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Who Is Ishmael?

IT IS A MOUNTAINOUS BOOK about the sea, an American book of revelation.¹ It represents a world, or worlds, that may be interpreted to infinite degrees, and have been. Since its rehabilitation by F.O. Matthiesson in the first part of the twentieth century, a literary industry has grown to explore its fathomless depths. Journals devoted to Melville seem as much devoted to this one book itself as to all of the rest of his amazing oeuvre. Hershel Parker hinges his massive life of Melville around the gestation and publication of it. Charles Olson assumes that the study of it is the most meaningful study of Melville (a man who, he claims, and I must agree, is later ruined by his re-conversion to Christianity), and it is also Olson who provides the poetry to render all future studies of it weak in comparison. C.L.R. James has made it the quintessential artistic representation of the impossible politics of American racialism. It has been made into film, into opera, and into a major Laurie Anderson performance piece. It has been borrowed by all forms of popular culture so ubiquitously that its characters are a shorthand for specific forms of madness, a fit echoing of Melville's own use of master Shakespeare's characters. The conflation of Melville the author with the narrator of the story—call him Ishmael (for now)—inevitably has encouraged psychoanalytic studies, perhaps most prominently Michael Rogin's densely layered argument concerning the family fortune of the Melville clan and the political economy of a country on the brink and in the aftermath of civil war. The influence of the book on one of Melville's own descendants has been so pronounced that he has named himself Moby, and has created ambient music reminiscent of the ocean. It is, in other words, a great temptation, a book to be reckoned with by anyone who wants to think about American experience.

I have my own temptations when it comes to *Moby-Dick*. I am interested in loneliness, and among its many themes *Moby-Dick* is a book about loneliness—the loneliness of Ahab, but for me, above all, the loneliness of the person, whoever he is, who says, “Call me Ishmael.” Who is Ishmael? For me, this is the most important question to ask if we are to think about the lonely self, this strange self that is beyond itself. The “who” of this question centers our thinking about the ends of loneliness—is there a “who” to whom we may repair, an identity that is able to settle us, a place for our placelessness, a home in the world for the lonely? In the end such a question is unavoidably a metaphysical one, but the sub-sub of the Sub-Sub, the pale consumptive usher of Melville’s grammar school, inherits these questions, if not the earth, if not the sea. A part of that inheritance is the figure who shadows Ishmael, another member of Ahab’s crew, Pip, the cook’s assistant, privy to the secret knowledge of the deepest thought-diver whose own secrets are hopelessly entangled with this question, and whose claims on an answer to the question may lead us to a new way to understand the lonely self in America.

In one of the most recent studies of *Moby-Dick*, Eyal Peretz also asks “Who is Ishmael?” and presents his own, startlingly original answers.

Moby-Dick is the narrative of Ishmael, the single survivor and sole witness to a horrendous disaster at sea in which all his friends were killed and brought to an early, stoneless and unmarked grave. As if wanting to share his friends’ destiny, he has left his given name at sea and has adopted the Biblical name Ishmael, thus indicating his abandonment and loss. From now on he wishes to be called Ishmael and not by his given name, which remains forever unknown. The story we are about to hear is his testimony, and it is the testimony of a survivor.²

Yet this is not all. Peretz notes that Ishmael is a school teacher, a depressed person, and that he is drawn to sea by a strange attraction to the whale itself, this time choosing a whaler as his boat. Moreover, he is anonymous for reasons that touch deeply on the tale that Melville is trying to tell.

