

On Democracy of Digression: Chapter 30 of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

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This essay focuses on chapter 30 of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, one of the novel's shortest chapters. It contrasts bigness, destiny and Captain Ahab's authoritarian abuse of power with smallness, free will, and digression, the democratic virtues portrayed in *Moby-Dick* mostly through their absence but also, in chapter 30, by their presence in the form of a pipe that Captain Ahab smokes on deck and is then compelled to toss overboard so that *The Pequod* might complete its star-crossed and disastrously foreshadowed voyage.

Out of the trunks the branches grow; out of them the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters.

— Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (224)

The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which man ought always to compose.

— Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne, May 1851 (567)

- 1 In a novel addicted to assonance, Ahab is inseparable from anguish in *Moby-Dick*. He is most himself when "Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock" (160). His very face reflects the act of crucifixion. He is in so many ways scarred. His pain lingers in the body left intact by the white whale, and his pain is there where his leg once was. He is a man in thrall to monomania, who with a ship full of whale oil, a ship full of profit, chooses the path of destruction, refusing to help another ship with a man overboard and only irritated by the merry making on the deck of *The Bachelor*, so indifferent are its captain and crew to the savage need to hunt Moby-Dick. Ahab is profound in his pain. Those with less pain cannot compete, much like Starbuck cannot dissuade Ahab from reaching the final terminus of his predetermined and often predicted tragedy, in so many ways "the fulfillment of an evil already presaged" (377). Starbuck has nothing so sublime as Ahab's anguish to offer, nothing so engrossing or heroic. Anguish is *Moby-Dick's* alpha and omega, the philosopher's stone from which the novel is quarried. Anguish is also deceptive in *Moby-Dick*, a pathology of Ahab's that is referenced in the novel, and challenged by the brief, vivid instances of happiness or anti-anguish that are the sunlight to the book's countless long shadows and bottomless murky depths.
- 2 The *Pequod's* linear journey becomes an analogue to Ahab's anguish. It begins in bad omens and in Isaiah's stark prophecies. As Ahab exerts his will over the craft,

the pleasant Dickensian rhythms of the novel's opening chapters—its amble from Manhattan to New Bedford to Nantucket, its evocation of adventure, of the seaside inn, of chowders made of clams and chowders made of cod—dissolves slowly into another kind of narrative. Eccentric, neo-Shakespearean dialogue intrudes on conventional (nineteenth-century) narrative prose, and manic foreshadowing leads into the breathless, terrifying motions of the final chase. The *Pequod* pushes and pushes to the resting place Ahab had set for it before departing Nantucket, gentle Ishmael having vanished and the ship's momentum taking over until in a foreshortened moment the captain is killed and the *Pequod* sinks. By the end, the novel's narrative velocity is intense to the point of cruelty. Forward, forward—finish. This is Ahab's anguish embedded in the story told about him. "Call me Ishmael," the novel says, almost casually, but this imperative is quickly overtaken by Ahab's far more urgent, far more fearsome imperatives. Take me to the whale! And taken he is over many miles of endless unforgiving ocean, although those taken with him are all taken unwillingly to their ruin. They must be tempted or coerced into self-destruction. Futile as their resistance is, it furnishes a map of the roads not taken and of all the homeward voyages unsound and unfulfilled.

- 3 Another aspect of narrative in *Moby-Dick* is not exactly anguish but something closer to *terribilità*, and this is the novel's hugeness, its comprehensiveness, its massive scope. It is clearly an epic book about an epic journey, which contains within it books of prophecy, books of philosophy, books of theology, travel books, books within books (ch. 54, "The 'Town-Ho's Story'"), and books modeled satirically on scientific treatises. With some self-deprecation and much genuine ambition, *Moby-Dick* tries to outdo those books that codify and explain the natural world—the universe, one might almost say. *Moby-Dick's* ambition resembles Ahab's ambition, the will to swim through libraries so that this knowledge can be possessed and pinned down and made subordinate to the intellect of the author and of the reader. This hunt is anguished as well. The hunt for knowledge is painful because as rapidly as the facts pile up, as deftly as the whale lore can be analyzed, the solidity of the fact is perpetually giving way in *Moby-Dick* to the furious mystery of collecting facts.
- 4 Then, at last, the infinite facts of nature, coupled with the ungraspable facts of human nature, take their revenge. This they do in the novel's final sentence, which reads: "Now small fowl flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (469). After all the explanation, all the meticulously gathered erudition, all the flourishes of scholarly intellect, *Moby-Dick* ends in the erasure of the story it purports to tell. It ends with Ahab silenced, with the whale invisible, uncaught—without science, without comprehension, without anything. First the sea is sullen and then it is brutally, aggressively indifferent, because it is brutally, aggressively itself—as it has always been. This famous final sentence implies something far more horrifying and agonizing than the sinking of the *Pequod*. The quest has ended not so much in tragedy as in a timeless, story-less nothingness—in epic dissolution. Yet even the novel's last sentence is alive and not quite with nothingness but with the typical

