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## Ahab's Splintered Self

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## Ahab's Splintered Self

It is absurd and ineffectual to give a summary of Moby Dick, or to quote, dismembered, some of its great passages... the beauty of Moby Dick can be known only to those who will make a pilgrimage to it, and stay within its dark confines until what is darkness has become light, and one can make out, with the help of an occasional torch, its grand design, its complicated arabesque, the minute significance of its parts. (Mumford 176)

The beauty and complexity of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* eludes summary, but for those willing to enter its "dark confines," there are staggering images that illuminate the text as a whole. Lewis Mumford, writing in 1929, directly indicts contemporary criticism, which fails to perform the "due pilgrimage" to Moby Dick, especially in the reductive treatment of Captain Ahab. Despite the complexity of Ahab, the "godly, ungodlike man," there has been a prevailing critical tendency to categorize him by the fatal consequences of his quest and his inhuman portrayal as a man of iron. This fails to account for the centrality of Ahab's haunting portrayal as a stricken being: his livid scar, his torn iron locks, his split brow, his mutilated leg, his "leaks within leaks". This pervasive image of fragmentation requires deeper analysis than the cursory attention it generally receives. Ahab's split self represents an existential rupture between subject and object; firstly because his limitless creativity as agentive subject is undermined by the inalterable finitude of his body, and secondly, because the world, as Object, rises up to crush and obliterate his agency. Through the image of the split Melville presents the underlying tension of humanity itself: we are constituted in and by this duality; we are all irrevocably split. Attention to this image reveals the complex humanity of Ahab's quest; his monomaniac obsession is not solely a personal vendetta, but a heroic defiance against the limitations of humanity. This image additionally opens

the text to the appreciation of the counter-images of undifferentiated totality found in the blankness of Moby Dick and the writhing plenitude of the sea. Ahab's splintered being defies these totalities, expressing the revolt of the human spirit against the forces of nature that leave humanity stricken. It is Ahab who tragically, magnificently, asserts his split singularity against the finitude we all face and against the intangible malice of the universe.

The recent trend in *Moby Dick* criticism has been to demonize Ahab: "Various writers have accused Ahab of embodying the dark Puritan hatred of nature, the nineteenth-century capitalist greed for forceful acquisition, and even the insane persuasiveness of a twentieth century dictator" (Woodson 351). These negative interpretations primarily focus on Ahab's "monomaniacal" madness, his transgression from normative morality, and his depiction as a man of iron. In *Salt Sea Mastadon*, Robert Zoellner explicitly connects Ahab's metallic portrayal to his ostensible inhumanity:

Ahab is associated with metallic hardness. He paces his cabin with 'iron brow'... he stands "like an iron statue, his 'firm lips [meeting] like the lips of a vice'. Ishmael speaks of 'Ahab's iron soul and Starbuck of his 'Heart of wrought steel.' (It is this metallic heart which makes it possible for him to stand 'like an anvil' as Captain Gardiner of the *Rachel* appeals for help in finding his son. (Zoellner 104)

For Zoellner, it is Ahab's "metallic hardness" and his "Heart of wrought steel" that renders him indifferent to the plight of a child lost at sea. Ahab certainly transgresses traditional ethics by his "monomania," which, on occasion, causes an indifference to the suffering of others. This does not, however, exhaust the complexity of Ahab and the motivations of his quest, nor account for the alternate depictions of Ahab's fragility and profound, extensive sympathy for the suffering of humanity.

The focus on Ahab's metallic portrayal misrepresents him by ignoring the more dominant depiction of fragmentation. For example, when compared to a bronze statue, "like Cellini's cast Perseus" (Melville 125) there is also a "lividly whitish" (125) scar that disrupts Ahab's metallic solidity. His brow is compared to a helmet, but a fractured one: "Ahab's splintered helmet of a brow" (543). Ahab is continually presented in terms of rupture. In addition to his "perpendicular seam" (125), Ahab's brow is split with horizontal fissures: "that ribbed and dented brow" (163), and, "Ahab's brow was left gaunt and ribbed, like the black sand beach after some stormy tide has been gnawing it..." (397) The combination of the perpendicular scar and the horizontal fissures explicate his crucified portrayal: "Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe" (126). This image of crucifixion is corroborated by his self-induced mutilation during his nightmares: "He sleeps with clenched hands; and wakes with his own bloody nails in his palms" (204). Besides the cross instantiated by his intersecting scars, Ahab is depicted as a self-crucifying Christ: the nails that crucify him are his own.

In "Sunset" (XXXVII), Ahab articulates his fractured metal physicality in relation to Christ and crucifixion, saying, "Is, then, this crown too heavy that I wear? this Iron Crown of Lombardy. ...'Tis iron – that I know – not gold. 'Tis split, too – that I feel; the jagged edge galls me so, my brain seems to beat against the solid metal; aye, steel skull mine; the sort that needs no helmet in the most brain battering fight!" (Melville 170) The Iron Crown of Lombardy was forged from the nails that crucified Christ, yet Ahab's crown is split. The image of the brain, the material symbol of subjectivity, is presented in active opposition to the external, steel encasement of his skull. This antagonism demonstrates Ahab's disconnect between mind and body, between subject and object.

