

The Appalling Beauty of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

By Patrick Baliani

Two English professors walk into a bar. One says, "Have you read *Moby Dick*?" The other replies, "Read it? I haven't even taught it yet."

Thank you all for being here. Thank you, Cindy and Joe, and everyone at **The Rogue**, for this great pleasure. Happy New Year to all. I'm always grateful for any opportunity to be here and I always write down this part of my talk, because expressing gratitude is probably the most important thing I have to say. Typically in the nervous jingle that accompanies the start of any talk, I say it, and move on. Today, I'd like my thanks to linger just a bit. I am grateful to you all to be here . . .

For once, the title of something I've written came readily to me. *The Appalling Beauty of Herman Melville's Moby Dick*. It came readily because the words "appalling beauty" are not mine, but Melville's. (*Pause.*) But how to approach such a colossal and profound novel? In the first scene of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Tyrone says, "The way to start work, is to start work."

1-- I first read the story of *Moby Dick* in the *Classics Illustrated Comic* book series. Fifty plus years ago. The impression the story made has never left me: of the peg-legged captain Ahab, obsessed with hunting the great white whale that had torn off his limb; of "there she blows" ringing in my ears when I first read those strange words, as though I were on that mysterious whaling venture myself. I remember the cover of the comic book: the grizzled, monomaniacal Ahab, standing at the prow of his boat, harpoon raised, about to thrust it into great Moby Dick, the great whale's eye phantasmagorically trained on him. Furious winds of hatred and waves of revenge whipping the demonic Ahab.

When I began preparing this talk, I thought about my encounter with that comic book and wished I could experience it again. Then I thought. Wait a minute. Surely I can retrieve the experience . . . should I or shouldn't I succumb . . . (*Hold up the envelope.*) Amazon Prime! Guess how much? Fifteen bucks! Fifteen bucks was all it cost me to return to my childhood. Free shipping! They don't make comic books like they used to. (*Show the comic book about.*) Am I right? Feel those pages. And they're mine! Feel them. Am I right? Oh, Amazon, I love you this once but I hate you in general.

Herman Melville's novel, *Moby Dick* is many things: fantastic adventure story, mysterious seafaring yarn, morality tale, religious parable, fable, allegory, encyclopedia of Nineteenth Century whaling, compendium of oceanic lore, prophetic vision of America, philosophical inquiry into the nature of existence, one of the world's greatest works of literature. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* stands boldly as one of the most philosophical and influential American novels, depicting the world as unknowable in rational terms and grasped best by way of its profound and fundamentally paradoxical nature.

It is also FUN to read! Verbal play, intriguing trivia, “Melvillisms,”--words he makes up--comic scenes, whimsy, wit, conundrums addressed to the reader, and tall tales all contribute to Melville’s fantastic sense of humor, as does Melville’s upending his own philosophizing, as when he compares at exacting length the differences between the heads of right and sperm whales and concludes: “The Right Whale I take to have been a Stoic; the Sperm Whale, a Platonian, who might have taken up Spinoza in later years.”(75) (367)

And yet, from the time it was published in 1851 to the present, it has among a great many readers and nonreaders acquired a different reputation . . . any words come to mind? Let’s consider: the novel proper begins with an Etymology “Supplied by a Late Consumptive Usher to a Grammar School,” followed by 14 introductory pages of Extracts “Supplied by a Sub-Sub-Librarian,” the subsequent 135 Chapters of narrative (many of which are notoriously full of whaling minutiae omitted in abridged versions or skipped over, even in college courses) and . . . finally, an Epilogue! In chapter 32, *Cetology*, the second longest chapter in the book—the longest is *The Town-Ho’s Story*, an extrapolated account sifted into the ongoing narrative--we learn the precise zoological classification of the various species of the order of Cetacea. Chap. 78, *Cistern and Buckets*, reveals that “Midwifery should be taught in the same course with fencing and boxing, riding and rowing.” (376) While Chap. 92, *Ambergris*, extolls the fact that “fine ladies and gentlemen . . . regale themselves with an essence found in the inglorious bowels of a sick whale!” (446). My edition of the book runs 625 pages, not counting the introductory sections described.

