

LOVE/HATRED DYNAMICS IN MOBY-DICK

Raluca Nicoleta ȘERBAN
Mihai ȘERBAN¹

Abstract

This article is one in a series of articles about the connections between the American author Herman Melville and the Romanian writer V. Voiculescu. In the previous articles we explored the similarities between the two authors' work, namely, the novel Moby Dick and V. Voiculescu's fantastic short stories, and the Leviathan, or the fascinating monster, as the central image of Herman Melville's novel. Among the favorite themes of the two authors one can mention the regression of the human hero to the animal regnum, or the opposite, the anthropomorphic animal present in the text, or the theme of the quest – all of these previously explored. In this article, the method of analysis is close reading, and our main focus was on the love/hatred relationship between Herman Melville's hero and the animal monster, once more directly linked to the central image of the text, the monster-whale.

Keywords: love/hatred dynamics; monster/Leviathan; anthropomorphic animal; alterity; regression

1. Demonic characters. Passion/Madness vs. Reason

The malefic, diabolical power that subjugates Captain Ahab is visible, is overtly stated especially in his relationship with Fedallah, the quintessence of diabolical influence over the captain, a Mephistopheles as perceived by the crew. Fedallah is present only as a non-human ghostly character, that comes into the open as the guide of Ahab in his search for a single marked monstrous whale all over the surface of the earth. He appears on stage as the one who guides Ahab's boat during the first lowering, when the first whale is seen, thus puzzling, horrifying the crew since he, an outsider, is the only one who can control Ahab, the only one who has power over the captain that everybody fears. This is a bad sign for the crew. Starbuck even wants to drown him, but he fears him as he could fear the devil. Only a devil could control the uncontrollable captain,

But did you deeply scan him in his more secret confidential hours, when he thought no glance but one was on him; then you would have seen that even as Ahab's eyes

¹ Raluca Nicoleta Șerban, Bucharest University of Economic Studies,
raluca.serban@rei.ase.ro

Mihai Șerban, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, mihai.serban@rei.ase.ro

so awed the crew's, the inscrutable Parsee's² glance awed his; or something, at least, in some wild way, at times affected it (Melville, 1990: 690)

This is a fact that torments the crew and makes them spread malicious comments about the outsider. However, their comments are surprisingly confirmed, given substance by Ishmael's observation, in his capacity of an impartial, fair – if possible – narrator. The Mephistophelic nature of Fedallah is emphasized by Ishmael in the episode in which Fedallah's shadow covers Ahab's, confirming the superstition according to which the one who sells his soul to Satan loses his shadow, too:

Meantime, Fedallah was calmly eyeing the right whale's head, and ever and anon glancing from the deep wrinkles there to the lines in his own hand. And Ahab chanced so to stand, that the Parsee occupied his shadow; while, if the Parsee's shadow was there at all it seemed only to blend with, and lengthen Ahab's. (Melville, 1990: 572)

Fedallah is, indeed, a mysterious character. He dwells upon a nocturnal, delirious space. When Ahab gets up, having had a dream, he sees Fedallah ready to make a prophecy about his death. Being introduced precisely this moment, the prophecy and Fedallah himself (Fedallah – the shadow, the ghost) seem to continue the dream, or rather, to come out of it.

'And when thou are so gone before – if that ever befall – then 'ere I can follow, thou must still appear to me, to pilot me still? – Was it not so? Well, then, did I believe all ye say, my pilot! I have here two pledges that I shall yet slay Moby Dick and survive it;'

'Take another pledge, old man', said the Parsee, as his eyes lighted up fire-flies in the gloom – 'Hemp only can kill thee'. 'The gallows, ye mean. – I am immortal then, on land and on sea', cried Ahab with a laugh of derision. (Melville, 1990: 670)

However, the prophecy is to be fulfilled towards the end of the novel, when the captain dies pulled by the hemp string of his lance. This fulfillment somehow hints at Fedallah's superiority over Ahab, as he has the power to foresee; his divinatory power and his malefic influence over Ahab make of Fedallah a true Mephistopheles. Here is the paragraph in which, having witnessed it, Ishmael reports Ahab's death:

