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Metaphorical Metaphysics: The Doctrine of Reincarnation in the Works of Herman Melville

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METAPHORICAL METAPHYSICS: THE DOCTRINE OF

REINCARNATION IN THE WORKS OF HERMAN MELVILLE

(TITLE)

BY

Ruth A. Riegel

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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YEAR

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DEPARTMENT HEAD

The spirit of Melville's search for Truth is epitomized by the Mardian Philosopher, Babbalanja:

I am intent upon the essence of things;
the mystery that lieth beyond; the elements
of the tear which much laughter provoketh;
that which is beneath the seeming; the
precious pearl within the shaggy oyster. I
probe the circle's center; I seek to evolve
the inscrutable.¹

¹Herman Melville, Mardi (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), p. 305.

Rising from the depths of Herman Melville's pessimistic portrayal of obsessed men, dimly discerned through their fog of ambiguity and doubt, there appears now and then a glimmering hint of an intuitive and imaginative spiritual insight, suggesting Melville's search for truth, culminating in his intuitive belief in immortality as man's consciousness continuing in the ever-present now, returning from time to time in a new guise to mortal existence.

After the publication of stories based primarily on pure adventure, he appeared compelled to include in his works metaphysical speculations and allusions to the search for spiritual truth. Critical reviews of such works, decrying his departure from action-packed adventure, depressed him, but did not inhibit his metaphysical introspection, one aspect of which was the question of immortality.

His frequent allusions to soul include a concept of its continuing journey developing toward perfection, not to be achieved in a single lifetime, but progressing slowly through numberless mortal lives in a learning process, perhaps, until it has attained the wisdom necessary for permanent union with God.

This reflection parallels some of the key ideas in the period of the American Renaissance. One was the concept of unending and inevitable progress. Another was man's belief in his perfectibility--that God is within him. Somehow these ideas suggest that the soul within man, born of God in the beginning of time, and linked with man in his fall, is seeking to return to its original source.

A pervading opinion regarding Melville's writing emphasizes his morbid fascination with elements of human nature more likely to be

associated with man's fall from grace, rather than with spiritual development. However, Melville's frequent allusions to soul come from an intuitive assumption, based sometimes on meditation, an aspect of reflection that pervades his prose and poetry.

Not only does his own writing indicate his preoccupation with man's relationship to a Cosmic Force or God, but the tenor of his thinking is revealed by his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. After they had met in England in November, 1851, Hawthorne wrote of their conversation during a long walk. After they had ". . . sat down in a hollow among the sand hills . . . and smoked a cigar," Hawthorne said that Melville

. . . as he always does, began to reason of Providence and Futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated;" but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. . . . He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. . . . he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.²

Melville's evident getting "'hold' of a definite belief" is expressed in this quotation from Moby Dick.

. . . death is only a launching into the region of the strange Untried; it is but the first salutation to the possibilities of the intense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored. . . .³

²Randall Stewart, ed., The English Notebooks by Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962), p. 432.

³Herman Melville, Moby Dick (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), p. 481.

He repeats his belief that death is not oblivion in much of his writing.

In nearly all of Melville's major works he includes a metaphorical or literal conviction of immortality, including the possibility of recurrent life cycles. In Clarel, through Rolfe, he makes one of these declarations. Rolfe is considered by Walter Bezanson, editor of Clarel, to be ". . . a partial self-portrait" of Melville. He describes Rolfe also as ". . . SEEKER AND SCEPTIC COMBINED"⁵ which, of course, embodies the essential quality of Melville's mind.

Rolfe, as a seeker, reiterates the certainty of the divinity of man, and emphasises again that that divinity within him ever continues, wearing a new "garment" or identity as needed.

God is man.
The human nature, the divine--
Have both been proved by many a sign.
'Tis no astrologer and star.
The world has now so old become,
Historic memory goes so far
Backward through long defiles of doom;
Whoso consults it honestly
That mind grows prescient in degree;
For man, like God, abides the same
Always, through all variety
Of woven garments to the frame.⁶

He also indicates that whoever searches the long record of historic proof of man's divinity, through meditation, perhaps, becomes possessed of foreknowledge and far memory, is omniscient; thereby

⁴Herman Melville, Clarel, ed. by Walter Bezanson (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1960), p. Lxxxiv.

⁵Ibid., p. 544.

⁶Ibid., Book IV, xci, ll. 66-78, p. 481.

knowing, without doubt, that man continues to reappear as the same consciousness in spite of the variety of guises and costumes or identities he assumes.

Melville's search for "a definite belief" seemed to flower into a declaration of immortality through reincarnation. In order to follow him in his seeking, it is necessary to recognize Melville's faith in intuition as a vital source of knowledge. The "prescience" he speaks of may mean intuition, an innate gift possessed, he felt, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was symbolized by Vine, in Clarel, as "the power and mystery of genius."⁷

Convictions regarding Hawthorne's genius expressed by Melville may be reechoed as applicable to Melville himself. He found Hawthorne worthy of comparison with Shakespeare, though not necessarily as great—like the Elizabethan, chiefly distinguished for "those occasional flashings forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality."⁸

Mrs. Hawthorne, on reading Melville's glowing remarks about her husband's writing, wrote Everett Duyckinck asking who the perceptive critic of her husband could be—" . . . so fearless, so rich in heart, of such fine intuition?"⁹

⁷Ibid., p. 548.

⁸Jay Leyda, ed., The Portable Melville (New York: The Viking Press, 1952), p. 407.

⁹Melville, Moby Dick, p. 575.

Extolling Hawthorne's genius in his essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville points out that only through intuition can one recognize its immensity. Because Hawthorne is immeasurably deep, one cannot grasp all that such a man offers, he says. Melville's explanation for intuitive realization is that "only the heart" can know such a man.

You cannot come to know greatness by inspecting it; there is no glimpse to be caught of it, except by intuition; you need not ring it, you can but touch it and you find it is gold.¹⁰

Elsewhere in his essay on Hawthorne, Melville tells his belief in the existence of an inner quality latent in man, perhaps the gift of awareness through intuition, the result of the urge to search for truth.

I somehow cling to the strange fancy, that, in all men hiddenly reside certain wondrous, occult properties--as in some plants and animals--which by some happy but very rare accident (as bronze was discovered by the melting of the iron and brass at the burning of Corinth) may chance to be called forth here on earth.¹¹

These "wondrous, occult properties" may appear during some introspective moment, or during some sudden awareness of beauty that floods not only the senses, but the soul itself with an intuitive knowing.

Melville symbolizes intuition in describing the beauty and mystery of a surfaced whale's spout. He compares the occasional rainbow which glistens through the foggy vapor above the nearly submerged head

¹⁰ Leyda, ed., The Portable Melville, pp. 406-7.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 421.

to divine intuitions. Describing the "canopy of vapor" overhanging the vast head, as "engender^{ed} by [the whal^e's] incommunicable contemplations," he adds that that vapor was ". . . glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts." Reflecting on the irradiation of vapor by rainbows instead of clear air, Melville parallels that condition in nature with his own doubts. Like rainbows,

through all the thick mists of the dim doubts
in my mind, divine intuitions now and then
shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray.¹²

Melville concludes this paragraph in Moby Dick with a cogent comment concerning his "double vision," the "sceptic and seeker."

And for this I thank God; for all have doubts;
many deny: but doubts or denials, few along
with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all
things earthly, and intuitions of some things
heavenly; this combination makes neither believer
nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them
both with equal eye.¹³

In contrast to the tranquil and beautiful ocean scene, Melville's symbol of light illumines the bleak picturization of the dry, dark, brackish Dead Sea in Clarel. Overhanging Sodom is a briny-tasting gloomy mist in which suddenly appears a rainbow, bringing unexpected beauty to the dismal landscape and reviving the mood of the pilgrims. With a cry of joy Derwent describes the far-flung curved "flag" unfurled by the goddess of the rainbow.

¹²Melville, Moby Dick, p. 372.

¹³Ibid.

Fiery, rosy, violet, green--
 And, lovelier growing, brighter, fairer,
 Transfigured all that evil scene,
 And Iris was the standard bearer.¹⁴

The rainbow is invoked again as a symbol rising over Nehemiah's grave. The exquisite lines describe the "aqueous light," and as the mourners turn and see this ". . . thing of heaven," they wonder, ". . . in that silence sealed, / What works there from behind the veil?"¹⁵

Intuitively one knows that there is beauty beyond the Dead Sea and that the grave is of the earth only. The rainbow irradiates doubt with an awareness of something hidden from mortals.

Writing obliquely rather than forthrightly, Melville symbolizes that receptive part of our minds which becomes aware of knowledge through intuition. Bezanson terms the figures in this passage from Clarel ". . . as striking analogues for the unconscious."¹⁶

In Piranezi's rarer prints,
 Interiours measurelessly strange,
 Where the distrustful thought may range
 Misgiving still--what mean the hints?
 Stairs upon stairs which dim ascend
 In series from plunged Bastiles drear--
 Pit under pit; long tier on tier
 Of shadowed galleries which impend
 Over cloisters, cloisters without end;
 The height, the depth--the far, the near;
 Ring-bolts to pillars in vaulted lanes,
 And dragging Rhadamanthine chains;¹⁷

¹⁴Melville, Clarel, Book II, xcix, ll. 120-128, p. 245.

¹⁵Ibid., Book II, xcix, ll. 149-150, p. 274.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 611-12.

¹⁷Ibid., Book II, xciv, ll. 1-12, pp. 260-1.

Melville apparently feels that the eighteenth century Roman engraver Piranezi hints at unknown conditions of mind that exist beneath a conscious level of awareness. According to Bezanson Melville had reference to particular ". . . monumental views of imagined colossal arches and gigantic stairways in fantastic prisons, peopled with dream-like figures. . . ."18 Perhaps these pictures which emphasize light and shadows in their ascending and descending lines are symbolic of the intermittent flashes of intuition that illumine the deeply buried hidden knowledge in man's subconscious.

The Rhadamanthine chains are inflexible but just bonds that may interfere with clear comprehension of hazy symbols. They are imposed, perhaps, by our own thoughts which create a condition that cannot be altered, except by new directions in spiritual perceptions. This possibility gives added emphasis to the Biblical warning, "As a man thinketh, so is he."

