“Another Orphan”: Trauma and Transcendental Homelessness in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale*

To understand home we need to understand homelessness, and in few other novels is home as fundamentally absent as in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale* (1851). We find, for instance, that the crew of the Pequod and its monomaniac leader, Captain Ahab, spend most of the narrative far from home, with only one of the mariners returning from the voyage to tell the tale. We learn, too, that the loved ones who have remained at home can only communicate with the Pequod via letters entrusted to outward-bound whalers – letters that may take years to reach their addressees, and perhaps will never arrive at all (196; ch. 53). The sailors’ physical absence from home is thus exacerbated by an almost complete lack of communicative ties to their home communities.

In what follows, we will focus in particular on Ishmael’s and Ahab’s sense of unbelonging, and on how it can be read in relation to such diverse ideas as Emersonian self-reliance, post-traumatic stress disorder, and Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. We will begin the discussion by examining Ishmael’s profound sense of alienation, which he attempts to combat through discursive constructions of universal belonging that seem persuasive but which, on closer inspection, turn out to be highly problematic. One way of interpreting Ishmael’s alienation is to see it as arising from his lack of self-reliance – in contrast to Ahab, who in many ways embodies Emerson’s ideal. At the same time, *Moby-Dick* undermines any simple binary opposition between Ishmael and Ahab, and the novel in effect constitutes a sustained critique of the concept of self-reliance as such. Moreover, we will find that both Ishmael and Ahab come from broken homes, and that both suffer from very particular kinds of unbelonging: social alienation in the case of Ishmael, and mental alienation (or ‘madness’) in the case of Ahab. Ultimately, though both experience moments of spiritual comfort that could in fact help them to combat alienation, neither Ishmael nor Ahab manages to overcome their profound sense of homelessness.

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If belonging proves elusive for Melville’s characters, for us as readers it is likewise difficult ever to feel at home in a novel that, from the very outset, confronts us with highly unusual kinds of textuality. The following, for instance, are the opening paragraphs of *Moby-Dick*:

**Etymology**

*(Supplied by a Late Consumptive Usher to a Grammar School)*

[The pale Usher – threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain; I see him now. He was ever dusting his old lexicons and grammars, with a queer handkerchief, mockingly embellished with all the gay flags of all the known nations of the world. He loved to dust his old grammars; it somehow mildly reminded him of his mortality.]

Etymology

“While you take in hand to school others, and to teach them by what name a whale-fish is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true.”

Hackluyt.

“WHALE. * * * Sw. and Dan. hval. This animal is named from roundness or rolling; for in Dan. hvalt is arched or vaulted.”

Webster’s Dictionary.

Even in purely formal terms, these paragraphs are likely to strike one as odd: square as well as round brackets, indented quotations, asterisks and a title – “Etymology” – that appears twice, once in a larger font and once in italics. Likewise, these paragraphs prove unsettling in terms of content, as they confront us with an eccentric figure who is no longer alive (“Late Consumptive Usher”; emphasis added), as well as with the twin possibility of mockery and untruth (“mockingly embellished,” “you deliver that which is not true”). It does not help, moreover, that this first section on the etymology of the word *whale* is followed by a longer and equally puzzling section containing eighty quotations on whales from a seemingly random array of texts (e.g. the Book of Genesis, Montaigne’s *Apology for Raimond Sebond*, and *Captain Cowley’s Voyage round the Globe*). These “Extracts,” as they are referred to in the text, were apparently *Supplied by a Sub-Sub-Librarian,* whom the narrator calls a “pains-taking burrower and grub-worm of a poor devil” (8; original emphasis). In short, the opening of *Moby-Dick* is one of the oddest in the literary canon, and perhaps the best indicator of just how unhomely it feels to most readers – including some leading...
literary critics – is the fact that they tend simply to ignore these sections, pretending instead that the novel opens with the first phrase of chapter one: “Call me Ishmael” (e.g. Eagleton, *How to Read Literature* 23; Edinger 22; Peretz 36). More generally, we will find that *Moby-Dick* is “a work that breaks all boundaries of genre” (Robert K. Martin 11) – a novel that juxtaposes various styles and registers and that continually raises expectations which it then proceeds to thwart. In *Moby-Dick*, characters as well as readers thus find it exceedingly difficult to establish a sense of home; significantly, the novel’s final word is “orphan” (427; “Epilogue”). *Moby-Dick* has often been read as a Great American Novel (Buell 138), and the desire to do so – i.e. to use it, as Nick Selby puts it, to “define what American literature might be” (8) – perhaps constitutes an indirect response to the fundamental sense of homelessness conveyed by the text: a desire to fill the void of unbelonging by turning Melville’s novel itself into a symbolic key to the imagined community of the American nation. And indeed, we will see that there is good reason to read Melville’s tale as an allegory of the ship of the American state – a ship that has strayed dangerously far from its intended course. However, we will also find that the novel simultaneously discourages allegorical readings. Like the Pequod’s crew, readers are thus tossed to and fro on the stormy seas of *Moby-Dick*, unable to find that “final harbor, whence we unmoor no more” (373; ch. 114); like Ahab, we eventually begin to wonder “whether the world is anchored anywhere” (385; ch. 121). Both formally and thematically, *Moby-Dick* is thus a deeply agnostic novel: admitting to, even longing for, the possibility of transcendence, but failing truly to believe in the existence of a transcendental home. Indeed, Melville’s novel even suggests that an unconditional belief in transcendence is likely to lead to personal as well as political disaster, and it is only in the most fleeting of moments that it seems possible to discern, on the horizon of *Moby-Dick*’s narrative universe, a utopian alternative

3 For a slightly different and more detailed reading of “Extracts” and “Etymology,” see Robert T. Tally, Jr., *Melville, Mapping and Globalization* 54–61.

4 See Benedict Anderson, who defines the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). For an illuminating discussion of the concept of the Great American Novel, see Lawrence Buell, “The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel: Moby-Dick as Test Case.” One of Buell’s key points in this essay is that “a great American novel project must be transnational and also transgeneric” (138).

5 See also Robert T. Tally, Jr, who notes the strong tendency by critics to read *Moby-Dick* “as an essentially American national narrative,” but who himself emphasizes “the powerful postnational energies” of Melville’s novel (*Melville, Mapping and Globalization* 51 and 54).
to orphaned existence: moments of common endeavor and bodily comfort in which the question of transcendence is suspended in favor of a home in the here and now.

**Alienation and Home-Making Practices**

The problem of homelessness and alienation proves central to Ishmael’s narrative from the very beginning – and Ishmael provides us with notably contradictory explanations for his sense of ‘unbelonging.’ Looking back, as a narrator, to the time before he joined the Pequod’s crew, Ishmael attempts to explain his fateful decision to go to sea. At first, Ishmael’s light-hearted tone suggests that this decision was entirely incidental: “[H]aving little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world” (18; ch. 1). However, we can reasonably doubt whether Ishmael’s decision is indeed based merely on the whim of a moment, both because he in fact admits to a lack of financial resources (“little or no money”) and because the phrase “nothing particular to interest me on shore” barely conceals a fundamental sense of isolation: Ishmael has no interest on shore – neither financial, nor intellectual, nor emotional. There is, in short, nothing and no one there who could make him want to stay. Ishmael’s subsequent remarks confirm that we are dealing here with an underlying problem:

> Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off – then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. (18; ch. 1)

Ishmael’s use of the word “whenever” in this passage reveals that a profound sense of alienation is a recurring problem in his life, and that his going to sea is a rather desperate attempt to prevent himself from committing random acts of aggression against innocent bystanders (“methodically knocking people’s hats off”). His genial tone should thus not seduce us into underestimating the extent of his crisis of unbelonging.

The idea that Ishmael’s sense of alienation is more fundamental than it appears at first sight is confirmed by his very name, which constitutes an intertextual link to biblical exile. According to the bible, Ishmael is one of the sons of Abraham, and God prophesies before his birth that Ishmael’s “hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him” (Genesis 16: 12). The name Ishmael is therefore, as Wadlington Warwick observes, “a synonym for
alienation between the name-bearer and all other men” (141). Moreover, the phrase Melville’s first-person narrator uses to open his tale – “Call me Ishmael” (emphasis added) – sounds as if we were not given the narrator’s real name, but instead a pseudonym chosen “for patently symbolic reasons” (Warwick 141; see also Eagleton, How to Read Literature 23). Like the deceptively light-hearted passages discussed above, the narrator’s name thus indicates that all is not well between him and his fellow men.

At the same time, it is possible to read the choice of the name Ishmael as one instance of what Samuel Kimball calls Ishmael’s desire to “make a narrative home of homelessness” (541): to mitigate his own sense of alienation by refracting his experience through the stories of others. Sigmund Freud, for instance, suggests that comparisons and analogies have the capacity to reduce unfamiliarity: “[W]e compare the less familiar with the more familiar, [...] and use the comparison to explain the item that is more difficult and unfamiliar” (The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious 202; see Punter 90). Accordingly, if the name is indeed a pseudonym adopted by Melville’s narrator, then the implicit comparison between his own experiences and the familiar biblical story of Ishmael may be read as an attempt symbolically to reduce his sense of isolation. Perhaps more importantly, however, the intertextual reference serves to reduce unfamiliarity on the part of the reader – at least, that is, if we assume “that writer and audience possess a common knowledge” (Warwick 141), for the allusion only has this effect for those who are familiar with the biblical narrative. This, in turn, reminds us of the double-edged quality of intertextual home-making practices, as those readers who are unfamiliar with the biblical narrative may end up feeling excluded from the novel’s implied readership (see introduction).

Examining further the biblical parallel established in Moby-Dick, we find that both the novel’s narrator and the biblical Ishmael are treated badly by their step-mothers, which may imply that there is a link between alienation in later life and the lack of a stable childhood home. In the biblical account, Abraham’s wife, Sarah, at first proves unable to bear children, and so Abraham “went in
unto Hagar,” Sarah’s maid, who eventually gave birth to Ishmael (Genesis 21: 16; KJV). Immediately there is strong tension between Sarah and her maid, and when many years later Sarah miraculously gives birth to Isaac, she urges Abraham to banish Ishmael and his mother: “Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son” (Genesis 21: 10; KJV). Initially Abraham is reluctant, but when God assures him that he will protect Ishmael, Abraham complies with Sarah’s wish to have Ishmael removed from the community. The relationship between Sarah and her stepson can thus hardly be called particularly loving. Similarly, in Moby-Dick, the narrator recalls that his stepmother “was all the time whipping me, or sending me to bed supperless” (37; ch. 4). This, in turn, explains the narrator’s choice of metaphor later in the novel, when he speaks of a “step-mother world, so long cruel – forbidding” (405; ch. 132). Never fully at home even as a child, Melville’s Ishmael remains unable to belong in later years.8

The resulting desire to “make a narrative home of homelessness” (Kimball 541) explains, among other things, why Ishmael is so interested in the character of Perth, a blacksmith, whose alienation from society, too, is connected to a broken home. Ishmael introduces Perth, whose function on the level of plot is relatively marginal, with a detailed account of the story of his life.9 Formerly an “artisan of famed excellence,” with a “youthful, daughter-like, loving wife, and three blithe, ruddy children,” Perth becomes fatefully addicted to alcohol and eventually goes bankrupt, with his wife and children dying in abject poverty (368–369; ch. 112):

Death seems the only desirable sequel for a career like this; but Death is only a launching into the region of the strange Untried; it is but the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored; therefore, to the death-longing eyes of such men, who still have left in them some interior compunctions against suicide, does the all-contributed and all-receptive ocean alluringly spread forth his whole plain of unimaginable, taking terrors, and wonderful, new-life adventures [...]. (369; ch. 112)

Forever estranged from the “equally abhorred and abhorring, landed world” (369; ch. 112), Perth seeks refuge in the oblivious infinity of the “all-receptive ocean” – partly because of “some interior compunctions against suicide.” This latter point is important because Ishmael, too, has felt tempted to end his life,

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8 McLoughlin, by contrast, argues that Ishmael’s biblical name links all sailors to outcasts” (61).
9 Later in the novel, Perth forges a new harpoon for Ahab shortly before the climactic chase of Moby Dick (370–372; ch. 113).
but opts for going to sea instead, as a “substitute for pistol and ball”; “With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship” (18; ch. 1). Both Perth and Ishmael, then, are trying to escape from the memories of broken homes, and going to sea is an attempt to prevent aggression not only against others, but also against themselves: a truly Freudian sublimation of a seemingly implacable death drive.

