Melville's Doubloon and the Shield of Achilles

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IF ASKED TO NAME ONE WORK of fiction as the American epic, most students of literature would no doubt choose *Moby-Dick*. By general consent this work not only has most of the internal qualifications of epic (however they may be defined), but it has also attained a standing in our national self-conception roughly comparable to that of *Paradise Lost* in England or Homer's poems in Greece. Milton, who was deeply immersed in academic classical learning from an early age, has been widely studied for Greek and Roman influences. Melville has not, perhaps because his schooling was informal and haphazard, and because in his writing there is little of that learned allusiveness with which Milton advertised his classical models. These conditions have led to a widespread assumption that the influence of classical epic on *Moby-Dick,* however profound, must have been general, broadly conceptual, and more or less diffuse. In this article I hope to encourage a more precise and specific classical reading of *Moby-Dick* by pointing out some striking similarities between the gold doubloon which is nailed to the *Pequod*'s mast and the shield made by Hephaestus for Achilles in the eighteenth Book of Homer's *Iliad.*

The Homeric parallels to Melville's doubloon invite the surmise that it was actually suggested by Homer's Shield of Achilles. As I will show, there is some good circumstantial evidence in favor of such an interpretation. The object of my argument is not, however,

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to prove a source for the doubloon passage. I would like instead to show how a similar device is used in two epics as a vehicle for two contrasting visions, and how Melville has shaped a technique of the earliest European epic to his own vision.

Before proceeding further, I will dwell briefly on the character of the literary device, which is known to students of classical rhetoric as ecphrasis.[1] Ecphrasis is the special term applied to rhetorical descriptions of works of art when such descriptions have an artistic purpose independent from that of the original work. Keats's "Ode On A Grecian Urn" is ecphrastic virtually in its entirety; usually the device is set in a larger whole. Often the work of art described is imaginary, as is the case with Keats's Urn; occasionally the object of an ecphrastic description is real, as happens to be the case with Melville's Ecuadorian Doubloon. Literary description of visual art was a favorite showpiece in ancient rhetorical schools; citing such early models as the Shield of Achilles and the Hesiodic "Shield of Heracles," teachers of rhetoric for over a millennium after Homer set ecphrasis as an assignment designed to make students compose vividly and precisely, to "see" with words. The exercise has since degenerated into the odious topic of the freshman composition course which requires the student to describe a banana.

An awareness of this subgenre is especially important for the student of Melville, because it is a favorite technique with him, not as a showpiece but as a vehicle of meaning. *Mardi* has a description of a carved oaken box of sea biscuit aboard the *Parki* in chapter 20, and the chaotic miscellany of carved figures implies something about the structure and content of what is to follow. The glass ship in *Redburn* and the small oil painting of the protagonist's father in *Pierre* are prominent visual objects which symbolize a state of mind essential to the novel's meaning. Likewise, at two points in *Moby-Dick* characters approach and study works of art and attempt to interpret their meaning. The first is in chapter 3, "The Spouter-Inn," where Ishmael puzzles over the "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture" representing a whale leaping or attempting to leap over the three

1. Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts* (Chicago, 1958), pp. 17 ff. Hagstrum prefers the term "icon" for this device. His term is as pertinent to Melville as to the 17th and 18th century writers discussed in *The Sister Arts*, for the word emphasizes the symbolic aspect of the objects contemplated as well as the act of repeated and studied contemplation which is so typical of Melville. See also Hagstrum's comments on Pope's translation of Homer, pp. 229 f.

masts of a Cape-Horner. Melville emphasizes, however, that Ishmael arrived at this "final theory" about the painting only after long scrutiny and consultation with many aged persons. The second point at which such scrutiny and conjecture take place is in chapter 99, "The Doubloon," where various characters arrive at contradictory interpretations of the gold coin nailed to the *Pequod*'s mast.