“Call me Ishmael.” So he addresses the reader. And then he tells a tale. But, Peretz asks us, his readers, what is the tale Ishmael is seeking to tell? Here things begin to get complicated, for the tale is told by someone who is employing a kind of “splitting” address, a narrative where the seaman’s yarn is joined to testimony concerning a disaster, where fable is joined to witnessing. We readers are enjoined to believe this story, to accept its reality while knowing of its fabulous character. Monstrous fable is joined to what Ishmael insists is independent testimony in order to establish the great truth of the story.³ This ambiguous structure of address, Peretz tells us, ought to force us to reconsider the meaning of those opening words. “The opening thus says: either my name is Ishmael and you should call me by my name; or this is not my given name, but one called for by the conventions of fiction; or it is my name, carefully chosen, and in order to explain why I chose it I have to tell you my life’s story; or, since I am an abandoned human and feel like a disowned son, I call upon you, the readers, to adopt me and call me by this name so that I won’t be alone any more.”⁴ (This last suggestion would also imply that we readers form a lost tribe, that we are disowned and abandoned, and that we are seeking some form of redemption by listening to the narrator of this book.)⁵

Peretz moves on to consider how this complex form of address precludes the likelihood of final meanings, and hence to consider how this novel leads readers from questions of meaning to questions concerning the relationship of power to authority. What is launched with Ishmael’s desire to go to sea is a series of crises of authority in which the story of the whale as “the white event” overwhelms and interrupts any attempt to reassemble prior meanings. The whale enables revolutions, the sort of transformations where nothing will remain the same, but at a cost that will be experienced by the survivor of the encounter with the whale as a shattering of his identity. So we may call him Ishmael, but that begs the question of who he is and who he has been. Thus Ishmael’s injunction to call him by that name may itself be understood as a demand or plea that we help him evade the ghost of his former self.

The possibilities outlined by Peretz advance our understanding of *Moby-Dick* substantially. But there is a significant path left partly unexplored by him—how could there not be? The novel, is, after all, infinitely large—a path that opens a different but connected perspective on the fact of shattered identity and its role in the unfolding of a sense of self, a perspective intimately connected to the terrific loneliness of the protagonist of the novel. Where to begin? We may note that Ishmael's occupation of schoolteacher gives him special powers to impart lessons of the sea, both factual and moral, to those who choose to listen to him. (Peretz, much later in his analysis, discusses at length Ishmael's attempts to provide pedagogic authority for the tale he witnesses.) In this sense Ishmael could also be imagined as the "metaphysical professor" who accompanies in thought all those who gaze out to sea.⁶ (C1) If it is to be Ishmael's life story that he tells, though, it is strangely abridged, for we know very little of him when we are introduced to him, and nothing of his past experience other than as a country schoolmaster who has had a rough transition to becoming a sea-man.

However, while we learn little of his past experience, in the same passage we learn something of his genealogy. Ishmael gestures toward a distinguished family tree, commenting on how hard it is for some to adjust to the lowly status of sea-man. "It touches one's sense of honor, particularly if you come of an old established family in the land, the Van Rensselaers, or Randolphs, or Hardicanutes."⁷ (C1) While the Van Rensselaers were a distinguished family, and Hardicanute a Swedish king, of particular interest is the reference to the Randolphs, who are one of the oldest and most distinguished Virginia names, the family of Thomas Jefferson. It built its fortune from the labor of slaves. To imagine oneself a Randolph suggests that one is a slaveholder. So Ishmael comes from a distinguished family. But the slippery language suggests that he may not. Moreover, in the very next paragraph he also asks "Who ain't a slave?"

Another clue. Peretz mentions the fact of Ishmael's name. In the Bible Ishmael was the first-born son of Abraham, not conceived with Sarah, his wife, but with Hagar, his slave. When in

her barren years Sarah conceived Isaac, Ishmael and Hagar were sent into exile. For Peretz, the connotations of banishment and abandonment loom large in this name. Moreover, etymologically Ishmael means “God will hear.”⁷⁸ In this sense, the word incorporates the notion of call or address. Peretz emphasizes the excess of meaning to be found in any call, that is to say, how any call overrides its meaning by virtue of its very form. He writes, “It is as if language is first of all an address and only secondarily a statement of meaning....”⁷⁹ It is as if, as Giambattista Vico insisted in his *New Science*, all language is first sung, and only later spoken. “Call me Ishmael” thus could be read as: “Call me a call,” and as an imperative, “Call this call,” “Sing me my song,” or “You must sing this song with me.” In these words Ishmael anticipates the song of Whitman, but the song is to be a writing of the disaster, sung by the entire crew.

