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ENTER AHAB, THEN ALL:

THEATRICAL ELEMENTS IN MELVILLE'S FICTION

AFICIONADOS ARE AWARE that certain chapters of *Moby Dick* are composed like a play script, complete to stage directions, but few seem to have noticed how frequently Herman Melville employs many other theatrical devices (visual and aural effects) at crucial points in his works. Most often the theatrical effects are blended in clusters around dramatic plot-situations, but they can be reasonably classified into three general techniques: the use of the nineteenth-century "picture-frame" stage; the use of semi-operatic choruses and bombastic speeches; and the use of theatrical sudden disclosures which are intensified by means of carefully contrived visual focal points. Before analyzing examples of these theatrical elements, however, it is of importance to consider the question of whether theatrical effects—practical stage devices—are consistent with Melville's thematic or, if you will, his dramatic purposes.

The very first chapter of *Moby Dick* provides a clue which suggests that for Melville the stage is a metaphor rather than a mere place for acting. Ishmael, having discussed his reasons for going to sea, begins to inquire into his reasons for writing about the last voyage of the *Pequod*: ". . . I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces . . ."1, and he surmises that he was predestined to the voyage. It is evident that what follows is to be a drama, in which the actors are cast and directed by the Fates. But how large is the stage? Melville is hardly attempting to portray all the world. Rather he presents a small complement of men in the narrow confines of a ship, roaming the most deserted areas of the world, cut off from the rest of humanity except for occasional encounters with like men, on like ships, equally confined and limited in their movements. In this

novel, Melville does not say any more about the stage on which he will perform his drama.

Forty years later, however, in *Billy Budd*, Melville falls into the same language of the theatre, although he does not compose any portions of this last novel in the manner of a stage script. Here he becomes most intent on explaining how and why a ship is a suitable microcosm for staging his ideas. In the first paragraph of Chapter 14, he says:

Passion, and passion in its profoundest, is not a thing demanding a palatial stage whereon to play its part. Down among the groundlings, among the beggars and rakers of the garbage, profound passion is enacted. And the circumstances that provoke it, however trivial and mean, are no measure of its power. In the present instance the stage is a scrubbed gun-deck, and one of the external provocations a man-of-war's spilled soup.²

Earlier, in Chapter 11, he had stated why human contacts are intensified on shipboard:

Now there can exist no irritating juxtaposition of dissimilar personalities comparable to that which is possible aboard a great warship fully manned and at sea. There, every day among all ranks almost every man comes into more or less of a contact with almost every other man (p. 35).³

By choosing a ship for his stage, Melville solves a problem that confronts every playwright: selecting a setting which will be limited in size, but which will still provide a natural arena for the interplay of the characters. A ship, when once properly provisioned, can exist independently of the rest of the world for months at a time, allowing the drama to be played out without outside human influence. Melville deliberately describes the independence of the *Pequod*, pointing out that it carries enough fresh water to maintain the crew on the Pacific for the greater part of a year. I believe that one reason for this isolation is thematic, reflecting Ahab's deliberate self-exile from humanity and, ultimately, from sophisticated manifestations of God's law. But the ship also provides a dramatically manageable environment for the exhibition of universal problems of good and evil. A desire to narrow the boundaries of action and focus the reader's attention at crucial moments seems to be characteristic of Melville as well as of the theatre. Focussing is one of the most basic stage devices of modern directorial practice, and Melville's methods are remarkably similar to those of the director. Melville had remarkable stage sense and an eye for vivid visual composition, and the way in which he used these abilities enhanced both the actions and themes of *Moby Dick*, *Billy Budd*, and *Benito Cereno*.

