

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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# *Moby-Dick* and Melville's Quarrel with America

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## I

Melville works out his thoughts on America's political character in his fifth novel, *White-Jacket* and in his sixth, *Moby-Dick*. The latter meditation is related to the former as antithesis to thesis; a hopeful confidence in his country's national purpose gives way to skeptical reflections on a dilemma inseparable from those founding principles that for Melville had once promised an enlightened and morally improved public life. In *Moby-Dick* Melville confronts a tension between the substantive and formal principles of the American regime, between a conception of the maintenance of human rights founded in nature, the nation's final cause, and the formal requirement of sovereignty, the democratic imperative of popular consent. The problem I suppose Melville to have puzzled over in the course of producing his nearest approach to a masterwork is this: How other than by appeal to Christian tradition does modern democracy produce needful restraints upon democratic will?

## II

To see why one can speak of needful restraints on a popular sovereign it is pertinent to appreciate Melville's radicalizing of the political issue as he passed from *White-Jacket* to *Moby-Dick*. Both novels acquaint us with the mechanisms that sustain despotism aboard an American ship. Yet the specific difference points to an enlargement of subject. The military despotism Melville anatomizes in *White-Jacket* is circumscribed and remediable by act of Congress, possibly even by executive directives. Troubles on the *Neversink* amount to an excrescence upon an American body politic which, as such bodies go, Melville seems to consider essentially healthy. The earlier novel exposes bad military usages evidently on the assumption that an informed citizenry will not give their consent to unnecessarily harsh navy discipline once they know of these

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abuses. With *Moby-Dick*, however, we are presented with a despotism over the spirit that relies on the consent of the very men whose lives, liberty, and pursuit of happiness will be sacrificed to the will of their leader. By thus raising the stakes the later novel calls attention to a conflict of principle latent within that Lockian-Jeffersonian political creed to which the youthful narrator of *White-Jacket* had attached his hope of world redemption.<sup>1</sup>

Locke is mentioned by name in the chapter (79) that recounts Stubb and Flask killing a Right whale, then attaching its head to the *Pequod's* hull so as to balance a Sperm whale's head already depending from the opposite side. The whaleman's practice inspires Ishmael with an academic plan to balance Kantian with Lockian philosophy. Ishmael evidently has in mind the Locke of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* with its materialist skepticism that might balance Kantian idealism. But Melville may have also been aware that Locke's skeptical epistemology subserves a revolutionary political teaching. His contractarian theory rejects the assumption of ancient and Christian political philosophy that government ought to aim at forming the moral character of citizens. Locke's explanation of the origins and nature of civil society rests solely upon self-interested material calculation. Lockian rights reduce at bottom to civil guarantees for freedoms conducive to self-preservation. Government no longer rests on a claim to divine favor or on the natural superiority of virtue but upon the consent of the governed. That consent depends in turn upon the individual's estimate of what he will need to preserve his life and property against a hostile nature and hostile men. Yet it is quite conceivable that to subdue stepdame nature one might think it necessary to animate men with a collective zeal that would make them indifferent to safeguarding the freedom of their neighbors. Locke's doctrine of consent promotes a tension within the secular, democratic regime, a conflict of purposes which Melville examines through his portrayal of Ahab's rule over the *Pequod*.

By depicting Ahab's successful subjugation of a crew among whom we find representatives of the nation's religious heritage as well as an Ishmael widely read in the philosophic tradition, Melville dramatizes a problem implicit in that founding creed which rests upon Jefferson's espousal of Locke's doctrine of consent. Whereas for the Melville of *White-Jacket* Lockian reasoning mediated through the Declaration of Independence provides adequate political guidance, the Melville of *Moby-Dick* discerns in Jefferson's two arch-principles of inalienable rights and consent an unresolved tension: legitimate government rests upon the consent of the governed, its formal principle, and secures rights, its substantive principle. Yet what if the formal and substantive principles should prove to be at odds? Cannot the majority consent to laws that infringe rights of the minority or of individuals? Jefferson certainly thought so in his first inaugural address when he warned that Americans should "bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable." The same difficulty beset Locke, who had

grounded his doctrine of the contractual origin of civil society upon the necessity of protecting rights, but had subsequently stipulated sovereignty for the majority without indicating how democratic majorities could be relied upon to respect the rights of man. Melville perceived lying at the heart of American democracy this dilemma of reconciling evidently necessary democratic means to more evidently obligatory moral ends. Moreover, *Moby-Dick* throws another shadow over the sunny political messianism voiced in *White-Jacket*. By the time he completed his greater work, Melville seems to have become aware of the despotic potential implicit in the Lockian concept of society as an engine for overcoming nature's scarcity and violence.

To appreciate the scope of the Lockian issues implicit in the novel we should begin by noting how Melville works up emotions more proper to heroic epics than to modern prose fiction. In the chapter "The Advocate," Ishmael exhorts readers to agree with him that the commercial-manufacturing enterprise he details merits literary treatment traditionally reserved for loftier subjects. At times the claim is put forward facetiously, Perseus and Vishnoo as archetypal harpooners and so forth. Plot and incident, however, establish heroic credentials for the seamen. Resembling armies on campaign, whalers leave home and family for lengthy intervals of hardship and strenuous action. If hunting ordinary whales exposes men to risks nearly comparable with hazards of warfare, an antagonist equipped with the white whale's cunning malignancy justifies the heroic terms Ishmael adopts when he refers to the ship's mates and their harpoon bearers as knights and squires. Furthermore, slaughtering whales requires virtues of leadership in addition to feats of individual courage and prowess. The whale killer needs to make sure of loyal subordinates, just as Beowulf had to secure the assistance of his comitatus following. Ahab, consequently, like the classical and Renaissance epic heroes Melville mentions in his novels and poems, must fulfill an administrative as well as a combatant's role.

Even so, the opportunities whaling affords for depicting quest, combat and leadership do not reassure the narrator he will accomplish heroic amplitude by incorporating these vivid activities. When Ishmael complains,

Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air<sup>2</sup>

we hear Melville's own exertion to elevate mundane material. The material seems more refractory than it need have been precisely because Melville has chosen to present a documentary on whaling as industry rather than focussing solely on its adventurous aspects. He makes Ishmael complain of a difficulty he appears in large part to have brought on himself by insisting on minute descriptions of provisioning the ship, rendering blubber, and cleaning up. If only artistic considerations impelled him, Melville could avail himself of a poet's liberty to ignore ship business and to confine his attention to exciting chases with their attendant psychological and metaphysical soundings. Who faults Homer for

withholding details of Achaean sumptering and latrine? Yet probably Melville makes much of overcoming the inertia of his materials because his theme is the struggle of a commercial society to escape routine, illiberal drudgery wherein the terms of life are set by the balance sheet.

Putting aside Southern slaveholders, the nineteenth-century Americans toiled for their livelihood, and, if they cultivated aristocratic virtues relating to war, command, sanctity, literature or other liberal arts, they did so in the course of gainful employment. So in this novel set at midcentury, Bohemian Ishmael and Faustian Ahab have no choice but to earn their daily bread, whatever their eccentric aspirations. "Socratic" Queequeg (Ishmael's epithet) cannot indulge a Socratic leisure except during the few days he decides to spend awaiting death. Nineteenth-century authors had to write for cash, as the hard-pressed author of *South Sea* literary vendibles attests in his letters. We observe Melville turning an apparent literary liability into an asset by taking as his subject the effort his narrator shares with Ahab of sublimating an economic activity, transforming commercial necessities into spirit-challenging undertakings.

