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Anti-Ishmael: Novel Beginnings in  
Moby-Dick

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ANTI-ISHMAEL:  
NOVEL BEGINNINGS IN *MOBY-DICK*

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“Call me Ishmael.” This invocation to the reader of *Moby-Dick* is, perhaps, the most famous line in American literature, and part of its notoriety, no doubt, lies in its being a famous *first* line. Even those who have never read *Moby-Dick* nevertheless *know* that it begins with the words “Call me Ishmael.” Of course, those readers who have read the novel also know that the three-word sentence appears as the opening line of “Loomings,” Chapter One of *Moby-Dick*, but not necessarily as the beginning of the novel.<sup>1</sup> Preceding “Loomings” are two unnumbered chapters, “Etymology” and “Extracts,”<sup>2</sup> chapters that are rarely discussed in scholarly or critical treatments of the novel. When they are discussed, it is usually *en passant*, a brief mention before getting to the meat of the interpretation, which more often than not revolves around the figure of Ishmael, the narrator and the observer. By reading “Call me Ishmael” *as* the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, a long line of literary critics has established that Ishmael must be the central figure of the novel. Of course, Ahab will become the tragic hero of *Moby-Dick*, but Ishmael will be the “voice” of the novel.

This Ishmael-centric tradition within Melville studies transcends different movements and ideological positions. From the Melville revival of the 1920s, through the period of academic and cultural canonization in the 1940s and 1950s, and persisting with the so-called New Americanists of recent years, the “Call me Ishmael” point of departure and the line of thought that extends from it have remained the prevailing perspectives. Meanwhile, the unnumbered chapters that precede “Loomings” have been almost entirely ignored.<sup>3</sup> I propose that the Ishmael-centric line of thought has enabled an interpretation of *Moby-Dick* that supports a nationalist cultural program, transforming the novel into a “national narrative.”<sup>4</sup> Taking “Etymology” and “Extracts” as the point of departure, I offer an alternative reading that suggests a trans- or postnational *Moby-Dick*, which resists encapsulation in a nationalist cultural narrative and anticipates the era of globalization or of the world system of which we are now a part.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning with Ishmael, or establishing Ishmael’s centrality at the beginning, enables a reading of *Moby-Dick* as an essentially American national narrative, a narrative which is designed to reproduce an ideological *mythos* of a special, even divinely ordained, status in the world, such that this nation may be considered unique, distinct from the rest of the world and, in turn, *better*—more free, more moral—than other nations. National narrative both presupposes and helps to create an “imagined community,” in Benedict Anderson’s words, a collective subject called a nation. Perhaps it seems wrongheaded to say that a focus on the individual subject (here, Ishmael) would foster national narrative; rather, it would appear that such a story would be, in Jonathan Arac’s generic taxonomy, a “personal narrative,” a category into which Arac places *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* (“Narrative Forms” 661). Yet personal

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narratives are appropriated by national narrative with relative ease, since, in the United States, national narrative is rooted firmly in a particular “individualism.” Or, to put it another way, following Wai Chee Dimock, a “poetics of individualism” is central to the ideological regime of nation-formation (and empire-building) in the U.S. (see *Empire for Liberty* 25–26).<sup>6</sup> That is, the sovereign individual is representative of the nation, which is geographically and ideologically extended over distant domains in what Dimock, following Thomas Jefferson, calls an “empire for liberty.” American national narrative celebrates this movement from the individual to the national and on to the imperial, a movement that is unified in purpose and effects.

This can be seen in the familiar images associated with American national narrative. As Donald Pease puts it,

The image repertoire productive of the U.S. national community can be ascertained through the recitation of its key terms in the national meta-narrative commonly understood to be descriptive of that community. Those images interconnect an exceptional national subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene (Virgin Land) and an exemplary national motive (errand into the wilderness). (“National Identities” 3–4)<sup>7</sup>

An Ishmael-centric reading of *Moby-Dick* fits neatly into this national narrative framework. Ishmael, notwithstanding his evocative name, conforms to the principle of the Adamic American hero. Many Ishmael-oriented critics have seen *Moby-Dick* as, at least in part, the story of a nation-representing Ishmael triumphing over a nation-destroying Ahab.<sup>8</sup> Much of twentieth-century criticism has hailed, or more recently assailed, *Moby-Dick* for being a national narrative *par excellence*, and such a view, I believe, is firmly grounded in seeing Ishmael as an American Adam.