Of course, in Freudian psychoanalysis, the death drive is not merely the bane of unhappy individuals with difficult pasts, but a universal condition of human life. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that Ishmael – after initially portraying his urge to go to sea as merely an incidental, individual problem – suddenly suggests that all humans necessarily suffer from a similar sense of alienation. Ishmael at first remains relatively cautious, asserting only that “almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean” (18; ch. 1, emphasis added). However, he quickly abandons any such show of circumspection, suggesting instead that man’s mysterious attraction to the ocean is an inevitable by-product of human selfhood as such:

Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (19–20; ch. 1; emphasis added)

Gone are such guarded phrases as “very nearly” or “almost.” Instead, Ishmael now claims that all of us (“we ourselves”) share Narcissus’s fatal attraction to watery reflections.

Ishmael’s theory thus has strong affinities with Jacques Lacan’s account of the development of subjectivity. Lacan describes the mirror stage as an irreversible process of subject-formation through alienation:

10 The following passage may serve to exemplify Freud’s position: “The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction” (Civilization and Its Discontents 111; see also Thurschwell 88–89). The German original runs: “Die Schicksalsfrage der Menschenaart scheint mir zu sein, ob und in welchem Masse es ihrer Kulturentwicklung gelingen wird, der Störung des Zusammenlebens durch den menschlichen Aggressions- und Selbstvernichtungstrieb Herr zu werden” (Das Unbehagen in der Kultur 256).
[T]he mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation – and, for the subject caught up in its lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an ‘orthopedic’ form of its totality – and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. (“The Mirror Stage” 78)

Lacan is a notoriously difficult thinker, but Pam Morris has provided an excellent paraphrase of his argument regarding the mirror stage and its role in the formation of the subject:

According to Lacan, at the mirror-phase of the infant’s development, it achieves a joyful perception of itself as a unified being, physically separate and independent from its surrounding world – an image of itself such as it might indeed see in a mirror. This recognition of a specular image offers a wholly desirable self in contrast to the infant’s actual state of total dependence, uncoordinated motor skills, and boundary uncertainty between itself and the world. It is, however, misrecognition, since self can never be identical to image. Thus the narcissistic desire for a unified self initiated in the mirror stage and pursued throughout life is always for a phantasy, for the imaginary ego-ideal. This first splitting of the subject into a perceiving self and a self as imaged is repeated in the next phase of development – entry into the Symbolic Order. A sense of individual subjectivity is constituted with the acquisition of the first person pronoun singular, but as with the specular image there exists an unclosable gap between the ‘I’ who speaks and the ‘I’ which is the subject of that discourse. These two phases of development, the mirror stage and entry into language, constitute the subject’s sense of self as an autonomous individual, but, since this image is an imaginary ideal, the subject is decentred and driven always by narcissistic desire after the unified ego-ideal it can never attain. (Dickens’s Class Consciousness 4–5)

As Morris observes, the Lacanian subject is decentered and driven by narcissistic desire, and Sean Homer rightly argues that Lacan defines the ego as “the effect of images” – a function of “misrecognition; of refusing to accept the truth of fragmentation and alienation” (Homer 25). All humans, in this view, are alienated, and in a sense the ego’s work is to disguise this fact from the subject. The mystifying work of the ego in turn renders it necessary for exceptionally insightful individuals – such as Lacan or Ishmael – to draw our attention to the hidden fact of alienation as a universal human condition. In short, while Ishmael initially portrays his decision to go to sea as merely his own individual problem,
he later tries to convince us that the condition is in fact rooted in the alienated subjec
tood he shares with Narcissus and, indeed, with us all.11

Ishmael’s Rhetorical Shifts
We ought to note, however, that Ishmael misrepresents the myth of Narcissus – a fact that should alert us to the possibility that his rhetoric, though powerful, may at the same time be misleading. In Ishmael’s account, Narcissus dies by drowning, yet this is not the case in any of the extant versions of the myth. In traditional accounts, Narcissus either kills himself with a sword, or he dies of thirst because he no longer dares to disturb the water that reflects his beloved mirror-image (Bremmer 712; Grimal 302). Harrison Hayford is of course right in arguing that Ishmael’s presentation of the myth is better suited to Melville’s novel (660), since the story of Narcissus’s death by drowning in the first chapter beautifully foreshadows the drowning of Ahab and his crew at the end of the *Moby-Dick*. However, in contrast to Hayford, we need to emphasize that Ishmael’s version of the myth of Narcissus is “the key to it all” – as Ishmael himself puts it (20; ch. 1) – not because this story discloses a universal truth, but precisely because it constitutes a case of misrepresentation on Ishmael’s part. After all, while Ishmael’s Lacanian view of an inherently alienating selfhood may be convincing as such, it clearly fails to answer the question he originally posed to himself: What is it that compelled him (and not anyone else, or even all of us) to go to sea? A theory of universal alienation cannot explain Ishmael’s particular choice, and accordingly we must remain skeptical of his rhetorical shift from contingent circumstances (lack of money and emotional “interest”) via alienation as a recurring problem in his life (“whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul”) to alienation as a basic human condition. Indeed, rather than accepting Ishmael’s interpretation of alienation as a universal truth, we should see it as yet another attempt to make a home of homelessness: a measure of Ishmael’s desire to belong and simply be just like everyone else.

In order better to understand the problematic elision underlying Ishmael’s rhetorical sleight of hand, we may adopt Richard Schmitt’s distinction between, on the one hand, the precondition for alienation, and, on the other, alienation itself. According to Schmitt, alienation “is a threat in human lives because we live as persons we did not choose to be in a world not of our own making” (48). For Schmitt, the body illustrates well that though we may have a good deal of influence on our life, we can never fully control or understand it; we cannot

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11 For extended discussions of the myth of Narcissus and its significance for literature and subjec
exist without a body, nor can we choose our body freely. Moreover, as our body constitutes both the basis of our existence and the root cause of our mortality, our relationship towards it is, in Schmitt’s view, fundamentally ambivalent (46–47). Schmitt further contends that this ambivalence is related to Martin Heidegger’s notion of Geworfenheit (‘thrownness’):

> Because we are geworfen (thrown) into this world, we do not know it […]. We find ourselves in the world, as we grow up, and need to discover its traits. We are not born understanding the world, nor do we know who we are ourselves but must discover that as life goes on. (48–49)

Just as the body is a home in which we can never feel fully at home, so do both the world and the self necessarily retain an unhomely (or uncanny) core.12

However, while all humans share this precondition for alienation, circumstances will shape the way in which they will have to confront it. Accordingly, Schmitt rightly insists that “the struggle against the precondition of alienation is much more difficult for some people than for others” – not least because some lives “are too burdened by external conditions” (51). Some people, that is to say, lack the material or mental resources to deal adequately with the fundamental ambivalence of the human condition, either because of individual experiences (e.g. a traumatic childhood), or because they live in societies that “systematically starve their members of the opportunities to learn how to live” (Schmitt 76).13

In other words, while it is impossible to remedy the precondition of alienation – or what Dominick LaCapra has called “structural or existential trauma” (History and Memory after Auschwitz 47) – we may distinguish between those societies that enable their members to cope with the Geworfenheit of human existence, and those societies that withhold the necessary resources or even exacerbate alienation. Applying Schmitt’s distinction to Moby-Dick, we can thus say that Ishmael subtly shifts from a more specific sense of alienation as the result of particular circumstances to the precondition for alienation (i.e. the idea that human selfhood itself makes alienation possible), thereby obscuring the biographical and social roots of his own condition.

And indeed, once we begin to view Ishmael’s rhetoric more skeptically, we find that some of his other explanations, too, fail to solve the problems he pretends to address. For instance, after having – ostensibly – answered the question

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12 Terry Eagleton is one of many critics who have expressed similar ideas: “Human beings move at the conjuncture of the concrete and the universal, body and symbolic medium; but this is not a place where anyone can feel blissfully at home” (The Idea of Culture 97).

13 Richard Schmitt here refers to a condition that Miranda Fricker has termed “hermeneutical injustice” (1).
why he decided to go to sea, Ishmael tries to explain why he chose to do so as a common sailor rather than as a passenger. The first reason he offers is, once again, pecuniary: “For to go as a passenger you must needs have a purse, and a purse is but a rag unless you have something in it” (20; ch. 1). Ishmael’s decision is thus due primarily to his want of financial resources. However, he immediately adds that he would rather be a sailor than a passenger anyway because passengers generally “do not enjoy themselves much” (20; ch. 1). Moreover, Ishmael claims that he prefers being a “simple sailor” to being “a Commodore, or a Captain, or a Cook” because he strongly dislikes “all honorable and respectable toils” (20; ch. 1). Not only is this assertion at odds with his later arguments for the dignity of whaling (e.g. ch. 82, “The Honor and Glory of Whaling”); it is also difficult to reconcile Ishmael’s first two explanations – lack of money, and a preference for lowly work – with the third reason he gives for deciding to become a sailor: “It is quite as much as I can do to take care of myself, without taking care of ships, barques, brigs, schooners, and what not” (20; ch. 1). In yet another rhetorical shift, Ishmael now claims that his becoming a sailor rather than a commander was not truly an act of choice, but instead derives from his awareness that he is barely able to take care of himself and therefore quite simply unable to assume any responsibility for others. There is thus, once again, a move from an apparently contingent cause – Ishmael’s lack of money, combined with a proud disdain for the easy life of the passenger – to an underlying, more general problem in his life.

Furthermore, not content with this shift from free choice to inability, Ishmael then tries to remold his argument into a general philosophy of life. In order to explain why he is perfectly content to bear the indignities associated with the life of a common sailor, Ishmael resorts to a lofty notion of metaphysical justice:

What of it, if some old hunks of a sea-captain orders me to get a broom and sweep down the decks? What does that indignity amount to, weighed, I mean, in the scales of the New Testament? [...] Who aint [sic] a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about – however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way – either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content. (21; ch. 1)

Ishmael here transforms what could be a cause for discontent – i.e. the fact that his decision to go to sea was dictated by poverty – into a philosophy of political quietism: one should simply be content with whatever life happens to offer because everybody is a slave in one way or another. Friedrich Nietzsche would,
arguably, deride Ishmael’s humility as one variant of what Nietzsche called “slave morality”: a morality of the oppressed that values “the kind, helping hand,” and that regards power as inherently evil (Beyond Good and Evil 203; § 260). At any rate, even if we are less polemically inclined than Nietzsche, Ishmael’s claim that he prefers working as a common sailor to being a commander “because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecastle deck,” as well as his suggestion that it is often “the commonality [who] lead their leaders,” look suspiciously like wishful thinking (21; ch. 1). What Ishmael wants us to believe, in effect, is that he dislikes both the “honorable toils” of a commander (which he is unable to perform) and the comfort of the passenger (which he cannot afford), preferring instead a life of indignities because such indignities are, ultimately, shared equally by all – at least from a metaphysical point of view. In short, Ishmael prefers to do what he cannot help doing because it is morally correct anyway ("I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right"). This may be a comforting philosophy for our narrator (as well as for others who find themselves in dire straits), but it is hardly a convincing analysis of the situation. And indeed, even Ishmael himself admits that he is at a loss to explain why he decided to enlist on a “whaling voyage” rather than to join a merchant ship, as he had done on previous occasions. He concludes that this mystery must form “part of the grand program of Providence” (21–22; ch. 1). What began as a simple question of money – or, to be precise, the lack of it – has thus miraculously metamorphosed into the providential shape of a transcendental necessity.

