

**VERSIONS OF ALTERITY.
THE WANDERING HEROES OF HERMAN MELVILLE
AND V.VOICULESCU**

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Abstract

Although there is no overtly stated, direct influence between the two authors, Herman Melville and V. Voiculescu, the similarities that could be found at the level of their themes are indeed fascinating for an attentive reader: the regression of the human hero to the sub-human, animal regnum, or the opposite, the presence in their texts of anthropomorphic animals, the love/hatred relationship between the hero and the animal monster, or the theme of the quest. In this article, the first in a series that will explore these similarities, I only aimed to introduce the two authors' writing, with a special focus on the reaction of literary criticism, both positive and negative, in both cases.

Keywords: *unheimlich, alterity, regression, anthropomorphic animals, monster/Leviathan*

The theme of human regression

The theme of identification, confusion, mixture of the human being and something sub-human opens a huge area of analysis. The implications of such a vast theme are no less intriguing: the human regression towards non-human registers, the anthropomorphic animal (because most of the times this regression stops in the immediate proximity of the human regnum, i.e. the animal one), the hybrid identity that comes out of their meeting and intermingling, all these coming as a result of a mutual fascination and obsession with alterity. This is the source of the *unheimlich*, the strangeness of the texts illustrating such themes: i.e. the clash between the sub-human milieu, seen as natural, *heimlich*, and the same environment turned into something strange, terrifying, un-common, un-natural, that was supposed to stay hidden, concealed but came into the open nevertheless.

Such a fascinating theme couldn't but infuse the whole literature of the world, as well as the mythical heritage of many nations, starting with the Bible. The regression of the human seems to be best symbolized nowadays by Narcissus: the fascination of the water, or rather of his own image as reproduced by the water, is

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generative of split identity and death, followed by a bizarre regression towards the vegetal environment. However, such a human metamorphosis into something sub-human is to be witnessed throughout the whole world's mythology and literature. Another very well-known example is the Song of Songs, where the two lovers see each other in terms of inanimate objects, in order to internalize each other in spite of the huge distance that separates them. Examples can also be found in more recent literary works of late 20th century, such as Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*, where the human body becomes fetus/lover for the huge body of an inanimate object: the island where he is isolated from the civilized world.

As easily comprehensible, the area of study offered by such a fascinating topic is huge. Even if we operate a restriction to the man-animal relation, to the uncommon, ex-centric, marked human individual and monstrous animal's love/hatred, fascination/fight, quest/clash relation – the area of study still remains immensely diverse. My personal interest was in two authors that illustrate this clash with unquestionable mastery. Melville's *Moby-Dick* immediately comes to one's mind when speaking of quest, of fascination, of love/hatred relationship between the madman and evil monster, of the circular route must necessarily be followed when engaged in such a quest, for one can pursue such monsters only by tracing them backwards to one's heart. Turning our attention to Romanian literature, and if we agree from the beginning to avoid mentioning the huge mass of oral myths and legends, the author that most obviously illustrates the above-mentioned theme is V. Voiculescu, in his short-stories.

V. Voiculescu and Herman Melville as perceived by literary criticism

Before starting to explore the similarities and differences between the two authors, one ought to mention the fact that both writers have been widely explored and analyzed by critics. Romanian literary criticism abounds in divergent commentaries about V. Voiculescu's short stories. Here follow a few of the best known opinions. On the one hand, literary criticism seems to agree that we deal with an exceptional story teller – an assumption grounded in George Călinescu's comments: after first listening to some of the stories, the critic enthusiastically declared that V. Voiculescu is far better a story teller than M. Sadoveanu himself (Pillat: 7). Most literary critics seem to agree on the writer's originality and exceptionality. Vladimir Streinu comments that the boundaries of Voiculescu's fantasy lie in-between anecdote and fairy-tale, in between truth and fiction, most of the times reality disappearing, melting into imaginary situations, while such imaginary plots are always grounded in something real (Streinu: 3). "Sezon mort" and "Pescarul Amin" are considered the masterpieces of Voiculescu's stories. Streinu emphasizes the writer's capacity to combine good and evil, black and white. In his analysis of "Sezon mort", the critic states that the bird's heaven described there dwells upon a