The two passages are related in interesting and, I believe, significant ways. The apparent magnetism of the objects studied combines in both instances with an emphasis on the act of observation. The painting in the Spouter-Inn is the first thing Ishmael sees upon entering: ". . . there [was] a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant." Ishmael's contemplation of the painting in the Spouter-Inn is multiplied in "The Doubloon": "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look"; the multiple interpretations of the several crew members contrast with the single vision of the earlier scene: ". . . at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture's midst. *That* once found out, and all the rest were plain." A further similarity is to be found in the content of the pictures contemplated—the whale arrested in mid-course over the three masts of the ship, the sun in mid-course over the three mountain peaks. The coincidence is no idle one, for the *Peqood* is presented as a microcosm of the world ashore, with its own peaks and valleys; in addition, the images of sun and of whale are closely linked in *Moby-Dick*. They come together at a number of points, including chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck," where Ahab shouts "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me!" and in chapter 116, "The Dying Whale": "floating in the lovely sunset sea and sky, sun and whale both stilly died together." The linked analogies of murky painting and cryptic doubloon point to meanings deeply embedded in the fabric of *Moby-Dick*.

It is no great surprise that Melville found his way as he did into ecphrasis, since he is constantly calling our attention to this or that work of art. Like Pope, whose translations of Homer he used, he is preoccupied with visual images and he repeatedly appeals to our remembrance of paintings, sculpture, and architecture.[2] One sus-

2. See Morris Star, "Melville's Use of the Visual Arts," Diss. Northwestern Univ. 1964.

pects that Melville had a special interest in other writers' ecphrastic pieces such as Homer's Shield of Achilles. We do know that Melville knew Homer in Pope's translation before starting work on *Moby-Dick,* if only because he had Jack Chase quote from Pope's Homer in *White-Jacket.*[3] Specific allusions in *Redburn* and in *Moby-Dick* itself tend to confirm Melville's awareness of Homer's lengthy description of Achilles' legendary shield.[4] This awareness of Homeric ecphrasis may explain a striking set of similarities between Homer's Shield of Achilles and the doubloon described in chapter 99 of *Moby-Dick*: (1) both objects are circular; the shield is mostly gold, the doubloon is all gold; (2) both contain features which suggest a symbolic representation of the world or the cosmos; the sun is represented in both; the shield has a representation of the ocean running around its rim and the doubloon has an "equator" indicated on its border by the words REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR. Homer's shield pictures constellations,

> The starry lights that heaven's high convex crown'd;
> The Pleiads, Hyads, with the northern team;
> And great Orion's more refulgent beam:
> To which, around the axle of the sky,
> The Bear, revolving, points his golden eye,
> Still shines exalted on the etherial plain,
> Nor bathes his blazing forehead in the main.

which have their counterpart in the signs of the zodiac represented on the doubloon. (3) Homer's description of the shield, beginning

3. " 'Happy, thrice happy, who, in battle slain,/Pressed in Atrides' cause the Trojan plain!" Pope's version, sir, not the original Greek" (Ch. 51). Melville's copies of Pope's Homer, which he bought in 1848 as vols. 32–34 of Harper's Classical Library, have not survived. His marked copies of Chapman's Homer, acquired in 1858, are in the Harvard Melville Collection. See R. W. B. Lewis, "Melville on Homer," *AL,* 22 (1950), 166–76.

4. Examples are: "a mighty pewter dish, big as Achilles' shield" (*Redburn,* Ch. 28); [a carved shark's tooth] "as close packed in its maziness of design, as the Greek savage, Achilles' shield" (*Moby-Dick,* Ch. 57). The shift to visual imagery in the latter allusion suggests that Melville may have seen Flaxman's celebrated bas-relief of Achilles' shield during his 1849 trip to London. There were numerous castings of it and Flaxman's drawings for it were in the British Museum. (For a picture of the shield see J. L. Myres, *Homer and His Critics* [London, 1958]). Another influence may have been the engraving of the shield in Pope's quarto edition of the *Iliad* (for illustrations, see the Twickenham ed.). Flaxman's illustrations of *Homer,* a copy of which Melville appears to have owned, may have had a part in shaping his feeling for the *Iliad.* See *Pierre*: "clear-cut outlines, yet full of unadorned barbaric nobleness" (Bk. 2, Sec. 7).

with the sky and ending with the ocean on the shield's rim with terrestrial features in between, is inverted in Melville's description of the doubloon, which begins with the words on the rim, proceeds to the description of the three mountains, and ends with the sun and the zodiac.