The call is also a calling, the desire for a vocation: Ishmael goes to sea in a direct attempt to shake off one self and to assume another through the vocational acceptance of a calling. The story that is his to tell is the story of his acceptance of the vocation of sea-man, of sojourner to the sea. But while he will tell us this tale, it is not one of redemption, even as it assumes the form of a conversion from one life to another. The conversion itself is to assume the most complicated and devilish form, for what is to be born again is not a soul redeemed, nor, despite the inner turn it takes, a self-reliant self. Another way of putting the matter is to ask the question: Ishmael becomes a sea-man, but what was he before? And yet another question: when did he become a sea-man? When is Ishmael’s moment of conversion?

God will hear. What will he hear? It is a peculiarity of the novel that upon the departure of the *Pequod* to sea Ishmael seems to disappear, or at least gradually fade, into the role of narrator. Sometimes the events to which he is supposedly witness seem impossible for him to have observed. Occasionally he is an actor in the tale that he narrates. This too is a clue. Among the curiosities of this book, the place of Ishmael as a witnessing narrator is especially curious. First, there is the question of Melville’s authorial license—he seems to place Ishmael as a witness to crucial

scenes throughout the novel, allows him to hear the spoken thoughts of other characters, and makes him a seemingly constant presence at the key turns of plot and conversation. Of course, how else is one to tell the tale? We may imagine that within the confines of such a Patagonian crew there is an infinite number of stories to be told, and we may even imagine that that Ishmael has only witnessed one iteration of the story. But what happens if we were to press the point, namely that this person we are to call Ishmael is, as Peretz reminds us, *witnessing* events, providing testimony? In that case the omnipresent narrator is not a possibility. So we must ask, how is it that Ishmael is present at certain scenes that only a witness could describe?

This question concerning the staging of the drama of *Moby-Dick* turns out to be crucially important. When we reflect on the confined geography of the *Pequod*, it is clear that for certain of the scenes Ishmael records he would in fact need to be present in or near the captain's quarters or the quarterdeck. For instance, while it would be easy enough to reconstruct the hierarchy of the cabin table without being present, the specific details of the presentation of food and the conversation of the mates and harpooners, as well as the details concerning Dough-Boy, the steward, would need to be provided by an eyewitness. (C34) (To suggest that Ishmael might have asked some of the diners what they did at dinner table is not credible. He is, after all, a *witness*, not a journalist.)

As another instance of Ishmael's mysterious witnessing, we may ask who is present during the conversation between Ahab and Stubb. (C29) This is the moment when Ahab is restlessly walking the deck in the middle of the night. Stubb "came up from below" to request that Ahab muffle the noise of his peg-leg with some wadding. The famous confrontation—Ahab calls Stubb a dog ("Down dog, and kennel!")—is told from the perspective of a third party. Who is this witness? In yet another instance, the crucial confrontation between Starbuck and Ahab occurs in the cabin, also needing a witness. (C109) And finally, we have the moving and startling conversation between Ahab and Pip in the confines of the cabin as well. Who could possibly be witnessing this conversation? (C129)

All these crucial conversations occur either in the captain's cabin, in the main cabin, or on the quarter deck immediately above those cabins and the mates' quarters. These quarters are in the stern of the ship, which also contains the captain's hold, whence emerged Ahab's secret team on the day of the first lowering. (C48) Moreover, the aft compartment is where the harpooners, as opposed to the men at sea, are lodged. (C33) The aft portion of the ship is also the location of the ship's galley, the place where could be found Pippin, or Pip, the person whom Ishmael describes as the most insignificant member of the crew, but the one to whom something most significant happens. (C93)

