

Element of prophecy in Melville's Moby Dick

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“Surely the Lord God will do nothing but he revealed his secret into his servants, the prophets.” 1

Nathalia Wright provides the fullest examination of prophetic quality in Melville's works. Bible is the major source to provide prophetic characters. Had he been less saturated with the tradition of the Bible he might have associated the insanity which he occasionally bestowed on his prophets with Greek rather than Hebrew though. Unlike the prophets of Christianity the oracles of Olympian gods were often as enigmatical to themselves as to their hearers. Between the priests of Delphi and Melville's cracked Eliza and Gabriel there is no connection. Melville uses Bible for forming an idea about prophecy but he quickly adds details and characteristics from other literary sources. The second major source comes from Greek history, epic and drama. In 1849, Melville ordered his publisher Harpers a thirty seven volume classical library set including Herodotus Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides.”² His first three books all contain some classical references. Gilman has demonstrated that Melville probably read ancient history at the Albany Academy. After Mardi Melville described prophets as oracles or seers. By White Jacket Melville depicts Jack Chase as an oracle. Both Moby Dick and Pierre continue to describe prophecy. Ahab re-enacts the Oedipus story and Pierre becomes the nineteenth century Orestes. Ahab like Oedipus disdains prophecy and attempts to outwit predictions. Pierre on the other receives conflicting advice from oracles, understands neither and finally acts from human motivation leaving divinity aside.

Melville's awareness of these classical ideas about prophecy was reinforced by reading of later writers like Shakespeare, Carlyle, Sir Thomas Brown and others. It is in fact, relation to Brown, Carlyle and Shakespeare that the prophetic characteristics of Melville should be taken into account. All these people are the prophets of humanity at large. They have a clear vision of life, sympathy for poor and miserable and a far seeing eye into the things. They are at large, like Melville the lover of humanity. It is in the play Macbeth that prophecy plays a dominant role. Shakespeare gives prophetic role to witches who meet Macbeth on the Heath:

“ First Witch : All hail Macbeth ! Hail to thee

Thane of Glamis.

Second Witch : All hail Macbeth ! Hail to thee

Thane of Cowder .

Third Witch : All hail Macbeth : Thou shall be

King hereafter .”³

Poor Macbeth believes in prophecy and the readers know how these prophecies are transformed into reality and Macbeth can only express his desolation about life which is “ a

tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.”⁴ In Antony and Cleopatra Enobarbus plays the role of prophet, he divines about the marriage of Antony and Octavia:

He will to his Egyptian dish again. Then shall the sighs of Octavia blow the fire up in Caesar, which is the strength of their amity shall prove the author of their variance.”⁵

According to Carlyle, Shakespeare possesses seer's eye, the first quality of a prophet. A man who has no hands but has feet can still walk but without morality a man's intellect would be impossible for him. Carlyle says:

“ The seeing eye! It is this that discloses the inner harmony of things, what nature meant, what musical idea nature has wrapped up in these often rough embodiments.....To the poet as to every other. We say first of all, see”⁶

Carlyle himself attains prophetic quality when he says about Shakespeare that Indian Empire will go, at any rate some day but Shakespeare stays with them. Melville presents the issue in terms of the relationship of individual, and fate personal choice predetermined events. What are the implications of fore knowledge? Does man will or identity, decide the outcome of his life or does the impersonal hand of fate chance or necessity. On one hand there is King Oedipus fighting against the unseen hand of fate that has been decided before his birth. Or King Lear on the other, he is a great king but brings down his own doom as well as his daughters. The lines which are spoken by King Lear should have been mouthed by Oedipus :

“ As flies to wanton boys are we to gods, They kill us for their sports.”⁷

No book of Melville is complete without Biblical references that show Melville's belief in divine justice. Three names in Moby Dick, Ishmael, Ahab and Elijah have been taken from Old Testament. Ishmael is the son of Abraham by his wife's maid servant. The name signifies a wanderer or a homeless man. Elijah and Ahab are related. When Ahab the king was killed, the dog licked his blood. Peleg, one of the owners tells Ishmael :

“ Come hither to me hither, hither, said Peleg With a significance in his eyes that almost startled me, ‘Look ye lad; never say that name on board the Pequod. Never say it anywhere. Captain Ahab did not name himself. ‘Twas a foolish, ignorant whim of his crazy widowed mother, who died when he was only a twelve months old. And yet the old square Tistig at Gay head said that the name would somehow prove prophetic.”⁸

Before going to the ship Ishmael and Queequeg go to the church and prophetically Father Mapple tells the famous Biblical story from the book Jonah, clinching the last verse of the first chapter of Jonah, “ And God had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah .”⁹ The story of Jonah shows that the people who do not believe in God are destroyed by him through a whale . Returning from the ship , they see a stranger , who asks them whether they have seen ‘old thunder’ , i.e. Captain Ahab . They do not pay attention to the stranger . When they ask the stranger who he is . To their shock and surprise he tells his name is Elijah. Next day when they come to wharf , Ishmael noticed some sailors running ahead to them towards the ship . Just then they heard a voice calling them and Ishmael feels a hand on his shoulder . It is Elijah who like Ancient Mariner tries to detain them and said :

