"Fictions of Complementarity": Melville's Sailor Poets and Shipwreck Imagery

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Introduction

Edgar A. Dryden's "Death and Literature: Melville and the Epitaph"（2006）is an extensive study on death in Melville's writing. Dryden seeks a common ground between Melville and William Wordsworth, arguing that the recollection of the dead is the subject of importance for "the surviving narrator or poet." Dryden claims that a sailor's act of mourning and recording a shipmate's death is "a process of substitution" that reflects the survivor's desire to prevent death（Dryden 299）. However, I wish to consider the act of recollecting the dead—and the frequent use of shipwreck imagery—with reference to the concept of time, for it seems to be associated with Melville's use of poetic dictions and the issue of mortality, a primary theme in *Moby-Dick*（1851）. It appears that Ishmael is not concerned with death itself; rather, he seems to be conscious of disharmony between the finiteness of human existence and the infiniteness of the world. Specifically, the circular ending of the novel evokes the fact that the world exists regardless of human deaths and that one must continue to live in this world even after the death of others.

Melville wrote a series of sailor poems framed with a retrospective musing by an old sailor（or an ex-sailor）who recollects his old shipmate and past days of a whaling voyage. In this paper, focusing on the figure of Ishmael, I posit that his poetic perspective belongs to what Frank Kermode calls the "fictions of complementarity," which attempt to evoke the "concords of past, present, and future"（Kermode 89）and serve to capture "the shape of life in relation to the perspectives of time"（Kermode 3）. A reconsideration of Ishmael's poetic practice in terms of its purpose for resolving the discord between mortality and eternity also provides us with a helpful perspective from which to examine Melville's characterization of sailor poets even in his later writings such as "John Marr" and his posthumously published novella *Billy Budd*（1924）. Melville's sailor poets seem to develop their poetic imagination when seeking to convey personal emotions or subjective experience, particularly when facing their own or others' mortality.

1. *In Medias Res and In Meddis Rebus*

The discussion of the concept of time in literary works is relevant to a better understanding of the ways in which Ishmael elucidates the meaning of life in relationship to perspectives of time. Literature's representation of time includes many perspectives across different periods. Generally, a literary work is based on tempo; it has a beginning, middle, and end. This is truer of prose than of verse as verse and prose have a different time-order; when examining the Latin terms *versus* and *prosa* in the etymology of "verse" and "prose," we see that verse originally indicated "to turn" or "to return," whereas prose indicated "to proceed" or to go "straight forward"（*OED*）. From this point of view, Roman Jakobson, who developed much of the foundation of structuralist phonology, established a clear distinction between verse and prose by explaining that prose is

represented as "a movement directed forward," whereas "verse contains the idea of regular recurrence"（Jakobson and Pomorska 75）.

A related but somewhat broader view of the concept of time is exhibited in Kermode's *The Sense of Ending*（1967）. To establish a connection between fiction, time, and apocalyptic modes of thought, Kermode considers poetry as "an art of the timeless prison" that "is intended to be outside time" （Kermode 174）. Concerning this point, he explains in detail the term *ailon*, "a third intermediate order," which he adds to *chronos*（linear time）and *kairos* （recurrent time）, with the following thought:

> The concords of past, present, and future towards which the soul extends itself are out of time, and belong to the duration which was invented for angels when it seemed difficult to deny that the world in which men suffer their ends is dissonant in being eternal. To close that great gap we use fictions of complementarity. They may now be novels or philosophical poems, as they once were tragedies, and before that, angels.（Kermode 89; underline mine）

The last sentence of this passage indicates that the concept of "fictions of complementarity" is unsettled in light of genre. The quotation nevertheless clearly provides us with its function─that is, to serve as a possible means to bring about reconciliation with the fact that "the world in which men suffer their ends is dissonant in being eternal." In short, "fictions of complementarity" seek to resolve the discordance between mortality and eternity.