The key point of the discussion so far is that Ishmael does everything in his rhetorical power to mitigate a fundamental sense of unbelonging. His humorous tone, for instance, constitutes an attempt to downplay the seriousness of the condition he describes. In addition, he goes out of his way to find other stories that are similar to his: the biblical Ishmael’s, Perth’s, and even the myth of Narcissus. However, Ishmael succumbs to the temptation to use these stories – particularly the myth of Narcissus – to diffuse the historical particularity of his situation; he no longer appears as an alienated outsider, but as someone who shares in a universal human condition. This strategy provides Ishmael with symbolical comfort, but it also comes at a political cost, as it leads him to embrace

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14 In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche describes slave morality as follows: "Supposing that the abused, the oppressed, the suffering, the unemancipated, the weary, and those uncertain of themselves, should moralise, what will be the common element in their moral estimates? [...] The slave has an unfavourable eye for the virtues of the powerful" (203; § 260). The German original runs: “Gesetzt, dass die Vergewaltigten, Gedrückten, Leidenden, Unfreien, ihrer selbst Ungewissen und Müden moralisieren: was wird das Gleichartige ihrer moralischen Wertschätzungen sein? [...] Der Blick des Sklaven ist abgünstig für die Tugenden des Mächtigen” (Jenseits von Gut und Böse 242; § 260).
a quietist worldview in which resistance to injustice finds little conceptual space. We discover, in short, that there is sometimes a very thin line between, on the one hand, the desire to belong, and, on the other, a problematic kind of moral conformism that impairs one’s ability to question the status quo.

**A Soul Not at Home: Ishmael, Ahab, and Emersonian Self-Reliance**

Rather than accept Ishmael’s own theories, we should therefore look for alternative explanations for his decision to go to sea, and one productive option is to regard it as resulting from a lack of what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls “Self-Reliance.” Comparing Emerson’s 1841 essay with Melville’s novel, we find that there are many surprisingly literal links between the two texts. For instance, in “Self-Reliance,” Emerson explicitly mentions whaling (191), and he later writes of his preference for “the silent church before the service begins” (192) – a scene that Ishmael describes in great detail early on in *Moby-Dick* (ch. 7–8). Similarly, Ishmael’s depiction of the Pacific Islander Queequeg’s quick recovery from illness towards the end of the novel (366; ch. 110) echoes very closely Emerson’s claim that the white man has lost the “aboriginal strength” that “the savage” still possesses (200). Given these strikingly direct parallels, it seems reasonable to bring the two texts into a more sustained dialogue.

For a start, we must note just how far Ishmael is from embodying Emerson’s ideal of a self-reliant man. Ishmael’s idea of a “joint-stock world” (64; ch. 13), for instance, closely parallels Emerson’s notion that society “is a joint-stock company” (“Self-Reliance” 178) – yet Melville’s narrator uses the expression in an emphatically positive sense (i.e. to explain why Queequeg risked his own life to save someone else’s), whereas for Emerson the phrase designates a market-place mentality that leads to conformity and slavish dependence. Given these diametrically opposed points of view, it is perhaps not surprising that Ishmael fails to heed one of Emerson’s central admonitions: not to mistake “mechanical” (i.e. physical) isolation from society for “spiritual” isolation, which alone can lead to “elevation” (192). Emerson insists that “the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (181), and that a person “who travels to be amused, or to get somewhat he does not carry, travels away from himself” (198). For Emerson, the self-reliant man should thus...

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15 There is, in fact, historical evidence that Melville “was reading Emerson when he was composing *Moby-Dick*” (Gray 132). Indeed, Melville read sections of “Self-Reliance” either “not long before, and possibly during, his composition of *Moby-Dick*” (McLoughlin 79).

16 McLoughlin also notes that Ishmael’s use of the concept is “a far cry from the concept of ‘the joint-stock company’ in ‘Self-Reliance’” (80).
“be admonished to stay at home,” and to put his genius “in communication with the internal ocean” (191–192; emphasis added). Ishmael, by contrast, cannot stay “with perfect sweetness” amongst the crowd, but is tempted to knock people’s hats off; he does not aim at spiritual elevation, but opts for mechanical isolation instead: for leaving home and traveling on the world’s external seas.

Seeing that Ishmael fails to meet Emerson’s standards of self-reliance, one might suppose that Ahab, the non-conforming and awe-inspiring commander of the Pequod, must figure as his polar opposite: a kind of Nietzschean Übermensch who, instead of subscribing to a humble “slave morality,” manages to subordinate others to his will. According to Emerson, the self-reliant man does not obey the customs of society, but lives “wholly from within”; no law is sacred to him but that of his own nature: “[I]f I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil” (“Self-Reliance” 179). It is a small step from this Emersonian belief that “the only right is what is after my constitution” (179) to Nietzsche’s notion of the great individual who, rather than following external laws, creates his own values and laws (Beyond Good and Evil 208; § 262). Nietzsche insists that mediocre people fear everything that lifts the individual up over the herd, and that therefore they decry such a person as evil (113; § 201). By contrast, Nietzsche himself holds that truly “noble” men not only live beyond good and evil, but are also humanity’s only hope for salvation:

17 See Emerson’s warnings against an excess of “intellectual nomadism” in his essay on “History”; while the “home-keeping wit” faces the peril of “monotony and deterioration,” the intellectual nomad “bankrupts the mind through the dissipation of power on a miscellany of objects” (161–162). Emerson’s distinction between “intellectual nomadism” and the “home-keeping wit” will be discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter.

18 “[T]he greater, more manifold, more comprehensive life is lived beyond the old morality; the ‘individual’ stands out, and is obliged to have recourse to his own law-giving, his own arts and artifices for self-preservation, self-elevation, and self-deliverance” (Beyond Good and Evil 208; § 262; original emphasis). The German original runs: “[D]as grösere, vielfachere, umfänglichere Leben [lebt] über die alte Moral hinweg […]; das ‘Individuum’ steht da, genöthigt zu einer eigenen Gesetzgebung, zu eigenen Künsten und Listen der Selbst-Erhaltung, Selbst-Erhöhung, Selbst-Erlösung” (Jenseits von Gut und Böse 248; § 262; original emphasis).

19 “[E]verything that elevates the individual above the herd, and is a source of fear to the neighbour, is henceforth called evil; the tolerant, unassuming, self-adapting, self-equalising disposition, the mediocrity of desires, attains to moral distinction and honour” (Beyond Good and Evil 113; § 201; original emphasis). The German original runs: “[A]lles, was den Einzeln über die Herde hinaushebt und dem Nächsten Furcht macht, heisst von nun an böse; die billige, bescheidene, sich einordnende, gleichsetzende Gesinnung, das Mittelmass der Begierden kommt zu moralischen Namen und Ehren” (Jenseits von Gut und Böse 134; § 201; original emphasis).
[W]here do we have to fix our hopes? In new philosophers – there is no alternative [...]. To teach man the future of humanity as his will, as depending on human will, and to make preparation for vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempts in rearing and educating, in order thereby to put an end to the frightful rule of folly and chance which has hitherto gone by the name of “history” [...] – for that purpose a new type of philosophers and commanders will some time or other be needed, at the very idea of which everything that has existed in the way of the occult, terrible, and benevolent beings might look pale and dwarfed. (117; § 203; original emphasis).

Such a new philosopher or commander, for Nietzsche, has an “unalterable belief that to a being such as ‘we’, other beings must naturally be in subjection, and have to sacrifice themselves” (212; § 265).21 Nietzsche thus agrees with Emerson, who maintains that “the strong spirits will overpower those around them without effort” (“The Transcendentalist” 256). Indeed, George J. Stack has suggested that “the parallels between Nietzsche’s depiction of the Übermensch and Emerson’s scattered descriptions of sovereign individuals could be multiplied beyond necessity” (333), and accordingly Stack speaks of an elective affinity between the two philosophers.22 Though Emerson is generally more optimistic than Nietzsche, retaining a belief in an “eternal trinity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty” (“The Transcendentalist” 255; see Mikics 230), both philosophers share a sense that contemporary society weakens its members, and that there is a need for exceptional individuals (such as Ahab) who dare to fly in the face of custom.

If we now examine the episodes in which Ahab, the sovereign individual, overpowers the weaker humans around him, we once again find striking par-

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22 See also Mikics, who notes as a shared concern of Emerson and Nietzsche “the wish to be perfected and to be guided by the allure of the exemplary (Emerson’s central or representative man, Nietzsche’s Übermensch)” (1); and Weber, who argues that the true man, for Emerson “just as later for Nietzsche, is necessarily beyond the common morality” (75).
allels between *Moby-Dick’s* plot and Emerson’s philosophical imagery. Ahab’s charismatic personality is first presented fully in a scene where he announces his quest for revenge against Moby Dick to the sailors under his command. The crew soon find themselves carried away by their captain’s rhetoric, gazing “curiously at each other, as if marveling how it was that they themselves became so excited” (138; ch. 36). Within a few moments, the sailors grow “frantic” (142; ch. 36), and Ishmael admits both to a dread in his soul – what Nietzsche would arguably interpret as the mediocre person’s fear of the exceptional – and to a “wild, sympathetical feeling” that made Ahab’s feud seem Ishmael’s own (152; ch. 41). Moreover, a later episode that illustrates Ahab’s power to dominate weaker spirits literalizes effectively a series of metaphors from Emerson’s essay “The Transcendentalist.” After Ahab, in a burst of rage, has destroyed his quadrant (378; ch. 118), we find the Pequod trapped in a thunderstorm and enveloped by glowing “corpusants” (i.e. St. Elmo’s fire). The sailors cower in superstitious fear and even utter “a half mutinous cry,” but Ahab snatches his harpoon – from the steel barb of which comes “a levelled flame of pale, forked fire” – and threatens to kill anyone who defies him (383; ch. 119). Let us now compare this to a passage from Emerson:

> [I]n society, besides farmers, *sailors*, and weavers, there must be a few *persons of purer fire* kept specially as gauges and meters of character; persons of a fine, detecting instinct, who betray the smallest accumulations of wit and feeling in the bystander. Perhaps too there might be room for the *exciters* and monitors; *collectors of the heavenly spark* with power to *convey the electricity to others*. Or, as the *storm-tossed vessel at sea* speaks the frigate or ‘line packet’ to learn its longitude, so it may not be without its advantage that we should now and then encounter rare and gifted men, to compare the points of our *spiritual compass*, and verify our bearings from superior chronometers. (“The Transcendentalist” 257; emphasis added)

