TWO

Platonic and Nietzschean Themes of Transformation in *Moby-Dick*

Mark Anderson

MELVILLE AND ISHMAEL

In the spring of 1849, one year before he began work on *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville was in good health and high spirits. His first two novels had been popular with critics as well as the general reading public, and these successes provided the security he felt he needed to marry Elizabeth Shaw.1 The two had wed two years earlier, and although their lives were cramped and hectic from sharing a house in New York City with several members of Melville’s family, they were by all appearances genuinely happy. Melville had recently completed his third novel, *Mardi*, a sprawling philosophical romance full of “poetry and wildness.”2 Reviews of the book had yet to appear, but as far as Melville was concerned he had accomplished something remarkable, having produced a work in which he broke decisively with the adventure tales of his first two novels to establish himself as a writer of serious literary fiction. Moreover, to surpass even everything else, his first child had been born in February. Hershel Parker sums up this period of Melville’s life with the apt words, “everything was going his way.”3

Melville’s psychological-spiritual and physiological condition in and around the time he wrote *Moby-Dick* is noteworthy because the novel is a literary-intellectual objectification of that condition.4 Common as it is to read the work as Ahab’s story, or the whale’s, as I read *Moby-Dick* the true protagonist of the book is Ishmael, and through Ishmael, *Melville himself*. Walter Bezanson, who also put Ishmael at the center of the novel,
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On April 5 of his high-spirited spring, while vacationing with his in-laws in Boston, Melville wrote excitedly to Evert Duyckinck that he intended to read Plato's *Phaedo* later that summer. That he had read Plato previous to this, the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* in particular, is clear from allusions to these dialogues in *Mardi*. But of all the Plato that Melville had read, and would later read, the *Phaedo* had the deepest and most lasting impact. The dialogue turns up explicitly in one, and possibly by way of allusion in the other, of the two novels he wrote during the summer he intended to read it. The "fancy" of "the glorious Greek of old" that the soul is "essentially a harmony," noted in *Redburn*, may well have been inspired by the *Phaedo*. Unquestionably inspired by that dialogue is the clergyman in *White-Jacket* who "had drank at the mystic fountain of Plato," and who "learnedly alluded to the Phaedon of Plato." These references suggest at a minimum that Plato's *Phaedo* was on Melville's mind as he wrote *White-Jacket*, and probably also that he had followed through on his intention to read the dialogue. He had pursued his interest in Platonic philosophy even further by the time he began to write *Moby-Dick*, for from evidence internal to the novel we may conclude that Melville was overflowing with Plato and Platonism, and that he was still quite enamored of the *Phaedo* in particular.

Ishmael's mention of Cato's suicide in the first chapter of the novel is likely the result of Melville's interest in the *Phaedo*, for the fact that Cato studied the dialogue prior to taking his own life is the subject of the first end-note of the edition of the *Phaedo* that Melville read, and it is recorded as well by Thomas Browne, whom Melville in his letter to Duyckinck...