Continuing his poetic declaration of awareness in intuition, Melville adds a passage regarding the power of Imagination.

Thy wings, Imagination, span
Ideal truth in fable's seat:19

It is necessary to couch the truth in fable or metaphor in order to make it more comprehensible--or palatable. If something is implied rather than overtly stated man can accept it more readily, "His penetralia of retreat."20

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 611-12.

¹⁹Ibid., Book II, xxxv, ll. 18-19, p. 261.

²⁰Ibid., l. 21, p. 261.

Melville frequently spoke of intuition as a power that occasionally illumined the unknown infinite. He included imagination as a necessary faculty to understand these previously undiscovered truths. He speaks of this through Babbalanja, the philosopher in Mardi.

This character frequently arouses scorn, amusement or rejection by his fellow travelers in mythical Mardi. However, Babbalanja represents a mystical approach to life that indicates Melville's deep reflection on the philosophic points of view expressed by the Mardian sage. The other characters who often ridicule his insights, could be considered parallel to Melville's own sceptical aspect, or to those of his acquaintances, readers and reviewers who understood little of his metaphysical allusions to his search for the Absolute.

Babbalanja, ever dispensing wisdom, informs Yoomy, Mohi, and Media, King of Mardi of the essential need to possess imagination to understand the infinite. Urged by Media to enlarge his theme, Babbalanja responds,

Well, then, my lord, I was about to say, that the imagination is the Voli-Donzine; or to speak plainer, the unical, rudimental, and all comprehending abstracted essence of the infinite remoteness of things. Without it, we were grasshoppers.²¹

Endeavoring to clarify his meaning, he adds,

Without imagination, I say, an armless man, born blind, could not be made to believe, that he had a head of hair, since he could neither see it, nor feel it, nor has hair any feeling of itself.²²

²¹Melville, Mardi, p. 426.

²²Ibid., p. 427.

Faith in the imaginative power of the mind was prevalent in Melville's age. The Romantics were convinced that the mind had great powers beyond those of the senses. Man's powers are unlimited because he knows without having to prove anything. Imagination was synonymous with intuition and transcended the limited powers of the senses or of rational thinking, or reason. Such a tremendous power could enable man to recognize truth in the universe. It was this gift of mind that enabled Melville in his writing to ask the questions that offered glimmerings of spiritual truth, which aid the soul in its slow evolution toward Perfect Wisdom or Union with God.

The idea of native intuition was part of the period's concept of Progress and Idealization. Imagination was concomitant to the intuitive mind. Prior to the advent of the Romanticists in the nineteenth century, imagination was firmly relegated to a position opposite clear thought and confident opinion. But the term is a victim of the limitations of language. Imagination draws unfailing vigor from a source beyond itself. Its function is to interpret the impressions of the senses beyond ordinary perception.

Coleridge's famous definition of Imagination includes his conviction that

IMAGINATION [is] the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.²³

In other words only through imagination can the mind of perceptive man understand the ever on-going Cosmic act of creation, or the Eternal

²³James Volant Baker, The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination (Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 115.

Now. James Volant Baker, in his book, The Sacred River, a study of Coleridge's theory of imagination, adds that this human perception

. . . intuitively organizes the whole . . . into ideal concepts. . . . The mind . . . intuits the real forms or the ideas behind the sensuous forms and establishes, in this way, direct contact with the divine.²⁴

Imagination is a power of vision which illumines the existence of a spiritual world. It is the energy of imagination that insists the world is not a mechanical sphere, but is in reality full of a vast all-pervading life.

To understand Melville's imaginative and intuitive explorations of archetypal questions of what we are and our relationship to God and the universe, it is essential for his readers also to have imagination. Ishmael explains that "without imagination, no man can follow another into these halls."²⁵ A contemporary of Melville's stated a similar contention in a review of Moby Dick in the "Literary Notices" column in Harper's December, 1851, issue. Lavish in its praise, the article explains the framework of the novel, adding that the author has included ". . . numerous gratuitous suggestions on psychology, ethics and theology." The reviewer goes beyond the story line further to add,

Beneath the whole story, the subtle, imaginative reader may perhaps find a pregnant allegory, intended to illustrate the mystery of human life.²⁶

²⁴Ibid., p. 119.

²⁵Melville, Moby Dick, p. 190.

²⁶"Literary Notices," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Vol. IV December, 1851 to May, 1852 (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1852), p. 137.

In an endeavor to follow Melville "into these halls," discovering in his works "a pregnant allegory," his readers may find some aspects of the mystery of human life illuminated for them. It seems that the allied powers of intuition and imagination might have been nurtured in meditative communings of which he writes so knowledgeably. Through numerous passages he indicates that it is through meditation that his mind was opened, filling it with metaphor for his mystical writings and suggesting the concept of ongoing soul revealed in his work. Babbalanja explains what happens in meditation. To the soul which wants God, or Oro, no other teacher is needed. God has given Reason, or inspiration, as

the first revelation; and so far as it tests all others, it has precedence over them. It comes direct to us, without suppression or interpolation; and with Oro's indisputable imprimatur. . . . Though in its best estate, not infallible; so far as it goes, for us, it is reliable. . . .²⁷

"Within our hearts is all we seek: though in that search many need a prompter."²⁸

One cannot help wondering whether such meditative soul searching might not have begun in Melville's twenty-fifth year. In a letter to Hawthorne in June, 1851, when he was 32 years old, he says,

From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself. But I feel that shortly the flower must fall to the mould.²⁹

²⁷Melville, Mardi, p. 506.

²⁸Ibid., p. 565.

²⁹Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilmar, eds., The Letters of Herman Melville (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 130.

The "unfolding" within himself seems a graphic indication that he began to lose himself in a deep reverie of detached awareness during which he found intuitive answers to deep questions of his relationship to God or the Cosmic Force of the universe. Metaphysical descriptions of the unfolding of one's consciousness are often symbolized in metaphysical teachings by the unfolding of the petals of the lotus, perhaps the "flower" of which he speaks.

During these seven years of "unfolding" with scarcely an interruption longer than three weeks, Melville began writing of his experiences as a seaman on the whaler Acushnet, his adventures with Toby Green in the Marquesas, and as a sailor on a man-of-war prior to 1844. In three of these books--Typee, Mardi and White Jacket--are seen evidences of meditative introspection and intuitive awareness augmented by imagination. By 1851, when he was immersed in writing Moby Dick, he felt that the unfolding flower of awareness within himself was soon to crumple, possibly because of his need to earn more money. It seemed that metaphysical hinting ruined the sale of his books. It still, however, was blooming brilliantly enough to embellish the whaling adventure story with metaphysical insights relating to good and evil, life and death, beauty and desolation, calm and tempest, hate and love, death and immortality.

Now and then one notices in his writings references to Eastern literature relating, perhaps, to meditation and the metaphysics of the Bhagavad-Gita. For example, he speaks of a dream in Sketch 2 of The Encantadas, in which he found himself sitting upon a tortoise, ". . . a Brahmin similarly mounted upon either side, forming a tripod

of foreheads which upheld the universal cope."³⁰ His attention to Vishnu and his incarnations in Clarel and Moby Dick pertain to the Bhagavad Gita. If one assumes that Melville has read this Hindu gospel, then one knows without doubt that Melville has considered that volume's authoritative discourses on the art of attaining truth through meditation, and also of the indisputable Eastern view of reincarnation.

In a relatively recent edition of the Bhagavad Gita, Aldous Huxley, in his introduction, points out that human beings can realize Brahman or Mind or God through ". . . direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning." He also speaks of ". . . the inner-man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul."³¹ He adds, "The purpose of human life is the discovery of Truth, the unitive knowledge of the Godhead."³² What Huxley has distilled of the hagavad Gita in his introduction was of course realized by earlier thoughtful readers of this Vedantic philosophy, including Melville's contemporaries whose interest in this work is documented in Matthiessen's American Renaissance, among other sources.

The meditative discourses found in Eastern literature and which seem evident in Melville are expounded by characters such as Ishmael, Queequeg, Rolfe, and, especially, Babbalanja.

³⁰Herman Melville, Piazza Tales (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), p. 157.

³¹Aldous Huxley, "Introduction to The Bhagavad Gita," translated by Swami Prabhavavanda and Christopher Isherwood (Hollywood, California: Vedanta Press, 1944), p. 7.

³²Ibid., p. 11.

Dr. Bruce Franklin, in his introduction to Mardi, describes Babbalanja as seeking

. . . to escape from the restrictions not only of the Mardian world, but of all time and space; ultimately he, like all the other questors except Taji, learns that "reason," not myth, is the only salvation.

This "reason" is not discursive reason, but the reason of the heart, which establishes a religion of the heart. . . . In this world, the only safe basis for religion seems to be intuitive psychological and moral truth.³³

Melville frequently alludes to his own kind of religious feeling, asserting that ". . . our hearts are our best prayer-rooms, and the chaplains who can most help us are ourselves."³⁴ This could be an oblique reference to meditation.

Through Ishmael Melville suggests that the meditative turn in the topmost rigging was "[his] best prayer room" wherein was pondered ". . . the problem of the universe revolving in [him]."³⁵ Here

. . . at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul pervading mankind and nature; every strange half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Cranmer's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over.³⁶

³³Melville, Mardi, p. x.

³⁴Herman Melville, White Jacket (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1956), p. 157.

³⁵Melville, Moby Dick, p. 155.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 156-7.

Here Melville is describing meditation and the ensuing heightened intuitive awareness that can accompany such exalted reverie. However, he reverses the mood of the dreamy, contemplative picture to remind the dreamer that to lose one's self completely in this dream-like detachment is to risk serious injury or death. It appears that Melville is warning the introspective sailor to beware of losing contact with reality, in order not to risk losing one's life, remembering that he lives also in a physical world. But in another sense, the contemplative searcher is in contact with another Reality, the one that is beyond the confining physical senses, and within which the conscious life is never lost. But in spite of what seems to be a warning to keep one's sensibilities alert to mortal danger, still Melville emphasizes the need for some men to search for understanding.