The image of the crucifixion itself also parallels the split in Ahab, as the material body of Christ is sacrificed for the spirit, and the will of the Father.<sup>ii</sup>

Ahab's fragmentation reaches beyond his skin, reaching his innermost interiority, for he is, "Gnawed within and scorched without" (Melville 188). In "The Chart" (XLIV), there is an eruption within him: "a chasm seemed opening in him" (204), and he creates a continual internal consummation of himself through his thought, "thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates" (205). Ahab is not only externally scarred, but his own thoughts metaphorically mutilate him, indicative of his madness and obsession with exacting revenge on Moby Dick. The Promethean quality of Ahab additionally corroborates his rebellion against a tyrannical God and the assertion of the superiority of the human spirit."

The most explicit iteration of Ahab's internal rupture is depicted as Starbuck warns Ahab of the leaking oil casks. While Starbuck is concerned with the monetary loss of oil, Ahab laments the leak within himself, saying, "Let it leak! I'm all aleak myself. Aye! leaks in leaks! not only full of leaky casks, but those leaky casks are in a leaky ship; and that's a far worse plight than the Pequod's, man" (Melville 483). The interior leak is not even singular, for Ahab has "leaks within leaks," openings within fractures, which powerfully illustrates his lack of wholeness or completion. The "leaky casks" within a "leaky ship" can be understood in relation to his physical deterioration; his encasing body leaks as well. The leakage of self is shown to be insurmountable, as Ahab says, "Yet I don't stop to plug my leak; for who can find it in the deep-loaded hull; or how hope to plug it, even if found, in this life's howling gale?" (483) There is a total inability to reach

a point of solidity, to plug such leaks, in "life's howling gale," the chaotic impermanence of existence.

This thematic of rupture problematizes the critical reduction of Ahab to a totalized singularity, for this is, paradoxically, what Ahab seeks but can never achieve. The significance of the split is explicated in relation to Ahab's desire to overcome it, demonstrated in his quest for autonomy and completion, his desire to plug his leaks. In a discussion with the carpenter, Ahab reveals a profound yearning for independence from the contingency of his body:

Oh, Life! 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... yet I owe for the flesh in the tongue I brag with. By heavens! I'll get a crucible, and into it, and dissolve myself down to one small, compendious vertebra. So. (Melville 481)

This passage captures the fundamental meaning of the split as the dichotomy between subject and as object. As subject, as bodiless will and spirit, Ahab is equal to the gods, but he is also acutely aware of the limitations of the flesh, of his existence as object. Ahab wishes to be "free as air" in the sense of transcending these bodily limitations, for any object or finite physical entity is necessarily contingent on forces beyond its own control. Ahab seeks autonomy in the fullest sense. In wishing to become "one small compendious vertebrae," Ahab expresses a desire for an all-encompassing singularity, free from the contingencies of life, and free from external determination. This reduction is formally instantiated in the concluding single word sentence, "So", concisely articulating his will with force and imperative.

In a conversation with Perth, the scarred blacksmith, Ahab expresses his desire for completion, for the solidity that would heal his stricken self:

Look ye here, then,' cried Ahab...'look ye here -here – can ye smoothe out a seam like this, blacksmith,' sweeping one hand across his ribbed brow; 'if though

could'st, blacksmith, glad enough would I lay my head upon thy anvil, and feel thy heaviest hammer between my eyes. Answer! Can'st thou smoothe this seam? (Melville 495)

Ahab's request to heal his physical scar reveals his desire to reconcile the split within himself, the rupture of subject and object. The desperate tonality reveals he is willing to face death if it would achieve this end, even if it means to "feel thy heaviest hammer between my eyes." Neither Perth nor anyone else can achieve this reconciliation: "Oh! that is the one, sir! Said I not all seams and dents but one?" (495) Zoellner essentially recognizes the scar as a division between mind and body, saying, "It is expressive of the dichotomization of Ahab's psyche and person" (Zoellner 101). However, there is no further exploration of this image, except to praise Perth's imperviousness over Ahab's brokenness: "Perth suggests that it is possible to undergo the agony of existence without cracking, as Ahab has; the blacksmith's wholeness hints at the existence of a deep-seated flaw in Ahab" (Zoellner 102). This statement is emblematic of the misreading of Ahab, attributing the split to a personal flaw. The praise of Perth is conspicuously peculiar because Perth is not only fractured but devastated. Perth is not whole; he has been so scarred that further scarring makes no difference: "I am past scorching; not easily can'st thou scorch a scar" (Melville 494). This supposed "deep-seated flaw" of Ahab's split is, in fact, what renders him inescapably human.

