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Editor's Introduction: Melville and Interpretation

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Why dedicate a special issue of *Analectica Hermeneutica* to Herman Melville (1819-1891), American novelist and poet? What do works such as *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1856), *Benito Cereno* (1856), or *The Confidence-Man* (1857) have to do with the concerns of hermeneutical philosophy? Melville's literary corpus has not only presented an object of interpretation in the approximately 130 years since the author's death; Melville's texts themselves often make the very process of interpretation a major driver of narrative. In *Benito Cereno*, Melville at one point expresses figuratively Amasa Delano's failure properly to interpret almost anything within the scene aboard the *San Dominick* in a literal knot no one can untie—and which therefore one sailor tosses overboard. Much of the action of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1856) proceeds from the title character's refusal simply to read a legal document (and in a novella that addresses directly the second-person "reader" with frequency, Bartleby himself becomes a "cipher" whose meaning frustrates the first-person narrator long before the story ends in revelation of Bartleby's prior employment at a dead-letter office: a facility for messages that are never received let alone understood). And at one juncture of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael dilates the problem of reading the features and expressions of human faces to the prospect of discerning meaning in the white whale itself:

> Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man's and every being's face. Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable. If then, Sir William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant's face in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can.

Clearly Melville raises questions that concern deeply the same issues that preoccupy Hans-Georg Gadamer and his students, questions that energize the study of hermeneutics. More specifically than that—a point that connects many of the contributors' works that comprise this special issue of *Analectica Hermeneutica*—both Gadamer and Melville seem to have fixated upon interpretation as a fundamentally social act, an undertaking that affirms human community and connectedness. Just as often as Melville draws our attention to scenes of interpretation, as in the several examples above, he frequently expresses his powerful conviction that the decoding of the world occurs within the horizon of intersubjectivity, relationality. In *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852) he insists that "We cannot live only for ourselves," since "A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men; and along these fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects."[1] At first glance Melville's formulation might not seem so distinct from Emerson's notion, about ten years earlier in "Compensation" (1841) that "The world looks like a multiplication-table or mathematical equation, which, turn it how you will, balances itself," since "Every secret is told, every crime punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty"[2]; but even more specifically than Emerson Melville so often addresses the possibility that what sustains these retributive, incipient "fibers" of connection is the cause of interpretation and understanding. Like Gadamer, who insists in *Philosophical Hermeneutics* that "Being that can be understood is language," and that "Thus, understanding is not the mere action of one subject, but the interaction of several subjects," Melville is drawn to moments of shared understanding—but also, just as often, scenes of catastrophic interpretive failure.[3] Remember what may be the most gutting sequence in all of Melville, where Ahab confronts Starbuck—who has "come here to hunt whales, not my captain's vengeance" or so he exclaims in response to Ahab's appeal to the men that they now dedicate themselves and the *Pequod* to hunting not whales but the white whale—by goading him and by implication all the crew to "strike through the mask" of Nature.[4]

It's a ruse, or perhaps it's more accurate to call it a choice of emphasis, pitched to stoke such grievance in the crew, such false recognition and misidentification, as to

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[1] Footnote *Pierre*.
[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo* Emerson, eds. Robert Spiller, et al. 10 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1971-2013), 2: 60.
[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Trans. And ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: U of California P, 1976), 31.
[4] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or, the Whale*. 1851. (New York: Modern Library, 1926), 162.

incite them to self-destruction. When the men of the *Pequod* acquiesce—agreeing to connect en masse with Ahab's death drive—Ishmael admits (perhaps from the vantage of present-tense survivor's guilt) that he too raised his voice with the rest to enjoin what he later calls "our horrible oath."[5] The white whale *means something to all of them*, Ahab insists, even as he also forwards an "inscrutable thing" as the object of his "hate," and therefore necessarily the hated object of them all. Ishmael's shame as he recollects this turning-point of the novel, this scene of mass-interpellation that occurs on the quarter-deck, is not simply the shame of having voted for death. Not simply shame, but despair; for what Ishmael attempts to exorcise as he confesses to having raised his voice with the rest is his despondent understanding that what drives that catastrophic decision to go with Ahab rather than Starbuck is, indeed, precisely, community.

Part of what makes Ahab so resonant today has to do with what should make Gadamer so germane as well: a statement included in *Truth and Method* to the effect that "The essence of the *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open."[6] The opening up of semiotic possibility is the opposite of what occurs in the quarter-deck chapter, but it is precisely what penetrates Ahab's regime of semiotic closure at other moments. One contributor to this special issue, Alexander Crist, writes that "Openness [. . .] has to do with being open to the possibility of transformation and of being wrong about a particular subject matter." Openness in a Gadamerian sense involves a proliferation rather than contraction of interpretive possibility, a proliferation we see in the chapter on "The Doubloon," where suddenly the gold piece that had once arrested the crew's collective capacity to resist Ahab—so ringingly did its signification of Ahab's mission and message then seem—now appears so rich with varieties of meaning. If Melville sides with any of the crew's diverse and often conflicting readings of the doubloon in this chapter, perhaps it is that of Pip, who notes, simply, "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look."[7]