Ishmael reminds the reader that even Solomon said, "The man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain," (i.e. even while living) "in the congregation of the dead."³⁷ The man devoted to the search for truth is alive to inspiration and awareness. He continues with a warning that the negative aspects of meditation can deaden its devotees. But, he continues,

. . . there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.³⁸

³⁷Ibid., p. 422.

³⁸Ibid., p. 423.

This passage symbolizes Melville himself. The Catskill eagle in his soul flies with him into the bleakest aspects of life, but even in his darkest moods of despair, he is still, as a reflective thinker, already in the mountains, "higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar."

Far more than Ishmael, Babbalanja, in his role of mystic and philosopher in Mardi, frequently offers poetic declarations regarding meditation and truth. Ever absorbing new wisdom in his meditative moments, Babbalanja asks the minstrel Yoomy to proceed with a song that seems unfinished to his listeners. When Yoomy explains that he has ". . . ceased in the middle; the end is not yet,"³⁹ Babbalanja utilizes that comment to define what sublime heights meditation can give to the earnest seeker.

Mysticism! . . . What, minstrel; must nothing ultimate come of all that melody no final and inexhaustible meaning? nothing that strikes down into the soul's depths; till, intent upon itself, it pierces in upon its own essence, and is resolved into its pervading original becoming a thing constituent of the all embracing deific; whereby we mortals become part and parcel of the gods; our souls to them as thoughts, and we privy to all things occult, ineffable, and sublime?⁴⁰

In meditation the soul unites with the pervading spirit of the universe, becomes part of God and becomes "privy to all things occult, ineffable and sublime."

The reverent cannibal, Queequeg, embodies many aspects of what might be truth revealed through meditation. His prolonged fast and

³⁹Melville, Mardi, p. 491.

⁴⁰Ibid.

meditation during the time of Ramadan prior to his sailing with Ishmael on the Pequod left his Yankee shipmate bewildered and distressed. After Queequeg ended his 24 hour communion, Ishmael endeavored to make him see ". . . now [how] deplorably foolish [was] this ridiculous Ramadan of his."⁴¹

Queequeg is full of "condescending concern and compassion" to think that his friend Ishmael is so lost to "pagan piety."⁴² Not every seeker is successful, however, nor is every man so inclined. Melville suggests through the demi-god, Media, that even for those who try to meditate there are many who gain nothing because of an inability to concentrate, or to remain on a high level of introspective receptivity.

. . . final last thoughts you mortals have none;
nor can have; and at bottom, your own fleeting
fancies are too often secrets to yourselves. . . .
Thus with the wisest of you all; you are ever un-
fixed. Do you show a tropical calm without?
Then, be sure a thousand contrary currents whirl
and eddy within. The free, airy robe of your
philosophy is but a dream which seems true while
it lasts; but waking again into the orthodox
world, straightway you resume the old habit.⁴³

Still, Babbalanja exhorts all those who seek knowledge to find it in solitude and "exhume our ingots." He knows that "much of the knowledge we seek, already we have in our cores. Yet so simple it is, we despise it; so bold, we fear it."⁴⁴

⁴¹Melville, Moby Dick, p. 85.

⁴²Ibid., p. 86.

⁴³Melville, Mardi, p. 320.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 506.

Revering and welcoming that knowledge, Babbalanja reveals to Taji and the others on the journey what he learned in Alma, the land where ". . . mystic Love . . . is [the] ruler."⁴⁵ He explains that while in deep meditation, his sixth sense was opened—or, in other words, he became aware of Knowledge. He has been given a glimpse of heaven by a celestial vision, taken to the stars, passing "systems, suns and moons."⁴⁶ Here, where death has given knowledge to the seeker, new mysteries to unravel perplex all those ". . . beings [who] will for aye progress in wisdom and in good; yet will they never gain a fixed beatitude." Mortals, upon death, only ". . . put off lowly temporal pinings, for angel and eternal aspirations."⁴⁷

For such utterances all the travel companions of Babbalanja ridicule him as a madman. Melville has an emphatic comment in a letter written in April, 1849. Speaking about a friend of whose madness he had learned,

This going mad of a friend or acquaintance comes straight home to every man who feels his soul in him,—which but few men do. For in all of us lodges the same fuel to light the same fire. And he who has never felt, momentarily, what madness is has but a mouthful of brains.⁴⁸

Melville's eternal involvement with opposing forces is expressed in a scene portraying negative involvement with meditation. This

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 555.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 561.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 562.

⁴⁸Davis and Gilman, eds., The Letters of Herman Melville, p. 83.

contradiction is revealed in that inexplicable "magnetic life"⁴⁹ that, with some, may recharge with new vigor or awareness in meditation; or, like Ahab, in his shipboard Satanic mass, discharge with a frenzied excitement. Ahab has mustered his crew round the capstan so that he ". . . may in some sort revive a noble custom of [his] fisherman fathers before [him]."⁵⁰ Touching the axis of three lances, extended by his three mates,

. . . it seemed as though, by some nameless, interior volition, he would fain have shocked into them the same fiery emotion accumulated within the Leyden jar of his own magnetic life. The three mates quailed before his strong, sustained and mystic aspect.⁵¹

At first Ahab feels his ceremony is meaningless because his mates do not sustain their gaze as he looks piercingly at them. Then on second thought, he assures them it is just as well.

For did ye three but once take the full-forced shock, then mine own electric thing, that had perhaps expired from out me. Per-chance, too, it would have dropped ye dead.⁵²

That "fuel" within us all is energized in Ahab by his will to vengeance, which ". . . is laid with iron rails whereon [his] soul is grooved to run."⁵³ Meditation results sometimes in new hypotheses, which, if discussed with others, or explained in novels, create doubts of the

⁴⁹Melville, Moby Dick, p. 164.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 163.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 164.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., p. 166.

sanity of the innovative thinker. But Babbalanja expresses the thoughtful man's need for quiet contemplation, declaring that mortals are justified in their inductions.

Have we mortals naught to rest on, but what
we see with eyes? Is no faith to be reposed in
that inner microcosm, wherein we see the charted
universe in little, as the whole horizon is
mirrored in the iris of a gnat?⁵⁴

The insight to be gained through that mirrored inner microcosm is revealed in another of Babbalanja's comments to the poet Yoomy who loves beauty but regrets that his enemies do not understand his songs about it. This could as well be Melville, the artist, speaking of his own intuitive Knowing, but which when shared is misunderstood. Explaining to Yoomy that they are both poets, having a common meeting ground in thought, Babbalanja points out that even though he is a philosopher and Yoomy is a poet, still they only seem to differ.

Not a song you sing, but I have thought
its thought; and where dull Mardi sees but your
rose, I unfold its petals, and disclose a pearl.⁵⁵

He emphasizes, however, that as a meditative philosopher he, perhaps like the 25-year-old Melville, unfolds the petals of the flower and discloses the pearl of illuminated Truth.

Each glimpse of the "pearl" heightened Melville's drive to make intelligible to himself and others what was so insistent in his own nature and ". . . waked the infinite wakefulness in him. . . ." ⁵⁶ and,

⁵⁴Melville, Mardi, p. 366.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 382.

⁵⁶Herman Melville, Pierre (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1957), p. 426.

aided by his gift of imagination, plunged him in his writings toward a passionate search for Truth.

His reverence is reserved for Truth as he has come to know it.

God is my Lord; and though many satellites revolve around me, I and all mine revolve around the great central Truth, sun-like, fixed and luminous forever in the foundationless firmament.⁵⁷

Queequeg further embodies Melville's assertion that the search for truth is inherent in man even in the so-called irreligious cannibal tribes. After his miraculous recovery from an almost fatal illness on board the *Pequod*, Queequeg spends many spare hours carving a copy of the hieroglyphic marks tattooed upon his own body onto the sea chest that was to have been his coffin. These tattoos had been indelibly marked upon him by a "departed prophet and seer of his island" who, in this manner had written ". . . a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth."⁵⁸

A young character in Mardi seems to embody Melville's own inner searching, discarding dogma and ritual for a personal intuitive striving for the path that leads to the knowing of God. The young pilgrim in *Maramba* spurned the admonitions of the avaricious, blind priest *Pari* who offered to guide pilgrims to the lofty peak of *Ofo*. This lad explains that although he may perish in his attempt to climb the peak, he still must follow the mountain's path that has been revealed to him in a dream, even though he has not absolute faith that he will reach the summit.

⁵⁷Melville, Mardi, p. 318.

⁵⁸Melville, Moby Dick, p. 477.

It doesn't matter by what name the Supreme Force is called, ". . . it is the soundless thought of him . . . that is in me," he explains. He feels the Supreme Force or God within him, though as yet unarticulated. "I but feel Oro in me, yet can not declare the thought."⁵⁹ Pani, symbolizing a formal creed, orders the boy to desist from his foolish desire to climb the Peak to find Oro. Angry because the boy rejects his guidance, the blind priest, later in an agony of uncertainty, yearns ". . . that [his] were a settled doubt, like that wild boy's, who without faith, seems full of it. . . . Methinks that daring boy hath Alma in him, struggling to be free."⁶⁰ But the priest "recovers," dons his mask of piety again, afraid the pilgrims might see him as he really is. Thus he obliterates his inner self's identity and longing for Truth, remaining bound to a creed.

The urge to find Truth is not always manifested from the highest spiritual impulses that animate men's souls. In a scene in Moby Dick where Starbuck endeavors to dissuade Ahab from his vengeful pursuit of the whale, Melville indicates other directions of man in relation to an awareness of truth.

One is Starbuck's exemplification of man as accepting limitations to instinctive questions regarding truth—as demanded unsuccessfully of the boy pilgrim by the priest, Pani. Starbuck exclaims in horror at what seems blasphemous to him, having been taught by the Calvinistic church that man is forbidden to seek to know, understand or relate to God, except as taught by decree and dogma.

⁵⁹Melville, Mardi, p. 291.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 293.

In contrast to Starbuck, Ahab represents that other polarity, whose focus is hate. He is that man striking out to know the unknowable, even though he destroys himself in the process, including all those around him.

