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## The Hand of Ishmael

J. H. Stone II

Focusing on the role of Ishmael in the production of *Moby Dick*, this essay suggests the multiple strategies the text employs to subvert, challenge, and thwart the will-to-control of the critic/reader, and the strategies resulting in Ishmael's displacing Melville as the scriptor who dominates the production of the text and resists "a comfortable practice of reading."

モービ・ディックの成立におけるイシマエルの役割に焦点を合わせ、このエッセイの狙いは批評家／読者の意思的制御を破壊し挑戦し覆えすことになる多様な手法や、作品の生成を支配し、安楽な読書体験を拒む話者としてメルビルにとって変わったイシマエルに用いられた手法に注意を促すことにある。

***Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael. . . . He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.***

Genesis, 16: 11-12

In terms of traditional poetics, the task of the interpreter has been the discovery, disclosure and transmission of the *sens* of the text, but despite the myriad attempts of literary theorists to resolve the problems endemic to this task, I would argue that most of their efforts have been misguided. I pose the issue with the following question: "Where is the *sens* of a text to be found?"<sup>1</sup> This question assumes, uncritically, that the location of *sens* can in fact be determined, and thus begs the question of the processual/dialogical production of meanings with assumptions regarding their availability and *topos*.

Arguably the most common result of the various quests to establish the site of textual meaning that have dominated literary theory for the past century has been the destruction or apotheosis of the text. Two styles seem to dominate: that which reduces the text to a virtually irrelevant container from which *sens* can be extracted (and the container flattened and discarded); and that which derisively treats the text as an enclosed icon generating its own meanings. Following, often uncritically, seminal paradigm shifts in demonstrably powerful "extra-literary" *Wissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, the critic/reader has generally found it more ideologically comfortable, commodifiable and authoritative to set aside the text in favor of various interpretive strategies that locate its *sens* extratextually, for example, somewhere "in" the "intentional arc" of its originary context, or "in" the theories and discourse of this or that community of interpretation.

Such strategies have some common characteristics. First, in "objectively" locating *sens* on the thither side of the text, or in "subjectively" locating it on the hither side, *sens* is reduced to a mere effect of its originary context, establishing fetishised (and constructed) origins as determinant in locating the availability of *sens*. Second, each interpretive strategy which locates *sens* extratextually is, in direct ratio to its tendencies toward totalization, self-referential and self-nullifying. Those discursive strategies that tend to a more and more definitive reduction of the *sens* of "the literary event" to its thither-side or hither-side cannot easily avoid locating the *sens* of their own expression similarly. If, for the critic/reader, the *sens* of a text is but an expression of the ubiquity of textuality, the *Kulturgeist*, oedipal or archetypal

structures of consciousness, et al., and if that claim is totalized, the intentional *sens* of the critic's own allegedly critical theory and the consequent interpretation is quite literally dislocated. Not only is it the case that "the phenomenon of expression belongs both to . . . the scientific study of language and to the literary experience," but also that the critical study of the literary event and the literary event, or advent, itself belong equally and fully to the phenomenon of expression. In *The Prose of the World* Merleau-Ponty argues that expression is:

. . . an operation that tends toward its own destruction, since it suppresses itself to the extent it ingratiates itself and annuls itself if it fails to do so. For this reason one cannot conceive of an expression that could be definitive since the very virtues that make it general would simultaneously make it inadequate [35 ff.].

In either case, the text is turned into an item for consumption, and intellectual capital accrues to the critic/reader in direct ratio to the commodifiability of his uncritical dislocation of and extraction of the *sens* of the text.

However, if there are inherent problems with any interpretive strategy that locates the *sens* of a text in its thither or hither side, temporally "behind" it or "in front of" it, in its *Vorgeschichte* or *Nachgeschichte*—if, to put it another way, strategies that locate *sens* exceed the text "as the notion of a universe. . . exceeds that of a world," and invariably result in an impoverishment of the literary event, then it would seem that the *sens* of the text must be located intratextually. This is a solution to the aporetics of reductive extratextual strategies that motivated New Criticism as well as *de jure* and *de facto* defenders of "the text as such," as the only legitimate context for its own *sens*. Against extratextual topoi for *sens*, Miller et al. argue that a text is "a bundle of relations that comprise a literary matrix, be it a unit [or] an entire writing, as an integral and indivisible, if not total, context of meaning [arrived at] by recognizing that that framework constitutes a hermeneutic context in its own right" (Miller, "Directions in Interpretation," p. 26).