“ Morning to ye! Morning to ye,! He rejoiced again moving off . ‘Oh ! I was going to warn ye against but never mind , never mind..... Shant see ye again very soon ,I guess ; unless it before the Grand Jury .’ And with these cracked words he finally departed , leaving me , for the moment , in no small wonderment at his frantic impudence” ¹⁰

Moby Dick represents the Marlowian spirit of Renaissance in American style . The nature of hybrid form in which Moby Dick is cast , provides numerous opportunities for Melville to insert at frequent intervals , the digression upon the universe and man's predicament . These philosophical comments are often placed on the lips of Ishmael . As told already he speaks the vision of Carlyle , the Victorian sage . Carlyle thinks that true reality lay hidden behind the cloak of perceived facts (the symbol of clothing). This concept was of startling significance for Melville who employs it in the most famous passage of Moby Dick. Starbuck is not happy with the determination of Ahab to kill white whale . Starbuck is the chief mate of Pequod with Ahab . Melville calls him superstitious . He is a great believer in portents and omens . He feels that utterly fearless man like Ahab is far more dangerous than a coward because a fearless man will become careless in situations which demand precautions . He does not lower his boat in to the sea to attack a whale after sunset . Nor does he believe in continuing the fight against the whale which persisted in fighting back . His own father and brother had met their doom during such voyages . But Ahab has made up his mind to chase and kill Moby Dick . According to the prophecy he has lost a leg . But he is determined to dismember the monster that has

dismembered him . Melville uses the sense of 'sultanism' in him when he speaks in a prophetic tone though his prophecy is proved false .

“ The prophecy was that I should be dismembered and aye! I lost this leg . I now prophecy that I will dismember my dismemberer . Now then be the prophet and the fulfiller one . That is more than ye gods ever were . I taugt and hoof at yee”.¹¹

In the view of Ishmael whale is the creation of God and Ahab is bent on killing it like Ancient Mariner kills Albatross . The tragic end of such a person is inevitable . The ship carries a special interpreter of Omens , a sea prophet as the old Manx man Ishmael describes this simple prophet's status that the old sea traditions , the immemorial credulities , popularly invested this old Manx man with pre-natural power of discernment . Through out the voyage , the sea prophet makes obscure predictions . He predicts that Ahab will never be tranquilly laid out for burial and he mutters as the sailors celebrate on the deck ,

“ I wonder whether these jolly lads bethink them of what they are dancing over . I'll dance over your grave” ¹²

As the wish old sailor he Ahab that the line on the log will break and as an authority on omens he overrides the sailors interpretations of the strange sea and discloses that the wild chilling sounds that one over heard are the voices of newly drowned men in the sea . Upon learning that Rachal (another ship) has lost a boat load of man , he asserts his interpretation as correct that he heard the spirits . Melville makes a subtle combinations of free will , necessity and chance symbolized by mat making . Queequeg and Ishmael were employed in weaving a mat to be used on the boat . To Ishmael the weaving of mat seems to be the 'Loom of Time' . He regarded himself as a shuttle mechanically weaving away the fate as if with his own hands . He piles his own shuttle and weaves his own destiny in to those threads . The element of prophecy holds so much dominance over the mind of Melville that a common incident too , is observed through the same angle . The old Tishtigo stands at the mast head and observes a school of sperm whale . How does he appear to Ishmael , is noteworthy:

“As he stood hovering over you half suspended in the air so wildly and eagerly peering towards the horizon , you would have thought his some prophet or seer beholding the shadows of fate and by those wild cries announcing their coming”¹³

Then comes Fedallah the head of five people who had been seen by Elijah in the beginning. He is tall man with one white tooth protruding from his lips wearing a shining white plaited turban. He seems to have some sort of influence over Ahab . In fact he has some authority over him . The complex origins of Fedallah suggests in the bulk , Melville's knowledge of numerous prophetic traditions . In his creation of sinister parsee , Melville draws on historical and literary sources has varied as classical drama , the Bible , eastern Zoroastrianism, Shakespeare and nineteenth century sea legends. Fedallah is a kind of false prophet who speaks the truth but does not represent the Lord , God of Israel. His puzzling three part prophecy resembles a classical oracular pronouncement in its ambiguity and misleading nature . But he has mastered more common sea superstitions . Flask tells Stubb that Fedallah seems to know all about ships . The Indian Tishitigo , ambiguous Elijah, the insane Shaker Gabriel , Cassandra like pip , multi faceted Fedallah, all emerge from varying traditions and merge in order to establish Ahab's rebellion against fate , his refusal to learn the lesson of history . He is turning his back on a universal phenomenon. These complex prophets receive their special knowledge from some kind of super natural sources although Melville deliberately leaves the origins. Father Mapple is the only prophet who speaks from a strictly Christian perspective . His sermon points out in the first place the error of Ahab's quest. He warns against the wilful disobedience of the command of God . Howard P. Vinsent says :

“ Ahab no less than father Mapple is in search of an absolute , be its name God of Moby Dick but Ahab acknowledges no law but his own , his search will be carried on in self assertion , not in self submission.” ¹⁴