If these resemblances are not sufficiently palpable in themselves, they are reinforced by the identical placement of the shield and the doubloon in their respective works. Both descriptions come at the beginning of the fourth quarter of the narrative and occupy approximately the same proportion of the works in which they occur.[5] For whatever reasons, attentive readers sometimes notice the correspondences and are reminded afresh of the epic, specifically Homeric forces at work in *Moby-Dick*. Anyone who cares to study the parallel further will find that it opens up a number of distinct perspectives in the comparative structure and content of *Moby-Dick* and the *Iliad*. The relation between Homer and Melville demonstrably works on a wide range of specific levels which go beyond a certain general similarity of conception. Melville was not merely inspired by Homer—he had absorbed him and he used him in meaningful ways that are not generally recognized. The doubloon ecphrasis provides a convenient door into the Homeric study of *Moby-Dick*.

It was noted that one of the similarities of the shield and the doubloon is their location in the epic structure. One need not assume that this location is somehow central, focal, or climactic in order to realize that the parallel may point to Homer as a *structural* model or influence. In fact, recent developments in the structural analysis of Homeric epic and *Moby-Dick* have taken similar directions. In the most systematic analysis yet made of the structure of *Moby-Dick*, Herbert G. Eldridge has argued compellingly that Melville's masterpiece is built around six symmetrically balanced sections "divided on the basis of the ship's progress from watery world

5. My calculations are based on Modern Library pages and lines of the Greek original; the same calculations based on the lines of Pope's translation produce the same percentages. Homer's ecphrasis begins 75.2 percent of the way through; Melville's begins at 75.3 percent.

to watery world and subdivided on a simple numerical principle."[6] Without summarizing Eldridge's arguments, I will diagram the structure of *Moby-Dick* as he represents it:

- I. *New Bedford & Nantucket* (22 chapters): "Loomings" to "Merry Christmas"
- II. *Nantucket to Cape of Good Hope* (28 chapters): "The Lee Shore" to "Ahab's Boat and Crew. Fedallah"
- III. *Good Hope to Sunda Strait* (36 chapters): "The Spirit-Spout" to "The Tail"
- IV. *Sunda Strait to the Pacific* (24 chapters): "The Grand Armada" to "Queequeg in his Coffin"
- V. *Pacific to the Equator* (19 chapters): "The Pacific" to "The Cabin. Ahab and Pip"
- VI. *Equator* (6 chapters): "The Hat" to "The Chase. Third Day"

The "general symmetry" which Eldridge's analysis emphasizes with terms such as "geometry" of composition and "carefully wrought 'envelopes' in the second and fifth [sections]" is a revealing and harmonious footnote to Melville's own theory of structure as suggested in chapter 63 of *Moby-Dick*: "Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters." What Melville perceived in an organic metaphor Eldridge analyzes mathematically or geometrically. What Eldridge does not seem to have recognized is that he is applying a principle of structure currently in use by analysts of Homer and applied normally to small units of oral poetry, but sometimes also to the *Iliad* as a whole and to large sections of the *Odyssey*.[7] The symmetrical method of composition is most simply manifested in the rhetorical figure of chiasmus: *A, B, B, A*. The addition of elements to a chiastic structure creates a so-called "onion-skin" figure or ring-structure, a strategy which is useful to the poet as a means of organizing material in an aesthetically pleasing bundle. Homeric ring-structure was first

6. " 'Careful Disorder'; The Structure of *Moby Dick*," *AL*, 39 (1967), 145–62. Newton Arvin (*Herman Melville* [New York, 1950], pp. 156–58) finds structural parallels of his own between *Moby-Dick* and Homeric epic.