Emerson mentions “exciters,” “sailors” and a “storm-tossed vessel”; we read of a “spiritual compass” and a “collector of heavenly sparks,” who can “convey the electricity to others.” In short, the episode in *Moby-Dick* incorporates Emerson’s imagery almost verbatim, which underlines Ahab’s position as a self-reliant, Emersonian individual (and simultaneously as a Nietzschean Übermensch). However, the catastrophic outcome of Ahab’s quest to kill Moby Dick ought to make us wary of reading Ahab’s self-reliance in an overly positive light – a point to which we will return.
Ahab, Trauma, and the Community of Suffering

While in many ways Ahab offers a stark contrast to Ishmael and his humble “slave morality,” we must also acknowledge the many similarities between the two characters. For instance, like Ishmael, Ahab comes from a broken home; he is the son of a “crazy, widowed mother, who died when he was only a twelve-month old” (78; ch. 16). In addition, both Ishmael and Ahab believe that the body (and material existence in general) is ultimately insubstantial when measured against the transcendent soul, for just as Ishmael sees in his body “but the lees” of his “better being” (45; ch. 7), Ahab insists that “immaterial are all materials” (396; ch. 128). Of course, John Wenke is right when he points out that Ahab – in contrast to Ishmael (and Emerson) – is an “inverted Platonist” who believes that the transcendent source of life is malignant (706). However, the key point in this context is that neither Ahab nor Ishmael question the idea of transcendence as such. Similarly, Ishmael’s statement that humankind seems, for the most part, “a mob of unnecessary duplicates” (356; ch. 107) strongly resembles Ahab’s view on the matter, which the latter makes explicit in a conversation with his first and second mates: “You two are the opposite poles of one thing: Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind; and Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors!” (413; ch. 133). The many differences between Ishmael and Ahab should thus not blind us to the fact that they also share certain views and characteristics.23

As Wenke observes, this spiritual convergence between Ahab and Ishmael has “its culminating, and most teasing, manifestation” in one of world literature’s great textual cruxes (710): a speech that has been attributed to both Ahab the character and Ishmael the narrator, and which is therefore worth quoting in its entirety:

Oh, grassy glades! oh, ever vernal endless landscapes in the soul; in ye, [...] men yet may roll, like young horses in new morning clover; and for some few fleeting moments, feel the cool dew of the life immortal on them. Would to God these blessed calms would last. But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm. There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; [...] once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling’s father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose un-
wedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it. (373; ch. 114)

In the first edition of *Moby-Dick*, this speech on orphaned souls and man’s fundamental homelessness was printed without quotation marks, and though they were added in later editions to make clear that the speech is Ahab’s and not Ishmael’s, their earlier absence points to a potential ambiguity that surely must, as Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford put it with admirable understatement, have “implications for any critical argument that takes Ishmael and Ahab as embodying opposing values” (373n1). Both Ishmael and Ahab believe in transcendence, and both feel deeply alienated; both come from broken homes; and both become obsessed with Moby Dick: Ahab with capturing the whale itself, and Ishmael with mastering the telling of its tale.

If we ask why, precisely, Ahab is bent on killing Moby Dick, one possible answer is to relate his obsession to a post-traumatic crisis. Ahab was mutilated in an encounter with Moby Dick, losing his leg (108; ch. 28) and consequently suffering a profound violation of his bodily integrity: a defining characteristic of traumatic events (Fricke 14). Moreover, as is typical for the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), some time elapses between the traumatic event and the appearance of the patient’s post-traumatic symptoms:

[When Ahab] received the stroke that tore him, he probably but felt the agonizing bodily laceration, but nothing more. Yet, when by this collision forced to turn towards home, and for long months of days and weeks, Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock, rounding in mid winter that dreary, howling Patagonian Cape; then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad. (156; ch. 41)

This brief account opens with Ahab feeling an “agonizing bodily laceration” – in other words, the kind of sensory overload that, once again, is characteristic for traumatic events (Fricke 15–17). Later, like other victims of trauma (Schönfelder 64, 146), Ahab suffers from bouts of depression alternating with fits of feverish hyper-arousal, as well as from a pronounced desire to take revenge. Indeed, hyper-arousal and the desire for revenge coincide in the scene where Ahab discloses his desire to kill Moby Dick to the Pequod’s crew. Only a few moments earlier, Ahab had seemed to be sunk in impenetrable gloom (131; ch. 34); however, Ahab now mesmerizes his rapt audience with a countenance that is “fiercely glad and approving” (137; ch. 35). Since post-traumatic crises negatively affect patients’ interpersonal relationships (e.g. Herman 56), even the fact that Ahab generally remains “inaccessible” to the other members of the crew (*Moby-Dick* 131; ch. 34) may be the symptom of PTSD rather than simply a
character trait. Moreover, in Dominick LaCapra’s terms, Ahab’s trauma is not structural or existential, but historical (i.e. it “is related to specific events”; History and Memory after Auschwitz 47).

Interestingly, in Moby-Dick Ahab feels drawn to others who have suffered from similarly traumatic experiences. For instance, when the Pequod meets a whaling ship from London, Ahab learns that its commander, Captain Boomer, has lost an arm because of Moby Dick. Ahab immediately wants to meet his fellow sufferer, and he greets Captain Boomer in an uncharacteristically sociable manner: “Aye, aye, hearty!” (336–337; ch. 100). Similarly, Ahab responds keenly to the fate of Pip, the black ship’s boy who, on two occasions in the novel, becomes so frightened during the chase of a whale that he jumps overboard. While the first time the others immediately abandon the chase to pick Pip out of the water, the second time they simply leave him behind. Although the sailors rescue Pip once the chase is completed, from that traumatic moment “the little negro went about the deck an idiot” (321; ch. 93). Significantly, when Ahab becomes aware of Pip’s altered condition, his reaction betrays intense emotions:

Lo! ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill, lo you! see the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and, 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! (392; ch. 125)

Ahab, usually so “inaccessible,” suddenly feels that community of suffering which, according to Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, often arises between people with shared experiences – especially if these experiences are of an “extraordinary if not traumatic quality” (47).

Of Masters and Slaves: Power, Isolation, and Recognition
What makes Ahab’s affection for young Pip particularly notable is that the latter is depicted as the very lowest person on board the ship (Fanning 217). For instance, the narrator points out that, “if there happen to be an unduly slender, clumsy, or timorous wight in the ship, that wight is certain to be made a ship-keeper” (319; ch. 93). Moreover, when Pip jumps overboard for the first time, the second mate Stubb upbraids him for being a coward and explicitly warns him that he may not be picked up so quickly next time: “[A] whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama” (321). Stubb, in other words, brutally reminds Pip of his status as a potential slave – a powerful threat in antebellum America, where slavery remained a terribly real threat for someone like Pip.
24 Though the terms slave is a rather problematic translation of the term Knecht, I have decided to retain it not only because the phrase master-slave dialectic is commonly used in discussions of Hegel's Phenomenology, but also because Hegel does actually use the term Sklav(e) in other works (Buck-Morss 52n90). The analysis of the master-slave dialectic constitutes a crucial step in Hegel's argument, for it is intended to demonstrate that no self-conscious being can ever exist as an entirely self-sufficient entity. When two consciousnesses fight for recognition, one initially becomes the dominant “master” or “lord” (Herr), while the other assumes the subservient position of “slave” or “bondsman” (Knecht).24 The master and the slave are, for Hegel, “two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another” (115).25 However, since for Hegel self-consciousness can only exist if it is recognized by another consciousness (112–114), the master also depends on the slave. This in turn renders the relationship between master and slave inherently unstable, for if the former depends on the latter, he cannot be seen as the unconditional master. Full self-consciousness is, then, only possible if recognition occurs between equals: when the master-slave dialectic is overcome or, to use Hegel’s term, sublated (aufgehoben) in a higher unity (Findlay xvii; Houlgate 68).

If we read the relationship between Ahab and Pip in the light of this master-slave dialectic, it becomes significant that Ahab explicitly bemoans his inescapable dependence on others. Ahab, the supreme master of the Pequod, curses “that mortal inter-indebtedness” that makes it impossible for him to “be free as air” (360; ch. 108) – or, we might add, to be truly self-reliant. Fittingly, when Ahab inspects the images on a Spanish doubloon that he has nailed to the Pequod’s main mast as a prize for whoever first sights Moby Dick, he reveals himself as the consummate narcissist:

[L]ook here, – three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too,
is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. (332; ch. 99)

At this point in the novel, Ahab construes the entire world as merely a reflection of himself – which of course renders true recognition of another impossible. It is in the very next chapter, however, that Ahab meets Captain Boomer, and this meeting with a fellow sufferer is the first moment a chink appears in Ahab’s armor of solipsism. Ahab’s empathy for Pip is the next step in this process, and, crucially, one of the first things Ahab notices when he looks at Pip is the latter’s inability to serve as his mirror: “I see not my reflection in the vacant pupils of thy eyes” (392; ch. 125). Whereas the pictures on the doubloon reflected only Ahab’s image of himself, the eyes of the symbolical slave seem to mirror nothing at all. Thus recognizing Pip as a fellow homeless soul, Ahab immediately decides that his own cabin “shall be Pip’s home henceforth” (392; ch. 125). In this way, the community of suffering between Ahab and Pip literally becomes the basis for a new and common home: a home made out of homelessness (as in Ishmael’s rhetorical attempts to universalize his sense of unbelonging).²⁶

At the same time, Ahab realizes that he can only continue his (self-)destructive quest to kill Moby Dick if he does not truly allow himself to accept others as equal human beings who, as such, are constitutive of his own, supposedly sovereign self. When Ahab finds that Pip’s condition is “too curing” for his malady because “[l]ike cures like,” he decides that they ought no longer to spend time together, and he hastily retreats when Pip tells him that he would prefer to “remain a part” of Ahab (399; ch. 129). Ahab is quite explicit about why he can no longer face Pip’s presence: “If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab’s purpose keels up in him” (399; ch. 129). He cannot, in other words, carry on with his single-minded quest if he acknowledges Pip the slave as constitutive of his own masterly self. Indeed, the very language Ahab uses expresses his inner conflict, for he distinguishes between the “me” that Pip addresses (“thou speakest thus to me”), and “Ahab,” another self, to which he refers in the third person only (“Ahab’s purpose keels up in him”).

Though Pip ultimately obeys Ahab’s command to leave him alone, the Pequod’s captain never quite regains his earlier ability easily to deny other humans the recognition they demand. For instance, not much after his final exchange with Pip, Ahab looks into Starbuck’s eyes and discovers the image of “the far

²⁶ cf. Edwin F. Edinger on Ahab’s reaction to Pip: “This is the first of several incidents indicating a growing self-awareness in Ahab, which begins to humanize him even if it is not sufficient to avert his tragic end” (109).
away home” there: the memory of his wife and child (406; ch. 132). Starbuck reacts by emphasizing that he, too, is a husband and father, before urging Ahab to abandon his quest for Moby Dick and, instead, to return to his loved ones. However, Ahab evades the presence of this too familiar Other – we learn that now his “glance was averted” – and instead muses upon the mysterious force that drives him onward:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozzening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural loavings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time [...]? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then 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. (406–407; ch. 132)

Freud would, presumably, point out here that no ego is ever “master in its own house” because of the all-pervasive influence of the unconscious (Introductory Lectures 285).27 Ahab, by contrast, insists that an external force – a malevolent, “hidden lord and master” – must be the cause of his self-alienation. And yet, the crucial point is that Ahab has doubts about his own mastery at all. Far from “defyingly” worshipping the hidden master, as he did not so long ago (382–383; ch. 119), Ahab now seems weary and on the verge of resignation. As readers, we may thus speculate that, had Ahab been given more time to converse with others and truly to reflect on his own situation, he might eventually have overcome his narcissistic isolation and decided to turn homewards instead.

