**Reading 7**

**Important Influences: Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville**

**Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Artur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838)**

The only novel by Poe was serialized in 1837 the *Southern Literary Messenger*, a magazine, which Poe edited between 1835 and 1837 but left (or was fired) before his novel started to appear there. Poe had serious financial problems which were aggravated by the loss of his job and economic crisis, The Panic of 1837. Therefore he decided to publish a longer work, which brought him first (in the serialized form) 3 dollars for a page. In 1837 Poe also married Virginia Clemm and the anonymous publication of the novel in two volumes by Harper in New York in 1838 was meant as a necessary step towards securing the family. Poe did not have a high opinion of this book and called it “a very silly”. Many critics think that he was unable to finish it.

Despite this, the novel became soon popular abroad, especially in France, where it was translated by Charles Baudelaire, and Jules Verne published the novel called *An Antarctic Mystery* (1897), which is the sequel of Poe’s novel. In the twentieth century, more than 300 adaptations of the novel appeared (the last one, entitled *Pym* was published by Mat Johnson in 2011) and it was admired by leading authors, such as Jorge Luis Borges. In the U.S., the novel was first reviewed unfavourably, but soon it aroused the interest of Herman Melville and became **one of the sources of *Moby Dick* (1851)**.

One of the reasons of the fragmentary nature of Poe’s novel may be **the conflict of the author’s interests**. The novel was **intended to be an adventurous narrative of naval exploration** based on Jeremiah N. Reynolds’s *Address on the Subject of a Surveying and Exploring Expedition to the Pacific Ocean and the South Seas* (1836), which Poe reviewed in 1837. Later, Reynolds led the U.S. expedition to the South Pole and his account of a huge albino whale, “Mocha Dick” (1839), is one of the sources of Melville’s *Moby Dick.* Other details were provided by James Cook, whose ship *Resolution* sailed as far as the 70th degree of southern latitude. Poe’s naval story includes accounts of a shipwreck, mutiny and cannibalism, which might have been provided by *Remarkable Events and Remarkable Shipwrecks* (1836) by R. Thomas from which Poe quotes in the novel. **The themes of appearance and randomness represented in the spectral ship episode in the *Ancient Mariner* are amplified by the literal images of the ship in *Pym* where dead bodies are moving like puppets pulled by the ship’s rigging, which in turn is moved by seagulls, and where the grin of teeth revealed under the putrefying flesh of a face looks like a friendly smile. Poe uses naturalistic images and rational cause-and-effect explanations of the apparently “supernatural” effects (both typical of the technique of the Gothic fiction) to escalate the horror of the scene.**

The second dominant interest locates the novel in the genre which Poe founded, that is, **science fiction**. The mysterious ending of the story, when the boat approaches a huge cataract where the ocean waters are falling to the Earth’s interior, is the reflection of the **theory of the hollow Earth**, brought to the modern science by Edmond Halley (the well-known 17th and 18th century astronomer: Halley’s Comet). According to Halley, the interior of the Earth was filled by two concentric shells separated by atmosphere and rotating at different speed. The theory was supported by a mathematician Leonard Euler and later developed by Sir John Leslie, a Scottish physicist, in his *Elements of Natural Philosophy* (1829). In America, the hollow Earth theory was corroborated by the French officer Jean-Antoine le Clerc Milfort, who explored the Indian territory in the watershed of Red River (a tributary of the Mississippi in Oklahoma, Texas and Arkansas), toward the end of the 18th century. Le Clerc Milfort allegedly found huge caverns from which the ancestors of Creek Indians emerged a long time ago. **Poe’s direct sources include John Cleves Symmes’s theory**, used first (in Symmes’s Circular No. 1) for propaganda purposes, calling for a polar expedition and the discovery of “warm rich land stocked with thrifty vegetables and animals, if not men”. Symmes believed that there were huge openings on both poles of the Earth. In 1826 James McBride, a follower of Symmes, published *Simmes’s Theory of Concentric Spheres* which also influenced Jeremiah N. Reynolds, who wrote *Remarks of Symmes’s Theory* (1827)*.* Evidently **Symmes’s theory was invented as an alternative to the booster propaganda which should influence people to settle the mostly infertile territories of the Great Basin** (Nevada, Arizona, Utah). Poe used this theory first in a short story “A Manuscript found in a Bottle” (1831).

