

WILD ORCHIDS

EVANS

FRIEDLANDER

HALSEY

PEASE

PFAHL

MCSWEENEY

MONK

SCAPPETONE

SYLVESTER

SZYMASZEK

VON SCHLEGELL

WILD ORCHIDS

ONE: MELVILLE

from Missing Limb

The striking absence of critical literature on Ahab's philosophical commitments—his way of feeling things out and connecting everything up—is a sign that many readers take for granted the Captain's inability to think clearly and sensibly. Nevertheless what follows is a serious consideration of his formidable intellectual powers, his enormous capacity for logic.

Ahab's deliberate, disorienting study of what gets a man thinking, by and large, and what gets in the way of his thinking, is in any case more carefully considered than our ready contempt for him. What was Ahab *thinking*? we marvel, and the misplaced emphasis of our analysis shows why his extraordinary pursuit is so rarely understood. Our attention is on the fairness of his indictment of Moby-Dick, not his ability to solve problems, and in this story of his story the Captain comes out looking bad. The fitness of his mind is thought to correspond with the validity of his case: the gauge of his good sense measured primarily by his ability to marshal evidence for that case. And in the end, this compulsion to pore over all the available information isn't good preparation for the full impact of Ahab's account. Our investigation is not carried out in hopes of better comprehending him but is rather an indication of our general distrust of his project—our old doubt about whether he was justified in his attempt to extract compensation from the whale.

Finally, ‘What was Ahab *thinking?*’ only launches a search for what we call the true story, and suggests our eagerness to judge him, to see him identified and reduced. In anticipation of his wrongdoing we initiate a hasty inspection of his mental processes, putting to an end any genuine exploration into the drift of his thoughts.

My claim is that Ahab is out to destroy the ground on which this kind of investigation depends. And since his violence is neither misdirected nor disproportionate, but meticulously employed against the practice of establishing something by collecting evidence for it, readers who go about prosecuting him in the usual ways will be hard pressed to follow his logic. Those who find in Ahab’s opening assertion—“Aye . . . it was Moby-Dick that dismasted me; Moby-Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now”—a declaration of something he thinks empirically true, instead of wondering what is expressed by such a sentence; who find in Ahab’s account the result of a strictly factual analysis of the chronological events of his life, without further elaboration or interpretation (without any *reading* of these events, that is to say), understand him to be making an “if, then” case against the whale. As if this were a revenge story, and there were some evenhandedness to be expected from the world. We stop listening to the details of Ahab’s account as soon as we understand him to be seeking some form of justice. *But he ain’t no freakin’ monument to justice.* Ahab doesn’t want us to forget his loss, but neither is he asking for any kind of trial. He is clearly not a man who is hoping to absolve or acquit himself. He wants, finally, to quash any suggestion that he got his picture of the world by satisfying himself of its correctness.

That is why, on the whole, if we continue to sort through our confusions about Ahab, instead of considering the concep-

tual confusions he turns his own attention to, both the depth of the challenge capturing *Moby-Dick* presents and the anxiety it creates for the Captain will be unclear. To repeat: Ahab's talk of capturing the whale is part of his effort to tackle conceptual confusion, and whatever trouble he brings on his head is designed to help readers of this novel know what trouble in thinking looks like, and how it may be met.

(What I am suggesting here is not that Ahab can't be read critically, but that a reading strategy centered on discovering what he has in mind in order to judge him should not qualify as reading. Working off our literary obligations by trying to reveal something about him, for instance that he is mad, or that he is mistaken, allows readers to imagine that if we could see the moving parts of his mind we would be in the best position to make sense of the work in which he figures. The character becomes a lens through which the novel may be read and the novel, in turn, straight away magnifies some invisible or unnoticed truth about the world, the reality that lurks behind the fiction and powers it. Fact has generated fiction, according to this model, but it is fiction that helps us to better understand and interpret the world. Reading *Moby-Dick* in line with this realist tradition means mining a text for clues about one's actual life, as opposed to the imaginary life of the text. Here it becomes easy to forget that in discussion of a piece of fiction we are talking about a *kind* of reality. The reality of the fiction must be taken up if we are going to begin the task of elucidation that awaits us.

Anyway the question about what is on Ahab's mind or behind what he says is not a good one because a mind is not a source-book; its movements can't be detected simply by peeling back the layers. Imagining Ahab as a nut that must be cracked is like thinking of *Moby-Dick* as a puzzle to be solved.