A most conscious passage which deliberately sets the stage is found in Chapter 19 of *Billy Budd*. The captain, having received Claggart's false report, has decided to confront the accuser with the accused: "The measure he determined upon involved a shifting of the scene, a transfer to a place less exposed to observation than the broad quarter-deck" (p. 48). Melville has used terminology which is peculiar to the language of the theatre, "Shifting of the scene." And later, in chapter 22, when the cabin is described, the description reads like the setting of a scene in a play script:

The court was held in the same cabin where the unfortunate affair had taken place. This cabin, the Commander's, embraced the entire area under the poop-deck. Aft, and on either side, was a small stateroom; the one room temporarily a jail and the other a dead-house, and a yet smaller compartment leaving a space between, expanding forward into a goodly oblong of length coinciding with the ship's beam. A skylight of moderate dimension was overhead, and at each end of the oblong space were two sashed porthole windows . . . (p. 52).

The description is complete to details of the light source and the doors leading offstage; and incidentally, as on stage, we never see the interiors of the offstage rooms. When Billy is closeted in the jail, he is out of sight, and when Captain Vere communicates the decision of the drum-head court to him, "what took place at this interview was never known." In other words, Captain Vere has left by the door "up-right", so to speak, and the audience cannot follow him. This is a convention of the theatre, not of the novel, but Melville has employed it as a means of keeping the focus on the courtroom where the strife-ful action is played.

In *Benito Cereno*, Melville also uses the ship as a stage on which a drama is to be played, and he makes use of a more fanciful stage setting than is found in *Billy Budd*. Near the beginning of the narrative as Captain Delano first describes Cereno's ship the *San Dominick*, he speaks of the air of enchantment which a ship met at sea takes on, an enchantment which is a result of its sudden appearance and subsequent disappearance. He says, "The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave."⁸ An encounter with a ship on the ocean, then, is like a stage play—or a tableau—because the encounter is a limited period within the continuum of time. The ship, like the stage, provides in a neat package a distinct physical and social environment which, so far as an outside observer is concerned, has a beginning and an ending. When the ship pulls away or the curtain falls, the environment

of the drama just observed is cut off and the onlooker sees only the neutral sea or the impartial drapery before him.

The *San Dominick*, however, is no mere tableau because Melville prepares the scene in a semi-operatic manner with a droning chorus and percussion orchestra sustaining a weird accompaniment which lasts throughout the greater part of the story. Ranged symmetrically above the bow are four grizzled Negro oakum-pickers who "accompanied their task with a low continuous chant." The other musicians seem to be perched on a stage, for here is how Melville describes the quarter-deck:

The quarter-deck rose into an ample elevated poop, upon the forward verge of which, lifted, like the oakum-pickers, some eight feet above the general throng, sat along in a row, separated by regular spaces, the cross-legged figures of six other blacks; each with a rusty hatchet in his hand, which . . . he was engaged like a scullion in scouring Though occasionally the four oakum-pickers would briefly address some person or persons in the crowd below, yet the six hatchet polishers neither spoke to others nor breathed a whisper among themselves, but sat intent upon their task, except at intervals, when, with the peculiar love of negroes of uniting industry with pastime, two-and-two they sideways clashed their hatchets together like cymbals, with a barbarous din (p. 9).

Later in the story, as Don Benito paces behind the line of hatchet polishers and looks at the deck below, Captain Delano, reinforcing the stage viewpoint, sees him as looking "from a stage-box into the pit".

The quarter-deck of the *San Dominick* is so very much like a stage that it seems strange that Melville does not employ raised decks more frequently. The reason that he does not is simply that, even as early as 1799, the year of Captain Delano's story, a deck elevated so high above the main deck was practically an anachronism. Looking at the antiquated ship in the harbour, the captain surmises that it must be a converted treasure ship or a "retired frigate of the Spanish navy" such as were "at intervals encountered along that Main", and he comments that its rigging and design "appeared to have undergone no material change from their original warlike and Froissart pattern." Captain Delano's reference to mediaeval ships (as pictured in Froissart's *Chronicles*) undoubtedly alludes to the high turreted forecastle and after castle, features which had all but disappeared by the mid-seventeenth century.⁴ In short, Melville has selected, as a stage for performing his drama, a ship which has been afloat for more than a century. I believe that it would not be unreasonable to suggest that he deliberately set the scene no later than 1799 mainly to utilize this particular kind of "stage" with its peculiarly appropriate stage effects: the ornate scrollwork and gilding of the old warship effectively intensify Spanish