In a further, desperate effort to surmount his corporeal limitation, Ahab denies his physicality and identifies with his subjective being. This identification is clearly stated after Ahab's peg-leg shatters while chasing Moby Dick, and Ahab says to Stubb, "even with a broken bone, old Ahab is untouched; and I account no living bone of mine one jot more me, than this dead one that's lost. Nor white whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being" (Melville 562). Ahab

categorizes himself by his subjective being; the container of his essence, his body, is secondary and irrelevant. Ahab attributes equal animation to his dead bone as to his living ones. This identification, in itself, is not enough to overcome his fragmentation, but it strongly articulates Ahab's need to overcome subject and object divide. John Wenke, in *Melville's Muse*, concisely addresses both the split and the identification with subjectivity: "Despite the vicissitudes of experience, Ahab claims that his essential self remains inviolate... The anguish of his spirit derives from his rhetorical assessment of the disparity between the 'unconquerable captain of the soul' and the pitiable evidence offered by his 'craven mate... [my] body" (Wenke 141).

The existential duality of subject and object has been a central problem for philosophy throughout history, especially since Descartes' postulation of the separation of mind and body. Although undeniably informed by the philosophical background of this topic, Melville's *Moby Dick* resists synthesis to any single philosopher or school of thought. Ultimately, Melville seems to have a dim view of the answers of philosophy, as is shown in *Moby Dick* itself:

The passage in *Moby-Dick* (II, 59), in which Melville recommends that Ahab, rather than balance Locke against Kant, throw both overboard if he wishes the *Pequod* to "float light and right," is not so much a condemnation of either Locke or Kant, or both, as an expression of discontent with all philosophy. It is of the same order as Emerson's asking, "Who has not looked into a metaphysical book? And what sensible man ever looked twice? —*Works*, II, 438. (Pochmann 759)

Although Melville valorizes the penetrating gaze which reaches into the depths of the universe, he does not believe that any philosophy is capable of capturing the "ungraspable phantom of life" (Melville 4), or effectively surmounting the existential duality in which we are constituted.

Instead of providing hallucinatory solutions Melville acknowledges the darkness of life, showing that the split between subject and object is both insurmountable and universal. This split functions primarily in two interrelated ways: the first is the split within an individual, the duality of spirit and body; the second is the split between individuated subjects and the external objects that affect them. For Melville, this is the primary problem facing humanity: forces beyond our control affect our corporeality, leaving us stricken despite any strength of will. Throughout *Moby Dick* there is a valorization of subjectivity and spirit, while simultaneously, painfully revealing the physical contingency and finitude of humanity. This divide problematizes the very notion of identity: "the self is near, yet remote; it is whole, yet it may, like Ahab's (and most other characters at one time or another), itself be split... the body is the self, and the body is not the self. Both statements are true, forming a closed circle from which there is no escape." (Brodtkorb 50). Ahab's splintered self reveals the paradoxical nature of the self as subject and as object, a paradoxical division "from which there is no escape."

An emblematic example of the irreconcilable division of self and body, and of subject against the world, is depicted in the "sunken eyed young Platonist" (Melville 162), who feels interconnected with the world from his perch at the top of the mast, but whose dream of oneness and selflessness is quickly ruptured by the inevitable vicissitudes of life:

There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. (163)

The implication of this passage is clear. Although we are lulled into a feeling of unity with the nature and God, this dream is quickly shattered by disaster and terror. Despite

metaphysical dreams or consolations, any experience of catastrophe brings our separate, individual identity "back in horror." The invocation of Descartes, who posited a distinction between mind and body, corroborates this, although it is clear that the solutions proposed by Descartes are ignored.

In *Moby Dick*, the finitude of humanity is expressed in antagonistic relation to the forces of nature and God. Ahab defies the ineffable powers of the universe, asserting his spirit against the indifferent brutality of nature. Lewis Mumford characterizes *Moby Dick* in these terms:

[Moby Dick] is fundamentally, a parable on the mystery of evil and the accidental malice of the universe. The white whale stands for all the brute energies of existence, blind, fatal, overpowering, while Ahab is the spirit of man, small and feeble, but purposive, that pits its puniness against this might, and its purpose against the blank senselessness of power. (Mumford 184)

It is in this expression of human purpose against the "accidental malice of the universe" that Ahab is stricken. He is broken by this defiance, but he nonetheless asserts his fractured self against the "blank senselessness of power," asserting his personality and subjectivity to the end.

In "Moby Dick" (XLI), Ahab's battle against the "brutal energies" is stated explicitly, which both substantiates Mumford's claim and articulates the universality of the split:

The White Whale swam before him as 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*. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning... which the ancient Ophites of the east reverenced in their statue devil; - Ahab did not fall down and worship like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, *he pitted himself, all mutilated*, against it. (Melville 186) [My italics]

The "malicious agencies" are not simply a figment of Ahab's madness, but substantial forces that leave "deep men" stricken, "living with half a heart and half a lung." This

passage also asserts that the antagonism with these forces has "been from the beginning," which connects this experience throughout human history, implying this disconnect is not merely a product of modernity. Instead of submitting before such inexplicable power, Ahab rebels and is destroyed in this assertion as he "pit[s] himself, all mutilated, against it." There is a quality of madness and deliriousness to Ahab, but "Ahab's madness springs from an excess of humanity" (Sedgwick 109).

