

# A Fragment of the Never-Ending:

A Political Reading of *Moby-Dick*

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## Introduction

A political interpretation of his novels that advocates a criticism of American nationalism is one of the recent trends in Herman Melville studies. Opposing the reception of Melville in the Cold War era, in which his works, especially *Moby-Dick*, were accepted as enforcing the American nationalism, Melville studies have attempted to see in various representations in Melville's novels various critiques of standardized concepts, such as an American exceptionalism, which subtends American identity of exclusion mostly rooted in influential nationalistic discourses from the colonial period to the nineteenth century: "the first new nation," "Manifest Destiny," "errand into the wilderness," and so on<sup>(1)</sup>. In addition, according to the recent study by Donald E. Pease, such an exclusive intention can be seen in the War on Terror policy or the Homeland Security State (*New American Exceptionalism* 183–190).

This study also aims to contribute to such a trend; for a reading of *Moby-Dick* incites a political analysis as far as the "WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL" is related to the political events: "Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States" and "BLOODY BATTLE IN AFGANISTAN." In *Moby-Dick* these are presented together, like news headlines, or the bill of a play:

“Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States.”

“WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL.”

“BLOODY BATTLE IN AFGANISTAN.” (7 Italics in the original)

The first and third quotes are references to political events that were occurring concurrently. According to Harold Beaver, the “Grand Contested Election” is regarded as the one held in 1840, in which the Whigs and the Democrats competed fiercely against each other. Similarly, the “BLOODY BATTLE” refers to the first Anglo-Afghan war that took place in 1842, in the course of which “the British army was massacred” (Beaver 706–7). In light of the fact that Ishmael’s whaling is juxtaposed between these political events as “part of the grand programme of Providence” (*Moby-Dick* 7), it seems natural to interpret his voyage as a political event. Furthermore, before presenting the bill described above, the narrator in *Moby-Dick* has already declared “I always go to sea as a sailor” (6) and commented as follows:

For as in this world, head winds are far more prevalent than winds from astern (that is, if you never violate the Pythagorean maxim), so for the most part the Commodore on the quarterdeck gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecastle. He thinks he breathe it firsts; but not so. *In much the same way do the commonalty lead their leaders in many other things, at the same time that the leaders little suspect it.* (6–7 italics mine)

Melville’s Ishmael problematizes the sovereignty of the leader. The representative democracy is therefore the subject suggested by the first statement on the bill. While a discussion of a representative political system is identified as part of the “programme” for his voyage, it is important not to overlook Ishmael’s primary purpose, namely the whale: “Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity” (7). Hence, it can be said that to see the political in *Moby-Dick* is to focus on the true purposes of the narrator: the representative democracy and the whale.

It is also possible to see an additional implication to the Indians in the bill quoted above. The election of 1840 was, according to Beaver, “the first ‘rip-roaring’ campaign in U.S. history” (706), and the winner of this election, William Henry Harrison, the ninth president of the United States, “had helped open Ohio and Indiana to white settlement, twice defeating the Indian forces of Tecumseh” (706). At the same time, the first Anglo-Afghan war had been caused by the East India Company’s invasion of Afghanistan. Not only the British soldiers but also those from India were called up for this war, and many of them were killed in Kabul (United States 1997). While, in the first instance, Indian refers to Native Americans, in the second situation it refers to the people from India; what is common to these political events is the reference to Indians, and especially to the defeated Indians. These implications regarding “Indians” echo in a statement that touches on both Indians and whaling in Chapter 2 (“The Carpet-Bag”) of *Moby-Dick*. The narrator, Ishmael, states “my mind was made up to sail in no other than a Nantucket craft” (8), arguing as follows:

... , yet Nantucket was her [New Bedford’s] great original—the Tyre of this Carthage—the place where the first dead American whale was stranded. *Where else but from Nantucket did those aboriginal whalers, the Red-Men, first sally out in canoes to give chase to the Leviathan?* (8 italics mine)

By setting the departure point of Ishmael’s whaling in Nantucket, from where the “aboriginal whalers, the Red-Men,” that is, the Native Americans, still referred to as Indians at that time, departed for their whaling, this sentence articulates Ishmael’s whaling with the history of the Red-Men’s whaling. Ishmael is destined to board the whaling ship *Pequod*, which bears the name of an extinct tribe of Native Americans. In this sense, the “WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL” also conveys a sense of the Indian involvement.