Melvillian precision; *small fowl*; *yawning gulf*; *great shroud*; *five thousand years ago*. Precision and detail—and through them the stuff of story—trail this massive tale of disaster to the very end.

I'll Smoke No More



René Magritte. "The Tune and Also the Words." 1964. Gouache over traces of graphite on cream wove paper. Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection. Art Institute Chicago.

Photo by Wiebke Kartheus

- 5 If Ahab's agony and *Moby-Dick's* bigness are intertwined, a problem arises with the many instances of smallness in Melville's novel. By his very nature as a writer, Melville pays extraordinary, meticulous attention to detail. No detail is too microscopic for his consideration: the sea's sullen indifference is not Melville's or narrator-Ishmael's.^[1] The gargantuan size of *Moby-Dick* actually accentuates the reality of small things, one of which is chapter 30, "The Pipe," a mere four paragraphs of prose devoted to an object that is itself small and thus the mirror opposite of a whale. (René Magritte's 1929 painting of a pipe, *The Treachery of Images*, which bears the inscription *Ceci n'est pas un pipe* similarly exploits the prosaic, humdrum smallness of a pipe as the subject of artistic consideration, something that is seemingly unworthy of serious art and might not qualify as art for this very reason.)^[2] Small in size, a pipe is small in other ways. It is not a harpoon or an instrument for cutting up whales. It is neither tool nor weapon, neither a means to kill nor to derive profit from what one kills. A pipe is a modest invitation to pleasure, to meditation, to diverting time from its rapacious flow. Or it may be an invitation to human fellowship, friendship, conversation—to telling or to listening to

stories. A more locally American association with the pipe is with peace. A stereotypical prop of the ship's captain, a pipe belongs just as easily to hearth and home. Why does Melville train the reader's eye on something as small, simple and cozy as a pipe in chapter 30 of *Moby-Dick*, putting the pipe on par—chapter-wise—with “The Whiteness of the Whale” (ch. 42) or “The Try-Works” (ch. 96) or “The Chase—Third Day” (ch. 135). What is little chapter 30 doing in a great book like *Moby-Dick*?

- 6 Chapter 30 is best approached as the focal point within a suite of three chapters, each of them quite short. The first is chapter 29, “Enter Ahab; and to Him, Stubb,” and chapter 31, “Queen Mab.” (ch. 32, “Cetology,” is an enormous, faux-scientific excursus on the history and the challenge of thinking about whales.) In chapter 29, Stubb encounters Ahab on deck at night, is castigated by Ahab (“Down, dog, and kennel!”), objects to being castigated, and is castigated more vehemently for having objected (“then be called ten times a donkey, and a mule, and an ass, and begone, or I'll clear the world of thee!”) (113). After this, the chapter chronicles Stubb's agitated inner monologue. Chapter 31 continues with Stubb. He comes to Flask not with a report of being humiliated by Ahab. He describes a strange dream about Ahab kicking him with his ivory leg. Stubb kicks back until a merman intervenes and instructs Stubb to “account his [Ahab's] kick honours” (116). Flask calls Stubb's dream “foolish.” Stubb disagrees. He believes the dream “has made a wise man of me.” As Stubb and Flask talk, a whale is sighted, putting their conversation to an abrupt end, though not before Stubb has penetrated to the fundamental truth of the *Pequod's* voyage. He says to Flask: “A white whale—did ye mark that, man? Look ye—there's something special in the wind. Stand by for it, Flask. Ahab has that that's bloody on his mind. But, mum; he comes this way” (116). *Moby-Dick* has 135 chapters, too many for there to be any single turning point; but chapters 29–31 are a turning point—at the very least for Stubb, not that he does anything about the wisdom he has gained from Ahab's solipsistic sadism or from his dream about Ahab's ambiguous kicks.
- 7 An interruption breaks the arc of Stubb's realization. Dressed down by Ahab, Stubb goes off to brood and to dream and to contemplate. Having entirely forgotten about Stubb, Ahab goes off to smoke his pipe unperturbed. Chapter 30 tells us that Ahab had been enjoying his pipe recently—smoking in the evening “as had been usual for him of late.” He sits smoking on a “tripod of whale bones” (114). True to his biblical predecessor (King Ahab), the *Pequod* captain's tripod makes him a monarch, “a Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea, and a great lord of Leviathans was Ahab” (114). In the chapter's third paragraph Ahab's thoughts are documented, self-referential as ever. First, “this smoking no longer soothes” (114). It is as if Ahab's body or his anguished soul is resisting the pipe —“Hard must it go with me if thy charm be gone! Here I have been unconsciously toiling, not pleasuring—aye, and ignorantly smoking to windward all the while; to windward, and with such nervous whiffs, as if, like the dying whale, my final jets were the strongest and fullest of trouble” (114). The smoke from his pipe is the smoke from the funeral pyre, Ahab likening himself to a dying whale. To smoke is to be in ignorance of the *Pequod's* actual voyage (ignorantly smoking) and it is to

