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Ahab, American

Susan McWilliams

Abstract: Despite common portrayals of Ahab as beyond the pale of common humanity, Melville offers much reason in *Moby-Dick* to regard Ahab as a reflection of ordinary American political life. Two of Ahab's most definitive characteristics—his isolation and his desire for domination—do not differentiate him from the other characters in the book but rather underscore how much he is like them. Among the *Pequod*'s crew in particular, those traits are the rule rather than the exception, a fact that helps to explain why the crew members are so quick to adopt Ahab's way of thinking: in large measure, it is already their own. Along these lines, looking at Ahab as a representative American man makes it possible to better understand Melville's true anxieties about the prospects for democratic flourishing in the United States.

> *If you should write a fable for little fishes,*
> *you would make them speak like great whales.*
>
> —*Moby-Dick*, prefatory "extract"[1]

When scholars talk about the dilemmas of American political life in *Moby-Dick*, they tend to focus on the dilemmas faced by the ship's crew: the narrator who wants us to call him Ishmael, Starbuck, Stubb, Flask, and so on.[2] Captain Ahab, in the literature, is largely approached as a monarchical or autonomous force—someone who comes in and exposes the weaknesses of the American polity by imposing himself on it, from above or outside. For C. L. R. James, for instance, Ahab is the "embodiment of the totalitarian type," "by nature a dictatorial personality" who is thus able to manipulate a relatively incompetent and incoherent crew.[3] Michael Rogin describes Ahab

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[1]Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 17.

[2]See, for instance, Elizabeth D. Samet, *Willing Obedience: Citizens, Soldiers, and the Progress of Consent in America, 1776–1898* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 64.

[3]C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1978), 15.

as the sole founder of a new, artificial Leviathan, who draws "on his destructive intimacy with nature, on the savage's instinctual power, and on a transforming, technological magic" in order to control the ship's sailors—thus symbolically changing the nation by reversing the course and mission of John Winthrop's *Arbella*.[4] John Alvis sees Ahab as a Caesarist demagogue who successfully subjugates a crew that lacks the religious or intellectual fortitude to resist him.[5] To others, Ahab does not even represent any type or group of human beings per se but rather large and impersonal social forces: industrial capitalism, high Calvinism, modern warfare technology, and so on.[6] And a fair number of writers have approached Ahab as if he is either evil or the devil incarnate.[7] All these approaches, and others like them, draw attention to the ways in which Captain Ahab stands apart, or stands differently, from the ordinary American or the American population en masse. In most assessments of his character, in other words, Captain Ahab is portrayed in some critical way as *not one of us*: foreign in the literal sense, foreign in the psychological sense, or both. Ahab seems to most to represent behavior that is beyond the bounds of ordinary sympathy and outside the strictures of everyday society.

It is true that in some ways the book supports this kind of reading; early on in the book, Melville has Captain Peleg describe Ahab as a "grand, ungodly, god-like man," a description upon which many commentators have seized.[8] And of course the great spectacle of Ahab's demise invites us to focus on the extraordinary size of his excesses and his flaws. But this familiar cast on the

[4]Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 139–40.

[5]John Alvis, "*Moby-Dick* and Melville's Quarrel with America," *Interpretation* 23, no. 2 (1993): 223–47.

[6]Inger Hunnerup Dalsgaard, "'The Leyden Jar' and 'The Iron Way' Conjoined: *Moby-Dick*, the Classical and Modern Schism of Science and Technology," in *Melville "Among the Nations": Proceedings of an International Conference, Volos, Greece, July 2–6, 1997*, ed. Sanford E. Marovitz and A. C. Christodoulou (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001), 252; Giles Gunn, "Enamored Against Thee By Strange Minds: Recovering the Relations between Religion and the Enlightenment in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century American Literature," in *Knowledge and Belief in America: Enlightenment Traditions and Modern Religious Thought*, ed. William M. Shea and Peter A. Huff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 76; R. Bruce Bickley Jr., "'Civilized Barbarity': Melville and the Dark Paradoxes of Waging Modern War," in *War and Words: Horror and Heroism in the Literature of Warfare*, ed. Sara Munson Deats et al. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 131.

[7]See, for instance: Linda Costanzo Cahir, *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 25; Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* (New York: Delta, 1992), 279; Henry A. Murray, "In Nomine Diaboli," in *Herman Melville, "Moby-Dick,"* ed. Nick Selby (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 80.

[8]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 108.

name Ahab leaves at least something to be desired, since in many ways Melville goes out of his way to stress that Ahab is not an impersonal or otherworldly force at all but an ordinary human being, someone who "responds humanly to other characters" and whose recognizably human qualities more than balance out his most extreme behaviors.[9] For instance, just seconds after Peleg describes Ahab in those semidivine terms he backtracks, emphasizing the extent of Ahab's "humanities." Ahab, he says, is a "good captain" and a "good man" with a good family; "he has a wife—not three voyages wedded—a sweet, resigned girl," says Peleg, and "by that sweet girl that old man has a child."[10] If Ahab seems strange or alien at first glance, we quickly learn that he hails from a place much closer to home.

More specifically, Melville stresses the extent to which Ahab is not a foreign force but part of a well-established class of American citizens, with long roots in the nation's history. Those roots are part occupational; early in *Moby-Dick* Melville cites one of Daniel Webster's addresses to the Senate, an address in which Webster describes Nantucket whaling as one of the oldest and most estimable American industries, one that deserves "public encouragement."[11] More fundamentally, those roots are genealogical. Melville even intimates that Ahab shares a bloodline with Benjamin Franklin; "better than royal blood," Ishmael says, Nantucketers like Ahab have the blood of the American founding in their veins.[12] Peleg underscores this genealogy in his discourse on Ahab; he tells Ishmael that, although Ahab has the name of a biblical king, "Ahab did not name himself"; in other words, if he seems aristocratic, it is by a kind of accident, and only a matter of appearance. Ahab, he emphasizes, is no noble; he is a Quaker, born and raised in that most egalitarian of early American religions. Shortly thereafter, when Ishmael foreshadows the story he is about to tell, a story of "meanest mariners" in which

[9]Melville, as James McIntosh puts it, works at "humanizing" Ahab throughout the book ("The Mariner's Multiple Quest," in *New Essays on "Moby-Dick,"* ed. Richard H. Brodhead [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 40).

[10]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 109. In both the title of and introduction to her book, Lisa Norling (*Captain Ahab Had a Wife* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000], 1) picks up on the fact that little attention is given to this kind of pedestrian or domestic detail in Ahab's life, despite multiple mentions in the novel.

[11]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 21. The entire speech appears in Daniel Webster, *Speeches and Forensic Arguments* (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1830), 433–35. William Ellery Sedgwick notes that when Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*, "the American whale fishery expressed the best in the American character. It also exemplified the peculiarities of our national life" (*Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945], 90).

[12]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 141. Melville is correct that Benjamin Franklin's grandmother Mary Morrill (or Morrel) was one of the founding female residents of Ahab's native Nantucket. See Henry Whittemore, *Genealogical Guide to the Early Settlers of America: With a Brief History of Those of the First Generation* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1967), 196.

"men may seem detestable" and may be marked by "ignominious blemish," he insists that even the tale's darkest characters are meant to be understood in the light of "democratic dignity," in "that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture." Even "the most mournful, perchance the most abased, of them all," Ishmael says, should be approached in the "Spirit of Equality," in service to a "great democratic God."[13]

It is worth considering Ahab along the lines that Ishmael suggests in the foregoing passage—not as an embodiment of impersonal force, tyranny, or pathology, but rather without any kind of "robed investiture." Such a reading, as Ishmael indicates, allows us not just to see Ahab in a new light but also to see Melville's more general teachings about the broader potential for democratic flourishing in the United States. I believe that the text more than justifies this kind of reading, not only for the reasons I have already suggested, but also because of a signal fact that has often gotten lost in treatments of Ahab's character. That is: two of Ahab's most definitive characteristics—his isolation and his desire for domination—do not differentiate him from the other characters in the book but rather underscore how much he is like them. Among the *Pequod*'s crew in particular, those traits are the rule rather than the exception, a fact that helps to explain why the crew members are so quick to adopt Ahab's way of thinking: in large measure, it is already their own.[14] Moreover, in various places Melville suggests that those qualities, which many have rightly identified as the integral components of Ahab's character, are decidedly or distinctively American qualities—that is, qualities that are endemic to the American population. If Ahab is noteworthy in these regards, then, it is largely because Americans as a whole are noteworthy in these regards.