Consider Pip. Pip is in fact depicted as the least of all the sailors aboard the *Pequod*, the most isolated of that crew of isolatoes, tragically gone mad after he floats for too many hours upon an open sea with no hope of rescue. Ishmael tells us that prior to his abandonment Pip was bright and tenderhearted and young, that he hailed from Connecticut, a tambourine player and a free man. On the *Pequod* he is a ship-keeper, that is, one who is not assigned to work the boats, but to assist the cook and perform other menial chores. But he is assigned as a temporary replacement rower on second mate Stubb's whale boat, a position he takes with great reluctance, as he fears whales. On his second trip out he entangles himself in the line, causing it to be cut and hence for Stubb to lose a whale. After that first mishap Stubb tells Pip, "Stick to the boat, Pip, or by the Lord, I wont pick you up if you jump, mind that. We can't afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama." This threat to Pip's freedom, while satirical on Stubb's part, is truly frightening to Pip, since he appreciates what Stubb does not—that any black man is compelled to think this thought as part of his everyday experience in anticipation of Congressional passage of the Fugitive Slave Act.

Ishmael describes Pip's first fate, his descent into madness after falling out of Stubb's boat, as a consequence of his belief that he has been truly and totally abandoned, just as Stubb had warned that he would be.

By the merest chance the ship had at last rescued him; but from that hour the negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather, carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wondering from all mortal reason; man comes at last to that celestial thought, which to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (C93)

So when Pip falls from the boat a second time he knows himself to be truly lost (even though it turns out that his abandonment is not a deliberate act by Stubb, but a tragic oversight). And so, it seems, his descent into madness. But Pip's self-knowledge and self-loss, we may come to learn, are both a part of a complicated mystery.

Ishmael's portrait of Pip emphasizes, prior to his abandonment, his pleasant, genial, jolly brightness. Yet Ishmael also insists on Pip's brilliance, his exemplary character, his depth as a human being. In predicting Pip's second and final fate, Ishmael suggests that "what was temporarily subdued in him, in the end was destined to be luridly illumined by strange wild fires, that fictitiously showed him off to ten times the natural luster with which in his native Tolland County in Connecticut, he had once enlivened many a fiddler's frolic in the green; and at melodious even-tide, with his gay ha-ha! had turned the round horizon into one star-belled tambourine."

What is Pip's second fate? "I look; you look; he looks; we look; ye look; they look," he says in "The Doubloon." (C99) This recitation of the conjugation of the verb "to look" presents a strong contrast to the idea of seeing—we look, we do not necessarily see. Pip looks at the doubloon that Ahab nailed to the mast and sees with his intensified sight that it is "the navel" of the ship. He notes that once nailed to the mast, the doubloon cannot be

unscrewed without the ship itself falling apart. So it must stay, eventually to go to the bottom of that ocean where, Ishmael has reported, Pip in his own descent has been granted a wisdom of madness. (The doubloon itself will not be recovered until the day of resurrection.) Pip's madness, in his descent, takes the form of a concentrated focus so intense as to result in his losing a sense of himself, a sort of ecstasy. The intense concentration of Pip's madness has everything to do with his repetition of the conjugation of the verb "to look." This repetition of the verb with its latent imperative form—look, look!—implicitly urges us to think how we may use words to declare our knowledge of the world while also showing the hopelessness of all our attempts, spoken from a place of madness that Ishmael and Ahab both recognize to contain a reality larger than what we are prepared to accept if we are to remain sane. (The possibility of healing that is suggested in the dialogue of Pip and Ahab, in which their pairing may serve to repair both, the hope that each could be re-membered by each other, must be refused by Ahab in the name of his obsession with the white whale, his lost limb, his lost membership in the world of men. Ahab's narrow vision propels him to his tragic fate, whereas Pip's will send him elsewhere.)