What supports this interpretation is that, in Moby-Dick, isolation from others is not only portrayed as a symptom, but also a cause of mental alienation. For instance, in the case of Pip, it is quite clear that the boy’s madness relates to his experience of absolute isolation after he had jumped overboard a second time, for “the awful lonesomeness” of the open ocean is intolerable to humans: “The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?” (321; ch. 93). In properly Hegelian fashion, Pip’s self cannot survive without the presence of another; bereft of the presence of fellow human beings, the abandoned boy eventually becomes mad. I therefore agree with Sa-

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27 The German original runs: “Die [...] empfindlichste Kränkung aber soll die menschliche Grössensucht durch die heutige psychologische Forschung erfahren, welche dem Ich nachweisen will, dass es nicht einmal Herr im eigenen Hause, sondern auf kärgliche Nachrichten angewiesen bleibt von dem, was unbewusst in seinem Seelenleben vorgeht” (Vorlesungen zur Einführung 295).
muehl Kimball that, in *Moby-Dick*, “selfhood is defined relationally in terms of homelessness,” in the sense that the self is haunted by the specter of abandonment and non-relation (546). Ahab, too, feels the intensity of this pressure, as he confesses to Starbuck after his last farewell to Pip:

> When I think of this life I have led; the desolation of solitude it has been; the masoned, walled-town of a Captain’s exclusiveness, which admits but small entrance to any sympathy from the green country without – oh, weariness! heaviness! Guinea-coast slavery of solitary command! – when I think of all this; only half-suspected, not so keenly known to me before – and how for forty years I have fed upon dry salted fare – fit emblem of the dry nourishment of my soul! [...] – away, whole oceans away, from that young girl-wife I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow – wife? wife? – rather a widow with her husband alive! (405; ch. 132)

Ahab believes that he suffers from more than the common sailor’s homesickness, though his absence from the loved ones at home is a burden, too. What makes his lot particularly difficult to endure is the “Captain’s exclusiveness” – that “Guinea-coast slavery of solitary command” that has for so long isolated him from his crew, the only home available during the years he spent far from his native Nantucket. Once again mastery involves a kind of “slavery” – an insight that for many years Ahab had “only half-suspected.”

The case of Ahab thus supports Terry Eagleton’s claim that power is “naturally solipsistic”: that it “tends to breed fantasy, reducing the self to a state of querulous narcissism” (*After Theory* 132). While the poor and disempowered cannot, according to Eagleton, afford to believe in a world that will simply bend to their every whim and desire, those in power regularly witness the apparent triumph of their own will over matter. Eagleton’s position is thus not entirely unlike Nietzsche’s, who posits a fundamental difference between “noble” and lower souls:

> In all kinds of injury and loss the lower and coarser soul is better off than the nobler soul: the dangers of the latter must be greater, the probability that it will come to grief and perish is in fact immense, considering the multiplicity of the conditions of its existence (Beyond Good and Evil 221; § 276)²⁸

²⁸ *Bei aller Art von Verletzung und Verlust ist die niedere und gröbere Seele besser daran als die vornehmere: die Gefahren der letzteren müssen grösser sein, ihre Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass sie verunglückt und zu Grunde geht, ist sogar, bei der Vielfachheit ihrer Lebensbedingungen, ungeheuer* (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 261–262; § 276).
Eagleton and Nietzsche thus share a sense that the elevated are also more vulnerable, for if their self is more sophisticated (or more inflated, depending on one’s point of view), it is also more likely to collapse entirely when confronted with an insurmountable obstacle. What is so poignant in Ahab’s case, however, is that his progress towards a less inflated sense of self is brutally cut short in Moby-Dick. When Ahab examines the images on the Spanish doubloon, he is still lost in the solipsism of his power. However, he increasingly opens up to others due to his encounters with fellow sufferers: Captain Boomer and little Pip. Ahab is a tragic figure because, when the Pequod meets Moby Dick and thus its doom, he is so close to overcoming his thirst for vengeance, to abandoning his monomaniac quest, and to re-establishing a sense of belonging with the fellow human beings around him.

Moby-Dick is, then, not primarily an indictment of Ahab as a character, but a critique of the very idea that self-reliant Übermenschen ought to shape the fate of the world. Even Nietzsche himself in fact admits that this idea involves terrible risks: “[T]he necessity for such leaders, the dreadful danger that they might be lacking, or miscarry and degenerate: – these are our real anxieties and glooms, ye know it well, ye free spirits!” (Beyond Good and Evil 117; § 203; original emphasis).

For Emerson, failure also constitutes a possible outcome, yet he tends to portray it as an individual tragedy rather than as a threat to the fate of mankind as such (“The Transcendentalist” 252–253). In Moby-Dick, however, Ahab’s tragedy is not individual, as virtually all his followers meet their doom – even Queequeg, who is arguably the most positive and heroic character in the novel (e.g. Cohen, The Novel and the Sea 185; Edinger 35; Flory 96–97). Only Ishmael survives to tell the tale, lost and abandoned: “another orphan” (427; “Epilogue”). If a self-reliant individual as damaged as Ahab for one reason or another assumes the position of supreme commander, this will likely lead to death and destruction. Accordingly, we can read Moby-Dick as a political allegory against the evils of power and the threat inherent in the idea of self-reliant mastery.

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29 In his Jungian reading of Melville’s novel, Edwin F. Edinger describes a notably similar dynamic: “[I]nflation is also an alienation insofar as being at a height separates one both from others and from the earthly realities of one’s own being. A fall is necessary, but if it is too abrupt, or if the dissociation is too great, the descent can be a disaster” (52).

**The Duty of Civil Disobedience**

The remedy that the novel implicitly proposes against the evils of, on the one hand, Ahab’s unleashed ‘will to power,’ and, on the other, Ishmael’s (and others’) political quietism is what Henry David Thoreau calls civil disobedience. In his essay “Resistance to Civil Government” (published two years before *Moby-Dick*, and later renamed “Civil Disobedience”), Thoreau points out that law “never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice” (387). In this view, the problem with the crew of the Pequod is that even those who condemn Ahab’s quest continue to obey their captain. This is particularly apparent in the case of Starbuck, who voices his outrage at Ahab’s desire for vengeance from the very outset of his commander’s quest (139; ch. 36), but who nevertheless continues to carry out Ahab’s orders. Importantly, the point here is not to argue that Starbuck should have killed Ahab when he had the chance to do so (ch. 123, “The Musket”) – and neither does Thoreau advocate violent resistance to governmental injustice. However, it is safe to assume that Thoreau would condemn Starbuck’s insistence on a “lawful way” to wrest Ahab’s power from him (387; ch. 123). Instead, Thoreau maintains that those “who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support, are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters” (394). In other words, those who see that the law is unjust yet nevertheless choose to adhere to it are, according to Thoreau, the most morally objectionable of all. The legitimacy of command must, in Thoreau’s view, derive from justice rather than from legal authority. Indeed, in the course of *Moby-Dick*, we learn of no fewer than two ships on which mutinies have taken place, which confirms that one of the novel’s central interests is the potential legitimacy of insubordination.31

*Moby-Dick* can thus be read as an allegory of the universal dangers of power and tyranny as well as of the potential remedies.32 At the same time, many critics see Melville’s novel as a response to more specifically American ills: a supposedly democratic and egalitarian society that is in fact based on exploitation and exclusion. The fact that the novel is set on a whaling ship to some extent supports the idea that national concerns may be central to the novel, as the U.S. was preeminent amongst the nations engaged in whaling at the time (Osterhammel 557) – a preeminence that registers in *Moby-Dick* in moments of national pride,
as when the narrator boasts “that the Yankees in one day, collectively, kill more whales than all the English, collectively, in ten years” (197; ch. 53). A whaling ship can thus be seen, with some justice, as a particularly American type of setting, and accordingly its allegorical significance might equally concern the U.S. in particular.

Critics who focus on this aspect of the novel generally highlight the discrepancy between, on the one hand, American ideals of equality, and, on the other, a highly exclusive political reality. Philip Armstrong nicely sums up this line of argument:

As Melville was well aware, his nation’s much vaunted ideal of democracy depended upon the exclusion of large sectors of the adult population. Many studies have shown how Moby-Dick satirically recognizes America’s dependence upon the labor of Native Americans, African American slaves, and conscripted Pacific islanders. (1050)

The Pequod’s three harpooneers – Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo – are a Pacific islander, a Native American, and an African, respectively, and though their labor is essential, they are effectively barred from the higher levels of command. Moreover, if the Pequod is a symbol of the American state, then the fact that the ship is named after “a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct as the ancient Medes” (69; ch. 16) becomes harrowingly appropriate, for the United States themselves are founded on the basis of violent conquest.\(^{33}\)

We need to bear in mind this underlying concern with ethnic Others when reading Ishmael’s assertion that “it was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me” (159; ch. 42), and perhaps the significance of the white whale is indeed, as Margaret Cohen suggests, to challenge the “schematic use of whiteness in Western moralities” (“The Chronotopes of the Sea” 657). Moreover, if race is one of the critical faultlines in the novel, then Philip Armstrong points out that gender is another key problematic, since women are excluded from the allegorical ship of the state altogether, and Ahab’s complaint about the distance from his wife “involves the Captain’s recognition of the damage produced by the economic separation between the genders” (1050).

That the benefits of such a racially and sexually divided societal order are ultimately insubstantial except for those who are already in power is nicely illustrated in Melville’s novel by the Spanish doubloon that Ahab has promised as a reward to whoever first sights Moby Dick. We have seen that the force of Ahab’s rhetoric may serve to sway others to his purpose, yet when it comes to

\(^{33}\) The fact that the Pequots (or Pequods) were not actually extinct (see Parker and Hayford 69n4) is, I suggest, irrelevant here; what counts is that the allegorical ship of the state is named after a Native American tribe that was utterly dispossessed.
persuading his crew to join him on his quest for revenge against Moby Dick, the prospect of a financial reward is perhaps equally, if not more, effective (138; ch. 36). At any rate, when the Pequod finally encounters Moby Dick, Ahab claims that he himself “raised the White Whale first,” and that “Fate reserved the doubloon” for him (408; ch. 133). Ahab, the captain (and part owner) of the allegorical ship of the state thus himself reaps the reward that he used earlier as a bait for those amongst his crew who remained reluctant to join him. In short, the financial reward promised for collaboration in the commander’s morally dubious endeavor ultimately proves illusory.34

The Signs of Madness and Transcendence: A “Hideous and Intolerable Allegory”?  
*Moby-Dick* thus invites at least two different kinds of allegorical readings: one that regards the novel as a general critique of power and the dangers of corruption, and another that focuses more particularly on the social ills of exclusion in the polity of the United States. At the same time, however, the text also discourages allegorical readings entirely. Admittedly, an allegorical reading of Ahab’s story is strongly suggested in some of the novel’s early chapters, in which Ishmael visits “a Whaleman’s Chapel” in New Bedford. In these chapters, Ishmael suggests that “the world’s a ship” and “the pulpit its brow” (47; ch. 8), with the preacher acting as “pilot-prophet” (53; ch. 9). Accordingly, if Ahab the pilot goes astray, then this involves grave allegorical dangers for the world. And yet, at other times the narrator explicitly urges readers to refrain from seeing Moby Dick as “a hideous and intolerable allegory” (172; ch. 45), emphasizing the realism of his tale instead (e.g. ch. 55, “Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales”). Indeed, the narrator’s attention to even the smallest details of whaling appears superfluous if we read his tale allegorically. It would therefore be better to say that *Moby-Dick* uneasily combines features both of a realist novel and of traditional allegory, without being fully at home in either genre.35 The extent of the book’s generic unbelonging is, in fact, reflected in the plethora of labels that critics have used to describe *Moby-Dick*, from “fable of the Real” (Eagleton, 

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34 Such a reading also ties in with Fredric Jameson’s reminder that the sea may seem to promise adventure and escape from the mundane world of business, but is in fact itself a work-place and trading highway, and as such essential to capitalist development (*The Political Unconscious* 198).