However, in an odd sense, the largely unsympathetic mid-nineteenth-century critics were closer to the mark. Most contemporary reviewers saw *Moby-Dick* as a failed personal narrative, chaotically multiformal (“an intellectual chowder of romance, philosophy, natural history, fine writing, good feelings, bad sayings,” in Evert Duyckinck’s words [in *Moby-Dick* 613]), the cause for a *writ de lunatico* (in one anonymous critic’s words [619]), and so on. Indeed, I would argue that *Moby-Dick* presents a kind of failed personal narrative as part of its critique of the nationalist project dominating letters and political discourse in mid-nineteenth-century America. The global, literary cartographic project of *Moby-Dick* is not the story of a “Whaling Voyage by one Ishmael,” as suggested in “Loomings.” By recognizing the degree to which the novel was, in the words of an 1853 review, “distressingly marred by an *extravagant* treatment of the subject” (620, emphasis added), Melville’s contemporaries, in their very displeasure with the work, validated the proposition that *Moby-Dick* is *not* representative of the national culture, but that it wanders out of bounds, becoming a savage anomaly that perhaps undermines the national ideal.

As William Spanos’s “destructive” reading of the novel’s “errant art” demonstrates, *Moby-Dick* contains the weapons to combat the logic of this national narrative of a Puritan errand into the wilderness. Spanos, however, does not displace Ishmael from his central position as narrator. Rather Spanos uses Ishmael to counter the power arrayed on behalf of *Moby-Dick* as national narrative, and in so doing, he discovers an Ishmael quite different from the representative American national subject. Spanos points out that the “Call me Ishmael” invocation cannot be taken to mean the same thing as “My name is

Ishmael.” The indeterminacy of the former phrase orients “the reader/listener’s attention to the possibility that the name is a mask [...]. By calling attention to the fictional status of the narrator, to his name *as sign*, Melville simultaneously reiterates and breaks down the distinction between the privileged author and the first-person narrator he ‘creates’ to tell his story” (Spanos 75). In Spanos’s reading, then, Ishmael is not the “subject” who stands above or outside of the narrative; nor is he the representative of a fixed identity (i.e., the American Adam). If Ishmael’s narrative is *errant*—erratic and extravagant, not to be reduced to a ruling *logos*—at least his is no errand into the wilderness. Spanos discovers in Ishmael’s errancy a counterhegemonic force opposed, not specifically to Ahab’s “tremendous centralization,” but to the “ontotheological tradition” that undergirds the organizing *mythos* of the American jeremiad, whose figure in *Moby-Dick* appears in Father Mapple’s sermon (Spanos 87–104). Ishmael vs. Mapple, not Ishmael vs. Ahab: this is the antagonism which, in Spanos’s view, energizes *Moby-Dick*, and which draws the lines of battle between a post-humanist (and postmodern) errancy and the Enlightenment theo-logocentrism *cum* anthropo-logocentrism animating national narrative (46–47).<sup>9</sup>

Among Spanos’s most emphatic points is that the Ishmael narrative is fundamentally errant, irreducible to a totalizing or imperial narrative structure. Spanos usefully retrieves the Ishmael figure from the hands of both the Cold War critics, for whom Ishmael stands as the representative American Adam fighting Ahab’s totalitarianism, and the New Americanists, for whom Ishmael is complicit in the American nationalist or imperialist mission. But I believe that Spanos relies too heavily on Ishmael for his argument. That is, the errancy of *Moby-Dick* need not be, and I think *is not*, specifically Ishmael’s; to focus on Ishmael proves misleading. For example, although Spanos believes that the “Ishmael” name is just a *sign*, a name “as good as any to initiate” the story (75), this sign eventually oversignifies, becoming—in the minds of more than a few critics—its own totalizing narrative voice.

One of the chief problems with the Ishmael-centered interpretation of *Moby-Dick* is that, by assuming a fixed identity and a stable narrative voice in the figure of “Ishmael,” critics tend to deny the polyphony and heteroglossia of so much of the text—in Spanos’s words, its *errancy*. Even Franco Moretti, who acknowledges (and praises) the polyphony of *Moby-Dick*, at its most dramatically audible in “Midnight—Forecastle,” winds up situating Ishmael as the *one* voice of narration. Moretti argues that *Moby-Dick* repeatedly reduces the polyphony to silence and that, by silencing the multiple voices heard especially in earlier parts of the novel, *Moby-Dick* is complicit in endorsing the “leveling” processes of imperialism and capitalism.

Here, the monologic device is the voice of Ishmael (Ishmael as narrator): *one* voice, omnipresent and situated at a level where no other can respond to it, and thus call it into question. In the central part of the novel, roughly half of the chapters are in fact concluded by the narrator’s reflections—a strategic placement, investing Ishmael’s words with a particular authority. [...] In the last resort, the ambition of the narrator of *Moby-Dick* is precisely this: to take the multifarious codes of nature and culture, and to demonstrate that they are all to be found in the moral super-code. To take polyphony, in other words, and reduce it to a single language: ultimately, to eliminate it altogether. (62–63)

Obviously, Spanos would dispute this interpretation, arguing instead that these chapters reveal Ishmael’s “carnavalesque parody” of such a super-code (192). (I will return to this

“parodic” narrator below.) However, by having an “Ishmael” as the narrator, critics like Moretti assume that this singular and authoritative narrative voice speaks throughout *Moby-Dick*, that the various voices heard in the novel are subsumed or silenced by the voice of one Ishmael.