7. See esp. Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), Chs. 5, 11, and 12; and Stephen Bertman, "The Telemachy and Structural Symmetry," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 97 (1966), 15–27. For a critique of Whitman see G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 259–67.

demonstrated in J. T. Sheppard's *The Pattern of the Iliad* (London, 1922), which used as a demonstration piece the description of Achilles' shield. Structural symmetry is now generally acknowledged to be an essential feature of orally composed poetry, and its adoption into classical rhetoric as a strategy of gross organization can be documented from numerous examples of early Greek writing.

It is pointless to argue that Melville recognized Homer's ring-structures (especially through the lens of Pope's translation) or that he consciously imitated them in laying out his plan for *Moby-Dick*. Even the existence of a conscious plan is conjectural. The evidence does suggest that Melville was attracted as was Homer to the principle of organic/geometric structure—for that, he need not ever have read or heard of Homer. Here we are on the fringes of empirical criticism, where one is left to speculate about the psychic processes by which every great poet is led inexorably to imitate his predecessors in whatever kind of poetry he is creating. Some Homeric imitation is acknowledged by virtually every critic of Melville, and F. O. Matthiessen makes the not entirely inappropriate claim for *Moby-Dick* that at its best "the writing is more consistently alive on the Homeric than on the Shakespearean level."[8]

Without diverting the argument here into an exhaustive compendium of Homerisms in *Moby-Dick*, one can identify a few lines of development easily comparable with Homeric motifs. In common with the *Odyssey* is the idea of a central figure (Ishmael) whose adventurous impulses and desire for gain bring him onto a ship of "fools" whose doomed lot he would share if it were not for other qualities that mark him for survival. There is a secondary identification of Odysseus with Ahab, inasmuch as the unwise determination of the captain to visit the Cyclops and later the Lestrigonians destroys certain innocent members of his crew. The nine gams are in some respects like the several episodes of Odysseus' magical voyage: both devices serve as an organizing structure, and both clearly represent types of human experience. Parallels with the *Iliad* are more numerous, just as the tragic overtones of *Moby-Dick* prevail over the comic. The mise en scène in both works is closely restricted: the *Iliad* never moves away from Troy and the plain nearby, and

8. *American Renaissance* (Oxford, 1941), p. 460.

once the *Pequod* clears the "Lee Shore" *Moby-Dick* rarely strays from the deck of the ship and the surrounding waters. Both the poet and the novelist use imagery, however, to remove us imaginatively from the usual scene to a totally different ambience: Homer (for instance) might compare the attack on a wall to a storm at sea, Melville a gentle sea to the rolling prairies of Illinois. This use of imagery with an element of contrast is possibly the most tangibly Homeric feature in *Moby-Dick*. Matthiessen traces his own sense of the Homeric chiefly to Melville's use of similes "to compare the whale to something even greater than itself."[9] This presumably refers to Homer's way of comparing a fighting hero to a lion or a rock beaten by waves, or even to fire. Homeric fire imagery would of course have a special pertinence to the defiant fire-worshipper Ahab.

The heroic center of the *Iliad* is Achilles, whose presentation has a good deal to do with the conception of Ahab. The Grand Lama-like exclusiveness of the *Pequod*'s captain recalls the Homeric technique of secluding Achilles through much of the *Iliad*; the Homeric model would no doubt have been more closely followed in this respect were it not for the countervailing instinct to create "a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies," with a Shakespearean "bold and nervous lofty language." A far more important Achillean trait reproduced in Ahab is the "wrath," the first word of Homer's poem, conceived as "hate" by Melville in the Quarter-Deck scene but true to the Homeric model. Both heroes seek unreasonable vengeance for an intolerable injury done them in the normal course of things; Agamemnon, publicly challenged and vilified by Achilles, protects himself by stripping Achilles of his gift of honor, the girl Briseis; Moby-Dick, attacked by Ahab, strikes back and "dismasts" his attacker: "Aye, aye! it was that accursed white whale that razeed me; made a poor pegging lubber of me for ever and a day."[10] Ahab's anger is transformed by his morbid brooding into a transcendentalist monomania in which the whale becomes a symbol. Achilles (or his creator) is incapable of such Platonic imagining, but his anger, continuing long after the original injury has been mediated and his comrades-in-arms nearly annihilated, is no less existen-