² At this point the Parsees are not immediately relevant for their Islamic religion, but for their belief in Zoroaster, a pre-Islamic prophet of ancient Persia, also referred to as Zarathustra

The harpoon was darted; the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line ran through the groove; - ran foul. Ahab stooped to clear it; but the flying tum caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, 'ere the crew knew he was gone. (Melville, 1990: 713)

Nevertheless, this does not turn the captain into an innocent victim; we should not forget that Ahab himself is “demoniac”, that he baptizes his lance in the name of the devil, and even sells his soul to Fedallah. His madness, sprung out of his fascination with and hatred for the White Whale, turns him in such a demoniac figure. Throughout the second half of the novel, the attentive reader witnesses his dehumanization: he is blasphemous, he is shouting “with a terrific, loud, animal sob, like that of a heart-stricken moose” (Melville, 1990: 472), refuses to help a father who was looking for his children and so on and so forth. The examples of his regression towards the animal register are indeed numerous. Seemingly, the starting point, the cause of all these transformations is his obsession with the White Whale – very clearly set by the narrator against the rationality of the crew, especially of his captains. Ahab embodies irrationality, madness capable of killing, destroying all the crew, while his captains stand for a rational struggle to rescue themselves and the ship from the vortex brought about by Ahab’s passion. They insist to go home, to their families, a wish they will never fulfill, since they are so well controlled by their superior.

To accomplish his object, Ahab must use tools; and of all tools used in the shadow of the moon, men are most apt to get out of order. He knew, for example, that however magnetic his ascendancy in some respects was over Starbuck, yet that ascendancy did not cover the complete spiritual man...Starbuck’s body and Starbuck’s coerced will were Ahab’s, so long as Ahab kept his magnet at Starbuck’s brain. (Melville, 1990: 502)

Chapter CIX, “Ahab and Starbuck in the cabin” places the two face to face in an overt confrontation: the voice of passion (i.e. madness) – vs. – the voice of reason. When Starbuck warns the captain that the ship is falling apart, the answer he gets, i.e. let it happen, we have to follow the White Whale shows that passion is ready to insanely sacrifice the whole crew,

And I was not speaking or thinking of that at all. Begone! Let it leak! [the oil in the hold] I’m all a leak myself. Aye! leaks in leaks! not only full of leaky casks, but those leaky casks are in a leaky ship; and that’s a far worse plight than the Pequod’s, man. Yet I don’t stop to plug my leak... how hope to plug it, even if found, if this life’s a howling gale? (Melville, 1990: 657)

Starbuck, due to the fact that he is listening to what his reason says, can see things which Ahab is blinded from. Starbuck can read the bad signs which Ahab doesn’t

even notice. He can figure that Fedallah is a devil, mastering his master's soul and endangering the crew, which Ahab can't realize, in his hate-dominated search. Probably this is why he warns Ahab to beware of himself. Once more, Ahab is not to fear, just like Ulysses, the monsters of the world, but only the monsters in/of his soul³. When ordered to go on deck, Starbuck, "mastering is emotion" warns Ahab: "Thou hast outraged, not insulted me, sir; but for that I ask thee not to beware of Starbuck; thou wouldst but laugh; but let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man". (Melville, 1990: 657)

Another paradoxical way of emphasizing Ahab's madness is associating him with his seeming opposite, Pip. Pip is a character whose instincts tell him he must stay alive, and thus he must go away and leave behind the ship of the madmen. However, his trial, together with his dual personality (at some moment he speaks of himself as if of someone else) are regarded as madness. The one who wants to escape death and the one who goes straight towards it are put together, "There go two daft ones now... one daft with strength, the other daft with weakness." (Melville, 1990: 683)

However, inasmuch as one could speak of a circular route of Ahab's voyage at sea, since he follows something that already masters him / lives within his soul, one could argue that the captain's madness is generated precisely by the Other's gaze. The psychic as well as the physical profile of the hero is drawn by the monstrous gaze (in Lacanian terms). Without his obsession with the White Whale, not being circumscribed by its devilish look (and by the diabolical look of Fedallah), the captain would lose his contour, would be dispersed in the surrounding sea.