This reading, or misreading, follows from taking “Call me Ishmael” as the beginning of *Moby-Dick*. The *beginning* is not merely the place one starts reading; it is the place that conditions the reading as a whole. As Edward Said has noted, “[w]hen we point to the beginning of a novel, for example, we mean that from *that* beginning in principle follows *this* novel” (6). With “Call me Ishmael” as the beginning, the reading of *Moby-Dick* that follows asserts that the story is Ishmael’s, that the narrator is singular, and that the narrative’s authority lies in this character.

Said argues that beginnings have two distinct aspects: transitive and intransitive. “One leads to the project being realized [...] that is, beginning with (or for) an anticipated end, or at least an expected continuity. The other aspect retains for the beginning its identity as *radical* starting point: the intransitive and conceptual aspect, that which has no object but its own constant clarification (72–73). In “Etymology” and “Extracts,” we see the beginning in “the whale” itself, which is defined, presented in various languages, elaborated through centuries of discourse. The original title of the novel, *The Whale* is retained as the alternative or subtitle: *Moby-Dick, or, the Whale*. The latter maintains a seemingly deliberate ambiguity, owing to the shifting nuances of the article *the* that allow it to be both general and specific at once. Thus, for example, “the *whale*” of “Cetology” describes the general character of the animal, which can be subcategorized into its various species; “*the whale*” of the chapter “Moby Dick” refers to a specific character in the novel, complete with a personality and a legendary biography. This ambiguity brings together the narrative and the descriptive (or scientific) elements of *Moby-Dick* under one sign. The reader soon learns that *ambiguity*—indeterminacy, polysemy, “inscrutability,” as Ahab would have it—is a crucial aspect of *the whale* (and of the novel). Before we have met an Ishmael, who might clarify or impose meaning on such a thing, the unnumbered chapters announce that *the whale* is the beginning of *Moby-Dick*.

With its own “Usher” (to whom I’ll return below), “Etymology” ushers *the whale* into being in the context of language. This beginning sets the tone for the novel as a whole. Throughout the novel, Melville associates the whale with language, perhaps most memorably in “Cetology,” with its whale-as-book taxonomic scheme (*Folio* whales being the largest, then *Quarto*, etc.). The beginning of *Moby-Dick*, in fact, involves a philological exploration of the whale. The world of the whale, as Melville presents it, is contained in the fragile density of the Word (in “Etymology”) and born in the material flesh of discourse (in “Extracts”). From this point on (in the American edition), the novel manifests the transitive and intransitive effects that characterize every *beginning*: a headlong rush towards the appearance of *the whale* and a repeated meditation on the *whale*. The etymological explication of the whale starts with a reference to Richard Hakluyt (spelled “*Hackluyt*”). The line attributed to Hakluyt makes specific reference to education, language, and truth—in short, to knowledge:

“While you take in hand to school others, and to teach them by what name a whale-fish is to be called in our language, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true.” (“Etymology” 1)

Thus the etymological beginning of *Moby-Dick* opens with a warning, a caveat that will be repeated throughout the book: knowledge of the whale, to be learned and to be disseminated, is (or is in perpetual danger of being) incomplete and false.

This caveat puts one in mind of others scattered throughout the novel, including those where Melville warns of the direct, physical dangers of acquiring accurate knowledge of the whale. In “Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales,” for instance, the narrator cautions that “the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan” (228). This ironic attitude towards scientific or artistic knowledge obtains throughout *Moby-Dick*. The reader must withstand a barrage of facts, data, descriptions, and documentary details, such that the novel appears, at times, more like a loosely gathered, nonfiction study of whales and whaling, yet the reader is also confronted, again and again, with admonitions or warnings against believing that he/she has got some clear grasp of the subject. Indeed, the novel repeatedly tells us that, notwithstanding the quasi-scientific descriptions abounding in the text, complete knowledge of the whale is impossible. At a notorious moment in “Cetology,” for instance, the narrator concedes that he is “the architect, not the builder” of the system of knowledge of the whale; the “cetological System” must remain unfinished, incomplete, “the draught of a draught” (118, 127–28). If, “through ignorance,” something is left out, the overall rendering of the whale will not be true, to the extent that the truth is ever arrived at in *Moby-Dick*. The invocation of Hakluyt announces a project that involves the narrator in a study of *the* whale and of *whales*, of which Moby Dick is a unique specimen.