2-- A Navajo student once told me, some things are not to be understood.

3-- My mom, who is 90, and I once watched John Huston’s movie, *Moby Dick*, together. This was after my reading the comic book and before I had read the novel itself. For years, I had maintained a fascination with whales--I used to draw and color them all the time, knew the different types of them, and was always, like Melville, drawn most particularly to the sperm whale, with its distinctive configuration. My mom had maintained a fascination with Gregory Peck! Many of you, I’m sure, can relate. For many of you, I imagine, Brad Pitt or Bradley Cooper don’t hold a candle! Am I right? And I remember my mom relating to me the uncertain, even scandalous nature of Gregory Peck portraying the visibly malevolent character of Ahab, given that honesty, sincerity, and goodness had previously permeated his movie persona. My mom explained to me that Peck risked losing an aspect of his reputation that the world had come to rely upon. I myself was torn over a certain scene in the movie. Perhaps you remember it. When Ahab is confronted with the Captain of the Rachel, in search of his lost son, the mighty Ahab (Gregory Peck) asks the other captain if he has seen the white whale. When the captain answers that he has, Ahab, asks, “You didn’t . . . kill him?” And it was the way he seemed to be desperately hoping the answer was “no” that befuddled me. Wasn’t the whale evil in Ahab’s view? Wasn’t Ahab’s greatest impulse to have the world rid of this monster? I didn’t know enough then about scourges, the fragility of the human psyche, things like revenge and obsession, how retribution can be one’s unremitting ambition, I didn’t know about the devil, and most of all, I couldn’t understand how whiteness, which I had learned was associated with purity, could be the symbol of something stark, raving, and wrong. After the tumultuousness at the end of the movie, I asked my mom, What happened to the white whale? (*Pause.*) She didn’t know. (*Pause.*) I remember wishing that Moby Dick had survived.

(Pause.)

Call me Ishmael. These are among the most treasured first words of an opening chapter in American literature. The biblical Ishmael, son of Abraham by an Egyptian, is generally associated with exile. Ishmael in the novel is an outcast from the start and he is most definitely one by the end. But anyone reading *Moby Dick* knows that the central consciousness operating in the book as a whole is not the man who introduces himself to us at the beginning of the story. There are many of scenes depicted to which he is not privy, there are the other characters' interior monologues (which Ishmael as we know him would be unable to fathom), there are the philosophical musings and rhetorical flourishes not in his voice, there is a wealth of knowledge and erudition which Ishmael would be incapable of acquiring, even during his long voyage. In other words, Melville's voice supersedes Ishmael's and becomes, soon enough, ubiquitous, even at times speaking directly in the first person to the reader, sharing his research as well as experience on numerous prior whaling expeditions. There's even a wonderful moment deep into the novel when he addresses Ishmael. *But how, now, Ishmael? (102) How is it, that you, a mere oarsman in the fishery, pretend to know aught about the subterranean parts of the whale? (489)*

Call me Ishmael. Some critics see operating in the novel's meta-narration a kind of Emersonian transcendentalism, which Melville was well acquainted with, and which strikes me as nonsense when I consider the way characters and story are created. My impression is that Ishmael allowed Melville into the writing of the story; once Melville was in it, the story grew in ways that his character, as a character, could not accommodate. So Melville did a brilliant thing. He made his voice omniscient--at times inhabiting the minds of other characters, including Ahab, the first, second, and third mates, Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask, respectively. Some chapters are even cast in play-like terms, set with stage directions, followed by pure dialogue.

As likely, Melville's internal conflicts while writing the novel played out figuratively in the disparate views of his main characters, including the relatively naïve Ishmael, the starkly moral first mate Starbuck, both of whom are subordinate to, and come under the spell of Ahab, the unrelenting Captain with forty years of whaling experience. Perhaps a genius like Melville had this outward progression of visions figured from the start and might well have been thinking, *Call me Ishmael, for now.* As for the so-called "whaling chapters," there is some evidence that Melville added them largely after he'd written most of the story. Very interesting.