hell of voracious desire. Other critics, such as Ion Vlad, speak of the extraordinary charm of the stories, lying in the pleasure of talking to an audience. He also understands the importance of the fantastic atmosphere created by them (Vlad: 142-152). One of the most authorized opinions is that of Nicolae Manolescu, who also praises Voiculescu both for his *Sonnets* and for the short-stories. Although representing an obvious anachronism in terms of viewpoint, technique, and subject-matter, the stories are considered masterpieces due to their capacity to present fictional events as real, to entertain the illusion of truth (Manolescu: 2). Finally, Mihai Ungheanu praises the supernatural oriented tales of Voiculescu, which, he considers, follow a very interesting Romanian folklore tradition. He is one of the critics who praise the captivating meta-text of these short pieces, and considers that Voiculescu, as well as Sadoveanu, inferred the great impact of the story-within-the-story convention (Ungheanu: 245-254). He also seems to recognize the more subtle connection between human individuals and animals or inanimate objects, the basis of the human regression to the animal regnum in literature.

On the other hand, there is a second category of exegetes, who criticize Voiculescu heavily. Although the relationship these stories entertain with myth is far too complex and intriguing to be ignored, Ion Pop, for instance, fails to recognize the important role myth plays in Voiculescu's fiction when stating that such fictions actually oppose myth as such, myths being considered nothing but fictions (Pop: 3). Virgil Ardeleanu is another critic who considers that V. Voiculescu simply uses mythology for artistic, rhetorical, i.e. functional purposes (Ardeleanu: 92-114). Such a oversimplification can only be unproductive. Another simplifying view would be that of George Munteanu, who considers that Voiculescu's activity as a folklore recorder is the only cause of his interest in local traditions, legends and myths, and comes up with the example of "Schimnicul", "În mijlocul lupilor", or "Lostrîța" (Munteanu). He also speaks of the importance of folklore allusions and quotes. Probably such reductions of the complex fictional universe of the Romanian author should be understood as connected to the communist period's understanding of inter-war authors, which was a reductionist one by definition. Other critics fail to recognize Voiculescu's originality and uniqueness, for example Al George does not seem to appreciate his mastery in creating a very interesting meta-text. The critic argues that the narrator cannot deal with the imaginary situation, and does not allow the reader to deal with it either (George: 287-302). The effect is, quite on the contrary, a very pleasant, though intriguing dialog of ontologically different levels of the narration. However, despite all criticism, the characteristic that most critics seem to observe is the "uncanny wedding of heaven and hell" in V. Voiculescu's short stories (Balotă).

Herman Melville, as seen by literary criticism, is another controversial author. It has been argued that an "influence of existentialism and crisis theology worked against earlier traditions of American optimism. Emerson, Whitman, and the pragmatists looked outdated and naïve to many American intellectuals after the

war; the tragic vision of Melville and Hawthorne, Kafka and Dostoyevsky seemed more in tune..." (Dickstein: 225). The approaches literary criticism has offered us throughout the last century and a half are widely varied. *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* seems to be focused more on a biographical understanding of Herman Melville.

*Though Melville claimed he had 'no development at all' till he was twenty five, his writings are grounded in circumstances and impressions of his early years, shaped intellectually in response to his later reading: the descent from two Revolutionary War grandfathers; the position as a second, apparently less brilliant son; the secure middle-class childhood in New York city that ended abruptly with the bankruptcy and subsequent death of his father; ... the sailor's voyage to Liverpool in 1839... and the more formative voyage to the Pacific that began o deserted by his father..."*¹² *n a whaler in 1841... Biographers since Raymond Weaver (1921) have stressed Melville's projection of himself as an Ishmael deserted by his father...* (Milder: 429)

If we turn our attention to *Moby-Dick*, the book has been considered a *bildungsroman*, "a narrative of education", and a very valuable one, "Even without Ahab, *Moby-Dick* would rival *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass* in the midnineteenth-century American literature of spiritual exploration" (Milder: 434). Moreover, the author considers that

with its maddened hero at the center, the book is a nineteenth-century apocalypse that dramatizes the emergence of a new cultural order, [...] Moby Dick belongs with those primeval dragons and sea monsters which embody the forces of chaos that rule over Creation; and Ahab, who is linked to such champions as Perseus and St. George... sets out to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah... and 'slay the dragon that is in the sea' (Milder: 435)