Because it is the object toward which the narrative rushes and because the species is remarked (or re-marked) on continually, the whale is forever resignified. If the letter *H* is left out of the word *whale*, the word becomes *wale*, which is a mark on the body or skin made by, especially, the stroke of a whip, the visible trace of a body having been struck. Through Hakluyt, then, a sign is introduced that, metonymically, anticipates the figure of Ahab, the figure of *the* whale, and the figure of *wales* in general.

[Ahab] looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them [...] Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish. It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom, ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded. Whether this mark was born with him, or whether it was the scar left by some desperate wound, no one could certainly say. (“Ahab” 109–10)

The “marked man,” Ahab, is brought into relation with the “whale-fish” on the first page of the novel.<sup>10</sup> Moby Dick, too, is “marked” (in many senses of the word). But Ahab, distinguished by his *wale*, may be said to be lacking the heart of the whale, the heart of the word “which almost alone maketh up the signification” of the *whale*.

Consider also the way in which this marking (and remarking) anticipates the whale—both *the* whale and the *whale*—later. In “The Whiteness of the Whale,” the narrator tries to come to terms with *the* whale, Moby Dick, through an examination of its

most visible mark, its whiteness. This attribute is explored through literary, mythological, historical, anecdotal, and scientific references, all leading to the conclusion that both *the* whale and the *whale* are inscrutable and overdetermined. Though he does not know “where lies the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints” (169), the narrator nevertheless can assert that “of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol” (170). These multiple meanings inhere in the whale itself. Elsewhere, in “The Blanket,” the narrator *reads* the whale through the “numberless straight marks in thick array [...] engraved upon the body itself” (260). These marks are “hieroglyphical,” imbued with meanings that the reader cannot quite understand: “the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable” (260). The marks, or wales, of whales render them full of meaning and yet inscrutable.

A *wale* also refers to any one of a number of strong strakes or wooden bands on the hull of a ship used to strengthen or fortify the structure of the vessel (e.g., as in the term *gunwale*). In a sense, then, the Hakluyt quotation may be said to prefigure the multiple confrontations—leading, of course, to the ultimate confrontation—between the whale and the ship in *Moby-Dick*: the force of the *whale* versus the strength of the *wales*. Here, the *Pequod* is itself metonymically (or synecdochically) invoked by reference to its wales; it is at once connected to and distinguished from the whale.

Yet before the white whale marked by Ahab rams the *Pequod*, “Etymology” cites *Webster’s Dictionary*. “WHALE. \* \* \* Sw. and Dan. *hval*. This animal is named from roundness or rolling; for in Dan. *hvalt* is arched or vaulted” (1); *Richardson’s Dictionary* then adds, after attributing “whale,” “to roll, to wallow” (1). The etymological origins of the whale, *roundness* and *rolling*, radiate throughout the novel, as descriptions not only of whales in *Moby-Dick*, but also of the world of *Moby-Dick*. The most prominent example, perhaps, may be seen in the final conflict between the white whale and the *Pequod*, inasmuch as the “roundness” and “rolling” come to mark the features of the novel’s end:

And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all of its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, *all round and round* in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the *Pequod* out of sight. . . . then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea *rolled on as it had rolled* five thousand years ago. (“The Chase—Third Day” 469, emphasis added)

“Etymology” establishes this roundness with linguistic circularity. It marks a line leading to a conclusion, in which Ishmael bobs up on a whirlpool that consumes everyone else, a “survivor’s narrative,” which extends from “Call me Ishmael” to the Epilogue.<sup>11</sup> It also starts the novel on a circular trajectory in which the narrator “reads” *the* whale in terms of the *whale*—and vice-versa—while reading the *wales* that serve as marks (or remarks). Tracing the line from “Etymology” to the last lines of “The Chase—Third Day,” the very figure of the whale seems to undermine, or literally *overwhelm*, the personal (and national) narrative that appears to begin in “Loomings.” By starting with “Etymology,” we see a *Moby-Dick* that is not the tale of a young man’s errand into the wilderness and his providential return to safety, but the roiling epic of a world of error, of uncertainty, and of horror. The story of “one Ishmael” cannot as such achieve the goal of a global, round and rolling, representation. Rather, the evocative image of Melville’s epic is the supra-individual whale as world itself.

