AH ANALECTA HERMENEUTICA
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HERMENEUTICS / INSTITUT INTERNATIONAL D'HERMÉNEUTIQUE

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 16 (2024)

The World in a Word: A Hermeneutic of Wonder in Melville's Whale

Lisa Fellars Watrous
Michigan Technological University, USA
ORCID: 0009-0002-4059-6745

Abstract

Herman Melville's Moby-Dick is a tale of vengeance, mortality, and human fragility, framed through the lens of language and interpretation. This essay explores the hermeneutic openings in Moby-Dick, emphasizing how Melville's engagement with language invites readers to wonder and make meaning. Drawing on the philosophical hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger and his intellectual successors, as well as Richard Kearney's concept of the "inaugural instant of reckoning," this analysis positions Moby-Dick as a call to cultivate a hermeneutic of wonder. By examining the interplay between the crew, the captain, and the whale, the essay discloses Melville's invitation to confront the ineffable and embrace the beauty of interpretive beginnings. Ultimately, these hermeneutic openings point toward both the everyday call to wonder and the ethical responsibility to navigate life's uncertainties with openness and awe, offering readers a pathway to begin again.

Keywords: Gadamer, Heidegger, wonder, hermeneutics, responsibility, care

> These things are reciprocal; the ball
> rebounds, only to bound forward
> again...Can't ye see the world where
> you stand?
> —Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a tale of rupture, of terror, of human fragility, and of the way we must always, it would seem, begin again and again. Certainly, it is the story of vengeance in the face of the unknown, or better said, it is the song of the man who believes himself capable of controlling, narrowly escaping, and thus overpowering his own mortality. It is also the daring refrain of men on the run from the mundanity of the land in the heart of the sea. And, it is the story of a great and awesome creature who will not let her nemesis have the final word. Indeed, there is no final word. Melville undertakes a wildly hermeneutic adventure that begins, where we always are beginning, in language. The story gets its start, not in the sea, but in a library, with the nostalgia of a bookkeeper found affectionately dusting off his old grammar school books because in them he had been oft reminded of his humanity.[1] As such, the line that seems to be accepted as the starting point for the tale, "Call me Ishmael,"[2] is little more than a punctuating marker amid Melville's love letter to language. *Moby-Dick* begins with an etymology echoed throughout by textual interludes of definition and exegesis. Just as the reader finds herself settled into the narrative she, like the crew of the *Pequod*, is jared from slumber and asked to wonder where it all began. This return is not a nostalgic longing for what might have been, but instead, a comportment toward the ineffable, or as Catherine Keller suggests, "regroup[ing] before the impossible."[3] Awash in language, Melville invites readers to make meaning. And, as we move between the crew, the captain, and the whale we find ourselves first and foremost in the presence of the impossible, which is to say beautiful language, or hermeneutic beginnings.

It is these hermeneutic openings that are of central importance as they point both to the call of everyday wonder, as well as the responsibility left to us in the wake of the wondrous. In other words, Melville's beginnings might assist our own understanding of the possibility of a hermeneutic of wonder. Throughout this essay we will call upon an understanding of philosophical hermeneutics granted to us

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[1] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick Or The Whale* (New York: Penguin Group, 1992), 3.
[2] Ibid., xxxvii.
[3] Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 16.

through the work of Martin Heidegger and his many philosopher-theologian students. Taking as a frame of reference Richard Kearney's call to return to the "inaugural instant of reckoning,"[4] the following sections are an attempt to disclose Melville's hermeneutic openings in order that we too may begin again.

I ~ The long way 'round

> We can begin (and we must always be beginning)
> only where our history has so far brought us.
> —Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle*

Long before the reader is introduced to the titular character of the text she is led, by way of the narrator, Ishmael, to a painting and a sermon. Said differently, we find Ishmael in a world of things and words of ultimate relational significance.[5] In each of these moments we find him filled with foreboding as he recalls the fatal voyage. He knows the journey ends badly, and as he retells the story, he does so after the fact, looking back in order to look ahead. Significantly, the reader cannot interpret the text outside of the narrator's invitation to look back, and looking back, or rather thinking back establishes the inherent hermeneutic effort required to make any kind of sense of the story.