35 For a similar argument see Jeremy Tambling, who suggests that in *Moby-Dick* allegorical significance “has faded in the age of realism; and the text cannot prove the validity of allegorical interpretation, save by asserting it” (*Allegory* 91).
Trouble with Strangers 216) to “monster anti-novel” (Hillis Miller, On Literature 73) and “modern epic” (Franco Moretti, Modern Epic).

Moby-Dick’s uneasy combination of allegorical imagery and novelistic realism is in many ways epitomized in Ahab, who constitutes a borderline figure between a ‘realistic,’ embodied individual with psychological depth, and a ‘flat,’ allegorical character. In his study of nineteenth-century realism, Fredric Jameson notes in passing that “allegory and the body […] repel one another and fail to mix” (Antinomies of Realism 37), and it is indeed difficult to reconcile the allegorical readings proposed above with the idea that Ahab suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. In other words, as soon as we focus on the realistic depiction of Ahab as a traumatized individual with a wounded body, we remain in the domain of literal meaning – which poses a problem for traditional forms of allegorical reading because, as Jeremy Tambling notes, allegory privileges the ‘spirit’ over the ‘letter’ of the word: “A spiritual reading says that the literal meaning is not as important as the allegorical message” (16). Accordingly, close attention to the ‘literal,’ realistic details of a character’s embodied mind distracts from the text’s allegorical message, which can only be revealed if the literal character disappears, or at least recedes from view. Perhaps this explains why, according to Angus Fletcher, an allegorical character’s way of acting typically is “severely limited in variety” (38), for by reducing the character’s ‘realistic’ complexity texts can foreground that character’s allegorical function.

Intriguingly, for Fletcher, this limited behavioral complexity of allegorical characters is open to two entirely different interpretations, one religious and the other secular. To tease out these two different interpretations, Fletcher imagines how an allegorical character would appear to us if we were to meet that character in real life:

[W]e would say of him that he was obsessed with only one idea, or that he had an absolutely one-track mind, or that his life was patterned according to absolutely rigid habits from which he never allowed himself to vary. It would seem that he was driven by some hidden, private force; or, viewing him from another angle, it would appear that he did not control his own destiny, but appeared to be controlled by some foreign force, something outside the sphere of his own ego. (40–41)

In the context of a real-life situation, the allegorical character would “appear to be controlled by some foreign force,” and Fletcher notes that in religious views of the world such external forces are referred to as the demonic (39). By contrast, from a secular perspective, the character’s “one-track mind” and “rigid habits” appear as nothing other than psychological obsession. As Fletcher suggests, Moby-Dick’s portrayal of Ahab oscillates precisely between these two poles (61),
and even Ahab himself wavers between a religious and a secular interpretation of his own condition: “I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened!” (143; ch. 37).

More generally, *Moby-Dick* as a novel oscillates between a realist understanding of madness as a psychological problem, and a religious interpretation of madness as demonic – i.e. a phenomenon with transcendental significance. For instance, when Ahab discloses his desire to take revenge on Moby Dick, the first mate Starbuck wavers between psychological and religious discourses, retorting that such a plan is “[m]adness” as well as “blasphemous” (139; ch. 36). The notion that madness may in fact be linked to transcendence is stated most explicitly, however, in Ishmael’s account of Pip’s tragic fate:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes [...] and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (321–322; ch. 93)

Pip may be mad, but he was also confronted with visions of the divine, and accordingly for Ishmael the boy’s “insanity is heaven’s sense”: the madness of the holy fool, which might hold the key to a kind of transcendental knowledge that other mortals seek in vain.

Ahab, too, refers at one point to Pip’s “holiness” (391; ch. 125), which suggests that he shares with Starbuck and Ishmael a view of madness that Michel Foucault regards as typical of a much earlier historical period:

In the Middle Ages and until the Renaissance, man’s dispute with madness was a dramatic debate in which he confronted the secret powers of the world; the experience of madness was clouded by images of the Fall and the Will of God, of the Beast and the Metamorphosis, and of all the marvelous secrets of Knowledge. (*Madness and Civilization* xii)

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36 It is interesting that some of the early critical reactions to *Moby-Dick* echo Starbuck’s link between madness and blasphemy, with one reviewer reading the novel’s “stylistic and formal incoherence” as “certainly blasphemous, and most probably insane” (Selby 18).
Foucault argues that, in the Middle Ages, the link between transcendence and madness constituted a theological given, and in *Moby-Dick* Ahab’s very name emphasizes this connection. “Ahab” is, as Ishmael points out early in the novel, the name of an idolatrous and ill-fated King of Israel denounced by the prophet Elijah, and we learn that it was given to Ahab by his “crazy, widowed mother” (78; ch. 16; see 1 Kings 18: 16–19). In other words, Ahab’s mother was mad when she chose his name – yet her choice also proves prophetic, for Ahab, too, is denounced by a man who calls himself Elijah. Indeed, Elijah had warned Ishmael and his friend Queequeg not to embark on the Pequod, and though Ishmael believes that Elijah “must be a little damaged in the head,” he is also riveted with the latter’s “insane earnestness” (87; ch. 19), confessing later that Elijah’s “diabolical incoherences” continue to haunt him (108; ch. 28). Moreover, by the end of Melville’s novel, we know that Elijah’s prophecies of doom have all come true, which in turn seems to confirm the earlier link between madness and “the marvelous secrets of Knowledge.” We are thus now in a position to understand what Georg Lukács means when, in his *Theory of the Novel*, he interprets madness as an objectivation of “transcendental homelessness” (61). Extraordinary mental states appear as demonic or prophetic in a world of faith, and it is only when the link to the transcendental home is severed that a purely secular concept of madness can emerge.

Let us be clear about the implications of these conflicting interpretations of madness for the larger theme of homelessness in *Moby-Dick*. What Emerson defines in positive terms as self-reliance – a kind of ‘splendid isolation’ from the mass of average beings – in Ahab appears as both mental and social alienation (i.e. his madness is linked to his being cut-off from other human beings). The captain’s madness thus constitutes a state of unbelonging – provided that we subscribe to a secular interpretation of his condition. We have seen, however, that *Moby-Dick* also offers a competing interpretation of madness as the sign of transcendental connectedness (“insanity is heaven’s sense”), and perhaps this explains why Ahab is so afraid of spending more time with Pip. If recognition of the symbolical slave were indeed able to cure the master’s malady, then this

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37 According to Johannes Völz, Emerson’s own thinking in fact “evolves from a theory of the individual as an aspiring self-reliant genius in which the Other is never absent, but generally pushed to the background from where it resurfaces as a problem, a theory of the individual who still strives to become the great man or genius, but who can become so only on the basis of what Emerson calls *representativeness*” (101). However, the aim of this chapter is not to provide a systematic account of the relation between Melville’s work and Emerson’s philosophy as it evolved over the years, but instead to use certain Emersonian ideas as one of several tools that may help us to explore the notion of home and belonging in *Moby-Dick*. 
process might also force Ahab to face the possibility that his obsession is ‘mere’ madness, and that his quest for the white whale lacks any transcendental significance. Put differently: were Ahab to relinquish his belief in the “demonic” nature of his quest, then this would force him to confront two kinds of trauma at one and the same time: the historical trauma of physical mutilation and mental illness (i.e. a recognition of his own madness, resulting from post-traumatic stress disorder), and the structural or existential trauma of transcendental homelessness. Faced with this double threat of unbelonging, Ahab holds fast to the obsessive quest that has given meaning to his life – and turns away from Pip forever.

We could say, then, that the ‘epic’ character Ahab shies away from the aesthetic of the novel, for according to Lukács the genre of the novel is a formal expression of transcendental homelessness (41). Lukács argues that the world of the epic (and, arguably, allegory) “is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars” (29). The novel, by contrast, “is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem” (56). As both Michael McKeon (Theory of the Novel 179) and John Neubauer (533–534) have noted, for Lukács this transcendental homelessness constitutes a fundamental loss, and Robert T. Tally Jr. rightly notes that the feeling Lukács evokes is akin to Martin Heidegger’s notion of existential angst (Spatiality 47). Lukács’s evaluation thus differs markedly from Mikhail Bakhtin’s, who finds in the genre of the novel “a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness” that he sees as profoundly liberating because he believes it to be incompatible with oppressive, ‘monologic’ types of discourse (“Discourse in the Novel” 367; see McKeon, Theory of the Novel 318; Neubauer 541).

Despite such differences in evaluation between Lukács and Bakhtin, however, we should note that linguistic and transcendental homelessness in fact remain intimately related. The link between the two ideas is nicely expressed in Barry Unsworth’s historical novel Morality Play, set in fourteenth-century England, in which a former monk wonders whether it is morally acceptable for actors to perform a play based on a real-life crime rather than stories taken from scripture:

God has not given us this story to use, He has not revealed to us the meaning of it. So it has no meaning, it is only a death. Players are like other men, they must use God’s meanings, they cannot make meanings of their own, that is heresy, it is the source of all our woes, it is the reason our first parents were cast out. [...] If we make our own meanings, God will oblige us to answer our own questions, He will leave us in the void without the comfort of His Word. (74)
If meaning is not revealed (and thus transcendentally guaranteed), then according to Unsworth’s narrator it necessarily becomes the problematic task of orphaned selves to create their own meaning in a comfortless void. In other words, if we lose the transcendental anchor of God’s Word, meaning itself becomes arbitrary and linguistically homeless.

Of course, it is possible to disagree with Lukács’s and Bakhtin’s view of homelessness as an inherent characteristic of the novel as a genre, but the important point in our context is that *Moby-Dick*’s concern with both transcendent and linguistic homelessness is in fact apparent from the novel’s very first page. In *Moby-Dick*’s opening section (“Etymology”; 7), the narrator tries to unravel the meaning of the word *whale* by venturing beyond the boundaries of English, his linguistic home:

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<td>WHÆL,</td>
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In doing so, however, Melville’s narrator merely highlights the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs (or, more precisely, the free-floating nature of the signifier, the meaning of which is not, in fact, transcendentally given). Moreover, in the novel’s second section (“Extracts”), the narrator provides us with quotations on whales “from any book whatsoever, sacred or profane,” and his use of the phrase “gospel cetology” beautifully encapsulates *Moby-Dick*’s characteristic oscillation between empiricist realism (“cetology”) and allegorical or transcendental significance (“gospel”; 8). In short, while initially these two sections are bound
to have an alienating effect on the reader, in retrospect we find that they are intimately related to the novel’s key philosophical conflicts.

**Losing Control: Madness, Obsession, and Homeless Narration**

The novel’s first two sections, moreover, highlight the extent to which the narrator’s quest for the meaning of his story parallels Ahab’s obsessive quest for meaning through his quest for revenge against Moby Dick.\(^{38}\) The narrator’s “systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera” (115; ch. 32); his promise to paint “something like the true form of the whale as he actually appears to the eye of the whaleman” (214–215; ch. 55); or his account of “the precise origin of ambergris” (317; ch. 92): these and other painstakingly detailed descriptions betray a well-nigh pathological obsession with the subject matter of whales. Put somewhat differently, we may say that readers who find themselves exasperated by *Moby-Dick*’s frequent essayistic digressions on every conceivable aspect of whaling have sensed something of vital importance: that the novel as a whole has an obsessive narrative structure that is, quite simply, apt to drive one mad.