Pip's commentary at this moment is not only key for the implicit democracy of its vision—not simply for the fact that in a democracy, just as on board the *Pequod* and its crew "federated along one keel," all have a capacity not only to look but to hazard one's own reading. The "we" and "they" who look and make meaning are like the generalized other of George Herbert Mead, or the Big Other of Jacques Lacan, both of which signify the abiding notion of something akin to a total community of speakers—all of us, all invested in the prospect of signification itself and all of whose

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[5] Melville, *Moby-Dick,* 414.
[6] Gadamer, *Truth and Method.* 1975. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury 2013), 310.
[7] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 432.

belief therefore is affirmed in every possible utterance. I think this is something like what Crist gets at as he explains that "Hermeneutic trust is a trust in language or linguisticality. It is a trust in the very condition for the possibility of interpretation and understanding to occur at all."[8] Which is to say that when I, you, she, he, we, ye, or they cease looking—cease hazarding one's own idiosyncratic view of sense in the way *Moby-Dick* repeatedly invites us and which Ahab attempts to suspend on the quarter-deck—the possibility of linguistic meaning itself collapses, at least temporarily.

Cornel West has referred to Ahab as a "gangster," an epithet he has also applied to President Trump.[9] Perhaps if the two figures share something, even beyond the apparent similarities that may appear as Ahab throws a rally on the deck of the *Pequod* to convince each of the crew, over the rational objections of his first mate, to join him in striking at the sun itself ("Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me"[10])—a tactic that precludes Make America Great Again in its group psychology if not in its poetry—it is in the capacity of each figure to shut down the process of individual meaning-making. In each scene of conscription, it's really only one person who looks. And I am struck by the contrast between such an asymmetrical economy of meaning-making and the process that has resulted in this special issue. When many months ago I conceived this issue of *Analectica Hermeneutica* in partnership with Professor Ramsey Eric Ramsey, the journal's regular editor, I had a certain general idea of what it might mean to take up that subject of Melville and interpretation through the lens of hermeneutic philosophy; but over the course of taking in the essays that follow this Introduction, my own sense for the scope of the issue shifted entirely. Which obviously is a crucial part of Gadamer's worldview concerning meaning, interpretation, and us, and Melville's too.

The first section of this issue is comprised of four essays, each of which attaches to some aspect of Melville and interpretation. The first, by Ashley Barnes, breaks new ground in addressing a particular aspect of the history of Melvillean interpretation: the Melville revival of the 1920s and its engagement with spiritualism and its "quasi-religious" receptivity to the dead, including dead authors. Following this is Alexander Crist, who approaches Meville's *The Confidence-Man* through the lens of Gadamerian hermeneutics in order to map out the confluences and divergences of

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[8] Alexander Crist, "Hermeneutic Virtue and Moral Masquerading: Gadamer and the Question of Solidarity in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, *Analectica Hermeneutica* 16 (2024): 7.
[9] On Ahab as a gangster, see for example "Radio Open Source" podcast of 20 August, 2020: https://radioopensource.org/moby-dick-in-2020/. On Trump as a gangster, see for example "This is what Neo-Fascism Looks Like," *Democracy Now* 1 December 2016: https://www.democracynow.org/2016/12/1/cornel_west_on_donald_trump_this.
[10] Melville, *Moby-Dick,* 162.

these two thinkers as they consider the mutual dependencies of meaning and sociality. Continuing the exchange concerning Melville and Gadamer, Lisa Watrous maps out the interstices of *Dasein*, connectivity, and the impasses of interpretation in the human connections that sustain *Moby-Dick*, especially the connection of Queequeg and Ishmael. After these two experiments in Gadamerian reading, Thomas Dutoit offers a reading of Melville's posthumously-published *Weeds and Wilding, chiefly, With a Rose or Two* rooted in the interpretive practices of one of Gadamer's great critics, Jacques Derrida. Finally, Andreea Norica Bălan follows with an essay that traces further the Gadamerian echoes that reverberate through Melville's narrative art—this time, *Moby-Dick,* which for Bălan condenses a consideration of "radical finitude" in the figure of Pip, the child of the *Pequod* whose transformation to "oceanic" subjectivity presents us with an illustration for how "hermeneutical events change one's being in the world and one's connection with others."

We follow this collection of essays with an interview conducted by Alenka Koželj with the Slovenian translator Jernej Županič, who discusses with Koželj Melville's reception in Slovenia, a country whose "maritime vocabulary is very limited," and where Melville's magnum opus has been "strangely absent from Slovenian cultural consciousness."

Finally, we are pleased to close this issue with a roundtable formed of contributions by Vítor Alves, Carlos Tapia Martín, William Homestead, and Christopher Yeomans, an exchange that ranges between such various subjects as contemporary architecture undertaken in response to *Moby-Dick*; Kantian ethics in and about Melville; othering; and Melville as an author of speciality. Very lastly, I could not be more delighted to end this issue with a verse response to "The Monkey-Rope" by *Analectica Hermeneutica*'s regular editor, my friend and colleague Ramsey Eric Ramsey.