The languages in which “Etymology” presents the word *whale* reflect the tremendous breadth of this world and the scope of the novel: thirteen languages, from ancient to modern, from European to South Pacific, frame an image geographically and historically. Thus, “Etymology” begins to trace a line of thought quite distinct from the narrative trajectory of an Ishmael-centered plot. For the very multiplicity of languages, like the multiple “renderings” of the text of the doubloon later, suggests that no one language—and, by extension, no one speaker—is alone authoritative.<sup>12</sup> The indeterminacy of a “true” name, a “true” language, or a “true” voice prefigures the indeterminacy of *the* whale, the *whale*, and the *narrator*. The interpretations of *Moby-Dick* which posit Ishmael as the narrator, and which thereby invest in Ishmael a singular authority, must ignore (and certainly *have* ignored) this profound indeterminacy. But “Etymology” makes visible, by its very excesses, the bankruptcy of a reading of *Moby-Dick* that requires a spokesperson able to speak a universal, representative language of fixed and stable meanings. By undermining the role of the American Adam—the ideological servant of national narrative, who would present an “imagined community” of readers or listeners—“Etymology” substitutes an image of a multinational world system for the nationalist image. With its *whale* in thirteen languages, ordered chronologically (at least from a certain Western point of view which would hold that the Pacific languages are “new” compared to the European languages) and ranging widely over the globe (from the Mediterranean, to the North Atlantic and Scandinavia, and on to the South Pacific), “Etymology” attempts to capture the entire world of nations, the world in a word.

In “Extracts,” the philological project expands to a general discourse of the *whale*, affording “a glancing bird’s eye view of what has been promiscuously said, thought, fancied, and sung of Leviathan, by many nations and generations, including our own” (2). If “Etymology” ushers the whale into being, discovering the outline of a world within a word, “Extracts” gives birth to the whale in the material flesh of discourse. As in “Etymology,” the ordering is basically chronological, such that the extracts promulgate the notion of a universal history, from ancient to modern. The geographical movement also appears to be largely the same: from the Orient (the Biblical Holy Land, corresponding to the Hebrew and Greek of “Etymology”) to the west and north (from the Mediterranean to northern Europe) and farther afield until one finds oneself singing with the whalers of the South Pacific fishery. In addition to its historical and geographical scope, “Extracts” also introduces the Bakhtinian, multiformal character of *Moby-Dick*, inasmuch as it represents all manner of forms or “stylistic unities,” literary and non-literary, poetic and scientific, travelogue, oratory, law, and so on.<sup>13</sup> These various forms—combining the sublime (as in *The Faerie Queene* excerpt [4]) and the mundane or commonplace (as in Cuvier’s “The whale is a mammiferous animal without hind feet” [7])—proliferate throughout the novel, forming, as the “higher unity of the work” (Bakhtin 262) a sprawling image of the world, including, of course, the literary world of these forms.

The collection of extracts says a good deal about whales. There is one exception, however, among the extracts—a quotation that deals with nothing cetological at all. “By art is created that great Leviathan, called a Commonwealth or State—in Latin, *Civitas* which is but an artificial man” (4). While it is certainly not surprising to see the most famous use of the word *Leviathan* since the Book of Job included among the extracts

(indeed its absence would have been surprising), the reference to the state, rather than to the whale, is striking here. Melville, or that “poor devil of a Sub-Sub,” has buried this line from Hobbes’s treatise on sovereignty amid a vast textual history of the whale, extending from Genesis to the mid-nineteenth century. “Extracts,” like “Etymology,” presents a multinational world system, expansive both geographically and historically. The nation-state, that embodiment and aim of national narrative, is subsumed within this world system.<sup>14</sup> Melville’s Leviathan is thus not Hobbes’s. Hobbes is concerned with the nature and functioning of sovereignty, and *Moby-Dick* disrupts and calls into question the ideas of sovereignty and, in particular, the sovereign subject. The extensive multinational frame, which is constructed in the first two, unnumbered chapters, ranges across both space and time, and displaces the supposed centrality of the sovereign subject and of the nationalist project. In other words, *Moby-Dick*, through its very excess, through its “outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep” (“The Fossil Whale” 478), announces in its opening pages that it is not, and cannot be, the representative American national narrative that it has become for many; rather, it is a cartography of a world of *ambiguity*, within which the American imperium and American national narrative (with its representative national subject) are subsumed.

By taking “Etymology” and “Extracts” as the beginning of *Moby-Dick*, I have been arguing for a line of thought in the novel that runs counter to the Ishmael-centered line which extends from the first three words of “Loomings” to the Epilogue. As I suggest above, many critics have imposed a coherence and narrative authority on the text by insisting that a monologic Ishmael is the narrator. By ignoring the unnumbered chapters, these critics have also overlooked the frequent unraveling of the narrative acts, the subversion of the narrator’s authority, and the ambiguities of the text in favor of an overarching master code (i.e., Ishmael’s “moral super-code,” as Moretti calls it). As Spanos’s reading makes clear, however, Ishmael need not be viewed as that monologic authority. Indeed, Ishmael need not even be considered a singular presence in *Moby-Dick*. “Ishmael” might be thought of as one of many *conceptual personae*, to borrow a term from Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>15</sup> His persona is not that of a “character” in the traditional sense; rather, he is a figure that accompanies concepts, a figure through whom thought moves, like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra or Dionysus, for example. Ishmael is not the only such figure in *Moby-Dick*. Before anyone has us call him “Ishmael” in “Loomings,” “Etymology” introduces us to the “pale Usher,” whose etymology ushers the whale into being on the novel’s first page. Then “Extracts” introduces us to the “poor devil of a Sub-Sub” librarian, whose extracts, culled from “the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth” (2), locate the whale in an expansive history and geography of discourse.