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that the narrator, who presents this bill, is aware of his destiny: it should be recognized that the narrator is not just a character

in the story who does not know what will happen to him, but he is also the author of the story, and the sole survivor of the shipwreck that took place at the end of the voyage. From Eyal Peretz's categorization of the patterns evident in the narrative<sup>(2)</sup>, we are aware that there are several levels to the narration of *Moby-Dick*. This situation gives a circular form to the novel in that the narrator refers to his own destiny within the novel. However, what is in focus at this point is that the circular structure is not simply confined to the story itself, but it attempts to include external factors by addressing them as well. By situating his voyage within the history of Native American whaling practices, the narrator tries to present his voyage as a repetition of the previous history of whaling, and as one which is not about to end. Therefore, I do not argue that this repetition is comparable to Ahab's subjectivity as Spanos or Peretz contends. Rather, together with the analysis of the relationship between the representative political system and the whale, this study examines the subjectivity of Ahab in the repetition of the whaling history of the Indians, which reduces and relativizes his centrality.

## Representative System as Deception

From where should we start to analyze the relationship between the representative democracy and the whale? A quotation from Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* in the "Extracts,"—a random collection of references on the word "whale" inserted before the start of the story—stands out in that, compared to other quotations about whale, it only has a political implication. As Robert T. Tally explains, the quotation from *Leviathan* "deals with nothing cetological at all" and "the reference to the state, rather than to the whale, is striking here" (7–8).

"By art is created that great Leviathan, called a Commonwealth or State— (in Latin, Civitas) which is but an artificial man."

*Opening sentence of Hobbes's Leviathan. (Moby-Dick xxii italics in the original)*

Of course, it should be recognized that *Leviathan* is not only devoted to a democratic moment, but also opened to various interpretations, such as a support for the contemporary monarchy in England, a negative understanding of human nature, an authority of commonwealth, and so on. However, insofar as *Moby-Dick* is concerned with the famous statement of a creation of Leviathan as Tally argues and the prophetic bill foreshadows a matter of representative democracy in part, Hobbes's social contract theory for producing agreement should be paid attention to, even though other contemporary writers in Melville's time, such as James Fenimore Cooper and Richard Henry Dana, Jr., generally shared a notion of ship/society and captain/sovereignty among themselves<sup>(3)</sup>. Thus, it is necessary to compare a procedure of making social contract in *Leviathan* to that of Ahab on the quarter deck.

Antecedent to Ahab's statement in Chapter 36 ("The Quarter-Deck"), a passage in Chapter 30 ("The Pipe") implies a relative and metaphorical connection between Ahab, the captain of the *Pequod*, and the Hobbesian Leviathan. With a comment on the Danish kings, who symbolize their authority by equipping their thrones with the tusks of narwhales, the narrator creates an analogy between them and Ahab through a reflection on Ahab's seat and that of the Danish kings:

In old Norse times, the thrones of the sea-loving Danish kings were fabricated, saith tradition, of the tusks of the narwhale. How could one look at Ahab then, seated on that tripod of bones, without bethinking him of the royalty it symbolized? For a Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea, and a great lord of Leviathans was Ahab. (129)

This analogy summons up the relationship between Ahab and the Danish kings because their power was symbolized by their narwhale thrones. Moreover, as Melville writes in *White-Jacket*, "a ship is a bit of terra firma cut off from the main; it is a state in itself; and the captain is its king" (23). Ahab, with such a sovereignty, also figures as representing the ship, the sea, and the leviathans. This suggests his figurative embodiment as the Hobbesian Leviathan, as Peretz annotates on this, "an obvious

allusion to Hobbes” (140).

