

the transformation of power relations at the site of sociopolitics. It is no longer the censorship—the active rejection or marginalization of deviant texts—that determines the structure of the canon. Like the disciplinary operations obscured by the ruse of the repressive hypothesis or, alternatively, of hegemony, it is, rather, (the domestication or pacification of their duplicitous, disruptive force in the name of deliverance but in behalf of national consensus. Theory has taught us, in other words, that the institutional production and consumption of literary texts constitutes one of the most important and powerful means of legitimating and reproducing the dominant cultural and sociopolitical formation. It is in this multiple sense that one can now speak of interpretation and canon formation (and the institutional machinery—literature departments, presses, journals, professional literary associations, accrediting agencies, and so on—which transmit their forms and contents) in the post-Enlightenment age as a form of (neo-)colonialism and the intended accomplishment of a *Pax Anthropologica*.)

A GENEALOGICAL HISTORY OF THE RECEPTION OF *MOBY-DICK*, 1850–1945

The general significance of the posthumanist disclosure of the logocentric will to power informing canon formation for the history of the reception of Melville's *Moby-Dick* should now be obvious. In the historical context of a still powerful Puritan tradition, however secularized as the "spirit of capitalism,"²¹ the Melville of *Moby-Dick* (1851), indeed, of *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities* (1852), "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), "Benito Cereno" (1855), *The Confidence-Man* (1857), and the other texts that followed, was arbitrarily dismissed by his early critics as exorbitant, if not exactly pronounced to be heretical: too radical in his departure from the Puritan/capitalist *logos*. (The official custodians of the American Cultural Memory (often repeating the judgment of Victorian English critics), that is, found Melville's text, especially those baroque stylistic and rhetorical elements associated with his representation of Captain Ahab, utterly alien, despite intimations of the writer's remarkable talent, even genius, to the Puritan/capitalist problematic determining their critical discourse, specifically, the "realist"/autobiographical form inherited from the Puritan confessional discursive tradition and exploited by Richard Henry Dana Jr. in *Two Years before the Mast* (1840) and by Melville himself in *Typee* (1846).

Omoo (1847), *Redburn* (1849), and *White-Jacket* (1850). Blinded by the oversight of an empirical problematic that rationalized a providential history, they read Melville's deliberately "errant" text—the structural oscillation between the personal discourse of common sense or experiential verisimilitude and the more predominant "eccentric" flights of imagination (which they reduced to "Fancy")—as the manifestation of something between lunacy (possession) and blasphemy: the confirmation of a tendency already latent, not least in *Mardi* (1849), but "under control" in his earlier seafaring romances.²²

In all those portions of this volume which relate directly to the whale, his appearance in the ocean which he inhabits, his habits, powers and peculiarities, his pursuit and capture, the interest of the reader will be kept alive, and his attention fully rewarded. We should judge, from what is before us, that Mr. Melville has as much personal knowledge of the whale as any living man, and is better able, than any man living, to display this knowledge in print. In all the scenes where the whale is the performer or the sufferer, the delineation and action are highly vivid and exciting. In all other respects, the book is sad stuff, dull and dreary, or ridiculous. Mr. Melville's Quakers are the wretchedest dolts and drivellers, and his Mad Captain, who pursues his personal revenges against the fish who has taken off his leg, at the expense of ship, crew, and owners, is a monstrous bore, whom Mr. Melville has no way helped, by enveloping him in a sort of mystery. His ravings, and the ravings of some of the tributary characters, and the ravings of Mr. Melville himself, meant for eloquent declamation, are such as would justify a writ *de lunatico* against all parties.²³

Despite variations, this overall judgment against the excessiveness of *Moby-Dick*, which barely conceals its privileging of the ideological relay between the economic and materially useful knowledge of empirical observation and the Protestant ethic over a disturbingly forceful discourse represented as wasteful—a discourse that, from outside the empirical problematic, could be characterized as an originary *poiesis*—is not simply that of the critics repelled by the exorbitant force of Melville's writing. This reactive judgment is also that of those critics who, like Evert Duyckinck, acknowledged *Moby-Dick* as the work of an American writer of genius, but were ideologically incapable of reconciling what their problematic compelled them to see as a radical and disabling division in Melville's psyche. It was not simply, as Duyckinck puts it, "the double character under which [*Moby-Dick*]" and "one or two other of Mr. Mel-

marginalization of the disruptive "Other." More important, it will also foreclose the possibility of thinking the relay of specifically situated terms repressed or marginalized by the visionary gaze in other modes than the binary logic that demonizes and incarcerates them in its inclusive, circular iron cage.