The result would be "a recognizable world that shaded off insensibly into the mysterious and terrifying" just as the fictional world of V. Voiculescu. Another observation made by Milder is reminiscent of a more psychoanalytical reading of the text, when he mentions "Melville's effort to exorcise the Ahabian element in himself" (436), as if the evil monster, the fiction could spring out of Melville's own passions. Another interesting detail: Ahab is seen as a "scapegoat-villain", i.e. himself hunted down and slain in the end, in a reverse hunter-hunted relationship.

Another critic, Terence Martin, noticed that, with Melville, as well as with Poe and Hawthorne, the target is confronted "with the full force of mind and volition". Similarly, the author considers that "strategies of caricature serve the writer well", helping to distort "the portrayal of self, at once limited and magnified, invested with incipient violence" (Martin: 81).

More recent criticism has looked at *Moby-Dick* from different, more unconventional perspectives. Joan Dayan considers that H. Melville presented Ishmael and the cannibal Queequeg in “a marital embrace” (Dayan: 107) that opens the way to comments regarding the democratic character of the novel - the savage is seen at the same level as the civilized man.

A few decades ago, another critic seemed to appreciate the book for similar reasons: “it raises more questions than answers”, praising it for its “capacity for growth through some inner vitality which increases with time” (Howard: 18). Still, Howard considers the action “fabulous”, the characters to have “mythological overtones”, while its rhetoric “romantic” and the language “suggestive and symbolic”.

Kathryn VanSpanckeren’s *Outline of American Literature* emphasizes the fact that the protagonists of the American Romance, Ahab as well, are “hunted, alienated individuals”, “isolated and obsessed”, trying to reach the unknowable, which “in some mysterious way, grows out of their deepest unconscious selves” (VanSpanckeren: 36); which is another point of the subsequent analysis. Melville’s meta-text is also paid attention: the novel is considered modern, since “self-referential, or reflexive...Melville frequently comments on mental processes such as writing, reading, understanding” (39). Paul Royster also considers that “*Moby-Dick* is no ordinary industrial novel, because of its conscious attention to the task of constructing itself as language” (Royster: 313).

As suggested before, there are lots of critics speaking of *Moby-Dick* as a “fiction of social justice” (Pahl 82). Ishmael’s propensity for tolerance seems to be the source of such commentaries. Others prefer to speak of “Melville’s Quarrel with God” (Thomson), and here we enter the more problematic ground of diabolical characters, demoniac obsessions and so on and so forth.

Can one compare two distinct fictional universes?

One of the first things that come to the attention of the reader is the fact that one has access to both these universes in the same way, i.e. both authors employ the same convention of a character/narrator who will act as a go-between, mediating between the reader’s real world and the strange world of the their literary works. Let us remember that in Melville’s novel, right from the first page, one stumbles into Ishmael, who acts as such an intermediary between the reality of the reader’s universe and the universe of the narrative. It is precisely the latter the place upon which the monstrous dwells. Since one has to face a world of differences, charms, loomings, a world that fascinates like a spell, it is only natural that a go-between is required by the very economy of the novel. It is a very individualized world, artistically speaking, Melville’s style obviously sparkling on a surface often placed

in the shadow of redundant pseudo-scientific information, that spoils the dramatic effect of many chapters. The scenes where the whale comes into the open, or when he is chased, hunted, or when he haunts the ship in his turn, the confrontation between the captain, the maddened hunter, and his rational mates – all these have been shown to represent the backbone of the novel, they are very much human focused, and very convincing. They could easily constitute a separate text within the text, a play within the novel.

Voiculescu's fictional world is not so overtly circumscribed by such alluvial information, but it is more elaborate and much denser with impressive details. V. Voiculescu does not add encyclopedic, pseudo-scientific information, but chooses to create a more fairylike, fantastic atmosphere. However, the world the reader enters is just as strange as Melville's. It represents a place of the different, of the unknown, of the fascinating, too. It also requires an intermediary between itself and the reader, and it offers such intermediaries all over the place. All the short stories are somebody's stories, are told or retold by somebody as we shall see further on.