Accordingly, it is possible to think that the Hobbesian social contract is applied to the noble custom of the fishermen forefathers that Ahab performs on the quarter deck. After holding up a doubloon as a reward for the first person who finds Moby Dick, Ahab assumes leadership in uniting the will of the crew to kill Moby Dick, and avows to revive the ritualistic custom of his fishermen forefathers: “I may in some sort revive a noble custom of my fisherman father before me” (*Moby-Dick* 165). Ahab makes his mates—Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask—cross their harpoons before him, and glares at them, grasping the axis of the crossed harpoons. Next, he persuades them to drink from the socket fixed to the end of their harpoons in completion of the ritualistic custom. Then, under the slogan, “Death to Moby Dick!” (166), Ahab and the inspired crew are spiritually welded into a unity, such as the Hobbesian Leviathan makes its subjects lay aside their natural rights by “simply Renouncing it” or by “Transferring it to another,” which “men call CONTRACT” (Hobbes 191–2). As Bernhard Rudolf recognizes Ahab’s “political attempt” as “to establish a new covenant” (*Will and Representation* 34), it is possible to recognize Ahab’s political intention for establishing precisely this kind of authority.

However, if Ahab is regarded as a Hobbesian Leviathan, a problem arises concerning the purpose of his social contract. By introducing Ahab as a person who was “by no means unobservant of the paramount forms and usages of the sea” (*Moby-Dick* 147), the narrator restates in Chapter 33 (“The Specksynder”) that “behind those forms and usages, ... he [Ahab] sometimes masked himself; incidentally making use of them for other and more private ends than they were legitimately intended to subserve” (147). This passage requires the readers to reconsider Ahab’s “true” motive for using the rituals to establish a social contract with his crew. Starbuck, the first mate of the *Pequod*, argues against Ahab, “How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou getest it, Captain Ahab?” (163), because he knows that the general purpose of whaling is to hunt a whale for financial gain. But Ahab’s “true” purpose, his revenge on Moby Dick, is not part of the normal practice of whaling. Through the ritual, he shrewdly converts the general purpose of whaling into a pri-

vate vendetta.

This conversion of motive works deceptively by the use of the doubloon as an incentive. Let us return to the scene on the quarter deck: Ahab introduces the doubloon as a financial reward for the crew and as a reward for his own desire for vengeance, by exclaiming, “whosoever of ye raises me that same white whale, he shall have this gold ounce, my boys!” (162). In order to divert the attention of his crew from the economics of whaling and make them recognize his private instruction, Ahab uses the doubloon as a substitute for the money that is traditionally to be won by whaling. This promise, shrewdly promoted by Ahab, not only encourages the crew to kill the white whale, but also solves their economic issues. Therefore, it is possible to say that, by deceptively integrating the will of his crew and dramatically invoking the ritualistic custom of his fisherman forefathers, Ahab enables himself to appropriate such an integrated will for his private purpose. Insofar as Ahab’s position as the Hobbesian Leviathan is formed deceptively by the social contract, the arrangement of Ahab’s social contract includes a contradiction that allows it to produce a non-democratic sovereignty out of a system of representative democracy.

This contradiction aptly illustrates the absolute position of Ahab who deceptively appropriates the social contract for his own purpose. Through his abuse of the social contract, Ahab assumes an overwhelming position as the sovereign, and he is not open to any request from his crew regarding the politics of the *Pequod*. Chapter 123 (“The Musker”) gives a clue that confirms how absolute Ahab’s state is. In this chapter, Starbuck tries to kill Ahab because of the apprehension of death held by all the shipmates due to Ahab’s monomaniacal obsession with Moby Dick. As the day of the encounter with Moby Dick approaches, Ahab ignores his crew. Starbuck, with a musket in his hand, stands in front of the door of Ahab’s cabin fearing for his own and his shipmates’ death through Ahab’s tyranny. However, as he states: “I can’t withstand thee, then, old man” (515). Starbuck cannot take the final step. He then tries to contrive a way of diverting Ahab’s obsession from Moby Dick without killing him, but he eventually realizes that it cannot be done. After hearing Ahab’s soliloquy, “Stern all! Oh Moby Dick, I clutch thy heart at last!” (515), Starbuck finally fails to

