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Moby-Dick and the Violent Schizophrenia of the Western Mind

> Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?
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> But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! Who would craven crawl to land!...Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!
>
> -Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (ch. 23)

Only a perfervid mind could create *Moby-Dick*. It is synthetic; Melville's life experience combines the concrete of whaling and living among cannibals with the abstract of erudition. It is perceptive; Ishmael is ill at ease with the hypocrisies of an age both Manichaean and mercantilist. It is unknowable; Melville channels these experiences through a dichotomy of sea and whale, beatific and uncanny, sublime and *unheimlich*.[1] Janus-faced, this perceptive synthesis of the unknown contrasts Ishmael to Ahab: Ishmael overcomes his fear of the uncanny to revel in the sublime, but Ahab's fixed hatred of the unknowably *unheimlich* invites his destruction.

Moby-Dick's shifting tone and structure reveal Melville's concurrent development as a reader. With "a whale ship [as] my Yale College and my Harvard," (ch. 24) Melville is free from rigid academic indoctrination. A ripe and receptive mind first tastes of

[1] From Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny:" "It is only rarely that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics . . .The subject of the 'uncanny' is a province of this kind. It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening — to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general. Yet we may expect that a special core of feeling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term . . . The German word *'unheimlich'* is obviously the opposite of *'heimlich'* ['homely'], *'heimisch'* ['native'] the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar."

Othello and *Julius Caesar*, influencing *Moby-Dick*'s masterfully muddled interweaving of prose and dramatic forms.[2]

An equally nebulous painting at the Spouter-Inn stages the uncanny-sublime motif:

> [It] endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched…there was a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous painting meant…it's a Hyperborean[3] winter scene.—it's the breaking-up of the ice-bound stream of Time. But at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture's midst. (ch. 3)

The "portentous something" is the whale whose uncanny and consuming whiteness, a "vague, nameless horror," (ch. 42) blots the sea's sublimity[4] from Ahab's eyes.

In a striking passage made possible by Melville's stay among cannibals on Nuku Hiva Island, Queequeg saves Ishmael from Ahab's fate. Following a phantasmagoric—almost comical[5]—night of bed-sharing with a tattooed Polynesian headhunter, Ishmael awakens to find Queequeg's inked arm wrapped around him. Contemplating his outlandish situation, Ishmael recalls a childhood visitation:

> a nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom . . . seemed closely seated by my bedside. . . take away the awful fear, and my sensation at feeling the supernatural hand in mine were very similar, in their strangeness, to those which I experienced on waking up and seeing Queequeg's pagan arm thrown round me. (ch. 3)

Thereafter, Ishmael and Queequeg become "bosom friends." (ch. 10) Ishmael comes to know the sublime only by embracing the uncanny, and is a better man for it.

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[2] Hence Stubb's tone in the aptly-titled chapter "Queen Mab": "Stand by for it, Flask. Ahab has that's bloody on his mind. But, mum; he comes this way." (ch. 31) Similarly, *King Lear*'s influence on the bloody-minded Ahab is so pervasive that it neither allows nor requires proper analysis.

[3] From Greek Mythology, Hyperborea is far-northern land of unspecified location. "Hyperborean winter" indicates eternal darkness and, by extension, the unknown.

[4] Elsewhere, the sea "is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life" (ch. 1) in which "meditation and water are wedded for ever." (ch. 1)

[5] Indeed, Ishmael's complaint to the landlord—"I come to your house and want a bed; you tell me you can only give me half a one" (ch. 3)—can be read as man's response to God's "vast practical joke" "in this strange mixed affair we call life." (ch. 49)

Ahab chooses a different path: he declares the nameless phantom a sworn enemy. He lives, like father Mapple and Bildad, in a dualist world without room for sublimity, but he utterly fails Job's lesson in humility. Responding to Starbuck's incredulity at his swearing vengeance on a "blind brute," Ahab cries: "how can a prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me." (ch. 36) That the novel's narrative authority shifts from Ishmael to Ahab as the calamitous end draws near is appropriate; while Ishmael embraces the sublime, Ahab, with Xerxian hubris,[6] attempts to "thrust…through the wall" that divides the physical and metaphysical realms.