decadence and place Benito Cereno's apparent weakness of character in ironic contrast to the symbols of past glory. That comparing the fading grandeur of Spain to Cereno's degradation was one of Melville's methods is made clear when Delano watches Don Benito being shaved and notices that the royal banner of Spain is being used as a barber's sheet. The effects are contrived, but as will be seen in *Moby Dick*, Melville would go to great lengths to achieve a single visual dramatic effect.

Chapter 99, "The Doubloon", one of the most contrived scenes of theatrical staging in *Moby Dick*, for example, is significantly enough one of the most important portions of the book, summarizing the attitudes and prejudices of seven major characters. The doubloon has been nailed to the mast for most of the voyage and it had been a focal point for the crew when nailed up. Now it is a focal point again, but this time it is not the centre of histrionic action, but is rather the object of successive soliloquies. As each man goes to the coin, he is observed by the others, hidden about the ship like so many characters in a Shakespeare comedy or a Mozart opera. Each comes forward, speaks his peculiar thoughts in his own peculiar idiom, and retires to observe the next man. If we discount Ishmael's opening description—although it is written in his own bookish mode of speech—we notice another excellent piece of stage writing: Ahab, in his soliloquy, describes the imprint of the coin in detail, thereby communicating the details of its appearance to the audience, who naturally were not able to see its design. By the time we come to the last observer, poor mad Pip, we are told that the doubloon, this focal point, is "the ship's navel", the focus of sinful greed.

The presentation of this chapter is essentially theatrical—no novelist need crowd a scene unnaturally with seven people to provide seven different attitudes toward one symbol. Hawthorne, for example, used the same device of commenting on a visual image in *The Scarlet Letter*, when at dawn, a cloud shaped like an "A" catches the ruddy morning light. His approach, however, was to take the novelist's licence to enter different homes, different rooms, different minds, to evoke a variety of interpretations of the vision. It should be noticed particularly that Hawthorne relates the unspoken thoughts of the viewers. But Melville, in his theatrical style, has each character speak aloud. The soliloquy, in fact, is one of the most characteristic methods in *Moby Dick*, and, although—as is so strongly manifested in Chapter 99—Melville can make amazing distinctions between the speech idioms of his characters, none of them speaks a true vernacular. Rather, they all speak the language of the stage and the pulpit. Even Flask, the very essence of cold practicality, speaks metaphoric-

ically. He begins, "I see nothing here, but a round thing made of gold . . ." (p. 463); but in two lines, this round thing embodies his values. It is for him "nine hundred and sixty cigars."

Another remarkable thing about the language is that it reads well aloud. It soon becomes apparent that one of the reasons for this is that the characters frequently break into regular metre. The following two passages from the Starbuck-Ahab dialogues in Chapter 132, "The Symphony", illustrate the rhythms of their theatrically unrealistic speech:

"Oh, Starbuck! it is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky. On such a day—very much such sweetness as this—I struck my first whale . . ."

Oh, my Captain, my Captain! grand old heart, after all! . . . Wife and child, too, are Starbuck's—wife and child of his brotherly, sisterly, play-fellow youth . . ."

(pp. 580-581).

There are few actors who could resist reproducing the thick essence of a balmy wind in "very much such sweetness as this", or the metrical heaping of images of home and family bonds in Starbuck's "brotherly, sisterly, play-fellow youth." It is not only that the poetic language suggests the stage—most novelists indulge in some rhapsody, although ordinarily as narrators—but that the diction is often on the verge of bombast. It is the language of the theatre.