Within this context, Melville's reflection on time-order in a literary art form might be better understood. This is clearly exemplified in a passage in his sixth novel *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities* （1852）. Although the novel is not directly associated with Melville's sailor poets, a reconsideration of Melville's view on mortality and immortality or of the living and the dead indirectly helps us to clarify, to some degree, the perspectives of his sailor poets who survive shipwreck or recollect their old shipmates.

Plotinus Plinlimmon's pamphlet in a chapter titled "The Journey and the Pamphlet" says that "human life on this earth is but a state of probation" ─"we mortals have only to do with things provisional"（Melville, *Pierre* 211）.[1] This reference to "human life" in "a state of a probation" seems to be resonant with Kermode's view on humans, as he states in more detail, which has received almost no critical attention:

> Men, like poets, rush "into the middest," *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. （Kermode 7; italics in original）

This passage indicates that "fictions of complementarity" are no more than a means of providing a meaning to existence for humans who are suddenly born into this world and who die just as suddenly. It is within this framework that I wish to place Dryden's assessment that "memorializing the dead is the primary theme of the surviving narrator or poet"（Dryden 299）. The shipwreck imagery and the act of recollecting the dead by Melville's sailor poets seem to derive from "irreducibly intermediary preoccupations" and the common urge to make sense of human existence in relation to time.

Melville's preoccupation with the characterization of sailor poets suggests that they are undoubtedly at the center of his oceanic imagination, even later in his life. Ultimately, I wish to place Melville's typical sailors in his later works─ including "John Marr," "Bridegroom Dick," "Tom Deadlight," "Jack Roy," and *Billy Budd*─next to Ishmael. Although little critical attention has yet been

paid to Melville's sailor poets in terms of time and their poetical practice, I would like to emphasize that they might inform us of the extent to which Melville was attempting to provide a reason for mortals' temporary status. This purpose might become clear, especially when considering the similarity between sailors in the poems and Ishmael as well as between the narrative frame of the sailor poems and the framework of *Moby-Dick*. In what follows, however, I focus on Ishmael, an archetypal figure of reminiscing sailors in Melville's writing, to examine how he wrestles with the issue of life and death.

2. The Circular Image of Vortex

A striking feature of *Moby-Dick* is its circular structure. In the epilogue, Ishmael quotes a phase from the Book of Job: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee"（Melville, *Moby-Dick* 573）. This epigraph is suitable to Ishmael who escaped death and was given the role of a narrator. It directly indicates Ishmael's intention to tell us the story of the dead and to restore his lost crew to life in a figurative sense. *Moby-Dick* has an ending in terms of form, but the text is indented to avoid ending and to return to its beginning, working against the linear movement of the prose. This recurrent narrative frame might be related to the circular image of a vortex wheeling in the epilogue.

I wish to stress, however, the importance of Ishmael's physical response to the auditory world in the "Epilogue." *Moby-Dick* is a text where everything but Ishmael is destroyed. It must be read with utmost care that when he recognizes that he is left alone after the final encounter with Moby Dick in the Pacific, the broad panorama of the sea is still being described, after everything, in association with the sense of hearing, as follows:

> So, floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. *Round and round*, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve. Till, gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst; and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring, and, owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirgelike main. （Melville, *Moby-Dick* 573; italics original, underlines mine）

In this quotation, Ishmael gives a full account of how the *Pequod* sunk, how his shipmates were all gone, and how he was irresistibly drawn toward the center of a boiling whirlpool. In most of the passage, the sea is not portrayed as gentle enough to enfold him with any consolation. When he is caught in the whirlpool and reaches the "vital centre" of the vortex, he is surrounded by the sound of "the button-like black bubble" and the bursting of the bubble. It is a sound of death caused by the sunken ship and his shipmates going underwater, but at the same time, it is also the sound of life, foreshadowing the rise of "the coffin life-buoy" that saves Ishmael. Consequently, this sound of the sea can be interpreted as a mixture of the sound of death and life. The multivalent sound of the bubble of vortex resonates with the repetition of the plosive sounds "p," "d," and "b." These sounds gather around Ishmael at the center of the vortex, that is, in other words, he is at the center of his auditory world, simultaneously hearing every sound from every angle. From Ishmael point of view, it is a *unified* sense, that is, a terrifying sense of being incorporated into the swirling sea. The use of poetic language is not only externally linked with

the sound of the sea, but also intrinsically describes Ishmael's experience as a survivor of the voyage.[2]

