

THE ANATOMY OF HERMAN MELVILLE'S MOBY-DICK (1)

--from the perspective of figurative rhetoric--

Kenji UEDA

0. the aim of this paper<sup>1)</sup>

In my previous papers on Herman Melville's Moby-Dick (The Functions of Ishmael and Queequeg and "Ahab and Moby-Dick" in Connection with "Ishmael and Queequeg"),<sup>2)</sup> I discussed my general interpretation of the novel.

I believe that I have 'grasped' this 'ungraspable' literary work to some extent; at least in terms of the general theme of the novel. In the above-mentioned papers I emphasized not only the importance of the relation between Ishmael and Queequeg as such but the possibility of approaching the ultimate and crucial subject of the work by shedding as bright light as possible on the correlation between the "Ishmael-Queequeg" relation and the "Ahab-Moby Dick" relation.

As far as the general message of Moby-Dick as a novel is concerned, I believe that I have cleared the essential points of my approach to this novel. In other words, I have cleared in my own ways both what Moby-Dick means to me and how I came to look at the work in such a way.

As for 'how Melville succeeded as the author of such a great literary work,' I do not believe that I have 'grasped' Moby-Dick as a whole to a full extent. By "as a whole" I mean that any great literary work, generally speaking, must have some other aspects that should be deeply studied and analyzed so as to achieve a real understanding of the work. This is especially true with Moby-Dick. To study a novel merely as a book with a certain message to the reader is one thing, and quite another to study it as an 'artistic' work.

The present series of papers, therefore, aim at renewing and deepening my understanding of Moby-Dick by approaching the 'artistic' literary work a little more "as a whole."

For this purpose of the papers, I will discuss the following three essential characteristics of Moby-Dick as an artistic work: 1) figurative rhetoric, 2) figurative rhythm and 3) figurative rhapsody.<sup>3)</sup>

Obviously what is common in these three is the figurativeness. The "rhetoric", the "rhythm" and the "rhapsody" are the most representative characteristics of the stylistic, phonetic and structural aspects of this artistic novel respectively. What is very important here is that in these three major characteristics this "figurativeness" exists as an mutual factor.

#### 1. figurative rhetoric

Before interest in Herman Melville was reawaken in 1921 by the publication of Raymond Weaver's Herman Melville, Mariner

and Mystic, Moby-Dick encountered very few favorable criticisms in and out of the United States. Unlike most other reviewers, London Leader (8 November, 1851) made a comparatively just and reasonable comment:

The Whale--Melville's last book--is a strange, wild, weird book, full of poetry and full of interest. To use a hackneyed phrase, it is indeed 'refreshing' to quit the old, wornout pathways of romance, and feel the sea breezes playing through our hair, the salt spray dashing on our brows, as we do here.... The book is not a romance, nor a treatise on Cetology. It is something of both; a strange, wild work with the tangled overgrowth and luxuriant vegetation of American forests, nor the trim orderliness of an English park. Criticism may pick many holes in this work; but no criticism will thwart its fascination.<sup>4)</sup>

As a result, however, "criticism picked many holes" and many "criticisms thwarted its fascination."

After 1921, much fewer "holes" have been picked in Moby-Dick. More critics have paid more attention to the "fascination" of this great work which was considered to be one of the best American novels. It is certainly very interesting to see such a striking contrast between the two different eras. The present paper, however, is not mainly concerned with such a difference, although it must be not only an interesting but an important topic to discuss. This paper is more concerned with something common between the ages before and after 1921. What is this "something common"?

Both anti-Melville and pro-Melville critics equally paid their attention to the style of Moby-Dick in discussing the

novel, equally focussed the attention on its rhetoric in discussing its style, and equally overlooked an essential aspect of the structure of the rhetoric concerned; the aspect of the figurativeness seen in many ways and on many levels in Melville's style in Moby-Dick.

Unlike those critics who criticized Moby-Dick harshly soon after it was published in the middle of the 19th century, modern critics preferred to discuss some other aspects of the rhetorical style of this famous world literature, trying to prove how it could 'be so 'great' and worthy of praise as a literary work.