Ahab attributes evil to Moby Dick not only out of his desire for revenge, but rather because to him Moby Dick personifies the ineffable "intangible malignity" of life itself. Ahab's quest is not, as it is generally read, simply an aggrandized personal vendetta, but a deeply human defiance of the forces that render mankind stricken:

All that most maddens and torments; all truth with malice in it; all that *cracks* the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the *general rage and hate felt by his whole race* from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, *he burst his hot heart's shell upon it*. (Melville 186) [My italics]

The universality of Ahab' quest is iterated in the "general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down." The "subtle demonisms of life and thought" are not mere fantasy, but a pervasive malice to humanity. Ahab's fragmentation is representative of the condition of humanity itself. The universality of this brokenness is stated explicitly: "for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending" (86). The symbol of the crack instantiates a lack of completeness, demonstrating the inexorable finitude of humanity in relation to the totality and wholeness of God. We cannot embody the whole, or even act as a microcosm of the whole, but are perpetually split. This finitude portrayed by the crack, is indicative of our contingency as objects; we are necessarily on the path to dissolution and death. Ahab throws his splintered singularity against the universe, obliterating himself in a noble assertion, "bursting his hot heart's

shell." It is this unswerving assertion of will in face of his brokenness that "stands for human purpose in its highest expression" (Mumford 189). Ahab repeatedly valorizes the human and expresses deep sympathy for our frailty, such as when he considers the plight of Pip, the black cabin boy, who loses his mind looking into the depths of the sea. Ahab laments, "Lo! ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill, lo you! see the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does, yet full of sweet things of love and gratitude." (526)

The image of rupture opens the text, revealing the continual opposition between Ahab's broken singularity and the undifferentiated, "malicious agencies" of the world. This opposition is formally depicted in the opposed images of Moby Dick's blankness and the unindividuated totality of the sea. The portrayal of Moby Dick directly opposes Ahab's strickenness. While Ahab is characterized by external and internal division, Moby is described as "not only ubiquitous, but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time)" (Melville 184). In addition to the quality of immortality, there is an emphasized lack of particularity in the brow of the Sperm whale in general:

But in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you *feel the Deity and the dread powers* more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature. For you see *no one point* precisely; *not one distinct feature* is revealed, no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none proper, nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, ships and men." (356) [My italics]

Ishmael directly correlates the whale's lack of particularity with "Deity", with "god-like dignity" and compares it's brow to "one broad firmament", all corroborating the connection between Moby Dick and the ubiquitous, omnipotence of God and the "dread powers" of existence. The powerful image of beholding a featureless brow, connected to ineffable power, is directly juxtaposed with the image of Ahab's "splintered helmet of a

brow." This antagonism is formally expressed in the "The Chase – Third Day" (CXXXV), the last chapter of *Moby Dick*, just before Ahab's death. Ahab shouts, "Forehead to forehead I meet thee, this third time, Moby Dick!" (566) It is clear that the image of Ahab's split forehead is not a cursory detail, but a formal expression of the opposition between the split brow of humanity against the featureless brow of the whale, and the lack of particularity in God.

While Ahab's attributes evil to Moby Dick, Ishmael similarly connotes something terrifyingly inhuman in the lack of coloration, extensively described in "The Whiteness of the Whale" (XLII). Ishmael laboriously categorizes the ineffable dread of whiteness, saying, "Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with thoughts of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?" (Melville 197) This passage universalizes the antagonism between humanity and the "heartless voids and immensities of the universe" which are depicted in the whiteness of Moby Dick. Attempting to grasp the whiteness of the whale is equivalent to a non-experience because in encountering the divine, regular categories of thought break apart:

when the ontological category of nonbeing is evoked by dread in the presence of the numinous, the mind hastens to comfort itself with an allegorical formula that will reduce to static intellectual tractability whatever formlessness it may be facing... But in itself it [Moby Dick] 'is' itself, and it cannot in itself be named, or structured and explained and categorized; nothingness floods through the interstices of any conceptual net designed to hold Moby Dick's essence." (Brodtkorb 146)

This passage captures the utter ineffability of what Ahab truly defies in Moby Dick. It is not merely an attribution of God's indifference to an unthinking animal, but a manifestation of the incomprehensible power of the universe. The blankness, the lack of particularity, is linked to the indifference of nature before the suffering of humanity.

