

The event stands there larger than life, massively symbolic in its inexhaustible and sibylline significance. Significances, rather, for it is an image of life, and as such is a condensation of many kinds of meanings. There is no single meaning appropriate to our occasion, and that portentous richness is one of the things that makes us stare at the towering event.

We shall not be able to anatomize this portentous richness, but we feel that we must try. We must try because it is a way of understanding our own deeper selves, and that need to understand ourselves is what takes us, always, to the deeper contemplations of art, literature, religion and history.

—Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (NY, 1964), 80-81.

## Preliminary Reflections on the Reading of *Moby Dick*

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This essay does not try to anatomize *Moby Dick*, but rather it tries only to indicate some things that seem necessary preconditions for such an anatomization. Since these are preliminary reflections, the essay is divided into sections that are more or less independent of one another, although they are not unconnected.

### I

How does one approach a book as vast and complex as *Moby Dick*?<sup>1</sup> One's original plan should be guided by what seems to be Melville's, or rather Ishmael's, hints about his intention in chapter 32, "Cetology," the second cetology in the novel. This requires a glance at the first cetology, which is found in the extracts (2-11), although they are by no means to be mistaken "for veritable gospel cetology" (2). This warning notwithstanding, perhaps something could be discovered in the extracts that might furnish a clue to the reading of the book.

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from *Moby Dick* are to the Norton Critical Edition, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker, and are designated by chapter and/or page number(s). Citations from Melville's letters are to *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William Gilman (New Haven, 1960), and are designated "Davis-Gilman." Where a letter is also in the Norton Critical Edition, a "Norton" designation is given too.

One thing to which the extracts point is an implicit fivefold distinction of levels: first, the sub-sub-librarian himself; above him, the three levels implied in his office—the sub-librarian, the librarian, and the libraries (cf. the reference to “the long Vaticans,” 2); finally, below him, there is inner narrator Ishmael, whose entire book will provide a commentary on the extracts by which it is prefaced, i. e., the entire book will be—in some sense—a cetology. In addition, since the libraries are in a world whose contents they house, since Ishmael himself is threefold [young Ishmael (the participant in the events described in *Moby Dick*), intermediate Ishmael (cf. chs. 54, 102), and oldest Ishmael (the inner narrator of *Moby Dick*)], and since Melville hovers behind everything as a genuine, although shadowy, presence, one can distinguish nine possible perspectives:

- (1) [world]
- (2) libraries
- (3) librarian
- (4) sub-librarian
- (5) sub-sub-librarian
- (6) young Ishmael
- (7) intermediate Ishmael
- (8) oldest Ishmael
- (9) [Melville]

Already, then, the enormous complexity of the text looms before one “like a snow hill in the air” (ch. 1, 16). This complexity reappears quite graphically when one turns to the cetology within the Cetology, where Ishmael hints at his project: “The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed” (ch. 32, 117). Therefore, the book is a lengthy interpretation of, or creation out of, the text “chaos.” Ishmael’s most noteworthy predecessors in this line of work were the pre-Olympian Greek gods and the Hebraic God, a rather distinguished company. The result of their artistry was the text “world,” a text that—according to Melville—has never been interpreted properly: “Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of this great allegory—the world?” (Letter 93, to Hawthorne, 17? November 1851, Davis-Gilman, 141-142; Norton, 566) Melville’s, and Ishmael’s, task is the proper interpretation of that text, a very wicked and hybristic project indeed, as Melville himself realized: “I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.” (Davis-Gilman, 142; Norton, 566)

Interpretation of text, then, seems to be an informing principle of the entire work. To see this principle at work, one need only glance at a few of the texts involved: the painting at the Spouter Inn (ch. 3, 20-21), of which seven possible interpretations are given; the tongue-in-cheek (or page-in-cover) scientific classification of whales (ch. 32); “all visible objects,” “behind the unreasoning mask” of each of which “some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features” (ch. 36, 144); the activities of the men on board the *Pequod*; the *Pequod* itself; the techniques of whaling; the white whale; whiteness; the prophecies (e. g., chs. 19, 21, 117); the doubloon (ch. 99); leviathan (see ch. 104, 378); human beings (e. g., Queequeg, ch. 110, 399); and so forth. In a very profound sense, Pip sums up the matter when he says, “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look” (ch. 99, 362). In order to fathom the book’s meaning, one must unscrew its navel, as it were, in order to loosen what may be behind and below the text.

