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Reflecting, Refracting:

The All-ness of the Whale and the Fragmentation of Ahab

A striking feature of Melville's *Moby Dick* is the author's use of foils and complimentary characters in order to develop certain central characters by way of their relationship to others. Moby Dick is of course a prime example of this tactic, as is Ahab, but with key differences; the whale acts as a reflection, encompassing all meaning projected onto it, while the man is refracted, bits of his characterization and motivation being expressed through secondary characters around him, mainly, for the purposes of this discourse, Starbuck and Stubb.

It is the all-encompassing nature of Moby Dick that frightens Ishmael the most, described in physical terms by his "whiteness:"

> Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick…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 (156).

It is not Moby Dick's immensity, his teeth, or his penchant for removing limbs that frightens the protagonist, but rather the fact that he is of a hue that represents both the combination of all things and the lack of all things. The whale is the blank slate on to which all men project their deepest fears and desires, their violence and their cowardice. Toward the conclusion of his study of "whiteness," Ishmael makes this idea quite clear:

> Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the absence of colour, and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is so much dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snow – a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink? (162 – 163).

Moby Dick is the representation of "the all," the meaning and understanding that all of humanity simultaneously shrinks form and seeks out. He cannot be pulled apart or killed because he is everything that ever was. Ahab, who has glimpsed "the all" in his encounter with Moby Dick has gone mad with his obsession to return to it, either to destroy it or be swallowed by it completely.

It must be remembered, in considering what the figure of Moby Dick *means*, that in the world of the narrative, he is physically just a whale; he does not spit fire, he cannot fly, and the claim that he is more aggressive than others of his kind is a fact proposed by men who have attacked him and goaded a natural survival response. The *meaning* of the whale is something supplied to us by the characters within the narrative, and especially by Ahab.

Ahab is fragmented both physically and emotionally by his encounter with the whale. He has lost a leg, and his mind has been splintered by madness and obsession – that much is obvious. But the narrative fragments him as well; as captain, he must give a part of himself to each member of his crew – his quest to find Moby Dick is not one that he can undertake as a man alone, and so he must inspire his men by inflicting upon them a bit of his own fear and desire. After a rallying speech and ratifying ritual, he muses:

> …my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve. Or, if you will, like so many ant-hills of powder, they all stand before me; and I their match. Oh,

> hard! that to fire others, the match itself must needs be wasting! What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do! They think me mad – Starbuck does; but I'm deamonic, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself! The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and – Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one.

Ahab alludes here to the fact that he must splinter himself further in his search for the white whale in his employment of his crew and in his mad obsession.

Furthermore, his quest for the whale is also in essence a quest to complete himself. That he has replaced his missing leg with whale bone is no coincidence; in his destruction of the whale, he seeks to make himself whole again, to satiate his madness and to reverse the symbolic castration that has been performed on him. This castration, it must be noted, is a result not of any mystical quality he attributes to the whale, but a consequence of his own hubris and violence in his attempt to kill it with a knife after falling into the water. These qualities he has since projected onto Moby Dick, and in so doing, his wish to dismember him becomes also a wish to eliminate the personal flaws that have lead him to be incomplete – without the recognition that they are his own.

While Ahab's injuries are represented by loss, Moby Dick's are represented by excess; "harpoons lie all twisted and wrenched in him" notes Ahab while describing him to the crew (135). Moreover, he is recognized not only by the harpoons sticking out of him, but by his immensity and his massive hump, which Ishmael sees as a portent of wisdom and which, in Stubb's dream, symbolically appears in the form of a pyramid. This characterization by means of excess is vital in understanding Moby Dick as a representation of the all, as the sublime, as

everything in that he is nothing and ready to be implanted with the various imagery assigned to him, like so many harpoons. Ahab and Moby Dick represent two sides of the same coin; while Ahab is absence, the whale is surplus; while Ahab assigns meaning, the whale emulates meaning; while Ahab is internal, the whale is external. One cannot exist without the other – the Ahab of the text is created by his encounter with the whale, while the Moby Dick presented by the text is constructed through the lens of Ahab's experience and obsession.

Stubb's aforementioned dream is fundamental in our understanding not only of Moby Dick, but of Ahab and his fragmentation. Stubb relates his dream to Flask thus:

> Such a queer dream, King-Post, I never had. You know the old man's ivory leg, well I dreamed he kicked me with it; and when I tried to kick back, upon my soul, my little man, I kicked my leg right off! And then presto! Ahab seemed a pyramid, and I, like a blazing fool, kept kicking at it. But what was still more curious…through all this rage I was in, I somehow seemed to be thinking to myself, that after all, it was not much of an insult, that kick from Ahab. 'Why,' thinks I, 'what's the row? It's not a real leg, only a false one.' And there's a mighty difference between a living thump and a dead thump…The living member, that makes the living insult (107).