While Moby Dick becomes the practically assailable object of defiance, it is, in essence, the indifference of nature and the malice of universe that Ahab defies. Ahab's assertion of his fractured personality against this totality of power is depicted in "The Candles" (CXIX) as he grasps the burning lightening rods and shouts to the heavens, "No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here" (Melville 512). This poetic proclamation undeniably asserts Ahab's strength of will and his independence of spirit, even with the recognition of nature's superior, "placeless power." In Ahab's Greatness: Prometheus as Narcissus, Thomas Woodson interprets this contention as a fundamental act of existence itself, "Man must affirm his own uniqueness in order to exist as man. This affirmation is of itself heroic and tragic, both for character and dramatist" (Woodson 353). It is tragic because he is doomed to fail (in the physical sense) but heroic in his manifestation of an unswervable spirit. Ahab's personality is pitted in the opposition to nature and God: "To live, to create a substantial body for oneself, is to destroy the *other*: man finds behind nature a competing mind and creative force; in order to become himself, man must destroy this competing other." (355) Rather than passively accepting the limitations of humanity, Ahab willfully opposes nature, becoming himself, paradoxically, through relation to what will destroy him.

The battle against Moby Dick is recognized unambiguously. There is, however, much less attention given to the opposition to nature itself, which is prevalently depicted in humanity's antagonistic relation to the sea. It is the sea that fully represents the totality and lack of particularity that Ahab opposes. While Moby Dick is portrayed as immortal, the sea is omnipotent: "It was a sight full of quick wonder and awe! The vast swells of

the omnipotent sea." (Melville 228) Where Ahab desperately wishes for a crucible, to attain an unachievable immanence, the sea *is* a crucible: "The sea was a crucible of molten gold, that bubblingly leaps with light and heat" (530). It is a crucible in the sense that it assimilates everything into itself, reducing diverse particularities into one.

The raw power of the sea better captures the antagonism with the blind force of existence than Ahab's attribution of evil to Moby Dick, for this ascription to the whale is problematized by the finitude of whales themselves. There are also parallels between Ahab and Moby Dick; they are both stricken, and depicted in terms of blankness, the whiteness of Moby dick mirroring Ahab's description as "a ray of living light" (Melville 205). Chris Baldick explicitly states the similarity between Moby Dick and Ahab: "the two share the same wrinkled brow and the same solitary and maimed grandeur" (Baldick 80). The sea, however, overpowers both man and whale in its sheer omnipotence:

Like a savage tigress that tossing in the jungle overlays her own cubs, so the sea dashes even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leaves them there side by side by the split wrecks of ships. No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe. (281)

In this passage, the plight of both whales and men are vividly placed "side by side" in relation to the unfathomable force of the sea. It is important to note that, in this instance, the sea is specifically described as "masterless", as autonomous. Humanity is constituted by split finitude but the sea is unstoppable; the sea "overruns the globe" by its own force, "no power but its own controls it." Whales, as finite physical entities, they have bodies to be smashed. The sea is not confined to form, and, therefore, is a more powerful symbol of the infinite.

While only one such description could be taken as mere poetic innovation, the sea is continually represented in similar terms. In "The Pacific" (CXI) the sea is described as a disturbed plenum, agitated by the absorbed particularities of humanity:

There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath.... And meet it is, that over these sea-pastures... the waves should rise and fall, and ebb and flow unceasingly; for here, millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned dreams, somnabulisms, reveries; all that we call lives and souls, lie dreaming, dreaming, still; tossing like slumberers in their beds; the ever-rolling waves but made so by their restlessness. (Melville 491)

The sea is not characterized by absence but by the total absorption of individuated life, where all "lives and souls" are assimilated in the plenum of the sea. This assimilation is not to a static death, but an endless, agitated sleep which causes the "gently awful stirrings of the sea." Melville's vision of the sea disturbingly articulates the indifference of nature before the fragile, wrecked dreams of humanity.

There are also more concrete demonstrations of the opposition between humanity's particularity and the totality of the malevolent sea:

Few or no words were spoken; and the silent ship, as if manned by painted sailors in wax, day after day tore on through all the swift madness and gladness of the demonic waves. By night the same muteness of humanity before the shrieks of the ocean prevailed; still in silence the men swung in their bowlines; still wordless Ahab stood up to the blast. (Melville 239)

The sea is hear revealed as a roaring, malevolent entity, exulting before the sailor's silence. Humanity is struck mute before the shrieks of the ocean, rendered inanimate objects: "painted sailors in wax." Ahab stands at the limit between the human and the infinite, opposing the crashing of the "demonic" waves.

There are contrasting renderings of the sea that exhibit mildness and tranquility.

This mildness, however, is but a facade that masks an underlying bestiality and horror.

This simultaneous beauty and terror of the sea is captured in an unforgettable description

of the waves: "Like hearth-stone cats they purr against the gunwale; these are the times of dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember, that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang" (498). This passage mirrors the dream of the young Platonist, in that seeing the "ocean's skin" one experiences the mildness of a domestic housecat, but there is forever a hidden terror, a concealed "remorseless fang." Beneath the ostensible serenity of the sea, there lurks the "fatal contingency of being" (435).