What's more, in the opening pages of *Moby-Dick* Melville twice calls our attention to the idea that, rather than treating Ahab's character as odd or singular, he will treat it as a reflection, albeit a distilled or exaggerated one, of the character of the society that surrounds him. Early on, Ishmael notes that on a whaling ship the captain "gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecastle":

> He thinks he breathes it first; but not so. In much the same way do the commonality lead their leaders in many other things, at the same time the leaders little suspect it.[15]

Before Captain Ahab is introduced, Melville already has suggested that he is not the sole or preeminent source of the atmosphere on the ship; even his breath is recycled from the lungs of the crew. It seems that even when we

[13]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 108, 146.

[14]Kim Leilani Evans has argued that if Ahab has power over the crew, "it is because they share, at some level, his motivations." See Evans, *Whale!* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 107.

[15]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 29.

think he is in charge, or even when Ahab himself thinks that his behavior is leading the direction of the ship, it may be in fact a lagging indicator of other, more widespread social phenomena.

But perhaps Melville's most clever hint along these lines appears among the book's prefatory "extracts." There, he includes a line of Oliver Goldsmith's that has been modified to read: "If you should write a fable for little fishes, you would make them speak like great whales." As Melville presents it, the quotation suggests that in stories meant to instruct, the key characters are going to be exaggerated, made to appear bigger or more dramatic than their counterparts in real life. If you would create a story about a whale to instruct a school of fish about themselves, by the same principle you would create a story about "a mighty pageant creature" to instruct a school of ordinary citizens about themselves.[16] You would exaggerate your character in order to better draw attention to a more pedestrian subject.[17] But Melville's implication particularly stands out if you compare his modification of the line to what Goldsmith actually said, since in the original that meaning is absent: "why, Mr. Johnson, [writing fables] is not so easy as you seem to think; for if *you* were to make little fishes talk, they would talk like WHALES."[18] Melville transforms the quotation so that it takes on a more general and imperative tone, one that indicates his own approach; it suggests that when we see whales or other imposing figures (like Ahab) in the book, we are to understand that they are speaking to, and about, much more ordinary selves.

In this essay I focus on the ways in which Ahab is an ordinary self, or an ordinary American citizen, by the standards of *Moby-Dick*. Although we might not be inclined to think of them as average or "normal" qualities, Ahab's isolation and desire for domination are presented in the book as qualities that are widespread in the population, and qualities that have a great deal to do with one another. To the extent, then, that we can understand Ahab as an exaggerated caricature of the American character, Ahab's grand decline and defeat thus sets into relief what Melville considered to be great dangers for and within American political life in particular, and perhaps modern mass-democratic life in general.

By looking at Ahab in that light, I argue that in *Moby-Dick*, we can see Melville worry that the United States is weakened by what he calls its *isolato* culture: a culture in which norms and circumstances conspire to isolate individuals from one another. In such a culture, Melville thinks,

[16]Ibid., 17, 102.

[17]This is an argument that Oliver Goldsmith does make in his essay "On the Use of Hyperbole." See *The Works of Oliver Goldsmith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1900), 6:83–86.

[18]The original remark appears in John Forster, *The Life and Times of Oliver Goldsmith* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1871), 2:191. The emphases in the quotation are in the original.

the idea of independence becomes so overemphasized that the fact of human interdependence becomes dangerously underemphasized. In such a culture individuals become increasingly incapable of forging the most basic interpersonal connections, and they become more broadly incapable of engaging in public discussions about the direction of their common life; they become, in the simplest case, bad citizens. To that extent, Melville echoes Alexis de Tocqueville's fear that American democracy inclines toward a kind of individualism that breeds a stance of political indifference and enervates public life. But further, Melville suggests that in an *isolato* culture, individuals who feel cut off from each other—and from deliberative political possibilities—tend to understand their options for action solely in terms of violence and domination. The grand threat of an *isolato* culture is that when the individuals within it act, they tend to act with a kind of brutality that is self-denying and ultimately self-destroying. If we read Ahab's story as a story of American character, what we read is a story about a particular kind of modern democratic self-delusion: a kind of self-delusion that emanates from certain individualist conceits of democratic life, but that culminates in a desperate struggle for dominance that stands to destroy a democratic citizenry in the end.

The Life of Solitude

Almost every description of Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, from the beginning of the book to the end, turns on Ahab's solitude. It is clear that even before his first encounter with Moby Dick, Ahab was a solitary man, not inclined to spend much time with others. As a sea captain, he has long been known for his profound detachment; though he has always been a great egalitarian, a person in whom "there seemed not to lurk the smallest social arrogance," Ahab has never been able to talk to other people. For instance, unlike other captains, Ahab does not forbid discussion at his dining table, but at mealtimes he himself falls dumb, unable to participate in any conversation with others. As Ishmael puts it:

> socially, Ahab was inaccessible. Though nominally included in the census of Christendom, he was still an alien to it. He lived in the world, as the last of the Grisly Bears lived in settle Missouri. And as when Spring and Summer had departed, that wild Logan of the woods, burying himself in the hollow of a tree, lived out the winter there, sucking his own paws.[19]

Ahab's insularity is one of his definitive qualities.[20]

[19]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 181, 185.

[20]F. O. Matthiessen describes this as Ahab's "self-enclosed" character. See *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 459.

But even though the extent of Ahab's isolation is striking, among the characters in *Moby-Dick* it is hardly unusual. One of the first things that Ishmael emphasizes, and then reemphasizes again and again, is that nearly everyone in his story is what he calls an *isolato*. Almost all on the *Pequod*, he says, are *isolatoes*, "not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each *Isolato* living on a separate continent of his own." And in this regard the crew of the *Pequod* is itself only a reflection of a broader culture; on the American shore, Ishmael notices how even men who have extensive and meaningful common histories will sit around at a "social breakfast table" in an awkward silence, "looking round as sheepishly at each other as though they had never been out of sight of some sheepfold among the Green Mountains." The same isolationism persists in church, where Ishmael describes the parishioners "purposely sitting apart from the other" in silence, "insular and incommunicable," preached to by a minister who stands before them in his own "physical isolation." Even the loquacious Captain Peleg strikes Ishmael as fundamentally "insular" and "distrustful" of others.[21] On land and at sea, almost everyone Ishmael encounters is an *isolato*, just like Ahab.

Tellingly, almost all the characters in *Moby-Dick* who do not seem to be *isolatoes* are not American citizens.[22] Ishmael is struck by how easily Queequeg, the "uncivilized" cannibal from the South Pacific, is able to make a heartfelt proclamation of deep and abiding friendship. "In a countryman," Ishmael reflects, "this sudden flame of friendship would have seemed far too premature, a thing to be much distrusted." But for Queequeg, "those old rules would not apply." Melville's suggestion here is clear: among Americans, deep human connections are so unusual that they are suspect; keeping interpersonal distance is the norm. Some kind of social isolationism is the peculiar national standard. Melville underscores this point even more forcefully by comparing the atmosphere on American whaling ships to that on foreign whaling ships. In contrast to the *isolato* culture of the American whaling ship, Ishmael wonders at the "abounding good cheer" and sociability of an English whaling ship, a ship filled with "eating, and drinking, and laughing." And those "famous, hospitable ships" of the English, he says, are meager in their sociability compared to Dutch whaling ships, where "high livers" are "flooded with whole pipes, barrels, quarts, and gills of good gin and cheer." The character of whale ships, he concludes, are "incidental and particular" to the countries that launch them.[23] By the same logic, it seems that

[21]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 151, 56, 60, 65, and 99.