Starbuck's earnest soul is shocked by Ahab's passion for vengeance. In his futile attempt to deter Ahab's unswerving pursuit of the white whale, he exclaims that ". . . to be enraged with a dumb thing . . . seems blasphemous."⁶¹ Ahab answers with a passionate declaration of the direction of his own search for truth. Ahab is determined to see what lies beyond or beneath the ambiguity of the whale, which to him embodies the truth of evil.

He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. . . . Who's over me? Truth hath no confines.⁶²

Ahab hates the mask of the Whale, his whiteness, his inscrutability. The whale represents two aspects of divinity, physical and spiritual. Ahab questions whether the whale is representative of an angry deity, the "Principal," filled with savage malice; or whether it is an indifferent "agent" of God, possessing immense force but non-selective and uncaring in the unleashing of its fury.

As a white whale Moby Dick is physically only an appearance or illusion, but in Ahab's passion to "thrust through the wall" the old

⁶¹Melville, Moby Dick, p. 161.

⁶²Ibid., p. 162.

whaler is searching for the ultimate behind all physical forms—that which is behind the whale. This is the significance of the quest—to discover spiritual Reality or Truth.

Ahab sometimes doubts that there is anything at all beyond what is apparent. However, his fixed purpose is paramount over occasional doubt and the very existence of the whale intensifies his thirst for vengeance which is his all consuming task. The focus of Ahab's hate is the inscrutability he feels is embodied in the whale. The powerful creature's whiteness represents the essential ambiguity of contrasts inasmuch as white can mean not only the absence of color, but also the absorption of all colors. Ahab is compelled to pierce the whale's Mask, and though he may find only nothingness, he still is intent on finding the Absolute. He cannot accept paradox.

Perhaps Ahab is an ambiguous aspect of Melville's own inner being, beset with a hatred for a God who seems to be without love. Although tortured by the fears of an unknown, vengeful God, Melville's gifts of imagination and intuition forced him into uncertainty and doubt regarding those early teachings, plunging him toward his passionate search for truth.

In Melville's "six-inch chapter" in Moby Dick, termed by Ishamel ". . . the stoneless grave of Bulkington," he states his conviction that the mind's search for truth is a compelling force in the lives of some men. Melville, perhaps, is pointing to himself and his own soul-driven searchings. Ishmael addresses the living consciousness of the drowned Bulkington:

Know ye, now Bulkington? Glimpses do ye
seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth;
that all deep, earnest thinking is but the

intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open
independence of her sea; while the wildest
winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her
on the treacherous, slavish shore?

But as in landlessness alone resides the
highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God--so,
better is it to perish in that howling infinite,
than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even
if that were safety!⁶³

Far better to perish in the search for truth than to accept safety
in the complacency of contemporary acceptance of whatever passes for
truth--or to be indifferent to any. But to an apparent searcher like
Bulkington, Melville breathes the certainty of continuing life,
elevated to a higher plane:

Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington!
Bear thee grimly, demi-god! Up from the spray
of thy ocean-perishing--straight up, leaps thy
apotheosis!⁶⁴

Whatever occurs in life, Melville is saying, bear it without giving
up the struggle. To the man who lives above complacent conformity
no matter what the cost to him, to the man whose soul compels him to
seek for comprehension, Melville offers certain conviction of a new,
glorious state after death--for Bulkington, an exalted level of
awareness. One meaning of immortality for Melville may be that it is
a level of consciousness predetermined by whatever one's thoughts have
been. Such a departure from accepted beliefs regarding Heaven can be
inferred in some of his work and was the basis for much of the criticism
of his writing.

⁶³Ibid., p. 105.

⁶⁴Ibid.

Babbalanja, in discussing the unknown depth below the surface of men, explains that, "we are only known by our names; as letters sealed up, we but read each other's superscriptions."⁶⁵ All that is contained within, the unknown depths of men's subconscious, is based on thoughts and actions of past existences.

Questioned about an ancient revered poet's rejection by his contemporaries, Babbalanja points out such an unappreciated man's personal satisfaction with his genius. He had his own consciousness, ". . . an empire boundless as the West. What to him were huzzas?"⁶⁶ Accused of over-quoting from "an antique pagan" called Bardianna, Babbalanja reiterates again the concept of remembered consciousness from another life. Suggesting that his listeners lack perception he explains,

. . . I do not so much quote Bardianna, as Bardianna quoted me, though he flourished before me; and no vanity, but honesty to say so. The catalogue of true thoughts is but small; they are ubiquitous; no man's property; and unspoken, or bruited, are the same. When we hear them, why seem they so natural, receiving our spontaneous approval? why do we think we have heard them before? Because they but reiterate ourselves; they were in us, before we were born. The truest poets are but mouthpieces; and some men are duplicates of each other; I see myself in Bardianna.⁶⁷

It is entirely possible that the pointed comments of reviewers decrying Melville's mysticism and calling only for pure adventure stories may have ended his metaphysical meditations. His need for an

⁶⁵Melville, Mardi, p. 343.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 345.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 346.

income to support his family probably superseded his experiments in abstraction. However, it seems evident that the insights gained regarding immortality remained as a source of certainty, appearing frequently and emerging again in his last publications, Clarel and Billy Budd. However, apparently for fear of being ridiculed and unread, he often couched his beliefs in obscure metaphor, the meaning of which was overlooked by many readers and possibly impatiently skipped over by others. Near the end of a passionate chapter in Mardi about the dreams that relate Melville to the empires of history, he repeats the need for his readers to infer much of what he feels obliged only to suggest. He compares his soul to the great Mississippi River which gathers unto itself the mighty Ohio, Missouri and Arkansas Rivers, encompassing their tributaries, to swell its ongoing torrent—" . . . with all the past and present pouring in me, I roll down my billows from afar."⁶⁸ Melville expresses the intensity of conviction regarding previous lives that swells within him, nearly bursting with the unremitting conviction that compels him to utter this "Audacity." As he begins again the discourse of Media and Babbalanja on the revelation of reincarnation through dreams, Melville states his own bitterness at being unable to state unequivocally that which has become his personal awareness of truth.

Meditate as much as you will, Babbalanja, but say little aloud, unless in a merry and mythical way. *[Italics mine]* Lay down the great maxims of things, but let inferences take care of the selves.⁶⁹

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 318.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 319.

In the writing of such books as Mardi, Moby Dick, Pierre, and Clarel, Melville may have been more interested in his monumental questions and their meaning for himself, than in what they might mean to his paying public.

However, he was profoundly grateful to those kindred spirits who understood this deeper meaning of his published efforts. In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne in November, 1851, he said that although Hawthorne criticized parts of Moby Dick, he ". . . understood the pervading thought that impelled the book--and that [he] praised. . . . [He was] archangel enough to despise the imperfect body and embrace the soul. . . ." ⁷⁰

Melville explains in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" that in order to slip suggestions of the Truth in his writing he has had to do it "covertly and by snatches."

For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth-- ⁷¹

The question of defining "Truth" is explained or evaded--according to one's point of view--at the end of a discussion occurring among three of the Mardian voyagers. Skeptical of a story told by Yoomy the poet, Mohi the historian complains to Babbalanja that in it the truth has not been told. The wisdom of the old philosopher reveals Melville's view of the meaning of Truth. Quoting again from the

⁷⁰Davis and Gilman, eds., The Letters of Herman Melville, p. 142.

⁷¹Jay Leyda, The Portable Melville, p. 408.

ageless wisdom of old Bardianna, Babbalanja explains to Mohi that "truth is in things and not in words: truth is voiceless. . . ." He asserts

. . . that what are vulgarly called fictions are . . . realities . . . for things visible are but conceits of the fancy. If duped by one, we are equally duped by the other.

"Clear as this water," said Yoomy.

"Opaque as this paddle," said Mohi. "But, come now, thou oracle, if all things are deceptive, tell us what is truth?"

"The old interrogatory; did they not ask it when the world began? But ask it no more. As old Bardianna hath it, that question is more final than any answer."⁷²

Mardi is the pinnacle of his efforts to present Truth to his readers. He may have felt that calling it "an allegorical romance" was a covert attempt to hide its purpose, but it includes far more than symbolic suggestions. Babbalanja is the chief exponent of Truth-telling, and in the significant frequent allusions to his madness by his associates may be seen a parallel to Melville's own experiences as a rejected, misunderstood author. Both were jeered for their uncontained imaginations. But his "madness" enabled Melville to recognize that "man's insanity is heaven's sense. . . ."⁷³

This attempt to describe ". . . a voyage into the very axis of reality"⁷⁴ meant much more to Melville than his novels of adventure in the South Seas. He wrote the publisher of Mardi, John Murray, asking

⁷²Melville, Mardi, p. 248.

⁷³Melville, Moby Dick, p. 413.

⁷⁴Melville, Mardi, p. v.

that he not put him down on the title page as the author of Typee and Omoo. He wanted Mardi to be regarded as differently as possible from those adventure novels. He continued his warm defense of Mardi by declaring that he preferred to write those sort of books which are said to "fail," asking pardon for his "egotism" in saying this.⁷⁵

He compared the rude reception of Mardi with the well-received "beggary"⁷⁶ Redburn. He sardonically wrote his publishers regarding Israel Potter that this time he would send "nothing Weighty." He added there would be ". . . nothing of any sort to shock the fastidious. . . . nothing reflective. . . . It is adventure."⁷⁷ Much later, at the publication of Clarel he said it, too, was "eminently adapted for unpopularity. . . . it may intimidate or allure."⁷⁸

A similar opinion regarding Mardi was made by an English reviewer in Bentley's Miscellany for April, 1849. It expressed reservations about the book, adding significantly that ". . . it was one which the reader will probably like very much or detest altogether, according to the measure of his imagination."⁷⁹

Commenting on those critics who scorned Mardi, Melville calmly wrote Lemuel Shaw that later generations would understand it.

"There's nothing in it," cried the dunce, when he threw down the 47th problem of the 1st Book of

⁷⁵Davis and Gilman, eds., The Letters of Herman Melville, p. 92.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 95.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 170.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 275.

⁷⁹Ibid., (footnote), p. 85.