Although the antagonism between humanity and the sea is often recognized in contemporary criticism, the prevalent interpretation is of man's drive to dominate and appropriation the natural world. CLR James' *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* equates Ahab's monomania with an ethos of consuming totalitarianism, representative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial ethos:

The diesel engine and now atomic energy face the vast majority with the same problem that he [Ahab] faced: the obvious, the immense, the fearful mechanical power of an industrial civilization which is now advancing by incredible leaps and bringing at the same time the mechanization and destruction of human personality. (James 17)

While James may elucidate problems of modernity, his critique misrepresents Melville's portrayal of humanity's relationship with nature. James' focus on the technological domination of the world is, paradoxically, the precise opposite of what is portrayed in the text. It is the sea which causes the "destruction of human personality," which obliterates humanity: "the most terrific of all mortal disasters have immemorially and indiscriminately befallen tens and hundreds of thousands of those who have gone upon the waters..." (Melville 280) The utter supremacy of the formless sea overpowers any technological progress: "however baby man may brag of his science and skill... for ever

and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make" (280). The "mechanical power of industrial civilization" is directly belittled by this passage, displaying the utter impotence of "baby man" and in his pretentious faith in "science and skill". Despite the technological progress of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Melville projects the domination of nature over man to infinity, until "the crack of doom." Although humanity faces grave dangers in industrialization and mechanization, these threats are infinitely surpassed by the ineffable, intangible force of the sea.

"The Sphynx" (LXX) portrays the magnitude of death and despair caused by the sea, revealed as Ahab contemplates the sights a dead Sperm whale had seen: "Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of the millions of the drowned..." (320) The juxtaposition of "names and navies" and "untold hopes and anchors" demonstrates how the aspirations and particularities of humanity are wrecked and relegated to mere objects as they are swallowed by the sea. Ahab then heartrendingly expresses the power of human love before the indifference of the sea: "Thou saw'st the locked lovers when leaping from their flaming ship; heart to heart they sank beneath the exulting wave; true to each other, when heaven seemed false to them" (320). The "locked lovers" corroborate the universality of Ahab's defiance of the indifference of God, as the lovers remain "true to each other when heaven seemed false to them." While demonstrating the corporeal fragility of humanity, the lovers simultaneously reveal a resilient strength of humanity, providing meaning for one another, even when drowned beneath the "exulting wave."

Nature's apathy, or even exultation, before the suffering of humanity is repeated in the image of the sun as well: "when amid the chips of chewed boats, and the sinking limbs of torn comrades, they swam out of the white curds of the whale's direful wrath into the serene, exasperating sunlight, that smiled on, as if at a birth or a bridal" (Melville 185). At the tragedy of human suffering, the sun remains unaffected, depicted here as smiling as if at a "birth or bridal." These two images, associated with reproduction, are almost entirely absent from Moby Dick. It is not that Melville is unconcerned with these aspects of human life; rather, he is troubled by how human joy is constantly undercut by the accidental malignancy of nature.

While Ahab is typically characterized by unyielding strength, there is a moment in "The Symphony" (CXXXII) which reveals his human fragility before the "exulting wave," as he cries a single tear: "From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop" (Melville 544). In this instance matter is immaterial. Though both the sea and the tear are composed of salt water, it is Ahab's "one wee drop" that singularly expresses the sorrow of individuated life, striving against the totality of the sea. Ahab then laments his split constitution, and the finitude of age: "God! God! God! – crack my heart! – stave my brain! – mockery! mockery! bitter, biting mockery of grey hairs, have I lived enough joy to wear ye; and seem and feel thus intolerably old?" (545) The repetition of "God!" forcefully indicts the apathetic treatment of human suffering, as Ahab articulates his broken heart and ruptured brain. The crushing weight of age additionally reveals the inevitable corporeal deterioration we all must face, as finite objects subject to decay. Ahab, in a momentary epiphany, then yearns for immediate human intimacy, saying, "Close! stand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to

gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God" (545). The valorization of gazing into a human eye over the immensities of sea, sky or God, is the clearest expression of Ahab's humanity. In this moment, he recognizes the superiority of intimate relationship between singularities over the infinite mysteries of nature and God.

This display of compassion is quickly overshadowed as Ahab realizes he cannot turn back from his quest. Most interpretations take this to be the clearest sign of his inhumanity since he loses his last potential for compassion and intimacy. In addition, Ahab, for the first time, questions his own motivations and agency: "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (Melville 546). Here Ahab's sovereignty of will is questioned, in addition to the overt limitations of his body. The questioning of subjectivity, however, is not a revelation of failure but a deepening of Ahab's understanding of man's limitation in relationship to God. It is here that Ahab recognizes the contingency of even his innermost essence: "how can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I" (546). Woodson recognizes the profound realization this entails, without reducing it to failure: "Critics have attacked him for inconsistency, but it seems more accurate to see him as more clearly understanding the division in himself between the humanity which wants to say 'I' and the hard truth that the mirroring world makes him into a 'thing'" (Woodson 365). This passage recognizes this moment as Ahab's painful grasp on humanity's limitations, which extends beyond corporeality into subjectivity itself.