2. The nature of the monster. Marked characters. Love/Hatred dynamics

Another point of interest for our study is the way in which Moby Dick himself is circumscribed by Ahab's gaze, as well as by the text itself. In a way that could remind one of Lacanian concepts, the whale becomes the monster that it is by being named Leviathan, thus being shaped into a whole, i.e. by the Other's gaze (cf. Lacan's concepts of double mirroring and otherness). The white whale has been an object of constant fascination for the literature of the world, as shown in the collection of quotes used as an introductory treatise on whales by Melville, as well as in more recent literary criticism in the same way in which Moby Dick is a source of fascination/hatred for most characters. Interestingly, it seems that the Leviathan, as frequently named in the novel, obsessed Herman Melville himself with just the same intensity, as he confesses in one of his letters,

³ "Atunci când spre Ithaca vei porni-o./ Dorește-ți 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." (cf. Kavafis, *Opera poetică*)

For some days past, being engaged in the woods with axe, wedge, and beetle, the Whale has almost completely slipped me for the time (and I was the merrier for it) when crash! comes Moby Dick himself... and reminds me of what I have been about for part of the last year or two. It is really and truly a surprising coincidence – to say the least. I make no doubt it is Moby Dick himself, for there is no account of his capture after the sad fate of the Pequod about fourteen years ago... I wonder if my evil art has raised this monster. (“Letter to Evert Duyckinck, in response to news of the sinking of a whale ship by a whale, November 7, 1851”: 5)

This letter excerpt is highly representative of Melville’s own fascination with the whale, with the subject-matter of his romance, which is to be blamed for this surprising trespassing of the boundaries between life, reality outside the novel (a whale ship reported to have been sunk by a whale in 1851) and fiction.

Here is a brief review of only a few of the fascinating interpretations of Moby Dick. It has been argued that the whale could be read as a metaphor of the text itself, a text reflecting a whale-like universe, i.e. a world/text which cannot be understood beyond its surface, “S-ar putea ca, precum Ishmael, să nu putem nici noi să disecăm mai jos de piele.” (Pop-Corniș, 1982: 10) Such an analogy might derive rather from the “Etymology” of the whale, as Melville emphasizes it. The roundness, circularity of the whale’s body can be read as a key – symbol of the text, which is constructed by such circular quests mentioned before. The only possibility to deal with this text would, thus, be comprehension, i.e. reaching it from the inside, from beneath the veil, in a hermeneutic approach, “Refuzând să fie anatomizată balena melvilliană ne aruncă provocarea de a o citi ‘prin propriii ei ochelari’, adică ca pe un metadiscurs... înglobând în sine cheia de descifrare”. (Pop-Corniș, 1982: 10)

Another approach, even more focused on the symbolism of the whale, is the following: Moby Dick can be regarded as a special, marked animal, i.e. ab-normal (cf. Deleuze and Guattari’s approach), which becomes in a certain privileged moment the agent of human change/ regression/ metamorphosis, while simultaneously altering itself, as it is, indeed, anthropomorphized. In order that such a metamorphosis, such a “contamination” could happen, it is necessary that both man and animal be marked. Ahab, as far as we could see is an ex-centric, marked individual, on the verge of regression, dehumanization. As for the whale, it is marked, too: its whiteness is its defining sign. When man and animal meet, their “contamination”, hence their metamorphosis, takes place. The special, unique and nevertheless strange relationship established between the two is based on this very “contamination”, on the fact that identity borders as well as alterity, otherness, seen as a border, vanish during the meeting and thereafter. The two individuals intermingle. Both the premises and the outcome of such a reading are sustained by the text. Ahab, after meeting the whale, is incomplete. Not only that he remains

crippled, not only that he loses one leg, but his psyche is also affected. A part of him remained out there, and in search of this does he cross all the seas and oceans. Moby Dick has become part of himself and they belong together, hence his hatred / passion / madness.

