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The Poisoned Well: Melville and Gnosticism

> *The yearning infinite recoils,*
> *For terrible is earth.*
> —*Herman Melville, from "L'Envoi"*

This epigraph, the significance of which will soon become apparent, is taken from the very last poem in the very last work by Herman Melville published during his lifetime, a book of poems entitled *Timoleon*. In that same 1891 collection, we find the following poem:

> Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem of the 12th Century
>
> Found a family, build a state,
> The pledged event is still the same:
> Matter in end will never abate
> His ancient brutal claim.
>
> Indolence is heaven's ally here,
> And energy the child of hell:
> The Good Man pouring from his pitcher clear,
> But brims the poisoned well.

Even if a reader comes to this poem with no knowledge of Gnosticism, much of the essence of Gnostic ideology can be inferred from the poem itself. In the first stanza, the speaker warns that having children and perpetuating civilization—traditionally two of humankind's chief objectives—are hollow achievements powerless to overthrow the tyranny of material existence, and indeed only serve to advance it. Matter is bad, and therefore any

act which encourages further material existence, such as giving birth or working for social progress, is at best counterproductive to human welfare, and at worst malicious.

The second stanza elaborates the ideas of the first, and adds a critical theological backdrop: not only is matter bad from the human perspective, it is objectively evil—the kingdom of hell. Whatever is opposed to material existence, on the other hand, is objectively good—in league with heaven. Because action of almost any sort serves to extend the reign of matter, activity is itself a sin, and inactivity is a virtue. The man of action who is judged "good" according to traditional standards is in fact merely an accomplice of evil. His supposedly virtuous acts are akin to someone pouring water into a poisoned well—all this does is increase the volume and spread of the poison. If the material world is fundamentally tainted, any ethos, no matter how well-meaning, which asserts and advocates for physical life is merely adding rottenness to rottenness.

We can infer then that Gnosticism is an ideology which maintains that materiality is evil and immateriality is good. This is in fact the primary belief which all Gnostic systems (and there are many) have in common. The poem also leads us to infer that Gnostics believe that the best existential policy is non-action. Here though, if we would not be led astray, we must remember that Melville is speaking specifically from the perspective of a 12th century Gnostic, by which he almost certainly means a member of the Cathar sect. Long after the decline of most other Gnostic groups, Catharism emerged as a flourishing Gnostic religion in Occitan France around the 12th century, prospering for nearly two hundred years before its members were genocidally exterminated by the Catholic Church and its allies in what became known as the Albigensian Crusade.

The Cathars, whose name comes from the Greek *katharoi*, meaning "the pure ones," were dualists who believed that there were two gods: a good god of the spiritual world and an evil god of the material world. Humans were thought to be souls from

the spiritual world who had become imprisoned in material flesh by the evil god. The goal of human life, therefore, was to escape from one's material confinement so that one's soul might fly back to its origin in the spiritual realm, there to enjoy everlasting bliss with its creator. This emancipation was accomplished through a rejection of the material world and a purifying sacrament known as the *consolamentum*, typically performed on the verge of death. Should one fail to live an ascetic life and receive this sacrament, one would be doomed to reincarnation.

Because the perpetuation of enfleshed existence was considered a sin, many but not all Cathars practiced sexual abstinence, as Melville implies. This was a precept they inherited from their ideological predecessors, the Bogomils, a Gnostic group active in Bulgaria several centuries earlier. As part of their defamation campaign against Gnostic heretics, Catholic partisans often claimed, without evidence, that both Bogomils and Cathars practiced sodomy in order to enjoy sex without procreation. Interestingly, the modern term "bugger" as a slang term for "sodomize" can be traced to a variation on the word "Bulgar," a reference to the Bulgarian Bogomils.

I cannot resist noting here that despite Catholic efforts, Gnosticism has never entirely left the soil and blood of France. Descartes, who famously posited strict mind-body dualism and spoke of the possibility of a demon deceiving him with the illusion of physical reality, provided a philosophically Gnostic basis for the modern French intellectual temper, which has taken the Gnostic impulse through such various forms as Decadence, Symbolism, Existentialism, Poststructuralism, and beyond.