9. *American Renaissance*, p. 460.
10. Cf. *Iliad* 9.646 f.: "'Tis just resentment, and becomes the brave:/Disgraced, dishonor'd, like the vilest slave!" (Pope).

tial. The hero's anger projects itself into a dramatic, insane defiance of nature itself, as when Achilles opposes the waters of the Scamander (Bk. 21), Ahab the fires of the corpusants (Ch. 119).

The most significant difference between the Greek and the American hero lies in the persistence of Ahab's delusion. Achilles realizes that his angry withdrawal has made him responsible for the death of his gentle friend Patroclus, whom he had allowed to go out in his armor to frighten the attacking Trojans away from the Greek ships. In the books that follow the killing of Patroclus (Bk. 16), Achilles subtly absorbs some of the compassion and gentleness of his dead companion (although his cathartic vengeance on Hector is more brutal than ever), and he becomes in Book 23 the benign and diplomatic patron of the funeral games, in Book 24 the sympathetic host of his worst enemy's father. In this scene with Priam, Achilles explains the unity of human suffering: Priam's grief is the grief of Achilles' own father Peleus; Hector's death is like the fated death of Achilles himself. In his consolation to Priam Achilles also explains the balanced rhythm of good and evil:

> Two urns by Jove's high throne have ever stood,
> The source of evil one, and one of good;
> From thence the cup of mortal man he fills,
> Blessings to these, to those distributes ill;
> To most he mingles both: the wretch decreed
> To taste the bad unmix'd, is cursed indeed;
> Pursued by wrongs, by meagre famine driven,
> He wanders, outcast both of earth and heaven.
> The happiest taste not happiness sincere;
> But find the cordial draught is dash'd with care.

The classic equipoise of vision achieved through suffering is not shared by Ahab: like Willy Loman he rushes to his death in a climactic frenzy of delusion.

This deliberate departure of Melville from his Greek model is nowhere more clearly symbolized than in the ecphrasis with which the last quarter of each epic is begun. The shield made by Hephaestus to replace the one stripped from Patroclus's corpse is a symmetrically balanced picture of the human community at peace and at war, in litigation and in marriage, working and dancing, plough-

ing and harvesting, killing and singing.[11] This unique shield is not only a part of the gleaming armor in which Achilles hunts down and kills Hector, but it symbolizes the universal, balanced vision of man's life which the hero displays in the last two books of the poem. The doubloon also acts as a mirror of the hero's vision: the mountain-tops, the "firm tower . . . the volcano . . . the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl . . . all are Ahab," symbols of his fatal individualism and determination, as well as Freudian emblems of the loss Ahab felt when the white whale "dismasted" him. Even the sun "wears a ruddy face" with which Ahab seems to identify himself as "he enters the sign of storms, the equinox." Ahab's impiety is symbolized too, in the riveting of this coin to the mast: like Ahab's vision, this coin has lost its other side, and like the old darky's wedding ring remembered by Pip, it is destined to remain implanted until a shaggy bark of bedded oysters covers it over and it has no side at all. Therefore for Ahab the doubloon is as much a symbol of a contracted vision as the shield is of Achilles' expanded vision. The unpeopled doubloon, "the white whale's talisman," is as much an emblem of death as the crowded, animated shield of Achilles is life itself.

Ahab's similarities to Achilles are strengthened by the resemblance of the shield and the coin, but their differences are as clearly marked by that same comparison. Achilles' triumphant human understanding and reconciliation with the terms of his existence are written on the shield, while the coin tells something more of a Faustian damnation for Ahab.