2.1. *The ex-centricity of the whale*

Moving on to the thesis of the ex-centricity of the whale, this is sustained by the fact that Moby Dick is also seen as a marginal, monstrous, marked individual. Although the narrator tries to dissuade the reader from thinking about whales in terms of monstrosity, the message and the result of its dissemination is quite the opposite. The “curious imaginary portraits” which he tries to dismiss, “by proving such pictures of the whale all wrong”, and nothing but “pictorial delusions” (Melville, 1990: 533) only add to the monster imagery proposed by the romance. Moby Dick *is* rather than *is not*, in spite of the narrator’s trials to prove it otherwise, one of those “Richard III whales, with dromedary humps, and very savage breakfasting on three or four sailor tarts, that is whaleboats full of mariners”. (Melville, 1990: 535)

Although the narrative offers a lot of what is believed to be “scientific” information, which is present throughout the book, even in excess, the description it finally offers is rather mythical, based on the Bible, as seen in the Introductory collection of quotes (Appendix 1), as well as on the myth of the killer-whale. All the characters think about Moby Dick with horror and awe, due to hundreds of legends about its fierceness; here is only one example:

Wherefore he had no fancy for lowering for whales after sunset; not for persisting in fighting a fish that too much persisted in fighting him. For, thought Starbuck, I am here in this critical ocean to kill whales for my living, and not to be killed by them for theirs, and that hundreds of men had been so killed Starbuck well knew. What doom was his own father’s? Where, in the bottomless deeps, could he find the torn limbs of his brother? (Melville, 1990: 444)

The very opening of the book was supposed to offer a mythical background to the plot, by establishing a well drawn mythology of the Leviathan. Such information is going to prevail over the pseudo-scientific information the novel abounds in. Moby Dick is, from the beginning, “the piercing serpent”, “the crooked serpent” that must be punished by God, because it is a representative of the devil. It is more than once named monster, or simply the Leviathan, it is malefic and believed to be evil for the evil’s sake, and thus anthropomorphized “in most instances, such seemed the White Whale’s infernal ... ferocity, that every dismembering or death that he caused, was not wholly regarded as having been inflicted by an unintelligent agent” (Melville, 1990: 485), but by some “intelligent malignity”. (Melville, 1990: 485)

The evil, wicked whale that *hunts/haunts* Ahab and his crew at the same time as they hunt it cannot be just a whale, but a monster. Here are some of the characteristics it is thought to have: “Forced into familiarity, then, ...knowing that after repeated, intrepid assaults, the White Whale had escaped alive; it cannot be much matter of surprise that some of the whalers should further in their superstitions; declaring Moby Dick not only ubiquitous, but immortal”. (Melville, 1990: 484)

More than that, “Such is then the outlandish, eel-like, limbered, varying shape of him, that his precise expression the devil himself could not catch”, hence, the Leviathan is *protean*, a devil in itself, uncatchable, unpaintable, “the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last”. (Melville, 1990: 535) The only certain thing about it, is that Moby Dick is not just “a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory”. (Melville, 1990: 498) It has substance taken from the myth of Jonah, from the very Bible.

2.2. Pseudo-scientific descriptions of the whale

Nevertheless, there is more than abundant “scientific” information throughout the narrative. The XXXIInd chapter aims to offer a scientific approach and even a classification of whales. It is called “Caetology”, yet, what it brings into the open is just another fanciful description of whales, a “classification of the constituents of a chaos”. (Melville, 1990: 454) The starting point is the assumption that “Utter confusion exists among the historians of this animal (sperm whale) says surgeon Beale, A.D. 1839”. (Melville, 1990: 454) Most of the times, the information the author tries to provide is at least fanciful, if not fantastic altogether. Here are some examples:

Between his ribs, and on each side of his spine, he is supplied with a remarkable involved Cretan labyrinth of vermicelli-like vessels, which vessels, when he quits the surface, are completely distended with oxygenated blood. ...he carries a surplus stock of vitality in him, just as the camel crossing the waterless desert carries a surplus supply of drink for future use in its four supplementary stomachs. (Melville, 1990: 596)

This “Caetology” describes the whale more in literary, than in scientific, terms. Here is one more example: one of the classes is described as “a pirate. Very savage. He is only found, I think, in the Pacific. ...Provoke him, and he will be buckle to a shark. ...” (Melville, 1990: 460) Soon enough the narrator abandons the scientific data and the scientific approach, since he cannot accept the whale is not a fish. “I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon

holy Jonah to back me". (Melville, 1990: 455) The authority that backs the narrator is, thus, a mythical one, once more.

