going to sound!” Leo Strauss states that to avoid censorship and persecution, the author may write the truth exclusively between the lines for “private communication” (25) with careful, thoughtful, intelligent and trustworthy readers. The obvious blunders or “inexact repetitions of earlier statements” (36) very often serve an obvious hint, and the real opinion of an author is not necessarily expressed in the largest number of passages because “he would make that [key] statement in the quiet, unspectacular and somewhat boring manner” (24). Here Melville may as Strauss suggests intentionally but secretly mean to have Moby-Dick encompass both sexes, or he writes only subconsciously as his idea flows to his pen. But whether deliberately or not, Melville betrays his true feelings about the “androgynous whale.”
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