

THE LIVING CONTOUR

The Whale Symbol in Melville and Pratt

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IT TAKES A LIVELY EYE to catch leviathan in the act of swallowing his tail. Yet such agility seems necessary to the reader of Pratt or Melville who wishes to cope with the great whale as a symbol. The question is largely one of limits. Where does significance begin and end? Or does it begin and end at all?

James Baird in his intricate study of Melville appears at one point to set limits. "Great art . . . endures because it lends itself to the hues on any passing sensibility. It goes on meaning all things to all men. The responsibility of criticism remains fixed: to establish the facts of what it meant to its maker."¹ The value of the statement lies in its defining not only the critic's role as compared to that of any "passing sensibility," but also the limits between which meaning in art can exist: "all things to all men" and "what it meant to its maker." The trouble lies, of course, in the word "meaning" itself. How much, one is bound to ask, of the "all things to all men" may lie within "what it meant to its maker."?

Critical comment on Melville's *Moby Dick* justifiably outweighs in bulk and elaboration what is available on Pratt's *The Cachalot*. Yet the criticism of each seems to me to lie between the same extremities: that which sees no justification for a symbolistic approach to what it regards as self-contained narrative, and that which finds the work open-ended, allowing for, if not inviting, countless varieties of interpretation. In Melville's case the balance tips towards the latter, while for Pratt it appears to favour the former. The reasons for this difference lie obviously in differences of size, design and complexity in the two works. What the two narratives offer, taken together, is a common image, the great whale; a

common action, a clash of titanic forces; and a common conclusion, mutual destruction. The opposition between these common elements in the narratives and the vast disparity of scope and design may prove useful to my purpose of examining the limits of significance.

The white whale in *Moby Dick* is given size by the size of the book. All of the whale and whaling matter in the book goes into the making of the central image. In the "Etymology" and "Extracts", a further extension occurs. The story proper and the individual whale are set in a larger context, which aims to encompass all the literature and lore of whales. Pratt's five-hundred and twenty-five lines are a minnow by comparison, and yet the sense of size in the central image is not wanting, and the effect is no less a cumulative one. The opening lines in establishing the whale's lineage have somewhat the effect of Melville's preliminaries, but Pratt does not reach as far out or backward, and his "cetacean lore" must bear a tremendous charge to equal in effect the amount of such lore actually present in *Moby Dick*. In this matter, there may be just no comparison, but there is, I think, for Pratt a compensating factor, which is the medium of verse itself.

Keats' sonnet, "On Looking into Chapman's Homer", is remarkable for the degree to which a sense of Homer's expanse is contained within fourteen lines. Imagery, vowel sounds and control of the iambic line are all factors in Keats' success, but equally important is the confinement of the sonnet form itself. The pressure of matter against form has a great deal to do with the poem's effectiveness. Similarly, in Pratt's octosyllabics, the pressure of matter against form, the play of multisyllabic roll on monosyllabic strength, and the cumulative effect of a sustained rhythm are built-in amplifiers. For all that, no one would claim for Keats' sonnet equality of magnitude with Homer, and no one would pretend for *The Cachalot* the measurements of *Moby Dick*. Within the limits of the poem itself, however, the sense of magnitude in the whale is similar. In either case, it is not just a matter of creating a life-sized impression of physical immensity, but of making a mythic or epic image, larger even than life.

Melville's prose medium is as fluid as the sea in which his whale swims. It is firmly responsive to the action depicted. Rhythmic expressiveness becomes particularly impressive in the final chapters of the book when the white whale enters the story physically: "...far out on the soft Turkish-rugged waters, went the glistening white shadow from his broad, milky forehead, a musical rippling playfully accompanying the shade, and behind, the blue waters interchangeably flowed over into the moving valley of his steady wake; and on either hand bright bubbles arose and danced by his side. But these were broken again by the light

toes of hundreds of gay fowl softly featuring the sea.” The responsiveness of this prose involves sound and texture as well as rhythm. Pratt’s medium would appear to be more confining:

Over his back, the running seas
 Cascaded, while the morning sun
 Rising in gold and beryl, spun
 Over the cachalot’s streaming gloss,
 And from the foam, a fiery floss
 Of multitudinous fashionings,
 And dipping downward from the blue,
 The sea-gulls from Comore flew,
 And brushed him with their silver wings.

This passage illustrates the maximum departure from the normal pulsations of the tetrameter. It is not my purpose to compare the effectiveness of the two passages, both of which I consider remarkably good, but to illustrate Pratt’s success in the more confining medium. The very regularity of the rhythm throughout the poem serves the poet here, since variations within a rigid medium have stronger effects than those within a more fluid medium.