As if the whole puzzling mass need only be put in plain words to make its purpose clear—when in any work of value the difficulties are the whole matter. *Moby-Dick* is not something one can simply go through, as if it were a tunnel, to see what's on the other side. It must be read or followed along with, and following something, as Ahab demonstrates, isn't simply a matter of keeping pace or sticking to a prearranged schedule. Despite much talk of penetration, moreover, the Captain's fierce declarations to "strike through" the whale also do not do justice to this difficult act. No matter how thick it is, merely going through the various parts of a thing in the order to which one has been trained or become accustomed does not add up to what we mean by following it.

Following *Moby-Dick* is not like following a rule. Nevertheless a good Melville scholar, employed by institutions in which reading literature, even in literature departments, is not what people do for *work*, is expected to come up with some authoritative principle for helping people know what to do with Melville: a feat that is somehow different from, and more than, reading what he says, in the language he chooses to say it in. To this end she attempts to account for his life as the font of his genius. Rubbing up alongside the primarily cultural-historical investigation, and applying a certain pressure, is a description of the writing that does not privilege the source of authority—but inevitably this loose history of glimpsed half-formulated uncategoryable perceptions is not what earns the critic her reputation.

A *bad* Melville scholar, happily, is someone who has found employment in just this other line of work. She feels her obligations less to a writer's life than to the way the writing presses conceptually upon her own. At least, the word 'criticism' is used by her to describe the noise the text is making in her head, the

imaginative turmoil brought about by the writing itself, rather than her study of the person behind it—what interests her is not the death of the author so much as the life of the text: if there is a grave or somber quality to the analysis it is because the critic knows that texts bring readers to life in ways they could not have predicted, and this is not always a *good* feeling.

A critic who invests herself in works rather than authors or disciplinary knowledge can generate bodies of work that feel uneven or even uncritical. Expert opinion and practiced methodology suffer ceremonial rejection as the critic learns to sort out various dissenting voices by trusting her ability to do so, by trusting that what has counted as her education has given her an ear for discriminating among a range of available theoretical positions and critical vocabularies.

In professional circles the critic who broadcasts this peculiar kind of faith in reading can incite suspicion, and rightly so; her intellectual contributions are less than clear, her technical vocabulary unimpressive, her few friends—notwithstanding their considerable talent or even fame—a collection of mavericks and cranks. Never mind. The critic who is interested in the possibility of language holds fast to the work her reading constitutes. She thinks of reading as an art for which no rules can be given; a matter of involvement, a manner of exposing herself to certain sentences that turn out to be more or less right, more or less useful. It is difficult to characterize this odd kind of critic except to say that she is unwilling, or let's say unable, to disguise the antagonism she feels toward much contemporary literary theory, where professional training based on learning terminology, and learning to deploy it, is displacing—or making increasingly forlorn—the practice of attending to the terms and conditions of discourse.)

As long as a man's mind is the subject of inspection,

the focus of our investigations will be his intentions, and not his works. Besides, in this case what's on Ahab's mind is the *whale*. The answer, such as it is, is whale. The motive is whale. If we are made desperate by the impenetrability of this matter, then we have learned, at least, to broaden our attention if we are to understand his mind's activity.

What's on a man's mind—revenge, or something just as fishy—is not measurably the same as his ability to imagine a form of life. Or, what's on a man's mind is not one thing, but many things. That sounds hopelessly vague, but what Ahab effectively demonstrates is that he cannot be said to know the whale if he is not also acquainted with its *logos*, those things to which it reciprocally relates, the intelligible structure that has given rise to it.

There is no end to the whale in *Moby-Dick*, and Ahab, already lost in its immensities, reveals the unbounded extent of it. "Without an end to recast the beginning as the beginning of the end," writes Ken Dauber, "The beginning disperses itself." Or as Ishmael puts it, since there is no way to extract from those "annihilated ante-chronical Leviathans" the point in time or space at which *Moby-Dick* comes into existence, man must sort for his categorization of it through countless "skeletons, skulls, tusks, jaws, ribs and vertebrae, all characterized by partial resemblances to the existing breeds of sea-monsters," not forgetting "a rabble of uncertain, fugitive, half-fabulous whales" that make it necessary to pick up "whatever random allusions to whales" can be found in "any book whatsoever, sacred or profane." Under scrutiny—and this research must be carried out in "unfathomable waters," so that "these incomplete indications but serve to torture" all naturalists—the whale loses its distinct shape. Having been "before all time" and destined to exist "after all humane ages are over," the whale is

widespread, dispersed, unsourced, and man's mind with it.