Already placed in brackets—“the typography that disguises,” as Claude Richard says in *American Letters* (60)—neither of these figures makes a good candidate for the American Adam so pivotal in American national narrative. Each travels vast fields of oral and written language, hardly “Virgin Land” waiting to be discovered and conquered. Their forays into the worlds of dictionaries and libraries certainly do not resemble an “errand into the wilderness” in any sense that would link either of them to a Providential mission. Rather, they tend to block the gateway to national narrative, and open the text to a polyphonic and polysemic world system beyond the image repertoire of Americanism.

[The pale Usher—threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain; I see him now. He was ever dusting his old lexicons and grammars, with a queer handkerchief, mockingly embellished with

all the gay flags of all the known nations of the world. He loved to dust his old grammars; it somehow mildly reminded him of his own mortality.] (“Etymology” 1)

The “I” in this passage does not enjoin the reader to call him (or her) Ishmael; the narrator is as yet unnamed. And the Usher is clearly not the Adamic figure of innocence and futurity; he does not elicit an “optative mood” in either speaker or reader. In fact, this minor custodian of knowledge, now apparently dead, appears to have had only one pleasure in life: the contemplation of his own finitude. Brushing dust off old dictionaries, those compendia of dead languages and displaced meanings, with a cloth “mockingly embellished” with a symbolic, international political geography, he does not invite celebration in all things American. He is as mocked by the variety and extensiveness of the world as he is consumed by it. *All* the flags of *all* the known nations of the world, rather than decorate individually and specifically, are instead etymologies of an immanent state of mind, an ever-present multinational perspective that consumes and subsumes Adamic figures and leviathans alike.

The Sub-Sub-Librarian is a persona who expands on the late consumptive Usher just as “Extracts” expands on “Etymology.” The Sub-Sub, himself another minor custodian of knowledge, operates in a somewhat larger arena (libraries instead of a schoolhouse), but he may be an even lesser personage (being, after all, a *sub-sub*). He is no more a figure of hope and futurity than is his predecessor. He is introduced as a “mere painstaking burrower and grub-worm,” whose collection of extracts cannot be trusted as accurate knowledge, as “gospel cetology” (2). The Sub-Sub belongs to a “hopeless, sallow tribe,” and—though not yet dead—his kindred spirits in mediocrity are reserving his place in the hereafter. He too is consumed, or subsumed, by the immensity of the world system, by “many nations and generations.” Copier of documents, bearer of dead letters, he prefigures Bartleby more than Ishmael.

When the Ishmael mask is donned in the opening line of “Loomings,” then, the reader is already familiar with conceptual personae who are neither Adamic nor a national. Ishmael, furthermore, is dissociated from any determinate, and determining, identity by the “Call me...” formulation, as Spanos demonstrates. His evocative name and the allure of his naming is so strong that, even when Ishmael, as character *or* as narrator, disappears or seems to disappear for long stretches of time during the course of the novel (e.g., when there is narration of events or phenomena that Ishmael could not have known about), most readers persist in naming the narrator “Ishmael,” in thinking of him as *one* voice, and in assuming, despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary, that the narrator is one and the same person throughout *Moby-Dick*. However, not only is the novel polyphonic, but the narrative voice(s) are as well. For instance, while the Ishmael mask may not be entirely removed, *Moby-Dick* presents other personae as the situation warrants: the narrator of “The Fossil Whale” is a geologist (379); he becomes a tattooed poet in “The Bower of the Arscides” (376); and, in relating “The Town-Ho’s Story” (280), he is suddenly transplanted to Peru, presumably speaking Spanish with cigar-smoking Spaniards.

It is possible, of course, that all of these narrative voices can be ascribed to one Ishmael. Yet even where the narration seems left in the hands, or voice, of one person, polyphony persists. The monological Ishmael, whom Moretti finds in so many of the central chapters of *Moby-Dick*, is at most a parody. The narrator’s “authority” in these chapters appears again and again to be a ruse, as if Melville is poking fun at the

authorities and at authority itself. For all of the assumed authority of the cetological chapters' narrator (or narrators), few readers accept this authority. The most "authoritative" comments often provide moments of humor. So, for example, when the narrator of "The Fountain" insists that "from the heads of all ponderous profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, Dante, and so on, there always goes up a certain semi-visible steam, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts" (313), it is difficult for anyone to take this seriously. Moretti chooses to overlook this irony and therefore overlooks not only the persistence of polyphony in the cetological chapters but also the way in which "monologic" authority is being undermined by Melville. As Spanos explains, "Ishmael's distrust of gravity (high seriousness) or, conversely, his irreverent levity, is not a casual impropriety; it is, rather, a deliberate means of preserving the freeplay of his mind against the imperial imperatives of logocentric structure" (86). Far from "silencing" other voices or shutting down the conversation, this parodic narrator calls into question the very "monologic authority" Moretti is concerned with. Moralizing, arrogant, or smug as the concluding remarks to the cetological chapters may be, they open the discussion to a wide range of possible interlocutors, even if these other personae be masked.<sup>16</sup>