But a text coterminous with its own *sens* must be literally and literarily mute, unless it is "spoken for," its *sens* represented, by someone. After all, say I with all the disarming validity of common sense, what text, even the book as mere object, can be lacking, at the very least, one reader? . . . to say nothing of an implied, even if anonymous, author. And what reader or critic is it that springs from nowhere, utterly lacking not only a community of interpretation, but also a historically and socially sedimented discourse. . . and what text does not take-up and reproduce the semantic thickness of its ordinary context as the occasion for its *sens*, even if its *sens* is to designate and occlude its origins and its meanings?

Simply, lacking at least one reader, who in fact **might** also be the author, a text cannot exist in any remotely relevant sense. Texts, including the most powerful texts in human history, often exist without authors and constitute a devastating challenge to the critics and academics who make a fetish of "authorial intention" and the author as "institution." Likewise, a reader/critic, lacking the limitations and possibilities of a thoroughly socialized human being "condemned to meaning," is merely a figment of scientistic ideology or fantasy. . . a notoriously unclear distinction. "Where can the *sens* of a text be found?" . . . anywhere **you** like. . . but only illicit ignorance can enable one's ignoring the fact that *sens* must be constituted before it can be located. The meanings of a text cannot pre-exist themselves; they cannot exist prior to or apart from their production by a reader subject to the conditions of possibility that constrain the outcome of the literary event. In short, the *sens* of a text is virtual; and the virtual text is the only text available, an adumbration of *sens*, constituted and reconstituted, imagined and reimagined, in an indefinity of movements of mediation. The meanings and doings of a text, *Moby Dick* in this case,

are virtual, neither contained in the text nor limited to it. They arise "in the middle," in the difference, the silence, between reader and text.

It might be supposed that the above "blubbing" implicates this critic in the anarchy ingredient to most humanistic reader-response theories of interpretation. However, refusing or setting aside the comforts and profits of presuming to locate a priori *sens* that cannot yet even exist does not implicate one in its putative opposite. The skeletal critique above subverts both subjectivistic and objectivistic approaches whether they are extra- or intratextual. It aims to deny privilege regarding the location of *sens* to all possible sites, equally. There are a number of political reasons for attempting to do so. First, the processual qualities of the production of *sens* are enhanced; the alleged stasis of *sens* that enables "semiotic totalitarianism" is undermined and the boundaries of authority are transgressed. Second, the reduction of the text to something else, including itself, is rendered uncritical, if not impossible; its *sens* is not "in" it, not "in" an other. . . *sens* has no topos. Third, the tendency to fetishize authorial intention (while, and primarily, at the same time legitimating the critic's desire for self-clarity in defense of her/his control of *sens*) by clinging to "the author as institution" is radically problematized to the point where the author's "formidable paternity" of the text, and the critic's intention are stripped of their interpretive authority. If, as I have argued, *sens* (like power) has no non-discursive topos, then it is relational and is realized only in its production and enactment.

This suggests an approach that subverts the role of the critic in traditional poetics, that role being to demonstrate the integrity, unity and consistency of the text. The critical strategy suggested here aims not at a demonstration of the consistency of the text with an eye to withdrawing the commodifiable capital of its *sens*, but to suggest what a text, *Moby Dick*, can do to challenge and thwart the will-to-control of the critic/reader. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes has provided a useful typology of texts, the *texte de plaisir* and the *texte de jouissance*. The former, according to Barthes, is a "text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, it is linked to a comfortable practice of reading." In contrast, the text of ecstasy is one that "imposes a state of loss, a text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, [and] bring to a crisis his relation with language." Arguably, one of the hallmarks of the latter kind of text is its self-referentiality or the "self-consciousness" of its discourse. As A. R. Lee has perceptively observed, "*Moby-Dick* both tells us a tale and, in ways which might strike us as radically contemporary, calls attention, throughout its length, to its own conception and modes of self-realization."