All that has been said so far, of course, is merely a groping in the darkness in a more or less amorphous way, but this too is fitting when one considers the skill with which the author draws one into his work and impels one to experience it as well as to reflect upon it. This is part of what Ishmael means when he asks, "And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?" (ch. 89, 334)

One must return, then, to the focus of the essay's original plan, the cetology chapter (ch. 32). The chapter presents itself, at first glance, as scientifically serious, but a more careful look reveals it as at least partially a parody. Even before Ishmael appeals to the most reliable authorities, namely his messmates, his very appeal to Linnaeus (119) carries within it the bite of satire by virtue of that part of it that is left untranslated. It takes no great Latin scholar to discern the gist of the latter. Ishmael, then, is poking fun at science. However, if the classification here is not meant to be genuinely scientifically accurate, wherein does its accuracy lie, and to what does it refer? The divisions of the whale provide a clue. Instead of dividing leviathan into phyla, families, genera, and species, Ishmael divides it into folios, octavos, and duodecimos. Of what is he speaking? If one were to hazard a likely guess, one might say that rather than speaking about whales, he is actually speaking about books, about texts. The footnote to octavo whales (123) seems to ground this analogy firmly.

However, Ishmael does set himself up as an authority, enough of an authority to reject certain whales as spurious (127). Yet, he is prudent enough to admit the incompleteness of his "system," because he is merely the architect, the drafter: "This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught." (128) Architects, at least "the grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity" (127). Nonetheless, if the plan is a good one, it will carry within itself the means of effecting itself in the form of the completed structure. Great architects may only lead one through part of the journey, but they also direct one, if only implicitly, to the journey's end.

Behind all that has been said thus far lies the attempt to somehow indicate that the author has written a book that is unified and ordered in such a way that from its apparent chaos the unity and order can be wrested, just as ambergris can be wrested from the foulest part of the whale's interior (cf. chs. 91-92). The book itself seems to cry out for an attempt of this kind, even though it places innumerable obstacles in the way. Some of the questions that must be asked of it are: What is whiteness? Who is the protagonist—Ishmael, Ahab, Moby Dick? How is the text to be interpreted properly? What is the cetology, or vision, that is presented? All these questions (and more) seem sorely in need of answers. Yet, since this essay is "but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught," it cannot hope to answer them now. One is still in the dark belly of leviathan, and one has not yet escaped to tell the tale. One only can hope that those suggestions that can be made in what follows may be "very like a whale" (3; cf. *Hamlet* III. ii. 365).

## II

It may be helpful to begin by considering the author's method of writing. Of all the references to this, perhaps the seminal one is the assertion, "There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method" (ch. 82, 304). One way in which this operates can be seen in the gam sequence (chs. 52, 54, 71, 81, 91, 100, 115, 128, 131). With respect to whaleships one is told of "the disorderly way they were sprinkled over the entire watery circumference" (ch. 41, 155). Yet one sees the *Pequod* encountering a

meaningful sequence of other whaleships, a sequence each member of which is also in itself significant. In this sense, the book has an organic order: “out of the trunk, the branches grow, out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters” (ch. 63, 246). However, one is looking for the roots, so this is only part of the story.

In addition, Ishmael (ch. 45, 175) urges on the reader the importance of the beginning of chapter forty-four for understanding “what there may be of narrative in this book” (ch. 45, 175). The reference is to the sea-charts over which Ahab pores in order to locate the white whale, which “might seem an absurdly hopeless task,” although “not so did it seem to Ahab” (ch. 44, 171). Nor so must it seem to the reader. Therefore, the reader must chart the currents and eddies of the book, an inordinately difficult task requiring much research and reflection. One may find an order therein which seems as if it were “verily mapped out before the world itself was charted” (ch. 54, 222). In any case, one must supplement the phrenological science of leviathan’s brow and spine (cf. ch. 80, 293) with the phrenological science of the oceanic bumps and swells of leviathan’s world. One must immerse oneself in this world, must “rise and swell with [its] subject” (ch. 104, 379), i. e., one must become a castaway, concentrically expanding one’s horizon out from oneself (cf. ch. 93, esp. 347) until one’s chart becomes finished.

However, the completion of the chart is not enough. In addition, one must then circumnavigate the world that one has charted: “but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through numberless perils to the very point whence we started” (ch. 52, 204; cf. ch. 13, 59). In the face of such an ineluctable and inscrutable enterprise, if one wishes to reach one’s goal, whatever risks may be involved, one must become monomaniacal, i. e., one’s soul must become like dark Ahab’s, and insofar as it does, one is a fast-fish indeed!

