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.\(^{15}\) 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.\(^{16}\) 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

---

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 größere, 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). 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. 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-

---


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, sympathetic 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.