Ishmael as narrator, as character and as symbol, has long enabled an interpretation of *Moby-Dick* that encourages the transformation of Melville's literary narrative into an American national narrative. My reading of "Etymology" and "Extracts," which takes these chapters *as* a beginning counterposed to the "Call me Ishmael" starting point, provides an alternative interpretation that pries the novel loose from a dominant meta-narrative of twentieth-century American literary history, and—with much more to be said—enables a recasting of American literature outside of any nationalist project. I believe that *Moby-Dick* is extremely well suited for such a task, partly because of the novel's hypercanonical status<sup>17</sup> as the Great American Novel (or at least one of them). Indeed, rather than being the representative national text, *Moby-Dick* is a perfect example of a "world text," whose "geographical frame of reference is no longer the nation-state, but a broader entity—a continent, or the world-system as a whole" (Moretti 50).<sup>18</sup> By arguing in favor of this alternative line of thought in *Moby-Dick*, I hope to highlight the possibilities for a different sort of Melville studies, and a renewed, postnational approach to American literary history and criticism.<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All references to *Moby-Dick* in this essay are to the Norton Critical Edition (1967). In citations, I have included the chapter title as well as page number for the benefit of those using other editions.

<sup>2</sup> In the first edition of *Moby-Dick* (published in England under the title, *The Whale*), these chapters appear at the end of the novel as an appendix. That edition also famously omitted the Epilogue. The first American edition placed "Etymology" and "Extracts" in the fore, but with small roman page numbers.

<sup>3</sup> The pervasiveness of the interpretations of the novel which follow from the “Call me Ishmael” beginning may be illustrated by comparing two important and quite different Melville scholars. Howard P. Vincent, whose *The Trying-out of Moby-Dick* was among the first comprehensive readings of the novel, utterly ignores “Etymology” and “Extracts.” Vincent’s interpretation begins (in a chapter significantly titled “Narrative Beginnings”): “‘Call me Ishmael.’ Arrestingly, dramatically, as though a mysterious dissonance had been plucked by the massed strings, Melville’s great whaling symphony begins” (55). Similarly, William V. Spanos, in *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*—a book expressly opposed to the sort of “Old Americanist” approach exemplified by Vincent’s study (among many others),—examines in detail the minutiae as well as the grand expositions of the novel, but he too manages to overlook entirely the unnumbered chapters preceding “Loomings,” choosing instead to open his interpretation with the words: “‘Call me Ishmael.’ So, unexpectedly, Melville begins *Moby-Dick*” (75). Both Vincent and Spanos, notably opposed on many other critical matters, isolate the famous three-word sentence as the beginning; both use the verb, *to begin*. I mention these two works and these two scholars, in particular, out of the hundreds of studies of *Moby-Dick*, because few others have attempted such a comprehensive and thoroughgoing analysis of the novel; their comprehensiveness makes their omissions all the more striking. Not even in passing are “Etymology” and “Extracts” mentioned by either Vincent or Spanos.

<sup>4</sup> The term *national narrative* requires some explanation. In Jonathan Arac’s elaboration of “Narrative Forms” in nineteenth-century American literature, the term “national narrative” is used to describe various works—including the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and the historical writings of George Bancroft—that “told the story of the nation’s colonial beginnings and looked forward to its future as a model for the world” (608). Arac considers these as generically distinct from “local” narratives, “personal” narratives, and such “literary” narratives as *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*. My use of the term *national narrative* is rooted partly in Arac’s understanding, but derives its force primarily from what Arac would call the “nationalization of literary narrative” by twentieth-century literary critics. That is, with the canonization of *Moby-Dick*, a generation of critics established an approach to the novel that made it fit within a discourse of national narrative. I believe that, notwithstanding their intentions to the contrary, many New Americanists continue to assume or reinforce this nationalist approach, even where they insist on producing a *postnational* view of American literature (see, e.g., Pease, “National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives”). By postnational (or supranational) in this context, I mean an approach that no longer views the nation or nationalism as the central, organizing concept of literary or cultural studies. For an example of postnational literary studies, see Wai Chee Dimock’s “Pre-national Time: Novel, Epic, and Henry James.”

<sup>5</sup> For a now classic study of Melville and the modern world system, see C.L.R. James.