4-- "Who is Captain Ahab, sir?" Ishmael asks Peleg, part owner and agent of the whaling ship, Pequod, early in the novel.

"He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man," says Peleg, whose name, facetiously I take it, sounds like Pegleg. It is in fact Peleg who informs Ishmael that Captain Ahab has lost one of his legs to a whale. "Ahab's above the common," he says. "Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales . . . He's Ahab, boy! And Ahab of old, thou knowest, was crowned a king!"

"And a very vile one," responds Ishmael. "When that wicked king was slain, the dogs, did they not lick his blood?"

Ishmael, of course, knows his Bible. From the *First Book of Kings*, Ch.16: “And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him . . . And Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel that were before him.”

“Look ye, lad,” Peleg persists. “Never say that on board the Pequod. Never say it anywhere. Captain Ahab did not name himself . . . I wish to warn thee . . . I know Captain Ahab well, I’ve sailed with him as mate years ago; I know what he is—a good man—not a pious, good man, like Bildad, but a swearing good man—something like me—only there’s a good deal more of him . . . I know too that ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale, he’d been kind of moody—desperate moody, and savage sometimes, but that will pass off. And once for all, let me tell thee and assure thee, young man, it’s better to sail with a moody good captain than a laughing bad one.”

And so, before we meet Ahab on the quarter deck of the Pequod, we are told of his dichotomous nature: “I don’t know exactly what’s the matter with him,” continues Peleg, “but he keeps close inside a house; a sort of sick, and yet he don’t look so. In fact, he ain’t sick; but no, he isn’t well either . . . He’s a queer man, Captain Ahab—so some think—but a good one. (88)

As often as the word “good” describes Ahab’s character at this point, epithets like “crazy” and “mad” soon gain prominence. Especially as regards Ahab’s “monomaniacal” view.”

All evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam on down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart’s shell upon it . . . [After his dismemberment,] Then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into on another, and so interfusing, made him mad. (200)

As regards the loss of sanity the novel probes various manifestations of it. Much is made of Ahab’s comings and goings from his cabin, below and out of sight, and the sightings of him on quarter-deck in the full view and awe of his crew. There is a way in which the story blends the forces of madness with complex, *rational* methods of whaling.

Ahab, in his hidden self, raved on. Human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing. When you think it fled, it may have become transfigured into some still subtler form. . . . (201)

The Pequod, many leagues and eventually several oceans away from home, assumes a world unto itself. As does his namesake in the Bible, so too Ahab asserts his lordship over the vessel. “Thou art always prating to me, Starbuck, about those miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience. But look ye, the only real owner of anything is its commander; and hark ye, my conscience is in this ship’s keel. —On deck!

“Shall we not understand each other better than hitherto, Captain Ahab?” says Starbuck.

Ahab seized a loaded musket from the rack . . . and pointing it toward Starbuck exclaimed: “There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that lord over the Pequod.---On deck!” (517)

5—Melville, Chapter 82: *There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method.*

6-- Cesare Pavese, the neo-Realist novelist and poet, established himself during the mid-twentieth century as one Italy's most important writers. By the time he committed suicide in 1950, at the age of 42, he had written ten novels, three books of poems, and several critical studies. His last novel, *La luna e i falò* considered by many including myself to be his finest, tells the story of its narrator's migration to the United States and his subsequent disillusionment upon returning to Italy after the war. On the last page of this culminating work, the character Santina, who had been a little girl while the narrator was growing up, emerges from a safe house the captive of the Partisans, having been found spying for the Germans. She is now a young adult herself, yet whereas she had always worn in previous scenes the fatigues of her compatriots, she appears for an instant the traitor "*vestita di bianco*"--dressed in white. This incongruity between her former innocence and her mature transgression forms the penultimate image of the novel, before her being put to death in the pyre referred to in the book's title. Cesare Pavese, prior to writing his ten novels and three books of verse, had accomplished at the age of 32, the definitive Italian translation of *Moby Dick*.

(An aside: Can you imagine translating Moby Dick into another language? And it has been translated all over the world. The first Thai language edition is being published soon.)

