
CLASSICS

OF DEMOCRACY

Landlessness: Melville and the Democratic Hero

LARZER ZIFF

Walt Whitman's contention that the greatest poet would be the age transfigured was very much the claim that Herman Melville made when he said that "great geniuses are part of the times, they themselves are the times, and possess a corresponding color."¹ This shared outlook was not the one Alexis de Tocqueville had foreseen for the American writer. Projecting the consequences of America's fundamental ideology, he predicted that among democratic nations, "The destinies of mankind, man himself taken aloof from his country and his age and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare propensities and inconceivable wretchedness, will become the chief, if not the sole theme of poetry." He based this on his observation that legends and old traditions are not agreeable to a democratic people even when they do exist, because fundamentally the people have ceased to believe in the meanings conveyed by the legends, however much they may be delighted by their picturesqueness. And, more importantly, since democratic language, dress, and daily action are resistant to literary idealization and since men ask of

¹ Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in *The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches* (1922; reprinted, New York: Greenwood Press, n.d.), p. 68.

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great literature that it give them the ideal behind the apparent, the great American writers, when they arrived, would treat of the "hidden depths of the immaterial nature of man."²

Although Whitman and Melville both explicitly expressed a contrary notion, their major works may very well be read as evidence on Tocqueville's behalf. For all the pictures drawn from daily America, "Song of Myself" dramatizes Myself and every reader he contains against the backdrop of ultimate reality; and a novel in which representatives of the many nations of mankind combine upon a ship to pursue a whale of metaphysical dimensions seems more a piece with the literature of man standing in the presence of nature and of God than with the literature of man as a creature of his times. Emerson and Thoreau seem even more starkly to fulfill Tocqueville's prophecy, and Poe, as strikingly different from them as he is, nevertheless studiously avoided the settings of his actual American world. Hawthorne alone appears to be apart, but his insistence on the license of romance, while it does not make him an exception that proves the rule, certainly goes far toward qualifying his exclusion from it.

It may be said, however, that just as Tocqueville in the 1830s was prophesying for the coming decades, so Whitman and Melville in those decades were prophesying for the ones ahead, not speaking of their own or their contemporaries' work. There is some point to this, but finally it is not sufficient. The occasion of Melville's remarks was a review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, and the occasion of Whitman's was the introduction of his own poems.

That their outlook and that of Tocqueville are reconcilable may still be considered, however, if it is remembered that American writers as yet had no social experience to report but did have an intense interest in the first principles of social relationships.³ If pictures of social life do not abound in their pages, nevertheless they do concern themselves with the terms on which men should combine. If they do not depict American society, they attempt to predict it.

Finally, however, there are two points of view in limited but significant opposition, and that of Tocqueville was pretty much represented by Emerson (though without reference to Tocqueville). Consequently Emerson was unable to take the novel seriously as a characteristically American art form, since that genre depended upon a social density that was secondary to the idea for which America stood. Indeed, Tocqueville himself finally presents abstractions, or at least projections, of what democratic life means based on his detailed observation of the beliefs and practices of the Americans. Their society, as he studies it, is not coequal with his subject, democracy, but is a metaphor for its fullest

² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Colonial Press, 1900), vol. 2, p. 80.

³ This is the argument in Harold Kaplan, *Democratic Humanism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

meaning. It is not as yet sufficiently complete to represent rather than suggest, and his task is to amplify the suggestions. In that amplification, he did not consider the possibility that the American writer, like himself, might also approach social actuality in some detail as a metaphor for the hidden whole rather than abstracting man from it. Coming from outside America, Tocqueville understandably believed his outlook was available only to the outsider. He did not anticipate the way in which a culture's major writers could themselves become outsiders, at least in point of view. Although very much of the culture, they could develop (or have forced upon them) a persona apart from the mainstream. Man in the abstract was really the man in the talk of the politicians and journalists immersed in the American vortex. For all their commitment to what are called the hard realities, these orators and writers were the retailers of generalized figures called democratic man, or common man, or free man, or the American. The great writer, especially the great novelist, would be born into that vortex but would have worked himself into a position apart from it. He would be a native-born outsider.

That Tocqueville did not consider that possibility is not surprising. Although writers, like other artists, have a popular reputation for being different from their fellow men in the way they live as well as the way they work, this, in the main, is a modern notion. In traditional societies the artist had a well-defined place and spoke from within it. But his place in American society seemed to be either no place or the marketplace; either, that is, he was to be a writing preacher, professor, or cobbler, or he was to be a journalist. What was not clear to Tocqueville, or to anyone else in the period, was that, despite the want of established lines of patronage and despite the absence of a finely articulated society, the American writer too would struggle to practice his art professionally—free of other jobs and of enslavement to the popular demands of journalism—and that since there was no predetermined place for him in his society, he would make of that necessity a virtue and assume the literary powers of an outsider together with the economic hazards.