If one identifies this subject with capitalism, one construes it too narrowly. A more uncompromisingly capitalist management of the *Pequod* would have avoided its catastrophe. No capitalist at all attentive to his interests would pursue a particular Sperm whale. On such grounds Starbuck challenges Ahab's fidelity to his contract, "How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee . . .?" (36. 163). New England's whaling industry seems, moreover, to operate on the principle of employee profit-sharing (granted labor's share is as small as the market permits). Melville does brood over the absence of moral restraint in a society avid for new technologies to multiply securities and material gratification, but he seems indifferent to whether the means of production be in private hands or collectively owned. Instead, the issue for him is whether an understanding of political obligations resting upon no other basis than calculations of partnership in acquisition, self-preservation, and mutual security will suffice to secure political justice and freedom.

### III

Melville may find himself balked before the task of inventing the American epic because he senses that assumptions apparently necessary for an audience's reception of the kind of heroism proper to epic poetry run counter to American beliefs. Such misgiving seems warranted if we consider the distance between traditional views of the grounds for civil society, on the one hand, and, on the other, the predominantly modern liberal democratic perspective adopted in the Declaration of Independence. The argument of the Declaration rests partly—some say it rests altogether—on a modern version of the contractarian theory of civil society elaborated by Locke in his *Second Treatise*. A brief reflection on Locke's thought will display its nonheroic tendency.

Locke hypothesized a state of nature existing prior to any civil order and characterized by such equality that no man was subject to the will of any other. Aboriginal men produced civil government with its laws in order to escape the inconveniences of their primal atomistic condition. They desired to make themselves more secure by protecting themselves against the depredations of stronger individuals, but they also needed to find means of cooperating in order to wrest a more certain and more abundant livelihood from natural resources. Free and equal individuals thus banded together surrendered to a commonly acknowledged authority some of their primordial liberty for the sake of enjoying greater security for themselves and their property. According to Locke's view, therefore, organized society exists because it offers a good bargain for otherwise vulnerable individuals. The bargain consists in their retaining as much of the original freedom and equality as they deem compatible with their safety and comfort.

Locke's balance sheet of revenue and costs looks to self-preservation through generating and protecting property. One's allegiance to the civil order is, and ought to be, utilitarian in outlook, provisional in temper. Tendering one's liberties to the community, one expects something in return, and, if returns are not forthcoming, one's contribution will not continue willingly to be made. The bond between individual person and state is calculated and selfish, or, at any rate, self-interested, rather than reverential or self-forgetful. Thinkers who commend these arrangements call them enlightened and argue that government becomes more responsible once everyone has been brought to think rulers have no claim to divine authority and must earn respect by convincing the governed of their having provided safety and comfort.

Whether regarded as refreshingly enlightened or discouragingly low-minded, we may deduce that once Lockian teaching on the relatedness of the individual to society has come to prevail, prospects for heroic literature memorializing national founders turn doubtful. First, what should an epic poet find to celebrate in nations that think of themselves merely as markets dealing in personal security? Insurance brokers do not inspire songs. Should one expect men to expend themselves in serving a people, as Moses, Aeneas, and Milton's Messiah did, if that people proclaims itself animated by no common purpose more inspiring than nursing comforts in safety? There is something contradictory about dying for security or about undertaking every sort of privation and inconvenience, as heroes of epic poems do, in order to arrange for someone else's future ease. The contractarian notion appears to disparage self-sacrifice. Why should one self-seeking party to a contract for protecting property give himself up for another? Locke's conception places at the origin of a political order not God's providence, the foundation of community for Moses, Virgil, or Milton, but human contrivance, thereby confining collective effort to human secular projects remote from divine interest. If men come to view their own will rather than the will of God as the source of law, they will hardly endorse the enabling

premise of traditional heroic literature: the hero leads his people under the supervision of a divine sponsor who judges conduct while inspiring hero and community alike. Inasmuch as contractarian models require a suppression of religious enthusiasms, which would inject unnegotiables into the social calculus, it is not coincidental that Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all seek to moderate religious attachments, and that the Locke of *The Letter on Toleration* produces the definitive modern argument for compromising belief. Lockian man in Lockian society practices religion diffidently, conforming his conduct to nonheroic expectations. Once Lockian teaching informs manners and guides judgment, the modern writer who seeks heroic subjects finds himself dispossessed of suitable material, i.e., ideals of self-sacrifice, dispossessed of a people worth the efforts of a hero and appreciative of his deeds, and dispossessed of divine authority, of a providential scheme and a theodicy.

My supposition that Melville means to present his tale against the backdrop of such a society organized along lines prescribed by Lockian theory throws some light on a problem of the novel's construction. *Moby-Dick* contains 135 chapters plus prefatory "Extracts" and an "Epilogue." Although the dramatic interest attaches to Ahab's pursuit of the white whale, Melville delays the first appearance of Ahab until the twenty-eighth chapter, after almost a fourth of the book has elapsed. Granted, important matter transpires in the exposition—Ishmael's meeting Queequeg, Elijah's warnings at the wharf, Father Mapple's Jonah sermon—still, the foreground seems of such inordinate length as to require justification. We are told Melville was well along in composition before he decided to throw his focus upon Ahab, but whatever the exigencies of composition, he chose to retain at publication all the detail of arranging transportation and lodging in two towns, plus a tavern scene, bargaining with shipowners, and elaborate ship descriptions, although all this delays introducing Ahab and launching the action proper. Justification for this undramatic foreground may lie in Melville's intent to make us feel the unleavened weight of a society given to getting and spending. Ahab will have to overcome this utilitarian preoccupation in pursuing his metaphysical vengeance, and Melville must overcome the same inertia if he means to convey a sense of epic momentousness.

The link with Lockian thought is commerce. A society organized for trade on the modern scale answers best to the project of enlarging and securing property, the goal of political association in Locke's contractarian theory. Commercial activity combined with the effects commerce works on manners and moral outlook occupy the reader's attention from the moment Ishmael hits upon the notion of going to sea until Ahab steps out of his cabin more than a hundred pages later. From initial musings on Manhattan clerks "tied to counters" to the moment of Ahab's entrance, commercial transactions absorb Ishmael, Queequeg, and several minor characters who make their brief entrances for no apparent reason other than that they serve to establish a busy commercial