Melville has a way of saving reference to some of the symbols until they can be produced suddenly in a brilliant dramatic flourish, and the symbols are invariably large enough to be easily seen—sometimes seeming obvious to the point of crudity. An outstanding example of this is found in Chapter 100 of *Moby Dick*, "Leg and Arm". Ahab calls to the *Samuel Enderby*:

"Hast seen the White Whale!"

"See you his?" and withdrawing it from the fold that had hidden it, he held up a white arm of Sperm whale bone, terminating in a wooden head like a mallet (p. 466).

Then follows the meeting of the two maimed captains, in an almost embarrassing dramatic act. Ahab is hoisted to the *Samuel Enderby*. We are told that this is done because Ahab could not manipulate the ladder. This is undoubtedly true. But it is also done to set up the stage for a symbolic action which would be ridiculous if Ahab were not slung aloft:

With his ivory arm frankly thrust forth in welcome, the other captain advanced, and Ahab, putting out his ivory leg, crossing the ivory arm (like two swordfish blades) cried out in his walrus way "Aye, aye, hearty! let us shake bones together!—an arm and a leg!—an arm that can never shrink, d'ye see; and a leg that can never run" (p. 467).

I think that most novelists would assume that a thrilling and darkly significant effect was produced by the other captain's sudden revelation of his arm; but a dramatist is compelled to illustrate visually important relationships which may be apparent only in the mind of one character, and Melville, whether consciously or unconsciously writing in the theatrical mode, has therefore prepared elaborate machinery to cross the ivory limbs.

The same type of theatrical sudden disclosure occurs frequently in *Moby Dick*. Queequeg's "ramadan" in Chapter 17 is revealed by having Ishmael shoulder the door down from a running start; at the close of Chapter 47, Ahab's devilish yellow boat-crew spills forth from below decks as the remainder of the crew stands transfixed; and in Chapter 131, after the *Pequod* has encountered the *Delight* just as it is burying another of Moby Dick's victims, it turns suddenly away:

As Ahab now glided from the dejected *Delight*, the strange life-buoy hanging at the *Pequod's* stern came into conspicuous relief.

"Ha! Yonder! look yonder, men!" cried a foreboding voice in her wake. "In vain, oh, ye strangers, ye fly our sad burial; yet but turn us your taffrail to show us your coffin!" (p. 578).

In a similar situation, in *Benito Cereno*, just after it is suddenly revealed to Captain Delano that Cereno is not the persecutor but the persecuted, another stage-like sudden revelation places Delano's reversal of attitude in brilliant relief as the sub-stage curtain is suddenly lifted to reveal the figurehead:

But by this time, the cable of the *San Dominick* has been cut; and the fag-end, in lashing out, whipped away the canvas shroud about the beak, suddenly revealing, the bleached hull swung round toward the open ocean, death for the figurehead, in a human skeleton; chalky comment on the chalked words below, "Follow your leader." (pp. 79-80).

And, in *Billy Budd*, there is another such example, as Billy is hanged:

At the same moment it chanced that the vapory fleece hanging low in the East, was shot through with a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision and simultaneously therewith, watched by the wedged mass of upturned faces, Billy ascended; and ascending, took the full rose of the dawn (p. 62).

This scene is one of perfect stage composition: the faces are all directed toward a single figure who is above all the others, and he is singled out to receive weird lighting effect.

There are in *Moby Dick* twelve chapters which employ stage directions. Two blocks of such chapters occur: the first block, Chapters 36 to 40, including the scenes in which Ahab swears his men to his mission; the second, Chapters 119-122, being the scenes of the great storm which demagnetizes the compass. Three isolated chapters have stage directions as well: Chapter 108 with Ahab and the carpenter, and Chapters 127 and 129 with Ahab and Pip. The mere listing of these chapters reveals two important points: Melville seems to use the playwright's method at exceedingly crucial moments, and he uses this method at moments when dialogue and a few elemental motions are needed to develop the basic action. (Obviously the pursuit of the White Whale, while crucial, is all action, and the narrative method is better suited to it.)