Elsewhere in *The Cachalot*, Pratt is able to use the regular pulse of his rhythm to make the whale’s movement physically palpable in the verse:

No febrile stirring as might spring
 From a puny barracuda lunging
 At a tuna’s leap, some minor thing,
 A tarpon or a dolphin plunging —
 But a deep consonant that rides
 Below the measured beat of tides
 With that vast, undulating rhythm
 A sounding sperm whale carries with him.

The faltering and steadying of the beat are locally expressive, but more significant is the discovery that the “vast, undulating rhythm” is the rhythm of the poem. The “deep consonant” is felt everywhere underlaying the surface fluctuations. Melville has other means of making his whale’s presence felt throughout the book, but the sense of it as a thing always there, a thing swimming continuously under the surface phenomena is similar. “. . . the great floodgates of the underworld swung open and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom like a snow hill in the air.”

The white whale is at first a phantom in the book but gathers body in the course of the pursuit. All of the physical details associated with the killing and processing of whales serve to solidify the image. The final chapters, in a sense, recapitulate the total development. On his first physical entrance, the whale is still a shadowy thing, merging with the fluid sea. In the course of the three days of chase, he assumes stronger and stronger bodily presence. In his "breaching" on the second day, Moby Dick, himself, breaks the surface of the novel with tremendous force. The larger movement is an aspect of the total design. The white whale, as an image, cannot be localized. He is the phantom pull seaward at the beginning, the motive of the voyage, and the end. The process of his realization is the process of the book.

There is nothing in Pratt's poem to match this larger rhythm, in which every pause is felt as a gathering of force for the final assault. There is not the same sense of growth and gradual emergence in the whale itself, which appears in full strength at the outset of the poem. Of the three sections of *The Cachalot*, the first two make up less than half of the poem. The chief narrative interest lies in the third part, for which the other parts may be regarded as preparatory. Section one is occupied by the cachalot himself, his lineage, his legendary feats, and his anatomy. Section two opens with a description of the kraken's lair and of the kraken himself. The encounter between the monsters follows with no suspense, and titanic as the struggle is, the issue is quickly decided. In the final section of the poem, the alternation of head-on attack with temporary pause is not unlike the action depicted in the final chapters of *Moby Dick*. The dramatic powers of both novelist and poet are summoned for the last lunge: ". . . in spite of all that mortal man could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship's starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled."

Ten feet above and ten below
 The water-line his forehead caught her.
 The capstan and the anchor fled,
 When bolts and stanchions swept asunder,
 For what was iron to that head,
 And oak — in that hydraulic thunder?

Although, as I have said, there is not in Pratt's whale the quality of growth found in Melville's, there is development of a kind. The second section of the poem has to be accounted for. How does the cachalot's battle with the kraken affect our notion of him? There are, of course, certain purely dramatic effects. The right of the cachalot to the title of monarch is proved in that second section,

and the lower extent of his kingdom is measured there. The whale's triumph in the deep lends irony to the outcome of the surface battle.

The symbolistic approach to Pratt's poetry dates from John Sutherland's long article in *Northern Review*² and the book he developed from it.³ Much subsequent criticism of Pratt has been endorsement or modification of Sutherland's views, or violent reaction against them.⁴ While I am not prepared to follow Sutherland all the way, I do think that en route he proves a perceptive guide. Particularly helpful are some of his comments on the second section of *The Cachalot* and the image of the kraken: "... when we turn to the poem, we discover the curious fact that most of the key words employed to describe him — 'antennae,' 'coil,' 'vibrate,' 'cable,' 'socket,' 'tensile,' and 'suction cup' — have an electrical or a mechanical reference as well as an anatomical one. . . . The kraken is half monster and half a superb machine."⁵ Sutherland goes on to assert that the cachalot in devouring the kraken assumes something of his character.⁶ He concludes with a significant statement: "... there is never a firm distinction in Pratt's narratives between the 'here' and the 'demon.' . . . There may be an ambivalence of this kind in part two of *The Cachalot*: if the whale and kraken are not actually 'kin,' they are related in a way that militates against a rigid interpretation of their significance."⁷

Pratt gives the impression that both his monsters are fearfully and wonderfully made. The kraken, of a more primitive, cold-blooded order, less conscious and less mobile than that of whales, is more alien and repellent. The struggle itself does not appear to be one of hero against villain, or good against evil, but of cetacean with cephalopod, a confrontation of two blindly amoral forces. When the cachalot, who has "gorged" upon the kraken's "fibrous jelly — Until finding that six tons lay — Like Vulcan's anvil in his belly," appears again in Part III, the sinister associations remain with him:

In a white cloud of mist emerged —
Terror of head and hump and brawn,
Silent and sinister and grey

Swimming blandly on the surface, he carries the depths and that grim encounter in the depths with him.