Melville, however, was not merely piqued by the peculiarities of the quietist Cathars but had a decades-long fascination with Gnosticism more generally. In Part 3 of his 1876 epic poem, *Clarel*, which chronicles a journey to the Holy Land fraught with religious inquiry and debate, we find the following passage:

'Twas averred
That, in old Gnostic pages blurred,
Jehovah was construed to be
Author of evil, yea, its god;
And Christ divine his contrary:
A god was held against a god,
But Christ revered alone. Herefrom,
If inference availeth aught
(for still the topic pressed they home)
The two-fold Testaments become
Transmitters of Chaldaic thought
By implication. If no more
Those Gnostic heretics prevail
Which shook the East from shore to shore,
Their strife forgotten now and pale;
Yet, with the sects, that old revolt
Now reappears, if in assault
Less frank: none say Jehovah's evil,
None gainsay that he bears the rod;
Scarce that; but there's dismission civil,
And Jesus is the indulgent God.
This change, this dusking change that slips
(like the penumbra o'er the sun),
Over the faith transmitted down;
Foreshadows it complete eclipse?

Melville was never the most graceful poet, but we find here the same brilliant concentration of thought and precocious proto-modernism as in his great works of prose. The passage begins by outlining Gnostic dualism in the terms of its most common narrative: the god of the Old Testament is an insidious imposter, usually called the Demiurge, who imprisons souls in the gross matter of the physical world he created, and who attempted to

withhold knowledge of the true spiritual reality from Adam and Eve. It is from this charlatan god that the true god, who takes the form of the Christ of the New Testament, comes down to save us (though Gnostics, unlike Catholics, do not believe that the Word ever condescended to be made flesh). The evil god of the Old Testament is of course none other than the god of the Hebrews, and we are therefore correct to identify traditional Gnosticism as a mystical form of antisemitism. On the Gnostic view, faithful Jews are effectively devil-worshippers, and it is a grievous error to try to reconcile the brutal deity of the Torah with the pacifistic savior of the Gospels—they are simply two different forces, one material and evil, one spiritual and good.

One fascinating thing to note about the Gnostic worldview is how it inverts the orthodox Christian perspective of mankind's relationship to the world. Whereas orthodox Christians believe that God made the world and it was good, and that the evil in the world can be explained by mankind's fall into original sin, Gnostics believe the opposite: it is the world itself that is evil, and the human soul is a purely good spirit which must learn to escape its material prison. From here it is but a short leap to the anti-lapsarian views of Rousseau and Emerson, and those who have detected a Gnostic flavor to the Romantic movement as a whole certainly have reason. No doubt Melville's interest in Gnosticism was stimulated not only by his own spiritual struggles, but by his desire to understand the psychospiritual basis for the Transcendentalist philosophy *au courant* in his day.

We can see then that the Gnostic phenomenon arose partly as an attempt to neatly solve two difficult theological issues: first, the existence of evil in the world, and second, the characterological disharmony between the god of Judaism and the god of Christianity. Historians still do not have an especially clear picture of how exactly Gnosticism—or, more accurately, various Gnostic systems—came to be formulated in the ideological ferment of

early Christianity, but several influences can be readily identified.

Unlike orthodox Christians, Gnostics believed that salvation was achieved through neither faith nor good works, but through personal mystical experience—the reception of what they called *gnosis*, the Greek for knowledge, by which they meant knowledge of the spiritual realm beyond the veil of materiality. To be a Gnostic is to be a "knower" of this kind. It is possible that this focus on mystical knowledge came, ironically, from the Jewish practice of Merkabah mysticism, a discipline which involved undergoing various rituals in order to receive a beatific vision of the divine chariot, as the prophet Ezekiel once did. Syncretistic pagan mystery cults, all the rage in the Hellenistic world, no doubt also influenced the mystical character of Gnosticism, as they did the ritualistic, sacramental nature of Christianity more broadly.