In conclusion, Moby Dick remains a Leviathan, a monster, a marked, ex-centric whale, made unique by its anthropomorphizing wickedness and by its color. Because we must not forget that the whale is the White Whale. Once more the narrator chooses to stuff the reader with more than enough information about the significance of this color.

*Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas, and pearls; and though various pre-eminence in its hue... and though in other mortal sympathies and symbolizings, this same hue is made the emblem of many touching, **noble things** – the **innocence** of brides, the benignity of age... This elusive quality it is, which causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, are coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten than **terror** to the furthest bounds* (Melville, 1990: 488; our underlining)

2.3. Characters' "contamination"

To sum up, the whale is also a marginal, ex-centric (monstrous) individuality, just like Ahab in his world. The conditions for their contact and "contamination" are fulfilled, sustained by the text. The result of such a process is also overtly stated in the narrative. The identification man/Ahab – animal/White Whale does take place, as we can see in the last few paragraphs of the novel,

and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it (Melville, 1990: 713),

in which the heaven – hell closeness and fusion is only a metaphor for the union Ahab – Moby Dick, as implied by Ahab's death in the struggle of the meeting. Not to mention the overtly stated fusion in the following excerpt,

Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. (Melville, 1990: 485)

Indeed, the whale can be seen – throughout the novel – as an "agent of influence", while itself changing, being influenced. The "subject of the change" is embodied

by Ahab, the wanderer, the nomad (cf. Deleuze and Guattari) who does not pursue a certain goal, but rather follows a certain path, leading to the object of his fascination. He knows only the way to the unidentified, exciting unknown (indeed the whale remains unknown till the end of the book, we should not forget that, like the Devil, it cannot be described, caught in any known pattern, hence its monstrosity). He follows this path, thus pursuing not only the whale, but his own initiation, which he is not aware of. Their first meeting will be followed immediately by the effects of the contamination: both whale and man become outcasts. Ahab is seen by his mates as a strange, isolated – though authoritative – person (cf. the above mentioned description from Ishmael’s perspective), marked, maimed and thus different. The same thing can be said about the whale, itself being marked, as already emphasized.

Such a reading also comes close to another approach, from the point of view of Todorov’s image of the Other. Todorov deals with identity in terms of fear: fear of the alterity, of the unknown, of the strange, of the foreign, i.e. of difference (Irimia, 1995: 198). The cause of this fear – and I would add fascination – is the fact that identity is “challenged from within... At the heart of identity there is alterity” (Irimia, 1995: 198).

This assimilation of otherness into sameness comes very close to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “contamination”. The difference is that their approach, unlike Todorov’s, takes into account both sides of the coin. The other irrupts in the middle of the self who is already different, “the other” within the circle of his own species, and at the same time this alterity receives the influence of the subject in a never-ending circular process of contamination.

This is also close enough to an early Martin Buber’s understanding of the relation between “Ich und Du”, i.e. “I and You”. In Buber’s terms, these two entities come to have a relation not because of their sameness, but especially because they are totally different from each other (Buber, 1992: 18). Once more do we come across a view which emphasizes the difference, the importance of otherness in a relationship based on comprehension (and not on objective understanding). It is interesting that Buber stresses, like Deleuze and Guattari do, the fact that such a relation cannot be established except in a certain privileged moment, a moment of “grace” (Buber, 1992: 19), “evenimentul relației Eu – Tu nu se instaurează decât prin conlucrarea actului deliberat al voinței cu grația” (Buber, 1992: 19), and again, “Pe Tu numai grația mi-l aporie, căutându-l, nu-l obțin”. (Buber, 1992: 37)

At this point, we should analyze Ahab’s wandering across the sea in these terms. Ahab cannot look for the whale, he wanders hoping to meet that moment of grace when he can finally meet Moby Dick. He can feel the monster, use his instincts to approach it, but only in a moment of “grace” can he encounter the monster.