discourage Ahab from his revenge and recluses himself from his mission of killing Ahab, as Hobbes states “none of his [Leviathan’s] Subjects, by any pretense of forfeiture, can be freed from his Subjection” (230). Joseph Adamson points out the similarity between the political natures of Ahab and the Hobbesian Leviathan in *Melville, Shame, and the Evil Eye*, as the Hobbesian Leviathan “that defends itself against a hostile outside world finds its psychological counterpart in Ahab’s fantasy of titanic human form” (98). Even as the absolutism of Ahab is evidenced by the Hobbesian social contract carried out on the quarter deck, so is Ahab’s absolute sovereignty confirmed and well exemplified in his declaration: “Starbuck now is mine; he cannot oppose me now, without rebellion” (*Moby-Dick* 164).

The comparison of the Hobbesian Leviathan and Ahab clarifies the problem of the representative democratic system and the whale, as foretold in the introductory section. This provides the opportunity for the reader to accept the figure of Ahab, not just as a totalitarian sultan, but also as a character, who is given birth by a system of modern democracy that includes a deceptive form of modernity with a contradiction of the democratic subject. In addition, when Ahab encounters his narcissus-like counterpart, the white whale, Moby Dick<sup>(4)</sup>, the very encounter and the ensuing suicidal death of the two Leviathans (in both the figural and literal senses) imply a systematic contradiction inherent in a process of social contract. This may also show an intentional inclusion by Melville: a disclosure of the deception of a democracy. In fact, Ahab, as the Hobbesian Leviathan, is conceptualized not by the logic of totalitarianism, as Donald E. Pease holds in his “Moby-Dick and the Cold War” (141), but through a system of social contract for making consensus among its constituents, one which is fulfilled deceptively through Ahab’s arbitrariness.

Although the novel exposes the deception of Ahab, and, as Spanos argues in *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, his position as the sovereign of “the centered circle” (120), whose status makes it possible for Ahab to marginalize other entities and abstract them into a mass, his authority is not forfeited. Peretz suggests that Ahab’s authority is diminished in that his position as the captain is reduced by the wound given to him by Moby Dick (51). The meticulous textual reading of Peretz in search of the



“excess” in imagining what is not written in the text is remarkable, and Cesare Casarino similarly shows an “excessive” entity in order to deconstruct the limit of normative subjects. The latter’s argument significantly helps us to understand that Melville’s trial in *Moby-Dick* provides a problematic toward “epistemological and disciplinary instruments” (78). Nonetheless, insofar as the novel sets the prophetic bill at its beginning, a political reading of Ahab still needs to attend to the repetitive structure of the novel, which remains a problem to be solved. It is thus necessary to, on one hand, partly rely on Peretz’s and Casarino’s points of view about the “excess,” while, on the other hand, it remains my task to offer a reading whereby Ahab’s centrality is called into question through the repetitive history of whaling, one that is inferred as an external of the novel.

## The Never-Ending Story

If the notion of the Indian and the chronic battle of whaling as imagined in the self-referential narrative overshadow the story itself, which is a fragment of history postulated outside of the narrative, then it must be possible to see in such chronic battles a moment to relativize and diminish Ahab’s entity as a Hobbesian Leviathan.

The description in Chapter 2 of the battles between the red-men and a whale throws into relief a following question: what does the Leviathan mean, and, further, why is “the Leviathan” capitalized with the definite article. This question may give rise to multiple possible answers. However, as far as we, the readers, see this novel as a story about the white whale Moby Dick, the following speculation is tenable: as Ahab in the *Pequod* confronts Moby Dick, so did the red-men in a canoe confront a monstrous whale comparable to Moby Dick. In fact, before Chapter 2, apart from the “Etymology” and “Extracts”, which are both inserted before the novel’s story starts, there is no indication regarding any whale, except for the white whale described as a “one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air” (*Moby-Dick* 7).