Before the narrator boards the ship he is beckoned by a painting. He cannot make sense of the artwork but he is called, nonetheless, to make it mean something. Melville's description of Ishmael in the presence of the painting is a commemorative hermeneutic invitation.

> On one side hung a very large oil-painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal cross-lights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose. Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched […] Yet there

[4] Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7.
[5] Martin Heidegger, trans. Joan Stambaugh, *Being and Time* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010), 85.

> was a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous painting meant.[6]

The painting requires much of the viewer. He cannot let the image go. He is confronted by what Gadamer calls the, "mysterious intimacy," of art that, "grips our entire being, as if there were no distance at all between us and the work and every encounter with it were an encounter with ourselves."[7] Through the poor lighting of the inn, the smoke that separates the viewer from the painting, amid the shades, shadows, colors, and cracks, Ishmael must interpret, and he is aware that the painting will not be understood in one sitting. He must interpret, over and over.There is no other option. Once confronted by the painting the viewer must return again and again to the site. He must study the composition, reflect on the colors, and consider, if ever so briefly, the artist. Admitting the difficulty of understanding such a piece, the viewer must "ask the neighbors," and converse with others in order to find some kind of meaning. He cannot do it alone. The image is murky, the colors are dark and faded. But he knows the painting is saying *something* to him. Indeed, he is summoned by a disclosure that will ultimately, as Gadamer asserts, "shatter, and demolish the familiar with a joyous and frightening shock."[8] The painting calls the viewer-narrator and the reader alike into question and discloses the world anew.

Melville anticipates his reader well, we may want the whale, but what we need is the world. And, the world is revealed not by statements and assertions of how things are, but rather, by a hermeneutic posture of questioning the things themselves. Possibilities of world and of meaning are evoked in the questions addressed to the narrator by the painting he attempts to understand. The chaos and uncertainty of the journey is manifest in the unknown and extraordinary wonder of the painting. A wonder that demands much and is, following John D. Caputo, an "interpretive imperative that lays claim to us so relentlessly as to constitute the very thing, if there is such a thing, that makes us who we are."[9] Being thus addressed, is according to Gadamer, the "first principle of hermeneutics."[10] However, while it may be the case

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[6] Melville, 13.
[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, edited by Richard E. Palmer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings* (IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 124.
[8] Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," 131.
[9] John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (UK: Penguin, Random House, 2018), 141.
[10] Gadamer, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method* (NY: Continuum, 2004), 298.

that Ishmael is addressed by the work of art, it is one thing to be addressed by something, and an entirely different thing to hear the summons. Here Heidegger's reminder that Dasein is always already in truth and untruth finds ground for Melville's reader.

> Thus, Dasein must explicitly and essentially appropriate what has also been discovered, defend it against semblance [Shein] and dissemblance [Verstellung], and ensure itself of its discoveredness again and again [. . .] Truth (discoveredness) must always first be wrested [abgerungen] from beings.[11]

From the ontic grasp of beings, plans, objects, and assertions, Dasein is called. The painting is a call to the viewer, just as the text is a summons to the reader and we must, it would seem, interpret all the way down. Wresting meaning from the image is a hermeneutic work of wonder. That is to say the image may be aesthetically pleasing, but its beauty, its wonder lies in the interpretive work it evokes from the viewer. Ishmael takes the painting so seriously as to "make an oath" with himself to return again and again to the site of wonder in order to make meaning there.