Many critics have pointed out as many resemblances as they could between the style of Melville in Moby-Dick and that of Shakespeare. Tracing a surprisingly large number of variations of Shakespeare's patterns, they have succeeded in emphasizing the greatest English poet's decisive influence upon Melville's style in this greatest American novel; especially in terms of 'rhetoric' in such a sense of the word as "the ability to use language effectively" and "the art of all specialized literary use of language."<sup>5)</sup>

It is certainly important to know how Shakespeare's rhetorical influence on Melville created such a 'great' work as Moby-Dick, because, needless to say, without those 'dramatic' effects Melville learned from Shakespeare, Moby-Dick would have been a totally different work. It is also very important, however, to realize that emphasizing the importance of the specific influence mentioned above should not lead us to believe that it is only by such Shakespearean 'dramatic' effects that the work can be great, and that such 'dramatic'

effects are the only important aspect of the rhetorical structure of Moby-Dick. In other words, there are some other important aspects of Melville's rhetoric in Moby-Dick that should be studied as deeply as in the case of the Shakespearean influence. What I mean here is not the necessity of considering some other British writers as Thomas Carlyle and Thomas Browne but that of paying more attention to such other aspects of rhetoric in the novel as the use of Biblical and cetological words in a remarkably 'figurative' way.

As for the hundreds of Biblical names, quotations, references and allusions which are constantly interwoven in the work, Lawrance Thompson considers that they "creates an ambiguous and equivocal effect which is strikingly similar to the effects achieved by Montaigne and Pierre Bayle for purposes of deception and self-protection."<sup>6)</sup> This scholar's primary subject is Melville's technique of deception in order to conceal the nature of his religious thought. Since he views this novel from his viewpoint of "Melville's anti-Christian purposes," his analysis of Melville's parade of Biblical terms in Moby-Dick is mainly concerned with the 'figurative' aspect of those rhetorical usage of Biblical words. By "figurative" here I mean such a sense of the word as "representing one concept in terms of another that may be thought of as analogous with it, employing a rhetorical figure."<sup>7)</sup> In Moby-Dick Melville in fact represented many concepts in terms of Biblical and religious words. Naturally many of those Biblical terminologies do function to acquire their 'figurative' meanings rather than 'literal' ones.

What is very interesting and essentially significant here is that the more carefully we analyze this 'figurative' aspect of Melville's terminology in Moby-Dick, the more deeply we can understand Melville's technique of using words and the original function of 'a word' which has enabled man to create 'literature' at the same time. In other words, it seems to me, a better knowledge of how the writer uses his words in his own 'figurative' way in such an artistic work as Moby-Dick can help us acquire not only a better knowledge of Melville as a writer but also an essential knowledge of 'a word' as an essential factor of 'literature' in general, without which we can never 'grasp' this American novelist.

As that traditional and time-honored combination of those three Chinese/Japanese characters (真, 善, 美) meaning truth, virtue and beauty symbolizes, it may be safely said, the only three truly worthwhile human activities are the search for truth, the practice of virtue and the creation and appreciation of beauty. What is very important here is that East and West, past and present, the only human heritage that is deeply concerned with all of these three is nothing but 'literature'. And what is more important is to realize an extremely simple fact: the fact that this literature that is so intrinsic to man could not exist without words. This fact is so simple that we tend to regard it as something unworthy of a serious consideration.

Let us give our serious consideration to this original relation between 'a word' and 'literature'. Basically, a word is 'a world' to man. And since only man has a word, this world of a word must be one of the most priceless worlds of

man. I believe that what is most worthwhile in this particular "world" of the human race is a work of literature. No one will dispute the fact that Moby-Dick is one of the most representative "works of literature" in a global scope. I also believe that this world-famous novel by Herman Melville could be a good 'textbook' for any good student of literature who wants to study the fundamental relation between a word and literature in general. This is because without an accurate understanding of the general relation between the two, no reader of Moby-Dick can solve that inevitable question: "Why are there so many cetological chapters in Moby-Dick?"

The original relation between a word and a work of literature, first of all, depends upon whether a word in a given context is used by the writer 'literally' or 'figuratively'. To be 'literal' or 'figurative'--this is the question. As long as a literary work consists of words, this question is always an important question for any serious reader of any literary work, because no matter how many words are used, and no matter how the words are used in a work, all those words are used either literally or figuratively.

This dual function of a word as such is usually easy to understand, since we rarely have difficulty in telling one function from the other, depending upon the context in which each word is used. What troubles us most is not the necessity of distinguishing the two but another dual function that exists in the 'figurative' function itself. This 'double-dual' structure which a word originally has is rarely paid special attention.

By "the dual function of the 'figurative' function" I

mean the two completely different functions of the same 'figurative' use of a word. One is the function to convey the reality, and the other the function not to convey the reality, at least directly.

This total difference is caused by our actual attitude toward what is called "communication" in human society; that is to say, we do not always want to communicate with others even in a situation in which we are supposed to do so. This may sound rather ironical but is an aspect of actual human behavior. And this is sometimes the case with a writer writing a fiction as a novel. (If I may call these two different ways of communication "positive" communication and "negative" communication,) man's "positive" communication is naturally concerned with the former function of the 'figurative' usage of a word, and his "negative" communication with the latter function in a delicate and complicated way.