What is the purpose behind this plethora of foreknowers and speakers? Most critics vaguely assert as does Nathalia Wright that Melville's use of prophecy in this novel is intended to create a "Mood of fate". In a purely technical way the trend builds both the suspense in the reader and artistically provides some unity to a long, draw out and often fragmented work. The prophecies push the reader forward in narrative. Other prophets either frenzied seers or prophetic story tellers reach these regions of what Melville terms 'intuitive truth' through supernatural revelation or imaginative perceptions. What is most striking in Moby Dick is the fact that these various kinds of prophecies despite their different origins and styles all point to the same conclusion. Every prophecy is fulfilled implying that the central truth runs the universe. Every man eventually takes a stand in their significance and their effect on his life. "The Quarter Deck" provides a key for identifying these varying attitudes. During the dancing scene, Ahab reveals his goal for ship's voyage to be the vengeful slaying of Moby Dick. The captain encounters feeble opposition of Starbuck and crew submit to him. Ahab's strength of will overpowers the first mate resistance and captures the spirit of the crew. Ishmael notes this phenomenon and then continues with a brief meditation on prophecy which demonstrates the growth and progression of ideas as opposed to the static attitudes of the rest of the crew:

"But in his joy at the enchanted, tacit acquiescence of the mate, Ahab did not hear the foreboding invocation; not yet the low laugh from the hold; not yet the presaging vibrations of the winds, nor yet the hollow fleep of the sails against the masts, as for a moment their heart sank in. For again Starbuck's downcast eyes lighted up with the stubbornness of life the subterranean laugh died away the winds blew on; the sails filled out; the ship heaved and rolled as before. 'Ah ye admonitions and warnings! Why stay ye not when ye come? But rather owe ye predictions than warnings, ye shadows. Ye not so much prediction from without as verification of the foregoing things within, for with little external to constrain us, the inner most necessities in our being, these still drive us'" 15

Leaving the development of Ishmael's own opinion aside for the present, we find that this passage identifies three basic attitudes towards prophecy. The first describes prophecy as "admonitions and warnings". The prophecy admonishes and warns the individual to change the decision. If prophecy exists in an advisory role, man's fate is not specifically fore-ordained and he can still change the line of action. The second position is that prophecy is not so much as a warning but as prediction of certain future. This view implies that fate is the central agent in life and will plays no role in one's action. Finally the third view rejects the idea of prophecy as prediction but as verification. These three views of prophecy as warning, prediction and as verification are held in varying degrees by Ahab, the crew of Pequod and Ishmael.

Starbuck's inability to exercise his will on the quarter deck already suggests his position on prophecy. But he demonstrates a deep belief in portents and omens throughout the book. The first mate is often seen as a man of faith and conscience who ineffectually opposes Ahab's quest, but too little attention has been paid to this pious man. He thinks for Ahab that "an utterly fearless man is far more dangerous comrade than a coward". 16

Before the fatal prophecy of Fadallah, there is another prophecy in guise of warning to Ahab, by Gabriel, the strange prophet of the ship, Jeroboam. When Ahab asks about the white whale, Gabriel warns him to beware of the tales related to white whale. Captain Mayhew tells the sad accidental death of his chief mate Macey who went to hunt Moby Dick in spite of being warned by Gabriel. He says that the white whale is no less a being than the God incarnated. Macey is thrown in to air falling at least fifty yards away from his boat. No harm is done to the boat, no mark of violence on the body but the man is dead. When Captain Mayhew asks Ahab if he intended to hunt Moby Dick, Gabriel begins to give warning to Ahab, that is prophetic as well:

"Gabriel once more started to his feet, glaring upon the old man and vehemently exclaimed, with downward pointed finger, "Think Think of blasphemer-dead and down there! Beware of the blasphemer's end!" 17

Fedallah represents the ego of Ahab . Not only his personality arises from his association with fire gods and with the part of Ahab that leaves towards the black and forbidden. He anxiously consults the Parsee for words about the outcome of the quest . Ahab observes hearers in the dream and asks Fedallah who replies :

“ But I said , old man ere thou die on this voyage , two hearses must verily be seen by thee on the sea’
And what was that saying about thyself?”

“Though it come to the last , I shall go before thee , thy pilot’.

‘And when thou art so gone before-if that ever befall then before. I can follow , thou must still appear to me , to pilot me still? Was it not so?’

“Take another pledge old man’ , said the parsee as his eyes lighted up like firelies in the gloom – ‘Hemp only can kill thee.”¹⁸

Referring to the third cause of Fedallah’s prophecy Ahab says that he must be immortal because hemp is used only to hang the criminals on the gallows and there is no possibility of his being hanged. Like Macbeth he uses these prophecies as a pledge of his own invincibility . Ahab’s denial of the obscure nature of prophecy keeps him decoding the true meaning of Fedallah’s riddle . He is not interested in superstitions omens as he is interested in Fedallah. Like Macbeth all the prophecies are fulfilled and Ahab dies fighting. Sea rolls over everyone as it rolled five thousand years ago leaving Ishmael to moralize upon the events.

Notes and References :

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