Intriguingly, just as Ahab fails to sustain his narcissistic fantasy of mastery, Ishmael the narrator in many ways loses control over the story he tells – to the extent that his very identity as a narrator threatens to dissolve.\(^{39}\) Ishmael’s status as a realistically conceived narrator who simply relates his own experiences is in fact precarious at best, for there are many chapters in *Moby-Dick* that read like classically omniscient narration.\(^{40}\) In the chapter entitled “The Doubloon,” for instance, the narrator never refers to himself in the first person; instead, he uses impersonal phrases such as “it has been related” and “it has not been added,” which could just as well be uttered by an extradiegetic, omniscient narrator (331; ch. 99). Moreover, it is unlikely that Ishmael, as a character, could actually have overheard what Ahab and Pip say to each other in the solitude of the Captain’s cabin, and yet as a narrator he is able miraculously to provide us with all the details of this exchange (399–400; ch. 129). In addition, the narrator refers to himself in the first person in only one of the novel’s final fifteen chapters; the

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\(^{38}\) Presumably, this is why Eyal Peretz has suggested that Ahab’s monomaniac desire to kill Moby Dick must be read as attempt on the captain’s part to become “the origin of meaning” (60).

\(^{39}\) See also McLoughlin, who notes that “the narrator recedes into the background midway in the narrative” (62).

\(^{40}\) Robert T. Tally, Jr., too, has argued that Ishmael need not be read as a “monologic authority” (*Melville, Mapping and Globalization* (61)).
other fourteen chapters conform to the paradigm of third-person omniscience. More disturbingly still, at various points in the novel, the narrator’s voice disappears altogether, as in a chapter that presents us with Ishmael’s musings about the loss of identity that can occur to someone who meditates in solitude on the mast-head of a whaling ship (136; ch. 35). In the chapters that follow, the conventional form of narrative fiction slowly dissolves, transforming instead into something that resembles a play script rather than novelistic prose:

HARPOONEERS AND SAILORS
(Foresail rises and discovers the watch standing, lounging, leaning, and lying in various attitudes, all singing in chorus.)
Farewell and adieu to you, Spanish ladies!
Farewell and adieu to you, ladies of Spain!
Our Captain’s commanded–

1ST NANTUCKET SAILOR
Oh, boys, don’t be sentimental; it’s bad for the digestion! Take a tonic, follow me!
(Sings, and all follow)
Our captain stood upon the deck,
A spy glass in his hand,
A viewing of those gallant whales
That blew at every strand. (145–146; ch. 40)

In these dramatized passages, the narrator virtually disappears – and as if in panic-stricken response to this loss of narrative mastery, the next chapter opens with an emphatic re-assertion of textual presence: “I, Ishmael, was one of that crew” (152; ch. 41).

What is striking about Ishmael’s moments of narratorial dissolution is that they are always associated with either Ahab or Pip, the two other characters whose sense of self proves highly unstable in the course of Moby-Dick. A first example is the sequence of increasingly dramatized narrative discussed just now, which opens with Ahab announcing his quest for vengeance against Moby Dick (138–139; ch. 36) and ends with Pip voicing his fear of death and dissolution in a prayer to God (151; ch. 40). A second example occurs after the chapter in which Pip jumps overboard for a second time and in consequence remains abandoned for too long in the vast solitude of the ocean (“The Castaway”; ch. 93). This chapter precedes Ishmael’s account of how, when squeezing the spermaceti extracted from a slaughtered whale, he suddenly finds himself squeezing his co-la-

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41 See Buell, who argues that the novel’s “first personness [...] disappears for the last part of the text save the epilogue” (146).
borer’s hands – an experience that leads Ishmael to indulge in a strongly homoerotic fantasy of bodily union with his fellow sailors (“let us squeeze ourselves into each other”) which he immediately proceeds to sublimate into a transcendental vision: “I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hand in a jar of spermaceti” (323; ch. 94). Though Pip’s traumatic isolation and Ishmael’s erotic abandonment differ in many respects, they both involve a sense that the bounded nature of their selves is being dissolved. Finally, the scene in which Ahab mesmerizes his crew by catching the heavenly spark of St. Elmo’s fire triggers another sequence of narratorial dissolution through an increasingly dramatized style of storytelling (ch. 118–122). We ought therefore to regard with skepticism Walter E. Bezanson’s claim that Ishmael’s voice “is there every moment from the genesis of the fiction in ‘Call me Ishmael’ to the final revelation of the ‘Epilogue’” (647), as well as John Bryant’s assertion that “it is always Ishmael who contains and controls” (80). Rather, Ishmael is a remarkably precarious narrator who continually struggles against his own dissolution; increasingly absent from the novel’s plot as a character, he must even fear that his narratorial voice will be drowned in the maelstrom of his story.

Moby-Dick thus constitutes a prime example of what Rick Altman calls a multiple-focus narrative. In his Theory of Narrative, Altman suggests that there are three basic types of narrative fiction. In the first type, which Altman calls dual-focus narratives, the narrator shifts his attention back and forth between two groups (or two individuals) whose conflict is defined by stable binary oppositions (55). Such narratives, according to Altman, presuppose a set of universal values that are temporarily challenged by one or more characters, but ultimately reaffirmed by either the destruction or re-integration of those characters who have strayed (86–87). As one example of a dual-focus narrative, Altman cites Homer’s Iliad, in which the Trojans violate supposedly universal values, and where the ultimate destruction of Troy reaffirms the Greek community (79–81). In single-focus narratives, by contrast, we typically concentrate on one main character who violates the symbolic laws of his or her community on a quest “into previously unexplored territory, behavior, or thought”; the emphasis, in other words, does not lie on reaffirming established values but instead on discovering new ones (Altman 189). One of Altman’s examples for this second type of narrative is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, which could easily have been told as a dual-focus narrative (with Hester Prynne embodying values opposed to the true Puritan faith of her community), but which instead concentrates entirely on Hester’s quest for new and different values (Altman 99–118). While, in dual-focus narratives, the two opposing sets of values are ordered hierarchically and portrayed as objective, in single-focus narratives all
values “remain subject to interpretation” (189). Nevertheless, even in
single-focus stories there is a stable narrative center – i.e. the main character –
and this distinguishes them from multiple-focus narratives, which “thrive on
discontinuity” (243). In such stories, “we find ourselves transported by the nar‐
rator from one character to another” in an unpredictable, seemingly arbitrary
manner (263). Multiple-focus narratives thus function, according to Altman,
“like a mosaic,” where the individual parts of the text “may mean something
quite different” from the text as a whole (288).

Importantly, *Moby-Dick* initially looks very much like a single-focus nar‐
tative, and this creates expectations that the text subsequently proceeds to thwart.
After plowing their way through *Moby-Dick*’s enigmatic introductory sections
(“Etymology” and “Extracts”), readers are likely to react with considerable relief
when the narrator invites them to call him Ishmael and join him on his narrative
quest. We follow Ishmael to New Bedford, where he meets a new friend in
Queequeg, who decides to accompany him on his journey. As is typical of
single-focus narratives, the novel concentrates on its main character – until the
moment when the Pequod sets sail (ch. 22). At this point, the narrative suddenly
loses focus. Chapter 23, for instance, is devoted entirely to a character named
Bulkington, whom we previously encountered only very briefly (ch. 3), and who
will never again appear in the novel. Next comes the first of many essayistic
excursions (ch. 24), and from this point on the story of Ishmael and his friend
Queequeg recedes into the background, displaced by the tale of Ahab’s quest.
Even Ahab, however, sometimes disappears for long stretches of the text (e.g.
ch. 74–80, or 92–98), making it impossible to construe him as a new and stable
textual center. As readers, we thus experience a movement from fixity of nar‐
rative purpose to textual disorientation, and according to Altman this is typical
of multiple-focus narratives in general: “Many texts invite a single-focus or
dual-focus reading, only to undermine the reading in favor of a multiple-focus
alternative” (255).42

Intriguingly, Altman describes the reader’s condition in multiple-focus nar‐
ratives as an experience of homelessness, and it is plausible to argue that
*Moby-Dick*’s disjointed narrative structure effectively undermines any sense of
spiritual belonging that we may gain from the narrator’s assurances of deeper
religious significance. Walter E. Bezanson, for instance, notes that readers ex‐
pecting “classical form” will find *Moby-Dick* aesthetically unsatisfactory because

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42 Compare these observations to Margaret Cohen’s claim that “Melville breaks his con‐
tract with the reader of sea fiction” because his “remarkable poetics transgress poetic
and generic expectation, across all the different scales of the novel” (*The Novel and the
Sea* 186).
“explorations of structure suggest elaborate interrelations of the parts but do not lead to an overreaching formal pattern” (655). This statement matches precisely Altman’s characterization of how multiple-focus narratives affect their readers:

Reading dual-focus and single-focus narrative, I always feel at home – whether it is the group-based home of the dual-focus texts or the single-focus identification with an individual. Coming to multiple-focus narrative with expectations developed in another world, I sense the new form as a loss, a lack, a diversion from the expected path. Trained to expect coherence [...], I can’t feel at home in the multiple-focus world [...]. (285)

Altman compares this effect of disorientation to the paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which confront us with images of a multiple-focus world marked by the absence of a clear center: “We remain unable to image the drawing as a whole, to constitute visually any unity or hierarchy, to restore a center in terms of either interest or space” (200). In Moby-Dick, this absent center is, of course, symbolized by the white whale itself: a void that structures the entire narrative but that continues to elude both the novel’s characters, its narrator, and its readers.

According to Altman, Bruegel’s technique of de-centering is complemented in multiple-focus narratives by a clash of various styles, and Altman explicitly associates this strategy with the Russian Formalist’s notion of defamiliarization (as well as with Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism and linguistic homelessness; Altman 217–221). In Moby-Dick, too, we encounter various contrasting styles – for instance in the novel’s juxtaposition of satirical legal history (ch. 89–90) with picaresque episodes (ch. 91) and didactic treatises (ch. 92). In thus failing to follow any predictable trajectory, multiple-focus narratives challenge their readers to “stretch beyond the action-oriented and character-oriented questions of single-focus and dual-focus narrative” (Altman 263). Instead, Altman contends, “the multiple-focus form seeks out the tertium quid of conception” (269) – i.e. it encourages its disoriented, homeless readers to look for common thematic denominators, formal patterns, and recurring tropes.

43 The following complaint by a contemporary reviewer is a good example: “This is an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact. The idea of a connected and collected story has obviously visited and abandoned its writer again and again in the course of composition” (“[An Ill-Compounded Mixture]” 597).
Unraveling the “Weaver-God”

Let us examine how one such recurring trope – the image of the loom – can help us to bring into sharper focus some of *Moby-Dick’s* central concerns. We first encounter this recurring image in the title of the novel’s very first chapter (“Loomings”), and already we are faced with significant ambiguities. The nautical meaning of the term *looming* is “land or ships beyond the horizon, dimly seen by reflection in peculiar weather conditions” (Parker and Hayford 18n1) – and indeed at this point in the narrative we do not yet ‘see’ the Pequod, but perceive it only dimly in Ishmael’s reference to a “whaling voyage” on which he is about to embark (22; ch. 1). This specialized meaning of *looming* is thus relatively close to its more general – and often figurative – meaning as a “coming indistinctly into view” (OED): a vaguely foreshadowed, possibly ominous presence. However, *looming* can also denote the “action or process of ‘mounting’ the warp on the loom” (OED), which is precisely what the narrator does in the novel’s first chapter: he sets out to weave the web of his story.