I want to suggest provisionally, then, that Melville overdetermines the "tragic" in *Moby-Dick* in order to expose the discourse of "tragic vision" as a ruse constructed by metaphysical confidence men (and thus, as a more subtle form of the blindness he finds in the "optimism" of the legacy of Emerson and Thoreau to the unequal, historically specific, lived experience of men and women). Far from writing or failing to write a novel that enacts the encompassing epiphanic closure of tragedy, Melville wrote a novel that exists to destroy not simply the idea of tragedy but the metaphysical vision that has given privileged status to tragic form, indeed, to all structurally teleological literary forms—including what came to be called the American romance—grounded in the certainty of an ultimate presence and a determinate meaning. However constrained by the philosophical, scientific, and literary discourses of his time and place, Melville had an intuition, not simply of the disabling internalization and resolution of existential contradictions incumbent on the reduction of being-in-the-world to miniaturized representation. He also had an intuition of the imperial will to power over being—and, as I will show, of the cultural, economic, and sociopolitical implications of this will to power—informing the miniaturizing tragic vision and the archival critical discourse it has produced. It is this intuition, I will suggest, that disaffiliates him from the exhausted and exhausting metaphysical tradition at large and its literary monuments and affiliates him in a proleptic way with the postmodern, or, more specifically, posthumanist distrust of tragedy as metaphysical confidence game. "Tragedy," Roland Barthes writes, echoing Bertolt Brecht, "is merely a means of 'recovering' human misery, of subsuming and thereby justifying it in the form of a necessity, a wisdom, or a purification: to refuse the recuperation and to investigate the techniques of not treacherously succumbing to it (nothing is more insidious than tragedy) is today a necessary enterprise."²⁷

I want to suggest, in other words, that *Moby-Dick* is a destructive social text—I am tempted to call it, after Nietzsche and Foucault, a work of "genealogy" in its parodic modality, or, after Mikhail Bakhtin, a "carnivalesque" novel—that finally exists to de-structure the "competent reader's"

archivally inscribed—and thus always confident—impulse to read and "master" texts spatially: not simply to expose its gaze's "imperial" project of decipherment, but to release the temporality—and the sociopolitical forces—it has colonized. To approach Melville's fiction with such a future anterior perspective—a geometric measure, as it were—is precisely to practice the restricted (imperial) economy of the ontology and epistemology he is calling radically into question in *Moby-Dick* (and the fiction that follows): specifically, the monomania that impels Captain Ahab on his murderous pursuit of the ineffable white whale. For the archival Americanist's assumption of and obsessive quest for tragic unity—the "talismanic secret," as it were—in Melville's radically elusive text is precisely analogous to Ahab's will to knowledge: a paranoid effort to coerce the multiplicity—the differential force—of being into Oneness. In interrogating this hermeneutic monomania, which imperially reduces difference to the indifferent and enervating Same, *Moby-Dick* discloses a different—a differential—measure, a de-centered and falling and errant measure, a cadence, as it were, that, in deference to its unnameability, will be named by resisting the impulse to name it in the sequel.

MELVILLE'S ERRANT MEASURE: THE TESTIMONY OF THE FICTION
FOLLOWING *MOBY-DICK*

The most significant symptomatic instance of the obstinate effort to repress the contradictions in Melville's novel that would disclose vision, and visionary writing as a metaphysical confidence game of metaphysical confidence men is the failure by virtually all the commentators—Old and New Americanists alike—to address the narrative evidence of Ishmael's representation and response to Father Mapple's sermon on the biblical Jonah text: more specifically, its function in the narrative at large. But because the subversive/emancipatory effect of this crucial but obliterated intertextual occasion works by way of a complex indirection, I will invoke other such suppressed occasions in Melville's post-*Moby-Dick* fiction, the retrieval of which will help to clarify not only the subversive function of Father Mapple's sermon in the novel at large, but also what is at stake in Melville's errant art, what Melville's ontological interrogation of vision is intended to compel the American cultural identity to (re-)think.

In the novels following *Moby-Dick* and their more or less indifferent

previous meditation on the genealogy of Ahab's ontological monomania, which he entitles "Moby Dick." Whereas Ahab pursues Moby Dick in the inexorable name of Mankind's vengeance against the dreadful force of being, (the young Ishmael's impulse, if not his resolute decision, is to accept the white whale as a manifestation of being's unspeakable mystery.) He resists reducing and converting the unnameable excess that spills across the circumscribing boundary of his imagination and terrifies him into something he can comprehend and pacify. Through his retrieval of his lapse before Ahab's centered and centering "master eye," the older Ishmael comes to understand that his oath was a temporary, however fateful, capitulation to that publically inscribed impulse, so magnified by the symbolizing totalitarian consciousness, to find a single, all-encompassing object for dread—a scapegoat—and thus to familiarize and contain the uncanny. His deepest instinct, however, is to acknowledge the dread activated by the terrible "whiteness" of the whale, the dread, which according to Heidegger, has no thing as its object, the Nothingness or absence of presence that reminds him of his thrownness in-the-world:

What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted. What, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid.

Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not but occasionally awaken in any man's soul some alarm, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest, and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. 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. (P. 188)

In Ishmael's stuttering meditation on the whiteness of the whale, there is no uncertainty about the function of naming the whiteness that pervades being. As his long participial catalogue of various temporal and geographical cultural representations—writing or figuration—suggests, the naming is driven by the impulse to reify "it" for purposes of domesticating its threat, whether this domestication takes the form of utility, aesthetic repose, or enhancement of power.

Though in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own, as in marbles, japonicas, and pearls, and though

where," as it were—of traditional fiction is so pronounced that one might say his story constitutes an act of mutiny against its mystified "concentrated" authority. The narrative continues to pursue, that is, "repeats," though now and increasingly in a deepening and more self-conscious way that implicates practice with theory, a double, or duplicitous, movement. It is a movement in which the "errant" impulse—and the discoveries it "charts" on the way (his *periplus*, as it were), not simply about ontology, but also, and crucially, as I will show, about other regions along the indissoluble continuum of being—destroys what the tradition would call Ahab's grand and untouchable hubris and the consolatory tragic action it precipitates by disclosing this hubris to be a metaphysical monomania and the tragic action an unerring disciplinary movement that end in a catastrophe that no "secret cause" can accommodate.

From the emergent, occasional perspective of Ishmael's estrangement, Ahab's Adamic eye has become a coercive gaze that gathers the dreadful multiplicity of the errant energies of being—of the "Naught," as it were—that renders the human situation, man's being-in-the-world, intolerable into a single, totalized dedifferentiated, visible, and identifiable trope.

Thus, like his counterpart, the fallen but still "central" man in the American tradition established by the Puritans, whose end "in the fullness of time" is promised in the beginning, Ahab is enabled to fulfill—in practice—his monistic project (his story) without digressing or de-viating from the linear (circular) course it projects, without "swerving" from the pre-scribed way. In a delirious soliloquy that refers to his anthropological vision as a prophecy in which the "prophet [seer] and the fulfiller [are] one," in which, that is, *theoria* becomes *praxis*, the panoptic gaze, a totalitarian "politics," Ahab projects his fierce yet calculative purpose in terms of the metaphors of the railroad, that technological instrument, not incidentally, precipitated by and for the rationalizing "sovereign subject" that was to play a decisive role in the leveling and domestication of the American earth—and the extermination of its native inhabitants: "Come, Ahab's compliments to ye [the malicious 'great God'] come and see if ye can swerve me. Swerve me! ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! man has ye there. Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!" (p. 168; my emphasis). Henceforth, it is this fierce, calculative inflexibility

authorized by his monolithic, ontological leveling of alterity—this technologizing of being—that Ishmael will insistently emphasize in referring to Ahab's direction of the *Pequod's* unerring itinerary through the "unhooped," labyrinthine seas. The ship's technological instruments become an extension of Ahab's "methodical" monomania (p. 200). Not unlike the "tables" of the natural and physical scientists of the Enlightenment, which, in their spatialization and classification of being, according to Foucault, paved the way for the panopticism of modernity, the harnessing of knowledge to power, to the task of transforming the hitherto amorphous, invisible, and threatening human collective into the modern disciplinary society, the ship's charts, for example, become an extension of Ahab's "master eye" in his unrelenting effort to track down the elusive white whale.

But it was not this night in particular [which preceded "that wild ratification of his purpose with the crew"] that, in the solitude of his cabin, Ahab thus pondered over his charts. Almost every night they were brought out, almost every night some pencil marks were effaced, and others substituted. For with the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of the monomaniac thought of his soul.

Now, to any one not fully acquainted with the ways of the leviathan, it might seem an absurdly hopeless task thus to seek out one solitary creature in the unhooped oceans of this planet. But not so did it seem to Ahab, who knew the sets of all tides and currents, and thereby calculating the driftings of the sperm whale's food, and, also, calling to mind the regular, ascertained seasons for hunting him in particular latitudes, could arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching to certainties, concerning the timeliest day to be upon this or that ground in search of his prey. (Pp. 198–99; my emphasis)

Whenever, on its inflexibly steered course, the *Pequod* meets another whaling vessel, Ahab's first and only question to the captain, no matter what the vessel's occasion, is invariably whether he has seen the white whale.⁷³ Like his Puritan ancestors, he will not tolerate *wasting time for "peripheral" purposes*. Thus, for example, while Stubb is extracting the rich ambergris from a sick whale, Ahab impatiently commands him "to desist, and come on board, else the ship would bid them goodbye" (p. 407).