be going in the wrong direction (smoking to windward). And so, the third paragraph of chapter 30 concludes, “What business have I with this pipe? The thing is meant for serenity, to send up mild white vapours among wild white hairs, not among torn iron-gray locks like mine. I’ll smoke no more—” (114).

- 8 Ahab’s pipe in chapter 30 anticipates Stubb’s pipe, to which he is much too attached to throw away. Stubb does not have Ahab’s self-mastery: Stubb’s insouciance explains his pipe smoking no less than his pipe smoking explains his insouciance. In narrator-Ishmael’s words, “I say this continual smoking must have been one cause, at least, of his peculiar disposition; for everyone knows that this earthly air, whether ashore or afloat, is terribly infected with the nameless miseries of the numberless mortals who have died exhaling it; and as in the time of cholera, some people go about with a camphorated handkerchief to their mouths; so, likewise, against all mortal tribulations, Stubb’s tobacco smoke might have operated a sort of disinfecting agent” (99). Hoping to protect himself, Stubb wears his comic (and ineffective) gallantry on his hat, where he keeps his pipe. He withdraws it “from his hatband, where he always wore it like a feather” (176). So bravely—or passively—unfazed is he by the world around him that he can be seen “calmly smoking his pipe in the rain” (180). He smokes his pipe when resting. He smokes his pipe when hunting whales.
- 9 By contrast, Ahab’s self-sought purpose requires him not to smoke. Serenity is impossible for him. It has been forbidden to “the scheming, unappeasable steadfast hunter of the white whale” (161). Given that Ahab had been smoking “of late,” there must be some tension in him. He is aging into white hair. He has wife and child on shore. He was not born a monster; he is a man of learning, intelligence, and eloquence; and he knows first-hand the power and ruthlessness of *Moby-Dick*. He seems to know, at least obliquely, that he is mad, a madman capable of reason and judgment but self-isolated from “pleasuring” and eager to transform his unconscious toil, the workings of his damaged psyche, into conscious toil, which, when he does, will complete his descent into full-blown madness. If chapters 29–31 reflect a turning point for Stubb, his acceptance that Ahab will treat him like a dog and clear the world of him, chapter 30 may well mark a turning point for Ahab, starting his unwavering commitment to the preconceived voyage. Chapter 30 concludes with Ahab’s decision. Its fourth paragraph reads: “He tossed the still lighted pipe into the sea. The fire hissed in the waves; the same instant the ship shot by the bubble the sinking pipe made. With slouched hat, Ahab lurchingly paced the planks” (114). In a few lines, he has gone from “a Khan of the plank” to a prisoner pacing the planks of the ship he commands. Of course, the prison he inhabits is one of his own making.
- 10 Chapter 30’s fourth paragraphs, with its 36-words, is a *Moby-Dick* in miniature. Ahab exerts control in the first sentence—“he tossed”—and his exertion of control is his pathology. His hat is slouched, askew. With his peg leg, he lurches on the moving ship, nervously pacing, agitated, ill at ease; and Ahab is the ship. His control and his spiritual sickness are one: they will subdue Stubb (they already have); they will subdue Starbuck; they will subdue Flask; they will subdue the crew