The Gnostic distaste for materiality, on the other hand, was largely a radicalization of the Platonic notion that the physical world was a realm of shadowy deception and imperfection which it was the philosopher's goal to transcend. Some scholars have also pointed to anti-materialist similarities between Gnosticism and Buddhism, and while there is no hard evidence that the latter influenced the former, it is certainly true that Gnosticism shares with all the Vedic religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism—a desire to escape the fetters of material existence through practices which lead to the experience of enlightenment. For those interested in exploring the spiritual pros and cons of Gnosticism, Vedic religions do indeed provide many fruitful points of comparison.

The most fundamental philosophical influence on Gnosticism, however, was neither Indian, nor Greek, nor Jewish, but Persian. Zoroastrianism, the very first prophetic religion, and the state religion of the ancient Persian empires, is also the first and most influential vision of religious dualism. According to the prophet Zarathustra (Hellenized as "Zoroaster"), there is a god of goodness and light, Ahura Mazda, and a spirit of evil and darkness, Ahriman.

All of creation is involved in a great cosmic war of dominance between these forces, and human beings must choose to fight on one side or the other. No religion prior to Zoroastrianism had ever granted the mortal individual so dramatic a role—the role not only of a soul seeking salvation, but of a soldier enlisted in a divine struggle. The Christian concept of a devil at war with God—a dualistic idea absent from Judaism—was no doubt partly an inheritance of Zoroastrian thinking. While the word "devil" ultimately traces back to the Greek *diavolos*, meaning "slanderer," there is likely a little more than coincidence in the fact that in Zoroastrianism, the spirits of evil are known as *daevas*, and Ahriman himself known as "The Liar." The oldest and longest lasting form of Gnosticism, Mandaeism, which is still practiced by an Iranian minority to this day, as well as the largest Gnostic religious movement in history, Manichaeism, which at one point was the chief rival to Christianity on the religious world stage, both arose directly out of a Zoroastrian milieu.

Directly preceding the *Clarel* passage I have quoted, Melville writes: "Ormuzd involved with Ahriman/ in deadly lock. Were these gods gone? / or under other names lived on?" When he later shrewdly notes of Gnosticism that "the two-fold testaments become / transmitters of Chaldaic thought / by implication," he is using "Chaldaic" as a synecdoche for Zoroastrian, and is therefore saying: "Gnosticism, because it pits one god against another god, is essentially a form of, or a successor to, Zoroastrianism." This is a gross theological generalization, of course, but the historical connection between the ideologies is undeniable and the point is well-taken. As we will see later, Melville frequently uses Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian imagery to supplement Gnostic ideas.

From here, Melville moves to a tack of critical observation which echoes Kierkegaard and anticipates Nietzsche. Though the Gnostic controversy is, in Melville's 19th century, "a strife forgotten," he claims that "with the sects, that old revolt / now

reappears, if in assault / less frank." Melville here asserts that new Christian sects of his day which see Jesus as the "indulgent god" and which politely ignore the more uncomfortable god of the Old Testament are effectively crypto-Gnostic (and therefore, for Melville, quasi-Zoroastrian) in spirit. Doubtless, this is the sort of criticism Melville would have leveled at the likes of Unitarian Transcendentalist preachers like Emerson, whom he mocks viciously in his last novel, *The Confidence Man*. It is perhaps an ironic paradox that a quasi-pantheist like Emerson should be accused of dualism, but Melville's shrewd insight is that if we ignore or belittle the dark, fearful, side of reality—the existence of evil, suffering, ugliness, and sin—we end up with a view of the world and of God which is so one-sided that it becomes a dualism by implication. The only way to avoid the dualist trap is, counterintuitively, to fully acknowledge life's dichotomies and embrace them all within a single cosmic order. As the author of Isaiah writes in chapter 45, verse 7, speaking in God's voice: "I form the light and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I the Lord do all these things."