A giant squid appears briefly in *Moby Dick*. It brings with it a sense of unutterable and alien mystery similar to that conjured with the kraken in Pratt's poem; "A vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth, lay floating on the water, innumerable long arms radiating from its centre, and curling and twisting like a

nest of anacondas, . . . No perceptible face or front did it have; no conceivable token of either sensation or instinct; but undulated there on the billows, an un-earthly, formless, chance-like apparition." Starbuck establishes the association between this kraken and the white whale: "'Almost rather had I seen Moby Dick and fought him than to have seen thee, thou white ghost!'" Like all the sea phenomena in the book, the squid serves to emphasize certain qualities in the central symbol.

The cachalot's colour is grey, grey seen through white mist. Grey is to Pratt as white is to Melville. Grey is appropriate in its neutrality to the ambivalence of attitudes established. One recalls the steely greyness of Pratt's shark,⁸ and his iceberg of *The Titanic*, "the grey shape with the paleolithic face."⁹ Whiteness is Melville implies a starker, antinomian ambivalence: "Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour, and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning . . . ?"

Even the least symbolic of *Moby Dick's* critics, one who denies the novel's power to bear the weight of interpretative criticism loaded upon it, admits the presence in the novel of qualities that seem to invite such treatment: "Of ambiguity, to be sure, there is plenty — contradiction and paradox, dualism and antinomy. Ahab is, according to Captain Peleg, 'a grandly ungodly, god-like man' (ch. 16); the whiteness of the whale is dubious — fair or foul (ch. 42). And to the ambiguous or paradoxical the symbolist critics particularly take, for latitude much eases the path of interpretation."¹⁰ The latitude that appears to Mr. Stoll to ease the path, in fact, erases it altogether and makes almost any individual reading, apart from the book itself, a misreading, in the sense of containing something less than the truth. John Sutherland, as we have seen, discovered that the ambivalence established in Pratt's poem "militates against a rigid interpretation."¹¹ This discovery did not prevent the critic from proceeding toward a highly individualistic interpretation, that of seeing Pratt's whale as a Christ-symbol.¹² Similar discoveries followed by similar courses are not hard to come by among Melville's critics.

The limits of meaning in both Melville and Pratt are set in part by the points of view. Melville, through the eye of his beholder, Ishmael, can peer into metaphysical depths denied to Pratt. On the other hand, Pratt is able to look into physical depths, within the living whale and in the ocean, denied to Melville.

Through Ishmael's eye, the vision of other characters in the novel is filtered, and Ishmael himself is the one who learns that the final meaning of things is past our finding out: "Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none?" Ishmael's place in the novel as a character and as author-narrator is not constant. At times, he disappears into his vision; at times, he assumes omniscience. In one respect, he shares Ahab's burden and his guilt; in another, he remains essentially detached from the moral issues. He is saved in the end not only for the act of creation; that is, come back and tell; but by the act of creation, which includes his beholding, his recording and his ordering of the vision.

In *The Cachalot*, the point of view shifts more freely. We begin with the author omniscient beholding the great whale inside and out. In the second section, the whale is perceived as a vibration in the squid's antennae:

The kraken felt that as the flow
Beat on his lair with plangent power,
It was the challenge of his foe,
The prelude to a fatal hour.

The fatality of the encounter is sensed through the kraken. In the third section, the whale is spotted first from the cross-trees of the royal mast of *The Albatross*. His sinister and immovable greyness appears in the eyes of the crew. In the struggle itself, the view shifts significantly to the whale:

He swung his bulk round to pursue
This arrogant and impious crew. . . .
An acrid torture in his soul
Growing with the tragic hurry
Of the bloodstream through the widening
hole
Presaged a sperm-whale's dying flurry.

In the final lines of the poem, the view returns to that of the outside beholder.

Pratt has freely shifted points of view, not to establish moral grounds, nor to cause the reader to identify finally with one protagonist. His moving eye has allowed for the fullest dramatic participation. Northrop Frye points out how the movements of the all-seeing eye effect a complexity in the image: "When we look from the outside . . . we see only the endless struggle to survive which has been practically all pain and cruelty. But when we shift the view to the inside,

we see the exuberant, unquenchable force of life, which fights to maintain itself, but can find its fulfilment also in defeat and death."¹³ The blend of awe, terror and exuberance, found in Pratt, is found in Melville as well. It is a matter of tone as much as of point of view.

