he later tries to convince us that the condition is in fact rooted in the alienated subjecthood 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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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

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).