The title “Loomings,” in other words, simultaneously constitutes an authentic use of nautical jargon, an ominous expression of foreboding, and a playfully metafictional comment. From the outset, *Moby-Dick’s* concern with a realistic depiction of life at sea is thus counterpoised with a transcendental aura of prophecy as well as with an interest in the workings of textuality as such.

Moreover, when an actual loom appears later on in the novel, we are confronted once again with Ishmael’s characteristic desire to imbue mundane facts with a deeper, transcendental significance. As he and Queequeg are “mildly employed weaving,” Ishmael begins to lose himself in thoughts about the symbolical value of looms:

[I]t seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration, and that vibration merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending of other threads with its own. This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg’s impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric; this savage’s sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance – aye, chance, free will, and necessity –

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44 looming, *n*¹ (OED Online, 2 August 2017; 2nd ed. 1989).
no wise incompatible – all interweavingly working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course – its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and side-ways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events. (179; ch. 47)

What is so extraordinary about Ishmael’s reading of the loom as a model of how necessity, free will, and chance interact as the three shaping forces of our lives is that his initial interpretation is thoroughly agnostic, for “necessity” could designate natural and historical laws just as it might refer to any mysterious, providential design.

Characteristically, however, Ishmael later revises his original interpretation in order to salvage a transcendental meaning. In the passage quoted above, God is conspicuously absent from Ishmael’s image of the “Loom of Time,” but Ishmael later sets out on project of rhetorical readjustment by claiming that Pip, while abandoned during the chase of a whale, “saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom” (322; ch. 94). Whereas God was at first merely an unnamed possibility, he now suddenly emerges as the omnipotent weaver. This image of the “weaver-god” returns a few chapters later, when Ishmael describes the lush landscape of a Pacific island:

[T]he industrious earth beneath was as a weaver’s loom, with a gorgeous carpet on it, whereof the ground-vine tendrils formed the warp and woof, and the living flowers the figures. [...] Through the lacings of the leaves, the great sun seemed a flying shuttle weaving the unwearied verdure. Oh, busy weaver! unseen weaver! – pause! – one word! – whither flows the fabric? what palace may it deck? wherefore all these ceaseless toilings? Speak, weaver! – stay thy hand! – but one single word with thee! Nay – the shuttle flies – the figures float from forth the loom; the freshet-rushing carpet for ever slides away. The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who look on the loom are deafened; and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it. For even so it is in all material factories. The spoken words that are inaudible among the flying spindles; those same words are plainly heard without the walls, bursting from the opened casements. Thereby have villainies been detected. Ah, mortal! [...] be heedful; for so, in all this din of the great world’s loom, thy subllest thinkings may be overheard afar. (345; ch. 102)

The whole world has now become, for Ishmael, a text woven by God, the great master-weaver, who is supposedly deafened by the noise of his creative act. And yet, the idea that our “subllest thinkings may be overheard afar” seems to imply
that there is some transcendent connection – possibly with the ones who have escaped the loom (which may be Ishmael’s poetic way of referring to the souls of the departed, as opposed to us mortals who “may be overheard afar”).

Just like his earlier rhetorical maneuvers, Ishmael’s remolded image of the “Loom of Time” thus expresses his deep yearning for a transcendental sense of belonging. At the same time, the idea that communication with God is entirely impossible, and that the transcendent weaver will neither cease his work nor ever react to human supplications must make us wonder how we could possibly know anything about this absent being. Moreover, it is telling that Ishmael introduces the problem of social alienation (i.e. the textile workers who are isolated from each other by the noise of the “material factories”) only to shy away from it, as if afraid of the “villainies” that we might detect if we remained undistracted by transcendental re-imaginings.\footnote{My argument is similar to Christopher S. Durer’s, who maintains that “the notion of the grand programme [of Providence] is present at the beginning, but is being corroded, undermined, and finally dismissed” (253). While Ishmael tries to emphasize the presence of God, the contradictions in his argument end up undermining his case.}

\textit{Visions of Home: Labor, Equality, and the Question of Gender}

In \textit{Moby-Dick}, the transcendental home remains out of reach, even as Ishmael refuses to relinquish his desire for it; time and again, this sole survivor of the Pequod’s disaster uses all the rhetorical means at his disposal in an attempt to retrieve some grander meaning from the wreckage of his life at sea. Just like Ahab, in other words, Ishmael is unable to let go of Moby Dick; the specter of the whale continues to haunt him, and significantly he ends his tale, not on a note of hope and belonging, or with a scene of joyful homecoming, but instead as merely “another orphan.”

It is remarkable how fundamentally absent home is in \textit{Moby-Dick}. Both Ahab and Ishmael come from a ‘broken’ home (i.e. Ahab’s mother was mad, while Ishmael’s stepmother treated him badly – and we know virtually nothing about their fathers). Indeed, this lack of parental care may have something to do with the two characters’ desperate attempts in later life to cling to the idea of a transcendent father (benevolent or malicious, as the case may be). In Ahab’s case, things are made worse through the experience of trauma, and neither the power nor the solitude and isolation that come with the captain’s office are likely to improve his condition, for while the former tends to foster a narcissistic sense of grandeur, the latter shuts Ahab off from human interaction (including therapeutic storytelling). In effect, Ahab as a character constitutes a study of the pathologies inherent in Emersonian self-reliance, and it is only when Ahab, the
ship’s master, encounters Pip the ‘slave,’ who suffers from a similar condition, that the captain tentatively begins to re-establish a sense of belonging – a development that is tragically cut short when the Pequod finally meets Moby Dick. Ishmael, meanwhile, is in some ways merely a good-humored conformist, but if we pay close attention to his rhetorical shifts, we find that in fact his textual contortions constitute discursive attempts at home-making in the face of a deep sense of alienation. Crucially, though Ishmael’s alienation may be rooted in some fundamental human condition (e.g. existential trauma or a human subjectivity that is necessarily based on lack), it is the lack both of financial resources and of any other kinds of interest that drive him away from a place that, given these circumstances, simply does not feel like home. Perhaps it is Ishmael’s ardent desire finally to belong – to have a well-defined place in the world – that stops him from even contemplating civil disobedience as a means to prevent Ahab from abusing his power. Tragically, the Pequod’s calamitous journey will leave Ishmael with such a mutilated sense of self that even his own narrative spins out of control, despite all his attempts to weave a discursive home out of the manifold strands of his story.

And yet, there are two brief moments in Melville’s novel when Ishmael feels at home in the world, and both of these are strongly homoerotic. One of these two moments occurs, as we have seen, when Ishmael squeezes his co-workers’ hands, filled with such an “abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling” that he wishes to tell them: “let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” (323). For one thing, we may note that Ishmael here alludes to a passage from Shakespeare’s tragedy Macbeth, in which Lady Macbeth is afraid that her husband may be “too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness,” and thus unable to seize the throne (1.5.16). From the reader’s point of view, this reference to a canonical text conveys an intertextual sense of home at the very moment when Ishmael, too, feels that he belongs. At the same time, while the original metaphor thrives on associations of milk with motherhood and nourishment, Ishmael’s use of the word “sperm” (ostensibly as a short form of spermaceti) adds to the image a decidedly masculine and sexual twist, leaving the familiar phrase strangely altered.47 Byron R.S. Fone has suggested that “Melville constructs a fictional world in which the primary characters are outcasts from the land-locked world of (hetero-)sexual morality” (52), and perhaps Ishmael’s alteration of the canonical text constitutes a stylistic correlative to the novel’s revision of supposedly given moral codes.

47 At this point, one is almost obliged to point out that, in Melville’s novel, a group of sturdy men join forces in order to extract sperm from a giant (Moby) Dick.
At any rate, the only similarly homely moment for Ishmael occurs much earlier in the novel, when he shares a bed with Queequeg at the Spouter-Inn in Nantucket. At the end of their first night together, Ishmael wakes up to find “Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner,” so that an observer could have “almost thought I had been his wife.” At this point, Ishmael’s sensations are still “strange” rather than pleasant (36; ch. 4), but his vague sense of discomfort has clearly faded by the second night:

How it is I know not; but there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts’ honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg – a cosy, loving pair. (57; ch. 10)

Ishmael and Queequeg are like a “cosy, loving pair,” and every once in a while Queequeg affectionately throws his legs over Ishmael’s because the two are now “entirely sociable and free and easy”; indeed, Ishmael loves to have Queequeg smoking by his side because the latter seems to be “full of such serene household joy” (57 and 58; ch. 11). In the comfort of a bed he shares with another man, Ishmael thus feels just as much at home as in the common labor of squeezing sperm with his equals on board the Pequod.  

These, then, are the glimpses of a utopian vision in a novel otherwise suffused with homelessness: equality and intimacy, shared work and bodily comfort – a home in this world rather than the next. In Ishmael’s case, bodily comfort happens to mean physical contact with other men, and it may well be that he fails to feel at home in his native land because there is no real place there for same-sex relationships:

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, [...] by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country [...]. (323; ch. 94)

Ishmael cannot imagine a real-life counterpart to his homoerotic “conceit” or “fancy,” and instead believes that “man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity” by settling for a conventional home shared with “the wife.” In a world where women are considered to be the natural

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48 See also Robert K. Martin’s more extended analysis of male friendship in Moby-Dick in his monograph on Melville, Hero, Captain, and Stranger (67–94).
home-makers, Ishmael is evidently unable to imagine an everyday home with another man at his side.\textsuperscript{49}

It is therefore important to be clear about the limited nature of these visions of belonging. On the one hand, \textit{Moby-Dick}'s utopian vision of equality and intimacy – of shared work and bodily comfort – transcends the divisions of gender because in theory both men and women can engage in common labor, and both men and women are able to heed the needs of other desiring human bodies. On the other hand, the utopian moments that are actually depicted in Melville's novel are shared only between men, and Ishmael as a narrator is unable to understand them as anything but fancies: pleasant, perhaps, but necessarily fleeting and insubstantial. In other words, unlike Emerson's self-reliant man, Ishmael and his ideas ultimately remain within the boundaries dictated by custom.

This latter point also explains why \textit{Moby-Dick} ought properly to be understood not as a downright rejection of Emerson's ideas, but as a complex and searching critique. What Melville's novel does reject, through its portrayal of Ahab, is Emerson's belief that self-reliance as such is synonymous with spiritual isolation, and must always involve the will to dominate and sacrifice others. At the same time, \textit{Moby-Dick} suggests that Ishmael is far too willing to accommodate to the status quo because he is afraid of standing apart, or appearing in any way as different from others. The point of the novel's critique, in short, is that isolation from others is neither splendid nor an end in itself, but only, at times, a tragic necessity when faced with widespread communal injustice – and it is this that Ishmael fails to grasp. \textit{Moby-Dick} thus confronts us with two very different male figures, both of whom remain transcendentally homeless. Melville's women, meanwhile, stay behind on shore, as absent characters who merely serve to symbolize the conventional home. To overcome this ideological deadlock, we must now turn to George Eliot's \textit{The Mill on the Floss}, where a female character takes center stage.

\textsuperscript{49} See Steven B. Herrmann for a Jungian reading of Melville's "portrait of same-sex marriage" (65).