atmosphere. We see almost no occasion for man meeting man in New Bedford and Nantucket other than seller finding buyer or employee seeking employer. A tavern-keeper purveys doubtful liquor in cheating tumblers and lodges a cannibal since "He pays reg'lar." Even the non-Westerner, South-Sea-Islander Queequeg, first appears as a vendor (of shrunken skulls). The proprietress of the second inn Ishmael visits worries about the damage suicides inflict on her business—a harpooner killed himself with the tool of his profession in one of her rooms, provoking her to complain that he has ruined one of her counterpanes. Melville prepares us for the disappearance from the story of the most romantic figure among his characters, the shore-despising Bulkington, with the authorial remark that Bulkington remains a "sleeping-partner" (3.16), a term borrowed from nineteenth-century financial jargon signifying an investor whose role in a firm went unpublicized. The cenotaphs on the walls of a church emphasize the perils of the industry that dominates this region. On the deck of the *Pequod*, we observe the painful husbandry of the ship's owners and are instructed in their practice of paying the seamen by assigning various fractions of the net profit. Then we discover that ledger calculations induce these Christian owners to several accommodations with Mammon. The long passage to the hunting zones permits no delays for religious observances, hence once outfitted the ship must set sail even though the day is Christmas (22.104). Bible-quoting Quaker shipmasters urge the mates not to work too much on Sundays, but not to miss a fair chance of a whale, Sunday or not (22.105). Ishmael will later characterize whalers as "Ex officio professors of Sabbath breaking" (67.303). Bildad and Peleg are not going to allow pagan Queequeg aboard, but put their scruples aside once they see him dart a harpoon (18.89). The owners' anxiety for gain prevails over their trust in providence and thrift pinches their charity. Stubb warns Pip a whale will fetch much more in the market than a black boy. Not surprisingly, then, the only formal definition of man to occur in the novel is "money-making animal" (93.413). Strenuous belief does not appear once we read beyond Father Mapple's sermon, and his preaching makes something of a quaint impression since Melville suggests that commercial avidity has supplanted once-paramount religious concerns.

By this portrayal of New England manners, Melville means to establish at the outset the impression of a society engaged in exchanging Christian standards for Lockian. Older religious pieties are at the point of yielding to new passions generated by emancipated avarice. Commercial preoccupations follow naturally from Lockian ideas of atomistic individuals devising cooperative social arrangements to make themselves secure in their accumulation of property. A regime organized for commercial activity on a large scale answers to Locke's teaching that men seek, and ought to seek above all else, to preserve their lives, and then to preserve them in some comfort. Whale oil brings comfort to buyers by providing fuel for their lamps, while profits from whaling secure the estates of Nantucket men and their families. The constant press of business in port and

aboard ship seems designed to suggest that for owners and mariners alike, light from whale oil takes precedence in their moment-by-moment consciousness over the light which ancestral piety had identified with God's son.

Melville devotes lengthy passages to explaining the whaling industry so as to keep in sight the image of the *Pequod* as an epitome of a society organized for the sake of commercial venturing. Excepting Ahab and Ishmael, who says he goes to sea for what we today would call psychic therapy, the men, diverse in race, regional ties, and religion, agree to be shipmates for no other reason than making their livelihood. If they have their further motivation, both Ahab and Ishmael nonetheless must get their living in their present circumstances by contributing to a commercial enterprise. Ishmael appreciates the cash motive, as we see from his trite meditation on original sin:

The act of paying is perhaps the most uncomfortable infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us. But *being paid*,—what will compare with it? The urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvelous, considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven. Ah! how cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition! (1.6)

Even Ahab must have a care for maintaining appearances of managing a profitable voyage (46.212–13). Not surprisingly, then, Ishmael characterizes as “sage and sensible” the latter-day Puritan's accommodation to the spirit of acquisition: “a man's religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another. This world pays dividends” (16.74). Similarly the Locke of the *Second Treatise* pays lip service to the Christian teaching that covetousness is “the Root of all Evil.” Yet the invention of money is for Locke the key to man's transition from a simple, rude existence to civilization, since “a little piece of yellow Metal” makes possible the accumulation of property and with it that stimulation of acquisitiveness which for Locke is the engine of human advancement. Melville thus makes clear enough that he intends to portray a utilitarian society colliding with a man of spirit who despises comfort and cares nothing for preserving his body. In Ahab Melville imagines the sort of leader capable of making Americans shift their bearings from preoccupation with gainful toil to willing service in a project promising more risk than profit. Yet, as I will argue presently, for all its daring his project is more Lockian than traditionalist in its premises.

Ahab's nobility consists in his impatience with utility, pleasure, accommodation, compromise, and conventional attitudes of piety. Observing on his first view of his captain the physique of a man whose spiritual energy seems to have consumed his own flesh, Ishmael likens Ahab to a martyr suffering for some as yet undefined heterodoxy, “a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them” (28.123). Melville plays up without explaining a livid scar which one old tar maintains runs the entire length of Ahab's body. He alludes to a rumor of Ahab having

been branded, presumably by lightning, in some elemental clash. Finally, Ahab himself hints at the scar's having been made by divine fiat to chastise him. Whatever its origins, the scar and the extraordinary vigorous spareness of Ahab's person combine with his whalebone leg to convey the sense of a spirit scornful of comforts in his preoccupation with mental struggle. We are not surprised to see such a man fling the pipe he has been smoking into the sea. Easy-living Stubb smokes continually, and companionable Queequeg shares a peacpipe with Ishmael, but Ahab looks upon bodily comforts as obstacles to the high intensity he maintains awake and, according to the steward's report, even in his dreams. During the final chase, like an Achilles become all spiritedness in his rampage, Ahab scarcely needs sleep or food. Melville contrives a certain dignity for his chief character by making him, as it were, so much compressed spiritedness in contempt of the compromising materialism now gaining authority over his New England compatriots.

Commercial manners favor the easy familiarity Flask enjoys and an originally misanthropic Ishmael learns to practice. Although not insensible to human affections, Ahab holds himself unselfconsciously aloof. He makes no show of his dignity; but because all his attention turns inward, he is oblivious of other men until he has some use for them, or until they happen to obstruct his quest or, like unthinking Stubb, belittle his affliction. Ahab doesn't smile, speak at table, nor, excepting fitful and quickly repented confidences half-opened to Starbuck and a despotic benevolence toward the cabin boy, does he enter into familiarity with anyone. Yet the distance he preserves between himself and his men results solely from self-torment. We are supposed to regard him not as snob but troubled visionary.

Lockian bargain-seekers doubtless experience the common run of vexations, but large sorrow is presumed to convey extraordinary spiritual capacity beyond a utilitarian's conception of human likelihoods. Ishmael says Ahab bears a "crucifixion" in his face. Without making extensive inventory of his injuries—a coming to cases that would certainly diminish our sense of his grievance—Ahab displays his continual consciousness of some unpardonable if unspecified affront. His language resounds with melancholy, resentful expressions evocative of Hamlet, outraged Lear, or the broodings of the author of Ecclesiastes. Melville depicts strength in grief, never plaintive or self-commiserating—a strength, moreover, which offers to champion the cause of all deep-grieving men. Ahab's sorrow appears magnificently in excess of the wound inflicted by the whale, since eventually we meet another ship captain who has had an arm taken in the same way Ahab had lost a leg (chap. 100), yet the tangy good spirits of the British whaleman remind us that physical impairment need not be taken as revelation of some altogether unacceptable malignity deep down in things.

In fact there is evidence suggesting that Ahab's rebellion against a cosmos he finds malevolent could not have had its origin in his physical loss. From

close attention to Melville's chronology one concludes that the most shocking blasphemy charged to Ahab appears to have occurred *prior to* the voyage that brought his injury, since Elijah speaks of his having defiled a chalice in a church sometime previous to the voyage during which the whale took off his leg (19.92). Already before he encountered the whale Ahab thought he had sufficient cause thus to express his *non serviam*. Consequently, we are supposed to recognize in Ahab's grievance against Moby-Dick the culmination rather than the origin of a protracted period of spiritual rebellion.

