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, 

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 sig-
nificance. 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 aes-
thetic 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 funda-
mental 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). Lu-
kács’s evaluation thus differs markedly from Mikhail Bakhtin’s, who finds in
the genre of the novel “a certain linguistic homelessness of literary conscious-
ness” that he sees as profoundly liberating because he believes it to be incom-
patible 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. [... I]f 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 transcendental 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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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