[22]The only exception to this rule is the black cabin boy Pip, a Connecticut native who seems, as a result of an accident that left him in the throes of what all on the ship deem "insanity," to grasp the interconnectedness of all things. Jason Frank explores Pip at length in an as yet unpublished essay titled "Pathologies of Freedom in Melville's America." I discuss Pip briefly at the end of this paper.

[23]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 78, 498–499.

Ahab's character, at least as far as his habits of solitude go, is incidental and particular to the country that launched him.

Although many scholars have tried to tie Ahab's isolated ways to other, more particular conditions—that he is an orphan, that he is a Quaker, that he is a whaler, that he is a captain, that he has been disabled—Melville makes clear that none of those may be regarded as a definitive "cause" of his solitude.[24] Characters in the book who were not orphaned are called *isolatoes*; characters in the book who are not Quakers are called *isolatoes*; women and children and others who never set foot on whaling ships fit the description of *isolatoes*; all the crew members on Ahab's ship who do not share his rank are *isolatoes*; and people who are not disabled are called *isolatoes*. Even if we may regard all of those particular qualities as aggravating the habits of solitude that shape Ahab's life, none can be considered to represent a singular, causal link. Perhaps to underscore the point, the book also introduces at least a couple of foreign whale ship captains, who share Ahab's rank and profession—and who even have lost limbs to Moby Dick!—but who do not seem to share Ahab's tendency toward social isolation and insularity.[25] In highlighting Ahab's habits of solitude when highlighting his Americanness, Melville suggests that the two are deeply connected.

In fact, Melville repeatedly suggests a link between American life and social isolation. The *Pequod*, peopled by *isolatoes*, is just like "the American army and military and merchant navies, and the engineering forces employed in the construction of the American Canals and Railroads," says Ishmael. In each case, he explains, the population is made up of people whose ancestry is international, but who have landed in a single place and find themselves engaged in common work. Yet even as they daily toil and strive together, they live without "acknowledging the common continent of men." They act as if

[24]For example, Wilson Carey McWilliams (*The Idea of Fraternity in America* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973], 342) suggests that "the circumstances of his birth would have made it difficult for him to form emotional bonds with the world," and that Ahab's Quaker religion taught him "to be a man of 'stillness and seclusion,'" thus contributing to his solitary ways. James (*Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, 79) contends that Ahab's isolation stems from his rank, itself "inseparable from the function of authority in the modern world." And August J. Nigro argues that Ahab's "dismemberment also leads to Ahab's external separation from community" (*The Diagonal Line: Separation and Reparation in American Literature* [Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1984], 78).

[25]The great example along these lines is Captain Boomer, the captain of an English whaling ship called the *Samuel Enderby* who lost his arm to Moby Dick. As Robert Zoellner has observed, Boomer's reaction to his injury is "opposite" to Ahab's. Boomer responds to his injury by drawing closer to his men, enhancing the already convivial and affectionate character of relationships on his ship. See *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of "Moby-Dick"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 116.

they still live on independent islands, although they all now sleep on the same piece of land. They have been "federated along one keel"—the language of "federation" is telling, of course, another indication that Melville is focused on the United States—but they remain separate, each in a place of isolation and solitude. For Americans, who are all somehow detached from their ancestry and tied to different histories, detachment has become the normal way of life. This way of life finds itself expressed throughout the American nation, and in its whaling ships. Melville again signals this in a prefatory "extract" which he modified from an original text, this time James Rhodes's *Cruise in a Whale Boat*: "It is generally well known that out of the crews of Whaling Vessels (American) few ever return in the ships on board of which they departed."[26] In the original text, the word "American" is absent.[27] Again, Melville misquotes to make his own meaning clear: that detachment and separation—not to mention some amount of disloyalty—are the marks of the American whale ship in particular, and the marks of American life more generally.

In a funny way, then, Melville echoes Ralph Waldo Emerson's assertion a decade earlier that a signal "sign of our times" in the United States is a set of norms and circumstances that isolate individuals from one another. In this environment, Emerson says, "everything that tends to insulate the individual" is valued and protected, and the idea that "help must come from the bosom alone" is accepted across the board.[28] The picture that Melville draws of American citizens in *Moby-Dick* is a kind of Emersonian paradise in those terms, a society in which individual insulation is the standard mode of being. But in Melville's telling, quite opposed to Emerson's well-known vision, a society in which solitude is the standard becomes a society of people whose way of thinking about themselves is deeply problematic.

Disdaining Dependence

Specifically, Melville suggests that in a society where solitude is a way of life, and the idea of solitude is valued, the fact and the idea of human interdependence are concomitantly devalued. No one exemplifies this more than Captain Ahab, who is humiliated by and furious about his injury in large part because it has made him tangibly dependent on others. He needs

[26]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 151; 22.

[27]The original volume is James Allen Rhodes, *A Cruise in a Whale Boat, by a Party of Fugitives: or Reminiscences and Adventures During a Year in the Pacific Ocean, and the Interior of South America* (New York: New York Publishing Company, 1848). See Kathleen E. Kier, *A Melville Encyclopedia,* vol. 2, *Loos-Z* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1990), 1132.

[28]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Charles Johnson (New York: Signet, 2003), 244.

doctors to help tend to his wounds; he needs a carpenter to craft and repair his false leg; he needs other crew members to assist him in climbing ladders during the ritual of "gamming" that takes place when two whale ships meet each other at sea. Without others, Ahab is quite literally without a leg to stand on. This state of things infuriates him. At one point, while waiting for the carpenter to fix his false leg, Ahab makes the nature of his most pressing complaint clear. He yells,

> Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be as free as air; and I'm down in the whole world's books.[29]

What Ahab says he hates about his injury, more than anything else, is the way in which it seems to have turned him into a dependent creature. For Ahab, a man who has long been habituated to a norm or standard of solitude, being so obviously dependent on other people seems a humiliation. Ahab's life of solitude has prepared him to mistrust all interdependence, even or especially his own, and his mistrust along those lines is one of his signature qualities.[30] Having spent a life in which his insularity has helped to define his identity and status, Ahab experiences his visible dependence almost as if it is a loss of his humanity. For him, being human means being able to live a life apart.

But notably, Ahab is not the only *isolato* on the ship who is troubled by the idea and fact of his dependence on others. Ishmael, for instance, becomes quite anxious when he finds himself tied to Queequeg by a monkey-rope as they work to insert the ship's blubber hook into a recently caught whale. Hitched to Queequeg, Ishmael begins to panic. "I seemed to distinctly perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two," he recalls later. "My free will had received a mortal wound." With no way to "get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed," Ishmael reports feeling their mutual dependence to be "so gross an injustice" that it could not possibly be sanctioned by Providence. Although he eventually comes to terms with the situation, he never forgets that first reaction: his association of interdependence with danger, degradation, and injustice. He remarks elsewhere that once you have cultivated an idea of "man, in the ideal," as a "grand and glowing creature" set apart from others, then the idea of men as "joint stock-companies"—that is,

[29]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 527.

[30]See Richard Manley Blau, *The Body Impolitic: A Reading of Four Novels by Herman Melville* (Amsterdam: Rodopoi N.V., 1979), 79; John Michael, *Identity and the Failure of America: From Thomas Jefferson to the War on Terror* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 100; and Rogin, *Subversive Genealogies*, 138. Joseph Adamson (*Melville, Shame, and the Evil Eye: A Psychoanalytic Reading* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997], 93) writes that Ahab "responds with shame and rage to any situation in which he finds himself incapacitated" or "dependent on others."

interdependent beings who share risk and liability—"may seem detestable."[31] In other words, Ishmael says, when you are used to the idea of humans as heroically independent creatures, the idea of humans as interdependent creatures seems decidedly second-rate. For those ensconced in *isolato* ways of being and thinking, interdependence becomes disdainful, and dependence becomes equivalent to dishonor.