Pip's name itself bears yet another clue. His name, as Ishmael notes, is the nickname of Phippen, and one meaning of the word pip is seed, so Pip may be thought of as being the seed of an apple, the heart of that which is the original temptation, and the original sin, the knowledge that will drive humanity out of paradise. The *OED* is instructive on another point as well—Pip is also a shortened version of "peep," a word which has among its meanings "to look." Pip also means the black mark that appears on playing cards and dice, giving the name an element of chance. Pip's mad looking encompasses those on board the *Pequod*. He may be thought of as the looker, the peeper, the secret witness to all events, deeply sensitive to the contingency of the event itself. (There are no great expectations for this Pip.)

Pip's madness is not exactly the same as that of Shakespeare's fools, though like the fool of Lear he imparts great wisdom to whoever will listen, especially to Ahab, the king of evil signification.

When Ahab sees poor mad Pip berating his absent self, he is touched to the heart, as he is untouched by any other. He makes Pip his constant companion in the captain's cabin until the moment he goes to his final confrontation with the white whale. Ahab admits that his love of Pip, even more than his love of Starbuck, is the last barrier he must surmount to confront the whale. His love of Starbuck is born of one identity—that of the father and husband: his love of Pip is born of another—that of a common abjection. He recognizes how Pip's deep sympathy balances him, distracting him from his monomania, and thus putting at risk his ultimate goal. When he prepares to leave Pip, he explains, "There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing of my malady. Like cures like, and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health." (C129) Pip protests, urging Ahab to use "poor me for your one lost leg; only tread upon me sir; I ask no more, so I remain a part of ye." Pip's recourse to the use of the first person here is a sign of his possible healing, his hope to return to some integration of his self with another. Pip's absence becomes Ahab's presence, the way Ahab is able to begin to gain perspective on his monomania. But because he is more wedded to his whale than to his life, Ahab must leave Pip, leave him alone, more alone than any living soul on the *Pequod*, deserted first by Stubb, and now not only by Ahab, but by himself. Upon Ahab's final departure, Pip says, "Here this instant he stood; I stand in his air—but I'm alone. Now were even poor Pip here I could endure it, but he's missing. Pip, Pip!" (C129) Hence Pip finally and forever abandons his use of the first person. How more alone can anyone be than to be missing himself as he stands in the air of another? This doubly absent self is yet another clue, for we may ask, who is speaking here? Pip is gone, who speaks in his place?

There can be no underestimating Charles Olson's contribution to our larger understanding of *Moby-Dick*—his discovery that the second draft of it was written after Melville read *King Lear*. This evidence firmly supports the idea of the truth-telling fool. When Pip loses his mind, he paradoxically achieves a strange objectivity, a third person perspective not uncommon to Shakespeare's fool,

a position from which he can comment upon the cruel ironies of the unfolding tragedy. But his comments are less about Ahab his king than they are about this other loss of self in the face of the white event. Moreover, Melville provides in Pip what Shakespeare does not provide for his fool—an explanation of the genesis of his madness in abandonment. (In that sense, if Pip indeed be a fool, he may be closer to Tom of Bedlam, the heroic Edgar, than to Lear's constant companion.)

Pip anticipates Ishmael's fate, to float alone, abandoned every bit as thoroughly as Pip himself was. Is Ishmael's entire narrative as mad as Pip's? As wise? Ishmael tells the tale, the lone survivor. We may imagine him as Peretz seems to imagine him, telling this tale in the streets of Martha's Vineyard, wandering the taverns of Manhattan, urgently pressing his narrative upon passersby, chagrined by their indifference, by their glancing recognition that Ishmael may be, like Pip in the end, mad.

Ishmael has a secret. What is it?

Pip is first abandoned at sea after being assessed as having a worth precisely one-thirtieth the value of a whale. This observation is a great catalyst for the subsequent shattering of his mind. Stubb's enunciation of the power of capital to reckon worth, underlines the all-too-present potential for Pip's descent into chattel status, the possibility of being placed on shore somewhere like Alabama, as opposed to his native Connecticut. As we have already noted, Pip's worth is determined by his "lay." Famously, Ishmael is the one who undergoes a protracted bargaining session with the owners of the *Pequod* in "The Ship" concerning the lay he is to receive for the voyage, a comical passage concerning the worth of a man. (C16) Prepared to sell his services, Pip, like all the other sailors, must sell himself for the length of his passage on the whaling boat. And if he is already owned, what is to prevent him from being sold?

