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 Throeau’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,

31 Indeed, the similarity between the titles of the respective chapters – “The Town-Ho’s Story” and “The Jeroboam’s Story” (ch. 54 and 71) – makes it difficult not to see them as interrelated.

32 See C. L. R. James’s Mariners, Renegades and Castaways (1953) for a classic reading of Ahab as the embodiment of totalitarian impulses.
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.