Losing Control: Madness, Obsession, and Homeless Narration

The novel’s first two sections, moreover, highlight the extent to which the narrator’s quest for the meaning of his story parallels Ahab’s obsessive quest for meaning through his quest for revenge against Moby Dick. The narrator’s “systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera” (115; ch. 32); his promise to paint “something like the true form of the whale as he actually appears to the eye of the whaleman” (214–215; ch. 55); or his account of “the precise origin of ambergris” (317; ch. 92): these and other painstakingly detailed descriptions betray a well-nigh pathological obsession with the subject matter of whales. Put somewhat differently, we may say that readers who find themselves exasperated by Moby-Dick’s frequent essayistic digressions on every conceivable aspect of whaling have sensed something of vital importance: that the novel as a whole has an obsessive narrative structure that is, quite simply, apt to drive one mad.

Intriguingly, just as Ahab fails to sustain his narcissistic fantasy of mastery, Ishmael the narrator in many ways loses control over the story he tells – to the extent that his very identity as a narrator threatens to dissolve. Ishmael’s status as a realistically conceived narrator who simply relates his own experiences is in fact precarious at best, for there are many chapters in Moby-Dick that read like classically omniscient narration. In the chapter entitled “The Doubloon,” for instance, the narrator never refers to himself in the first person; instead, he uses impersonal phrases such as “it has been related” and “it has not been added,” which could just as well be uttered by an extradiegetic, omniscient narrator (331; ch. 99). Moreover, it is unlikely that Ishmael, as a character, could actually have overheard what Ahab and Pip say to each other in the solitude of the Captain’s cabin, and yet as a narrator he is able miraculously to provide us with all the details of this exchange (399–400; ch. 129). In addition, the narrator refers to himself in the first person in only one of the novel’s final fifteen chapters; the

38 Presumably, this is why Eyal Peretz has suggested that Ahab’s monomaniac desire to kill Moby Dick must be read as attempt on the captain’s part to become “the origin of meaning” (60).
39 See also McLoughlin, who notes that “the narrator recedes into the background midway in the narrative” (62).
40 Robert T. Tally, Jr., too, has argued that Ishmael need not be read as a “monologic authority” (Melville, Mapping and Globalization (61)).
other fourteen chapters conform to the paradigm of third-person omniscience. More disturbingly still, at various points in the novel, the narrator’s voice disappears altogether, as in a chapter that presents us with Ishmael’s musings about the loss of identity that can occur to someone who meditates in solitude on the mast-head of a whaling ship (136; ch. 35). In the chapters that follow, the conventional form of narrative fiction slowly dissolves, transforming instead into something that resembles a play script rather than novelistic prose:

HARPOONEERS AND SAILORS

(Foresail rises and discovers the watch standing, lounging, leaning, and lying in various attitudes, all singing in chorus.)

Farewell and adieu to you, Spanish ladies!
Farewell and adieu to you, ladies of Spain!
Our Captain’s commanded—

1ST NANTUCKET SAILOR

Oh, boys, don’t be sentimental; it’s bad for the digestion! Take a tonic, follow me!

(Sings, and all follow.)

Our captain stood upon the deck,
A spy glass in his hand,
A viewing of those gallant whales
That blew at every strand. (145–146; ch. 40)

In these dramatized passages, the narrator virtually disappears – and as if in panic-stricken response to this loss of narrative mastery, the next chapter opens with an emphatic re-assertion of textual presence: “I, Ishmael, was one of that crew” (152; ch. 41).

What is striking about Ishmael’s moments of narratorial dissolution is that they are always associated with either Ahab or Pip, the two other characters whose sense of self proves highly unstable in the course of Moby-Dick. A first example is the sequence of increasingly dramatized narrative discussed just now, which opens with Ahab announcing his quest for vengeance against Moby Dick (138–139; ch. 36) and ends with Pip voicing his fear of death and dissolution in a prayer to God (151; ch. 40). A second example occurs after the chapter in which Pip jumps overboard for a second time and in consequence remains abandoned for too long in the vast solitude of the ocean (“The Castaway”; ch. 93). This chapter precedes Ishmael’s account of how, when squeezing the spermaceti extracted from a slaughtered whale, he suddenly finds himself squeezing his co-la-

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41 See Buell, who argues that the novel’s “first personness [...] disappears for the last part of the text save the epilogue” (146).
borer’s hands – an experience that leads Ishmael to indulge in a strongly homoerotic fantasy of bodily union with his fellow sailors (“let us squeeze ourselves into each other”) which he immediately proceeds to sublimate into a transcendental vision: “I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hand in a jar of spermaceti” (323; ch. 94). Though Pip’s traumatic isolation and Ishmael’s erotic abandonment differ in many respects, they both involve a sense that the bounded nature of their selves is being dissolved. Finally, the scene in which Ahab mesmerizes his crew by catching the heavenly spark of St. Elmo’s fire triggers another sequence of narratorial dissolution through an increasingly dramatized style of storytelling (ch. 118–122). We ought therefore to regard with skepticism Walter E. Bezanson’s claim that Ishmael’s voice “is there every moment from the genesis of the fiction in ‘Call me Ishmael’ to the final revelation of the ‘Epilogue’” (647), as well as John Bryant’s assertion that “it is always Ishmael who contains and controls” (80). Rather, Ishmael is a remarkably precarious narrator who continually struggles against his own dissolution; increasingly absent from the novel’s plot as a character, he must even fear that his narratorial voice will be drowned in the maelstrom of his story.