In other words the whale came before Ahab, and what came before the whale is not for him to say. In the beginning was the *whale*, or what the Captain knows as Moby-Dick is not something he can measure but a complex system of relations—not even a system so much as a sea of overdetermined influences, each impossible to get behind.

Now for Ahab it is difficult to begin with this kind of beginning, and not try to go further back. But those who believe that the whale's meaning is supplied by him—who think that the whale's significance or worth is somehow decided by man—are even more confused by this process than he is. They have not properly comprehended the connection between the Captain's *understanding* and his *life*. They have failed to grasp that the whale's meaning depends for its sense on more than Ahab is able to formulate.

What Ahab learns, after his run-in with Moby-Dick, is that he cannot know what a whale means simply by having some experience of it: nothing in his experience of the whale prepares him to make sense of it; nothing reliably expresses its value—it remains opaque to him, obscure and unintelligible. This suggests two possibilities: either he alone is responsible for the whale's significance, which besides leading to an alarming relativism makes the whale's import an entirely arbitrary affair; or, more logically, knowing how to find a whale meaningful is an operation that depends for its outcome on something *other* than his appreciation of its particular qualities, what intelligence he draws from sense impressions.

Ahab's concern throughout is with what it is for a whale, this incalculable, unmanageable state of affairs, to have sense, and over the course of his wild journeyings he develops his own strong opinions. The first is that Moby-Dick must have sense

before the question of whether he reads it rightly or wrongly can arise. (Which is to say, more varied, more useful, and more interesting, than the issue of whether Ahab's ideas about the whale are good or bad, is the issue of how he is able to see or make sense of it at all). And second, that the whale can have sense for him only where his thoughts about it have developed from or grown out of thoughts he has about other matters.

This last estimation, so clearly true that it hardly needs to be stated, were it not so easy to overlook, is precisely the point of Ahab's deliberate decision to include everyone and everything in his pursuit. Those who call Ahab "monomaniacal" and mean something damning by it have neglected the detail that a man's sense of one particular thing rests on the associations he has with any number of things. Getting some idea of the *countless* things that have captured Ahab's attention, at any rate, furnishes the world in which we imagine him with the rich, rough quality of a material setting. It contextualizes his concerns without reaching behind them to his psychological motivations or through them to the 'real' world with which he seems to have lost touch. And it makes clear why, rather than struggling to expose him, readers should decide whether Ahab expresses himself clearly, in this matter of the whale: if it is possible to follow his thinking in this regard: and if what he manages to say makes any difference to the way we understand things, if we can see at all differently—or if his great effort to establish confidence in the unity of discourse, including his wonder that such unity exists, is just one more bit of disconnected nonsense to add to the growing pile.

II

Of course considering how hard it is to get rid of a powerful mythology, the idea that Ahab is in possession of a sound mind is unlikely to appeal to readers captivated by a different picture: a zealot, overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of life, invents a system of beliefs that makes thinking unnecessary. That at least is the Ahab we are introduced to by Starbuck, who argues that “worse than devil’s madness” is Ahab’s refusal to temper his convictions with a rational foundation. Though Starbuck sees Ahab as a man of outstanding intellectual ability, he mostly registers sadness and shock that his Captain, having established himself as a whale-hunter of systematic precision, should in this matter of *Moby-Dick* have fallen prey to such nebulous subjectivism:

Never, never, wilt thou capture him, old man—In Jesus’ name no more of this . . . Two days chased; twice stove to splinters; thy very leg once more snatched from under thee; thy evil shadow gone—all good angels mobbing thee with warnings:—what more wouldst thou have?—shall we keep chasing this hated murderous fish till he swamps the last man? Shall we be dragged by him to the bottom of the sea? Shall we be towed by him to the infernal world? Oh, oh,—Impiety and blasphemy to hunt him more!

As Starbuck sees it, belief must be founded on evidence. Ahab’s inability to draw a rational conclusion from available information represents disobedience of the highest order; it is the wrongness of men enslaved to their opinions and reasoning from received principles.