What lies back of Ahab's defiance, then, is evidently some animus resembling the theological equivalent of unrequited love. We see this as the novel builds toward the final chase, when Melville discloses the origin of Ahab's mysterious scar in another act of defiance directed toward God-in-nature. The crucial chapter, "The Candles," depicts an Ahab who demonstrates his indifference to terrors of a typhoon as he stands up to lightning and ostentatiously extinguishes the corpusant fire with his breath. He stands with right arm uplifted to salute lightning which still shows on the mast, and while he keeps his foot in contact with devil-worshiping Fedallah, Ahab addresses the spirit of fire:

Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. (119.507)

Ahab was once prepared to worship the source of light and life, but the wound suffered in the act of devotion he interprets as a rebuff and an admonition to stand off in fear rather than approach in amity. We know Ahab feels thwarted in his love because he subsequently says, "Come in thy lowest form of love and I will kneel and kiss thee." Ahab would hold out an open hand to a God who showed himself disposed to love, yet he has convinced himself that no such loving God presides over nature, and he will not respond to a ministry of fear because to do so, he feels, would be to submit a higher agency to a lower. Ahab's greatness of soul will not permit him to worship except on his own terms and only if God meets a test Ahab will set him.

Ahab seems to have rejected altogether such proofs of love as his fathers once ascribed to Christ's redemptive generosity. In fact, Ahab never mentions Christ, insisting instead that natural phenomena be the sole test of divine beneficence. Ahab will not subscribe to the idea of a loving God from the evidences of created beauty and order that Ishmael observes at times because he thinks rapacity and ugliness ultimately prevail in physical nature. In the chapter immediately preceding the first day's chase, Ahab confides to Starbuck the lesson he has learned from forty years of whaling. He thinks of himself as having warred all that time against "horrors of the deep." Observing the oceanic phenomena from Ishmael's perspective, a reader will likely be as impressed with its tran-

quail, life-producing rhythms as with its death-dealing commotions. The "Grand Armada" chapter serves to focus this sense of order with its tender sea pastoral. Against Ishmael's testimony Ahab's career spent in chase and combat has so concentrated his imagination upon the rigors of his profession that he becomes indifferent to these benign aspects of the seascape. Habits of aggressiveness long reinforced make Ahab keen to perceive—and to exaggerate—nature's own destructiveness. Therefore when Starbuck attempts to dissuade Ahab from further pursuit by appealing to the serenity of a fine day, the old man considers he has refuted the mate when he points to an instance of nature's law of eat or be eaten:

"Look! see you Albacore! Who put it into him to chase and fang that flying-fish? Where do murderers go, man! Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?" (132.545)

Melville intends us to think of Shakespeare's *Lear* when we hear Ahab's indictment of the Creator. Like *Lear* on the heath and for much the same reasons of disillusionment, Ahab ascribes perversity to nature. All living beings are murderers. Whoever has made them and continues to govern them has made them to be killers. The supreme law of creation is self-preservation, life overbearing life with no assurance that the devourer can claim to be "higher" than the devoured in any other regard than in its capacity to exert superior force. Melville evidently would have it that Ahab's experience is shared by honest observers of carnage between the species. Queequeg moralizes on a shark feeding-frenzy: "Queequeg no care what god made him shark . . . wedder Fejee god or Nantucket god; but de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin" (66.302). Ishmael can ask, "Who is not a cannibal?" (65.300), and he meditates upon "the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began" (58.274). Stubb approves Fleece's sermon exhorting large-mouth sharks to share with those who "can't get into de scrouge to help demselves." Stubb's comment: "that's Christianity."

The narrative action suggests that nature's law of domination by bloodshed extends up to the human realm. Ahab's charge echoes the irreligion of the Manxman in "Forecastle-Midnight" who had commented on one mariner's drawing a knife against another:

In that ring Cain struck Abel. Sweet work, right work! No? Why then, God, mad'st thou the ring? (40.178)

If God has created men with the disposition to kill their brothers, such a God ought to be defied, and the most practical way to defy is to war against God's death-dealing creatures while boasting consciousness of thereby expressing one's resentment against the Author of this botched creation. It appears there

embitters Ahab's defiance something of the resentment associated with apostasy, disappointment that experience has denied him his fathers' trust in a benevolent Deity. Nature having shown itself to be what it is, however, he will dedicate himself to a religion of hate as fervently as, had the world borne out the hopes of believers, he would have devoted himself to practicing loving kindness. Melville seems to suggest that trust in the kindness of a personal providence once it collapses under adverse experience yields to immoderate resentment against a natural scheme now seen as cruel, hostile, and capriciously wasteful.

Christian explanations of evil which blame Satan run against the further question why God, having the power to overcome Satan, should apparently comply with his adversary. Responding to Flask, Stubb gives Melville's reply to the orthodox:

"do you suppose I'm afraid of the devil? Who's afraid of him, except the old governor who daresn't catch him and put him in double-darbies, as he deserves, but lets him go about kidnapping people; aye, and signed a bond with him, that all the people the devil kidnapped, he'd roast for him? There's a governor!" (73.326–27)

By extending to several spokesmen freethinking doubts of a just governor for this cosmos, Melville means to suggest that Ahab's dispute with God proceeds from intellectually honest confrontation of evidence widely felt but rarely acted upon with the resoluteness Ahab embodies. Melville means also to indicate the grounds on which some of the crew will make common cause with their commander in a quest the impiety of which he inclines rather to emphasize than conceal. Ahab thinks he is more just than God, because if the world were his to govern, he would rule it with less tolerance for cruelty and waste than God, as he thinks, stands accountable for.

Ahab's quarrel rests on a wider basis of inference than that provoked by bloody spectacles in predatory nature. The chapter in which he meditates on the severed head of a whale recently taken has Ahab address the scheme of things with challenging questions. He imagines this "Sphinx" (so Melville refers to the head) has witnessed the full scope of human woe under a heartless or unobservant heaven. The head has seen in sunken navies the ruin of national hopes, children torn from their mothers, and lovers who "sank beneath the exulting wave; true to each other, when heaven seemed false to them." Ahab continues his indictment with Job's complaint of decent men slain and the wicked prospering and concludes with the fancy of a ship struck by lightning as it transported a "righteous husband to outstretched loving arms" (70.312). Since he draws the moral "thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham," we realize Ahab has taken the very widest survey of man's lot and has ascribed its misfortunes to divine spitefulness. *Moby-Dick* simply incarnates the general malignity Ahab sees everywhere. As Ishmael convincingly

speculates, "he piled upon the white whale's hump the sum of all the general rage felt by his whole race from Adam down" (41.184). At another place Ishmael compares Ahab's indignation with the anguish Prometheus suffered (44.202). Both the Titan and Christian rebel insist that human misery proceeds from a cruel supreme deity.

More disturbing than Ahab's obsession is his ability to induce other men to acquiesce in it or even willingly to serve it. Ahab practices Caesarism, despotism advancing by the politician's manipulation of popular passions rather than by reliance on mere terror. He succeeds partly by accommodating to the tendencies of a Lockian social system and partly by appealing to needs neglected by such a society. Despotic control on the warship in *White-Jacket* had depended on a legally authorized monopoly of force exercised by the officers backed by their praetorian guard, the detachment of marines included in the ship's ordinary complement. Ahab never employs force, relying instead on the arts of incitement, self-dramatization, flattery, bluff, and appeal to self-interest.