Euclid—"There's nothing in it—" --Thus with the posed critic. But Time, which is the solver of all riddles, will solve "Mardi."⁸⁰

His prophecy was proven after the lapse of only a few decades following Melville's death in 1891. New generations of readers are attempting to "solve" not only Mardi, but the "pervading thought that impelled . . ." Moby Dick, Clarel and other works, finding in them strong evidence of plausible answers to age-old questions.

In the midst of the tale of Taji in Mardi, Melville digresses to speak directly of faith and knowledge to the curious, questioning reader. He reminds those who include this brief chapter in their reading that ". . . many infidels but disbelieve the least incredible things; and many bigots reject the most obvious."⁸¹ We all might have been doubting Thomases had we lived in Christ's day. Melville is strongly suggesting that it is our lack of faith that makes us so limited in our awareness of Truth. "The greatest marvels are first truths; and first truths the last unto which we attain."⁸² Then, in closing his digression on faith and knowledge, Melville makes what seems to be a personal positive declaration of his belief in reincarnation:

In some universe-old truths, all mankind are disbelievers. Do you believe that you lived three thousand years ago? That you were at the taking of Tyre, were overwhelmed in Gomorrah? No. But for me, I was at the subsiding of the Deluge, and helped swab the ground, and build the first house. With the Israelites, I fainted in the wilderness; was in court, when Solomon outdid all

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 85.

⁸¹Melville, Mardi, p. 259.

⁸²Ibid.

the judges before him. I, it was, who suppressed the lost work of Manetho, on the Egyptian theology, as containing mysteries not to be revealed to posterity, and things at war with the canonical scriptures; . . . I touched Isabella's heart, that she hearkened to Columbus. . . . I am the leader of the Mohawk masks, who in the Old Commonwealth's harbor, overboard threw the East India Company's Souchong; I am the Vailed Persian prophet; I, the man in the iron mask; I, Junius.⁸³

This proud declaration of remembered on-going consciousness is only one of a number of positive statements regarding reincarnation as an aspect of immortality. For example, a scene in Mardi may be assumed to personify any lifetime. Yoomy, at the prow of a canoe estatically describes Mardi as the world lying before the voyagers, with her islands, lakes and ". . . all her stores of good and Evil." Even though their craft may sink in the storms that may come, he relishes the winds that give them ". . . a lively blast. . . ." Calling for a gay sailing, he epitomizes the search for Yillah as the purpose of this trip.⁸⁴ The search for wisdom is the core of existence.

Queequeg, whose inner wisdom urged him ". . . to learn among the Christians the arts whereby to make his people still happier than they were, and more than that, still better than they were. . . ." ⁸⁵ is shown as an example of ongoing soul. Queequeg is described as critically ill of a fever, apparently dying, being brought ". . . nigh his endless end." Weakening gradually, he looked out at his friends with "a strange softness

⁸³Ibid., p. 260.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 177.

⁸⁵Melville, Moby Dick, p. 55.

of lustre . . . a wondrous testimony to that immortal health in him which could not die or be weakened."⁸⁶

Evidence in the structure of Mardi suggesting successive lifetimes is indicated by H. Bruce Franklin in his introduction to Mardi. He describes an idea hinting of immortality in the novel's plan.

Despite the segmented narrative, the rapidly shifting levels and kinds of allegory, and the Protean changes in the narrator's identity, Mardi does have a consistent structure. This structure is an apparent circle which turns out to be not a plane figure but a solid circular on many different planes. The action, which is in some senses trivial and in some senses cosmic, is replayed on each of these planes, which are different kinds of worlds--physical, romantic, imaginary, and allegorical. These worlds begin and end in a watery wake.⁸⁷

Dr. Franklin has, perhaps, inadvertently, described a theory of reincarnation. In Mardi Melville presents Taji who ". . . begins as a sailor, becomes in order a deserter, a thief, a murderer, a liar, a cosmic fraud, and a suicide, and finds himself still a sailor and always a ghost."⁸⁸

Melville's concept of endlessness as developed in Mardi might be related to a theory of immortality that is the basis of ancient religions such as that outlined in the Bhagavad Gita. In his introduction to Mardi, H. Bruce Franklin describes the repeated landings and new beginnings

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 473.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. vii.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. ix.

of new journeys across the endless seas as "unrelieved metempsychoses."⁸⁹

The suggestion of reincarnation is developed in *Mardi*, beginning with the calm that may represent the limbo of pre-existence or purgatory.

"Succor or sympathy there is none. Penitence for embarking avails not."⁹⁰

From that state of inactivity is developed the soul's urge to find new action and new journeys. In seeking a companion, the narrator, pre-Taji, selects Jarl, who symbolically "hails from the isle of Skye."⁹¹ Our sojourn on *Mardi*, symbolic of the planet, Earth,

. . . may be the retributive future of some forgotten past. . . . Time is Eternity and we live in Eternity now. . . . [Oro] is the everlasting now; which is an everlasting calm; and things that are,--have been,--will be.⁹²

Immortality in the suggestion of reincarnation is seen again in *Pierre*. ". . . for the most mighty of Nature's laws is this, that out of Death she brings Life."⁹³ "We lived before, and shall live again; and as we hope for a fairer world than this to come; so we came from one less fine."⁹⁴

In a magnificent interlude in his *Mardian* allegory, Melville discourses in poetic metaphor on dreams which reveal previous lives and shared experiences. Their varying dramatic situations suggest existences in "Deathful, desolate dominions" of the Antarctic barrier of ice, and

⁸⁹Ibid., p. viii.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 8.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 10.

⁹²Ibid., p. 550.

⁹³Melville, *Pierre*, p. 9.

⁹⁴Ibid., pp. 43-44.

at the equator, ". . . all round me, long rushing oceans, roll Amazon and Oronocos; . . ." He compares his consciousness to a frigate, ". . . full with a thousand souls; . . ." Between new adventures in existence, he rests in a "tropical calm."⁹⁵

Ay: many, many souls are in me. In my tropical calms, when my ship lies tranced on Eternity's main, speaking one at a time, then all with one voice; an orchestra of many French bugles and horns, rising and falling, and swaying, in golden calls and responses.⁹⁶

Melville is possessed of "far memory," able to recall ". . . many worthies [who] recline and converse [in him]," including Zoroaster, ". . . [who] whispered me before I was born. . . . My memory is a life beyond birth; my memory, my library of the Vatican, its alcoves all endless perspectives, eve-tinted by cross-lights from Middle-Age oriels."⁹⁷

Previous lives or "far memory" are intimated in Moby Dick. Ishmael declares that 2,000 years ago, he taught Pythagoras, "a green, simple boy, how to splice a rope!"⁹⁸ Ahab, in his worshipping address to his impersonal God of power repeats Melville's theme of immortality in reincarnation.

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. . . .⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Melville, Mardi, pp. 316-17.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 317.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 318.

⁹⁸ Melville, Moby Dick, p. 426.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 500.

His concept of immortality suggests that a sense of shared experiences among individuals is that which ". . . shall hereafter reunite all us mortals, when we . . . shall have exchanged this state's prison man-of-war world of ours for another and a better."¹⁰⁰

In the breathless intensity after the second day's disastrous chase of Moby Dick, Ahab suggests to Starbuck that their souls may have been acquainted in previous existences. Since the mutual recognition of understanding in one another's eyes, Ahab says, ". . . of late I've felt strangely moved to thee. . . ."¹⁰¹ But, where Ahab's frenzied hate exists, Starbuck may not interfere.

Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act's
immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee ¹⁰²
and me a billion years before this ocean rolled.

And, when, on the third day Ahab advances toward the whale, he tells Starbuck it is his "soul's ship starts upon this voyage."¹⁰³

Even in his denunciation of the oppressive Articles of War in White Jacket, Melville finds a way to comment on his religious philosophy—immortality that continues through successive lifetimes. He hears within his soul the knell of ". . . the cutthroat martial law [intoning]. . . 'shall suffer death' . . . following [him] through all eternity, like an endless thread on the inevitable track of its own point, passing unnumbered needles through."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰Melville, White Jacket, pp. 172-173.

¹⁰¹Melville, Moby Dick, p. 553.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 554.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 558.

¹⁰⁴Melville, White Jacket, p. 282.

If one conceives of eternity as the ever-present Now, as Melville does when he states that Time is Eternity and God is the Everlasting now,¹⁰⁵ then the Biblical threat of hell and the promise of Paradise might possibly occur alternately, or almost simultaneously in one life; or perhaps, one dominating a particular existence--the opposite condition paramount in another. As H. Bruce Franklin puts it, "The narrator's voyage is both celestial and infernal, and he hurtles endlessly around through many worlds."¹⁰⁶ Melville said essentially the same thing in White Jacket. Musing on the "sufferings and slights, and all manner of tribulation and anguish . . ." Melville wonders if ". . . evil [is] but good disguised . . . [and if] in other planets, perhaps, what we deem wrong may there be deemed right . . . [and], taken [all in all], our man-of-war world itself [is] as eligible a round-sterned craft as any to be found in the Milky Way."¹⁰⁷

Melville does not consider this particular planet as the center of the universe. His feeling about conscious life existing throughout the cosmos is discussed at length in Mardi. Babbalanja insists that in him are thoughts shared by all the beings inhabiting all the other stars. With eager conviction he continues. "Worlds pass worlds in space, as men,--in thoroughfares; and after periods of thousand years, cry:-- 'Well met, my friend, again!'--To me, to me; they talk in mystic music; I hear them think through all their zones."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵Melville, Mardi, pp. 549-550.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. viii.

¹⁰⁷Melville, White Jacket, pp. 182-83.

¹⁰⁸Melville, Mardi, p. 545.