### III

However, there is more than darkness here. There is also whiteness, which is incarnate in the white whale. Whiteness is an infinity that is shadowed forth as a duality: it embodies both the beautiful and the terrible, both the all-color and the colorless (cf. ch. 42, 169). One must assimilate this whiteness, as Ishmael does. This means that Ishmael assimilates to himself the colors of all those with whom he comes into contact: in the hat that he wears in the white city of Lima (ch. 54, 224), one sees Ahab (cf. ch. 9, 45; ch. 130, 437-441; ch. 132, 443); in his swearing on the Gospels (ch. 54, 224), one sees Starbuck; in his jollities, one sees Stubb (cf. ch. 49, 195-196, especially the use of the word “queer,” 195, which is one of Stubb’s favorite words—cf. ch. 29, 113-114); in his fire-worshipping at the try-works, one temporarily sees Fedallah (cf. ch. 96); in his near-drowning, one sees Pip (cf. epilogue to ch. 93, 347); in his tattooed body while he is in the *Arsacides* (see ch. 102, 376; cf. ch. 110, 399), one sees Queequeg (if one had not already done so by then); and so forth. In other words, Ishmael is all-color. Yet, he is also colorless, as is indicated by the chapters in which the presentation is purely dramatic, with no narrative interruptions, chapters that are only possible because of the omniscience (cf. ch. 104, 378) that is necessarily coupled with colorlessness. This Ishmaeleian duality explains two of the book’s structural enigmas, namely the apparently inexplicable narration/drama alternation and what has been called a lack of distinct character in Ishmael. Further, Ishmael’s all-color colorlessness, i. e., his being the human correlate of the white whale, or his being somehow akin to the white whale,

accounts for his being the only one who escapes the catastrophe of the *Pequod*. However, Ishmael is only a steppingstone to the truly colorless all-color figure, and that is Melville himself, a being who is as elusive and inscrutable as the white whale, and as divine.

Ishmael, then, is the alternative to Ahab. If Ahab plumbs the depths, Ishmael flies to the heights; if Ahab is profound, Ishmael is lofty. In short, Ishmael is the "Catskill eagle in [the soul] that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar" (ch. 96, 355). In other words, however low he swoops, he is still loftier than Ahab soaring above sea-level. Of course, the black depths have their brightnesses (cf. ch. 16, 77; ch. 125, 427; ch. 127, 432-433; ch. 132), and the sunny heights have their blacknesses (cf. ch. 4, 32-33; ch. 41, 162; ch. 48, 192-193; ch. 49, 197). Therefore, not only must one's soul become monomaniacal, but it must also soar like the Ishmaelian eagle, and insofar as it does, one is a loose-fish indeed!

In Ahab, one sees the woe that is madness; in Ishmael, one sees the wisdom that is woe (cf. ch. 96, 355). One must look to Melville, through the mocking blackness of Pip, for the wisdom that is madness (of which Pip is the obverse, i. e., Pip is the madness that is wisdom).

#### IV

Finally, it is desirable briefly to indicate the way in which this is an American book, for with whatever else the great American classics of the nineteenth century may have been concerned, they were also concerned with democracy.<sup>2</sup> If one were to select one phrase as representative of the core of American democracy, that phrase would be "all men are created equal," a principle that was regarded in the nineteenth century as virtually sacred. With this phrase, the Founders legislated not only equality, but also the idea of unlimited possibilities for all humans. In other words, an ideal was posited, but with minimal guidelines as to the specific realization of that ideal. To the fervently democratic, acutely morally conscious writers of nineteenth century America, it became clear that a perhaps necessary, perhaps ineradicable, tension between ideal and action had arisen. In *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, this problem is treated from the point of view of the *disparity* between ideal and action. On the other hand, in *Moby Dick*, the same problem is treated from the point of view of the *coincidence* of ideal and action. The whaleship *Pequod* is the ideal in action. It is a government in which each citizen has a share (a lay: cf. ch. 16, 73-76; ch. 18, 83), the size of each share dependent only on one's natural abilities: it is a "joint stock company" in which every member has a "Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals" (ch. 72, 271; cf. ch. 26, 104; ch. 13, 61). Thus, it is a society in which each member must absolutely and voluntarily submerge his or her individuality into a unified whole (cf. ch. 134, 454-455). However, this submersion of individuality involves no loss of purely abstract human dignity: it is zealously humanistic. Melville expressed this in a letter to Hawthorne thus: "So, when you see or hear of my ruthless democracy on all sides, you may possibly feel a touch of a shrink, or something of that sort. It is but nature to be shy of a mortal who boldly declares that a

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (NY, 1964), 40-41.

thief in jail is as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington. This is ludicrous. But Truth is the silliest thing under the sun.” (Davis-Gilman, 126-127; Norton, 556-557; cf. *Moby Dick*, ch. 10, 52; ch. 24, 101; ch. 82, 306; ch. 98, 358) In this society, humans are neither equally slaves (cf. ch. 1, 14-15) nor equally masters, but they are equally humans, and this leveling to the purely human is the colorlessness of the great American democracy. At the same time, it is a radically self-sufficient society (cf. ch. 87, 319), the self-sufficiency of which is mirrored in each of its citizens. It is an island, each of the inhabitants of which is an island unto himself or herself alone (an *isolato*). In other words, it fosters a radical individualism, and in this sense, it is all-color. Democracy, then, is the political avatar of the colorless all-color whiteness that permeates *Moby Dick*, and therein lies its paradoxical nature: it is a ship that must perpetually sail between the Charybdis of humanism and the Scylla of humanism.<sup>3</sup> Ishmael expresses this paradox most explicitly:

They were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, *Isolato*es too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own. Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these *Isolato*es were! An Anacharsis Cloutz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth....