The moments during which Ishmael and Queequeg are linked by a monkey-rope are even more telling, though, because Queequeg—the non-American who alone seems to resist the *isolato* culture of the ship—does not seem to be bothered by the experience in the least. While Ishmael is busy convincing himself that the situation represents a mortal blow to his free will, Queequeg goes about his business. Undisturbed by the idea of being tied to another, Queequeg is able to act with what others on the ship consider unparalleled calmness and bravery. Throughout the book, in fact, Melville stresses both the fact that Queequeg thinks differently about interdependence than the other men on the ship, and that his different thinking gives him a kind of strength and ability to act that the *isolatoes* lack. For instance, before they board the *Pequod* Ishmael and Queequeg wind up in a minor altercation that ends when a man gets blown off a dock and begins to drown. While all the Americans at the scene stand and watch in horrified silence, Queequeg dives into the water and saves the flailing man. After the rescue, the American bystanders want to fawn over his bravery, but Queequeg just asks for a glass of water and stands at the edge of the crowd. Ishmael watches Queequeg in this pose and says that he "seemed to be saying to himself—'It's a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians.'"[32] Again, then, Melville associates Queequeg's distinctiveness with his acceptance of the idea that it is a "mutual, joint-stock world"—that is, a world in which all humans are interdependent and liable for each other. And Melville underscores that this distinctive outlook has something to do with the fact that Queequeg remains a "cannibal"; he has not been Americanized.[33]

[31]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 365, 146. Elsewhere, he repeats this message by saying that if you think about man from the point of view of the "moons of Saturn"—a very non-Earth-bound position—the idea of "man alone" is a vision of "a wonder, a grandeur, and a woe." But from the same viewpoint, men as a collective "seem a mob of unnecessary duplicates" (521).

[32]Ibid., 89. Queequeg repeats this feat later in the book when he rescues Tashtego when the latter falls overboard into the massive head of a sperm whale (390–91).

[33]Aside from Queequeg's un-Americanized behavior and mannerisms, Melville also draws attention to the fact that Queequeg continues to worship an idol named Yojo according to his ancestral customs. Queequeg takes the bearings for his thought from a set of traditions that seem completely unfamiliar to all the Americans in the novel. See Zoellner, *The Salt-Sea Mastodon*, 70.

Queequeg, in contrast to Ahab and the other men on the *Pequod*, does not experience his own dependence as either disturbing or paralyzing. Even when an illness brings him to death's door, and he becomes almost totally dependent on other members of the crew to keep him alive, Queequeg remains calm and even good-spirited. He even asks the ship's carpenter to fashion him a coffin that will resemble those used on his native island. Quite unlike Ahab, who rages and roils when the carpenter works on a project that signifies his frailty and dependence, Queequeg seems nothing but grateful to the man who has so worked on his behalf. And later, when he recovers from his illness, Queequeg is not bothered—as other men on the ship are—by the frailty and dependence that the coffin signifies; rather, "with a wild whimsiness," he turns it into a sea-chest. Queequeg both acknowledges his own, interdependent status in the world and does not fear or lament it. And critically, it is at this moment in the story that we learn that Ahab is both mystified by and envious of Queequeg. Ishmael describes as Ahab watches Queequeg on the dock, as if the latter's body spoke "a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth." Staring at Queequeg, Ahab exclaims, "Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!"[34]

For Ahab, Queequeg is alluring because he represents an appealing way of being; he embodies the possibility of ailing and depending on others without suffering humiliation.[35] Put another way, Ahab knows that Queequeg possesses a critical quality that he, Ahab, does not. And he also seems to know that this quality enables Queequeg to have, even in moments of total dependence, a kind of spiritual clarity or contentment and a kind of inner strength. But Ahab has trouble learning what, according to Ishmael, Queequeg has to teach: the idea that every individual has a "Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals," and to acknowledge that is the first step toward an "unappalled" life of courage and contentment. According to Ishmael, Queequeg demonstrates that while acknowledging interdependence is fearful because it involves the acceptance of human frailty—since it forces you to realize that "if your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die"—it also is liberating in that it brings you closer to the truth of the human condition. Queequeg's "good cheer," so unusual on the ship, comes from his appreciation of human interdependence.[36] It is a lesson that Ahab seems unable to learn. Committed to habits of isolation and a kind of thinking that idealizes solitude, he tends to resist even the idea of his own, interdependent human condition.

Melville underscores the idea that for Ahab—and, indeed, for his fellow American *isolatoes*—the way of thinking that accompanies the

[34]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 537.

[35]See Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 164.

[36]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 365.

habit of solitude is a way of thinking that both neglects and devalues the idea of human interdependence. Further, in *Moby-Dick* this proves to be a way of thinking that is less than desirable: a way of thinking that brings neither knowledge nor strength nor spiritual contentment. Melville associates the *isolato* way of thinking with anxiety, paralysis, and rage. This stands in contrast to the bravery, wisdom, and contentment that Melville associates with the acceptance of human interdependence. By this token, if Emerson is right in thinking that Americans are wedded to the idea of human independence, Melville worries that Americans are dangerously divorced from the fact of human interdependence. And the result of that divorce may well be a nation that drowns in rage and anxiety. For Melville, the *isolato* model that seems to define American thinking leads down an unfavorable path; his descriptions of Ahab's rage and desolation, and his bewildered envy of that foreign harpooner, begin to make that clear.

The Desolation of Solitude

To be fair, at some moments Ahab seems to come close to recognizing the limitation of the way he thinks, and the cost that his *isolato* ways have imposed on him. In one of *Moby-Dick*'s most memorable scenes, in a chapter titled "The Symphony," Ahab laments his life to Starbuck, and what he laments in particular is the "the desolation of solitude it has been." His life, he says, seems to have forced a burdensome isolation upon him, one that has compelled him to exist "against all natural lovings and longings." As he sheds a tear, he describes living without any kind of close or extended human companionship. It is a kind of "Guinea-coast slavery," he tells Starbuck, to be so solitary in the world. He imagines, he says, that his "one small brain" and "one single heart" are "turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass," with nothing to grasp, and nothing to which they may be fixed.

At one point in this set of pained reflections, Ahab even implores Starbuck to look into his eyes—"let me look into a human eye," he says; "it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God"—so that he might finally find some human connection. The eye is the "magic glass," he tells Starbuck, and he hopes that looking into his first mate's eyes may finally bring him some true communion, some sense of connection to others, and some sense of being at home in the world. "Close!" he yells to Starbuck. "Stand close to me." Starbuck obliges and, as his eyes meet Ahab's, begins to speak of his own "loving" and "longing" in the world. But at that, Ahab looks away—"like a blighted fruit tree," Ishmael says, casting "his last, cindered apple to the soil." Ahab turns away from Starbuck, and Starbuck promptly runs off. Finding his first mate gone, Ahab crosses the deck "to gaze over on the other side," where he stares at

the "two reflected, fixed eyes in the water there."[37] He begins the final chase for Moby Dick the next morning.

There are a couple of critical things to notice about this passage, which I agree with many others is pivotal within *Moby-Dick*.[38] The first is that this attempt at human connection, despite Ahab's heartfelt plea for it, is not in the end successful. It culminates not in an embrace, not in any profession of mutual interdependence or purpose—not in any kind of human togetherness. It ends with Starbuck stealing away and Ahab staring into the ocean, both men seeming more isolated than ever. Despite what both Ahab and Starbuck acknowledge in that moment as a basic human need for connection with others, they cannot achieve it. It is a grim and foreboding failure, one underscored by the description of Starbuck as "blanched to a corpse's hue with despair" as he hurries off the deck.[39]

To that end, this chapter of the book encapsulates Melville's idea that people who have become habituated to a life of isolation might not be able to overcome that isolation in any meaningful way, even when desperation or necessity demand it. If this is as close as two *isolatoes* may get to sounding in true harmony—a suggestion Melville makes by titling this chapter "The Symphony"—it is clear how poorly they do.[40] Their voices do not come together in a pleasing or brilliant consonance; they remain separate and halting, reaching a discordant end. These *isolatoes* are unable to find a common sound, even when they search for it. The conclusion is grim, but it is a common refrain in Melville's writing. None of Melville's *isolatoes*—in *Moby-Dick* or elsewhere—succeed socially or find human connection, despite their desire or need to do so.[41] The individual who has become so isolated suffers a kind of distortion over time, a distortion that renders him or her incapable of full access into the human community.[42]

[37]Ibid., 602–6.