*Moby Dick* repeatedly reflects upon its own, necessary incompleteness; directly and indirectly poses challenges to the extraction of *sens* by the reader; reminds the reader of salient passages; places great emphasis on itself as a piece of *writing*; and, in these ways and others, affirms and confounds the reader's complicity in the hunt for *sens*. Various carnivalesque inversions, scatologies and transgressions of the dominant cultural imaginary abound, and in "The Doubloon" a parody of reading processes and sense-seeking criticism is provided.

In "The Quarterdeck," Ahab, the monomaniacal captain of the *Pequod*, has hegemonically implicated his crew in the hunt for Moby Dick, and has promised a golden doubloon to the mast-header who first sights the whale. In "The Doubloon," the coin, which Ahab nailed to the mainmast, serves as the text for a series of interpretations constituting a lengthy meditation on the reading process. The coin is described thus:

On its round border it bore the letters, REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: QUITO. So this bright coin came from a country planted in the middle of the world, and beneath the great equator, and named after it; and it had been cast midway up the Andes, in the unwaning

clime that knows no autumn. Zoned by these letters you saw the likeness of three Andes' summits: from one a flame; a tower from another; on the third a crowing cock—while arching over all was a segment of the partitioned zodiac, the signs all marked with their usual cabalistics, and the keystone sun entering the equinoctial point of Libra [359].

Ahab is the first reader, "not unobserved by others." (Parenthetically, I might note that, for the vast majority of critics, Ahab has always been "the first reader" and the focus of the author's intention!) The thrust of his reading is radically subjective. He soliloquizes: "The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab" [359].

Ahab is observed by Starbuck, the first mate: "He goes below; let me read. A dark valley between three mighty, Heaven-abiding peaks that almost seem the Trinity. . . . So in this vale of Death, God girds us round; and over all our gloom, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon and a hope" [360]. Having observed the captain and the first mate who have produced narcissistic and anagogical readings, Stubb, the second mate, opts for an intertextual reading, and for a reading having all the dominative characteristics of semantic imperialism. Having gone below to get his almanack, he speaks:

Here's the book. Let's see now. Signs and wonders; and the sun, he's always among 'em. Hem, hem, hem; here they are—here they go—all alive:—Aries, or the Ram; Taurus, or the Bull;—and Jimimi! here's Gemini himself, or the Twins. Well, the sun wheels among 'em. Aye, here on the coin he's just crossing the threshold between two of the twelve sitting-rooms all in a ring. Book! you lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places. You'll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts [361].

With the appearance of Flask, the third mate, an economic interpretation is given: "I see nothing here, but a round thing made of gold, and whoever raises a certain whale, this round thing belongs to him" [361]. Flask then observes, and reports, the readings of the Old Manx-man whose interpretation is solidly symbolic. He in turn is followed by Queequeg, the tattooed harpooneer, who appears as Flask is commenting on this entire reading process.

There's another rendering now; but still one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see. . . . Here comes Queequeg—all tattooing—looks like the signs of the Zodiac himself. What says the Cannibal? As I live, he's comparing notes; looking at his thigh bone; thinks the sun is in the thigh, or in the calf, or in the bowels. . . . And by Jove, he's found something in the vicinity of his thigh—I guess it's Sagittarius, or the Archer [362].

A Freudian prolepsis, perhaps; but surely a parody of Ahab's radically subjective reading.

Queequeg is then followed by Fedallah, Ahab's headman and *Doppelgänger*, who "only makes a sign to the sign and bows himself; there is a sun on the coin—fire worshipper, depend on it" [362]. The final word in this confounding of the proper place of *sens* is left to Pip, the black cabin-boy and maddened castaway. Flask or Ishmael, the identity of the observer/commentator has now become unclear, speaks:

Ho! more and more. This way comes Pip—poor boy! would he had died, or I; he's half horrible to me. He too has been watching all these interpreters—myself included—and look, now, he comes to read, with that unearthly idiot face.

"I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look."

"Upon my soul! He's been studying Murray's Grammar! Improving his mind, poor fellow! But what's that he says now—hist!"

"I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look."