None so clearly exemplifies this phenomenon as Herman Melville. As a common seaman he was already on the margin of his society when he began writing *Typee*, the book of adventures that his nascent genius improved into episodes symbolic of America's deepest anxieties about savagery and civilization, mythic location and historical location. Emerson, another widow's child, had drawn some of the same parallels before him:

In the Fejee islands, it appears, cannibalism is now familiar. They eat their own wives and children. We only devour widows' houses &

great merchants outwit & absorb the substance of small ones and every man feeds on his neighbor's labor if he can. It is a milder form of cannibalism.⁴

But he told this to his notebook, and there it existed as a wry comment, shrewd but unresonating. Melville, beginning with experience rather than thought, converted it into symbolic drama, as he did another of Emerson's notebook comments, his copying with approval the observation of a friend: "You send out to the Sandwich islands one missionary & twenty-five refutations in the crew of the vessel."⁵ The ideas were in the heads of every thinking American, but they achieved expression in the lived drama of a young American who came to the event unstructured by preconceptions. As a result his tale is symbolic rather than didactic. The abstractions it yields are only secondary products of its emotive effect.

When young Melville went east to the Atlantic rather than west to the frontier, he chose, perhaps without much forethought, to accept his bottom position in society rather than contest it. The compensation he most desired for his lot was a sense of social identity, membership in, even solidarity with, a vital community that, because of his failures to earn a living on land, he had not acquired. This need drew him more strongly than did the desire to succeed financially with the hard work it entailed and the burden it inevitably placed upon him of competing with others rather than cooperating, or facing enforced solitude and enforced cheerlessness if he went west to Greeley's opportunities. When in late life he looked back on the choice, he reflected that frontier settlers were, in the main, kindly but ungenial in their hardworking existence. Sailors, although they too had left home, had done so in acceptance of economic powerlessness and in preference for companionship over success. They frequented the "free-and-easy tavern-clubs" in "old and comfortable sea-port towns" and, more importantly, they enjoyed comradeship afloat. To work before the mast was to belong to a community that extended its cohesiveness beyond work to all the sociabilities of life. Despite the treacheries that life could visit on one, the flower of life was geniality, "springing from some sense of joy in it."⁶ If the price of picking that flower was permanent residence at the bottom it was not too much for certain men with certain needs to satisfy. Even when Melville became a known author and developed definite economic ambitions, his literary voice managed always to retain this affability, this sense that being in the lowest layer was not in itself so bad a

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1961-), vol. 7, pp. 421-22.

5 *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 23.

6 Herman Melville, "John Marr," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Chicago: Packard, 1947), p. 161.

Not all.

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to readers?

matter. There were true evils abroad compared with which mere social position was nothing. From this attitude there springs the peculiar air of amiability that plays about even the darkest dramas—the shrug and smile of Ishmael when he is kicked. Men who find too many slender matters inexcusable, Melville seems to say, will not recognize the truly inexcusable when they encounter it.] *Exactly*

Before Melville, Richard Henry Dana had embarked on a cruise as a common seaman, and Dana, like Melville, was possessed of a social background and an education much closer to that of the officers under whom he served than to the crew of which he was a member. Meeting his duties fully and winning his place in the community were challenges that Dana met triumphantly, a vital test of his worthiness to enjoy the same privileged position he had on land. In that way Dana foreshadowed the muscular Christianity of Theodore Roosevelt some fifty years later, although in justice to Dana it must be noted that forever after he was sensitive to the plight of abused workers and remembered it in his abolitionist activities and in his legal efforts on behalf of brutalized seamen. Still, he conducted these activities as an enlightened gentleman with an acute sense of how the other half lives rather than as a brother of the downtrodden. In his account of his years before the mast he briefly contemplates the possibility that he will be stranded in California and compelled to remain a mariner for life, but when he does so, although he is a laborer, he automatically envisages his career as that of a captain. But none of Melville's sailor-narrators—in *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Redburn* (1849), *White-Jacket* (1850), or *Moby-Dick* (1851)—envy their officers, however much they may resent specific commands, and none in contemplating his future aspires to rise above his membership in the crew, however much he may desire specific distinction within it to be achieved by earning a post valued by his peers.