Moby-Dick thus constitutes a prime example of what Rick Altman calls a multiple-focus narrative. In his Theory of Narrative, Altman suggests that there are three basic types of narrative fiction. In the first type, which Altman calls dual-focus narratives, the narrator shifts his attention back and forth between two groups (or two individuals) whose conflict is defined by stable binary oppositions (55). Such narratives, according to Altman, presuppose a set of universal values that are temporarily challenged by one or more characters, but ultimately reaffirmed by either the destruction or re-integration of those characters who have strayed (86–87). As one example of a dual-focus narrative, Altman cites Homer’s Iliad, in which the Trojans violate supposedly universal values, and where the ultimate destruction of Troy reaffirms the Greek community (79–81). In single-focus narratives, by contrast, we typically concentrate on one main character who violates the symbolic laws of his or her community on a quest “into previously unexplored territory, behavior, or thought”; the emphasis, in other words, does not lie on reaffirming established values but instead on discovering new ones (Altman 189). One of Altman’s examples for this second type of narrative is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, which could easily have been told as a dual-focus narrative (with Hester Prynne embodying values opposed to the true Puritan faith of her community), but which instead concentrates entirely on Hester’s quest for new and different values (Altman 99–118). While, in dual-focus narratives, the two opposing sets of values are ordered hierarchically and portrayed as objective, in single-focus narratives all
values “remain subject to interpretation” (189). Nevertheless, even in single-focus stories there is a stable narrative center – i.e. the main character – and this distinguishes them from multiple-focus narratives, which “thrive on discontinuity” (243). In such stories, “we find ourselves transported by the narrator from one character to another” in an unpredictable, seemingly arbitrary manner (263). Multiple-focus narratives thus function, according to Altman, “like a mosaic,” where the individual parts of the text “may mean something quite different” from the text as a whole (288).

Importantly, *Moby-Dick* initially looks very much like a single-focus narrative, and this creates expectations that the text subsequently proceeds to thwart. After plowing their way through *Moby-Dick*’s enigmatic introductory sections (“Etymology” and “Extracts”), readers are likely to react with considerable relief when the narrator invites them to call him Ishmael and join him on his narrative quest. We follow Ishmael to New Bedford, where he meets a new friend in Queequeg, who decides to accompany him on his journey. As is typical of single-focus narratives, the novel concentrates on its main character – until the moment when the Pequod sets sail (ch. 22). At this point, the narrative suddenly loses focus. Chapter 23, for instance, is devoted entirely to a character named Bulkington, whom we previously encountered only very briefly (ch. 3), and who will never again appear in the novel. Next comes the first of many essayistic excursions (ch. 24), and from this point on the story of Ishmael and his friend Queequeg recedes into the background, displaced by the tale of Ahab’s quest. Even Ahab, however, sometimes disappears for long stretches of the text (e.g. ch. 74–80, or 92–98), making it impossible to construe him as a new and stable textual center. As readers, we thus experience a movement from fixity of narrative purpose to textual disorientation, and according to Altman this is typical of multiple-focus narratives in general: “Many texts invite a single-focus or dual-focus reading, only to undermine the reading in favor of a multiple-focus alternative” (255).  

Intriguingly, Altman describes the reader’s condition in multiple-focus narratives as an experience of homelessness, and it is plausible to argue that *Moby-Dick*’s disjointed narrative structure effectively undermines any sense of spiritual belonging that we may gain from the narrator’s assurances of deeper religious significance. Walter E. Bezanson, for instance, notes that readers expecting “classical form” will find *Moby-Dick* aesthetically unsatisfactory because

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42 Compare these observations to Margaret Cohen’s claim that “Melville breaks his contract with the reader of sea fiction” because his “remarkable poetics transgress poetic and generic expectation, across all the different scales of the novel” (*The Novel and the Sea* 186).
“explorations of structure suggest elaborate interrelations of the parts but do not lead to an overreaching formal pattern” (655). This statement matches precisely Altman’s characterization of how multiple-focus narratives affect their readers:

Reading dual-focus and single-focus narrative, I always feel at home – whether it is the group-based home of the dual-focus texts or the single-focus identification with an individual. Coming to multiple-focus narrative with expectations developed in another world, I sense the new form as a loss, a lack, a diversion from the expected path. Trained to expect coherence [...], I can’t feel at home in the multiple-focus world [...]. (285)

Altman compares this effect of disorientation to the paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which confront us with images of a multiple-focus world marked by the absence of a clear center: “We remain unable to image the drawing as a whole, to constitute visually any unity or hierarchy, to restore a center in terms of either interest or space” (200). In *Moby-Dick*, this absent center is, of course, symbolized by the white whale itself: a void that structures the entire narrative but that continues to elude both the novel’s characters, its narrator, and its readers.

According to Altman, Bruegel’s technique of de-centering is complemented in multiple-focus narratives by a clash of various styles, and Altman explicitly associates this strategy with the Russian Formalist’s notion of defamiliarization (as well as with Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism and linguistic homelessness; Altman 217–221). In *Moby-Dick*, too, we encounter various contrasting styles – for instance in the novel’s juxtaposition of satirical legal history (ch. 89–90) with picaresque episodes (ch. 91) and didactic treatises (ch. 92). In thus failing to follow any predictable trajectory, multiple-focus narratives challenge their readers to “stretch beyond the action-oriented and character-oriented questions of single-focus and dual-focus narrative” (Altman 263). Instead, Altman contends, “the multiple-focus form seeks out the *tertium quid* of conception” (269) – i.e. it encourages its disoriented, homeless readers to look for common thematic denominators, formal patterns, and recurring tropes.