"Why he's getting it by heart—hist! again."

"I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look."

"Well, that's funny."

"And, I, you and he; and we, ye, and they, are all bats" [362].

The last word is given to the mad Pip, the castaway "Alabama boy," a native of "Tolland County in Connecticut"; but Flask's recognition that there are many readings but only one text is even more telling. The doubloon as text; "The Doubloon" as text; the text as doubloon; and *Moby Dick* as doubloon/text.

In literary terms, "The Doubloon" is a singularly aggressive act! In the pages previous to this chapter, in broad and small brush strokes, the character, interests and values, i.e., the desire, of each of these "interpreters" have been well established by the narrator. Thus, none of these readings is surprising; but to stop here, acknowledging that *sens* is a dialogical process that engages the reader's ideological imaginary, is to avoid the challenge that "The Doubloon" presents. It is not only the readings of the seven individuals in "The Doubloon" that are disclosed as partial, incomplete and "unfinalizable" (Rus., *nezavershennost*; an awkward but useful term of Bakhtin). The reader of these readings is challenged by the doubloon/text in ways that the individual readers in the text cannot be, with the possible exception of the narrator. Each of the immanent readings poses the problem of *sens* and discloses its virtuality. Clearly, for the captain, the three mates, the Manxman and Queequeg, there is no *sens* but what each produces. The reader of "The Doubloon," however, is more strongly challenged and is directly confronted not only with these agonistic readings in the text, but with "The Doubloon" as an allegory of reading which not only calls attention to the reading process but also works to disrupt the reader's most prized assumptions and to thwart her/his most powerful and authoritative strategies for extracting and commodifying *sens*. As voiced by the mad Pip, we all read, we all produce *sens*; but "I, you and he; and we, ye and they, are all bats" [362], blinded by the desire for "owned," pleasurable *sens*.

In each of these readings, the doubloon/text is subordinated to the reader's desire to produce (virtual) *sens* that is consonant with a "comfortable practice of reading." The reader of "The Doubloon," however, is not only presented with the aporia of conflicting, agonistic readings, but also with Pip's carnivalesque reading of all readers!

Here's the ship's navel, this doubloon here, and they are all on fire to unscrew it. But, unscrew your navel, and what's the consequence [363]?

The consequence, as is well known, is that one's ass will fall off. In short, to subordinate the text to one's desire to produce *sens*, to displace the text, to "unscrew" the only controlling force that works against semiotic totalitarianism can only result in disaster. Indeed, it can be argued that each of the readers in "The Doubloon" did in fact "unscrew" the doubloon as text, subordinated it to desire (as each had already done with the white whale and Ahab's monomaniacal quest for vengeance on a "flat-tailed fish"), and died.

"The Doubloon" contributes powerfully to what can be called the anti-readerly qualities of *Moby Dick*, that is to the ways it unsettles readerly habits and, if reflected upon, enters into a struggle with the reader for control over *sens*. Metaphorically, it might be interesting to consider "The Doubloon" as having affected an inversion or reversal of the power dynamics common to reading/producing a text of pleasure. In this instance, the reader is "read" by the text at the same moment she/he is reading the text. Barthes has argued that "to write" is an intransitive verb, i.e., when I write, I inscribe myself. Analogously, "to read" is also an intransitive verb in the sense that when one reads, one is also "read"; e.g., in the act of reading, I am confirmed (a text of pleasure) or denied (text of ecstasy), to put the issue overly simply.

The power of a text to challenge or deny readerly desire and pleasure is among the characteristics that led Barthes to label certain texts as "writerly" (French, *scriptible*) in contrast to "readerly" (French, *lisible*). This might lead us to conclude that Melville, who once wrote, "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as a lamb," intentionally produced a writerly text; but, for me, this conclusion is premature and in its common sense conceals an ideology of literary production that fetishizes the author while accepting interested, self-serving and banal hypotheses as proof of validity. Olson, in a remarkable piece of criticism, "written to be *read away from* the centenary celebration of the publication of *Moby Dick*," quipped that "a very wicked man wrote a very spotless book," and that might be more to the point. Melville's putative "wickedness" was not restricted to artistically and proleptically envisioning a complex of agonistic forces that would, if arguably, result in American cultural failure. That *Moby Dick* is, by some reader/critics, constructed as a readerly text cannot be denied. (Neither can the obvious fact that it is constructed as "an intellectual chowder" and a complete artistic failure by others.) It is also a text that aggressively confronts its reader/critics not only with their desire, but also with a battery of immanent critical devices and strategies that wrest control of its *sens* from both the reader/critics— and the author, i.e., a "writerly" text.