Ahab's reduction to mere object is substantiated in his following meditation on the sea. Ahab initially experiences the mildness of the sea, only to be brutally reminded of his objective finitude that ends in death: But it is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky; and the air smells now, as if it blew from a far-away meadow... the mowers are sleeping among the new-mown hay. Sleeping? Aye, toil we how we may, we all sleep at last on the field. Sleep? Aye, and rust amid greenness; as last year's scythes flung down, and left in the half-cut swaths." (Melville 546)

The initial tranquility of nature, the repeated mildness of sea and sky, is undermined by the recognition of humanity's limitations. This shift in perception is formally portrayed in the transformation of mower into scythe: "Ahab feels his nostalgic mood dissipate into the brutal reality of the chase, he changes from the sentient human mower into the rusting scythe, becoming only a used-up "thing" in a world of cold wintry desolation" (Woodson 367). It is this collapsing into objectivity that reveals the more pernicious finitude of humanity; despite Ahab's immense power of will, he remains split because he can never escape the limitations of corporeality and is continually rendered an object.

Despite his excruciating acknowledgement of limitation and brokenness, Ahab remains defiant, quickly gathers his strength, and is able to embrace fate and determination: "Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fate's lieutenant; I act under orders" (Melville 563). The acknowledgment of fate is, once again, followed by a recognition of the split between body and soul: "Ye see an old man cut down to the stump; leaning on a shivered lance; propped up on a lonely foot. 'Tis Ahab – his body's part; but Ahab's soul's a centipede that moves upon a hundred legs." (563) Despite the recognition of his finitude, Ahab takes up the limitation and still asserts his essential self against the "malicious agencies" of life; broken and blasted, his spirit remains undaunted.

Ahab cannot avert the course of his fated quest; he cannot give up and experience intimacy with others. This inability is inhuman to a degree, but the motivations of his

quest are of a deeper, more complex humanity. His "monomania" is an obsession with precisely what leaves humanity stricken. This is articulated once again by Ahab's sensitivity to the fragility of the human condition:

Here's food for thought, had Ahab time to think; but Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels, that's tingling enough for mortal man! to think's audacity. God only has that right and privilege. Thinking is, or ought to be, a coolness and a calmness; and our poor hearts throb, and our poor brains beat too much for that. And yet, I've sometimes thought my brain was very calm – frozen calm, this old skull cracks so, like a glass in which the contents turn to ice and shiver it. (Melville 565)

For Ahab, in his final moments, there is an expression of the fragile sensation of humanity, which is opposed by the coolness of thought. Despite his throbbing physicality, he is frozen and split by thought – his skull cracks under the weight of his rebellion. This exhibits an identification with the body, which is once again experienced as a duality in which thought disrupts the sensing of the body.

The identification with the body is furthered as Ahab feels the wind blowing through his hair, which reiterates his splintered self: "How the wind blows it [his hair]; they whip it about me as the torn shreds of split sails lash the tossed ship they cling to" (Melville 565). Ahab's personal fragmentation is extended to humanity as he contemplates the wind:

A vile wind that has no doubt blown ere this through prison corridors and cells, and wards of hospitals, and ventilated them, and now comes blowing hither as innocent as fleeces... And yet, 'tis a noble and heroic thing, the wind! who ever conquered it? In every fight it has the last and bitterest blow. Run tilting at it, and you run but through it. Ha! a coward wind that strikes stark naked men, but will not stand to receive a single blow. Even Ahab is a braver thing – a nobler thing than *that*. (Melville 565)<sup>vi</sup>

Although Ahab praises the unconquerable strength of the wind, he ultimately valorizes the broken finitude of man over the intangible indifference of nature. Like the sea, the wind is formless; it "strikes stark naked men" but does not present a body, so cannot be

struck itself. Ahab, in his brokenness, is more valiant in his noble assertion of self. The formlessness of the wind is what renders it one of the "malicious agencies" antagonistic to man: "Would now the wind but had a body; but all the things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless, but only bodiless as objects, not as agents. There's a most special, a most cunning, oh, a most malicious difference" (565). It is the bodiless forces that "most exasperate and outrage mortal man", for these agencies are what render humanity stricken, without providing a physical essence to defy.

The complexity of Ahab requires a broader scope of interpretation than the narrow ethical lens that is often applied to him, which reductively presents only his flaws. The tremendous virtue of Ahab's uncompromising assertion of self is explicated by Melville's treatment of suffering and joy. There is an overt appreciation of a suffering that breeds depth over the shallows of mere contentment or joy: "while even the highest earthly felicities ever have a certain unsignifying pettiness lurking in them, but, at bottom, all heart-woes, a mystic significance, and, in some men, an archangelic grandeur" (Melville 473). The profundity of Ahab's tortured sorrow is beautifully captured by the metaphoric eagle of the soul, which attains great height even when diving into the deepest gorges of despair:

there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar. (436)

It is the profundity of Ahab's assessment of the world that is revealed in *Moby Dick*, not his deviation from social conventions. In his strickenness, Ahab pushes the boundaries of humanity itself, rebelling against our split constitution and the indifference of nature and God. In a letter to Nathanial Hawthorne, Melville describes a hero of the spirit whose

description mirrors Ahab's undaunted defiance, who pursues truth despite the consequences: "By visible truth, we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him,-the man who... declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven, hell, and earth" (Melville [Letters] 113). Ahab represents this superior nature; he is stricken by the forces of the universe but remains sovereign in himself.