Ahab could not succeed in making himself despot over the souls of his crew did he not first take care to conceal his violation of the mercantile purpose of the voyage. By cruising the ordinary whaling grounds and taking some few whales en route to the site where he plans to seek Moby-Dick, he protects himself from a charge of usurpation for which he could be legally removed from command. The one custom he permits himself to violate is the unwritten law of helping the distressed, yet this abrogation of maritime *ius gentium* is less risky than misappropriating property. Ahab senses he can safely ignore the Christian commandment of neighborly charity as long as he makes show of observing the Lockian commandment to respect another's property. Moreover, Ahab undermines Starbuck's chances for leading a successful revolt by winning the approval of common sailors. Following the example of Caesar, he enlists the commoners against an "aristocratic" rival.

Caesarism requires a certain flexibility from the despot who must know how to work upon a variety of human materials. Ahab knows the variety of means at his disposal for fashioning his malleable populace. Some men will kindle merely in response to a show of energy. The publicist in Ahab enables him to know how to stage himself so as to provide the excitement that will stir the shallow sort, while he also contrives for the somewhat more intellectually able an appeal to more solid motives of avarice. Ishmael attributes to Ahab the axiom that "The permanent condition of the manufactured man . . . is sordidness" (46.212). A doubloon he nails to the mast combines appeals to passions of excitement, low ambition, and greed. The gold piece looks rich beyond its exchange value, comes bearing glory to the winner of a contest, is earned without sweat, and stirs the envy of everyone who loses out. Besides these ordinary mainstays of the demagogue, Ahab knows how to mystify. His sense of grand purpose will allow him to employ cheap tricks without embarrassing himself, as is evident from his astonishing some of the crew by making a

lightning rod of his own arm when the corpusants descend, and from his effort to overawe ignorant seamen by making a compass of an ordinary sail needle. Somewhat more subtly, Ahab knows how to enlist a man's piety in a bad cause. When he must choose a watchman to guard the line that has hoisted him aloft in the rigging, he chooses God-fearing Starbuck. Ahab knows Starbuck's conscience will not permit him to kill even though Starbuck has said Ahab's mania will destroy ship and crew (130.538–39; 123.515).

In addition to these time-tested expedients of business administration, Ahab possesses two other holds upon his men, and these he enjoys precisely because both provide relief from the shortcomings characteristic of a Lockian, commercial society. The reason heroic tempers from Homer's time to our own have despised merchants and mechanical toil is from aversion to the unadventurous, meanly calculating transactions required for buying low and selling high. Upon the uncontested observation that merchants must cut corners, seize little advantages, and minimize risks literary men have propagated the sizeable exaggeration that commercial manners are inconsistent with generosity and adventure. Several of Melville's poems suggest he endorsed this prejudice. In any event, the hunt for the white whale gives scope to emotions larger than those connected with the whalemens' routine, workaday world of mechanical labor. Ahab invites all hands to try out the exhilaration of expending themselves as warriors rather than laborers. Furthermore, he adds a common touch to this feeling of the sport. They will join with him as comrades-in-arms, their subjugation to his will obscured by their inebriation in enjoying a sense of a common will, a shared cause.

Beyond adventure-sharing, Ahab's quest promises a purpose that dignifies even the meanest auxiliaries, because the hunt for Moby-Dick fabricates a *telos* for otherwise aimless lives. It affords a pretense of purposefulness, of that which we today are accustomed to speak of as "meaning." The crewmen feel larger and more alive once they conceive their exertions count toward some end beyond their personal desires. Ahab knows that human beings respond to appeals to unite with something larger than themselves. Accordingly he calls for sacramental rum, delivers existentialist sermons, and exploits this yearning by offering his own conduct as a model for perseverance in sublimity. Ahab embodies a modern substitute for the sublimation once identified with either philosophy, patriotism, sanctity, or selfless love.

What is this meaning to which the men of the *Pequod* assent, however vague, partial, and inarticulate may be their grasp of it, when they raise their voices to consent to Ahab's quarterdeck oath? At bottom, they and Ishmael—or part of him—find Ahab a compelling leader rather than a negligible be-deviled crank, because some portion of their own soul takes his part. In his attack on the white whale, they acknowledge a poetically emphatic version of an impulse of resentment which most heirs of the Enlightenment can lay claim to, a resentment directed against limitations imposed by nature, by the sum of

things not amenable, or not yet amenable, to human improvements. In their most telling form, these limits impose physical affliction, injury depriving us of that which is most intimately our own—our bodily limbs and faculties. The most vivid form of human defiance, therefore, is a war conducted against natural limits for the sake of relieving man's afflicted condition. My supposition is that Ahab's vengeance against Moby-Dick is one in principle with a program set by Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Marx, and eloquently endorsed this side of the Atlantic by Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Emerson (excepting Marx, Melville mentions all these authors in his writings). The project of the modern technological regime in either its free or collectivist versions has been to assault unimproved nature for the sake of enlarging man's estate, to liberate from limits imposed by a nature which opposes human effort but yields to our socially concerted technological efforts. Struggles against disease, against all defects of birth and circumstance, against natural scarcity of food or energy, efforts to prolong life or to make it more secure or more accommodating—all these strenuous and well-organized expeditions against nature's empire take their rise from the impulse which Melville symbolizes in Ahab's vengeance upon his whale. That malignant principle which Ahab would strike at, piercing through its masks, is the grudging, confining, unfair, and bullying aspect the cosmos displays to a modern man when he meets opposition to his will where he had required compliance.

A recurrent theme of modern teaching asserts that we properly define ourselves as human beings by opposing a world which appears blindly to frustrate or even capriciously to maim and destroy human beings, who on all accounts are supposed the noblest product and lords of earth, and who therefore ought to find in nature resources instead of obstacles. Holding it nobler to oppose than submit, Ahab will not patiently endure what he supposes to be either nature's despotism or its indifferent stupidity. If he cannot make it over, he will at least strike back at one of the malign agents of this despotism. He shows, thereby, that human will cannot be cowed, even if the body be subject to such humiliation as he has suffered in the loss of the leg. The men of the *Pequod* respond to a leader who represents in large and clear terms a resentment they each harbor, although inchoately. As Starbuck ultimately perceives, "all of us are Ahabs" (123.515). Ahab can be seen as having succeeded in supplanting a traditional with a modernist view of the etiology of evil. For the Christian doctrine of the fall and original sin, Ahab substitutes resentment against a coquette nature who provokes desire, then withholds the means to satisfaction. Man is innocent of any originary wrongdoing yet all the same suffers the straitened condition Christians impute to an aboriginal fall. Like Locke, Ahab transfers the onus from man to nature, or nature's God, yet Locke's remedy, the cultivation of productive arts, is too tame for Ahab. He will take more literally the project of making war on nature while he invests the struggle with poetic color and religious zeal.