Even the diversions in the *Pequod's* course are diversionary, covert acts of mastery calculated to appease—indeed, to neutralize by instrumentaliz-

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ing—the potentially disruptive uneasiness of Ahab's sublunar, human crew, especially Starbuck's volatile abhorrence of Ahab's vengeful purpose and his desire to "disintegrate himself from it." Since the passage I am referring to is important for what it suggests not only about Ishmael's emergent attitude toward Ahab's "subtle insanity respecting Moby Dick" but also about his own narrative art, it warrants quotation at length:

To accomplish his object Ahab must use tools, and of all tools used in the shadow of the moon, men are most apt to get out of order. He knew, for example, that however magnetic his ascendancy in some respects was over Starbuck, yet that ascendancy did not cover the complete spiritual man any more than mere corporeal superiority involves intellectual mastership, for to the purely spiritual, the intellectual but stands in a sort of corporeal relation. Starbuck's body and Starbuck's coerced will were Ahab's, so long as Ahab kept his magnet at Starbuck's brain; still he knew that for all this the chief mate, in his soul, abhorred his captain's quest, and could he, would joyfully disintegrate himself from it, or even frustrate it. It might be that a long interval would elapse ere the White Whale was seen. During that long interval Starbuck would ever be apt to fall into open relapses of rebellion against the captain's leadership, unless some ordinary, prudential, circumstantial, influences were brought to bear upon him. Not only that, but the subtle insanity of Ahab respecting Moby Dick was noways more significantly manifested than in his superlative sense and shrewdness in foreseeing that, for the present, the hunt should in some way be stripped of that strange imaginative impiety which naturally invested it, that the full terror of the voyage must be kept withdrawn into the obscure background (for few men's courage is proof against protracted meditation unrelieved by action), that when they stood their long night watches, his officers and men must have some nearer things to think of than Moby Dick. . . . [W]hen [sailors] retained for any object remote and blank in the pursuit, however promissory of life and passion in the end, it is above all things requisite that temporary interests and employments should intervene and hold them healthily suspended for the final dash. (P. 212; my emphasis)

Indeed, calculation—the mental act of manipulating the elusive differential phenomena of temporality (the "nearer things," the "temporary interests and enjoyments") to achieve a preconceived (and preexistent) end—becomes the solar Ahab's essential measure in gaining "ascendancy" over the essential mutability of his "sublunar" crew: "that protection [from the 'unanswerable charge of usurpation' to which his private purpose laid him open] . . . would only consist in his predominating brain and heart and hand, backed by a heedful, closely calculating attention to every minute atmospheric influence which it was possible for his crew to be subjected

to" (p. 213). Accordingly, just as Sameness underlies the minute spatial particulars of Ahab's cosmos, so it underlies the minute temporal particulars of his understanding of time; just as Ahab's commitment to the ontology of the One levels spatial differentiation (in this case, the reduction and pacification of the differentiated crew of American *Isolatoos* into technologized, that is, docile and efficient bodies), so his commitment to an absolutely linear (circular) concept of time levels temporal differentiation. Like Father Mapple's prefigurative, exegetical method, Ahab's calculative measure will allow no thing or event to be superfluous. To recall a telling metaphor that Ishmael uses in the passage quoted above from "The Chart," Ahab's calculative measure, like the Athenian Theseus's, is positively capable of threading the maze of the oceans of being and to and from the lair of the "monstrous" Leviathan at its core.

In the last phase of the voyage, of course—as many Americanists since Matthiessen have observed—Ahab shows signs of relenting to his "natural" human impulses. Ishmael's attentive documentation of this emergent antithetical claim on Ahab's being—this disruption of his monolithic ideology, as it were—has been invoked by traditional Americanists to justify their representation of Ishmael/Melville's story as a narrative determined, not by ideology, but, in the terms Lionel Trilling appropriates from Henry James, by the "imagination of disaster,"⁷⁴ the "dialectical" or "liberal" imagination, he reiteratively tells us, by which "the world [is] raised to the noblest expression."⁷⁵ In the following passage, Trilling is referring to James's *Princess Casamassima*, but what he says by way of his analysis of Hyacinth Robinson's story about James's "imagination of disaster" is, in its exemplary resistance to the hegemony of the progressive, that is, ideologically driven, "realism" of the Parringtonian tradition, clearly intended as a generalization that applies to the American romance extending from Hawthorne through Melville to James.⁷⁶ And whether or not Trilling would, in fact, include *Moby-Dick* in this generalization, it is certainly the case that the Americanists who appropriated his enabling binary opposition between the romance and the realist novel, between the former's complex and "aware" "moral realism" and the latter's reductive and blind ideological realism would:

By the time Hyacinth's story draws to its end, his mind is in a perfect equilibrium, not of irresolution but of awareness. His sense of the social horror of the world is not diminished by his newer sense of the glory of the world. On the contrary, just

In thus retrieving his renunciation of the oath of violence, Ishmael begins to perceive that this crucial gesture of remembrance disengages him from the centralized and integrated crowd, which can only do violence in that instrumentalized capacity. Simultaneously, Ishmael opens up the possibility of a different kind of relationship with such a polyglot crew, a relationship not of an effective solidarity grounded in the principle of essential identity, but of a care-ful generosity—what Heidegger calls *Mitsein* (being-with) in *Being and Time*—activated by the recognition of the absence of (self-)presence.

What Ishmael actually articulates at this point is, as he well knows, both sentimental and unattainable in this world, and so he does not take it seriously. But it does anticipate the ultimate disclosure that comes in Ishmael's "Epilogue," which, as *epi-logos*, a word that is "beside" or "against" the Word, "upwards bursts," as it were, from the "vital center" of his troping narrative. Despite the familiarity of its terms, the "Epilogue" demands full quotation for the dislocation of the received meanings of its parts activated by the recognition of the "post-ultimacy" of this moment in Ishmael's text:

The drama's done. Why then here does anyone step forth?—Because one did survive that wreck. It so chanced, that after the Parsee's disappearance, I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab's bowsman. When that bowsman assumed the vacant post, the same, who, when on the last day the three men were tossed from out the rocking boat, was dropped astern. So, floating at the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve. Till, gaining that vital centre the black bubble upward burst, and now, liberated by reason of its cunning spring, and, owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths, the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks. On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and pick me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan. (P. 573)

"The drama's done. Why then here does anyone step forth?" Why, then, this *epi-logos* or supplement? this stepping forth across the bounding line of the traditional narrative determined by the "talismatic secret" or "Transcendental Signified"? In the temporal process of "re-telling" his "ancient

mariner's" tale to the landsman listener, Ishmael does not come home again like the hero of the romance or more subtly of tragedy. He does not discover the still point in the turning world that certifies his fathered centrality in the cosmic scheme of things, in *physis*. At the end of his narrative journey he discovers the centerlessness of being, and that discovery de-centers him, renders him marginal. His "proper self"—the self-present (male) self of the self-reliant "Central Man" of the humanistic tradition whom Emerson and Thoreau and Whitman and Cooper would reinscribe into the romance of American culture—or the more complex but affiliated self-present self of Tragic Man of a certain Hawthorne or Henry James the elder—becomes the "ec-centric," or "ex-orbitant," self. I mean the self that, according to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lacan, Irigaray, Derrida, Foucault, and many contemporary novelists and poets, the Western tradition at large has existed to discipline and reform in and for its symbolic order.

At the "end" of his narrative, Ishmael, as we have noted, comes to perceive the centered circle as a vortex, the All as zero. But as the declaration and the disruptive question that follows it in the "Epilogue" suggests, it is only now, by way of his "stepping forth"—his "ek-sisting"—that he realizes that the destruction of the circle as All is what has precipitated his "saving" errant "book." "Disintegrated from the One," as Starbuck could not be because of his commitment to the enterprising self of the "Nantucket market," by his recognition of metaphysics as a broken instrument (a recognition underscored by his ironic repetition of the metaphor of the Fates he had called into question in the beginning of his story), and his renunciation of violence against the white whale, Ishmael now understands and acknowledges mortality (Queequeg's coffin) as the absence of presence at the center of being. He thus liberates himself from whatever remaining hold the "abiding" patriarchal Word has on him. (It should not be overlooked that Ishmael is picked up by the "devious-cruising Rachel," a whaling ship of males hitherto on Man's [phallic] business, but now acting under the sign of women.) And he divests himself of the vestigial remains of the coercive patriarchal genetic structure—the inclusive circle and its symbolic order that the patriarchal Word actualizes—which is the geo-metric measure legitimized by the American landsmen's philosophy of (Adamic) "Presence." Having "leaped in the circle primordially and wholly," as it were, Ishmael's circular story has precipitated not identity but difference.