The third important concern was the problem of **race**, which does not appear directly in the *Ancient Mariner*. In Poe’s *Narrative*, **blackness is understood as the negative determination of whiteness**, as a kind of **punishment for the sins of the white race**. The importance of race in the *Narrative* was pointed out by **Toni Morrison** in her essay “Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination”. Dirk Peters, Pym’s companion, can be understood as a symbol of **the fear of miscegenation** (evident in Cooper’s *Last of the Mohicans*): he is a hybrid of whites and Native Americans and his physiognomy, “bald head like the head of most negroes” refers to the fear of African slaves and racist theories of the inferiority of the Africans. The narrative of the island of Tsalal and the strange hieroglyphs found there implies both the fear of the other races and the consciousness of the cursed fate of the whites. Poe might have been influenced by **William Alexander Caruthers**’s novel *The Kentuckian in New York* (1834), which is sceptical about slavery but also pessimistic about the consequences of its abolition. Here, the pictograms are written by an African slave. The Note in Poe’s *Narrative* ends with a mysterious quote “I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock”, whose style links **the black and white symbolism** of the novel’s ending to **the Angry God of the Old Testament** **and represents the black natives of Tsalal as the predecessors of Hebrews.** Another reference to the Old Testament is one of the notes, which refers to the Book of Job, where the word translated in the Christian Bible as “Redeemer” is interpreted as the “Avenger” of the wrongs God inflicted on Job. In this way, **the possibility of Redemption, crucial for Christianity, is excluded**. **Whiteness and blackness are connected with the themes of** **guilt, sin and revenge** prominent in the *Ancient Mariner*. It can be said that **Poe expands the ambiguous symbol of whiteness as well as the symbols of death-in-life, rottenness and putrefaction** (the “rotting” sea teeming with “slimy things”) **in Coleridge’s poem** **into** **(pseudo-)historically grounded symbolism of inevitable racial conflict, originating – among others - in substantial falsification of Western spirituality, religion and mythology responsible for the consciousness of the supremacy of the white race**.

**In contrast to the *Ancient Mariner*, which testifies of Coleridge’s failure to harmonize and unify Christian doctrine and pagan mythology (and philosophy), Poe’s novel shows the inevitability of the conflict between the “white” culture based on the Bible and Hebraism** (whose glorious triumph was envisaged in the future of the U.S.) **and the ancient, repressed culture of the “blacks”.** As a result, **the white shrouded figure** to which the boat with Pym and Peters is driven may not be understood as the dead end of Poe’s symbolic narrative but as **the representation of the key secret of the history of the U.S. – the conflict between the secularized apocalyptic myth** (the U.S. as the utopian end of all evils in human history) **and the racism inherent in the U.S. society**. **All apocalyptic mythology is exclusive and racist, which can be demonstrated by later Fascist ideologies**, like *The Turner Diaries* (1978) by William Luther Pierce (Andrew Macdonald).

**Herman Melville** generalizes even more on this topic, using the Greek myth of Narcissus in the first chapter of *Moby Dick* and describing **the whites as being fascinated by their own mirror image**: they desire the wholeness of life but are confronted only with its **“UNGRASPBLE PHANTOM” – their mirror reflection**.

I**t can be concluded that Coleridge’s poem has stimulated Poe to produce a fundamental work of fiction which, in a rather “common sense” way, using the means of adventure novel, hoax and science fiction, situates Coleridge’s symbolism in a different historical context and expands its range and depth thematically as well as formally (from medieval folk-ballad to a modern novel)**.

**Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851)**

Chapter 42 – The Whiteness of the Whale

**The reference to the Albatross from Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*** (p. 164 and footnote on p. 165, *Moby Dick. A Variorum Edition*, Norton, 1968) **disputes the moral meaning of nature’s symbols** emphasized by Wordsworth, who pressed on Coleridge to rewrite the 1798 version of *Ancient Mariner* making its ethical message clearer and closer to the Christian doctrine of sin and redemption.

**Melville recalls Coleridge’s Albatross and writes about the mystique of its whiteness:** **“the secret of spell” which belongs to nature and “took hold of God.”** The latter phrase does not determine God as *the origin* of the spell: rather it indicates that **the spell of whiteness transforms God Himself**. Hence it can be said that the white of the **Albatross becomes a kind of *simulacrum* of God’s presence** produced by “God’s great unflattering laureate, Nature.” (165 and n) In this passage, **the poetry**, or *poiesis*, - in other words, the supreme creativity -, has been **transferred from God to Nature personified as the Poet Laureate** (originally the court poet of English kings) **who, however, does not flatter the supreme ruler**. In other words, here **the symbolic and poetic aspects of nature do not point to any transcendental reality** (God, Pantheist Nature, Nature as a Creative Spirit). This is also confirmed by the narrator’s comment: “by no possibility could Coleridge’s Rhyme have had aught to do with those mystical impressions which were mine” (165 n.). This is an allusion especially to the final part of Coleridge’s ballad stressing the power of Divine love manifested to the hero. **The figure of the ARCHANGEL** (an Angel seems to appear over the scene of the execution of the protagonist of Melville’s posthumously published novel *Billy Budd*) is a symbolic representation of the **otherness of Nature** (“Roman bill sublime”, “vast archangel’s wings”), **repressed** both **in Coleridge’s poem** (by the Christian doctrine) and in Emerson’s philosophy (by manifest egocentrism). **The sacred nature of the simulacrum of God is subverted in several ways:**

1. **Representing the Otherness of the Universe**

Ishmael **does not know** that the bird is the albatross. Yet he is enchanted by the **secret** (cf. Derrida’s discussion of secret in *The Gift of Death:* “knowing not to know”)its **otherness**: “mystical impressions” – “eyes” through which one can “peep to the secrets which took hold of God,” that is, **secrets of the universe**, where **God is a mere anthropomorphic and anthropocentric fantasy.** Philosophically and aesthetically, **this secret is closest to the SPECTRE of King Hamlet:**

In contrast to the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, where others are always related to the Other,[[1]](#footnote-1) the ghosts and spectres are always “*plus d’un*,”[[2]](#footnote-2) that is, more than one as well as no more one, which also means that **there is no single, doctrinary or speculative, ground to integrate and explain the problems of spectrality, representation and ethics**.

If, in spite of this, one still feels an urge to generalize, ghosts and spectres can be said to mark **the essential discontinuity of time**. Apart from problematizing the relationship between the past, the present and the future, they also make one reconsider the use and validity of concepts as the basic means of scientific cognition.

The otherness of the **universe/albatross** is **opposed to human culture, civilization and even to memories establishing them.**

1. **Using Irony as the Link to the Language and Experience of Common People**

The bird is **ironically** called “gooney”. Thus, **Ishmael’s “mystical experience” is linked with common mariners’ experience,** while **in the *Ancient Mariner*** the encounter with the Albatross **separates the hero from his shipmates.**

1. # Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Totalité et l’infini, 1961) (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991) 77: “The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. A relation with the Transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation. It is here that the Transcendent, infinitely other, solicits us and appeals to us. The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbour is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself.” For a commentary on “transcendent” and “*salvationist* nature” of the relationship of the self to the absolute Other see, e.g., Michael Weston, “Kierkegaard, Levinas, and ‘Absolute Alterity,’” in *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion*, ed. J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 2008) 153-168.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)