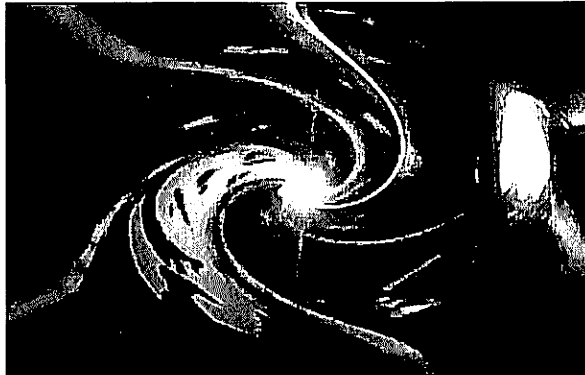


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Melville and Borges: Queequeg and the Jaguar

By Chris Rollason, M.A., Ph.D.

The Ishmael-Queequeg relationship has been classically examined by Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960).

Fiedler places the friendship in the context of a line of similar rapports across 19th-century US prose literature between a white male protagonist and his non-white male companion-in-adventure: Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook (Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*), Pym and Dirk Peters (Poe, *Arthur Gordon Pym*), Huck and Jim (Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*). In Cooper, the companion is a Native American; in Poe, a half-Native American; in Twain, an African-American. Queequeg differs from the other three by being a non-white from the Pacific, outside the political and geographical purview of the US. However, his friendship with Ishmael can reasonably be read as an instance of cultural miscegenation in action (even if both are male and not in a position to produce physical progeny). By sharing a bed, they symbolically blend the energies of their cultures ("Queequeg embraced me, pressed his forehead against mine" -- Chapter 12, 1992 Penguin edition, p. 63); and they agree to disagree on religious matters: Ishmael thinks Queequeg entertains "the most absurd notions" about his idol Yojo, while Queequeg in turn "thought he knew a good deal more about the true religion than I did" (ch. 17, pp. 90, 95). Their achievement of mutual tolerance, coming as it does before the monomaniac Ahab has appeared on the scene, forms both a prelude and a contrast to the book's main story, suggesting mixity and non-dogmatism as an alternative to Ahab's confrontational, all-or-nothing relation to the universe. At the same time, while Queequeg's experience of white culture leads him to conclude that "even Christians could be both miserable and wicked; infinitely more so, than all his father's heathens" (ch. 12, p. 72), there is no question of the text as a whole endorsing any knee-jerk protopolitically-correct notion of "non-white legs good, white legs bad"; against Queequeg must be balanced the demented Zoroastrian Fedallah, whose silent presence on the *Pequod* implies that non-whites can also be quite as

single-mindedly fanatical as the Judeo-Christian Ahab.

Queequeg's tattooed body also implies that the sense of the universe is beyond the grasp of any single religion or belief-system. The tattoo-marks turn the islander into a text, but one that no-one can interpret, himself included: "this tattooing had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by these hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read" (ch. 110, p. 524).

The tattoo-marks are also described, in the case of Queequeg's arm, as "an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure" (ch. 4, p. 28). This image suggests Melville may be anticipating Borges, and, indeed, the Argentinian weaver of dream-labyrinths has a story called "La escritura del dios" ("The God's Script," in *El Aleph*, 1949), in which the sense of the universe is indecipherably manifested in marks on a body, this time an animal's. A presumably Aztec priest, incarcerated by the Spanish invaders, is the only inmate of a cell opposite which is a jaguar's cage. Over the years of his imprisonment, he gradually observes the patterns on the creature's body ("the black forms which stained the yellow fur" -- my translation), finally concluding that they make up a text, "a sentence written by a god." Meditation on the enigma gradually leads him to awareness of the sense of existence ("I saw the universe and I saw the intimate designs of the universe"), but he refuses to reveal the secret before his death ("I do not pronounce the formula ... I allow myself to be forgotten by the days, lying in the darkness").

What is striking in both Melville and Borges is that the unrevealed enigma is incarnated in a physical body, whether a human's or an animal's: both texts, it may be, suggest to the reader that even if ultimate meaning remains ungraspable, our philosophical systems, partial attempts to make sense of the world must, if they are to succeed even provisionally, start out from our bodies and our material existence -- or from what Wordsworth, in "The Prelude," called "this very world which is the world/Of all of us, the place where in the end/We find our happiness, or not at all!"

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