Melville troubles us with the intimation that the project Ahab takes on deliriously might just as effectively be pursued in cold blood on a national scale and with the same baneful consequences for the citizens of the republic as is suffered by the crew of the *Pequod*. The number Melville sets for the crew on this “federated keel” (30) is the number of the states of the U.S.A. prior to the admission of California. Although to be sure it is elsewhere the standard complement of a whaler, Melville has made a symbolic use of the number *thirty* for the states of the union in *Mardi*, Chapter 158 (thirty stars) and Chapter 160 (thirty palms). Ahab’s success in imposing his despotic will on a ship flying the flag of a republic points to a weakness in the foundations of the American republic. As indicated previously, Lockian teaching has men form civil society in the hope of overcoming two obstacles to their security, one human, the other nonhuman. The threat posed by the unrestrained wills of other men is allayed by the institution of a government which secures rights, but the same civil institution also promotes the overcoming of nature’s scarcity by facilitating acquisition of property and division of labor. Peaceable association with other men makes feasible a more vigorous prosecution of that campaign against nature which arises from the same sovereign cause of self-preservation as does the contrivance of civil government. Nothing insures, however, that the first end will not be compromised for the sake of the second. Will men not agree to sacrifice liberties of their fellow citizens and risk losing some of their own if the inducement comes in the form of a strong leader who promises in exchange relief from nature’s despotism? If the social contract reduces to a bargain negotiated on calculations of self-preservation, it seems not improbable that self-interest might consent to despotic power in the hope of maximizing power over nature’s resources.

To bring home this threat Melville does not have to project some hypothetical situation remote from his contemporaries. The prolonged national temporizing with slavery would have seemed to him proof of his countrymen’s liability to accept limits upon human rights in exchange for an institution considered by some Americans indispensable for subduing the land. He has Ishmael protest in his cynical reflections on “Fast Fish and Loose Fish”:

What are the sinews and souls of Russian serfs and Republican [United States] slaves but Fast-Fish, whereof possession is the whole of the law? (89.398)

Ishmael’s disillusionment over the equivalence of Russian and American despotism in the matter of slaveholding extends to his country’s foreign policy, “What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-fish.” If the republic the narrator of *White-Jacket* praised as bearer of “the ark of man’s liberties” can countenance slavery in its domestic policy and is no respecter of rights in its foreign policy, Melville, speaking through Ishmael, feels justified

in now concluding, "What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish?" (89.398).

Melville is no proto-environmentalist protesting species-centric depredations or sounding alarms for a putatively fragile ecosystem. He fears rather that the more radical impulse driving modern, particularly American, politics may overwhelm the more benign liberalism of Jeffersonian dedication to natural rights. The problem arises from the amoral character of the principle upon which the social contract rests. Self-preservation is, first and last, the engine that drives and the destination sought. To preserve himself the Lockian individual consents to creating a civil authority, agreeing thereby to regard other men as equals under law, yet to preserve his life and to preserve it more abundantly that individual may consent to a despotism which regards men as tools. Within the system founded in a calculus of self-preservation there appears no moral cause for self-restraint, and, moreover, the system undermines those religious sanctions supporting self-restraint that were once sustained in pre-Lockian polities.

When Ahab makes his display of defying the lightning in the scene previously discussed, he proclaims:

In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whencesoe'er I came; wheresoe'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. (119.507)

Ahab's "personality" has been affronted by the maiming dealt by the whale as well as by the attempted intimidation he presently reads in the storm. He affirms this personality by persisting in his quest and by communicating his animus to a body of men. *Personality* is modernity's substitute for soul. Its other name for personality is the *self*, which Locke defined as "that conscious thinking thing . . . which is sensible, or conscious of Pleasure and Pain, capable of Happiness or Misery, and so is concern'd for it *self*, as far as that consciousness extends." Without the immortal ordination held by Christians to ennoble the soul, the modern thinkers' "personality" or "self" is nonetheless sovereign, and without needing to establish its virtue against such generic standards as are upheld by classical moral philosophy it nonetheless is held to deserve a special dignity. This "queenly personality" is altogether individual because it is the result of individual will putting its stamp on human nature and producing thereby a unique version of human potential brought to specific act. The individual will, the personality, is what the all-compelling passion of self-preservation preserves. It is the beneficiary of "the pursuit of happiness," Locke's phrase before it was Jefferson's. One may suspect the notion reduces to a grandiloquent excuse for willfulness, but however that may be, Melville will not go so far in questioning Ahab's greatness. Yet he does indicate that although Ahab's character is heroically ample, his efforts are demonic in the degree that he promotes hatred rather than benevolence. Because he regards other men only as instruments to be employed in executing his wrath against nature and na-

ture's God, Ahab neglects, and finally chooses deliberately to renounce, promptings of humanity. His obsessiveness precludes companionable feeling with the one crew member—Starbuck—with whom he might make a friendship, and he renounces the fellowship available in the faith of his fathers only to espouse the bleak Manichee worship practiced by the Parsee, Fedallah. Most tellingly, Ahab betrays the trust of subordinates pledged to unquestioning obedience. Just before the final chase, Starbuck reminds the older man of the wife and young son who await his return to Nantucket. But an Ahab almost past feeling, certainly past acting upon, family affections pushes down husbandly and fatherly emotions and turns away from Starbuck to cross the deck and gaze into the water where he sees reflected Fedallah's face (132.545). Melville here directs his irony toward an Ahab who himself now causes those sorrows he had charged to divine indifference in the Sphinx chapter. In the present instance, not an uncaring God but a preoccupied Ahab sends sailors to the deep and separates husbands (Starbuck and himself) from faithful wives (Starbuck's, his own).

A parallelism between Prometheus and Ahab reinforces the latter's violation of loving kindness. Melville has Ahab evoke the Prometheus myth when he makes himself a fire bearer ("The Candles"), when he braves a God he acknowledges to be his superior in power, and when he supplies substitutes for divine providence with his technical resourcefulness ("The Chart," "The Needle," "Log and Line"). After the manner of the Titan depicted in Aeschylus, Ahab practices a science altogether utilitarian. Ahab exhibits no interest in knowing for its own sake.

A chapter depicting the repair of Ahab's ivory leg conveys Melville's skeptical estimate of this new Prometheus. We overhear his requirements for reconstructing human nature to produce a machine all will and power:

while Prometheus is about it, I'll order a complete man after a desirable pattern. Imprimis, fifty feet high in his socks; then chest modelled after the Thames Tunnel; then, legs with roots to'em, to stay in one place; then, arms three feet through the wrist; no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains. . . . (108.470)

In Melville's romantic hierarchy of faculties, the heart stands for moral judgment, while the calculative technical agency is the brain. He declared in a letter to Hawthorne: "I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart than Jupiter Olympus with his head." Ahab would remove the heart because he realizes that feelings generated there—his residual attachments to wife, child, Starbuck, Pip—could soften his otherwise unbending resolve. Promethean revisionism serves the will, finds its instrument in brain power, and confronts its internal adversary in an opposed moral sense which prompts love rather than resentment. Early on we were told Ahab had "his humanities," yet this late soliloquy indicates he would suppress whatever re-

means of compunctions of fellow-feeling for the sake of giving free rein to power and will.