Some eight days or so before the *Pequod* and its crew arrived at "the shattered sequel" [344] of the tale, the ship's carpenter was ordered to make a lifebuoy out of Queequeg's intended coffin. His muttered response follows:

I don't like this cobbling sort of business—I don't like it at all; it's undignified; it's not my place. Let tinkers' brats do tinkering; we are their betters. I like to take in hand none but clean, virgin, fair-and-square mathematical jobs, something that regularly begins at the beginning, and is at the middle when midway, and comes to an end at the conclusion; not a cobbler's job, that's at the end in the middle, and at the beginning at the end [430].

*Moby Dick*. . . "a cobbler's job" that can only begin at the end; a cobbler's job "that's at the end in the middle" since it is a text that literarily cannot be read once, but must be read twice [—unlike the first English edition of *The Whale* which lacked the "Epilogue" altogether!]. Its beginning is not in "Loomings," the first chapter, but in "Epilogue," the last. Only Ishmael survives the *Pequod*'s shattered sequel; and like the four messengers in *The Book of Job*, he survives alone ("And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" [470]) to narrate/inscribe this tale of tragic heroism, death and unintentional destruction. The reflective reader/critic, upon learning that Ishmael, a marginal, liminal, boundary figure at best, alone survives, should be (but very rarely is) stricken with the realization that **all** interpretive devices, tactics and strategies that *had been* found useful and comforting in reading from the beginning of "Loomings" ("Call me Ishmael"[12]) to the end of "The Chase—Third day" (. . . and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" [469]), have led to nothing but readerly mis-appropriation and mis-interpretation. "Epilogue" is the middle of this cobbler's tale, and its interpretive beginning. Ishmael, the paradigmatic "other" and self-styled "author from the dead" [396; cf. 197: "I survived myself; my death and burial were locked up in my chest"], takes the text in hand and, by doing so, displaces Melville as scriptor and radically challenges readerly desire for control leading to the pleasure of the text.

Authorial intention (always a construct owing in part to the inability of any author to write self-transparently) is invariably compromised by the reader's complicity with the text in producing virtual *sens*. To paraphrase Kermode, "we must become accustomed to the fact that the first to misunderstand the meaning of a text is its author." Following Valery, Jerzy Kosinski has argued that:

There is no true meaning of a text. . . after the book is presented to the public, the writer becomes one of many readers of his own work, and his judgment on his work is. . . neither

more astute nor more shallow than the judgment of any other reader ["Notes of the Author on *The Painted Bird*," p. 21].

In short and in terms of the immanent criticism of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael's survival makes it virtually impossible to decide what is event, what is memory, hallucination, fantasy, or narrator's interpolation. At the very least, Ishmael's survival establishes provisionally the idea that his narration bounds the text as the horizon, the limit **and** possibility, of the reader/critic's interpretation. But, unlike Ishmael, readers and critics can never come alone to a text.

"Call me Ishmael"—not "I am Ishmael," but "**call me** Ishmael." The bastard son of Hagar and Abram, half-Egyptian, half-'Apiru, an exiled, outcast figure from *Genesis*, the beginning, now a writer. A small thing, perhaps, but the editors of the text used in this paper, when noting the biblical origins of the name, refer to Ishmael as follows: "And he will be a wild man; and every man's hand against him" (*Genesis* 16: 12). Setting aside the syntactical infelicity of the second "and" in this quotation, the editors' deletion is of particular interest. Verse 12 actually reads: "He will be a wild [ass of a] man, *his hand against every man* and every man's hand against him" [italics added]. If, as I am about to argue, only Ishmael can be the narrator (an argument made by some other critics) and the scriptor of this text (as contrasted with the book which one Melville wrote), then to omit Ishmael's antagonistic, oppositional and "maddened hand" [53] might be to deny him his crucial role in the construction of a writerly text that is written against the grain, showing not only, as Barthes would have it, how meanings are produced, but also how the production of meanings is restricted or prevented.