But "there's another rendering": Melville's coin may be read in another way because there is another hero and another vision, Ishmael's. The only surviving witness of Ahab's tragedy is completely silent in this scene. He listens to an array of characters—the first such array since the voyage began and the last before it ends—and notes the spectrum of interpretations or personal reflections which the doubloon elicits. This human montage corresponds in one respect to Achilles' shield: the variety of human *experience* shown

11. See Sheppard, pp. 1 ff. In "Observations on the Shield of Achilles" at the end of his translation of Bk. 18 of the *Iliad,* Pope (paraphrasing Ovid's *Met.* 13.110) characterizes the shield passage as "the picture of the whole World," and "a Sketch for what one may call an *universal Picture.*"

there is like the variety of human *perception* seen here, not represented on the doubloon itself but instead dramatized through the various viewers who study the gold coin. There is Ahab's heroic egotism, Starbuck's uneasy faith in a benevolent God, and Stubb's jolly pessimism; King-Post's mindless practicality sees nine-hundred and sixty cigars;[12] the Manxman reads a prophesy of doom;[13] Queequeg, like Ahab, sees a reflection of himself in the coin—but the self he sees reflected is not inner character but the outer cabalistics of his tattooing. (The Freudian symbols of potency which Ahab perceived in the mountain-peaks, the flame, and the tower are seen by "the Cannibal" in the arching zodiac of his tattooed thighs, with Sagittarius or the Archer in the position occupied by the sun on the coin.)[14] The ghost-devil Fedallah sees the coin as an icon of the sun, and worships it. Pip, Ahab's Fool, identifies the doubloon as the ship's navel,[15] and madly but truly foretells that "the green miser" will hoard it soon. One coin, eight readings—only Ishmael has heard them all, with the sanity to endure even the crazy-witty reading of Pip. Four of the readings, those of Ahab, Flask, Queequeg, and Fedallah, are in one way or another affirmative, while the other four are in a similar manner negative.[16] The resultant composite vision is Ishmael's and it is as ambiguous and inconclusive as the mystery of the whale itself. Like the whale, Ishmael sees two distinct and unrelated pictures, and it is his nature that he cannot master the ambiguities: "The whale, therefore, must see one distinct picture

12. Anyone inclined to dismiss the personal dimension of Melville's Flask should consider Melville's remark about *Redburn:* "—a thing which I, the author, know to be trash, & wrote it to buy some tobacco with." See also *Pierre:* "Now, the dollars derived from his ditties, these Pierre had always invested in cigars" (Bk. 18, Sec. 2).

13. A noteworthy feature of Melville's work is his modification and reuse of bits of old material in new works. In this case compare the old Finn on the *Julia* in *Omoo:* "The night of the burial he laid his hand on the old horse-shoe nailed as a charm to the foremast, and solemnly told us that, in less than three weeks, not one quarter of our number would remain aboard the ship—by that time they would have left her forever" (Ch. 12).

14. For Queequeg here Melville reworked the description of Bello in *Mardi:* "his sturdy thighs were his triumphal arch; whereon in numerous medallions, crests, and shields, were blazoned all his victories by sea and land" (Ch. 147).

15. See John Seelye, "The Golden Navel: The Cabalism of Ahab's Doubloon," *NCF,* 14 (1960), 350–55. Seelye's article explores the oracular aspects of the doubloon, noting that *omphalos,* the Greek "navel," referred to the oracle at Delphi.

16. Melville's ordering of these readings gives a further insight into his sense of symmetry and balance; schematically represented beginning with Ahab and ending with Pip, they seem to be arranged in two sections: + — — + and — + + —.

on this side, and other distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him."

Ishmael's ambiguous double vision is represented on the coin itself as Melville describes it at the beginning of the chapter:

> Now those noble golden coins of South America are as medals of the sun and tropic token-pieces. . . . It so chanced that the doubloon of the Pequod was a most wealthy example of these things. On its round border it bore the letters, REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: QUITO. So this bright coin came from a country planted in the middle of the world, and beneath the great equator, and named after it; and it had been cast midway up the Andes, in the unwaning clime that knows no autumn. Zoned by those letters you saw the likeness of three Andes' summits; from one a flame; a tower on another; on the third a crowing cock; while arching over all was a segment of the partitioned zodiac, the signs all marked with their usual cabalistics, and the keystone sun entering the equinoctial point at Libra.