[38]See, most notably, Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 315. See also Joan Burbick, *Healing the Republic: The Language of Health and the Culture of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 173; James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, 79; and Ian Maguire, "'Who Ain't a Slave?': *Moby-Dick* and the Ideology of Free Labor," *Journal of American Studies* 37, no. 2 (2003): 300.

[39]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 605.

[40]There is no doubt that Melville considers Starbuck an *isolato*, and not only because Ishmael says that everyone on the ship could fit that appellation. Elsewhere, Ishmael singles Starbuck out as an *isolato*, remarking on "the wild watery loneliness of his life" (*Moby-Dick*, 144). And Starbuck himself at one point says that he regards himself "alone here upon an open sea" (572), a comment which I discuss in more detail below.

[41]R. E. Watters writes that "in Melville's opinion, prolonged isolation either chills the heart or corrupts the mind—or both" ("Melville's 'Isolatoes,'" *PMLA* 60, no. 4 [1945]: 1140).

[42]See R. E. Watters, "Melville's 'Sociality,'" *American Literature* 17, no. 1 (1945): 34.

In the exchange between Ahab and Starbuck, Melville offers a hint about how he understands the nature of that distortion and what it entails. When looking into Starbuck's eyes, Ahab calls them a "magic glass." But in those words, what sounds like a poetic tribute to human communion is actually a disturbing revelation: earlier in the voyage, Ahab describes a "magician's glass" as something that "to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self." What Ahab actually sees in Starbuck's eyes—what any human might literally see, looking in another's eyes—is his own reflection. Ahab experiences the eyes not as the window to another's soul but as a mirror to his own. It is on that count no wonder that when he turns away from Starbuck, he turns to stare into the sea. His view there is the same; indeed, early in *Moby-Dick* Ishmael says that Narcissus was tormented by "the same image" that "we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans": our own.[43] The particular distortion of Ahab's vision is that he has become so isolated that he cannot see, in an almost literal way, outside of himself. And Starbuck's vision is not much better. His first response, when Ahab looks into his eyes, is to start talking about himself: his own yearning, his own loneliness, his own desire to return to Nantucket. Starbuck, too, is an *isolato*, and in his own way, he has trouble reaching outside of his inner being. It is not merely that these men devalue interdependence, intellectually speaking; it is also that they have trouble expressing their interdependence and acting with that interdependence in mind, practically speaking.

What Ahab *can* speak, as he does in this exchange, is the language of "Guinea-coast slavery." The great irony of the master of the ship—whose rule depends on enforcing his authoritarian, almost totalizing control over others—claiming a position of enslavement is not to be missed.[44] Especially in nineteenth-century America, this is not an innocent linguistic inversion.[45] It suggests at the very least a kind of political blindness, an inability to see outside the self. (This is not a blindness of Ahab's alone; at the beginning of the book Ishmael speaks in similarly problematic terms when he asks, "Who aint a slave?")[46] That he would call his own isolation an enslavement demonstrates his neglect of the very proximate existence of *actual* slaves. Ahab's isolation corresponds, in Melville's telling, with a failure to understand the most evident political dynamics of his time and place—largely because he does not seem to be able to acknowledge the reality of anyone's position other than his own. And, of course, that kind of neglect of the experience of others itself provides support for the legal and political institution of slavery.

[43]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 604, 484, 27.

[44]See Michelle Ann Stephens, *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 252.

[45]See McGuire, "'Who Ain't a Slave?,'" 289.

[46]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 28.

Through this exchange, Melville develops the notion that Ahab's isolation—and the isolation of others on the *Pequod*—is not just a kind of material fact but involves the development of a particular way of seeing. It is a way of seeing that lacks the quality of mutual recognition, the very quality that Ralph Ellison among others has singled out as essential to the maintenance of any democratic covenant in general, and to "the ethical authority of American law" in particular, since mutual recognition involves an acknowledgement of the common humanity that justifies democratic citizenship.[47] Both Ahab and Starbuck, having lives where social isolation is a norm, have adjusted their vision accordingly, and adjusted it in a way that makes it difficult if not impossible for them to see each other in full. Each has been thrown back on himself enough to be confined, to borrow Alexis de Tocqueville's phrase, "within the solitude of his own heart."[48] In another, each man sees only himself, just another reflection of his solitary pains. This makes effective communication and joint action difficult at best, since both depend on some recognition of others, and of the common continent of humanity.

This way of seeing is endemic on the *Pequod*. As Melville presents it, it is the way of seeing that develops among people who assume their own isolation from others, and who by some degree of circumstance and choice have long been divorced from a sense of commonality. It finds no clearer example than when Ahab nails a gold doubloon to the mainmast, announcing that he will award it to the first sailor who spots Moby Dick. The doubloon comes from Ecuador, and it is an unremarkable coin in that it has a border announcing its provenance and an artistic design of national significance in the middle.[49] But every single man on the ship, when looking at the doubloon, reads himself and his own story into the coin's design. As each person on the ship comes by to look at the gold coin, it becomes clear that the doubloon merely reflects the aspirations and attachments of the

[47]Greg Crane, "Ralph Ellison's Constitutional Faith," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Ross Posnock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 114. "Responsibility rests upon recognition," says the Invisible Man, "and recognition is a form of agreement" (Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [New York: Vintage International, 1995], 14). Ellison drew many of his themes from Melville's work; notably, the epigraph to that book comes from Melville's *Benito Cereno*.

[48]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 2:99.

[49]The coin described is an eight escudo gold piece, which were actually minted by Ecuador from 1838 to 1841 (and in a smaller version between 1841 and 1843), during the very early years of that state's existence as a republic. See Paul Royster, "Melville's Economy of Language," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 317. See also Chester L. Krause, *Standard Catalog of World Coins: Spain, Portugal, and the New World* (Iola, WI: Krause, 2002), in which the coin is listed as KM 23.1.

person who gazes upon it.[50] No one on the *Pequod* speaks with anyone else about the coin, not to compare interpretations of the design and certainly not to reflect together about what the doubloon's presence itself might signify for the voyage as a whole. Melville portrays the crew members as locked into their solitary worlds, confined mostly to conversation within their own heads. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, the characters do not engage in discussions with one another so much as they give speeches to themselves.[51]

Of course, in their failure to come together to see what the doubloon might mean for them as a community, the *isolatoes* on the *Pequod* demonstrate one of the reasons that their voyage ends in such spectacular failure. By looking and speaking only within themselves, they neglect the chance to develop a more holistic, communal sense of the state of the ship—a sense that might come from more interpersonal connection and communication. This kind of failure is first made clear in *Moby-Dick* when Ahab announces his intention to pursue the white whale; there are varying degrees of discomfort among the crew, but no man on the crew discusses his hesitations with another.[52] Melville even separates the reactions of different crew members into different chapters and headings, drawing attention to the extent of their mutual isolation. In a community of *isolatoes*, it seems, there is a predictable reluctance to engage in the kind of shared discussion and public deliberation that may exert an informing or even moderating force on policy. Presuming that they, too, have developed habits of seeing and thinking that lack the quality of mutual recognition, they may even be unable to imagine such a public or common discussion in the first place. Many are able to run from Ahab, quite literally—they run apart "in a terror of dismay" when he reasserts his plans later in the book—but none are able to communicate with each other or translate their dread into some kind of organized response.[53] This impotence gets worse over time; monologues become more frequent as the story progresses, gradually replacing dialogue and multivoiced conversation almost entirely.[54] Again, on this count, Melville's *isolatoes* sound a great deal like Tocqueville's description of the kind of American individualism he feared; in "the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone," they comprise a populace who live divorced from the public sphere,

[50]See Christopher Sten, *Sounding the Whale: "Moby-Dick" as Epic Novel* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1996), 64.

[51]Robert Milder sees in the book "a series of parallel soliloquies" (*Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 73).