The Hobbesian formulation of the relationship of worth to price is a root dynamic that is played out fully in *Moby-Dick*. Beyond the hubris of Ahab, underwriting his madness yet apart from it, is the constant calculation of worth that exists in complementary tension with the unfathomable value of the interior

life of the lonely self. The attempt to present equivalent values reduces the members of the crew to interchangeable parts of an infernal machine. It also intensifies the relationships that exist among the crew members as they strive to join together in a common project so as to increase the worth of each and every one, or, put negatively, to escape the harsh valuation of a failed voyage. So like Pip, Ishmael believes himself to be threatened with the possibility of slavery. Like Pip, Ishmael is a peeper, narrating events that could only be observed from a particular position on the quarter deck of the *Pequod*. Like Pip, Ishmael is cast away at sea for a day and night, only fortuitously picked up by the *Rachel* as that ship seeks out its lost crew member. Like Pip, Ishmael is a self at a loss, brilliant and bright, a Connecticut man who has become a New Yorker of the heart no doubt, someone who imagines that upon the sea his lay will not be counted separately from the lay of others.

Let me say it: the engine of *Moby-Dick* is the fact that Ishmael is Pip. The shattered identity of the narrator who demands or suggests or pleads that we call him Ishmael is that which is inhabited by the least significant member of the crew of the *Pequod*, Pip. It is Pip who alone survives to tell the tale, cook's assistant assuming the identity of an imaginary seaman, an insignificant peeper passing with a new identity. It is Pip who is the silent witness to the most important as well as the most trivial events on board the ship. It is Pip who demands that we call him Ishmael and claims to be a seaman, Pip who imagines himself repelled by the black church he is stumbling into, Pip who claims at first to be repelled by the blackness of his eventually beloved Queequeg. It is Pip reporting on Pip's descent to the bottom of the ocean, Pip describing how *he* saw God's foot on the loom. Only Pip can provide witness to Pip's experience.

All of these incidents in the retelling of the tale assume an ironical, or perhaps even gothic cast. This *post hoc* identity can easily be understood as simply serving the cook's assistant as a good disguise as he observes the activities of others, as from his lowly post he imagines a more elevated station for himself, as he is compelled into service on Stubb's boat, as his personal experience of

the white event drives him to the dissolution of his very self, and finally as he becomes the closest confidant to the most important personage on the ship. The dancing, tambourine-playing, bright and brilliant artist has the sensitivity to describe in detail the ongoing drama of the *Pequod*, and in being a castaway anticipates the final fate of the crew, who will eventually come to see what he has seen, the deepest depths of the sea.

Who is Pip? Let us imagine him to be as Ishmael suggests, brilliant, but let us imagine something more, perhaps something like this: a first son of a famous man, a child of the coupling of master and slave, who takes the name Ishmael because that is who he is—the lost son, bastard brother, founder of the lost tribe (even if only of the all-one of himself), neglected, first-born elder of the much-beloved legitimate son, black child of Randolph family miscegenation, he who has another tale to tell of the Patagonian crew of the counter-biblical, demonic, and doomed *Pequod*.¹⁰

If we imagine Pip to be Ishmael we may be able to imagine something more—the Ur-text of an American self at a loss, shattered by the tragedy of its own unraveling, unable to cope with the desperate knowledge that every self may be bought or sold, and that every measure can be reduced to the common denominator of price. Then the tale yields yet another lesson, for Pip tells us: To be lonely in America is to be black, and brilliant, constantly in danger of being bought and sold, rooted in the deepest genealogy of power and loss, and secret witness to a catastrophe that only deepens over time.