This first portion of the dream casts Ahab as the whale and Stubb as Ahab, unsurprising when one considers how often Ahab is likened to the whale and that Stubb acts as one of the fragmented pieces of his captain's sanity – but more on that later. When Ahab kicks Stubb with his whale-bone leg, he is reenacting, in the place of the whale, the initial battle between Ahab and Moby Dick. Stubb's retaliation and subsequent loss of limb can therefore be read as the resulting mutilation of Ahab himself after his attempt to best the whale. It is vital to note that Stubb takes responsibility for his own injury in the dream – his place as Ahab signals not only

his fear of the man and Ahab's resemblance to Moby Dick, it also indicates his place in that narrative as a piece of Ahab himself; he is the part of Ahab's splintered consciousness that knows that the whale is just an animal, and that his endeavor is foolish. Indeed, he calls himself a "blazing fool" for his continued assault.

It must also be considered that Ahab, as he represents Moby Dick in this instance, only turns into a pyramid after Stubb, acting as Ahab, has kicked his leg off. In other words, the Ahab of the dream is merely a man until the injury, at which point he becomes a monumental and intimidating structure. Whereas Ahab's encounter with the whale and the subsequent loss of his leg, in waking life, has caused him to view the whale as an intelligent, malevolent force, Stubb's alteration of Ahab in the dream into the pyramid, which is man-made, shows an awareness of the situation of reactive projection that Ahab himself does not possess.

This point is furthered by Stubb's reflection of his own rage in the dream. His understanding that to be kicked with the whalebone leg, something "dead" is "not much of an insult" is indicative once more of Stubb's place in the narrative as the reason that Ahab has lost; Moby Dick is, after all, not a man with reason and intelligence, but a whale. His violent encounter with Ahab is merely a result of its fighting for survival. In this passage the terms "living" and "dead" could easily be substituted for "purposefully malignant" and "intellectually unaware," especially when one considers the dream-logic of the situation. All this is to say that Stubb, who in his dream portrayal of Ahab understands and accepts that the whale is just a whale, devoid of the desire to insult one man, and that his persistence in seeking revenge against an animal is foolish and more injurious to himself, is representative of that particular fragment of Ahab's sanity, which has been lost to Ahab himself.

This is not the only moment in the text at which we can see evidence of Stubb as a fragment of Ahab, however. Take, for instance, the fact of each man's pipe; Stubb is hardly ever seen without his pipe, and it is noted as being one of his central points of characterization. In fact, when we are first introduced to Stubb, we first hear of his care-free nature, and are then assured that it is his pipe that is the cause of it:

> What, perhaps, with other things, made Stubb such an easy-going, unfearing man, so cheerily trudging off with the burden of life in a world full of grave peddlers, all bowed to the ground with their packs; what helped to bring about that almost impious good-humour of his; that thing must have been his pipe. For, like his nose, his short, black little pipe was one of the regular features of his face. You would almost as soon have expected him to turn out of his bunk without his nose as without his pipe (98).

Here, it seems explicit that the pipe is an extension of Stubb and that both are the heralds of good-humor, even in the face of danger. Stubb is a man at peace, someone who greets the world with good-natured indifference because he understands that everything just is the way that it is. He is not a man who imposes deeper meaning onto the objects and events in his life, and even when discussing his dream with Flask, he does not do the work of interpretation, but rather suggest that the dream, as is, has presented him with some wisdom. The text works very hard to make it clear that his pipe is a representation of that inner tranquility, a tranquility that Ahab has lost in his fragmentation.

In the chapter immediately preceding Stubb's dream there is a very short, seemingly arbitrary, if not somewhat humorous, incident in which Ahab finds no comfort in his pipe and so throws it overboard and keeps pacing like a madman instead. He says to himself:

> …this smoking no longer soothes. Oh, my pipe! hard must it go with me if thy charm be gone! Here have I been unconsciously toiling, not pleasuring, – aye, and ignorantly smoking to windward all while; to windward, and with such nervous whiffs, as if, like the dying whale, my final jets were strongest and fullest of trouble. What business have I with this pipe? This thing that is meant for sereneness, to send up mild white vapours among mild white hairs, not among torn iron-grey locks like mine. I'll smoke no more – (107).

Ahab recognizes that the pipe, and therefore "sereneness" no longer suits him, and although he laments somewhat, the act of pitching it into the sea – rather than perhaps putting it away for another day, or just chucking it in the Pequod's lost-and-found for another sailor to enjoy – is representative of his act of dispelling, of his own volition, the part of himself that might find peace with his dismemberment and its cause.

Ahab's association of his pipe smoking and the last jets of a dying whale become especially important when read in congruence with Stubb's act of killing one. The description of the whale when it is spotted links it promptly with the pipe: "…lazily undulating in the trough of the sea and ever and anon tranquilly spouting his vapoury jet, the whale looked like a portly burgher smoking his pipe of a warm afternoon" (236). There is a beautiful metaphor constructed wherein the pipe going out becomes symbolic of death when Stubb, smoking his pipe throughout the chase and subsequent slaying, contemplates the whale he has killed and remarks "'Yes; both pipes smoked out' and withdrawing his own from his mouth, Stubb scattered the dead ashes over the water…" (239). If we view the dying out of the contents of the pipe as symbolic of death, natural and inevitable as it is, then it follows that Ahab's casting away of his pipe overboard and its "death" in the water is both a metaphor for his fear of death and subsequently a metaphor for

his actions as the cause of an accelerated and unnatural death. Stubb, meanwhile, who understands the nature of death through the simple dying out of his pipe, simply enjoys the act of smoking it until it is through.