7-- "*Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick . . .*, writes Melville, "*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.*"

We associate whiteness with purity--'pure as the driven snow' or 'lily white,' each of which connotes moral goodness, a virtuous condition: virginal, spotless, sinless, immaculate, in a word, pure. Melville, in a stupendous chapter, *The Whiteness of the Whale*, acknowledges that *in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own*. He elaborates on the many common and benign associations of white, including bridal wear, the ermine worn by judges and royalty, the Christian priest's alba (from the Latin, meaning "white")—all symbols of virtuous purity.

Then he wields the image aligned with his work's central paradox:

“. . . for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, yet there lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more panic in the soul than that redness which affrights in the blood. (204-205)

This elusive quality it is, which causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten the terror to the furthest bounds. Witness the white bear of the poles, and the white shark of the tropics . . . Bethink thee of

the albatross . . . [Further] What is it in the Albino man so peculiarly repels and often shocks the eye, as that sometimes he is loathed by his own kith and kin??

What becomes “terrible in itself” and “heightens the terror” a few chapters later is the Sperm whale’s notorious ferocity. In *The Affidavit* chapter, Melville records the sinking of the whaling ship Essex, part of the inspiration for his novel. He writes: *The Sperm Whale is in some cases sufficiently powerful, knowing, and judiciously malicious, as with direct aforethought to stave in, utterly destroy, and sink a large ship; and what is more the Sperm Whale has done it.*

Judiciousness, maliciousness, forethought. In attributing these qualities to the great leviathan, Melville complicates greatly the great whale’s character. Prescience, malice, judgment--Ahab invests deeply in these qualities and amplifies their nature when relating to his first mate Starbuck the intrinsic nature of his prey.

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike though the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me . . . He tasks me, he heaps me; I see him in outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me.

8-- A Navajo high school student once said to me, “Some things are not to be understood.”

(A second aside: In the Spring of 1998 I first taught *Moby Dick* to a group of unsuspecting UA Freshman. They loved it! Or so I imagined.)

9— Fully one third of the sperm whale’s body is comprised of its head. No other whale approximates these relative dimensions and Melville spares no amount of attention to this grandeur. There are times in the book when the head of the Sperm Whale suggests nothing less than the ultimate animate being on earth. *You feel the Deity*, writes Melville. And to be clear: these emanations of a supreme being are not anthropomorphic.

. . . in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object living in nature. For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face, he has none, proper . . . 79 / 379

Moby Dick in particular is associated with divinity many times throughout the novel. In one passage, *the white whale [is] no less a being than the Shaker God incarnated” (7)* During his voyage, Ishmael learns that whalers in the South Atlantic seas consider *Moby Dick ubiquitous and immortal (41)* And when at last we see *Moby Dick* late in the novel, (133), he is referred to as “a grand god” that swims “divinely.” Melville further testifies “*of the whale, pronouncing*

him the most devout of all beings 86 / 413 For this reason, perhaps, Ishmael himself cannot fathom Moby Dick's transcendent being. *What the white whale was to them [the South Atlantic sailors] or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim unsuspecting way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life, all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go.*

What remains to be seen is how much deeper the novel as a whole can go.

10-- Shakespearean scholar, Caroline Spurgeon, writes: "I incline to believe that analogy—likeness between dissimilar things—which is the fact underlying the possibility and reality of metaphor, holds within itself the very secret of the universe."

Melville, I am inclined to believe, is America's master at the extended metaphor. *Moby Dick* is full of them. All of Chapter 60, *The Line*, describes the "magical, sometime horrible whale-line" affixed to one end of the harpoon and ultimately, if the whale is disabled or killed, used for towing the whale to the ship. Melville describes the various qualities of hemp this whale-line is made of, where it is purchased, traded, its thickness, length, strength, flexibility, where it is housed, how its coiled, why it coiled, when it is tarred, how a second line is always at the ready, should a whale dive deeper than the first can accommodate, why it's end is never affixed to the boat, how and why it girds the rowlocks and in close proximity, the sailors attendant to them—he does this for a good four pages of exposition if not disquisition. Then Melville hits you, and if you haven't been attentive, you are apt to miss the magnitude of his truth. *So the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentines about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play—this is a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair. But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side. (306)*