Since Melville's sailors go to sea principally to find the community denied them on land, they do not fear a loss of identity in becoming members of the ship's society and acceding to its regulations and rituals. Rather, they fear being locked into separateness even there. A major theme of both *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* is the protagonist's difficulty and eventual success in achieving the merger he desires. There is nothing like being found a misfit on land to give one a sufficiency of differentness. The sea is for those who find alienation more intolerable than the poverty that caused it.

As a consequence, although the organization of any ship is one of rigid autocratic hierarchy for which there is but one obvious political model—absolute monarchy—ship life nevertheless serves Melville as a microcosm of human society. Political democracy can only with high elaboration be analogized with the way a ship is governed, and before *Moby-Dick* Melville's excursions into this analogy have but slight success. When he concentrates on questions of freedom and authority the voyage theme must be put aside: the ship is abandoned in

Typee; a mutiny cancels the voyage in *Omoo*; and in *White-Jacket* the theme of political democracy compels a shifting of the narrator's specific concerns and a depiction of the world of the fore-castle where the mate's qualifications are considered to be superior to the captain's. But Melville's primary theme is that of social not political democracy, the inherent dignity in the common man, and the way communities are shaped by this quality; and this theme is served by the crew alone with the officers functioning as remote capricious agents of fate who affect the entire community, so that their government does not essentially alter the dynamic of relationships among crew members.

Melville had no model to look to for the rendering in fiction of the democratic man as democratic man. Before him Cooper had addressed the problem, but Cooper did not see that such a theme, new to the novel in English, necessitated a new form. He was content to intrude such a concern into structures that closely imitated the novel of manners. When Natty Bumppo first appears in *The Pioneers* (1823), he does so to fill the need for one of a number of minor types reflecting the range of American society. That novel is presented in the traditional frame of courtship, within which Cooper attempts to demonstrate that even the American village, when it comes of age, will best be organized in terms of social distinctions voluntarily accepted by the lower as well as the privileged classes. His model village, Templeton, requires for its social furnishings examples of each class from the bottom up, and this hierarchy—from hunter through woodcutter through farmer through craftsman through tradesman through professional man to squire—can be read both spatially as an anatomy of society and temporally as a recapitulation of American history. The classes have a chronological as well as a social relationship to one another, the higher arriving later. Natty is created to fill the dual role of the white man first on the land and the landless man at the bottom of the social ladder.

As he begins to move in the novel, however, Natty displays such virtues of democratic integrity that Cooper, to his credit, allows him greater range than the framework of the plot requires. Having thus discovered him, Cooper returned to him as the central character in four succeeding novels. Even in these, however, he retained the outline of the novel of manners, and even in these he finally patronized Natty from the viewpoint of a squire who recognizes the good stuff of which those lower in society are made. Their virtues are a sound base on which to build a democratic society, but the edifice must be modified by the refinements of civilized life. The plain, democratic man in Cooper is finally expressive only when filtered through the consciousness of the complicated civilized man who stands firmly on the top of the structure.

Cooper did not, then, offer his fellow upstate New Yorker formal clues as to how to express the democrat as hero. But his Natty parallels Melville's sailors in notable ways, and if the parallels do not demonstrate influence, they certainly

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suggest a significant similarity in the way these two authors, concerned beyond their fellows with democracy in the novel, viewed the sources of that system. Although Natty represents a central value in American life, he is not the product of American society nor does he live within it. Rather, he inhabits a middle ground between the settlements and the wilds. That in his simple dignity he is the moral equal of the very best man in society is a result of his having learned from nature and nature's creatures. Inherent value in the common man depends for its ripening on a degree of direct exposure to the natural environment. At the same time, Natty is of European descent, a Christian with an ultimate racial loyalty to the white and an ultimate dread of descending into the pagan behavior of the Indians whom he so greatly admires. He traverses uneasily the territory between civilization and primitivism, too white to be swallowed by the forest and yet too wild to stay in the town. As civilization advances he flees it, the path he clears into the wilderness becoming a trail blazed for settlers who will follow.

The middle ground occupied by the pathfinder between contrasting cultures and the assignment of his democratic virtues to his natural location rather than to his training in a democratic society (which, for Cooper, yields mainly bigots and demagogues) parallels Melville's handling of the common seaman as a truer democrat than any republican on land. Like Natty he has fled the settled regions of his world and again like Natty his flight away from civilization is an advancement of it, since he flees in ships that chart the way for missionary and merchant and eventually carry them as passengers. Again like Natty, his inherent dignity has been matured by a life lived in alert response to the voice of nature. That response had been developed for survival and then extended into contemplation, rather than being bred by a political system. And finally the Melville hero too is fascinated by and feels an affinity with the primitive people he encounters. Still, despite his distrust of civilization, he has a deeper horror of being swallowed by primitivism.