In Chapter 51（"The Spirit-Spout"）, Ishmael calls the sea "savage" when he explains how he feels "a sense of peculiar dread" toward Moby Dick （Melville, *Moby-Dick* 223）. In the "Epilogue," floating all night and all day in the Pacific after everything around him has gone, Ishmael retains his sense of hearing, describing the sea as "a soft and dirgelike main." It should be noted that the calmness of the sea, described here as "soft," contrasts the ghastliness or savagery of the sea—or Moby Dick in a symbolic way—which brought death to Ishmael's shipmates. The adjective "soft" also paradoxically highlights the plosive sounds of "black bubble" that surround Ishmael and seemingly echo in his ear forever. By means of the sound of language, he records that he was at the center of the world that passed away.

Ishmael's poetical experience of correspondence in a soundscape must be interpreted in this context. Death seems to be one of the lyrical centers of his oceanic imagination. This is simply because only Ishmael survives the quest for Moby Dick. Yet, death is never an abstract idea to be dealt with in a figurative way; rather, for Ishmael, it is more real and intricately linked with his own experience. It is not beyond the sea, but is there. This sense of reality is expressed as a physical feeling of plosive sounds of "black bubble," "a soft and dirgelike main," or the sound of waves lingering forever in his ears. This vivid sense of hearing tells us that the sea, for Ishmael, is not only a metaphysical device. When Ishmael tries to convey this reality through his correspondent experience, death is recognized as an essential source of his poetical practice. When he touches death or tries to pull the world that is passing away into the past closer to the present, the prosaic world yields to the poetic, wherein Ishmael records the lyric. Here is a peculiarity of Melville's surviving narrator to restore the value of physical reality that was lost in visual-centered transcendentalism at the modern age.

Ishmael is also acutely conscious of mortality and writes at the end of Chapter 60（"The Line"）as follows: "All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life." Ishmael's view of human existence is echoed with one of the central subjects that Kermode discusses in his argument, as mentioned earlier. Ishmael informs the reader about human existence in the "ever-present perils of life" in a text that continues without end. A sign of harmony is seen between the theme and the structure of the text. One of the sea-pieces titled "Far Off-Shore" in *John Marr and Other Sailors with Some Sea-Pieces*（1888） could be read as a good example reflecting Ishmael's view on life and death. It alludes to humans who are "caught in the swift, sudden turn of death"（Melville, *Moby-Dick* 281）.

3. Life and Death in "Far Off-Shore"

"Far Off-Shore" is in two stanzas, each four lines long. The quatrain form typically rhymes *abab*, and the poem is written in complete rhyme.

> Look, the raft, a signal flying,
> Thin—a shred;
> None upon the lashed spars lying,
> Quick or dead.
>
> Cries the sea-fowl, hovering over,
> "Crew, the crew?"
> And the billow, reckless, rover,
> Sweeps anew!
> （Melville, *Published Poems* 229）

As Sean Ford emphasizes, "Far Off-Shore" is the most perfect poem in *John Marr* in terms of form as follows: "each odd line containing eight syllables and each even line three. Every line begins with a stressed monosyllable word, every odd line ends in a one-word trochee, and every even line follows the

stressed monosyllable with a single iamb" （Ford 240）.[3] In the poem, Melville uses his favorite technique, duplicity. The opening enjoinder （"Look"） involves readers in the scene of the poem. Although the narrator's point of view is distant from its object, he never avoids engaging the readers in its action while limiting access to it. The expectation of the reader interaction appears as the theme of "an imaginative urge to reach for truths that can be neither known nor expressed" （Ford 242）. A form of writing, thus, is associated with the satiric and the ironic, and inaccessibility or the act of reading itself has arisen as a primary theme in the poem.