Such impressions may have been gathered by Melville from a reading of the Jewish Kabalah or the Hindu Vedas. Babbalanja's frequent attempts to explain the wisdom of Bardianna may be meant as an explanation of these ancient esoteric doctrines. One chief point he makes is that although man is supreme on this insignificant planet,

. . . we are but a step in a scale, that reaches further above us than below. . . . we demand Eternity for a life time: when our mortal half-hours too often prove tedious. . . . What it is to be immortal, has not yet entered our thoughts. . . . Fellow men! our mortal lives have an end; but that end is no goal: no place of repose. Whatever it may be, it will prove but as the beginning of another race.¹⁰⁹

Continuing his theory of the progression of souls, Babbalanja declares that the ". . . universe is all over a heaven: nothing but stars on stars, throughout infinities of expansion. All we see are but a cluster." There are planets even less important than earth perhaps. "Peradventure at this instant, there are beings gazing up to this very world as their future heaven."¹¹⁰

Again Melville's concept of immortality as Now, an Eternity being lived constantly in the present, that we are at this moment experiencing the future of our forgotten past, is expressed in his recapitulation of man's life:

. . . through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in mankind's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 505.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

infants, boys, and men, and I's eternally. Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling's father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it.¹¹¹

The soul is the traveler into immortality. "Thus deeper and deeper into Time's endless tunnel, does the winged soul, like a night hawk, wend her wild way; and finds eternities before and behind; and her last limit is her everlasting beginning."¹¹² Our souls create that unrest in seekers after Truth that search endlessly for answers that their intuition will accept as way stations on its continuing journey. The search for Truth, the yearning to relate to a Cosmic Force takes place in the mind, through contemplation and meditation. It does not follow that answers always flood the soul with illumination, yet Melville feels—

So, if after all these fearful, fainting trances, the verdict be, the golden haven was not gained;—yet, in bold quest thereof, better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals; and give me ye gods, an utter wreck, if wreck I do.¹¹³

Here Melville says convincingly enough that the search for Truth is a compelling force in some lives, even if it eludes one's search. It is better to ever continue seeking rather than remain indifferent to Truth; and if, in the search, one's life is endangered, materially

¹¹¹Melville, Moby Dick, p. 486-487.

¹¹²Melville, Mardi, p. 202.

¹¹³Ibid., p. 488.

or physically, then let death be the end of that particular existence, rather than allow fear of either loss to end the search.

This same urge is expressed in another point of view in Pierre.

. . . wherefore whoso storms the sky gives best proof that he came from thither! But whatso crawls contented in the moat before that crystal fort, shows it was born within that slime and there forever will abide.¹¹⁴

According to Melville, the complacent, the conventional and the dull are not likely to move forward very quickly in the eternal progression of consciousness.

* * * *

The bitterness of life was often emphasized in Melville's writings. It might be said that some of his characters represented a view that Hell was visited upon them during their existence. The characters in Clarel have all had disastrous experiences, points out Walter E. Bezanson in his introduction to that work. And yet out of their pain has come the urge to probe beneath the superficial traits of personality and the "vulgar shoals" of life in order to discover through intuition, perhaps, the deepest revelations of the innermost self, or soul.

Melville speaks of intuition in man's life as but an acting upon mysterious hints. We respond to inner impressions urging us to do this or that.¹¹⁵ Through intuition, man's awareness of his soul comes to him gradually. Its appalling, tremendous immensity is beyond his mortal

¹¹⁴Melville, Pierre, p. 483.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 246.

comprehension. In an analogy to man, Melville paints the soul's development from the little toddler, shrieking for his parents' support, to the developed man, who leaves "the very mother who bore it, and the father that begot it, and crosses the seas, perhaps, or settles in far Oregon lands."¹¹⁶ Thus, the developing soul, perhaps through countless lifetimes, demands and begs

. . . the support of its mother the world, and its father the Deity. But it shall yet learn to stand independent, though not without many a bitter wail, and many a miserable fall.¹¹⁷

In its assumed gradual growth, the soul, according to Melville, was leagued with the mind, so that one's thoughts constantly shaped and modified the soul's condition. An example of a soul hindered by hate is Ahab, whose frenzied obsession with the pursuit of Moby Dick only tormented his spirit, inhibiting it by monomaniac thought from seeking the path to spiritual Truth.

Ishmael describes Ahab's frantic frame of mind that persisted even into his dreams as "this hell in himself." At night now and then he heard Ahab scream and saw him ". . . burst from his state room as though escaping from a bed that was on fire." Ishmael explains that the "agent" that causes Ahab such horror is ". . . the eternal, living principle or soul in him," which sought to escape from ". . . the scorching contiguity of [his] frantic [mind]."

Ah, God! what trances of torments does that man endure who is consumed with one unachieved

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 412.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

revengeful desire. He sleeps with clenched hands; and wakes with his own bloody nails in his palms.

One creates one's own hell by one's thought, ". . . as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul. . . ." ¹¹⁸ Not only is the mental, and perhaps, physical, hell of existence thus created for present or future lives, but also the urge, conscious or hidden, to seek a change in one's conditions.

After Melville had endeavored to write of his admiration for Hawthorne, whose thought he considered to be superior to any writer except, perhaps, Shakespeare, he observed that his own remarks about Hawthorne's writings were "paltry," incapable of expressing what he really felt. He wondered when his talent would reach the level he yearned for. He agonized, "When shall we be done growing?" He considered that,

As long as we have anything more to do, we have done nothing. . . . Lord, when shall we be done changing? Ah! it's a long stage, and no inn in sight, and night coming, and the body cold. ¹¹⁹

Here he is speaking directly about eternal progression; developing slowly through the exigencies and failures of ordinary, mortal life with hardly a conscious realization of growth—only too painfully aware of life's miseries and disappointments instead of possessing positive assurance of a new and challenging life to come.

¹¹⁸Melville, Moby Dick, pp. 199-200.

¹¹⁹Davis and Gilman, eds., The Letters of Herman Melville, p. 143.

Melville feels that awareness of the eternal progression of things points the way toward one's recognition of enlightenment. In discussing prayer, Babbalanja comments on the contradictory petitions sent to the gods, who ignore all ". . . hints from below," not intending to ". . . jar the eternal progression of things." However, Yoomy believes in the efficacy of prayer, for ". . . prayer draws us near our own souls, and purifies our thoughts. Nor will I grant that our supplications are altogether in vain."¹²⁰

The concept of eternal progression seems to require the positive efforts of mind and soul to achieve a higher spiritual plateau. Babbalanja insists the chief end of religion is to make us wise--the only manifestations of wisdom being reverence to Oro and love for mankind. Oro may be what is represented by Queequeg's wooden idol or Rome's statues or whatever has meaning to the believer. Individuals whose troubled lives are eased by faith and hope and the ministrations of prayer, perhaps, or of love and goodwill, have made mental and emotional union with whatever force they understand as God, thus achieving a level of wisdom higher than possessed before that experience. Through moments of reverence and love such thinking, according to Babbalanja, enable men to create a condition conducive to progression to fuller awareness of the basis of spiritual truth.

Babbalanja muses over the question of where is the place assigned the non-seekers and the unregenerate sinners of the earth after death. He is answered, in meditation, by a light-filled vision which enigmatically

¹²⁰Melville, Mardi, p. 298.

replies that all have their places. His question concerning what happens to those whose lives are empty of service to God or fellow man " . . . is the last mystery which underlieth all the rest."¹²¹

However, Melville indicates now and then the prospect of a gloomy repetition of the same dull, miserable kind of life so many endure, rather than a hopeful anticipation of brighter things to come. Such a view is seen in his description of the wharves of New Bedford where " . . . side by side the world-wandering whale ships lay silent and safely moored at last," and where new cruises were made ready. Melville compares mortal existence to these new preparations.

. . . that one most perilous and long voyage ended, only begins a second; and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, for ever and for aye. Such is the endlessness, yea, the intolerableness of all earthly effort.¹²²

He is slightly more optimistic when he compares the mortal end of life to the spout sighted by a whale ship lookout. Although each chase of the whale is seemingly repetitious, every "sighted spout" may result in a substantial addition to the "hold"--the necessary maturing or growth process. He feels that after toiling in this world to extract what one can, then,

. . . hardly is this done, when--There she blows!
--the ghost is spouted up, and away we sail to fight
some other world, and go through young life's old
routine again.¹²³

¹²¹Ibid., p. 562.

¹²²Melville, Moby Dick, p. 59.

¹²³Ibid., p. 426.

He seems to be saying that the routine of birth, the growth and, hopefully, maturing process occurs again and again in order to "fill the hold," so to speak. It takes more than one sighted spout to complete a ship's quota. Getting enough oil to justify a ship's return to harbor in order to collect the payment due for all the toil and effort that was necessary to complete the hoped-for goal requires innumerable "sighted spouts"--or many lives fulfilled in order to gain the reward of wisdom.

An example of the maturing process may be seen in Taji, who still pursues Yillah in order to possess wisdom. In spite of being continually reminded that he is a murderer, and though tempted to turn completely to the evil Hautia, Taji possesses a quality that may yet lead to redemption--his yearning, determined search for Yillah, the personification of wisdom. However, Taji, always pursued by the avenging sons of the murdered priest Alleema, is still in the grip of the continuing cycle of constant rebirth to continue, perhaps, until Aleema is avenged. The last line of Mardi suggests that expiation of sin may be necessary to continue soul progression: "And thus, pursuers and pursued flew on over an endless sea."¹²⁴

There is still another kind of soul, one for which Melville sees no hope of progression at all, nor is there even the possibility of a routine return to the previous level of existence. This type is illustrated in his denunciation of Nulli, the slave-breeder, who lives in the extreme south of Vivenza in Mardi. He contemptuously contends

¹²⁴Melville, Mardi, p. 580.

that souls do not exist in his slaves, having been bred out of them.

A man like this, who

. . . wrenches bond-babe from mother, that the
nipple tear; unwreathes the arms of sister; or cuts
the holy unity in twain; till apart fall man and
wife, like one bleeding body cleft;--let that master
thrice shrive his soul; take every sacrament; on his
bended knees give up the ghost;--yet shall he die
despairing; and live again, to die forever damned.¹²⁵

There seems no opportunity for progression in a person so lacking in reverence for life and love for humanity. The damnation that exists forever may have been illustrated by Melville in his account of the transmigration of souls to a literal hell on earth as portrayed in a passage in Clarel and in the Encantadas.

Transmigration is another aspect of metempsychosis which suggests that the soul is taken from a human and condemned to the body of an animal, reptile, fish, bird, insect, etc.