In addition, in Chapter 14 (“Nantucket”), which forms an introduction to

Nantucket and its original settlers, the narrator says “Look now at the wondrous traditional story of how this island [Nantucket] was settled by the red-men. Thus goes the legend” (63), and he goes on to explain that the movement of the red-men, as Nantucketers, across the sea world, is parallel to Anglo Americans’ imperialistic expansion into land. He continues, “have these naked Nantucketers, these sea hermits, issuing from their ant-hill in the sea, overrun and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders” (64). The narrator here suggests the notion of imperialism by referring to events that had taken place: “Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun” (64). It is evident that the reference to Mexico and Texas refers to the Mexican-American War from 1846 to 48, which was supported by the contemporary discourse of the “Manifest Destiny.” The relationship between England and India is also obvious. These references to the attitude of America to Mexico, Cuba, or Canada, and of England to India, bring into focus the imperialisms of America and England. As an analogy to this enumeration of imperialist advances, the narrator presents the Nantucketer as an imperialist of the sea, “For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires” (64). The canoes they used for whaling are “armed ones but floating forts” (64). They go whaling “to and fro ploughing it as his own special plantation” (64). Through this analogy, the narrator speaks of the red-men as a state or an empire, which expands its territory into the sea for purposes of domination. This understanding enables us to postulate the state of red-men as a whole as very similar to that of “the Leviathan.” Therefore, on one hand, “the Leviathan” indicates a monstrous whale like Moby Dick; on the other hand, it is an image of the nation, like a Hobbesian Leviathan. These notions are condensed in this expression, “the Leviathan” in Chapter 2.

Such an understanding about “the Leviathan” might help us to equate the battle between Ahab and Moby Dick with a series of chronicled battles between the Indians and “the Leviathan.” That is, Ahab as “the centered circle” is put into the cycle of battles between Indians and whales. The description of the ships that had departed from the Nantucket coast emphasizes this centrality: “that one most perilous and

long voyage ended, only begins a second; and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, forever and for aye. Such is the endless, yea, the intolerableness of all earthly effort" (*Moby-Dick* 60). The battle between the *Pequod* and Moby Dick should be enclosed in the images of a circle and the red-man. In the last scene, the wreckage of the *Pequod* and its crew are floating in the sea. "And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lancepole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the *Pequod* out of sight" (572). Hence, by gathering all the substances of the story into itself, this vortex shows an image of circulation and brings it into its chronology as the structure of the novel takes the form of a self-awareness and addresses the circular history of the battle between the Indian and whale as the novel's interpretive external, much as Peretz assumes an excess of the text as a traumatic disaster, and sees in it a problematization of "the logic of authority and the legal conceptualization" for "a stable identity" (115) of literature toward Ahab, Ishmael, and the reader.

Therefore, the last battle of the *Pequod* versus Moby Dick evokes an image of the Indian and the vortex in its closure. A red arm appears from the vortex and with a hammer spikes a sky-hawk on a spar.

... at that instant, *a red arm and a hammer hovered backwardly uplifted in the open air, in the act of nailing the flag faster and yet faster to the subsiding spar. A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-gasp, kept his hammer frozen there.* (*Moby-Dick* 537, Italics mine)

It is remarkable that what appears at the end of the story is not the whale bone leg of Ahab, which would have symbolically shown his agony, vengeance toward, or simi-

larity to Moby Dick, but the red arm of Tashtego, who is introduced as “an unmixed Indian from Gay Head, . . . , where there still exists the last remnant of a village of red men, which has long supplied the neighboring island of Nantucket” (120). This also confirms that a series of chronicled battles between the Indians and a monstrous whale reflects the battle between Ahab and Moby Dick. In this sense, the whale is “her [the *Pequod*’s] hereditary foe” (70), and “Moby Dick was ubiquitous” (182) in the history of the battles between a sovereignty and its phantom-like counterpart.