Any theology which denies this comprehensive view of God, either by positing evil as a separate force or ignoring evil altogether, quickly falls prey to dualistic thinking. Melville warns that such thinking is like a shadow cast over the sunlight of true, authentic faith. He ends the passage with apocalyptic flair: "foreshadows it complete eclipse?" For Melville, the pollyannaish cast of thought in contemporary Christian sects is not simply a quaint confusion—it is an existential threat to the authentic religious life, a threat which Melville prognosticates in Nietzschean fashion just a few years before Nietzsche's own mature works on the crepuscularity of the modern soul first appeared in print.

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However, the greatest fruit of Melville's lifelong spiritual agon with Gnosticism came twenty years before *Clarel*, and a whopping forty years before *Timoleon*. I am speaking of course of that incomparable anatomy of man and whale, *Moby-Dick*. The ideological influences Melville weaves together in *Moby-Dick* are legion and multifarious, but I believe that Gnosticism, particularly as Melville synthesizes it with Zoroastrianism, provides the principal basis for the spiritual drama of this greatest American novel. In what follows, I draw heavily on Dartmouth scholar Thomas Vargish's essay, "Gnostic Mythos in Moby-Dick," though I flatter myself that several key connections and insights are my own.

In the course of the novel, we learn that Captain Ahab suffers from two permanent physical injuries: a missing leg, bitten off by the eponymous white whale, and a "lividly whitish" body-length scar courtesy of being struck by a lightning-bolt. Ahab took both of these injuries personally, and it is the conflation of these two white menaces in his mind which leads to his unique metaphysical stance. His vendetta against the whale is more well-known, but before we get to that, I hope to demonstrate that Ahab's cetacean hatred can only be properly understood by first examining his equally interesting and equally significant hatred for fire and light.

To begin with, we must first note that in Zoroastrianism, the virtuous god Ahura Mazda is also conceived of as the god of light, and fire is considered to be the greatest representation of his power and presence in the world. As such, fire is exceptionally sacred to Zoroastrians and occupies pride of place in all their rituals. Holiest of all fires is lightning. As Ishmael remarks in chapter 42: "by the Persian fire-worshippers, the white forked flame [is] held holiest on the altar."

Now, perhaps the most hauntingly mysterious figure on the crew of the *Pequod* is the quiet harpooner who shadows Ahab

known as Fedallah. Feared by the rest of the crew, and viewed as a sinister, even diabolical influence on Ahab, he is explicitly identified as a Parsee—that is, an Indian Zoroastrian. The nature of his strange bond with Ahab is only revealed in chapter 119, entitled "The Candles." In that chapter, the crew are caught in a fierce thunderstorm, and the electricity in the air causes the tips of the masts to glow with electrical charges known as corpusants—a term which, incidentally, comes from the Portuguese "corpo-santo," meaning "holy body." Fedallah kneels down in reverence to the corpusants as indications of the divine presence. Ahab, however, blasphemously puts his foot on Fedallah's back, and proclaims the following:

> Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here.

Here begins what is without a doubt one of the most revealing of Ahab's many monologues. He makes the shocking confession that he, a white American of Quaker extraction, once followed the Zoroastrian faith—no doubt, we suspect, due to the influence of Fedallah. He then reveals what one might call his villain origin story: once, when performing a Zoroastrian rite to honor the sacred white lightning, he was smote by it. It was at this moment of

literal, extremely painful enlightenment that he realized that the Divine is utterly impersonal, utterly indifferent to the prayers of mankind. His rude awakening prompts him—once a believer in and worshiper of a god of virtue—to lash out against the cosmic order and proclaim that the only proper worship of God is defiance—a hopeless, egomaniacal assertion of the individual will against the crushing impersonality of the deity. Once he exalted fire; now he despises it as a symbol of God's dumb, fatalistic cruelty—indeed, Ahab often describes fire, with disdain, as "mechanical." Ahab's trauma-induced inversion of Zoroastrianism, his belief in the brute hostility of God rather than God's goodness, and his conviction that the war between good and evil in the world actually favors evil, is the seed of his subsequent Gnosticism. We see this later when he says:

> There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou
> clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time,
> all thy creativeness mechanical. Through thee,
> thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it.
> Oh, thou foundling fire, thou hermit immemorial,
> thou too hast thy incommunicable riddle, thy
> unparticipated grief. Here again with haughty
> agony, I read my sire. Leap! leap up, and lick the
> sky! I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would fain be
> welded with thee; defyingly I worship thee!