There is a total inversion of social mores in this undeviating power of will, which Mumford captures well: "When the human spirit expands itself to the uttermost, to confront the white whale and hew meaning from the blank stone of experience, one must reverse all the practical maxims: earth's folly, as Melville says, is Heaven's wisdom, and earth's wisdom is Heaven's greatest disaster" (Mumford188).

Ahab pushes the limits of humanity, and in so doing, paradoxically mirrors both Christ and Anti-Christ. Ahab is presented in a linguistic split that conveys this paradoxical nature; he is a "grand, ungodly, god-like man" (Melville 84). The paradox is that Ahab "is 'god-like' (and Promethean) in that he creates his own image of the world, but is 'ungodly' in that he rebels against his existence as a *creature* of forces beyond his control" (Woodson 363). He is like Christ, in that he takes the wounds and brokenness of humanity upon himself and defies nature, fate and finitude. The opposing image of anti-Christ is that this defiance is against God. While Jesus is "light leaping out of darkness, Ahab describes himself as "darkness leaping out of light" (Melville 513). Ahab is a self-crucifying Christ, obliterating himself in an expression of finitude and brokenness before God. It is not the sins of man, but the indifference of God that is truly terrible: "For what are the comprehensible terrors of man compared with the interlinked terrors and wonders of God!" (112)

Ahab's ultimate failure is generally read as futility, yet it is in his mad, uncompromising rebellion that Ahab, on a deeper level, succeeds: "Not tame and gentle bliss, but disaster, heroically encountered, is man's true happy ending" (Mumford 187). This valorization of heroic death is corroborated in the text itself:

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? 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. (Melville 111)

Ahab perishes in the "howling infinite", and is actualized in the realization of his utter defeat: "Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief" (574). While his quest to defeat Moby Dick ostensibly fails, there is a deeper success in the inexorable defiance with which he "pit[s] himself mutilated" against the "intangible malignity" of life. Even in death, Ahab is still defiant: "Now small fowls flew screamingly over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (576). In his last description, Ahab is the "sullen white surf" defying the cavernous abyss. Ahab is ultimately unable to achieve a reconciliation of his splintered self; he is fragmented even as the sea swallows him up. As *Moby Dick* ends with the unindividuated plenum of the sea, we are drawn to the appreciation of human particularity. It is Ahab's assertion of will, though physically flawed, cracked and splintered, that is nonetheless valorized as the unconquerable spirit of humanity actualized in defiance of the restless, rolling totality of the sea.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> See explanatory notes of Hendricks House edition of *Moby Dick. Iron Crown of Lombardy*: "Legend said that it contained one of the nails from the cross of Jesus, discovered in Jerusalem by Helena, mother of Constantine, in 326." (688)

"Ahab's relationship to Christ is extremely complex. For further investigation see Dillingham's *Ahab's Heresy* (Dillingham 150-172), and Herbert's *Calvinist Earthquake: Moby Dick and Religious Tradition*. (109-140)

The Promethean quality of Ahab is a substantial topic in itself. For the purposes of this paper, however, it is enough to recognize the basic commonality in the championing of the human spirit in opposition to a domineering, unsympathetic God: "As the thief of fire, rebel against authority, creator of mankind, and patron saint of work, Prometheus helps us come to terms with the nature scope, and evolution of the human condition in all its fundamental complexity... Prometheus' myth has been invoked to tell a story of the human condition as a celebration of the triumph of the human intellect, imagination, and technology over all that nature can throw our way" (Dougherty 20).

The duality of subject and object additionally opens the question of the Hegelian relationship between perceiving the self as subject and the other person as object. The relation between subjects is certainly a rich possibility of inquiry, but I would argue it is not the primary difficulty for Melville: "For what are the comprehensible terrors of man compared with the interlinked terrors and wonders of God!" (Melville 112)

This is not to suggest that James' attention to the political undercurrent of *Moby Dick* is irrelevant. Melville is undeniably aware of the devastating affects of capitalism and colonialism, as is explicitly demonstrated in "Fast Fish and Loose Fish" (IXV). There is, however, a misrepresentation of Melville's exhaustive demonstration of nature's domination over humanity's finitude.

This quote is often misrepresented as an acknowledgment of failure, not a recognition of superiority. For example, John Wenke, in *Melville's Muse* fails to present the key part of the paragraph in which Ahab recognizes the cowardice of the wind, and asserts his own bravery – providing only ellipses. By so doing, he characterizes the passage by saying, "Ironically, his admiration of the wind defines his own quixotic futility." This is an utter misrepresentation of the quote, in which Ahab values his courage over the indomitable power of the wind.

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