At the point where his entity is marginalized *in* the repetition of the narrative of Indian-whale battles, Ahab’s centrality is relativized and diminished. This is despite Casarino argument that, by way of Melville’s description of Ahab’s well-known proclamation on the quarter-deck, “All the visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks” (*Moby-Dick* 164), Ahab imagines yet another excessive and limitless sphere beyond the white whale as a limit set by capital (Casarino 100). By addressing an external history and regarding the story of the battle between Ahab (as a Hobbesian Leviathan) and Moby Dick as a part of a never-ending battle, the narrator makes Ahab parallel to the sovereignties of the past and future. The narrator, Ishmael, comes to be a “decentered” man, not in a sense suggested by Spanos<sup>(5)</sup>, but in a sense that he diverts the readers’ attention from Ahab’s centrality. Ishmael does this by addressing an external, or excess of his narrative. He becomes a part, or a frame for this repeated history, which might continue from the time when “the great shroud of the sea . . . rolled five thousand years ago” (*Moby-Dick* 572). In this sense, such an understanding may help in critiquing Ahab’s centrality in making himself a kind of representative of the empire, and reducing it into the external history in which the story is just a frame.

## Conclusion

In *Transpacific Imaginations*, Yunte Huang elaborates on a criticism of American exceptionalism through an analysis of Ahab’s monomania, which coexists with substances concerning capital in the course of his transpacific journey. Huang’s demon-

stration is significant, but his intention “to complicate the picture” (53), which criticizes American exceptionalism as many New Americanists do, may not provide a solution except by indicating the coexistence of a non-capitalistic moment (objects of Ahab’s monomania) and capitalistic objective (whaling). It is necessary to show how an authority, or centrality, can be reduced. This study may respond to the existing criticisms of American exceptionalism in Melville Studies, through the reduction and relativization of Ahab’s authority, which has been compared to the status of contemporary and current American exceptionalism.

Because Ahab represents a Hobbesian Leviathan, *Moby Dick*, which is represented as his counterpart in the sea and as a narcissistic mirror, takes the form of a whale. Therefore, demonstrating the deceptive nature of democracy, Ahab comes to his death. In this sense, the critique of Ahab is shown to be valid. By referring to an external, or excess, from the inside, the narrative situates itself within the history of the external, which may continue forever. By placing himself within the repetition, Ahab’s centrality is relativized and diminished as a fragment of the never-ending. In this way, a political reading of *Moby-Dick* becomes effective.

#### Notes

- (1) For example, Leo Bersani tries to see in an excessive repetition of normalized sexism in the *Pequod* a dissipation of itself (136–54). Developing Bersani’s point of view further, Cesare Casarino in *Modernity at Sea* interprets an excessive subjectivity in *Moby-Dick* as one that overwhelms a limit of standardized subjects by comparing *Moby-Dick* to Marx’s *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy* (142–183). In *Herman Melville and the American Calling*, William V. Spanos criticizes the notion that America is an exception to any international law by finding in Melville’s text the expression of a resistance to American exceptionalism (1–13).
- (2) In analyzing the narrative authority of the novel, Peretz classifies the narrative of *Moby-Dick* into three patterns: Ishmael is “a character participating in the action of

the narrated events which constitute the main story-line of the novel,” he is “a whale-author, a writer whose work is dedicated to the enigma of the whale,” and “an ambiguous narrator” who trembles between the status of story teller and witness to the shipwreck (67).

- (3) Cooper, *The Pilot: A Tale of the Sea*, Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast*, etc.
- (4) On Ahab and Narcissus, see Schirmeister 101–7.
- (5) In *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, Spanos regards Ishmael as a “decentered man” who diverts from Ahab’s dominance because he does not stand in the same dimension as Ahab: as a narrator, he is in a meta-position to the story itself. See *Errant Art* 151–7.

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