Such strong parallels do not so much suggest Cooper's influence upon Melville as indicate the notable fact that the two American novelists who were most concerned with the character of the democratic man both traced this definitive quality to his exposure to nature and his avoidance of established society rather than to American political circumstances. The ultimate relationship of his democratic bearing to the democratic assertions of his society was that he stood as an example of the dignity and worth of the common man, on whom a society could possibly be built; he was not, however, its result, and indeed that society, as constituted, threatened rather than enhanced him.

The society of the crew was a democratic one because it postponed political questions about the mechanics of government in a republic to the prior question of the social relations to be developed among men who were called by the demands of nature into an instinctive selfhood and yet who were also by nature

gregarious and in need of community rather than political power. Melville was concerned centrally with the sociology rather than the politics of democracy, and after *Typee* and *Omoo* he essayed a direct, unliterary approach to it and related topics. *Mardi* (1849), in title at least, promised to be like its predecessors, only to reveal to astounded readers that the voyage undertaken in its more than five hundred pages is allegorical, a tour of the modern world in the guise of a cruise among Pacific islands, with each shore visited the counterpart of a civilized nation. Instead of developing appropriate symbolic vehicles for his thoughts on philosophy, art, religion, history, or politics, Melville offered them in extended monologues and lengthy dialogues engaged in by characters who possessed nothing so much as the leisure in which to talk for as long as Melville wished. The book was a commercial disaster and Melville in frustration heeded the warning, for a time at least. He turned back to sea adventures in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* in order to regain the audience he had been losing.

✓ But he was bitter at the failure of *Mardi*, attributing it to the imprudence of trying to tell Americans the truth. He wrote his friend Evert Duyckinck that *Mardi* proved that "an author can never—under no conceivable circumstances be at all frank with his readers."⁷ He may have been right, but he certainly underestimated the sheer unreadability of the work compared with his earlier narratives. There was indeed matter in the book to offend American readers, but few of them penetrated far enough to reach it.

What Melville expressly says about the United States in *Mardi* is that its amazing success stemmed from its possession of abundant natural resources and ample geographical space rather than from its political system. He says that if the country were as straitened in area and natural resources as Great Britain, it is likely that the government would be far more despotic than Britain's. The United States had not yet passed any significant political test. When it reached the end of its space and exploited the last of its cheap resources, then the test would come of its vaunted democracy. Until then Americans might well consider whether other political systems were not better suited to people otherwise situated.

History, Melville suggests, unless it is more correctly perceived, will work against the American idea, most obviously in the exhaustion of the land but just as importantly in the spread of civilized habits among a once wild or at least imperfectly tamed population. Thanks to her geographical position America is the savage of civilized nations, and thanks to her savagery she is the home of equality. But as that equality is the result of savagery rather than of the history Americans are making, they may very well find they have lost their equality once their history has been made. Political democracy is an effect of primitive conditions,

⁷ Herman Melville, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 96.

Melville
Consciousness

not the cause of a free society. If political theory recognizes this it may be shaped to serve freedom after literal savagery has passed by nurturing the savage in each breast.

In order to point the lesson that the essential issue lies in the way men permit one another to exist regardless of the governmental structure they have established, one of Melville's characters presents to the citizens of Vivenza (the United States) a document they shred in outrage. The document proclaims that

freedom is more social than political. And its real felicity is not to be shared. *That* is of a man's own individual getting and holding. It is not, who rules the state, but who rules me. Better be secure under one king than exposed to violence from twenty millions of monarchs, though oneself be of the number.⁸

When Melville turned in disgust to writing *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*—"They are two *jobs*, which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood"⁹—he nevertheless continued to examine in the fore-castle the essence of man's freedom regardless of how domineering the quarter-deck was. He had meanwhile lived through a time of great political disaster equivalent to the personal disaster of the failure of *Mardi*—the collapse of republicanism in Europe after the revolutions of 1848. In reaction to this he was able with some good conscience to provide the chauvinistic fare his countrymen craved, although some pinch of sea salt had to be taken with it. Had not freedom seemed to have failed everywhere but in America it would be difficult to respect Melville when he contends that the political messiah has come in the person of the American people: "And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of the earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we can not do a good to America but we give alms to the world."¹⁰

The Americans of whom he speaks are not a separate nation but the advance guard of all nations breaking a path in the wilderness. They are not a particular people but are the potential condition of all people who are ready for freedom, what Emerson meant when he noted that "the Atlantic is a sieve through which only or chiefly the liberal adventurous *America-loving* part of each city, clan, family, are brought. . . . the Europe of Europe is left."¹¹ Watching the "wild Irish" on board his packet from Liverpool, *Redburn* says:

8 Herman Melville, *Mardi* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 528–29.

9 Melville, *Letters*, p. 91.

10 Herman Melville, *White-Jacket* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 151.

11 Emerson, *Journals*, vol. 11, pp. 397–98.

Let us waive that agitated national topic, as to whether such multitudes of foreign poor should be landed on our American shores, let us waive it, with the only one thought, that if they can get here, they have God's right to come; though they bring all Ireland and her miseries with them. For the whole world is the patrimony of the whole world; there is no telling who does not own a stone in the Great Wall of China.¹²

His attitude contrasts strongly with Consul Hawthorne of Liverpool's contempt for nationalized citizens, based on a belief that only those habituated to America's liberties from birth can make right use of them; others will only make trouble. Hawthorne saw democracy as the earned result of historical process, the product of a tradition that could benefit only those who were born to it. But Melville, although he fled savagery for civilization, nevertheless saw in that savagery a validation of democracy. Having lost his wildness on land he reacquired it at sea in sufficient measure to temper his commitment to history. If he did not discard history as Emerson did, nevertheless he believed like Thoreau that wildness preserved rather than destroyed what was best in the world. And like Thoreau who faced the disappearance of Walden woods with equanimity so long as he could see the woods shining in the healthy faces of immigrant children, so Melville rejoiced in the westward-bound offscourings of the world.

In his disgust with the failure of *Mardi* and the wood-sawing books to which he turned after it, Melville wrote, "So far as I am individually concerned & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to 'fail.'" ¹³ And to Duyckinck, editor of the *Literary World*, he wrote, "But we that write & print have all our books predestinated—& for me, I shall write such things as the Great Publisher of Mankind ordained ages before he published 'The World'—this planet, I mean—not the Literary Globe."¹⁴ These are foreshadowings—*loomings* would be Melville's word for it—of *Moby-Dick*, although at the time he made these remarks, in fall and winter of 1849, Melville had not yet settled down to that work, and even when he did so he at first pursued a false trail and apparently worked on a manuscript that was very much like *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, treating a whaler as those had treated a commercial packet and a man-of-war. His struggle was not between another commercially promising work with which to feed his family and another *Mardi* with

¹² Herman Melville, *Redburn* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), p. 281.

¹³ Melville, *Letters*, p. 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

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Melville

which to feed his imagination, because he no longer sought the self-indulgence of a nondramatic disquisition. Rather, it was the struggle between his sea-novel formula and the larger symbolic values it could be made to convey. For all his expressed contempt for them, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* had gone some distance toward educating him into the ways in which life among the meanest aboard ship could serve as microcosm of man's historical and cosmic condition.

But the question of audience was a pressing one. He was a democrat and yet the democratic audience was the chief external obstacle to the full expression of his views in his work. *Moby-Dick* became, among other things, Melville's attempt to define the democratic reader—not to appeal to the populace but to project the democratic audience through writing democratic literature. Although the projection was different from Whitman's, both writers shared a proletarian concern to make the art of literature one that spoke from actualities other than those experienced by the relatively well-to-do readers of serious literature. At the same time, the two shared an artistic drive toward integrity of vision without compromise with artificial appetites. As a result, *Moby-Dick* could not be a popular work, but it would be addressed to an assumed audience of democratic readers and, with that assumption, shape such an ideal audience even as the ideal of that audience shaped it.

When Father Mapple stands before his congregation early in *Moby-Dick*, he announces that his lesson will be two-stranded: one strand applies to all sinful men; the other to him alone as a leader of men, as, he says, "a pilot of the living God." The lessons are religious. All men, including Mapple the pilot, must learn to repent of their sins even if they cannot, as would be desirable, avoid sinning. The special lesson for the leader is that truth must be preached in the face of falsehood even though acquiescence in falsehood brings temporal comfort and adherence to the absolutes of truth brings woe.

The sermon about preacher and congregation establishes a version of the relation of the one to the many, of the relation of authority to liberty, a subject more fully and ambiguously explored in the consideration of Ahab's relation to his crew. And what is set forth explicitly about the preacher as the voice of the democratic congregation, and complexly about the captain as leader of the democratic crew, plays even more profoundly and more ambiguously over the entire work in terms of Ishmael-Melville and the American readership, in terms, that is, of the American artist (commoner, truth-teller, witness to suffering, sufferer) and the American public, a collection of isolated souls who when massed lacked distinction. They have all embarked on the ship of mortality blown by trade winds to an uncertain haven. What identity will shape them? Are they to be told the awful message that life is pain and exhorted to kiss the rod, for if it is a dog's life we should, at least, know that we are God's dogs and receive our worth from that? Or are they to be coerced into an identity by theatrical demonstrations of

the adequacy of their leader to all exigencies, and through the unabating vigor of a keyed-up rhetoric that hums so constantly in their ears that they are persuaded to accept it as the sound of their own voices? These are questions not only about Mapple and Ahab, on one hand, and congregation and crew on the other, but about Ishmael-Melville, on one hand, and on the other, about his readership in a land with widespread literacy but no wide public for serious literature.