Consider some meanings of "loomings": things impending, things threatening, things woven, things taking shape, things indistinct, things ambiguous, things warped, things magnified. . . and the title of the first chapter in *Moby Dick*, "Loomings." Consistent with at least one of its meanings, "Loomings" is portentous as Ishmael's meditation upon water and his rationale for going whaling. It is woven from scatological justifications for going to sea as a common seaman ("head winds are far more prevalent than winds from astern. . . if you never violate the Pythagorean maxim" [15]), self-mocking headlines ("WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL" [16]), incomplete ideas ("and this is the key to it all" [14]), but above all by Ishmael's clarification of his motives.

Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity. Then the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale; these, with all the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds, helped to sway me to my wish. With other men, perhaps, such things would not have been an inducement; but as for me, I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts. . .

By reason of these things, then, the whaling voyage was welcome; the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and *midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air* [16; italics added].

Since Ishmael first heard of Moby Dick when Ahab prematurely proclaimed his vengeful purpose on the quarterdeck [142], or possibly from one of the mastheaders referred to in "Queen Mab" [116], it is narratively impossible for the "one grand hooded phantom," Moby Dick, to have been the chief motive or even among the wild conceits that swayed Ishmael to his mock picaresque quest for hypo-therapy. While not denying the significance of the whale in Ishmael's inscribed memory of loss, it must be stated unequivocally that *Moby Dick* occasioned not going a'whaling in the first place, but a "whaling voyage [written] by one Ishmael." The need to reopen the past, to resignify, retell and account for the shattered sequel to the *Pequod's* last



voyage motivates Ishmael not only to narrate, but to write, or, to use Ishmael's more typical terms for writing, investing, ascribing, blubbering, exfoliating.

Taken together with the fact that Ishmael is the sole survivor of the *Pequod's* destruction, his mention of Moby Dick in "Loomings," which serves as a prologue to *Moby Dick* (and as the focus for "readerly" desire), suggests that it is his memory that circumscribes the text, that it is his memory that is the undeniable atmosphere within which the tale and the telling take place. Although it might be the case that for some critics texts should have "a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut," the *sens* of *Moby Dick*/Moby Dick "was not inside like a kernel, but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine" [Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*, p. 9].

Throughout *Moby Dick*, there are phrases, passages and even entire chapters in which Ishmael draws attention away from the narrative and to the "self-consciousness" of the text as a piece of writing. "The Lee Shore" is described as "this six-inch chapter [which] is the stoneless grave of Bulkington" [97]. In "Cetology" a typology manqué of whales is given that organizes the species as a series of texts of different sizes folio, octavo, duodecimo, etc. [116 ff.]. Ishmael begins his extended meditation on the whiteness of the whale by noting that "it was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught" [163]. The reader is warned in "The Affidavit" that "so far as what there may be of a narrative in this book. . . the foregoing chapter, in its earlier part, is as important a one as will be found in this volume" [175]. Later in the same chapter of *Moby Dick*, the text again "reads" the reader's reading and severely challenges the allegorizing will-to-control of the majority of its readers.

I do not know where I can find a better place than just here to make mention of one or two other things, which to me seem important, as in printed form establishing in all respects the reasonableness of the whole story of the White Whale, more especially the catastrophe [which is yet to come]. . . So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical and otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory [177].

"The Crotch" begins: "Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters" [246]; and ends: "All these particulars are faithfully narrated here, as they will not fail to elucidate several most important, however intricate passages in scenes hereafter to be painted" [247]. Later, Ishmael ponders the placement of a whale's eyes:

Now, from this peculiar sideways position of the whale's eyes, it is plain that he can never see an object which is exactly ahead, no more than he can one exactly astern. . . The whale, therefore, must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him. . . This peculiarity of the whale's eyes is a thing always to be borne in mind in the fishery; and to be remembered by the reader in some subsequent scenes [279].