[52]The only interaction there is amounts to a kind of violent frenzy, about which I say more later.

[53]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 565.

[54]P. Adams Sitney, "Ahab's Name: A Reading of 'The Symphony,'" in *Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick,"* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 144.

disconnected from the political.[55] They fail to act well as interdependent beings because they fail to see each other as interdependent beings.

Notably, despite the emphasis in thinkers such as Tocqueville and Winthrop on the potential for religion to furnish the kind of spirit of interdependence that the men on the *Pequod* lack, their common Christian background does little to furnish them with the sense of community they need.[56] Not only is their worship on land one defined by its "insular and incommunicable" rituals marked by "physical isolation," as I discussed above, but also Melville suggests that their religiosity at sea is more reminiscent of some "Christian hermit of old times" whose worship takes place only in the context of a much more powerful—definitive—separation from society at large.[57] Stubb makes this point powerfully clear when he shouts "That's Christianity!" in response to a speech by the ship's cook, the thrust of which is that, just as it is hopeless to keep sharks from being sharks, it is hopeless to keep men from their own sharklike inclinations.[58] It is a speech that suggests that self-restraint and democratic self-governance are all but impossible. Melville presents the "Christianity" of the crew, then, as all but a farce; whatever truly Christian sentiments they once harbored have been overpowered by the isolating (and ultimately self-absorbing) forces of their lives. Again and again, despite an ancestral religion that insists on treating the other as self, the men on the *Pequod* are stymied by their repeated failures even to engage each other.

Among the crew, perhaps the greatest failure along these lines is Starbuck's, which Melville describes in meticulous detail. Even when Starbuck thinks of trying to stop Captain Ahab, he never considers sounding out anyone else on the ship or looking for others who might agree with him, much less trying to enlist anyone else's help (and Melville makes clear that there are at least some other people on the ship who would aid his cause).[59] Starbuck feels so isolated—"I stand alone here upon an open sea," he cries—that he thinks his only option is to commit a ghastly crime: to sneak into Ahab's cabin and shoot him. But he rejects that course of action, understandably reluctant to become a murderer.[60] Yet having made the decision that

[55]Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2:98.

[56]It is telling that Queequeg, who I describe throughout this essay as providing an alternative vision to that of Ahab and the other Americans, tells Ishmael that he sees Christianity as a corrupting force (Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 83).

[57]Ibid., 186–87.

[58]Ibid., 338. See also Zoellner, *The Salt-Sea Mastodon*, 223.

[59]For instance, Stubb suspects that the devil has something to do with Ahab's quest for the white whale. See Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 371. Notably, Stubb happens to walk by Starbuck during the scene I am about to describe: he seems to reinforce the idea that Starbuck is unable even to consider working in concert with others on the ship. For his part, Stubb is oblivious to Starbuck's agonies.

[60]Ibid., 572.

private violence is beyond him, he goes no further. He neglects to think about the possibility of any common or public option for resisting Ahab. Rather, he effectively throws up his hands, giving himself up to whatever might happen. Having decided that he cannot stop Ahab by himself, with violence, Starbuck comes to believe that he can do nothing.

In some ways, Starbuck's feelings of terrible disconnection bring this analysis back to an earlier point, since they echo the feelings of terrible disconnection that Ahab expresses when he bewails the isolations of his own life. Each man is accustomed to imagining that he stands alone in the world. But standing alone has, by definition, a lonely element to it. Thus, Ahab says that at times he imagines himself as a tiny being, tossed around in a cold universe by the winds of chance. And Starbuck despairs of the cruel hand that fate has dealt him, as he imagines himself entirely alone, in the middle of the yawning and watery Pacific. Although the two men seem often set in a kind of opposition, they share in the *isolato*'s lament. It is the lament of the man who is cut off from any sense of common human action or purpose, hampered by a disdain for the idea of human interdependence, a failure to fully recognize others, and an inability to forge meaningful human connection.

Moreover, it is telling that, during the moment in which he feels this kind of disconnection most acutely, Starbuck contemplates murderous violence. Believing that he is alone in the world, he understands his ability to act to be limited to the most naked kind of brutality. He believes, in short, that the only way he might connect with the world enough to change it is by imposing himself on it by force. Though Starbuck does not go down that path, his sense of the set of actions available to him is telling. It seems difficult and almost unnatural for him to contemplate collective or deliberative action, but it seems effortless for him to consider the path of inaction on the one hand and the path of violent, dominating action on the other.

The Drive to Domination

Of course, those are precisely the two paths of action that Ahab believes are available to him when it comes to the white whale. As he says over and again, in his mind the only two options are between doing nothing and risking the lives of the entire crew to kill the white whale. He cannot—and will not—consider any other possibilities for more moderate or deliberative action, as he makes most clear when he tells Starbuck that the decision to pursue Moby Dick is his alone. He can choose either inaction or domination, he says, and points a musket at Starbuck's head to indicate that he has chosen the latter path.[61] Ahab's sense of his own options mirrors Starbuck's sense

[61]This exchange echoes a moment much earlier in the text, during which Ahab lambastes Stubb; in line with my argument elsewhere, Stubb decides to tell no one about Ahab's aggression and does nothing.

of his options, and it draws further attention to the way that Ahab's way of thinking is not unusual on the ship he commands. Melville indicates that if collective or deliberative joint action seems difficult or even unnatural to *isolatoes*, they have little trouble imagining action that is violent or domineering. *Isolatoes* tend either toward the path of inaction—exhibiting the kind of indifference to the public sphere that Tocqueville feared—or toward the path of action through undeliberative force.

Needless to say, Ahab chooses the path of domination and force. But tellingly, he justifies his choice time and again by arguing to the crew that it is only by force that men can overcome their isolation and solitude. Men live behind "pasteboard masks," he says, and the only way to escape the solitary confines of living behind the mask is to "strike through the mask" with some kind of violent action. "How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?" he asks.[62] For Ahab, who assumes human isolation, choosing violence is superior to choosing inaction because at least violence—even destructive violence—may have the potential to transform or even overcome the pains and limitations of human isolation. Dominating someone forges a kind of connection with him, albeit a nonideal one. And sharing in an act of domination does the same. But perhaps more importantly, violence seems to hold out the possibility for one individual to assert a singular place in the world, to transcend the boundaries of the isolated self. Ahab's thinking along these lines is what one critic has called "bad transcendental thinking," but it is the kind of transcendental thinking that Melville posits as natural, or at least probable, for the *isolato*.[63]

Melville stresses this when he has Ahab say, as some of the crew members begin to rally to his cause, that they all must join in because "stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tost sapling cannot."[64] The image Ahab uses is revealing, largely because it is almost exactly the language he uses to describe the desolation of his own solitude. But this time, Ahab locates himself on the side of the hurricane gales. For Ahab, the world seems a place of impersonal forces that exert power by domination. And in such a world, the individual can only have power to the extent that he can become—or, to a lesser extent, become part of—a dominating force. The alternative is to be subject to the whims of an impersonal world, to be dependent and therefore, in Ahab's mind, humiliated. Unable to come to terms with the fact of human interdependence, Ahab can only conceive of the world as a struggle for domination, in which the central dynamic is to humiliate or be humiliated.[65]

[62]Ibid., 197.

[63]John Bryant, "*Moby-Dick* as Revolution," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 74.

[64]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 197.

[65]See David Leverenz, "Selection from *Manhood and the American Renaissance*," in *Herman Melville, "Moby-Dick,"* ed. Selby, 131. Interestingly, psychologists today consider the "humiliate or be humiliated" dynamic so well embodied by Ahab to be a

In such stories, one is either dominant or humiliated, either rendered powerful by the use of force or rendered impotent by inaction.