Ahab knows that his primary task in galvanizing his crew of individuals (their separateness emphasized by their being islanders, *isolatoes*) into a unit is to overcome the resistance of the democratic qualities represented in their most civilized form by Starbuck. Starbuck is next in command as the people are always next in command; Starbuck is married and a father and thus has an interest in life beyond the reaches of the *Pequod's* savage decks; Starbuck is intelligent and articulate; Starbuck has the true, Platonic courage, born of fear of the strength of the powers of the adversary rather than of foolhardy ignorance or reckless disregard of them; Starbuck has a sound, commercial sense of the nature of the venture: he kills whales for profit, not in expression of a bloodthirsty nature nor in compensation for the frustrations of life on shore. He is the model democrat who can emerge from the equality of primitive nature: healthy, level-headed, brave, trustworthy, industrious, and modest.

Ishmael feels Starbuck to be so, to be the representative of "that immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves, so far within us, that it remains intact though all the outer character seems gone." Starbuck's is the "august dignity," which "is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture." Ishmael says, "Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity, which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence our divine equality!"¹⁵

But Starbuck falls to Ahab; falls, that is, to another version of authority than the democratic one Ishmael extols. The ideal man within us all is God within us all. Divinity is a human principle rather than an objectified and therefore opposed power. This divinity falls with Starbuck. The society of the *Pequod* is to be governed by an older form of authority, one that relies on robed investiture and maintains its power by asserting its protective ability to be adequate to the trials that common man cannot endure. If men unite in upholding such authority and submit their wills to it, their recompense for lost self-mastery will come from the sense of unthinking solidarity they gain in the united support of a leader who has persuaded them that his cause is the common cause. They can delegate their weaknesses as well as their strengths to him and sail on.

¹⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), p. 104.

✓ I disagree. He resists to NOT freedom but authority

Framm

Why is free man so willing to delegate his freedom? What, in the text, does Melville find wanting in the democratic experience despite his sense of the beauty of the ideal? What, that is, are the sources of Ahab's ascendancy?

Man's experience, says Melville, is more powerful than his idea of freedom through the merger with a benign oversoul. It is the experience of a suffering in the world for which he is not responsible and which he finds it easier to hate than to comprehend. Starbuck had lost a brother and a father in the violence of the whale fishery. And although Starbuck continued brave he became vulnerable to the man who would play upon his spiritual terrors.

The test of accounting for suffering in the world is political as well as theological, and it is one that democracy cannot face easily. The suffering may be made tolerable so long as the responsibility for it is placed outside the democratic mass. Ahab, the leader, offers so to locate it. He can lead, he asserts, because he himself has suffered greatly and therefore representatively. His authority will not reknit the circle, will not again attach the ideal man to the daily life. It will, rather, dismiss his individuality and offer as life's purpose a unified conflict against the source of suffering in this world, describing it as apart from the mass, a malevolence objectified.

That Ahab does not fulfill Melville's version of the coherence common men require is demonstrated implicitly in the drama and is also stated explicitly. When Ishmael considers the stage devices that Ahab uses to keep the crew steadfast in their (which is to say, his) purpose, he observes: "Be a man's intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men, without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always in themselves, more or less paltry and base."¹⁶ Ahab accepts the baseness with the glory, thereby both advancing his purpose and dooming its result.

Father Mapple saw the break in the circle of democracy with God at center and God at circumference as sin. He saw repentance as the source of unity, and truth to sinful experience, which is to say a constant identification of the self as the source of human misery, as the role of the leader. This, finally, is an assertion of original sin, an assertion that suffering proceeds from a shared guilt and is to be redeemed through divine assistance.

But the history of modern democracy begins with a new myth in which the primitive world without sin is still available to those who grasp the reversibility of time and step out of history as they step into democracy. Belief in the ability of man to rule himself without adherence to inherited, arbitrary rule is based on the denial of any native incapacity in him. When Tom Paine taught the Americans that their war for rights within the British Empire—a historically determined event—was really a war for the reclamation of the independence they had always

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 219.

possessed—an assertion of their mythic stature—he told them they were too young for the doctrine of original sin, or, what was the same, had outgrown it. “Government, like dress,” he wrote, “is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise.”¹⁷ Reassume your innocence and you need no master over you.