(ch. 27, 108)

Seat thyself sultanically among the moons of Saturn, and take high abstracted man alone; and he seems a wonder, a grandeur, and a woe. But

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<sup>3</sup> That humanism and individualism are the poles between which the dialectic of the American political experience operates is stated vigorously in Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas*: “First, let us see what we can make out of a brief, general, sentimental consideration of political democracy.... We shall, it is true, quickly and continually find the origin-idea of the singleness of man, individualism, asserting itself, and cropping forth, even from the opposite ideas. But the mass, or lump character, for imperative reasons, is to be ever carefully weigh’d, borne in mind, and provided for. Only from it, and from its proper regulation and potency, comes the other, comes the chance of individualism. The two are contradictory, but our task is to reconcile them.” [*The Works of Walt Whitman in two volumes as prepared by him for the deathbed edition* (NY, 1969), vol. II, 216-217; also see vol. II, 223, 224, 231, 240-241, 246-247.] Even the title of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* suggests this in its coupling of the leaves of individualism with the undifferentiated grass of humanism. Also, consider James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat* (Baltimore, 1969), 70, 107, 121, 186-187, 228-230. See also *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (Evanston and Chicago, 1971), Book I, ch. 3, 9: “For indeed the democratic element operates as a subtile acid among us; forever producing new things by corroding the old, as in the south of France verdigris, the primitive material of one kind of green paint, is produced by grape-vinegar poured upon copper plates. Now in general nothing can be more significant of decay than the idea of corrosion; yet on the other hand, nothing can more vividly suggest the luxuriance of life, than the idea of green as a color; for green is the peculiar signet of all-fertile Nature herself. Herein by apt analogy we behold the marked anomalousness of America; whose character abroad, we need not be surprised, is misconceived, when we consider how strangely she contradicts all prior notions of human things; and how wonderfully to her, Death itself becomes transmuted into Life. So that political institutions, which in other lands seem above all things intensely artificial, with America seem to possess the divine virtue of a natural law; for the most mighty of nature’s laws is this, that out of Death she brings Life. [¶] Still, are there things in the visible world, over which ever-shifting Nature hath not so unbounded a sway. The grass is annually changed; but the limbs of the oak, for a long term of years, defy that annual decree. And if in America the vast mass of families be as the blades of grass, yet some few there are that stand as the oak; which, instead of decaying, annually puts forth new branches; whereby Time, instead of subtracting, is made to capitulate into a multiple virtue.”

from the same point, take mankind in a mass, and for the most part, they seem a mob of unnecessary duplicates, both contemporary and hereditary.  
(ch. 107, 387; cf. ch. 134, 454-455)

The novel suggests that it is on the rock of this paradox, i. e., on its very colorless all-color essence as externalized in the white whale, that the ship of state founders.

However, Melville, or rather Ishmael, does not stop here. Not only does one see a political democracy in action, but also one sees a cosmic democracy in action. Not only are all human beings equally human beings, but also all beings are equally beings. Ahab would “strike the sun if it insulted [him]” (ch. 36, 144), he wishes to strike the white whale because it has insulted him, and he threatens to strike Starbuck because he is on the verge of insulting him (ch. 109, 394; cf. Stubb’s encounter with Ahab, ch. 29, 112-113, and Stubb’s dream afterward, ch. 31). The most eloquent articulation of the cosmic democracy of the novel is the passage that concludes the first “Knights and Squires” chapter (ch. 26, 104-105), a passage that has been called the “finest rhetoric of democracy.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, the cosmic democracy is presupposed by the political democracy as its ground and principle. The incarnation of this ground and principle is the white whale, in whom humanism is manifested in facelessness (cf. ch. 86, 318) and individualism is manifested in the specificity of the name and the physical markings by which Moby Dick is so readily identifiable. Therefore, Moby Dick is the agent of the cosmic democracy, and it is manifest that the consequences of democracy on the cosmic level can be as catastrophic as those on the political level.

The grandeur of the book consists, at least partially, in the fact that while the author in no way shrinks from the potentially dreadful consequences of democracy on all levels, he yet remains ruthlessly democratic. In other words, he can state the negative case as strongly as possible without shaking his fervent positive belief in democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (San Francisco, 1947), 24.