(this part is easy). The ship appears in restless motion, itself lurching toward its demolition—"the ship shot by." These four one-syllable words harmonize with the larger narrative. They are the whole point of the narrative. Yet the imagery Melville/narrator-Ishmael implants in this paragraph tugs in another direction as well. The pipe is still alight when Ahab heaves it into the sea, still alight in the enveloping darkness. Its fire "hissed in the waves," surviving via Melville's zeal for detail to generate a bubble before sinking into oblivion. Heedlessly, the ship rushes forward, while the extreme brevity of this chapter concentrates focus on the pipe. It is a punctuation mark of a chapter, a means of slowing the reader down, a smoking break in four paragraphs. The pipe had been a digression for Ahab just as chapter 30 ("The Pipe") is a digression for the novel as a whole. This is a digression that asserts itself, alerting the reader to the many counter-forces *Moby-Dick* establishes to its relentless linear narrative. The novel sanctifies digression as the narrative alternative to monomania and as the inverse of a journey destined for disaster. *Moby-Dick* pays repeated homage to the humanizing majesty of the digression. Remarkably, the ship's captain Ahab is the one who must reject his pipe. By doing so he elevates the pipe—smoking, reflection, digression—to an aspect of leadership or captainship, all the more poignant for being there so briefly and at the same time for being worthy of steadfast refusal.

- 11 In the spirit of digression, one might meander back from chapter 30 to the novel's beginning. Ishmael and Queequeg first meet over a pipe, though it is two-edged and initially perceived by Ishmael as a weapon. Queequeg took up "his tomahawk from the table, [and] examined the head of it for an instant, and then holding it to the light, with his mouth at the handle, he puffed out great clouds of tobacco smoke" (33). When the two become friends, they share a pipe, or because they share a pipe they become friends: "Soon I proposed a social smoke; and, producing his pouch and tomahawk, he [Queequeg] quietly offered me a puff. And then we sat exchanging puffs from that mild pipe of his, and keeping it regularly passing between us" (52). The pipe is a lever of domestic happiness, a means to an end that inverts (or suspends) Ahab's "intense bigotry of purpose" (130). Means and end are the same in "the condensed confidential comfortableness of sharing a pipe and blanket with a real friend" (57). Queequeg elevates the pipes to a vehicle not just of conviviality but of acceptance and tolerance (in Ishmael's judgment). He rescues a sailor from the sea and "that done, he put on dry clothes, lighted his pipe, and leaning against the bulwarks, and mildly eying those around him, seemed to be saying to himself—'It's a neutral, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians'" (59).
- 12 One might meander as well from chapter 30 to chapter 54, following the trail of pipe smoke in *Moby-Dick* all the way to Melville's notion of storytelling and perhaps even of literature itself. Chapter 54, "The Town-Ho's Story," changes location, leaving the *Pequod* behind, and it changes voice. It is an elaborate story narrated by Ishmael to an audience of friends at an inn in Lima, Peru. In this chapter, Ishmael's baroque language leaves no detail unmentioned, no bit of context excluded. The scene of Ishmael's storytelling is languorous to the point of caricature, a tale told "to a lounging circle of my Spanish friends, one saint's eve,

smoking upon the thick-gilt tiled piazza of the Golden Inn” (208). To smoke here is to want to tell and to listen to stories. To listen to stories is—potentially—to learn from them, not so much a distraction from life’s truer purposes as a reckoning with them. “The Town-Ho’s Story” is one of many embedded mini-stories in *Moby-Dick*, a technique Melville borrowed from Cervantes and Boccaccio, among others, from the early practitioners of the novel form. These mini-stories are very often parables or allegories or, put more simply, clues to a novel that is far too big to take in, a novel organized to overwhelm. But the reader must be open to these stories, unrushed and unfazed by a momentary departure from the inevitability of plot. The reader must be willing to pause over the lit pipe of literature and, unsure of the destination, unsure of the point, stand poised to learn what there is to learn from the unwinding, unfurling journey. That is the crooked path of wisdom.

- 13 And in wisdom lies felicity. *Moby-Dick* repeats and repeats the word *woe*. Coffins abound in this book. Doom lurks at every corner and at every narrative step forward, but tragedy’s wisdom is not *woe*. It is felicity, and felicity comes when perception *shifts* and the elements’ war against the hero reveals not so much the elements’ fanatical, insurmountable force as the appreciation of the happiness in reach when happiness is in reach. Such is Ishmael’s heroic and beautiful realization—“that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his concept of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country” (309). Interestingly, this list of objects that give us attainable felicity is mostly unobtainable at sea. On ship there is no wife, no bed (only a hammock), no saddle, no fire-side, no country. These are the objects Ishmael has learned to digress his way into loving or to digress his way into seeing for what they are. One could easily add one other object to Ishmael’s list of philosophical goods, his poem in seven nouns—a pipe. Well smoked, a pipe merges wisdom with felicity and felicity with wisdom. A small object, the pipe represents something big in *Moby-Dick*—big, precise and actual. So too does its absence after chapter 30 represent something big.