Peretz explains that to grasp the fullest meaning of *Moby-Dick* requires us to understand the fabulous character of the disaster in “the enigmatic realm of the white event of address.”¹¹ Ishmael’s encounters with whiteness—of the whale, of Ahab, of the cries and shouts that he voiced and that blended with the voices of the rest of the crew into a white noise—give expression to an irresolvable enigma of identity in the face of the catastrophe that shatters all possibility of knowing. This catastrophe is

no less than a recognition of the overwhelming sense of life in the face of its destruction. This encounter demands our complete response. "This wounding call through which the 'me' discovers, ashamed, its living nudity is at the same time a singularizing call and that which dispossesses me, and being exposed to it means that I both have to respond to it, call it by name, and be responsible to it, although I do not know what it wants from me. I also have the task of responding to who I am in front of it, that is, to justify my existence, my life, which is exposed to its judgment."¹² In the end, this responsibility and the impossibility of its resolution constitute the subject matter of the modern novel. He writes,

This event's fabulous nature should not be understood as offering some escapist fantasy from reality, for we have seen that the white event as the origin of the fabulous is also a disastrous, traumatic event. The collapse of the "I" involved in this event is a wounding devastation which destroys the "I's" familiar and stable world. It is thus that the fabulous, the monstrous, and the disastrous open up together and are entangled in the same moment of address, linguistically associated with the cry.¹³

This cry is all that we have in the face of the white event, it is what sets us in motion, it is the heart of the tragedy of modernity itself. This cry, which comes in the form of a call, separates the human from the non-human. It is a howling, the bare minimum below which we cannot fall and still remain human.¹⁴

It may well be that the collapse of the "I" in the face of the destruction of its world is the signature event of *Moby-Dick*. If that is the case, and if it also is the case that Pip is the narrator of this collapse, then his mysterious survival as Ishmael "to tell the tale" places him in a unique position to comprehend two intertwined political problems—the status of the African American individual in a culture of enslavement, on the one hand, and the universalizing of the dissolved identity of the castaway as the avatar of lonely being, on the other. In this sense, the undoing of the tragedy of African American experience remains the impossible project of American political thought, and it is the surrogate claim that all Americans must make upon the world, in the

end, to save us from ourselves. As we must accept the haunting of chattel slavery we must move forward to accept that we are haunted as well by the other genocides of identity and power that we have so far refused to account for or confront in our own time. For there is yet another comparison that is called forth by the experience of the lonely self of *Moby-Dick*, that of the ruined and mad chattel slave with the Müßelman of the concentration camp, both existing as alternative incarnations of the contemporary form that bare life—what Peretz refers to as “the living nudity”—takes.¹⁵

This bareness, this exposure to the nothingness of the white event is the unspoken, perhaps the unspeakable, experience of the lonely self *in extremis*. We are bidden to feel the heart of this darkness, and yet none of us can speak it. The call of the white event plays itself out in the secular history of the Western lands through the active witnessing of a history combined with a subjective stepping outside it, participating, wailing as a witness and yet prophetically imagining an overcoming of that very history. What Americans have a greater claim to have known the white event than those who experienced the Middle Passage? Torn from their families, transported in shackles to the western shore of Africa, thrown into the black hole of the hold of the slave ship, sailed across an unknown ocean to an unknown land, shattered both physically and psychically, wailing in the face of an unspeakable and interminable transit, these African immigrants of a different sort came to the eastern shores and gave decisive shape to culture. They prepared us to know the horror lurking here the malice at the root. The American sublime—for this is what we may call the experience of the white event—has come to haunt the entire world. If not the figures of Vietnamese, Filipinos, Mexicans, Japanese, Amerindians, in older adventures of empire, then the new figures of inmates in the colonial prison of Abu Ghraib crystallize the enormity of the white event into a single image, make those claims contemporary, and warn us of the larger catastrophe awaiting the empire we have forgetfully made.