In short, and this could be extended even further beyond the point of usefulness, throughout the text there are proleptic and analeptic discursive strategies which confront the reader/critic with his/her readerly desire while confounding that desire with restrictions upon the freedom with which the production of *sens* can proceed.

However, at the same time that the text is displaying its discursive self-consciousness, it vaunts its incompleteness, its undecidability, its "unfinalizability," its indefiniteness. Ishmael promises "nothing complete; because any human thing

supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty" [118]. For its narrator/scriptor, one Ishmael, "this whole book is but a draught—nay, but a draught of a draught" [128]. Closure, consistency, integrity, order, monologism, systematicity, stasis—virtually all the principles of pleasurable criticism are capsized and shattered by Ishmael's scriptoral hand.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Ishmael's use of antagonistic codes, e.g., "heroic/mediocre," in his re-remembering and re-presentation of the crew and captain of the *Pequod*. In "Knights and Squires," a relationship that he will invert and confound at the end of "The Quarter-deck," Ishmael describes the first or chief mate, Starbuck, and concludes that "this Starbuck seemed prepared to endure for long ages to come, and to endure always, *as now*" [103; italics added]. "As now"? When? "Some years ago—never mind how long precisely. . . . I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world" [12]. Thus, Ishmael begins his narrative in "Loomings" (after having interpellated himself as "Ishmael"). In recounting "The Town-ho's Story," he writes: "For my humor's sake, I shall preserve the style in which I once narrated it in Lima" [208]. In short, the "now" until which Starbuck has endured is the narratological, scriptoral present and can be no other. (And, readers of this essay might be reminded, he yet endures, now.) These two apparently insignificant words, "as now," can be taken as a hinge or *brisure* of *Moby Dick*. The narratological/scriptoral present, the time of Ishmael's writing, displaces and replaces the temporality of "past, present and future," a process implied above in the discussion of "a cobbler's job." Here (in the text), Ishmael begins to write of writing while never quite forgetting that he is also telling a tale of events that occurred "some years ago." There have been hints of this discursive turn in previous chapters, but for the most part Ishmael has, from "Loomings" to "Merry Christmas," narrated a familiar romance while occluding, indeed silencing, the workings of his "maddened hand."

In "Loomings" Ishmael reflects briefly on his role in the tale:

Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces—though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which. . . induced me to set about performing the part I did. . . [16]

As the following discussion will show, Ishmael did not remain content with having a shabby role in a whaling story, nor, it should be recognized, was he able to allow others such shabby roles either. The "others" who "were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies," for example, were "set down" by Ishmael who, to extend the metaphor, took a much more important role, that of dramaturge.

Having invested Starbuck with many virtues, heroic and otherwise, and having noted that he was "a staid, steadfast man, whose life for the most part was a telling pantomime of action, and not a tame chapter of sounds" [103], Ishmael prefigures Starbuck's fate:

But, were the coming narrative to reveal, in any instance, the complete abasement of poor Starbuck's fortitude, scarce might I have the heart to write it; for it is a thing most sorrowful, nay shocking, to expose the fall of valor in the soul. [104]

Having predicted that what he in fact will do with Starbuck, i.e., abase him completely, will be sorrowful and shocking, Ishmael immediately turns his scriptoral hand against every man, including himself.

If, then, to meanest mariners, renegades and castaways, I shall *hereafter ascribe* high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted

mounts; if I shall touch that workman's arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it. . . bear me out in it, O God! [104-5; italics added].

A few pages later, having described the other "knights" and their "squires," the harpooneers, Ishmael remarks that "though the harpooneers, with the great body of the crew, were a far more barbaric, heathenish and motley set than any of the tame merchant-ship companies of my previous experiences had made me acquainted with, still I *ascribed* this. . . to the fierce uniqueness of the very nature of that wild Scandinavian vocation in which I had so abandonly embarked" [109; italics added]. The crew of the *Pequod*, comprising "meanest mariners, renegades and castaways," a "barbaric, heathenish and motley set" "made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals" [162], around whom Ishmael textually weaves tragic graces, to whom he ascribes high qualities. . . the crew, led by a "grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world" [162].

