Melville's Thematics of Form

Dryden, Edgar

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Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth.

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In recent years a number of important studies of Melville have appeared. Although these have approached his fiction from radically divergent points of view, there has been, for the most part, an implicit agreement with Charles Feidelson's belief that Melville "from first to last . . . presents himself as an artist, and a conscious artist. It is in this character that he seize our attention." 1 Valuable studies of Melville's artistry and the formal aspects of his work have been contributed by Constance Rourke, F. O. Matthiessen, Charles Olson, Newton Arvin, and most recently, Warner Berthoff; a wide interest in his literary reactions to religions and mythologies has culminated in H. Bruce Franklin's The Wake of the Gods; and a general concern with the themes and meanings of his books has produced, among others, the illuminating studies of Merlin Bowen and Milton R. Stern, as well as countless articles in scholarly journals.

Closer to my own approach, however, is the work of those critics whose interests center on the predilections of form in Melville's fiction. Deserving special recognition here are Charles Feidelson's seminal discussion of Melville in Symbolism and American Literature; R. W. B. Lewis' account of Melville in The American Adam; Daniel Hoffman's analysis of Moby Dick and The Confidence-Man in Form and Fable in American Fiction; Leo Marx's comments on Melville in The Machine in the Garden; and Paul Brodtkorb's recent study of Moby-Dick, Ishmael's White World.

All of these investigations are taken for granted here, and without them and the source materials provided by such scholars as Jay Leyda, Howard Vincent, Charles Anderson, and Merton Sealts, this study could not have been undertaken. Therefore I am anxious to acknowledge here my great debt to

1 Charles Feidelson, Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago, 1953), p. 163.
the many students of Melville’s life and work and especially to those critics who have helped shape my own view of his work. However, my focus has been slightly different from theirs: I have attempted to describe the internal morphology of Melville’s fictional world and to trace the implications of the form of his vision of things as it gradually develops throughout the span of his career as a writer. My special perspective is provided by “Hawthorne and His Mosses” in which Melville defines fiction as the “great Art of Telling the Truth” and implies that an essential part of the career of any writer is his search for a form which will allow him safely to explore and reveal a destructive and maddening Truth. This focus is necessarily restrictive, but Melville’s fictional world, like that of any great writer, is composed of an unlimited number of horizons, and an unlimited number of critical perspectives are possible. I have chosen one which seems to me to reveal an interesting and important portion of Melville’s fictional landscape.