Ahab taunts the flames, declaring that there is a god beyond the god of light, compared to whom the god of light is not a true creator, but merely a dumb craftsman. In effect, Ahab identifies the god of light as the evil, idiotic, false creator god which the Gnostics called the Demiurge: a title taken from Plato's *Timaeus* meaning "craftsman." The "unparticipated grief" which Ahab refers to is the demiurge's grief at being isolated from and inferior to

the true god. The Demiurge and Ahab are alike in that they both wish to "lick the sky," and transcend their material limitations.

Elsewhere in this passage, Ahab speaks mysteriously of a "sweet mother" and a "queenly personality" opposed to the fiery father, whom he associates with the ocean. Vargish has argued convincingly that this is likely a reference to the Gnostic concept of Sophia, the feminine divine wisdom which inadvertently gave birth to the Demiurge, and who now seeks to atone by rescuing souls from the prison of matter. For our purposes, however, we shall keep our attention focused upon the Demiurgic symbols.

Once one knows to look for them, examples abound of Ahab's hatred of light and fire. One of Ahab's most memorably hubristic utterances comes from chapter 36, where he declares: "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me." In chapter 118, he fumes: "Cursed be all the things that cast man's eyes aloft to that heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him, as these old eyes are even now scorched with thy light, O sun!" Thrice, as I have mentioned (in chapters 119, 133, and 134) Ahab dismisses fire as being "mechanical." We need not press the matter. Curious souls may consult C. C. Walcutt's essay, "The Fire Symbolism in Moby-Dick."

But what, you may ask, does all of this have to do with whales? Well, for one thing, Moby-Dick and the lightning-bolt are both characterized by their whiteness. If Ahab received his spiritual disillusionment from the lightning strike, it is likely that he had his limb-losing encounter with Moby-Dick sometime afterward, and that the unusual whiteness of the whale instantly seemed to him a token of the same hostile force which brought the white lightning down upon him—the traitorous Ahura Mazda, the Demiurge imposter.

Secondly, we would do well to remember why American sailors went whaling in the first place—to obtain spermaceti for use in making candles. As Melville memorably wrote in an earlier work, *Mardi*, the whale is the one "whose brain enlightens the

world." Instantly, we see that whales are, in their own way, agents of light—they are Luciferic. Therefore, in Ahab's mind, they are lieutenants of the Lord of Light, the Demiurge. How much more so a whale whose hide is preternaturally white?

And the symbolism does not stop there. The waxy substance in a sperm whale's head is called spermaceti because it looks like, well, sperm—a fact that the homoerotic Melville takes gleeful pains to emphasize. What could be a more potent symbol of the perpetuation of material existence? Sperm whales are not only bringers of light—they are phallic symbols of material generation, embodying the agenda of trapping more and more souls in prisons of the flesh, brimming the poisoned well. Need I remind you of the name of the white whale?

Finally, we should note the fascinating fact that in Zoroastrianism, whales are viewed as servants of evil. According to Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, a book which Melville is known to have read, "The Zoroastrians think that of animals, such as dogs, fowls, and urchins, belong to the Good, and water animals to the bad; for which reason they account him happy that kills most of them." Instantly, we realize why Fedallah seems almost as intently focused on whale-hunting as Ahab—for him, whales serve the spirit of evil, Ahriman. For Ahab, though he has turned his Zoroastrian theology a bit topsy-turvy, the association of whales with metaphysical evil remains, and his holy bloodlust comes naturally to him.