In a chapter called, *Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish*, Melville differentiates in whaling terms between, aptly enough, Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish. *Alive or dead, a fish is technically fast, when it is connected with an occupied ship or boat, by any medium at all controllable by the occupant or occupants--a mast, an oar, a nine-inch cable, a telegraph wire, or a strand of cobweb, it is all the same. Likewise a fish is technically fast when it bears a waif, or any other recognized symbol of possession; so long as the party waiving it plainly evince their ability at any time to take it alongside, as well as their intention to do so. Conversely, a Loose-Fish is fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it. (p.433)* Melville includes three pages worth of instances when the definitions were contested in court of by plaintiffs and defendants, weighing in with his opinion, as he often does, as though he were judge and jury himself.

Then we get: *What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard by way of waiving it for his royal master and mistress? What was Poland to the Czar?. What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? What at last will Mexico be to the United States? All Loose-Fish.*

There's more:

What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish? What all men's minds and opinions but Loose-Fish? What is the principle of religious belief in them but a Loose-Fish? What to the ostentatious smuggling verbalists are the thoughts of thinkers but Loose-Fish? What is the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish? (Pause.) And what are you, Reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too? (435)

One more example which speaks for itself:

Squeeze! Squeeze! Squeeze! shouts Ishmael, in Chapter 94, *all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally, as much to say—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come: let us squeeze hands all round; nay let us squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves into the very milk and sperm of kindness . . . Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm forever!* (456)

And you thought Ishmael was in for the wanderlust!

11- To paraphrase the hundreds of fascinating interpretations of *Moby Dick* would not do you, the book, or them justice. I won't mention any. *(Pause.)* Just kidding!

Andrew Delbanco, Professor of Literature at Columbia, claims that “[Melville] wrote *Moby Dick* in a messianic fervor because he wanted to save his country from itself. / One way to approach Melville's forbidding text is to regard it as part of his lifelong meditation on America.” Delbanco believes that Melville was born at a time (1819) when “the vestiges of aristocracy were fading” and the country was becoming “the scene of feisty combat among populist heroes like Andrew Jackson and political professionals like Martin Van Buren.”

I do see a brand of American exceptionalism expressed in the novel, not born of privilege or wealth, and certainly not from pre-destiny, but hard earned from courage and experience. American know-how is writ large in the pages of the book, epitomized by the whaling industry, which Melville lauds throughout and believed would continue unabated. He could not foresee the technological advances that would vastly diminish the seas of its leviathans; in his day and for shortly afterward, whales were more likely to evade capture than not. As for American exceptionalism, I wonder what Melville would made today of the entire progressive world aboard ship, except us.

Delbanco continues: “In the harried months between the early spring of 1850 and the fall of 1851, he produced the greatest work of imagination in the history of our literature.”

Less than two years, to write *Moby Dick*? There she blows!

Eric Wilson, in *Studies in American Fiction*, “treats Moby Dick as an allegory signifying the rise of Darwinism and the consequent dethroning of man, the victory of evolution over essentialism. The novel constitutes a prophetic parable of what Freud called the second great blow to man’s sense of domination (after the astronomy of Copernicus and before Freud’s own psychoanalysis.)”

How funny! On a more serious note it’s interesting to me that Melville prefigures by a century the essentialist/existentialist debate, along gender lines, especially in one of the more startling chapters early in the book, called *The Blanket: Upon waking next morning about daylight*, recounts Ishmael, *I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife . . . I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me.”*

There’s more, as always there is with Melville. *I then rolled over, my neck feeling as it were in a horse-collar, and suddenly felt a slight scratch. Throwing aside the counterpane, there lay the tomahawk sleeping by the savage’s side, as if it were a hatchet faced baby. A pretty pickle, truly, thought I: abed here in a strange house in the broad day, with a cannibal and a tomahawk.*