Digression and the Democratic Sensibility

- 14 *Moby-Dick* certainly has a political hue. It cannot avoid the ship-of-state metaphor, which it of course embraces. Its crew serves symbolic functions, allowing Melville to look at social hierarchy as it had instantiated itself in the early republic. *Moby-Dick* explores decision-making, which is one side of politics, and beyond decision-making it examines obedience, which is another side of politics. The question of power begets the question of legitimacy, obedience hanging in the balance. The fundamental concern of politics is the preservation of the polity, and, if preservation can be managed, the flourishing of the polity: the good state well governed. A less fundamental though not uncommon concern of politics is the potential for self-destruction (*Moby-Dick*’s story) and decision-making antithetical to a polity’s flourishing. The first way to read *Moby-Dick* as an inquiry into politics is to study Ahab’s character, his hold on his mates and his crew, his genius for

legitimizing a project that is suicidal for everyone involved. *Moby-Dick* has been profitably read as an anticipation of fascism and of modern dictatorship in general. Hitler had much in common with Ahab and Nazi Germany with the *Pequod*. Recapitulating the plot of *Moby-Dick*, Nazi Germany combined fanaticism with self-destruction. What enabled the self-destruction was the obedience Germans gave to Hitler, something *Moby-Dick* can help us to understand.^[3]

- 15 When it came to politics, Melville's preoccupation, however, was not with some premonition of fascism. It was with democracy. He was the descendant of Revolutionary War heroes. His brother was active in the affairs of the Democratic Party. His early novels, *Redburn* and *White Jacket* and *Mardi*, display many discussions of democracy—in theory and in practice. *Moby-Dick* was written in the shadow of the compromise of 1850 and of the Fugitive Slave Law. It may not be the one-to-one depiction of political configurations that Alan Heimert makes it out to be in his splendid essay, "*Moby-Dick* and American Political Symbolism," but Heimert uncovers a wealth of plausible ties between antebellum politics and the authoring of *Moby-Dick*. This second way of reading *Moby-Dick* as an inquiry into politics is to emphasize a particular American crisis, to which Melville was responding in real time: a rapidly expanding republic (the cannibalistic *Pequod*) riven by sectional and racial tension, increasingly extreme in its attitudes (Ahab and the whale) and inclining toward disaster (looming sectional strife). In this reading, democracy may be the mob on the *Pequod*—susceptible to Ahab's skillful manipulations—self-government by a *demos* too weak, too rough, too shortsighted to steer the ship of state into safe harbor. Or democracy may be a valuable enterprise and one that Ahab steals from his crew the way demagogues might have exploited the divisions and the rage of 1850–1851, wreaking havoc. Democracy may be too brutal, too strong for its own good, or it may be too fragile. These are the two separate lessons Melville might have spun from the democracy in his midst while composing *Moby-Dick*.
- 16 Chapter 30 opens out to a third reading of *Moby-Dick* and politics. Melville could be searchingly critical of American democracy: wherever he looked he saw hypocrisy and the lust for power and money. He was not sentimental about democracy or about American democracy, but was a democrat, and *Moby-Dick* may not only be a study of democratic failure, of impending civil wars, and of dictators and demagogues. *Moby-Dick* may also be a subtle affirmation of democracy, even though it is Ahab's book and a realization of the causal relationship between Ahab's anguish and the *Pequod's* splintering into nothingness. Democracy does not succeed with any of the novel's characters. Ishmael is taken in by Ahab. So is Queequeg. Stubb dreams himself into equating a kick from Ahab with an honor; it is a distinction to be kicked by the captain. Starbuck can justify assassinating Ahab. He just cannot pull the trigger: Starbuck equivocates, Ahab acts, turning his crew into the automatons of his iron will: "like machines, they dumbly moved about the deck, ever conscious that the old man's despot eye was on them" (380). Though all of the encountered ships' captains talk sense, none can talk sense into Ahab. He will not listen, and if democracy's affirmation is to be discerned in *Moby-Dick* it is not in the individual characters and

still less in its plot but in its myriad digressions, of which chapter 30 is such a fine specimen.