Although Ahab means to imitate Prometheus as benefactor, Melville suggests he is a specious friend to man. He states his case for revising nature in terms of philanthropy: contesting with God as mankind's advocate. Ahab boasts his love for oppressed human beings and seems to act upon pity for the outcast when he takes up with Pip, the black cabin boy who jumps from a whaleboat in mid-chase and, left for a time alone in the sea, emerges a demented, intermittently insightful visionary. Melville so constructs Ahab's scenes with Pip, however, that he exposes the shallowness of Ahab's pity, if not its perversity. Ahab has taken no notice of his subordinate until the boy's misfortune makes him suitable as an exhibit illustrating human providence stepping in to rectify God's unconcern. When Ahab takes Pip under protection, Melville intends we should recall Lear's meeting houseless Tom o'Bedlam. Yet an equally pathetic Pip elicits from Ahab nothing of the self-recognition Lear had been moved to. Instead, Ahab arraigns God and befriends the boy so that he may congratulate himself for his benevolence. Ahab taunts storming skies, not as Lear had his own "pomp," to "take medicine, take medicine" (120.509). Shakespeare's king had charged himself to learn sympathy, whereas Melville has Ahab boast he surpasses God in pity for suffering human beings. Three chapters later egoism decked out in ostentatious kindness becomes obvious when Ahab offers Pip as court evidence to prove "there can be no hearts above the snow-line" (125.522). Taking the boy to his cabin, Pip's new protector treats him to some Enlightenment sermonizing:

Lo! ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill, to you! See the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does, yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude. Come! I feel prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor's!

From Melville's vantage, what offends in Ahab's vaunt is less some affront to deity but rather the insult to human dignity. Ahab violates the secular humanist's moral code when he debases its supreme good of benevolence by turning kindnesses into expressions of hatred. Taking up Pip as a cat's-paw to strike at the gods shows his philanthropy is adjunct to his pride. His dream of revising human nature has so chilled his heart that, although he professes love of man, he neglects to be kind to the actual human beings whose lives are in his care. Obviously, Pip goes down with all the other mariners dependent on Ahab.

Melville introduces the three-day death chase of Moby-Dick with an episode designed to gauge the inhumanity of a philanthropy founded in resentment. The incident of the *Pequod's* encountering the *Rachel*, previously alluded to, registers the irony of an Ahab who has voiced his pity for mankind in the abstract and has rebuked heaven and sea for their unkindness to the human race, now refusing to interrupt his hunt at the entreaty of a fellow sufferer. Ahab's last

contact with human community beyond the decks of the *Pequod* shows his having become so entirely consumed by his obsession with his role as protesting champion of oppressed humanity that he chooses protest over such remedy as lies within his power, at this moment refusing help to another father, compatriot, and fellow captain. Self-pity, although it has expanded to pity for mankind at large, causes Ahab to be cruel to men one by one. Rights of man have become fast-fish hostages to this embodiment of despotic potentials inherent in the technocratic impulse, the gentler aspect of Locke mastered by the more compelling.

## IV

Melville encloses Ahab's story within Ishmael's in order to juxtapose the former's career in resentment against the latter's education in self-preserving acceptance. The contrast has led some readers to suppose Melville offers in Ishmael a correction to Ahab. This hypothesis proves out well enough when applied to the novel's theme of discovering proper ways of knowing. Ishmael's character supplies no corrective to Ahab's, however, in the matter of locating better guidance for America's political destiny.

The very source of the mental flexibility which makes Ishmael the superior student of nature incapacitates him for effective political action. He cultivates intellectual independence by taking up and then discarding one after another a number of antithetical perspectives on every issue he inspects. Compounded with continual irony and self-deprecation, this strategy causes Ishmael to attach himself only provisionally to any intellectual position. He enjoys exploding conventional opinion, arguing the humanity of cannibals and the difficulty of accepting the biblical story of Jonah (chap. 83). A latter-day Montaigne whose mobility as seaborne intellectual permits his sampling a diversity of cultural tenets on questions metaphysical, religious, or ethical, Ishmael feels wise not to be bound by any creed. Both as character and as author, he makes the most of a freedom from sectarianism won for American intellectuals by Jefferson's and Madison's arguments for toleration drawn from Locke. Ishmael protects himself from narrowness by keeping a mind open even to the possibility of yet discovering a transcendent order, "Ah, mortal! then be heedful; for so, in all this din of the great world's loom, thy subtlest thinkings may be overheard afar" (102.450). He remains steadfast only in nonsubscription:

Long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e. what is called savagery. Your true whalehunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois. I myself am a savage, owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him. (57.270)

Ishmael boasts himself a philosopher because he sees the merely conventional basis of opinions less-enlightened minds mistake for truths and because

he maintains a stoic composure while loose harpoons dart about his head (60.281). His cetology attests to Melville's preference for Ishmael's intellectual method over Ahab's. Collecting and playing off multiple perspectives serves to correct Ahab's tense, humorless fixation, enabling Ishmael to grasp that the way to transcend Ahab's allegorizing lies not in rejecting analogies altogether (the opposed impercipient of soulless utilitarians like Flask and Stubb), but in imagining a range of analogies from various vantages not excluding those of scientific measurement and commercial utility. If we accept Melville's implication that study of whales stands as a synecdoche for study of anything, we acknowledge Ishmael's better way. To credit him with philosophy, however, seems a bit grand. We might suspect Ishmael enjoys less the rigors of pursuing wisdom than the pleasures of evasion and withdrawal. An alert, supple receptivity toward the spectacle of manners and opinion he achieves by learning to detach himself from practical concerns. Yet he also thereby insulates himself from pressures to settle into moral judgments which might implicate him in dangerous action.

The skepticism he carefully preserves permits Ishmael, as Ahab's monomania permits *him*, to elude obligations that might restrain his will. In one of his reveries, Ishmael thinks it prudent to lower aims of "attainable felicity" to the "hearth and home" (94.416), yet he does not seem to have married (see the "Town-Ho" digression). He professes admiration for Jacksonian democracy without, as far as we can see, intending to stump for candidates. On which side of the national division over slavery would Ishmael enlist: for Lincoln, because he despises people who consider a white man "anything more dignified than a white-washed negro" (13.60)? Or would he hold with the neutrals since in another mood he seems to trivialize the issue with characteristic flippancy, "Who aint a slave" (1.6)? Ishmael's fondness for discovering antinomies prevents his having any political view worth taking trouble for.

His independence from conventional opinion allows Ishmael to make a reliable friend of a cannibal, and that opening to affection, he says, generates kind feelings toward humankind at large. Queequeg has worked him to a mollification of temper in the glow of which no longer were "splintered heart and maddened hand turned against the wolfish world" (10.51). Not surprisingly for an Ishmael who likens all orthodoxy to submerged yet dangerous wreckage of ships (69.309), religion must give way to freethinking and sailors' camaraderie. Even friendship must yield nonetheless to concern for self-preservation. Ishmael draws a line beyond which he will not extend his tolerance even to have his new friend's approval. He refuses to imitate or to sympathize with self-severe devotions that require something of heroic discipline. Although a latitudinarian in most articles of religious observance, Ishmael reacts with disgust to Queequeg's keeping a lengthy fast. His friend's zeal provokes him to a lecture on minding one's comforts. He has determined that such rigors as "Lents and Ramadans" violate "obvious laws of Hygiene and common sense" and that "hell is an idea born on an undigested apple-dumpling." So that we do

not take this scoffing to be a banalism that Ishmael grows beyond over the course of the novel, Melville has his narrator switch to the editorial present when he voices his creed of self-preservation in comfort:

I have no objection to any person's religion, be it what it may, so long as that person does not kill or insult any other person, because that other person don't believe it also. But when a man's religion becomes really frantic, when it is a positive torment to him, and in fine, makes this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in; then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him. (17.84–85)

Ishmael's is the liberal catechism of Locke, a resolve to tolerate diverse theologies for the sake of peace while encouraging unofficial uniformity of belief in the priority of pleasure. His aptness to accommodate sets Ishmael in contrast to Ahab and allows him to experience sentimental fellowship in the scene of "squeezing case," where he touches the hands of his shipmates and moist-eyed, forgets "[his] horrible oath" to pursue the white whale (94.416).