Whatever the white whale may mean to us, what he means to Ahab is made overwhelmingly, abundantly, exactly clear, as countless passages may illustrate. Interestingly, one such passage contains the only explicit reference to Gnosticism in the whole novel. In chapter 41, appropriately entitled "Moby-Dick," Ishmael says:

> The White Whale swam before him as the
> monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious

> agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east reverenced in their statue devil;—Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.

What is of particular interest to us in this passage is the mention of the Ophites. The Ophites, who take their name from the Greek word *ophis*, meaning snake, were a Gnostic sect who worshiped the serpent of the garden of Eden. Because they viewed the Hebrew god as evil, they interpreted the Satanic serpent as a heroic figure who was able to bring true knowledge—gnosis—to Adam and Eve. Indeed, the Ophites believed that the serpent actually prefigured Christ as a liberator of the human soul.

But here is where it gets really interesting: in the Ophite mythos, the virtuous snake, the Satanic serpent, is opposed by an evil snake—Leviathan. For the Ophites, Leviathan was not merely a gigantic sea serpent but was actually the monstrous embodiment of physical reality itself: a cosmic beast coiled upon itself like an

ouroboros to prevent souls from escaping into the spiritual realm. The world of the Demiurge, within which we live and breathe, is in fact the body of Leviathan. In ritualistic maps known as the Ophite diagrams, we see the entire physical world encompassed by a circle labeled with the name of the biblical creature.

It is likely that you now see exactly where this is going. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville calls whales "leviathans" on a near constant basis. Instead of giving you an example, I will simply inform you of the fact—which you are welcome to confirm for yourself—that *Moby-Dick* contains the word "leviathan" 122 times, including 13 times in the opening epigraphs alone. Melville knew about the Ophites—indeed, was impressed enough by them to mention this obscure religious sect in his book—and for him, whales and leviathans were practically one and the same. It is therefore no surprise whatsoever that he came up with the idea of a whale as the perfect symbol for cosmic evil and material imprisonment—the ultimate Gnostic monster.

That Moby-Dick is—or is projected to be—such a Gnostic monster is confirmed throughout the text. In chapter 38, Ishmael goes so far as to call the white whale a "demigorgon," a term for a monster which is bastardized from the word "demiurge." In chapter 36, "The Quarter-Decks," Ahab attempts to explain his irrational hatred of the white whale in the following terms:

> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But

> 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.

It is appropriate to say, in general terms, that Moby-Dick represents the sublime mystery of existence or the problem of evil. However, as we have seen, Melville has something far more specific in mind. Being struck by lightning turned Ahab into a lapsed Zoroastrian, abandoning the idea of a good God. Being mutilated by the whale then turned him into a raging Ophite Gnostic, determined to pierce through the flesh of evil god, harpoon in hand, to reach a state of transcendence. Like so many of the greatest authors, Melville is able to convey the towering grandeur and beauty of a false idea, the better to make its ultimate failure all the more moving and catastrophic. When Ahab and his crew are swallowed by the whale—a tableau reminiscent of the death of the monomaniacal Ulysses and his men, striving to reach Mt. Purgatory—it is a mighty yet sympathetic condemnation of Gnostic transcendental thinking.

We have now plumbed the mystery of both the lightning and the whale—but what about their characteristic whiteness? On this question, Melville has famously done all the work for us, and all the critic must do is pass the mic to the author. As Ishmael himself says on the subject: "Explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught." It is this writer's opinion that chapter 44 of *Moby-Dick*, entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale," is probably the high point of American literature to date. There, trying to articulate the ominousness inherent in the color white, Ishmael astonishingly concludes:

> 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 as 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, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear coloured and colouring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?

How does one follow language like that? I will do so only to emphasize that Melville has here touched on the deepest horror of the Gnostic worldview: that the beautiful world we live in and learn to love, and all the things and people in it that we love, are nothing but the theater and flesh puppets in a tale told by an idiot, a nightmarish masquerade from which we cannot escape unless by the most desperate measures. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?