In re-collecting the circumstances in which he sailed on the *Pequod*, Ishmael lapses into a (typical) discursive reverie that begins with the fact that many Nantucketers are Quakers with biblical names, "Quakers with a vengeance" [71]. Somewhat whimsically, he conjectures that the peculiar characteristics of these whalemens probably result from three factors: being Quakers, having scriptural names, and the "thousand bold dashes of character" [71] that come from pursuing the whale!

And when these things unite in a man of greatly natural superior force, with a globular brain and a ponderous heart. . . —that man makes one in a whole nation's census—a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies. Nor will it at all detract from him, dramatically regarded, if either by birth or other circumstances, he has what seems a half-wilful over-ruling morbidness at the bottom of his nature. For all men tragically great are made so through a certain morbidness. Be sure of this, young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease. *But, as yet we have not to do with such an one, but with quite another.* . . [71; italics added].

Ishmael's re-recollection of his first meeting with Captain Bildad, a majority owner of the *Pequod*, occasions a typically heterodiegetic disruption of the surface of the narrative and one that adumbrates the "tragically great" if mortally diseased figure of Ahab.

In "The Specksynder" (sic), a chapter that "breaches" from lexicography to dramaturgy, Ishmael notes that Ahab "was by no means unobservant of the paramount forms and usages of the sea" [129]. But, owing to a "certain sultanism of the brain" [129], such forms and usages served primarily to mask Ahab's "egomaniacal" purposes, and to distract from, even occlude altogether, Ishmael's scriptural hand and ascriptive imagination.

Nor, will the tragic dramatist who would depict mortal indomitableness in its fullest sweep and direst swing, ever forget a hint, incidentally so important in his art, as the one now alluded to.

But Ahab, my Captain, still moves before me in all his Nantucket grimness and shagginess; and in this episode touching Emperors and Kings, *I must not conceal that I have only to do with a poor old whale hunter like him*; and therefore, all outward majestic trappings are denied me. O, Ahab! *what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air* [129-30; italics added].

More than merely a tension between Ishmael's "shabby part" in a whaling voyage and his dramaturgical claims is evinced here. Ishmael is openly and aggressively challenging "all mortal critics" to implement strategies of reading and interpretation that can rid *Moby Dick* of the determinant effects of his ubiquitous presence. Ishmael writes that he has "only to do with a poor old whale-hunter," and

adds that everything grand that is ascribed to Ahab by anyone, including as first among many, one Ishmael, must be imagined. In short, Ahab is, in every respect, Ishmael's creature, just as the crew is his product. Ahab's "mortal indomitableness" is inextricably woven by and into the fabric (L., *textus*) of Ishmael's memory. An irony for the would-be critic to ponder here, of course, is the fact that the above passage is the conclusion of a chapter that allegedly deals with the role of the fat-cutter (Dutch, *specksnyder*) in the whale fishery.

Mortal critics can choose between two equally problematic approaches to Ahab, and, thus, to *Moby Dick* and Moby Dick. Either read and interpret the text as a product of Ishmael's imagination, in which case its *sens* will ever be "undecidable," or subjectivistically pluck, dive and feature an Ahab, a Moby Dick and a *Moby Dick* that are but direct effects of the desire for pleasure, comfort and self-transparency. The *Moby Dick* that is the product of Ishmael's maddened, scriptorial hand is a text of ecstasy in its challenge to "comfortable practices of reading." Indeed, even Melville is excluded from control of Ishmael's text, exhibiting his own death as author. Neither the author nor the critics survived "the shattered sequel" to the voyage of the *Pequod*. Only Ishmael, a wild ass of a man whose hand was against every man and every man's hand against him. . . only Ishmael as scriptor and Moby Dick as text survive "the vengeance of a flat-tailed fish." Narratologically considered, the destruction of the *Pequod* is "the shattered sequel" to which Ishmael alludes twice in "The Castaway." Scriptorially, *Moby Dick* is itself the fragmented sequel created in Ishmael's re-membering Ahab, Queequeg, himself and the others, "the shattered sequel" in which they all endure, now.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I shall unabashedly exploit the polyvalence of the French word *sens*, i.e., way, style, manner, meaning, judgment, direction, opinion, interpretation, the physical senses, etc.

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#### References

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