Melville adapts this Cartesian dualism to the particularly American commingling of Puritanism and capitalism. Says Ishmael:

> [I] could not find it in my heart to undervalue even a congregation of ants worshipping a toad-stool; or those other creatures in certain parts of our earth, who with a degree of footmanism quite unprecedented in other planets, bow down before the torso of a deceased landed proprietor merely on account of the inordinate possessions yet owned and rented in his name. (ch. 17)

With this oblique but unmistakable reference to American capitalism, Melville sees through the hypocrisies[7] of supposed cultural superiority. Ishmael "tr[ies] a pagan friend" in part because "Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy," "wolfish[ly]" engendering in him only "a splintered heart and maddened hand." (ch. 10)

Bildad the Quaker typifies the hypocritical Christianity Melville scorns. In response to Bildad's fire-and-brimstone harangue, Peleg bursts: "it's an all-fired outrage to tell any human creature that he's bound to hell." (ch. 10) In a mockery of Christian

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[6] "To any monomaniac man, the veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings. "Swim away from me, do ye?" murmured Ahab." (ch. 34)

[7] Regarding self-delusion: if it "requires a strong moral principle to prevent [Ishmael] from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off," (ch. 1) America's miraculous merger of selfless Christianity and selfish capitalism appears immune to all but the most intrusive analysis.

numerology, Bildad, a capital sponsor of the *Pequod*, tries to give Ishmael the 777th lay of profits.

Melville prefers Romantic transcendentalism[8] to fearmongering and Manichaeism. Father Mapple's Manichaean vision—"I saw the opening maw of hell/…In black distress, I called my God/…with speed he flew to my relief" (ch. 9)—is unpalatable to Melville, who discerns not only good and evil but also the truly *other* and, through it, the truly one. "All of us," affirms Ishmael, "belong [to] the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world." (ch. 18) Queequeg's ouroboric signature, an infinite figure eight, binds all of humanity.

By laying bare sham superiority, Melville is not so much defending Queequeg's cannibalism as he is pointing out what Socrates learned in Athens: that true self-knowledge requires an often unwelcome degree of honesty. Humanity houses the noble and the base, the refined and the savage, the land and the sea:

> Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure…Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.
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> Consider all this; and then turn to the green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return! (ch. 58)

To pretend at false perfection and enlightened superiority while "nail[ing] geese to the ground and feast[ing] on their bloated livers in thy paté-de-foie-gras" (ch. 65) can lead only to self-deception.

This was Ahab's great error: to allow "his special lunacy storm his general sanity," to imbue the whale with the entirety of the world's ill will. Moby Dick becomes

[8] He stops well short of endorsing pantheism, however. The unknown for Melville seems to coexist with a singular, not a plural, morality.

"the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung." (ch. 41) Humanity must learn to live with—indeed, relish—sublime uncertainty, lest it consume him body and soul. For not just Ahab, but the *Pequod* and her entire crew (excepting Ishmael), paid the price for his promethean immolation.[9]

Although *Moby-Dick* falls prey neither to the cynicism of *The Confidence-Man* nor to the fatalism of "Bartleby," the contemporary lessons learned from Melville's great American novel are unpalatable in the extreme. The present U.S. administration, looking into the whiteness and seeing only enemies, prefers Ahab's vindictive quest to Ishmael's dialogic contemplation. The political and the economic encroach upon the aesthetic and its fount, the sublime, unwittingly diverting the very waters that sustain them. In the 21st century, Ahab's quest to annihilate nature seems all too attainable, and humanity would be wise to heed Melville's sardonic call: "how cheerily we consign ourselves to perdition!" (ch. 1)

[9] Much as the Pequod Indians suffered as a result of U.S. expansionism.