How are we to comprehend Pip’s madness in reference to this

catastrophe? Pip floats to the bottom of the existential ocean to witness the expanse of godly wisdom. His descent allows him to see beyond reason, he is able to see behind the mask, “the unwarped primal world.”¹⁶ “So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wondering from all mortal reason; man comes at last to that celestial thought, which to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.” (C93) In his cosmic indifference, Pip is able to witness all, and to speak of God’s foot upon the loom. But what does he witness? He dissolves into an observer of himself, perfectly lonely. He is ever after a third person. “Where’s Pip?” he asks, not knowing this one thing. It is only as Ishmael that he is able to answer the question. That means that he is no longer Pip, that Pip, if present in bodily form, has been absorbed into this new and other identity. This is the schizoid split enacted by the lonely self, the operation that allows you to talk about yourself as though you weren’t even there. Pip is the terminus of the Cartesian self.

Pip disappears into this other self who wants to be called Ishmael. He is lost. But what does this mean? Is there a ghostly survival here, a haunting of Ishmael by Pip, and a haunting of all of American literature as a consequence? And if so, how can this literature of the marginal help to us in understanding the abject experience of this lonely, insignificant being? If we identify the emergence of Ishmael from the ruins of Pip, we may be able to locate another movement within a larger political narrative, another struggle over the fate of the lonely self at wit’s end. To put it in the form of a question, what happens when this most marginal of characters enters the heart of our experience as political subjects?



Perhaps I need to be reminded that Pip is a figment of the imagination of the writer Herman Melville, who would himself die in obscurity, with no one listening to his urgent and mad stories, his own expressions of an obscure desire to be rid of his lonely self. Pip is no one. Pip is alone, the “all-one,” the deep thought-diver, call him Ishmael, lost brother, invisible man, split,

schizoid, least body on the good ship *Pequod*, eyewitness to the white event, floating in the sea, clinging to the coffin of his one imagined friend, mad, lost, the lonely self. As we bear witness to him, we witness our own ghosts, our own lost and pitiful selves. Consider Pip. This is what it is to be lonely in America.

NOTES

¹The author wishes to thank Catherine Holland, Tess Taylor, Chip Turner, and Kim Townsend for thoughtful comments on earlier drafts.

²Eyal Peretz, *Literature, Disaster, and the Enigma of Power: A Reading of Moby-Dick* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 36.

³*Ibid.*, 37.

⁴*Ibid.*, 39.

⁵I have tried to suggest something similar to this view in an earlier foray into reading *Moby-Dick*, but Peretz has done much more to clarify the matter by focusing so specifically on questions concerning the witnessing powers of Ishmael and their connection to Melville's authorial intent. See Thomas L. Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), Chapter One.

⁶All direct references to *Moby-Dick* are to specific chapters. C1 is Chapter One, etc. I use the University of California reissue of the Arion Press limited edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979). This text is based on the critical edition of *Moby-Dick* prepared for Northwestern University Press by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle. I use this text as well for its precise illustrations of the whaling ship provided by Barry Moser, which help illustrate the argument I wish to make concerning the identity of Ishmael.

⁷My thanks to Tess Taylor for sharing with me her insights into the history of Randolph family and in particular for pointing out this important passage.

⁸*Op. cit.*, Peretz, 131-132, notes 4 and 7.

⁹*Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰We may also note that this shape shifting in identity becomes a more explicit theme in Melville's *The Confidence Man*.

¹¹*Op. cit.*, Peretz, 87.

¹²*Ibid.*, 86.

¹³*Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴For a more lengthy discussion of the howl, see Thomas L. Dumm, "Wolfman and the Fate of Democratic Culture: Four Fragments," *Journal of Law, Culture and Humanities*, 1.2 (Spring, 2005).

¹⁵On bare life, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) and *Transcripts of Auschwitz* (New York: ZONE Books, 2001).

¹⁶Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary*, 34. The desire of Ahab to strike behind