Ford also suggests that "Far Off-Shore" offers "a key project" （Ford 241） of the *John Marr* volume —the limits of accessibility in a remote scene, by which *John Marr* engages readers in its action. Melville certainly expects reader interaction in the poem. However, the irony might be caused by assuming that there is a truth that we never reach in the poem. When we suppose that the poem directly depicts a truth and does not contain any truth inaccessible to us—a scene without a crew itself or the unknown fate of the sailors —, the irony disappears; instead, the narrator's sense of reality appears.

Here, however, we are more concerned about the imagery of shipwreck in the distance and the poet's keen sense of the *present* and the *absent*. The last line （"Sweeps anew!"） suggests that the "billow" swallows ships again and again. This scene depicts the result of the disappearance of the crew, and the adverb "anew" signifies the succession of "swift, sudden turn of death" through which "mortals realize the silent, subtle ever-present perils of life" described in *Moby-Dick* （Melville, *Moby-Dick* 281）.

As in "Far Off-Shore," Melville's sea-pieces generally highlight, as a central theme, a lament for the passing of whaleships. Prior to *John Marr*, Melville employs the identical theme in a poem titled "The Stone Fleet," in his second collection of poems,

Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War （1866）. The Civil War hastened the decline of the whaling business.[4] In this respect, when Mary Malloy notes that "most writers did not share Melville's sentimental view of the sinking of the vessels," her remark is more suggestive because the subject of ships far at sea or retrospective musing on whaling voyages reflect a perspective unique to Melville, who "had sensed the shift toward mechanization" （Malloy 634, 642） and often transformed his own experience as a seaman into the subject of his writing.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to contribute to the examination of Melville's perspective of time as a major component of the creative process of his imagery of shipwrecks and a lonely, old sailor or ex-sailor. The old sailors inevitably recall the figure of Ishmael, who is Melville's representative reminiscing sailor. Ishmael in the "Epilogue" deserves particular notice because he tells us how Melville attempts to provide meaning to mortals within the temporal status of humans. These examinations reveal that the characteristics of shipwreck imagery derive from the conflict between the fact that the world exists despite death of humankind and Melville's exhausting struggle to accept the disharmony. With a keen sense of time, Ishmael demonstrates imaginative capacity as a means of integrating the past, present, and future. He thus affirms a relationship of complementarity with the past. This affirmation is one of the essential aspects of Melville's sailor poems.

Notes

[1] For the ideas of Chronometricals （ideas celestial） and Horologicals （things terrestrial）, see *Pierre*, 210-15.

[2] For the reading of soundscape in the "Epilogue," it might be noteworthy that in Thomas Beale's *The Natural History of Sperm Whale* （1839） Melville underlined a passage describing a sinking ship making

"horrid sounds of thunder, terrible in the extreme, *causing a sickening of the very soul*" （qtd. in Robertson-Lorant 241; italics original）.

[3] Ford discusses three poems about ships far at sea; "The Aeolian Harp," "To the Master of the 'Meteor,'" and "Far Off-Shore."

[4] Mary Malloy, who examines the sentiment of Melville and the factual information correspondent, emphasizes the importance of "The Stone Fleet" because the "tone throughout is personal and sentimental, unlike that of the other poems in *Battle-Pieces*, which are delivered in the straightforward style of a journalist" （634）. In addition to "The Stone Fleet," Malloy mentions a poem titled "Cabinet Conversation Piece" as another example that exhibits a distinctive tone in *Battle-Pieces*.

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