The throughline of call and response follows Ishmael from the pub to the pew where sanctuary vestments and a minister's words reveal a sacred hermeneutic invocation. "These things are not without their meanings,"[12] he laments as he makes his way through a somber congregation to his seat before the pulpit. The things, which are epitaphs of whalers long lost at sea, awaken the dread of the unknown, and serve as a fleeting reminder of the human condition. "Perhaps," Ishmael remarks, "we have hugely mistaken this matter of life and death, "as "[t]he [deathly] business of whaling is a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of man into Eternity."[13] The would-be whaler must contend with the harsh reality of the fragility of his own existence. It is one thing to be beckoned by an interpretive opening as he stood before an unknown work of art, knowing he can return again to harvest meaning. It is altogether different to face the interpretive imperative made evident in facing one's own death. He may, like all the rest, lose himself to the sea, the whale, the monster. However, Ishmael does not dwell long in this depressing disclosure. Indeed, being-towards-death is, for Heidegger, a primary catalyst for hermeneutic authenticity, and in Ishmael we witness the

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[11] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 213.
[12] Melville, 42.
[13] Ibid.

considerable and bittersweet struggle in every interpretive opening.[14] Just as quickly as the thought is awakened within him he returns to the service with a hopeful lens toward his vocation. He reminds himself of something like latent hope in the very face of doubt, "[f]aith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope," he remarks.[15] The condition for the possibility of despair is also the hope that compels him to the water.

At war with himself and in the disquieting truth of death he resolves otherwise. Or he thinks himself in some way untouchable, that is to say, he is able to distance himself from the death of the others. Ishmael's response within the chapel stands in stark contrast with his having been addressed by the painting at the inn. Whereas the painting is a beginning as well as the evidence of relentless wonder and further inquiry, the church and her somber congregation do little more than conceal the wonder of being. This interpretive road block offers an opening which will later serve as a hermeneutic framework to help the reader justify Ahab's outrageous demands. Ahab, Starbuck, and every whaler that somehow manages to return bears witness to the reasonableness of the journey. Heidegger calls this posture toward death an evasion and an acceptance. Here his words are helpful.

> The evasion of death which covers over dominates everydayness so stubbornly that, in being-with-one-another, [. . .] [i]t wants to bring him back to Dasein by helping him to veil completely his ownmost nonrelational possibility. Thus, the they provides a constant tranquilization about death. But basically, this tranquilization is not only for the "dying person," but just as much for "those comforting him." [. . .] Entangled, everyday being-toward-death is a constant flight from death. Being toward the end has the mode of evading that end–reinterpreting it, understanding it inauthentically, and veiling it.[16]

The difficulty Melville articulates here, in the chapel, is not necessarily the fact of the danger of the business of whaling, but rather the understanding concealed in the activity in the first place. The chapel does not awaken the whaler. He will not return to the chapel as he will the painting. As such, this opening towards death and authenticity is left unattended and will require further hermeneutic wrestling.[17] Certainly Ishmael is moved to thought concerning his own mortality however, he does

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[14] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 243-244.
[15] Melville, 45.
[16] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 243-244.
[17] Ibid., *Being and Time*, 247-248.

not linger there. "Surely," he thinks, "their fate is not mine." After all, it was Sunday, and the minister had prepared a sermon. He must begin again.

As if to further the dread faced by every whaler, Melville introduces Father Mapple's pulpit and readers are met with the familiar biblical tale of Jonah. Jonah is the fugitive prophet who contends with a terrifying great fish and lives to tell about it. He is the very representation of anomalous optimism and hermeneutic entanglement. Father Mapple's sermon is full of the righteous indignation of a whaler who has come to terms with his powerlessness and lived. And, as expected, the response of the congregation is little more than affirmation of what they think they already know of Jonah's story. The sermon, rather than opening up alternative possibilities of interpretation and response, solidifies a long accepted misunderstanding. That is to say, while the minister attempts to dissuade his audience, his words cannot be heard. Gadamer lends insight into the trouble found in making meaning within a tradition mistaken for having been understood once and for all and asserts that the efficacy of the tradition is wholly dependent on the ongoing work of interpretation.[18]

Mapple's Jonah sermon expects too much of an audience ill prepared to make sense of the story, pregnant with meaning, but covered over all the same. Melville anticipates this problem and before Mapple enters the sanctuary, Ishmael pauses before the pulpit. The wonder of this Sunday service is not found in the preacher, but in the hopeful potential of words yet to be uttered. "What could be more full of meaning?" he asks. He then proceeds to call attention to the wonderful reservoir of language gathered in the pulpit.