Buber also emphasizes the importance of reciprocity in this Ich – Du relation: a relation by definition means reciprocity, “Beziehung ist Gegenseitigkeit” and, later on, “Tu al meu acțiunează asupra mea exact așa cum acționez eu asupra lui” (Buber, 1992: 42), close enough to Deleuze’s earlier concept of “répétition ontologique” (Deleuze, 1968: 374), which is

Celle-ci n’aurait pas pour fonction, de supprimer les deux autres; mais, d’une part de leur distribuer la différence (comme différence soutirée ou compressé), d’autre part de produire elle-même l’illusion qui les affecte, en les empêchant pourtant de développer l’erreur attendant ou elles tombent (Deleuze, 1968: 374), which is a way of stating that the two entities in the process of meeting (later “contamination”) share each other’s difference, without losing their identity. The madness of the individual probably springs from the fact that the two entities dwell upon a liminal position. Their contamination, the process of their changing and melting into each other is a never-ending one, since they are condemned to live in a borderland.

2.4. The whale as an agent of initiation

So far, the whale has been read as the other, in a very special relation with another marked individual, and as an agent of change. We shall now focus on the concept of initiation in order to better synthesize the role of the whale as an agent of initiation. What this concept basically implies is the idea of a revelation and also the conditioned acquisition of a second personality. This process implies an entire ritual consisting in successive revelations following a crescendo pattern: sacrifice/maiming/castration, symbolic death, rebirth into a superior state. An essential element in this ritual is the sacrificial experience, which may consist of ritual murder and sacrifice, sexual maiming (literal castration), all these emphasizing the victory of the forces of evil and death, of chaos over life.

As we mentioned before, Melville’s hero has come through such maiming and symbolic death. Ahab’s wounds are concrete, visible, marking him and representing steps towards, stages in his initiation. He experiences a real *sparagmos*, a ritual disappearance from the deck of the ship. Ahab’s seclusion in his cabin for three days can be read as the seclusion within the monster, the Leviathan, like that of the old Shamans, which is to be followed by change and rebirth. Actually, the hero is saved through a ritual rebirth, for this succession death – new birth describes a rite of passage from one stage of life to a superior one.

A very interesting problem to discuss is the type of initiation that Melville’s heroes undergo (cf. Marcel Pop-Corniș) in order to acquire mature consciousness, since Melville’s characters can be read as child-like innocents. Just like the initiation of heroes and explorers, the initiation of the innocent presupposes a series of physical and spiritual attempts. However, there are some differences between the two types:

while the “hero” is a winner (even though he is punished immediately after his deed, for his *hybris*), the innocent must abandon all hope of winning and accept the total obedience to a superior force (*moēra*?) Melville’s innocents will also discover, step by step, that the world cannot be known through static contemplation, but only through moving on, through conscient navigation (Pop-Corniș, 1982: 100-117). From this point of view, demoniac Ahab, who baptized his lance in the name of the Devil, can be read as an innocent who needs to be initiated in order to receive the final communion. Thus, the shape of Melville’s romance would be that of an encounter, of initiatory confrontation at the end of a travel (cf. the model of the *Odyssey*). All the four moments of the expedition myth are to be found in *Moby-Dick*: *agon*, *pathos*, *sparagmos*, *anagnorisis*. Ahab goes through a stage of confrontation with the monster (*agon*), through one of suffering and maiming (*pathos*), cf. Ahab’s own acquiescence, “now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief” (Melville, 1990: 713), disappearing as above mentioned (*sparagmos*), and a final stage of “recognition”, of revelation (*anagnorisis*).