A generation of LBGTQ readers have discovered, with good cause, the reformist foresight of *Moby Dick*. There is no mistaking Ishmael’s newfound awareness early in the novel. And as we today cannot examine gender issues without addressing race, class, and religion, Ishmael, comes to a timely realization: *For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking cannibal. What’s all this fuss I have been making, thought I to myself—the man’s a human being just as I am; he has as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.* (3) (26)

Now a great deal has been written about the allegorical components of *Moby Dick*; in my view they are merely that, components, not the core. Allegory looks for something “beside” or “above” the text; in an allegory the analogues are equally if not more significant than the literal truth, but this is most definitely not the case here. In *Moby Dick* you must pay close attention to the surface of the prose in order to plumb its oceanic subtext. In *Moby Dick*, the story’s the thing!

We have Melville’s own words devaluating the novel’s allegorical elements, when in *The Affidavit* chapter--which reads much like one of his letters to friend and some time neighbor, Nathaniel Hawthorne--he writes:

So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical or otherwise, of the fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory. (223)

And the renowned literary and social critic, Harold Bloom, bless his deceased heart, concedes in his introduction to *Bloom’s Notes on Moby Dick*, that “Ahab, the tragic protagonist of *Moby Dick*, has only a few peers among American literary characters, and none of them is wholly of his eminence . . .” He also writes: “Herman Melville risked overt allusions to a number of

precursor figures in creating Ahab: Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear, Milton's Satan, Byron's Manfred and Cain, Shelley's Prometheus, and the Bible's Job. Most like Macbeth and Satan, Ahab is a hero/villain, conceived on a vast scale, cosmological as well as national.”

I have nothing to say about that--my mother taught me never to malign the dead.

12—*To produce a mighty book, writes Melville, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it. (497)*

Melville’s reverence for the Sperm Whale is palpable throughout. To read ***Moby Dick*** is to confront an existential dilemma, an irresolvable mystery, the enigma of human life, which bring us back, as everything in ***Moby-Dick*** does, to the dichotomies embodied in every aspect of the great sperm whale.

Other poets have warbled about the praises of the soft eye of the antelope, writes Melville, and the lovely plumage of the bird that never alights; less celestial, I celebrate a tail.

In no living thing are the lines of beauty more exquisitely defined than in the crescentric borders of these flukes. At its utmost expansion in the full grown whale, the tail will considerably exceed twenty feet across. (400) . . . in the tail the confluent measureless force of the whole whale seems concentrated to the point. Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it.

The motive force of the almighty deity earlier discerned in the faceless, massive head of the whale extends to its furthest extremity. *Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven (86) (413)*

Nor does this—continues Melville--its amazing strength, at all tend to cripple the graceful flexion of its motions; where infantileness of ease undulates through a Titanism of power. On the contrary, those motions derive their most appalling beauty from it.

And in one of his most stunning claims, Melville writes: ***Real strength never impairs beauty or harmony, but it often bestows it; and in everything imposingly beautiful, strength has much to do with the magic. (400-411)***

Melville—so confident in so much of his discourse on so many subjects--can only skirt such magnificence:

The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it. At times there are gestures in it, which though they would well grace the hand of man, remain wholly inexplicable . . .

Ishmael had previously expressed his shortcomings in knowing the whale; now Melville himself proclaims his inability to grasp the unfathomable. *Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. (414) 86*

While many things--from Transcendentalism to American Exceptionalism to Manifest Destiny--have been attributed to Melville’s great novel, ***Moby Dick***, it is above all an inquiry into the

ultimate paradox of human existence, with all of the strivings and failings the endeavor to know embodies. We have, inexplicably, this one life to fathom as best, as fallibly, as we can.

Consider all this, writes Melville, referring to the whale as “the most devout of all beings” . . . “and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return! (299)

Apart from being a fantastic adventure story, apart from its having captivated so many of us since our youths, apart from its influence worldwide and the vast enjoyment it continually affords, apart from the appalling beauty of it commingling good with evil, ***Moby Dick*** depicts our paradoxical quest for the unfathomable nature of human existence. In Melville’s ***Moby Dick*** the impenetrable, the inexplicable, the unknowable, attracts, holds, endures.

Thank you very much.