Another important characteristic both fictional universes share is the reader's impossibility to decide upon their nature, the difficulty to identify and focus on the monstrous nature of Melville's characters, or on the fantastic details of Voiculescu's short stories. *Uncertainty* is one of the key-words of both analyses.

The monstrous nature of Melville's novel is very difficult to isolate, to identify in one fixed entity, the whale for example. The whale can be read as a monster for all the reasons emphasized above, but the monstrous as such is disseminated throughout the novel, in all its details. It is and it is not generated by the naming of the whale, the Leviathan; it is and it is not triggered by the fanciful classification of whales that does not circumscribe its object in a scientific way; it is and it is not brought about by the mythical descent of the white whale, seen to be the follower of the Biblical monster; or by the descriptions of the ones who saw the whale. Neither the mythical accounts, nor the reliable sources represented by witnesses seem to be enough. Melville himself cannot help forcing his subjective, passionate point of view upon the reader. He does not separate himself from the object of his study in a scientific way, which helps create a bizarre atmosphere. The author and, consequently, his narrator tend to get involved in their study, are fascinated by it; they do not try to understand, demonstrate – de-monstrare – the monster, but to touch it in a hermeneutic circle of comprehension. The whale, like any monster, cannot be de-monstrated – de-monstratum – but only shown, pointed at – monstratum. However, the monstrous irrupts, intrudes also in those nightmarish scenes (the hunt especially), in which *the monster is not necessarily Moby-Dick*, but the terror that bursts out of the fervor of those episodes. The monstrous, the terrifying is generated by *the very proximity of the whale*. Whatever or whoever (see Ahab) gets close to the whale becomes or, at least, is perceived as a monster itself, himself. The maddened hunter who is himself hunted/haunted by the

monster, and the only way to find it is by tracing it back to his heart. This circular, *aporetic* route is also to be found in V. Voiculescu's short stories.

On the other hand, Voiculescu's universe is not so much centered on the monster, although monsters are to be found in this weird space, too. This strange world is rather a fantastic space, as we shall see in a subsequent paper. What makes it more appealing to the reader is the fact that it lacks the redundant mass of information that sometimes tends to suffocate the dramatic core of Melville's book. Still, until the reader gets to this fantastic world, to the core of Voiculescu's fictional world, he/she has to go through its diluted form, through its waiting room, i.e. through the world of *anecdotic short stories*. This is a different space, animated – interestingly enough – by its *passion for telling*. Much of the unusual passion and strange characters of Voiculescu's masterpieces seem to be contained, *in nuce*, by these diluted stories.

Yet, the world of these short stories does constitute a unitary narrative, one united by characters' fascination with hunting and fishing, as well as with unusual, monstrous animals (big fish, wolves, bears) which springs from the author's own fascination, just like in the case of Herman Melville. The short story, or rather the note placed in the beginning of his collection of stories, "Amintiri despre pescuit" ("Memories about Fishing") does the same job as Melville's correspondence: Voiculescu confesses sharing the fever/madness of his characters. He seems to know everything about fishing, about the fish species in Romanian waters, as well as about the lure they can be caught with. Although he starts by denying any special attraction to fish:

Nu sunt ahtiat după pește. Dar pentru frumusețea pașnică a îndeletnicirii am practicat aproape toate soiurile de pescuit, oriunde m-au purtat întâmplarea și slujba mea de medic (Voiculescu: 8),

the rest of this account implies quite the contrary:

ne dezbrăcam până la brâu și începeam goana după el. Îl descopeream în vadurile mai scăzute, unde-l urmăream cu îndârjire până-n bulboanele adânci în care-l prindeam. Dar nu ne lăsam... (Voiculescu: 9)

Words such as *goana/the chase*, or *îndârjire/stubbornness, fury* – emphasize the emotional involvement of the participants. The author himself caught and was fascinated by the same fabulous fish like his heroes (see Aliman),