The balance between the affirmative and negative readings of the coin's meaning is symbolized by the sun's position in the zodiac "entering the equinoctial point at Libra," the sign of the balanced scale when day and night are equal. The figure of balance is repeated in the letters REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: QUITO with the author's comment on the place "in the middle of the world" and "midway up the Andes." The sun, suggesting perfect knowledge, is in Libra, marking the epistemological paradox running through *Moby-Dick,* that human knowledge is most certain when it is least conclusive: "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." The inconclusiveness of such vision justifies Ishmael's attitude of withdrawn contemplation. This is one of the meanings suggested by the name of the coin's place of origin, Quito. In Spanish, this means "withdraw," but it also means "redeem, set free." Ishmael's freedom and redemption, intimately linked to his withdrawal, are tied together almost mystically in the iconography of the doubloon, which seems specially minted for the purposes of his story.[17] Finally, the shape of the doubloon provides one more hint of the "certain significance" that the inhabitants of the *Pequod* try to read therein:

17. See illustration of the coin. The words on the border also predict what will happen to the *Pequod* and where it will happen.

"And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher." This teasing suggestion comes early in the chapter, before any of the characters have made their contradictory statements. Only Pip, with his enigmatic parable of the Darky's wedding ring, seems to realize that, at least so far as this doubloon is concerned, all things *are* of little worth. So the coin may represent another aspect of Ishmael's vision, one which was articulated only three chapters before, as Ishmael looked into the fires of the try-works: "The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. 'All is vanity.' ALL." The final paradox of the gold doubloon, though only lightly touched on by Melville, may therefore be that the sum of its richly textured meanings and cosmic suggestions is zero. As with the "colorless all-color" of whiteness, it is an equation in which everything cancels out, like the weights in the scale of Libra, like the seasons in Quito, "the unwaning clime that knows no autumn," or like the conflicting meanings extracted from the coin's cabalistics. This is Ishmael's shield. With a heraldry of his own devising Melville created a talisman of withdrawal and redemption for the lone survivor Ishmael.[18]

To summarize, Homer and Melville both employ symbolic ecphrasis in the beginning of the final quarter of the *Iliad* and *Moby-Dick*. Both describe wealthy examples of metal work with universalizing images of the natural world and suggested types of human experience. Homer by the various activities of men represented on the shield itself and Melville by the various comments from the coin's observers, represent an antithetical and balanced view of reality. This antithesis and balance constitute an important part of the grand vision of the *Iliad* and *Moby-Dick*. In both epics this vision is

18. A related complex of images appears near the end of *Billy Budd:* "The hull, deliberately recovering from the periodic roll to leeward, was just regaining an even keel, when the last signal, a preconcerted dumb one, was given. 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." The doubloon's sun in the sign of an even keel"; the string of religious images recalls especially Starbuck's view of the doubloon; Billy's ascension into the rose of the dawn carries an association with Ishmael's redemption (Quito).

affirmative, insofar as Achilles' humanity and Ishmael's redemption are symbolically represented. But whereas Homer's grand vision is primarily affirmative (against a dark background of violence and death), Melville's contains a strong element of the everlasting nay: he hints that the coin means nothing at all, and he implies that a balanced view of things leaves open only one course of action: withdrawal (Quito). Modern counterheroes, like Ishmael and his whales, must suffer from "the helpless perplexity of volition, in which their divided and diametrically opposed powers of vision must involve them" (Ch. 74). It follows from this reading of the two epics that the consolatory, heroic, triumphant conclusion of the *Iliad* differs radically from the sense of life which Melville communicates in the latter chapters of *Moby-Dick*. The gold doubloon, by inviting comparison with the shield of Achilles, focuses this important difference in epic vision.