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Moby-Dick: On Failure of Purpose and the Cunning of Reason

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My brief reflection is that of a fascinated reader completely innocent of the voluminous secondary literature on Melville and *Moby-Dick*. The subtitle signals my own background as a Hegel scholar, but I hope more as an evocative phrase to describe my response than a category applied a priori to the work. More than anything, the contrast between the effects of two failures interests me: Ahab's failure to kill the white whale, and Melville's failure to make Ahab's failure something tragic. For to me, Ahab is the least interesting character in the book, a caricature of brooding vengeance while life goes on all around him. Unlike a tragic hero whose drama expresses the tensions of the time and place that they represent, Ahab's tensions are his own; they are merely idiosyncratic rather than a heightened and concentrated experience of tensions more generally felt. And yet: the novel so evocatively and exhaustively presents those more general tensions—presents the form of life in comparison to which Ahab reads as idiosyncratic—that the novel is a success despite Melville's failure of purpose. Ahab fails at his goal of killing Moby Dick and takes everyone else down with him. But Melville's failure enlivens the thick descriptions of a form of life that are the great joy of reading the book, since their very independence from Ahab and his purpose means that significance of that form of life itself is not brought down with him.

In pointing to Ahab's failure to be tragic I might seem to be relying on what one might consider a social-expressivist theory of tragedy. That is, I have said that Ahab fails to be tragic because he is merely idiosyncratic, not a manifestation of something larger than himself. But I mean this to be a diagnosis of the failure rather than an argument for it. I don't even take anything particular to turn on the notion of

tragedy or any attribution of intent to Melville. And I take no view on whether the inescapability of this failure for this reader is due to my circumstances rather than Melville's skill, or to express any confidence in any such explanation. But I simply find Ahab so completely uninteresting—the least interesting character discussed in any detail aboard the *Pequod*—and yet the novel so compelling, that I am myself compelled to understand how both could be the case.

Part of the difficulty, no doubt, is excessive self-consciousness of Ahab. The inevitable end is not sneaking up on him unawares, but rather he tells Starbuck "Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled."[1] This goes quite beyond fate to a Johannine inflection of predestination. And as Max Weber has shown us, election by grace does not produce fertile soil for the kind of humanism required as the context for a tragic figure; rather, it produces an experience of extreme and anxious loneliness which resolves itself only in the dedication to a calling. We do get this extreme isolation from Ahab: "But even with a broken bone, old Ahab is untouched; and I account no living bone of mine one jot more me, than this dead one that's lost. Nor white whale nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being."[2] It is not that Abab demonstrates this dedication—quite the contrary: it is the three mates and the harpooners who demonstrate this sort of calling. Rather, it is that this value of the dedication to the calling provides the context in which to understand Ahab's obsession. And in this connection it cannot but be viewed as a pathological form. Nothing smacks more of worship of the creature than Ahab's search for vengeance to the detriment of the profitability of the calling of the whaler. But there is nothing tragic or even particularly interesting in this from the perspective of either human character or the individual's relation to social norms—it is just a garden-variety vice, even if it is one that kills the whole crew save one.

To relate this to the contrast with the effective aspect of the book—its portrayal of the collective life on the sea of the whalers—it can be noted that it is impossible to imagine any of the other characters in the book turning into Ahab. There is no sense in which but for fate or even but for the grace of God, the other characters might have been Ahab. Contrast Greek tragedy—any Greek man might have fought for pride at the crossroads as did Oedipus, and any Greek sister might have felt compelled to bury her brother as did Antigone—but there is no attempt by Melville to present Ahab in this way. He is monstrous, not tragic, and the continued

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[1] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Hershel Parker, A Norton Critical Edition (New York London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 480.
[2] Melville, *Moby-Dick,* 479.

comparisons with the whale itself only serve to confirm his uniqueness to the point of caricature: "Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and spite of all that mortal man could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship's starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled."[3]

Of course, the primary contrast to Ahab which Melville offers is that of the first mate, Starbuck. Starbuck the Quaker is precisely as Weber would have him: viewing his courage as "a thing simply useful to him, and always at hand upon all mortally practical occasions. Besides, he thought, perhaps, that in this business of whaling, courage was one of the great staple outfits of the ship, like her beef and her bread, and not to be foolishly wasted."[4] When Ahab reveals his purpose for the voyage, Starbuck explains that he is game, "if it fairly comes in the way of the business we follow; but I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance" which "will not fetch thee much on our Nantucket market."[5]

The second mate Stubbs is similarly far from anyone who could become an Ahab: "A happy-go-lucky, neither craven nor valiant; taking perils as they came with an indifferent air . . ."[6] The exception that proves the rule is the third mate, Flask, "who somehow seemed to think that the great Leviathans had personally and hereditarily affronted him; and therefore it was a sort of point of honor with him, to destroy them whenever encountered."[7] One might expect that the connection between Flask and Ahab is developed in some detail, but primarily Flask appears as a character to whom the other mates speak and even his status as an obstacle to Ahab's vengeance is set down to his "pervading mediocrity."[8]

Instead, the real joy of reading *Moby-Dick* lies in its description of the way a society grows both aboard the ship and between ships. Despite the fact that the whole business of whaling which it describes now seems to us archaic, cruel, and environmentally disastrous—and has for generations of readers now—the thick description of this form of life remains just as compelling as it ever was. It is not that this joy is impersonal—rather that the joy is essentially social. And it is this compelling cast of characters and their interactions, as they voyage over the oceans of the world, that fills the reader with wonder at so full a form of life. This life proceeds despite Ahab's crusade and is only first substantially affected by it at the time of its destruction

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[3] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 487.
[4] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 139.
[5] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 179.
[6] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 141.
[7] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 142.
[8] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 201.

in the sinking of the *Pequod*. Though Ahab himself is said to have "piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down," no one else on the ship seems to participate in that rage and hate.[9] Even Flask's desire to kill whales gives him not hate but rather makes him "a little waggish in the matter of whales; he followed these fish for the fun of it."[10]

One final thought is also inspired by Weber. In the same way that Weber thought that the institutional form which the protestant ethic had animated had long ceased to need that animation, such that that the psychological forces which created that form are now simply habits rather than duties—much less religious duties—it might be the case that the inner dynamic which animates Ahab has simply ceased to speak to us. But why is the form of shipboard life which was produced by men of Ahab's general psychology still so compelling to us several centuries later? Surely that is no less archaic. And yet I suppose that the *Pequod* shows up to us as a distinctive sort of workplace, both with respect to its own crew and its distinctive activities, and with respect to the other ships that it meets in the fishery. But there is no tragedy in the demise of the *Pequod* either, since the dangers of whaling are so much present in the awareness of the way of life itself. Though the *Pequod* sinks, the life goes on.

[9] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 199.
[10] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 142.