> [T]he pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.[19]

While the sermon will underscore an already made meaning, the pulpit points to the not yet realized possibility of interpretation anew. In other words, the pulpit is an eschatological rendering of hope grounded in language yet to be spoken. It is the site, at least for Melville, where words make way for hermeneutic redemption. Caputo, following Gadamer, names this redemption as an inherent hermeneutic potential

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[18] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 398.
[19] Melville, 45.

found in a text "able to speak again and again, in ever-new contexts."[20] The power of Father Mapple's pulpit is not the man behind it but the words spoken from it. It is a sacred, ordinary thing that points to the real and true. Unlike the chapel, or the sermon, the pulpit–like the painting–invites conversation over and again, each time calling forth wonder from, as Karl Rahner asserts "the true and real hidden in all the ordinariness" of the world.[21] As the reader follows Ishmael from the church to the ship she is left with the great responsibility of attending to the varied call of wonder found in being-with and among the cacophony of the world of things, of people, of words.[22]

II ~ You and me and everything in between

> Our rich and complex international networks of
> production and distribution have come to an end before,
> but here we are, you and I, and here is humanity.
> —Sally Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*

Of course, Melville does not end his narrative in Nantucket. The pulpit and the painting are the first of many hermeneutic openings along the way to the whale. However, beyond being a catalyst for arousing Ishmael out of (mis)understanding, they also point to a central characteristic of being-in-the-world. Namely, we find ourselves in a world always already shared with others.[23] And, those others with whom we share the world make meaning with us. We need each other to make sense of things. That is to say hermeneutic openings are evident, thanks to language, in relation with others. In other words, interpretation is not a solitary endeavor. The painting requires conversations with the neighbors. The pulpit faces an audience in varying levels of readiness to apprehend and converse with the sacred text. In other words, we cannot and do not make meaning outside of our being-with. The hermeneutic imperative may be inescapably who we are,[24] and we are always in it together. Indeed, according to Gadamer, the task of hermeneutics is, to clarify the miracle of understanding, which is to say sharing in a common meaning,"[25]

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[20] Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information,* 100.
[21] Karl Rahner, translated by Annemarie S. Kidder, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life* (NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 5.
[22] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 115.
[23] Ibid., 116.
[24] Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*, 141.
[25] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 292.

Finding common meaning, or meeting one another in the miracle of hermeneutic possibility, is no small charge. However, Melville once again seems to anticipate the shared interpretive injunction as his characters are led toward one another in such a way that they can only be said to be in relation with one another through and through. Ishmael may have been able to evade impeding thoughts concerning his mortality in the chapel, but once aboard the *Pequod*, in the company of friends there remains little opportunity for willful ignorance. Wonder, here in these hermeneutic beginnings, is found in the arms of a friend, and the labor of the community aboard the ship.

You will remember that Ishmael arrives in Nantucket without a place to stay filled with the hope of a journey he could never imagine. Every inn is full of whalers and dreamers, and at last he agrees to share a room with the strange and foreign cannibal, Queequeg. Melville describes Queequeg as a "tattooed abominable savage," and also a man unlike any other man who treated Ishmael with remarkable "civility and consideration."[26] Ishmael's unlikely friendship with Queequeg reveals the relational dynamic of hermeneutic possibility and is the first of many interpretive beginnings where being-with is a structure of understanding otherwise. Melville's lengthy description of their "bosom friendship," is helpful.

> How it is I know not; but there is no place like a bed for confidential disclosures between friends. Man and wife, they say, there open the very bottom of their souls to each other; and some old couples often lie and chat over old times till nearly morning. Thus, then, in our hearts honeymoon, lay I and Queeqeug–a cosy, loving pair. Be it said, that although I had felt such a strong repugnance to his smoking in the bed the night before, yet see how elastic and stiff our prejudices grow when love once comes to bend them. For now I liked nothing better than to have Queequeg smoking by me, even then.[27]

While the powerful moment where prejudices are washed away in the intimacy of an evening shared certainly lends understanding to a hermeneutic of openness and care toward others of difference, we would do better to reflect on the conversation that took place prior to Ishmael's reflective response. In other words, in their being-with, in their world that was nothing less than words, they uncovered the possibility of caring differently for one another. Language, according to Gadamer, thus had its "true being

