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