Agath, the broken old Greek timoneer in Clarel, tells the story of a desolate island, covered with dry ash, with volcanic fires burning beneath the lava, obscured by leaden smoke and edged by a cindered beach. He describes what seems to be a faint path that hardly seems to have been made by a living source, and yet it has a "wasted" look "As it were travelled ceaselessly--/Century after century--"¹²⁶ He describes gleaming surfaces

. . . rubbed to unctuous gleam
By something which has life, you feel;
And yet, the shades but death reveal;¹²⁷

¹²⁵Ibid., p. 469.

¹²⁶Melville, Clarel, Book IV, iii, ll. 29-32, p. 416.

¹²⁷Ibid., ll. 51-53.

. . .
 But list--a sound! Dull, dull it booms--
 Dull as the jar in vaulted tombs
 When urns are shifted. With amaze
 Into the dim retreats ye gaze.
 Io, 'tis the monstrous tortoise drear!¹²⁸

The ensuing description of hopelessness Melville relates to a condemned soul

A hideous, harmless look, with trace
 Of hopelessness; the eyes are dull
 As in the bog the dead black pool:
 Penal his aspect; all is dragged,
 As he for more than years had lagged--
 A convict doomed to bide the place;
 A soul transformed--for earned disgrace
 Degraded, and from higher race.¹²⁹

The canto continues with the imagery of the obstacle-ridden searching of the hungering, thirsting, wretched reptile. Melville's fascination with this idea of a soul "degraded from a higher race" apparently had continued for 20 years to reappear in Clarel after the much earlier publication of The Encantadas where the same scene is described.

In the first sketch of these scenes describing these desolate islands is seen the initial reference to the theory of transmigration of souls. Here Melville ascribes the idea to a superstition common among mariners that is

. . . not more frightful than grotesque.
 They earnestly believe that all wicked sea-officers, more especially commodores and captains, are at death (and, in some cases, before death) transformed into tortoises; thenceforth swelling upon these hot aridities, sole solitary lords of Asphaltum.

¹²⁸Ibid., ll. 58-62.

¹²⁹Ibid., ll. 67-74, p. 417.

Not only the ashy landscape, but the tortoises themselves inspire " . . . so quaintly dolorous a thought. . . ." Not only do their physical features suggest self-condemnation, but more especially their lumbering bodies. "Lasting sorrow and penal hopelessness are in no animal form so suppliantly expressed as in theirs; . . ." Melville adds that the " . . . thought of their wonderful longevity does not fail to enhance the impression."¹³⁰

In contrast to the condemnation concept, Melville, ever involved with the dichotomy of appearances, offers a celestial viewpoint in his presentation of the tortoises of the Enchanted Island. Watching three they had captured, he felt them to be " . . . mystic creatures. . . . They seemed newly crawled forth from beneath the foundations of the world. Yea, they seemed the identical tortoises whereupon the Hindoo plants this total sphere." Under Melville's mystical scrutiny, "They expanded—became transfigured. I seemed to see three Roman Coliseums in magnificent decay."¹³¹

Melville relates himself to them as, lying in his hammock that night, listening to " . . . the slow weary dragging of the three ponderous strangers along the encumbered deck," he marvels at their " . . . stupidity or their resolution. . . ." so great that nothing deflects them from their forward movements. He considers their " . . . strange infatuation of hopeless toil . . ." an indication that " . . . these tortoises are the victims of a penal, or malignant, or perhaps a

¹³⁰Melville, Piazza Tales, pp. 152-53.

¹³¹Ibid., pp. 155-56.

downright diabolical enchanter. . . ." He adds that "Their crowning curse is their drudging impulse to straightforwardness in a belittered world."¹³²

An explanatory note relating to this comment suggests that "This passage is an attempt to get one of those flashes of insight into the truth of things which Melville admired in others and sought for his own work."¹³³ It has peculiar emphasis when one considers Melville's bitterness over the public's rejection of his declarations of Truth in Mardi and Pierre. His persistent search for Truth, unrewarded in a "belittered world," like the unswerving straightforwardness of the tortoises, was a "crowning curse," with himself the victim of a "penal enchanter" remanding him to earth to enlarge the mysteries for unwilling fellow men.

Transmigration of the divine god Vishnu to the mortal body of Leviathan is described in Moby Dick. Melville pictures the drawing of a whale seen in the "famous cavern-pagoda of Elephanta in India." This "wondrous oriental story" of the god's descent

. . . gives us the dread Vishnoo, one of the three persons in the godhead of the Hindoos; gives us this divine Vishnoo himself for our Lord;--Vishnoo, who by the first of his ten earthly incarnations, has for ever set apart and sanctified the whale.

As a whale, Vishnoo was sent to recover the Vedas or mystical books lost during one of the world's "periodical dissolutions." They were needed for " . . . practical hints to young architects,"¹³⁴ (old souls

¹³²Ibid., p. 156.

¹³³Ibid., p. 243.

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 362.

making new attempts at earthly progress, perhaps) to aid them in re-creating a new world. It is possible that the Vedas are what is meant by the writing of Bardianna, so often quoted by the philosopher-mystic, Babbalanja in Mardi.

Vishnu is met again in a curious canto of Clarel which is specific in its context of reincarnation. Bezanson calls it

. . . a cryptic self-fantasy on a major scale in which Rolfe is likened to one of the incarnations of Vishnu, who was born a god though he knew it not.

Bezanson adds that

The analogy is excessive, for the Rolfe of the poem is fortunately quite un-divine, but the idea does recur in Rolfe's soliloquy to the Palm when he recalls being "hailed for a descended god" by island natives.¹³⁵

(No doubt Melville was referring to the same incident described in Typee, wherein the Marquesan Island natives treated him as a descended god, thus indicating their belief in the possibility of a divinity returning to mortal life.)

It seems that Bezanson's opinion of the analogy may not be as far-fetched as he indicates. It is, after all, an "image of a novel mind,"¹³⁶ which knows that man possesses within him that spirit which is born of God and therefore is divine. The textual notes regarding this passage add a corroborative detail to the consideration of reincarnation which is a tenet of Eastern religions, the theme of the Bhagavad Gita.

¹³⁵Melville, Clarel, p. lxxxvi.

¹³⁶Ibid., Book I, xxi, l. 300, p. 107.

Vishnu, the god-hero of the Indian Ramayana, offers to be born as a man in order to do battle with Ravana, a great demon who is tyrannizing mankind. After Vishnu enters his mortal existence, he has no recollection of his divinity, a condition of mind that confines all men's realization of their spiritual potential. In the lines from Book I, Canto xxxii, "Of Rama," Melville suggests the vain puzzlings of the now-mortal Rama who "retains the consciousness of self," although not remembering he was a god. Melville compares others, like himself, perhaps, who,

Though black frost nip, though white frost chill,
Nor white frost nor the black may kill
The patient root, the vernal sense
Surviving hard experience
As grass the winter. Even that curse
Which is the wormwood mixed with gall--
Better dependent on the worse--
Divine upon the animal--
That cannot make such natures fall.¹³⁷

Here he is saying that none of the wintry, bleak, despairing experiences of life can kill the ongoing self or soul, "the patient root." One's returning consciousness is "the vernal sense." The necessary return to earth is "that curse."

Continuing his digression or interruption of the story of Clarel's journey in this separate canto, Melville mentions those individuals whose consciousness creates strange impulses to thought which are often hidden even from their own understanding.

Such natures, and but such, have got
Familiar with strange things that dwell
Repressed in mortals; and they tell
Of riddles in the prosiest lot.¹³⁸

¹³⁷Ibid., Book I, xxxii, ll. 20-28, p. 108.

¹³⁸Ibid., ll. 38-41.

One cannot outright discuss these ideas and expect understanding from all who read or hear them presented. He is saying also that those whose faith in Heaven is strong will never agree to the interpretation of "hidden truth" in anyone's writings.

Mince ye some matter for faith's sake
And Heaven's good name? 'Tis these shall make
Revolt there and the gloss disclaim.¹³⁹

Melville insists, however, that the gift that compels a man's inner self to search for meaning must be utilized, and that the hidden page on which the writer or the seeker has written his discovery,

Although disreputable, sooth.
The riches in them be a store
Unmerchantable in the ore.
No matter: "'Tis an open mine:
Dig; find ye gold, why, make it thine.
The shrewder knack hast thou, the gift:
Smelt then, and mold, and good go with thy thrift."¹⁴⁰

Melville says outright here that there will be those of his readers who dig beneath the surface of his adventure stories and "disreputable" allegories and find "riches" that cannot be marketed by Melville himself. He is untroubled by this situation, knowing that those who look will find something of value, if they have "the shrewder knack, . . . the gift." He adds his good wishes for anyone who can recognize and refine, then use that which he has hidden in prose and poetry.

Melville concludes his "gold-filled" canto with another allusion to the only way he, as a writer, can make his declaration of truth:

¹³⁹Ibid., ll. 42-44.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., ll. 48-54.

Was ever earth-born wight like this?
Ay--in the verse, may be, he is.¹⁴¹

The verse of Clarel is filled with such statements. In the writing of his long, 20,000-line poem Melville merged his skepticism of formalized religion with his faith in immortality. The editor of Clarel, in his introduction, points out that the central symbol of the hope of immortality is a palm tree.¹⁴² Another symbol of immortality is seen as one of Clarel's monomaniac characters who is called Mortmain, a name meaning "Death Hand," but also possessing another, a legal meaning. It has a singular relationship to the "hidden" theory of reincarnation now and then appearing throughout Melville's writings. Mortmain means also "perpetual ownership, as by ecclesiastics or corporations; . . ." ¹⁴³ This interpretation suggests the never-ending reappearance of the same consciousness on its continuous path of development.

The young divinity student around whom Clarel is developed has many questioning doubts which he hopes to have answered in the Holy Land. He learns much from some of his fellow travelers who collectively embody many of Melville's complex views as "seeker and sceptic combined." Along the way Clarel falls in love with a beautiful young Jewish girl, Ruth, from whom he must be separated.

Although the young Clarel gains much insight from his teacher-travelers regarding life's tragedies and triumphs, his experiences on his

¹⁴¹Ibid., ll. 55-56, p. 109.