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[26] Melville, 30.
[27] Ibid., 59-60.

in dialogue, in coming to an understanding." Furthermore, coming to an understanding is not a passive happenstance, but rather intentional work, purposeful action, a "process in which a community of life is lived out."[28] In the presence of the other, with difference on full display, Ishmael and Queequeg work out their understanding together. They interpret, and they embrace. As they do so they make meaning otherwise, and there was no other way. They learn to love one another, and herein is the wondrous, the impossible. Love is the hermeneutic rendering of a world always already shared. Rahner attends to this kind of being-with in the language of his theology writing,

> When people truly love their neighbor, they drop into and penetrate the ultimate depths of their existence, the ultimate realities of the world and creation and are—without necessarily calling it this—mysteriously encountering God [by] virtue of their love.[29]

How easy it is to love when differences are not so evident. The truly wondrous makes way, not in the realm of similarity, but rather in the hard work of being-with and abiding difference. Which is to say the presence of the impossible that neither party could have foreseen. Caputo calls this a religious experience of the impossible where, "our sense of reality and of its limits is disturbed and we begin to lose our grip and find ourselves in the grip of something that carries us along." In this space we are transformed, "exposed, vulnerable, expectant, in motion, moving, being moved, by the impossible."[30] More than an evening shared between new friends, what Melville brings us to in the early days of Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg is the very possibility of love as a hermeneutic of wonder in a world shared between at least two.

This hermeneutic is further underscored in Melville's account of the interdependent labor demanded between crewmates and harpooners fastened tightly together by the fate of the whale and the monkey rope. Queequeg's life was dependent on Ishmael's. They were inseparably linked and thus found themselves no longer able to look away from the harsh truth of human fragility. Describing the "humorously perilous business" of the monkey rope, Ishmael recalls,

> For better or worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that

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[28] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 443.
[29] Rahner, *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life,* 77.
[30] John D. Caputo, *On Religion 2nd Edition,* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 17.

> instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake [. . .] So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two. Still further pondering, I say, I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he one way or another, has this connexion with a plurality of other mortals.[31]

The monkey rope that connects him to his friend disallows the extravagant evasion of the reality of death, and binds the whalers together such that they cannot flee. Significantly, their interpretation is wholly dependent on being-with one another. While the whalers are no strangers to death, they are, however, placed in relation to it differently by virtue of the monkey rope. Ishmael and Queequeg find themselves in varying degrees of care for each other.[32] Significantly, care structures being-with, and is accompanied by the real possibility of sharing and facing death, which brings forth a hermeneutic invitation to wonder.[33]

Sustained by the monkey rope, Melville leads his protagonist and reader alike to reverence for the humanity of the other of himself, and the common meaning being made between two. Prior to the monkey rope, Ishmael had little desire to consider the very real possibility of his death. The monkey rope thus, not only moves him toward a hermeneutic of authenticity, but also, requires, to some degree, that he linger there. It is to this *lingering* that we now turn.

III ~ Dwelling here, being-there

> Tomorrow he would buy a new notebook and write them down. Tonight he would write down enough. He had time to feel the strangeness of before and after; an hour ago there had been no poems, and now they came like rain and were real.
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> —A.S. Byatt, *Possession*

[31] Melville, 349.
[32] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 118.
[33] Ibid., 249.

Each of the previously discussed hermeneutic openings have underscored the call and response character of (mis)understanding. Or, to use Heidegger's language, we have seen truth and untruth as the constitutive reality of Dasein having fallen prey to the everydayness of a world increasingly resistant to understanding. Furthermore, the work of wresting understanding from concealment is ongoing, "Dasein must explicitly and essentially appropriate what has also already been discovered, defend it against semblance [Schein] and dissemblance [Verstellung], and ensure itself on its discoveredness again and again."[34] As such, interpretive possibilities, or hermeneutic openings require a certain willingness to linger in order to hear the call of truth through the chaotic noise of untruth. And lingering might be said to be the dwelling place of wonder.