Melville's white whale, then, would seem to have multiple significance, and a single interpretation is more likely to be partial, less than true to Melville's intention, than outside it altogether. Most critics I have read are aware of this limit and set their individual interpretations on this side of it. Such characterizations of the whale as "a comprehensive, dynamic symbol for the whole immense, riddling, uncaring cosmos,"¹⁴ are not uncommon nor far-fetched, for they simply state in other words what the book itself finds out. Pratt's cachalot offers probably less latitude, and a single interpretation is in greater danger of trespassing outside the limits of conscious or unconscious intentions. Nevertheless, the nature of the whale and the conflicts he is caught in seem, as in *Moby Dick*'s case, to encompass Pratt's notion of the way things are, and any arbitrary meaning is likely to be *a* meaning without being *the* meaning.

Pratt had not read Melville before publishing *The Cachalot* in 1925, but in 1929 he edited a condensed version of *Moby Dick* for Macmillan's St. Martin's series. (How much of a hand Pratt had in this cutting up of Melville's whale I have not been able to find out.) Commenting on the novel's significance in his brief introduction, Pratt remains well within the limits set by the book: "The appraisal of *Moby Dick* as an immensity in our English literature springs from the underlying feeling of mystery, the sense of clash between vague, titanic forces — the feud which, as Melville says, 'Time has with the sons of men.'"¹⁵ More interesting is his remark that "the great achievement is the final impression left on the reader's mind that chaos itself is subject to architectural treatment."¹⁶ Here is the novel's meaning for an artificer who, like Melville himself, is engaged in finding means for bodying out and giving significant shape to what is essentially shadowy and shapeless. The significance lies in the architectural process itself.

At this point, it is interesting to note that E. E. Stoll's attack on the symbolistic approach to *Moby Dick* is really an attack on the book itself. It is not the failure of the critics to understand the book that concerns him, but the failure of the book, in his view, to stand up to such understanding.¹⁷ Other critics, like Charles Feidelson Jr. have emphasized the solidity of the book as the ground for symbolistic interpretation: "The whale is simultaneously the most solid of physical things and the most meaningful of symbols. The voyaging intellect of Ishmael interacts with the material world to generate symbolic meaning."¹⁸

Substance and process, it seems to me, suggest the limits of symbolic meaning in the work of both Melville and Pratt. The whale symbols created by both are not static or arbitrary but organic, each having its growth not only in the individual work but in the writer's *œuvre* as a whole. Symbolistic interpretation may justifiably proceed in two directions: outward from the individual work and inward from the total development. Symbolistic meaning is inherent in the artistic process itself, the "architectural treatment" of materials that without it hold no meaningful shape in the mind. A critic who flies easily into speculation runs the risk of leaving the book which is his ground far below. He will end by creating his own book, if he is good, and we shall not quarrel with his right to do so, as long as he doesn't try to make us forget the book he started from. Individual interpretations may enrich the book for us, but what counts is the architecture of the book itself, the great arches of bone and muscle that compose the image. We end as we began somewhat equivocally in saying that the book itself is what the book is about. "And the only mode in which you can divine even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a-whaling yourself." (*Moby Dick*)

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ James Baird, *Ishmael: A Study of the Symbolic Mode in Primitivism*.
- ² "E. J. Pratt: A Major Contemporary Poet," *Northern Review*, V (April-May 1952), 36-64.
- ³ *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt: A New Interpretation*, (Toronto, 1956).
- ⁴ See Earle Birney, "E. J. Pratt and His Critics," *Masks of Poetry*, ed. A. J. M. Smith, (Toronto, 1962), pp. 72-95.
- ⁵ *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt*, p. 60.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ⁸ *Collected Poems*, p. 5.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 242.
- ¹⁰ E. E. Stoll, "Symbolism in Moby Dick," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XII (June 1951) 450.
- ¹¹ *The Poetry of E. J. Pratt*, p. 61.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- ¹³ "Introduction," E. J. Pratt, *Collected Poems*, p. xxi.
- ¹⁴ John Parke, "Seven Moby Dicks," *Interpretations of American Literature*, edd. Feidelson and Brodtkarb, (New York, 1959), p. 87.
- ¹⁵ "Introduction," Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, (Toronto, 1929), p. xiv.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
- ¹⁷ Stoll, p. 452.
- ¹⁸ *Symbolism and American Literature*, (Chicago, 1953), p. 184.