All his talk of Jesus notwithstanding, the first mate in fact practices a kind of scientism, and when not forecasting the punishment God will visit on Ahab, thinks systematic observa-

tion alone can explain phenomena, and reason alone should influence human action. If Ahab's beliefs are allowed to change the direction of his thinking, then his beliefs, Starbuck seems to suggest, may well be the result of a weakness in his rational faculties—for a man must back up what he believes with trial and experiment.

Sir Francis Bacon had in the same way seen in empiricism some liberation from the great error of inclining before false idols, whose hold on men's minds represented the intellectual outcome of original sin. This obstacle to the right use of the senses let men swallow whole beliefs as absurd, argued Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, as the doctrine of transubstantiation. Men bound in such a way to their convictions "will disbelieve their own Eyes, renounce the Evidence of their Senses, and give their own Experience the lye, rather than admit of any thing disagreeing with these sacred Tenets."

But readers who agree that Ahab ought to come by his knowledge of things by trusting the clear evidence of his senses forget that the only world in which this rule works is imitative and small. In order for Enlightenment rationality to succeed there must be a certain mathematical strictness to the world, a classic orderliness to its design. In this tidy universe the principle that everything that happens must have a cause powers reports of things unseen.

Needless to say, searching, peering into crevices, is no substitute for thinking. And as it turns out, over-confidence about the unassailable relation of cause to effect is what makes a premise far-fetched. The first thing Ahab bets his life on is that any attempt to evaluate an event by determining its cause *lacks sense*, it is not even false, and leads to an unmanaging, unmanageable belief in causation—a belief Ahab is opposed to from the start. The Captain could not have been more explicit

on this point. His business with the whale illustrates why the application of observation and experiment doesn't work, since evidence never adds up to anything like an explanation, when the sum of the parts can't quite cover the holes.

(What holes in this story *aren't* gaping as the result of something being left out, or something forcing its way through? There are so many breaks in the arrangement of *Moby-Dick* it could be a poem. The distance between the men before the mast and those behind it, for instance, or between Ahab's hopes for the voyage and Starbuck's, which is something like the disconnect between philosophy and business. The leaks in the hold. The openings in the crew, where lives have been lost. The crack, which is full of sharks, between a whale carcass and the side of the ship—but nothing like the terrible cavity between a man and the object of his interest.)

Men are always eager to tally up the facts, but as Hume coolly demonstrates in the *Treatise*, there is no way to derive an ought from an is. Since there is “a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses,” a thoughtful person should refuse to draw conclusions from what appears to be overwhelming evidence. (The work of the early empiricists had shown that our knowledge of the world and its objects—our experience—is made up of impressions. What Hume laid bare is that these impressions have no unimpeachable basis but are held together by custom and sentiment. Because our knowledge of the world can never surpass our experience of it, what we call knowledge is not something we can have unless it is something we have made.) Since man is submerged in the world that gives meaning to his senses, he is never of the right mind to count on them.

Even so it has become commonplace to throw out Ahab's late nineteenth century understanding of the world for philo-

sophical advances of the seventeenth. No matter how exhaustive, concentrated, or inspired Ahab's logic, our assessment of him inevitably shares with Starbuck's the assurance that he has lapsed into mythical thinking. If Ahab questions the efficacy of enlightened rationality, or throws out its instruments, or abandons epistemological attempts to see how things are, then it follows that he is enslaved to mythological concepts, and must buttress his real experience with fabulous self-deceptions, and occupy his mind with mystic-gnostic fantasies of a world beyond his own.

Despite the fact that whole generations of disciples have ridden the hobbyhorse of Starbuck's banal censure, it is time to examine more closely these uncharitable suspicions and outdated hostilities. Starbuck's values are grounded in an existence independent from the shifting life he knows at sea: that is why his business sense, his practical acceptance of the actual nature of things, is the foil for Ahab's rather more superstitious world picture. Such a man is warranted to do well in any climate, since his sound understanding of things, his enlightened reason, keeps him warm: "His pure tight skin was an excellent fit; and closely wrapped up in it, and embalmed with inner health and strength, like a revived Egyptian, this Starbuck seemed prepared to endure for long ages to come, and to endure always, as now."