Of course you will recall Aristotle and Plato as naming wonder as the origin of philosophy. Significantly, Heidegger follows suit with this origin story and describes wonder as a disruptive dispositional dwelling place. That is to say, we wonder, and can only be wondering from within a world we're always already amid.

> Wonder is the basic disposition that primordially disposes man into the beginning of thinking because, before all else, it displaces man into that essence whereby he then finds himself caught up in the midst of beings as such and as a whole he finds himself caught up in them.[35]

In other words, while it may be the case that we find ourselves wondering before a hitherto inexperienced new thing, that *new* thing cannot appear outside of the world of things and words we have already called home. Jeff Malpas underscores this notion, "[w]onder is thus a returning, sometimes with the abruptness of a sudden shock, to the world to which we always already belong."[36]

Certainly, the common use of *linger* is something like waiting, or loitering, simply staying a little longer in place. However, we would do well to reflect on the word beyond its everyday usage. To linger not only suggests a waiting, or a yielding but also the two-fold possibility of dwelling and desire.[37] To linger is to "dwell, abide,

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[34] Ibid., 213.
[35] Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected Problems of "Logic,"* trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schwer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 147.
[36] Malpas, Jeff, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being.* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 267.
[37] See Ramsey Eric Ramsey's, "Before the Work of Art: Education as Yielding to Art's Address," *Phainomena*, vol. 28. 110-111, 2019, 307-322.

or stay," and it is also called upon to indicate a "longing, craving, or hankering."[38] Heidegger names dwelling the "manner in which mortals are on the earth."[39] Said differently, to linger is to stay a while, to recollect and reflect, on account of that which we lack, and know not what, and may not yet have the sense to articulate. And, to linger is to occupy a middle ground somewhere between truth and untruth, the sacred and the profane, the earth and the sky. It is, akin to the account Plato's Socrates offers of Love, the child of Plenty and Poverty, who beckons time and again to understanding otherwise.[40] That is to say, dwelling or lingering is how and who we are. We pause before the painting, the conversation, the other, not because we have already understood, but because we want to understand. Significantly, the desire to understand, that leads to wonder is not, as Malpas warns, mere puzzlement or curiosity that will be resolved in some kind of answer.[41] Rather, lingering brings forth wonder, and makes way for understanding. To linger is to recollect oneself, to withdraw from the everyday within the everyday and somehow make our way home. This ongoing movement of return and wonder, or lingering in the everyday and longing for home is central to Melville's insistent hermeneutic provocation.

For the most part, the hermeneutic invitations we've explored thus far have been from the vantage of a generally amenable subject. That is to say, Ishmael, though taken up with everyday concerns, is a character in whom we see the hopeful possibility found in being at least willing to heed the call of understanding. He seems aware of his misunderstanding and so he waits, he listens, and he finds himself over and again in a space of interpretive possibility toward what he does not know. However, this orientation toward understanding is not the norm. We are, according to Heidegger, in flight from thought. Our everyday concerns and moods cloud our thinking and make it difficult to find relief let alone linger.[42] In many ways, Captain Ahab serves to remind of this very challenging reality. He cannot see further than the nemesis he pursues. His understanding is as limited as the forestructures of thought that hold him captive.[43] Captain Ahab's rigidity and arrogance, then, stand in stark contrast to Ishmael's hermeneutic humility and provide a frame of reference where wonder languishes amid interpretive stopgaps of our own making.

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[38] *Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "linger (v.)," March 2024, https://doi-org.services.lib.mtu.edu/10.1093/OED/9408004489.*

[39] Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Basic Writings*, edited by J. Glenn Gray and Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 326.

[40] Plato, *Symposium* trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[41] Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place,* 253.

[42] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 131.

[43] Ibid., 151.

Melville strikes a balance between Ishmael's perception of Ahab's obsession with hunting the whale and the crew's desire to follow Ahab to their most certain end. It is this tension that brings Ahab's dangerous rigidity into focus. Neither the clear thinking of Starbuck, nor joyful recklessness of Stubb could alter Ahab's course.