To be sure, Ahab's well-documented quest for domination is an attempt to reassert his own individual power, to "prove" that his evidently disabled and dependent condition is only a kind of illusion. If, by killing the white whale, Ahab were able to triumph in a battle over nature itself, he would be able to reclaim the old fantasy of himself as an independent presence in the world.[66] His attempt to achieve a kind of cosmic transcendence by force is an attempt to make a definitive statement of independence. This is clear in the language he uses when, partway through the journey, he starts worshiping fire.[67] Ahab announces that he is modeling himself after fire; he, too, will seek to reassert control over his own destiny through destructive force and domination. In addition, he says, he worships fire because fire is a "hermit immemorial"—a solitary figure exerting independent force in the world, even in the face of "unanticipated grief." For Ahab, fire seems to embody the possibility of existing in the world on essentially independent terms, overcoming setbacks and losses without needing any help; fire seems to him to demonstrate that such independence can only come through the pursuit of a kind of destructive domination. Ahab even announces that the flames are his "fiery father," the representation of his "genealogy."[68] He has chosen to follow the path of fire, as he understands that path to exist.

Quite obviously, in making this proclamation Ahab demonstrates the extent to which his self-knowledge has become distorted; he quite literally disowns his human forebears. His claim represents an attempt to distance himself from his species, showing the extent to which his way of thinking has led him to disdain humanity altogether—even his own.[69] Here, Melville indicates the extent to which Ahab's aspirations to independence (and his accompanying disdain for the idea of interdependence) have distorted his thinking. Ahab's desire to be an independent power in the world, a desire that he believes can be realized through the destructive domination of others, amounts in the end to a desire to be something other than human. As Catherine Zuckert has indicated, such a desire in fact represents

central feature of the sadomasochistic personality type. See, for instance, *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*, ed. Peggy J. Kleinplatz and Charles Moser (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park, 2006), 287.

[66]David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 138.

[67]Gabriele Schwab says that Ahab's "god of fire is a god of destruction who steers his destiny" and thus is in that respect Ahab's great ideal (*Subjects Without Selves: Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994], 56).

[68]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 564.

[69]William Hamilton explores Ahab's "defiance of humanity" in *Melville and the Gods* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 58.

an abrogation of responsibility; he would rather take his whole ship down than admit his own mortal limits and the limits of his understanding.[70] Ishmael underscores this when he opines that any person who takes his bearings from a fire is suffering from an "unnatural hallucination" of lies. "Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man!" he cries. If Ahab has become an exemplar of "madness," Ishmael suggests, it is because his way of seeing the world culminates in hallucinatory thinking. But notably, Ishmael says this after relating his own experience of staring too long into the flames of the try-works on the ship; he thus makes clear that the temptations of fire watching—the temptations of hallucination and destructive action—are not temptations to Ahab alone. It is easy, on the *Pequod*, to want to stare into the fire and to embrace all it represents.[71]

Again, it is important to realize that Ahab's way of thinking, while exaggerated, is not exceptional on the *Pequod*. As a number of critics have noticed, the *Pequod*'s crew seems inclined to violence from the beginning, always seeking domination through a kind of unrestrained and even totalizing warfare.[72] On virtually the only occasion that Melville describes a long conversation among the crew themselves, it culminates in a brutal knife-fight. Even the Quakers among them are "fighting Quakers," Ishmael says; they are "Quakers with a vengeance" who seek not consensus but domination.[73] They alternate between periods of inaction and periods of naked aggression, with, as I have mentioned, little conversation in between—and when they do have conversations, it is often only after they have recently killed a whale.[74] To the extent that they have a common life, their common life is organized not around mutual recognition but around mutual violence. Their behavior suggests a general belief in the idea that domination by force is the primary if not the only course of action available in the world—at least, the only action besides inaction.

Moreover, as Zuckert has argued, Ahab represents the aim of modern science, with its emphasis on the conquest and mastery of nature.[75] He

[70]Catherine H. Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990), 111–12.

[71]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 477. Notably, in this passage Ishmael notes that only American whalers are equipped with a try-works located so prominently that it is easy for men to stare into its fire (474).

[72]See Julian Markels, *Melville and the Politics of Identity: From "King Lear" to "Moby-Dick"* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 68. See also James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 23; and Harold Kaplan, *Democratic Humanism and American Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2005), 170.

[73]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 102.

[74]For instance, only right after they kill a whale do Stubb and Flask have a conversation about the direction in which the ship is heading. See Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 369–374.

[75]Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination*, 108.

would assert his mastery over nature not just in spite of but because of his awareness that nature is in fact the master of men, an inclination that Melville stresses is common among whalers.[76] "But a moment's consideration will teach, that however baby man may brag of his science and skill," he writes, "yet for ever and for ever, the sea will insult and murder him." Ahab is just one of many who would, by virtue of setting sail, engage this "foe" who is likely to consume him in the end.[77] All the men on the *Pequod* are men who have a strong desire to exert themselves against a hostile nature.

Ahab's vision thus has deep resonance with a crew made up of people who, on many levels, see the world in the same terms he does. They, too, seem accustomed to thinking in terms of a dichotomy between impotence by inaction and domination by force. At that fundamental level, Ahab's way of thinking is the crew's way of thinking. Many of them are already inclined to pursue a risky and violent course in the world. And even those men on the ship who have some sense that the violence in Ahab's plan is ill-advised—men like Starbuck, who might be inclined to choose inaction—have trouble resisting because they have trouble imagining or actualizing some kind of joint response. And, as I have mentioned, they even have trouble recognizing each other's discomfort in the first place; they are too locked into their private isolations. Therefore, even though Ahab's plan reveals itself to be a plan based on "measureless self-deception," as Ishmael suggests, Ahab seems to have an equally "measureless power of deceiving and bedeviling so many others" because their way of thinking, like his, already inclines to precisely that kind of self-deception.[78] To that degree, it is easy to explain why, as so many scholars have noted, it actually takes Ahab very little effort to convince the crew to go along with his plan.[79] He has not so much to convince them as to speak in a language that is already theirs.[80]

[76]Richard H. Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 37.

[77]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 316–17.

[78]Ibid., 360.

[79]Richard H. Brodhead, "Trying All Things: An Introduction to *Moby-Dick*," in *New Essays on "Moby-Dick, or the Whale,"* ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 47.

[80]See Michael West, *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 329. Similarly, James Fentress Gardner writes that "the whole ship's company could be swept along by Ahab, regarding his mad quest as their own" because "all are partly moved by the spiritual principle … that Ahab centrally *represents*" (*Melville's Vision of America: A New Interpretation of "Moby Dick"* [New York: Myrin Institute, 1977], 39). Zuckert, too, argues that Ahab is able to obtain the crew's sympathies because "they, too, wish savagely and naturally to strike back"—although in her telling, this is less a particularly American trait than a natural human one; see *Natural Right and the American Imagination*, 102.

And theirs is a language and way of thinking that, according to Melville, is decidedly American. Throughout the book, American ships are depicted as most notable for the erratic violence of their pursuits. For instance, Ishmael says that *only* American ships have made a habit of pursuing sperm whales to violent ends; "among those whaling nations not sailing under the American flag," most have "never hostilely encountered the Sperm Whale." Ishmael even considers whether the "positive havoc" wreaked on sperm whales by American ships alone—American ships, he says, kill 13,000 sperm whales a year just in the Pacific Northwest—may be enough to render the species extinct. The figure is shocking in part because Ishmael has just described at length how difficult and risky it is to capture a single sperm whale; any reasonable deliberation or calculation of risk would dispose a ship's crew to pursue more mainstream and accessible prey. American whaling ships are characterized throughout the book as inclined toward particularly reckless courses of violent action—nurtured, Ishmael speculates, by the "agrarian freebooting impressions" that exist across the American nation, even "in the land-locked heart of our America."[81] The aggressive spirit of the American whale ship, Ishmael indicates elsewhere, is only exaggeration—or maybe even a prophecy—of the nation's future.[82] Melville suggests that in their inclination toward violent action, and their willingness to take a violent path rather than do nothing or consider a more moderate course, the crew members of the *Pequod* only reflect the general inclinations that exist in the American nation more broadly. By that standard, Ahab does not seem like such an outlier.