Now, how does the 'figurative' usage of a word function so as not to convey the reality in the case of this "negative" communication? While both the "positive" and "negative" functions of a 'figurative' word are caused by such a basic definition of the word "figurative" as "representing one concept in terms of another" (as I mentioned earlier), the basic difference is based upon how and to what extent each person thinks of "one concept" as analogous with "another". In the case of a fiction, if the writer understands this analogy in one way and the reader in another way, the 'figurative' word concerned cannot function in a "positive" way; and, as a result, this 'figurative' word inevitably turns out to partake of some ambiguous, equivocal and sometimes even inscrutable



nature. Unfortunately, this was exactly the case with many reviewers who examined Moby-Dick soon after it was published in London. The unsigned reviewer of John Bull (25 October, 1851) commented: "Who would have looked for philosophy in whales, or for poetry in blubber?"<sup>8)</sup> It is true that "pausing here and there to write chapters dealing with the natural history of the whale, its size, skeleton, amours and so forth,"<sup>9)</sup> Melville puzzled not only those 19th century book reviewers but many modern readers.

I do not mean that all the cetological words in Moby-Dick are used 'figuratively' by the writer, but it may be very safe to say that very many or (to most readers) too many of those technical words are clearly used in a 'figurative' way, the function of which is very often very difficult to understand. But, why so?

I believe that the general and original structure of the "dual function" of a 'figurative' word (which we have seen so far) can be applied here as a right 'key' for the solution of this 'ungraspable' question.

What is most characteristic about Melville's way of using cetological words is that in terms of a cetological word or concept Melville tries to convey some other concept which he considers to be "analogous" himself. On the other hand, however, what the writer considers to be "analogous" is not always considered to be so by his readers. This gap between the writer and his readers concerning the analogy upon which the former believes the "figurative function" of the word is based--this specific gap have caused many of his readers, before and after the book became famous as a world literature,

to puzzle over the question of why so many chapters are about whales. This is nothing but a beautiful example of what we call here "the negative function of the 'figurative' use of a word" in "the negative communication" between a fiction-writer and his readers.

The "negative communication" always means the existence of something that should be concealed. What was this "something" in the case of Melville in Moby-Dick?

Just as Melville tried to "conceal the nature of his religious thought" (as Lawrence Thompson pointed out),<sup>10)</sup> so he constantly made various efforts throughout the novel to conceal his viewpoint of anti-Western civilization. As I emphasized in my previous papers<sup>11)</sup> on Moby-Dick, this American novelist did not necessarily believe in what was (and is) called "Western civilization" in terms of the global problems of man's fate. He believed that various aspects of "Western civilization" was too "bloody" for peaceful happy man's life. He believed that the history of the West had been as "bloody" as that of whaling. He believed that what was going on in the Western world was mostly as "bloody" as what was going on aboard the Pequod under Captain Ahab.

However, he also believed that most of the readers of Moby-Dick believed in what he did not believe in. He was so conscious of this 'gap' that he inevitably made use of the "negative function" of a 'figurative' word and expression in order to produce an ambiguous and equivocal effect, because he knew that otherwise his "communication" with his readers would be worse; which meant that he would lose even those readers who would be satisfied on a superficial level.

Take Chapter 89 for a typical example: the words "fast-fish" and "loose-fish" are used both 'literally' and 'figuratively'. As 'figurative' words, they function in two ways: on a superficial level they function "positively", meaning something captured and something uncaptured; while on a profound level they function more ambiguously or equivocally, meaning much more that is concealed by Melville for the purpose of a kind of self-protection. The following sentence, for example, is not only concerned with a historical fact that Ireland was 'captured' by England but also suggestive of Melville's viewpoint against the "bloody" nature and history of "Western civilization": "What to that redoubted harpooneer, John Bull, is poor Ireland, but a Fast-Fish?"<sup>12)</sup>

#### NOTES

1. This paper is the first of the three papers in serial form.
2. The two papers are in the vol.16(1983) and the vol. 17(1984) of Collected Treatises on English and American Literature (Beppu University)
3. The present paper is concerned with the first of the three.
4. Watson G. Branch(ed.), MELVILLE, The Critical Heritage. (London and Boston, 1974), pp.262-263.
5. Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Second Edition
6. Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God (Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 151.
7. Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Second Edition
8. Watson G. Branch(ed.), MELVILLE, The Critical Heritage, p. 255
9. W. Somerset Maugham, Ten Novels and Their Authors (London, 1963), p. 201.
10. Lawrance Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God, p.153.
11. Cf. the second note above.
12. Herman Melville, Moby-Dick or, The Whale (London: Constable and Company, 1922. Reprinted, Tokyo: Meicho Fukyu Kai, 1983), p. 147.