¹⁴²Ibid., p. lix.

¹⁴³Ibid., p. 542.

journey do not answer his questions; " . . . new problems of infinite complexity are at hand; the thesis of the poem is that they can neither be solved nor escaped."¹⁴⁴ He sees many deaths among his fellow-travelers, including the final despairing discovery of the death of his beloved Ruth. But Clarel does not yet achieve that certitude of knowing the soul persists.

Wending, he murmurs in low tone:
They Wire the world—far under the sea
They talk; but never comes to me
A message from beneath the stone.¹⁴⁵

Melville's epilogue to Clarel suggests that reflective, maturing men become possessed of ever greater levels of understanding.

Degrees we know, unknown in days before;
The light is greater, hence the shadow more;¹⁴⁶

Inasmuch as men are baffled by the "strange illusions" through which they pass,

Even death may prove unreal at the last,
And stoics be astounded into heaven.¹⁴⁷

The concluding lines of Clarel repeat the recurring concept of immortality. Melville speaks to the grieving young Clarel, whose knowledge is yet to come:

Then keep thy heart, though yet but ill-resigned--
Clarel, thy heart, the issues there but mind;
That like the crocus budding through the snow--
That like a swimmer rising from the deep--

¹⁴⁴Ibid., p. lxi.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., Book IV, xxxiv, ll. 50-54, p. 522.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., Book IV, xxxv, ll. 18-19, p. 523.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., ll. 25-26.

That like a burning secret which doth go
 Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep:
 Emerge thou mayst from the last whelming sea,
 And prove that death but routs life into victory.¹⁴⁸

All of the inward anxieties and forebodings in Melville's brooding psyche are indicated in characters such as Celio, Mortmain, Agath and Ungar. However, in contrast, Nehemiah is depicted as possessing serene faith like that of Babbalanja's. He too suggests the onward progression of consciousness, hinting that even a lowly worm may yet attain an unknown level.

Behold, proud worm (if such can be),
 What yet may come, yea, even to thee.
 Who knoweth? canst forecast the fate
 In infinite ages? Prove thy state:
 Sinless art thou? Then these sinned not.¹⁴⁹
 These, these are men; and thou are--what?

In contrast to the still-to-be developed "proud worm" there is Babbalanja, who epitomizes the ultimate level of cosmic awareness that can be achieved by mortal man on this particular planet. Steeped in wisdom, familiar with the revelations that come with deep meditation, and learned in the written philosophies of ancient poets and prophets, Babbalanja accounts, perhaps, for the inarticulate Billy Budd, Melville's last tragic hero. Quoting from the ancient poets and teachers, he declares,

Of the highest order of genius, it may be truly asserted, that to gain the reputation of superior power, it must partially disguise itself; it must come down, and then it will be applauded for soaring. And furthermore, that there are

¹⁴⁸Ibid., ll. 27-34.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., Book I, xxvi, ll. 9-14, p. 85.

those who falter in the common tongue, because they think in another; and these are accounted stutterers and stammerers.¹⁵⁰

Perhaps the inarticulate Billy Budd was meant to represent a superior soul who returned in order to become a source of awareness and hope to the spiritually stunted men on board the HMS Indomitable.

Throughout Melville's last published work, Billy Budd, are found hints regarding Billy's high level of spiritual development. The master of the ship from which Billy was removed to join the Indomitable, complains, "Lieutenant, you are going to take my best man from me, the jewel of 'em." He explains that before Billy joined his crew the " . . . forecastle was a rat-pit of quarrels." But Billy's presence seemed to end the trouble. "Not that he preached to them or said or did anything in particular; but a virtue went out of him sugaring the sour ones."¹⁵¹

In contrast there is Claggart, whose spiritual development has not yet begun. Or, at least, it is not yet in evidence. Even the "lowly worm," and the tortoise, hints Babbalanja, have the spiritual capacity for development innate in them, even though one has yet had no opportunity for mind and soul to coexist, and the other has disregarded any intuitive hints that may have presented themselves to his consciousness. Even the hopelessly damned slave breeder, Nulli, may yet in some unknown era recognize something in himself that responds to humanity and God, thus beginning again the pattern of progression.

¹⁵⁰Melville, Mardi, p. 343.

¹⁵¹Leyda, Portable Melville, pp. 642-643.

Claggart, like Nulli, was a man " . . . in whom was the mania of an evil nature, not engendered by vicious training or corrupting books or licentious living, but born with him and innate; in short 'a depravity according to nature.'"¹⁵² Claggart had " . . . no power to annul the elemental evil in him . . ." therefore " . . . what recourse is left to [such a nature] but to recoil upon itself and like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted it?"¹⁵³

After Billy, speechless with shock and unable even to stammer, has struck Claggart dead, Captain Vere exclaims, "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!"¹⁵⁴ In the hours prior to his execution Billy sleeps—

. . . he lay as in a trance . . . now and then in the gyved one's trance a serene happy light born of some wandering reminiscence or dream would diffuse itself over his face, and then wane away only anew to return.¹⁵⁵

Perhaps he is recalling the peaceful calm from which he was taken in order to stimulate the intuition and imagination of others.

The sensitive chaplain attending Billy " . . . felt that innocence was even a better thing than religion wherewith to go to Judgment [and] reluctantly withdrew. . . ." ¹⁵⁶

¹⁵²Ibid., p. 675.

¹⁵³Ibid., p. 678.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 703.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., p. 725.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., p. 727.

Billy's blessing upon Captain Vere was " . . . delivered in the clear melody of a singing-bird on the point of launching from the twig. . . ." ¹⁵⁷ At the moment of execution no movement occurred in the "pinioned figure," but,

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. ¹⁵⁸

His "ascension" is evident. Later, discussing the phenomenon of the lack of muscular spasm in Billy's dying body, the purser suggests that Billy's death actually occurred prior to the action of the rope, calling it either will-power—as if induced by Billy—or, euthanasia, brought about by supernatural means. The surgeon refused to discuss the doubtful scientific authenticity of either possibility, saying, "It is at once imaginative and metaphysical,—in short, Greek." ¹⁵⁹

Continuing the parallel of Billy's spiritual purity with that of Jesus, the spar from which Billy was hung was kept track of by the sailors. "To them a chip of it was as a piece of the Cross." ¹⁶⁰

Billy seemed to know intuitively and to exemplify all that was meant by Christ's teachings regarding the power of spiritual love.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 729.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 729-30.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 731.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 738.

Through Ungar, in Clarel, Melville suggests that only the developed soul is capable of understanding Christ's parables, the meaning of which Billy Budd seemed to personify.

There is a callousness in clay.
 Christ's parables divine,
 Breathing the sweet breath of sweet kine,
 As wholesome too; how many feel?
 Feel! rather put it--comprehend?
 Not unto all does nature lend
 The gift; at height such love's appeal
 Is hard to know, as in her deep
 Is hate; a prior love must steep
 The spirit; head nor heart have marge
 Commensurate in man at large.¹⁶¹

Ungar is a character in Melville's long poem who no longer believes in church or creed, but he is certain of God's existence, that evil exists in man, and of the need for religion. He symbolizes a facet of Melville himself whose beliefs parallel those of Ungar. Through Ungar Melville expresses the belief that few people even feel instinctively the meaning of, much less comprehend, Christ's parables. Nature has given few people the gift of understanding. It must come from previous experiences. "A prior love must steep the spirit." In mankind in general, there seems to be no equal combination of mental development and the capacity to love unselfishly. Ungar seems to be saying that great intellectual ability is a poor second to the developed capacity for spiritual love.

There are not too many examples of genuine love nor of Babbalanja's level of awareness to be found in Melville's works. He has indicated strongly enough that he could not elaborate openly about matters not

¹⁶¹Melville, Clarel, Book IV, xviii, ll. 125-135, p. 470.

understood by his general readers. But even in such a book as White Jacket he cannot refrain from injecting his convictions.

Although White Jacket was conceived as a documentary of life aboard a United States man-of-war in the late 1840's, it includes passages that indicate the idea of on-going soul. Howard P. Vincent, in his critical study, The Tailoring of White Jacket, compares the end of the jacket to an "episode of rebirth."¹⁶² Frantically ripped open by White Jacket's knife, as the sailor struggles in the sea, the jacket sinks; its disappearance hastened by the crew, who mistakenly harpoon it for a shark. Saved by his mates, bereft of his jacket, the incident, according to Vincent, " . . . is the determination of an artist moving to a new kind of writing, to a renewed attempt to capture a new kind of truth, higher than mere factuality."¹⁶³ The scene may mean more than only a new kind of writing, but the statement in general seems to be illustrated by the final, philosophic chapter of the book.

Simply entitled "The End," the last chapter of White Jacket repeats Melville's frequent metaphorical comparison of a ship at sea as analogous to the earth whirling in space. Always the port we have sailed from is behind us and we travel without knowing the ultimate shore; " . . . yet our final haven was predestinated ere we slipped from the stocks at Creation."¹⁶⁴ Melville assures his readers of immortality,

¹⁶²Howard P. Vincent, The Tailoring of White Jacket (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 224.

¹⁶³Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁶⁴Melville, White Jacket, p. 375.

" . . . some blessed placid haven, however remote at present, must be in store for us all."¹⁶⁵

He does not answer his earlier question, "Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more?" But Melville's frequent use of the word "haven" is indicative that he is certain that there is a level of existence yet to come that is free of storm and tribulation, where evil has been left behind in planets such as ours. "[We are] but one craft in a Milky-Way fleet, of which God is the Lord High Admiral."¹⁶⁶ The planet Earth contains some of the less experienced and skillful crew who in the learning suffer sorrow and pain.

Comparing the lives of all who travel the earth whether as shipmates or world companions, Melville recognizes that every individual suffers to some degree. Again he suggests that the repetition of successive lives is necessary in order to redress the " . . . evils [that] we blindly inflict upon ourselves . . . each man must be his own saviour . . . and though long ages should elapse . . . yet, shipmates and world-mates! let us never forget that

'Whoever afflict us, whatever surround,
Life is a voyage that's homeward bound!'"¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., p. 374.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., p. 376.

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