Am avut noroc și de lostrite bucălate, acești pești străvechi, aproape fabuloși, neam de al păstrăvilor. Ele s-au prins ca niște minuni în undițele noastre întinse în Bistrița Bicăzului (Voiculescu: 10)

and seemed to recognize the monstrosity of this *ancient, fabulous* fish, “the Leviathans of our waters”, *dihanii*/monsters, just like his short stories imply:

Aici, la gura Argeşului, am prins la cârlige, cu momeli de hoit, somniul hulpavi, leviataniile apelor noastre, care, după spusa lumii, înhaţă copiii de la scaldă. În pântecul spintecat al acestor dihanii s-ar găsi deseori câte o mână sau alt mădular din prada înghiţită. (12)

In Voiculescu’s fictional universe, a monster seems to exist (the word *dihanie/dihănie*, i.e. *monster*, is very frequently used), one that resembles Moby Dick himself, hungry for human flesh, malicious, a devilish creature. Sometimes the description of such monsters, huge sturgeons as well as carp, tends to transgress the real world, and enter the fictional, such as in the following fragment. The hyperbole is the stylistic device that helps create such a strange effect,

am ajutat pescarilor din Greaca să tragă năvoadele cu crapi cât viţei si să-şi puie pripoanele cu cârlige. De multe ori dihăniile se smulgeau din fier si se duceau cu pripon cu tot. (Voiculescu: 11)

All Voiculescu’s heroes share the author’s passion, fascination with this almost aboriginal space - the wilderness, and especially the water: Aliman (in “Lostrî’a”), Amin (in “Pescarul Amin”), the wolf master, Luparul (in “În mijlocul lupilor”), the monk (in “Schimnicul”), or the old magician (in “Ultimul Berevoi”).

Conclusions

Although it is virtually impossible to establish an overt influence between the two authors, it is worth comparing the two different styles, two different fictional universes – however, two worlds between which hundreds of captivating connections can be made. Melville’s fiction opens before the reader’s eyes as a fabulous world, in which the human chase after the untouchable Leviathan, with all its theoretical implications, is the key image. The scenes describing the actual meeting whale/monster – man/wanderer represent an impressive dramatic nucleus, a text within the text. Voiculescu’s short stories will offer the attentive reader a fascinating universe, generating un-natural fears and passions, populated by strange creatures and witnessing spectacular metamorphoses; the fantastic atmosphere, the *unheimlich*, as Freud puts it, is very much at home in this archaic world.

What is present in both these fictional universes is the same passionate, mad search, quest for a monstrous animal, for temptations and dangers that always spring from the very soul of the heroes. This circular route is followed by both Melville’s wanderers and Voiculescu’s wild heroes. In both cases an attentive reader will infer the regression of the human individual towards sub-human worlds,

mainly towards the animal one, a necessary step towards the identification, physical as well as spiritual, between man and animal, between the marginal, eccentric individual and the malefic monster – to be explored in a subsequent paper. Although the Romanian author doesn't confess an overt influence of Melville, the reader can find an impressive quantity of details that send him back to *Moby-Dick*, and even deeper to the same myths and archetypes that seem to be the roots of both fictional universes. The analysis, based on the close reading, of the two authors' texts, will be the object of a subsequent paper.

Let us conclude with the image that unites the two authors, that of the circular, mad quest of the heroes, obsessed with the evil animal. Just like Ulysses is warned in a Kavafis poem, the monsters/dangers that heroes run after always already live within themselves, hence the twofold character of the chase, of the quest: the hero is haunted/hunted by monsters from within, as much as he runs after them. The passion and the fascination that flood both these fictional universes go both ways:

*Atunci când spre Ithaka vei porni-o,
Dorește-ti drumul cât mai lung să fie,
plin de peripeții și-nvățăminte.
Să nu te temi de Lestrygoni, nici de Ciclopi
Și nici de a lui Poseidon mânie...
Cu Lestrygoni sau cu Ciclopi,
Sau cu sălbaticul Poseidon nu te vei întâlni
Dacă nu-i porți cumva în tine,
Dacă sufletul tău nu ți-i va scoate-n față (Kavafis, Opera poetică)*

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