Since Melville appears to approve his narrator's progress in secular humanitarianism by arranging the ponderous symbolism of Ishmael's escape from death by means of Queequeg's coffin cum lifebuoy, it may seem the end of *Moby-Dick* leads us back to Lockianism by a road lower than Ahab's but more humane. Ishmael's softer version of modern individualism corrects the militant harshness of Ahab's stern version, allowing hope for the gradual pacification of man's estate through self-interested pursuit of comfort and opening the way to human compassion by suppressing anxiety concerning doctrinal questions over which Europe had bled during its two centuries of sectarian fervor. A dividend accrues in the freedom to muse, an approximation of philosophy sufficient to satisfy most writers and academics. A reader cannot be certain Melville means to convey reservations against Ishmael's corrective of Ahab, and yet consideration of the political theme will cause us to think there must be a further word than the antitheses posed by Melville's opposition of Ishmael's "desperado philosophy" to Ahab's promethean despotism.

We can see, for instance, that Ishmael escapes Ahab's inhumanity at the cost of dampening heroic spiritedness. One admires the generosity Queequeg displays, first when he dives into an icy sea to save a stranger and, subsequently, when he plunges into a whale's carcass to rescue a shipmate. Although Ishmael also admires this nobility in Queequeg, he does not recognize that his friend's selflessness may be owing to beliefs in a law higher than self-preservation, beliefs supported by those religious disciplines Ishmael finds offensive to hygiene and common sense. Clearly enough, Ishmael proves incapable of heroism for any reason, not even on behalf of friendship. When a bumpkin insults Queequeg, Ishmael evidently sits passively awaiting his friend's response (13.60). Despite his secret decision to dissociate from Ahab, a change of mood recorded in the "Try-works" scene and confirmed during the case-squeezing,

Ishmael neither opposes Ahab publicly nor reproaches himself for inaction, although Melville inserts the "Town-Ho" digression with its account of a mutiny against a despot captain apparently to show that resistance to the *Pequod's* despot was for all its risks not impossible. Against Ahab's tyranny by persuasion some counter-persuasion is called for. Since the first mate and the man of learning are the only spokesmen capable of opposing rhetoric to Ahab's rhetoric, the ship's company can be saved only by their alliance. During the quarter-deck crisis Ahab succeeds in dominating because at the moment Starbuck makes his gesture of opposition Ishmael not only fails to support him but adds his voice to the crew which is shouting its consent.

The well-known chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale" gives Ishmael's reason for siding with Ahab at the one moment he might have been successfully opposed. A tortuous series of meditations on whiteness as symbol for cosmic meaninglessness builds up to Ishmael's concluding that he was moved to identify the white whale with nature's false promise of a final meaning, white being "a colorless all-color of atheism" (p. 195) underlying all natural hues and exposing them for "subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within" (p. 195). For all his care ordinarily to look on all sides, Ishmael here succumbs to Ahab's determination to perceive the whale under one aspect only. Ishmael makes a symbol of Moby-Dick as Ahab is doing, and their overlapping reductions are evident in Ahab's remark that he dreads to find the whale to be the symbol of meaninglessness: "Sometimes I think there's naught beyond" (36.164). Ishmael admires Ahab for striking back at deceitful Nature and thereby creating by an act of will a meaning for his life in despite of Nature's general meaninglessness. Creating meaning where there is none to discover is the post-Enlightenment intellectual's version of the common human impulse toward self-preservation. At a moment when political action is most requisite, Ishmael proves as vulnerable as the rest of the seamen to Ahab's proposal because a part of him admires Ahab's force, and the remainder which would resist cannot make alliance with pious Starbuck, since Ishmael believes he has liberated himself from the traditional religious belief Starbuck embodies. In Melville's allegory of the national character, a Christianity weakened by accommodation to commercial prosperity proves a feeble protector of the ark of man's liberties, while America's intellectual class, skeptical of a higher law it identifies with rejected Christian teaching, now holds no beliefs which might inspire dangerous political effort on behalf of freedom. The intellectual suffers a further debility in an ambivalence that has him partly admire despotic concentrations of the national prowess in an assault on deceitful or begrudging Nature. Although Ishmael may discover an intellectual vocation in the celebration of the whaling industry, his insistence on his doctrinal independence is such that he never becomes attached to the political life of an actual community. That is why in the editorial present he stipu-

lates we are to call him Ishmael. He was at the time of the *Pequod's* voyage and continues now to be a deracinated observer. Melville may be tracing likelihoods and suggesting that a liability of a Lockian society is the tendency of its intellectuals to purchase their freedom of inquiry at the cost of their countrymen's political liberties.

## V

*Moby-Dick* leaves Melville with the problem of imagining a hero suitable to realize America's mission as "bearer of the ark of the liberties of the world" against a despotism grounded in the American doctrine of popular consent. The alliance Ishmael and Starbuck fail to arrange suggests the shape Melville judges heroic action might take in a more politically effective Christian endowed with learning or, alternatively, in a more spirited intellectual capable of appealing to Christians. Statesmanship founded in a political religion transforming passive piety into active devotion to the rights of man could suffice to meet Ahab's zeal with an equal but opposite republican temper. An appreciation of the timeliness of such a statesmanship so founded seems to have set the plan Lincoln adhered to throughout a career in which he tried to win assent to the proposition that the principle of natural rights has priority in the national purpose over the principle of consent. This was the issue Lincoln debated with Stephen A. Douglas in the Illinois Senate campaign of 1858. Lincoln thought America's conquest of nature—represented by expansion westward and industrialization through the railroad—could not be allowed to extend slavery, even if the people of the territories consented to importation of slaves.

Although Melville's literary career spanned Lincoln's political career, I find no evidence that Melville followed Lincoln's speeches in the forties and fifties. His volume of poetry, *Battle Pieces and Aspects of War*, deals directly with Lincoln in a single poem lamenting his assassination. Instead of focussing the series of Civil War poems on the man who presided over the Union at war, Melville throws his emphasis upon portraying a people, offering his own thoughts as a projection of the national temper Lincoln had forged between 1860 and 1865. The dedicatory notice announces this emphasis on a heroism of collective sacrifice: "To the Memory of The Three Hundred Thousand Who in the War for the Maintenance of the Union Fell Devotedly Under the Flag of Their Fathers." Lincoln's statesmanship is best shown, Melville may have decided, through his effect upon the people he led.

From the outset Melville invites his readers to perceive his particular stance toward the Civil War: the lavish expenditure of blood and resources for a cause not evidently profitable to the ordinary Union soldier attests human capacity to rise beyond calculations of self-interest. The sacrifice offered by the three hundred thousand implicitly rebukes both the cautious self-preservation practiced

by Ishmael and the self-assertive individualism pursued by Ahab in his exaltation of "queenly personality."

#### NOTES

1. White-jacket's expectation for America as a redeemer nation is evident in the rhetoric of his tribute to "the Israel of our time" entrusted by providence "to bear the ark of the liberties of the world" (chap. 36).

2. *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press; Chicago: Newberry Library, 1988), vol. 6, chap. 33, p. 148. Subsequent citations within parentheses refer to chapter and page of this edition.