The first block of scenes is the finest, starting with words which are as memorable as "Call me Ishmael": "enter Ahab: Then, all"; and building up to a frenzied scene representative of all mankind dancing and singing to the steady beat of the tambourine. The rhythmic background commences in the second paragraph—"Soon his steady, ivory stride was heard . . ."—and leads into the catechism of the sailors:

"What do ye do when you see a whale, men?"

"Sing out for him!" . . .

"And what do ye do next, men?"

"Lower away, and after him!"

"And what tune is it ye pull to, Men?"

"A dead whale or a stove boat!" (p. 171).

And the excitement builds up, interrupted only by Starbuck, until Ahab has his harpooners drink a pact with him from the hollows of their harpoon heads. This chapter is followed by three short chapters, each a soliloquy of a major figure. Here are the stage directions which open each of the chapters:

Sunset: The cabin; by the stern windows; Ahab sitting alone, and gazing out.

Dusk: By the Mainmast; Starbuck leaning against it.

First Night Watch: Stubb solus, and mending a brace.

The very positions of the three men are carefully selected to reflect their characters, before each speaks. Grim Ahab, alone, at the stern windows; Starbuck in a position of anguish, but not standing alone—rather leaning against the mainmast. His first words show that he has relinquished his power to stand independently: "My soul is more than matched; she's over-manned; and by a madman!" And Stubb is disclosed, at work, totally business-like, but understanding in a shallow way, Starbuck's problem:

“. . . who calls? Mr. Starbuck? Aye, aye, sir—(Aside) he's my superior, he has his too, if I'm not mistaken . . .” (p. 182).

The first block culminates in Chapter 40, which is a play script opening with the stage direction to “raise the foresail” and carrying the men from song to dance, to contemplation of the sea as a sensuous woman, to a quarrel—until all breaks up as nature provides a squall to top the petty squalling of the men. In these scenes, then, we see the welding of the crew into a weapon of vengeance, and the stage-dialogue method has effectively portrayed the wildness and enthusiasm of the moment, while the musical accompaniment provides a steadiness in the background that, contrasting with the headlong drunkenness of the men's speech, creates a tension which probably reflects the tension that is felt on an intellectual plane by Starbuck and Ishmael. This method of producing tension is extremely powerful in the operatic tradition (consider virtually any Verdi opera) and, as we have seen, was used again by Melville in *Benito Cereno* where the inexorable droning of the oakum-pickers is punctuated by the clashing of the hatchet-cymbals, which provides a rigid regularity in tense contrast with Captain Delano's vacillating thoughts about Don Benito and his crew.

This fortieth chapter of *Moby Dick* is the most theatrical: never again does Melville bring the whole crew into the action as a chorus, and he uses only a few crew members other than the harpooners as single characters. But when he does, he returns to the stage technique. When lightning strikes the ship and all the crew gather around aghast, Ahab steals the show, posing before the “trinity of Flames”. Finally, when Ahab does speak to crew members—the carpenter and the cabin boy—Melville also reverts to dramatic dialogue.

One is tempted to suggest that Melville meant *Moby Dick* to be a drama, but that the narrative of Ishmael, the digressions on cetology, and the violent action of the actual whale-hunts are too essential and could be dealt with only in the novel form. Melville did, however, make conscious use of theatrical conventions, probably to reinforce his view of a ship as a stage; as much of a microcosm as a stage, and yet as limited as a stage. He undoubtedly anticipated modern playwrights in accepting the limitations of a small physical environment, and in fact turned the limitations to his advantage by intensifying human contacts and intellectual problems through the use of highly selective and vivid symbols, placed in visual prominence. His dialogue is artificial, yet each actor has his characteristic mode of speech, usually established by means of distinctive metaphors. In short, the peculiar stage passages in *Moby Dick* enhance the