Let us now conclude our investigation by looking at what is perhaps Melville's finest poem—a poem which is, on the surface, entirely imagistic, but wherein a Gnostic specter lies lurking in the depths. This is the sort of poem which Yvor Winters would have called "postsymbolist": accomplished, sharply sketched, and self-sufficient on the literal level, but charged with an equally coherent allegorical subtext. Unlike the first poem we examined, which, while interesting, is little more than a bald statement of ideology and metaphor, Melville has here entirely digested the Gnostic worldview and synthesized it with his keen eye for marine life to create an arresting symbolic vision. The poem is called "The Maldive Shark," and it goes like this:

> About the Shark, phlegmatical one,
> Pale sot of the Maldive sea,
> The sleek little pilot-fish, azure and slim,
> How alert in attendance be.
> From his saw-pit of mouth, from his charnel of maw
> They have nothing of harm to dread,
> But liquidly glide on his ghastly flank
> Or before his Gorgonian head;
> Or lurk in the port of serrated teeth
> In white triple tiers of glittering gates,
> And there find a haven when peril's abroad,
> An asylum in jaws of the Fates!
> They are friends; and friendly they guide him to prey,

Yet never partake of the treat—
Eyes and brains to the dotard lethargic and dull,
Pale ravener of horrible meat.

Those who come to this poem after studying the metaphysics of *Moby-Dick* will immediately note the similarities between the shark, that "pale ravener of horrible meat," and the white whale. In the role of Leviathan, Moby-Dick represents the cruel indifference of nature and the wretched limitations of the physical world. He is the vessel of the Demiurge's creation. The shark, however, is more than that—he is, in my reading, the idiotic, predatory Demiurge himself: the dotard who carries living souls, the pilot-fish, in the "jaws of the fates." Just as the pilot-fish are the symbiotic "eyes and brains" directing the path of the shark, so too are we, the eyes and brains of physical creation, yet possessed of immortal souls, made to be the servants of the monstrous Demiurge who hosts us. The white "glittering gates" of the shark's teeth are a parody of the pearly gates of heaven, just as the Demiurge creates a kind of grotesque parody of heaven in the form of the physical world. Disgusting physical existence, "horrible meat," is not only created by but consumed by the Demiurge—he is a god who feasts on his young, condemning those he makes to death and decay.

And yet, while Melville paints the shark in deeply unflattering, even gruesome terms, the relationship of the fish to the shark, unlike the relationship of, say, Ahab to the whale, seems on the whole quite positive. The fish have "nothing of harm to dread" from the shark, and indeed, see him as both a friend and a haven from the outer depths. Written over thirty years after *Moby-Dick*, this poem perhaps reflects a mellowing Melville who, while retaining a Gnostic horror of the world, has come to amicable grips with it, recognizing the Demiurge not so much as a barrier to transcendence but a natural shelter from alien forces beyond.

Melville was not the sort to ever take refuge in a particular

faith or philosophy. He was by nature a spiritual seeker fascinated by metaphysical questions, which he loved to discuss late into the night with friends like Nathaniel Hawthorne, but he was never satisfied with the claims of any one dogma. Clearly, however, the Gnostic perspective haunted him throughout his life. I suspect that he personally felt not only the cosmic horror inherent in the worldview, but horror at seeing himself tempted by it. Through his writing, however, he was able to work through many of the existential anxieties which plagued him, reaching always for a high and complex wisdom true to the glory, intricacy, and darkness of life, which he has passed down to generations of grateful readers. Again and again, we see him wrestling with Gnostic suspicions about the world—yet whether it is in *Moby-Dick* or *Clarel* or "The Maldive Shark" (to say nothing of other, more sublunary masterpieces like *Bartleby*, *Billy Budd*, and *Benito Cereno*), he always manages to achieve a grander, more conciliatory vision than that with which his demons tempted him. It is the strength and ambition of such fierce spiritual visions which make him the great genius of American letters.