> Such a crew, so offered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge [. . .] For one, I gave myself up to the abandonment of the time and the place; but while yet all a-rush to encounter the whale, could see naught in that brute but the deadliest ill.[44]

The journey begins with Ahab as a myth of sorts. He's on the ship, but no one has seen him. He stays below deck with an undisclosed illness shrouded in the lore of the sea. When he finally emerges, he does so with a spirit so forceful as if to awaken himself from the internal conflict that brought him to the *Pequod* in the first place. He raises his war-cries against the white monster of the water and enthusiastically beckons the crew to join his vengeful journey. And, then he makes his presence daily known on deck. He broods in anger and grief. He fantasizes over a successful hunt. He leads his crew to their death. Of course, these details are well known. However, more troubling than Ahab's tenuous relationship to reality, is his irreverence in the face of the great creature and the towering waters of her residence. That is to say, while Melville was certainly calling attention to Ahab's consuming vengeance, his hubris in the presence of the unknown was far more fatal. He could not linger, he would not wonder, he thought he knew what he could not have known. He treats both whale and water as predictable, and in so doing ceases to wonder, and as Wendell Berry powerfully notes, Ahab thus, "gives up on life."[45] Malpas follows a similar refrain and reminds that "wonder involves a way of seeing the world, and the things in it, that is independent of what one may know or what one can explain, even though it may also have an important role in making knowledge or explanation possible."[46] Wonder is the beginning of understanding allowed by having misunderstood in the first place. In other words, misunderstanding is the condition for the possibility of understanding and wonder arrives as the beautiful consequence of having come to understand at all.

Thankfully, Ahab's story is not merely one of hubris and the absence of wonder. Melville, by way of a coin, causes Ahab to linger, if only for a little while and

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[44] Melville, 203.
[45] Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition.* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 6.
[46] Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place,* 253.

along the way we meander through various interpretive possibilities of world and word.

> But one morning, turning to pass the doubloon, he seemed to be newly attracted by the strange figures and inscriptions stamped on it, as though now for the first time beginning to interpret for himself in some monomaniac way whatever significance might lurk in them. And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston to fill up some morass in the Milky Way.[47]

After making his morning rounds about the deck and pausing to gaze at the sea in hopeful anticipation of finally capturing the whale, Ahab notices the dubloon, as if he'd never seen it before. There were no answers to be uncovered in the presence of the coin. Neither he nor the crew could predict with any kind of accuracy what was to be the success of their voyage and thus the fate of the whale or the dubloon. He had seen the coin a thousand times before. But, on this morning, it caught him off guard and he lingers there so enamored that the crew begins to take notice.[48] And then, as if by miracle, those aboard the *Pequod* one after the other pass by the coin to offer their interpretation, to preach a word about the world. Ahab sees himself and his pain. Starbuck sees destruction and failure, and then he prays. Stubb reads the stars and prophesies concerning the times, the seasons, and the sure success of their voyage. Others see nothing but a coin. Queequeg takes and compares notes. Pip tries but cannot make sense at all. None of the interpreters nor their interpretations are superfluous, and if taken seriously may be read as invitations to participate in the language-world inhabited and shared aboard the *Pequod*. Each of the crew members respond with sincerity to what Caputo calls the "business of life," which is to, "strain to hear what is addressing us, to enter into dialogue in which the world beckons and respond."[49] Thus Ahab lingers before the dubloon. His desires, like our own, may be as banal as the day before, but, if only for a moment, he dwells amid hermeneutic wonder and, remarkably, he leads his crew to do the same, enlarging their world by the very words they share.

Time and again Melville leads the reader to hermeneutic openings that demand nothing less than lingering in the face of the unknown from within an everyday marked by the mundane. Ishmael was the lone survivor of the *Pequod's* first and final voyage.

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[47] Melville, 470.
[48] Ibid., 471.
[49] Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*, 310.

But we are not alone. We are here, in the world and of the world and so, we too must begin again. We respond. And we, like Ishmael, are wanderers, for whom it is, "generally well known that out of the crews of Whaling vessels (American) few ever return in the ships on board of which they departed."[50]

[50] Melville, l.