Nor does Ahab's "dominate or be dominated" psychology seem so unusual when seen against the background of racialized slavery in America, which Melville mentions many times throughout the book. The idea that one must dominate or be dominated, humiliate or be humiliated, is central to the master-slave relationship. Ahab's own desire to capture "the whiteness of the whale"—to capture and claim the whitest being in the world—has evident resonance in a society where whiteness is generally accepted as a legitimate reason to dominate others.[83] (Here, too, Queequeg, with his effortless interracial friendships, stands in the book as a visible alternative to the American way of seeing things.)[84] In a society that legalizes the enslavement

[81]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 215, 516, 284.

[82]See the discussion of the rule of "fast-fish and loose-fish" in ibid., 446–49.

[83]Ibid., 223. D. H. Lawrence calls Moby Dick "the deepest blood-being of the white race" in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1951), 173. Toni Morrison makes a similar argument in *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 15–16.

[84]See Carolyn L. Karcher, "A Jonah's Warning to America in *Moby-Dick*," in *Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick,"* ed. Bloom, 67–92.

of some humans by others on the basis of nothing but skin color, the tenor of Ahab's quest is hardly beyond the pale.

Ahab and the other *isolatoes* on the *Pequod* comprise what Melville elsewhere called a "ruthless democracy"—a society in which common action seems possible only through destruction, domination, and violence.[85] They seem incapable of considering the more moderate courses of action that lie between doing nothing and doing something dangerously violent. Melville's clear suggestion is that this failure emanates from the standards of an *isolato* culture in which the idea of human interdependence seems disgraceful, and deliberative or common action thus becomes difficult. In denying or obscuring the interdependent elements of their humanity, Ahab and the crew of the *Pequod* have trouble acting humanely. Caught up in a way of life and a way of thinking that put all their emphasis on the human individual, they are not good at thinking about themselves as a human community. That their journey ends with the destruction of their community at large is, without doubt, a suggestion of exactly how significant Melville thinks their intellectual and cultural failure is.

Conclusion

One of *Moby-Dick*'s most haunting moments comes near the end of the story, when Ahab realizes that he is doomed. "Oh, lonely death on lonely life!" he cries, bemoaning his isolation to the last.[86] But the folly of his final remarks should not be missed. Even in his moment of reckoning Ahab fails to see his connection to others of his kind.[87] Ahab is dying with dozens of other men; they are all going down together. As he has long failed to see the extent to which their lives were bound into a common, he fails to see that their deaths are in common as well. His final moments crystallize his great flaw: his deep inability to recognize the extent to which his life is, in fact, inextricably bound to the lives of his crew members.[88] Even as he dies, Ahab is unable to see or articulate his connection to humanity, in either proximate or universal terms.

Ahab's last minutes crystallize the failure of thought and vision that marks his actions throughout the story of *Moby-Dick*. But they also in large measure crystallize the failure of thought and vision that marks the action (and sometimes the inaction) of the *Pequod*'s crew. Throughout the ship's voyage, the

[85]See Timothy B. Powell, *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 153–76.

[86]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 636.

[87]Wilson Carey McWilliams (*The Idea of Fraternity in America*, 341) observes that "whatever else his death is, it is not lonely."

[88]William Ellery Sedgwick says that in this way, Ahab's "whole inward truth is reflected in the manner of his death" (*Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind*, 117).

men on board repeatedly neglect to recognize their interdependence and fail to see the full range of possibilities available to them for common deliberation and action. They accede to Ahab's vision so readily because it is premised on their own way of thinking: a way of thinking that dichotomizes inaction and violent action and sees no possibility for public or common life in between the two. They, too, are *isolatoes* living lonely lives: lives that have taught them to disdain the idea of interdependence and have ill equipped them for constructive political action.

Indeed, for Melville, the ultimate failure of the *isolato*'s way of seeing and being in the world is a deeply political failure. Inclined to think in terms of the self and disinclined to think in terms of interdependence or commonality, the *isolato* tends to see opportunity for joint action only in the basest and most violent terms. These are not only terms that erode the fellow-feeling that undergird democratic life, but also terms that reduce human interaction to a struggle for dominance in which the idea of equality fades into the background. It is perhaps no wonder that a society of *isolatoes* is also a slaveholding society; *isolatoes* are basically impotent when it comes to cultivating the mutual recognition that is necessary to sustain democratic governance. They tend only to the polarities of private indifference or public dominance; as a result, they readily submit to the despotism of others or become despots themselves.

The real difficulty, as Melville intimates throughout the book, is that the *isolato* way of thinking emanates from the conditions and conceits of modern democratic life itself—most specifically in its American form. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville describes a country filled with men and women of varied (and often mysterious) ancestry who have inherited a belief in striking out on one's own—and who still, for understandable reasons, have trouble seeing each other as a unified nation. It is a nation that, as Melville depicts it, has come to value independence because the circumstances of American life encourage independence. And in such circumstances, even the experience of making their own laws—Melville emphasizes that American whalemen are unusual in having been "their own legislators and lawyers"—has resulted not in an appreciation of common life, but rather in the conviction that each man ought to set his own rules by whatever means are available to him.[89] In *Moby-Dick*, the danger to American democratic life very much comes from within American democratic life, and the danger to American citizenship very much comes from within the citizenry.

In his most definitive qualities, Ahab is not an outlier on his ship or in his nation.[90] Rather, Ahab is quite evidently a paradigmatic, if exaggerated, caricature of certain tendencies within the American citizenry. If we read his

[89]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 446.

[90]Thomas Woodson writes that to dismiss Ahab as "a madman, a Satan or a Byronic egotist is too simple" ("Ahab's Greatness: Prometheus as Narcissus," in *Critical Essays*

story in that light, we see set in relief Melville's anxieties about what he saw as an ascendant *isolato* culture within American life—a culture that threatens to undermine the foundations of responsible democratic citizenship. In his description of Ahab and the other men on the *Pequod*, Melville echoes Tocqueville's worry about the extent to which modern democracy—in its circumstances and its norms—could isolate the individual, the extent to which it "throws him back forever upon himself alone."[91] Like Tocqueville, Melville worries about the extent to which such isolation could result in a population marked by public inaction and indifference. But in addition, Melville worries that when *isolatoes* do act, they act out in a violent struggle for domination that is destructive and self-defeating. For Melville, at bottom the *isolato* way of thinking is hallucinatory, representing a denial of the fundamental interdependence of the human community—a denial that leads in the end not only to the destruction of democratic ideals but also to the destruction of the community altogether.

It is telling, toward that end, that the one moment in which Ahab says his "purpose keels up in him" and he considers giving up his quest is the moment in which he holds the black cabin boy Pip's hand.[92] Pip, having been brought to the edge of death in an accident—and then reminded by that sharklike Stubb that he could be sold in Alabama—has become what most of the people on the boat regard as insane. And yet he often seems saner than the rest. On a number of occasions, Pip's words suggest that he alone among the crew sees the pervasive self-absorption in their chase, such as when he suggests that everyone's obsession with the doubloon is only so much navel gazing; both racially and in his words, he is a constant reminder of the failure of both Ahab and his crew to find any degree of social cohesion.[93] Ahab's brief recognition of Pip's humanity indicates that the captain—and thus the dangerous political psychology he represents—is not incapable of being saved. There is always the potential for the recognition of the true interindebtedness of the human species, and in that potential lies the true hope of democratic life.

And yet in the end, Ahab dies without some final revelation or change of heart, suggesting that Melville is not sanguine about the prospects for true democratic flourishing in America. True, Ishmael survives—and he survives with a clearer understanding of human interconnectedness both at the universal and at the community level. He says he has come to understand how all humans are inextricably bound to a plurality of other humans, and that

on Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick," ed. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (New York: Hall, 1992), 440.

[91]Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2:99.

[92]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 593.

[93]John Bryant, *Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 225.

fate is not individual but shared. He declares a new appreciation for the interdependence of the "kingly commons." But Ishmael's enlightenment comes only after the wholesale destruction of the community of which he had been part; although he survives by riding on his friend Queequeg's coffin, his is in fact a rather lonely fate. At the end of the novel, he is picked up by another American ship, which only finds "another orphan"—another lonely and disconnected soul—to add to the national collection.[94]

[94]Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 147, 638.