This hermetic Starbuck, protected from any outside interference, believes himself free to use his reason without recourse to external guidance. But what gives this view legs is his confidence that the universe is a rational system, wholly accessible to knowledge's reach. How could anything be true unless there were some set of established truths to which it corresponds? Starbuck can insist Ahab provide proof or evidence for his beliefs because he grounds his own ability to reason in

a free and independent natural world. The first mate's classic conception of mind as a mirror of nature is what allows him to make his petition: an appeal not to Ahab's moral sense but to his common sense.

We can glimpse Ahab's wholehearted rejection of Starbuck's view when he refuses to find *intelligible* the idea of an external world, a safe, dry location or standpoint from which, or because of which, certain standards can be maintained. When the oil casks in the hold spring a bad leak, Starbuck tells his captain that they must "Up Burtons and break out"—bring the ship to port in order to repair the barrels. But his Captain will have none of it:

"Up Burtons and break out? Now that we are nearing Japan; heave-to for a week to tinker a parcel of old hoops?"

"Either do that, sir, or waste in one day more oil than we may make good in a year. What we come twenty thousand miles to get is worth saving, sir."

"So it is, so it is; if we get it."

"I was speaking of the oil in the hold, sir."

"And I was not speaking or thinking of that at all. Be-gone! Let it leak! I'm all aleak myself. Aye! leaks in leaks! not only full of leaky casks, but those leaky casks are in a leaky ship; and that's a far worse plight than the Pe-quod's, man. Yet I don't stop to plug my leak; for who can find it in the deep-loaded hull; or how hope to plug it, even if found, in this life's howling gale?"

For the Captain, Starbuck's tightly organized system of beliefs dissolves as soon as the idea of finding some well-anchored, rescuing world is found to be an illusion. Whatever order orders Ahab does not correspond to the empirical world – and this vital detail, that the logical and the empirical must be sharply

distinguished from one another, gives us some idea as to why Ahab's investigation of the whale cannot be a scientific one. There is no *explanation*, arrived at through tinkering with objects, to which Ahab can turn in order to solve his problem: how it is that the whale can have sense for him. (And if Starbuck, with his usual condescension, thinks he can teach his Captain how to reason, he has overlooked the fact that Ahab could not have understood the situation if he did not already know how to reason.)

This in a way expresses what is meant by the suggestion that Ahab was "intent on an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge." In order to protect his private interests Starbuck must play down the world's non-rational aspects, devalue local customs and habitual practices, minimize the sound and the fury. But what to do when by all odds a certain class of men are "most directly brought into contact with whatever is appallingly astonishing in the sea;" when "face to face they not only eye its greatest marvels, but, hand to jaw, give battle to them"? Ahab's reverence for those things in the universe that are both irrefutable and un-confirmable is designed to expose the weakness of any purely rational system, shorn of supernatural or miraculous elements and calculated to support an enlightened moral code.

Why is it, then, that even careful readers of *Moby-Dick*, sensing, but sensing dimly, that something is missing from Starbuck's view, are apt to see the world as he does—the total amount of all the things in it—when this is to ignore entirely the matter of the world's relations? For Starbuck, *Moby-Dick* is a thing like any other thing, which is why he has only two meaningful ways of considering it: kill the whale for his living, or be killed by it. But when Starbuck thinks of the world as a totality of things he passes over the problem that things are held to-

gether in certain ways, and *this* is what he has failed to explain. If Moby-Dick is simply a thing, from what quarter can it be said to derive sense? Which combination of elements makes its representation possible? What allows a man to understand what he sees, or enables him to talk about it with others?

What Starbuck has refused to notice is that his view of the whale, the extent of his ability to know it, can't be separated from what he sees as its whiteness, its whaleness. Or, for that matter, from any number of characteristics, for doesn't Moby-Dick also "fan-tail a little curious," as Tashtego declares, and "have a curious spout, too," as Dagoos observes, and as Queequeg detects, "a good many irons in him hide"? What is called Moby-Dick is really a constellation of undetermined elements arranged in determinate ways. And while any number of features might prove essential contributions to this portrait, not excluding future marks or scars, the assembly of these features is not, as it were, arbitrary. That is why Moby-Dick is not a figment of the Captain's imagination, just what is the case. Why, Ahab argues, Moby-Dick is not a thing, but a *fact*. Why the world is the totality of facts, not of things.