This strain of thought had a powerful appeal for Melville. The most heroic of his earlier characters, Jack Chase, was “a stickler for the Rights of Man,”¹⁸ and he himself had grounded America’s strength on her savagery. He shared Emerson’s fervor for the individual’s potential far more than Hawthorne’s doubts about it. But he could not slide into an Emersonian acceptance of evil as no more than misperceived good. Something out there resisted. In “Benito Cereno” he was to explore the charmed life led by Americans who, against the manifest evidence of malevolence, acted as if the world were innocent and miraculously got away with it. But he was not the guileless American captain of that tale, and in *Moby-Dick* he sought to comprehend both evil and yet the rightness of the democratic response. The opposition is dialectic and the containment is within a dramatic world drenched with the ambiguities of the clash.

If man is free and flawless, then man must be the cause of ill as well as good, and suffering can be reduced only through his willingness to take upon himself an almost infinite series of social manipulations and to sink his ego in an almost infinite series of adjustments. The stamina required seems superhuman, but the task by definition is the greatest of human obligations. Wherever the stamina fails, an Ahab stands ready to reorganize the effort along other lines. To follow him may be to surrender liberty, but it is to retain, at least, the precious and delusive source of self-esteem, the belief that one is innocent of the woe that has befallen him. As opposed to original sin, the doctrine of division between innocent self and evil other is Manichaeism. Rather than contemplate his complicity in suffering, democratic man baffled accepts a divided world in which a power of evil asserts an independent counter to the good he wills.

Ahab is a Manichaeon both in his doctrine and in his trappings. Indeed, Melville risks the dramatic credibility of his narrative in order to underscore the fact at the moment when he produces Fedallah and his Parsee crew. Their function is made plain in one of Melville’s reference works, Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionary*, in which a discussion of Zoroastrianism occurs in the full and more than slightly sympathetic entry on Manichaeism. Ahab’s Manichaeism is not the moral of the tale but the source of one range of symbols that charges the complex world of *Moby-Dick* and is countered by another range, stemming principally from Ishmael’s direct perceptions of circularity and merger.

¹⁷ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ed. Nelson F. Adkins (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), p. 4.

¹⁸ Melville, *White-Jacket*, p. 18.

After Ishmael has characterized and to some extent deplored the petty stagecraft of Ahab, he goes on to discuss how political superstition can make a madman into a mighty man, how the plebeian herds crouch before the severities of a czar because he wears a crown and therefore represents for them "tremendous centralization." Ishmael then remarks, to himself as much as to the reader, "Nor will the tragic dramatist who would depict moral indomitableness in its fullest sweep and direst swing, ever forget a hint incidentally so important to his art, as the one now alluded to."¹⁹ Ishmael, the tragic dramatist, like Ahab the moral tyrant, cannot afford to neglect the force that will be lent his drama if he centers it on one man and elevates that man to greatness through granting him the trappings of superiority. Although *Moby-Dick* carries as a central concern the nature of democratic man and sees Manichaeism as the paranoid offspring of the failures of the common man to affect his own social and spiritual salvation, the tragedy cannot take that common man as its protagonist nor can it afford to dispense with theater if it is to reach a responsive reader.

The Ahab who thus receives dramatic focus emerges as the antithesis of the ideal of authority in a democracy. He rules absolutely, holding his mates as well as his crew in awe of him. But we also see that the condition of his leadership existed abundantly in the formless mediocrity of nineteenth-century American democracy, so that Ahab is not untypical of his society. The political paradox his leadership embodies is one that was observed in his day by Emerson, for example, who feared that the populace in its failure to stand forth individually and realize each his own best self was vulnerable to the man on a horse who would cohere them as a mass against a fancied objective foe. "The Best are never demoniacal or magnetic but all brutes are,"²⁰ he wrote. So is Captain Ahab.

The simple, separate person who is the true democrat is also by definition unheroic and cannot achieve the grand effects the reader's interest in a heightened actuality allows only to the extraordinary—the disproportioned hero. Even Emerson had to talk of Napoleon and Goethe rather than his neighbor Hosmer. But to permit such a hero to gain exclusive control of the drama, as Melville sensed, is to defect from the modern condition. It is the equivalent of the democratic artist joining the opposition and, despite his cultural location, finding for the common man no identity except that which his leader assigns him, relieving the common man of responsibility so long as he lends his yell to the common outcry. Hawthorne, with a great concern for the heart of humanity, nevertheless made it the regulating context of his actions at the center of which

¹⁹ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 129–30.