<sup>6</sup> See also *Empire for Liberty*, 38–41. Dimock’s reading (in her own words) “virtually ignores” Ishmael in name, and Dimock does not see in Ishmael a figure of redemption (see 236 n.52). However, in placing the blame for “blaming the victim” squarely at

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Melville's own feet, Dimock identifies the "whale author" of "an imperial folio" as the representative American subject himself: "In any case, as the exemplar of a 'poetics of individualism,' Melville will emerge in my account as something of a representative author, a man who speaks for and with his contemporaries, speaking for them and with them, most of all, when he imagines himself to be above them" (6).

<sup>7</sup> Readers will recognize these key terms also as the titles of three "classic" Americanist critical works: R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), and Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956).

<sup>8</sup> The development of this "Ishmael vs. Ahab" argument is discussed in more detail by Donald Pease, in "*Moby Dick* and the Cold War."

<sup>9</sup> Manifest Destiny, as an idea and as an ideology, is the very figure of the movement from the *theo*-logocentrism of the Puritan errand into the wilderness to the *anthropo*-logocentrism of nineteenth-century America.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the link between Ahab and the whale, and more generally between the human and natural world, see Armstrong, "'Leviathan is a Skein of Networks'."

<sup>11</sup> In arguing in favor of this alternative line of thought in *Moby-Dick*, I am also arguing against the heightened significance attached to the Epilogue itself, which—operating like Freudian *Nachträglichkeit*—retroactively establishes, or re-establishes, the personal narrative of Ishmael as a survivor's tale.

<sup>12</sup> For a fascinating discussion of "Etymology," especially with respect to the potentially rich meanings associated with the "incorrectly written" Hebrew word for *whale*, see Schleifer, "Melville as Lexicographer."

<sup>13</sup> See Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel." Bakhtin argues that the "stylistic uniqueness of the novel as a genre consists precisely in the combination of these subordinated, yet still relatively autonomous, unities (even at times comprised of different languages) into the higher unity of the work as a whole: the style of the novel is to be found in the combination of styles; the language of the novel is the system of its 'languages'" (262).

<sup>14</sup> Another extract, attributed to Edmund Burke, mentions the whale only metaphorically and directly addresses the nation-state: "Spain—a great whale stranded upon the shores of Europe" (6). Here again, the leviathan figure of the modern state is invoked (more noteworthy still since it is Spain, arguably the first and initially most powerful modern state), but it is invoked only to show its relative impotence in relation to the world system, here presented in the figure of Europe.

<sup>15</sup> On "conceptual personae," see Deleuze and Guattari 63.

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<sup>16</sup> The reference to *masks* should not be taken to suggest that conceptual personae are employed to hide the truth. “Truth hath no confines,” says Ahab, even in a world in which “all visible objects are but as pasteboard masks” (“The Quarter-deck” 144). The extent to which conceptual personae are “masked” is an effect of the thoughts that they mobilize. Perhaps the most significant conceptual persona in *Moby-Dick* is the white whale itself, the very figure of polysemy and hence inscrutability, “hooded” and masked. What is deeper, more profound, than the whale? And as Nietzsche notes, “all that is profound loves masks” (*Beyond Good and Evil* § 40).

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Arac uses the term *hypercanonization* to refer to the twentieth-century process that has made *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *Huckleberry Finn*—and, really, no others—the “must-reads” of nineteenth-century American literature. See his “Nationalism, Hypercanonization, and *Huckleberry Finn*.”

<sup>18</sup> According to Moretti, the “construction of national identity—henceforth required of the novel—is thus replaced, for the [modern] epic, by a far larger geographical ambition: a global ambition” (50–51). Moretti attempts to draw a sharp distinction between the novel and the modern epic, his genre-transcending genre that includes Goethe’s *Faust*, Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, among others. In order to maintain this distinction, he must occasionally twist genre theory (especially that of Northrop Frye), in order to make the case for the epic’s encyclopaedic nature, and Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, in order to show the epic’s (but not the novel’s) polyphony or heteroglossia. I continue to use the term *novel* with respect to *Moby-Dick*, but I acknowledge that, owing to the extravagant nature Melville’s work, it often exceeds the boundaries of the traditional novel.

<sup>19</sup> This work is, of course, already well underway. For example, much of Wai-chee Dimock’s recent work has focused on the globalization of literary studies. Arguing against the idea (and Benedict Anderson’s in particular) that literature, especially the novel, is tied directly to the nation-state, Dimock writes: “We need to stop thinking of national literatures as the linguistic equivalents of territorial maps. [...] Theorized as the consequence of [a] global readership, literature handily outlives the finite scope of the nation. It brings into play a different set of temporal and spatial coordinates. It urges on us the entire planet as the unit of analysis” (“Literature for the Planet” 175).

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