What establishes a connection among all these approaches, i.e. the reading of the whale as the initiator of influence, contamination between the two marginal, exceptional, marked individuals; or the decoding of this process as an initiation based on suffering and castration (*pathos*); or the Ich–Du relation, based on the fascination of two different entities; or the fascination/fear of alterity – what is common to all these points of view is precisely the stress laid on the *monstrosity*, ab-normality, exceptionalism of the whale. One could speak of *Moby Dick* as monster either seen as embodiment of the forces of evil, or as the Leviathan, an aquatic monster “de la mythologie phénicienne mentionné dans la Bible, où il devient le symbole de paganisme.” (Maubourguet, 1995: 1466)

2.5. The monster whale

We can also see it as a monster in the broadest sense of the word. Here is how *Encyclopaedia Universalis* defines it: “Le monstre se définit donc comme différence par rapport à la perception que l’on a généralement du monde naturel.” (*Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 1985: 285) Even more important than this is that “le monstre constitue un signifiant esthétique”, so it is created in order to be opposed to the real world, a thing also stated by Melville’s chapter LV, “Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales”, as already emphasized. The goal of creating monsters would be “d’opposer à l’univers perçu un autre monde, parfois un antimonde”. (*Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 1985: 286) The spirit of order of Classicism considers the monster a chaos “constitué par le démembrement des êtres organisés par Dieu”. Thus, “le monstre conteste le goût de l’harmonie et le respect de la nature”. (*Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 1985: 286)

In spite of the narrator's explicit intention to prove the fact that, such monstrous representations are nothing but "pictorial delusions", Moby Dick yet appears – as already shown – as a genuine monster, i.e. *protean*, "his precise expression the devil himself could not catch" (Melville, 1990: 535), ungraspable, unpaintable, because "there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like." (Melville, 1990: 536)

Although Moby Dick cannot be painted as a sum of parts deriving from the dismemberment of other natural beings, as any monster should be, its protean character fits in the same pattern. If we take into account other characteristics of the monster, we will notice that the white whale stands for most of them,

- "instaurant l'angoisse et la terreur, il ne fait pas 'plaisir'";
- "le monstre réveille en l'homme des peurs très primitives";
- "souvent le monstre *attire, fascine et dégoûte* à la fois", "ne représente pas toujours le mal";
- "le monstre se nourrit de fantasmes" (*Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 1985: 285)

Indeed, we have seen already that, at certain times, nobody knows for sure if the whale is a phantasma or a real thing that it fascinates and scares the characters at the same time (cf. the fear/fascination of otherness). More than that, the white whale brings about hatred and vengeance that will motivate its search.

Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge. How it was that they 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; the White Whale as much their insufferable foe as his. (Melville, 1990: 487)

As we have tried to emphasize, madness sprung out of this hatred generates in its turn "the abandonment of the time and the place". (Melville, 1990: 487) Above all, the whale remains the Leviathan, symbol of evil, devilish creature, able to turn an entire crew/world into dust. Synthesizing all these approaches, Moby-Dick *does* stand for the special, marked agent of man's initiation, ab-normal, unreachable, protean, hence monstrous. It is the Devil himself pursued by the wanderer always already possessed by it, by the innocent who does not know what it is, but only the path to be followed. Though agent of death and evil, an irresistible source of fascination, i.e. hatred. Above all, "Moby Dick seemed combinedly possessed by all the angels that fell from heaven". (Melville, 1990: 710)

3. Contemporary responses

One last thing should nevertheless be mentioned: the huge amount of information about whale hunting and whales as such, the encyclopedic information that stiffens the natural flow of the plot. It is enough to mention a few chapters that bring about this unpleasant effect: “Caetology”, with the almost unbearable classification of whales, “The Sperm Whale’s Head – Contrasted View”, “The Right Whale’s Head – Contrasted View”, “The Honour and Glory of Whaling”, “Jonah Historically Regarded”, etc, etc. All these data spring out of the author’s wish to exhaust the subject-matter, which proves a difficult task; it is, nevertheless, an accomplished goal, although the plot’s fluidity is sacrificed: “Since I have undertaken to manhandle this Leviathan, it behooves me to approve myself omnisciently exhaustive in the enterprise; not overlooking the minutest seminal germs of his blood...” (Melville, 1990: 646)

Although such data have huge importance in the economy of the text – they establish, as shown above, the mythical roots of the novel itself – at times they suffocate the drama. Because the novel is, among other things, a very well knit drama.