- 17 *Moby-Dick* is structured for digression. Two examples are the epigraph's mountain of citations and the big breaks in the narrative. The never-ending epigraphs are funny in their excess. They are all whale-centered, to be sure, and quite possibly the work of some monomaniac researcher, "this mere painstaking borrower and grub-worm of a poor devil," the sub-sub-librarian. Yet the grub-worm research reveals an unfathomable variety, rhetorical twists and turns, modulated angles of vision, changes of tone and tonality, leaps from country to country and from century to century in the writing about whales that has come down to us from antiquity.
- 18 Each epigraph digresses from the one before it, amiably, the way a friend might let the play of intellect lead the way in an unhurried conversation. This, and also this, and then this as well... . These are micro-digressions, and there are at least five macro-digressions in *Moby-Dick*: the digression away from Ishmael's perspective and from Ishmael's friendship with Queequeg; the digression from storytelling to speculation about whales and thick description of whaling; the digression from cetology to Ahab's final pursuit of Moby-Dick; the digression of the epilogue that posits life after the sinking of the *Pequod*; and the unseen digression whereby Ishmael survives the voyage, returns home and finds his way back to the novel's first sentence, "Call me Ishmael." Surely, these digressions say something about Melville's style of composition. He did not outline his novels before writing them. But he was perfectly capable, in *White-Jacket* and *Redburn*, of writing without digression, from start to finish. Big and small, the digressions of *Moby-Dick* are conscious and therefore integral to the novel.
- 19 Digressions do not tell us much about democratic procedure. Instead, they are a window into the democratic sensibility. Digressions validate free will by qualifying predestination or alleged predestination, thus validating deliberation. Hitler and the Nazis were addicted to neologisms involving the word *Schicksal*, destiny: *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of destiny), *Schicksalsentscheidung* (decision of destiny), *Schicksalskrieg* (war of destiny). Destiny set the course for Hitler with terrible consequences. Soviet communism similarly relied on a teleological theory of history, with laws and with a pre-determined beginning and a pre-determined end, to which all would be subject. By contrast, the democratic sensibility thrives when there is no destination, no law of human development and when the mind is open to digression.
- 20 Digression is also a method of dealing with variety, an incitement to variety, a proof of variety. Digression *is* variety, variety in action, and it may be that the capacity for digression and the capacity for compromise (to accept some degree of variety) are twinned. Only when he digresses from his fear of Queequeg, from his presupposition about this most foreign of foreigners, can Ishmael see for the first time a princely man and worthy companion. Ishmael must compromise with himself to get this far. He must digress from himself, but for Ishmael digression comes naturally, and he is anything but the ship's captain. Having digressed from

his shore life, he is the *Pequod's* impressionist poet of the mast-head, no less an artist of digression than of friendship—and not by accident the lone survivor and the skilled teller of the tale. Ahab is indeed the ship's captain and a man who happens to reject—on principle—"mankind's pondering repose of If" (358). He is aware of what digressions can validate and of their incompatibility with authoritarianism, demagoguery, monomania, and dictatorship. That is why he must throw his potential for serenity into the ocean still lit. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*.

Notes

[1] In "Ruthless Intimacy of Fiction," his valedictory statement about a life in literature, Philip Roth points to Melville as the writer who (together with Mark Twain) gave American literature the gift of detail. Roth notes "this passion for specificity, for the hypnotic materiality of the world one is in, is all but at the heart of the task to which every American novelist has been enjoined since Melville and his whale and Twain and his river: to discover the most arresting, evocative verbal depiction for every last American thing" (393).

[2] Melville and the graphic arts are commonly paired in Melville scholarship. The pairing tends to emphasize the dramatic and the sublime, rather than the miniature and the incidental. An excellent study of Melville and the sublime in painting is Wallace's *Melville and Turner*.

[3] Throughout the twentieth century, Melville was read in light of fascism and Bolshevism. F. O. Matthiessen devoted one book of his voluminous 1941 study, *American Renaissance*, to Melville, linking up Melville's capacity to see evil with the moral imperatives of twentieth-century politics and especially of anti-fascism (317–516). In his 1962 essay collection, Richard Chase made a case for Melville as a proto-liberal and therefore as a writer with anticipatory insight into the Cold War. Andrew Delbanco frames his 2006 critical study of Melville around September 11, bringing Melville the prophet of geopolitical evil into the twenty-first century.

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