²⁰ Emerson, *Journals*, vol. 7, p. 376.

were deviants from the standard. And Whitman made that man gigantic by dint of making him contain all men in an idealized presentation perforce abstracted from a specific social setting.

In response to this impasse Melville moves in the direction Whitman also took, although he holds his character to a more detailed actuality than Whitman did. Every atom belonging to Ishmael as good belongs to us. Myself's walking, stooping, peering, listening, suffering are accomplished by dint of Whitman's breaking the rules and issuing himself a new poetic license. And Melville too is unflinching when literary conventions no longer serve in the novel he wishes to write. His narrative is first-person yet it is omniscient. Ishmael sees himself with a cosmic eye as a man who has been handed a part to play in the world, and yet with a worm's eye, as most like us in his defeats rather than in his triumphs. He is vulnerable because he is good-humored, but when he turns resentful of his troubles, he is again vulnerable. He is clothed only in clothing and is therefore but a savage dressed, yet he is furnished with Shakespeare and the Bible as well as with a seaman's manual and a temperance tract. He is a down-at-heels common sailor, but he is the conscious heir of all that has ever happened on the sea. He has been made by history and he will tell a history, yet he has felt the beginnings and experienced the awesome agony of his captain who dared to challenge the original contract of the gods and who in his defeat nevertheless took a little bit of heaven with him. Whatever history is, it all comes down to Ishmael its teller. Without his presence, no history; and without his omniscience, no myth.

Melville came to see that when the literary work is viewed from the point of view of the writer who produced it, then it can be seen to be rooted in history even as its producer is bounded in chronological terms. But when it is viewed after the fact, as, that is, a self-contained world, then it can be seen as mythic, the provider of a cosmic account of our condition. Although he did not until *Billy Budd*, more than thirty years later, move to direct mythmaking, Melville in all his tales from *Moby-Dick* to the long silence that commenced in 1858 split his point of view. He did not do so twice in the same way, did not repeat, for example, the combined first-person and omniscience of *Moby-Dick*. But *Bartleby* and his employer are both necessary lenses for viewing the world in "Bartleby the Scrivener," as are Benito Cereno and Amasa Delano for viewing the world in "Benito Cereno," while in other tales and sketches other forms of multiple vision are offered, climaxing in the hall of mirrors that is *The Confidence-Man* (1857).

Ishmael the character yields to Ahab on the stage of the novel, but Ishmael the teller encompasses the fall of kings and outlives a Manichaean conflict in demonstration of the view that life brings its woes but denial of complicity in them is an insane if noble mistake. His victory is the limited triumph of a man such as the hero of Whitman's poems, a triumph that enables its undergoer not to crow but to hold out his hat, sit shamefaced, and beg. We glimpse him after

the *Rachel* has lifted him from the sea, lounging about the ports of Peru, playing the fool a bit as he spins his yarns to grandees in exchange for a glass of chicha. And we also glimpse him with other common sailors in a gam or on a night watch, whispering about the full horrors they have experienced, as survivors of a holocaust whisper intently to one another of what only they who have undergone it can understand. Their muted confidences are obsessively concerned with one or another manifestation of a recurring phenomenon. They have each, at some time or another, been among the nameless in a crew that has been dominated by an extraordinary individual, a cracked prophet escaped from some religious order, an Apollo-like canal man whose presence cowed commanders, a mono-maniacal, one-legged Quaker who made his own compass and steered by level log and line rather than by celestial navigation. Somehow they have survived the violence and suffering consequent upon such experience, survived what seemed the eruption of the cosmic into daily life or the temporary flash of majesty in the midst of the crew that darkened the nominal authority of the captain. And here they are again, herded into the forecabin of a ship they do not direct, the anonymous, the survivors, the brotherhood of man.

Melville feels with Ahab, feels along his heart and in his blood, and yet finally has not taken his place with the brilliantly defiant and gloriously defeated. He has instead chosen to survive as a lowly figure squatting on the hatches in intense talk with those of us who will squat with him and recognize that the most recent thump we received is not the last that will be dealt us. Our sharing is not one of resentment, but neither is it one of submission. It is, rather, the communion of the otherwise isolated, otherwise lonely undergoers, each too savage to relinquish his self-mastery and each too conscious of his failings to dominate his fellows. It is, that is to say, Melville's practice of literary art in the terrifying void that threatens the citizen of a modern democracy parted from the anchor of traditional beliefs by a rotted cable and adrift in a sea without milestones.