If Stubb is the representation of the peace that Ahab has lost, then Starbuck is perhaps his caution and reason; he is another piece of Ahab, and another portrayal of who Ahab might have been if not for his madness.

> Uncommonly conscientious for a seaman, and endued with a deep natural reverence, the wild watery loneliness of his life did therefore strongly incline him to superstition; but to that sort of superstition, which in some orginisations seems rather to spring, somehow, from intelligence rather than from ignorance. Outward portents and inward presentiments were his. And if at times these things bent the welded iron of his soul, much more did his far-away domestic memories of his young Cape wife and child, tend to bend him still more from the original ruggedness of his nature, and open him further to those latent influences which, in some honest-hearted men, restrain the gush of dare-devil daring, so often evinced by others in the more perilous vicissitudes of the fishery (95).

Starbuck, described as having an "iron soul" as Ahab is so often described and so often describes himself in terms of "iron," is a man whose perspicacity is set in stark contrast to Ahab's monomania. The text takes care to mention that he has lived a difficult life and seen many of the terrors that a life on the sea has to offer, but rather than cause in him a vengeful obsession, his experiences instead foster a cautiousness and an exactitude that keep him safe. Ahab levels a musket at him, ready to shoot, and yet Starbuck in his careful considerations cannot bring himself to shoot his captain with the same musket when he finds it loaded and ready later in the narrative. His retaliations are not automatic and rooted in feeling, but rather calculated and

abandoned as fruitless. This is the reason and caution that Ahab has lost in his fragmentation. His pursuit of Moby Dick is calculated, to be sure, but all of his plans are laid for one reason and one reason only, and his intended revenge against an unwitting animal has little logic behind it.

Furthermore, it is Starbuck's status as a husband and father that makes him a cautious man, as evidenced in the passage above and at many other points throughout the text. Thus, he is also representative of Ahab as husband and father, and Ahab's rejection of his family is similar to his rejection of the pipe in that it is symbolic of his fragmentation of himself. When thinking of his family, a single tear drops from his eye and into the sea, and in the same fashion as the pipe, he discards them from his life on the basis that they do not factor into his obsession. He speaks to Starbuck of his family: "Aye, I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey – more a demon than a man?" (443). If his sense of reason and caution had remained, than perhaps his family would factor into his decision regarding his chasing the whale, instead of being a mourned as one of the costs of it.

When Ahab is approached by Starbuck, after the latter has recognized his sadness, he says to him, "I see my wife and child in thine eye. No, no; stay on board, on board! – lower not when I do; when branded Ahab gives chase to Moby Dick. That hazard shall not be thine. No, no! not with the faraway home I see in that eye!" (443). This furthers the claim that Starbuck is in fact representative of another part of Ahab that has been lost; it is not Starbuck's family that he sees, but his *own,* and his wish that Starbuck stay on board, while on the surface a mercy for the latter, is also another way by which he distances himself from his family and his caution. It is

not only Starbuck that he leaves on the Pequod in his fevered chase, it is the sense of reason that might keep him from doing so.

Perhaps most telling in the understanding of Ahab's fragmentation are the grouping of chapters entitled "Sunset," "Dusk," "First Night-Watch," and "Midnight, Forecastle." Each of the four is titled according to a different span of time, and yet they all comprise the night, and while the first features Ahab himself the three that follow each represent a way in which he has been splintered. "Dusk" features Starbuck, who mourns a loss of reason in his servitude: "My soul has been more than matched;" he laments, "she's over-manned; and by a madman! Insufferable sting, that sanity should ground arms on such a field! But he drilled deep down, and blasted all my reason out of me!" Now that Ahab's intentions have been made clear, Starbuck's first reaction is a sort of call to reason.

"First Night-Watch" features Stubb, who characteristically reacts to Ahab's quest with humor: "…a laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer…" he remarks, "…I know not all that may be coming, but be what it will, I'll go to it laughing. Such a waggish leering as lurks in all your horribles!" Stubb is unafraid of what lies ahead because he does not trouble himself with obsession – he has a sense of peace that is unflappable.

Lastly, "Midnight, Forecastle" features the crew, whose tumultuous and seemingly random chatter further the claim made earlier that Ahab has been fragmented by his very use of a crew to meet his designs. He is a monomaniac, but it would be impossible for him to achieve his goal alone, and so he must spread his obsession among those whose servitude he requires. He is the sunset that brings forth the night, and in a metaphorical sense this night composed of four chapters contains the pieces of himself. Unlike Moby Dick, it is he who is represented in everyone else, and not he who represents.

Thus, as I have argued, Ahab and Moby Dick contrast in the very nature of their characterization – the whale is all, and the man is only pieces. Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick is motivated by a need to put himself back together, and to reverse his symbolic castration, but in his projection of his own anger and blood-lust onto the whale, his quest to complete himself becomes, in actuality, a quest to destroy himself. Accordingly, his encounter with Moby Dick ends only in death and devastation of his own creation.