The novel is not very convincing as a narrative, however it is full of powerful images and scenes. There are to be found a lot of paragraphs and even chapters that can be staged. More than once does the narrator offer the reader true stage directions. Unfortunately, such brilliant visual dynamic fragments are scattered in an ocean of encyclopedic data.

Probably this is why the contemporaries of *Moby Dick* very seldom appreciated it. Here are only a few examples: “This is an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact. The idea of a connected and collected story has obviously visited and abandoned its writer... The style of his tale is in places disfigured by mad (rather than bad) English...”, says the *London Athenaeum* (“Moby-Dick; or, The Whale. Contemporary Criticism and Reviews”: 4), October 25, 1851. Or, “The ‘marvelous’ injures the book by disjointing the narrative, as well as by its inherent want of interest, at least as managed by Mr. Melville”, states the *London Spectator*, October 25, 1851. The *Illustrated London News* also thinks that the book’s imaginative power is “degenerating, however, too often into rhapsody and purposeless extravagance”, and the examples could continue.

Most of the critics think that the novel is spoiled, if not ruined. Only a few praise the book. However, no one can deny at least nowadays that

The artist has succeeded in investing objects apparently the most unattractive with an absorbing fascination... the profound reflections uttered by the actors in the

wild watery chase in their own quaint forms of thought and speech – and the graphic representations of human nature in the startling disguises under which it appears on the deck of the Pequod – all these combine to raise *The Whale* far beyond the level of an ordinary work of fiction. It is not a mere tale of adventures, but a whole philosophy of life, that it unfolds. (London *John Bull*, October 25, 1851).

4. Instead of conclusions

Just as interesting as this complex, even if hybrid, novel is the way in which the reader has access to it. It is not a fully-drawn character that helps us enter this strange fictional universe, merely a voice, a shadow, acting as a witness. Ishmael's role is maybe the most interesting detail of the novel. He is the one who shows, indicates, points at things and also interprets them for the reader. Ishmael is a sort of go-between acting at the frontier of the fictional world to be described, and the reader, and this is why he is not completely integrated in the plot. He seems to be an instrument of the author just like the other characters are an instrument of Ahab, only that he is moved to and fro in a universe that he must show and try to comprehend. "Look there!" (Melville, 1990: 395) are his favorite words, establishing a dialogue with the reader, since the latter must be caught in the trap of the text, since the latter must be shown "the key to it all" (Melville, 1990: 378), which can only be: true life means meeting, "Begegnung" in Buber's terms (Buber, 1992: 38), or rather chasing. In other words, it is the reader himself who must accept to be fascinated by the White Whale, or rather, by *Moby Dick*.

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The authors

Raluca Șerban is currently associate professor with The Bucharest University of Economic Studies and teaches Business English and Professional Communication to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as Romanian as a foreign language. Specialized in American Studies, she has a PhD in this field, with the thesis *Representations of Authorship in the Postmodern American Novel. Self-fictionalization in John Barth's Writing*. She has published articles in academic journals and has authored and co-authored several ESP textbooks. Her main research interests include American cultural studies, postmodern literature and action / practitioner research.

Mihai Șerban is currently lecturer with The Bucharest University of Economic Studies and teaches Business French and Professional Communication to undergraduate and graduate students and Romanian as a foreign language. Specialized in Comparative Literature, he has a PhD in this field, with the thesis *Lecturi iconologice și ekphrastice la André Gide. Procedeeul punerii în abis și fenomenul de transfer*. He has published a number of articles in academic journals and has authored RFL (Romanian as a foreign language) textbooks. His main research interests include comparative literature, psychoanalysis, iconological and ekphrastic studies, but also action / practitioner research.