

Michael Roffo
5-9-2019
ENG 391MM
Final Paper

Punishing Piety: Humane Starbuck among the Cannibals

In Herman Melville's famed magnum opus *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab rallies his castaway crew against the leviathan of legend who made him a one-legged man: Moby Dick. Only first mate Starbuck objects to the mad captain's suicidal crusade before Ahab leads the *Pequod*'s entire crew to a watery grave as "both jaws, like an enormous shears, sliding further aft, bit[e] the craft completely in twain" (Melville 347). The only survivor is one storyteller who bids us "call me Ishmael" (Melville 1). As Ishmael himself asked in an obvious invitation to critical analysis, "How it was that [the crew] so aboundingly responded to the old man's ire—by what evil magic their souls were possessed... all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go" (Melville 117). Firstly the pariahs and pagans who crewed the *Pequod* were all outsiders of the Christendom from which they sailed; perhaps they rally under Ahab's leadership because in the whale and/or its whiteness they, not unlike their mad captain, saw "all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down... visibly personified... and made practically assailable". In contrast, first mate Starbuck's family ties in Nantucket as well as his pious Quaker upbringing make him an insider of Christendom, likely prompting his utter unmindfulness that whiteness could inspire horror, which in turn motivates his dissent from the homicidal hunt. Most interestingly, the same insider-morality that sparks Starbuck's objection also spurs his practical failure to sabotage Ahab's murderous mission. The true pariah among Ahab's crew of

outcasts, Starbuck's differing identity as an insider of Christendom drives not only his moral opposition to the white whale hunt but also his practical failure to thwart it.

Since Ahab's *Pequod* is crewed by the outcasts of Christendom, their shared horror of idealized whiteness makes them eager recruits for his vengeful hunt against a white whale. Indeed Ishmael, Ahab, and the crew alike constitute Christendom's outsiders. Our narrator Ishmael's very namesake, in the Bible, is the son of Abraham—but not by his wife. Cast into the wilderness as a boy, Ishmael becomes a wild man and an outsider. Similarly our sailor Ishmael introduces himself with the remark that he first went whaling because he had “nothing in particular to interest [him] on shore” (Melville 1)—presumably not even family or friends, making our narrator a sure outsider. As for Ahab, on a portentous evening when it is too late to turn back from the suicidal crusade, he laments to Starbuck an isolation paralleling Ishmael's. Yet far from sharing Ishmael's ironic detachment, the mad captain apostrophes with heartrending sincerity: “... let me look into a human eye... By the green land; by the bright hearthstone! ... I see my wife and my child in thine eye” (Melville 343). By mentioning his hearthstone specifically, Ahab raises symbolism of welcoming homes, of love and belonging, which for forty years in “the walled-town of a Captain's exclusiveness,” he has never known. Such is the “desolation of solitude” that makes Ahab call himself “cannibal old me” (Melville 343). Most importantly, since Ishmael calls Ahab's crew “renegades, mongrels, and cannibals” (Melville 73), then not only Ishmael and Ahab, but the *Pequod*'s entire crew as well exist on the fringes of the society from which they sail. Indeed, Ishmael, Ahab, and the crew alike do not belong to the very society of Nantucket Christendom which they so weary and palsy themselves to serve.

These characters' outsider-status also triggers their revulsion at the idea of whiteness. In the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael remarks that he understands whiteness differently from mainstream society. Although in many places whiteness "enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own," he objects that "there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness... in blood" (Melville 118). Specifically, whiteness is "the great principle of light... [which] would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper..." (Melville 122). As Ishmael explains, to lepers like him, it is *society* that seems the leper, making Ishmael feel like a traveler in the arctic circle—lo! in what place could a person feel more isolated from society?—who, not wearing sunglasses, like a "wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him... And of all these things the Albino Whale was the symbol." (Melville 122). Hence for Ishmael the outsider, whiteness "strikes panic to the soul" because for him it speaks partly of a lone wanderer, north of the arctic circle, desperate, wretched, cast out. As for Ahab, in "The Symphony," his confession of soul-rending loneliness, of bitter isolation from society, is directly followed by his lamenting "What... cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing..." (Melville 343). Since Ahab despairs his isolation then ponders his motives, it may just be that the isolation on his mind is exactly what motivates him against the horror he sees in the whiteness. Thus, for Ahab, too, a castaway identity prompts a hatred of whiteness. In "Midnight, Forecastle", we learn an outsider crewmember's attitude towards whiteness as the crew fraternize after Ahab's announcement. One Spanish sailor makes entertainment by provoking the African harpooner, Daggoo: "thy race is

the undeniable dark side of mankind—devilish dark at that. No offence,” to which Daggoo grimly rebuts “... mannikin! White skin, white liver!” (Melville 110). Therefore though the whiteness of the whale may represent to Ishmael a philosophical horror, to Ahab the “general rage” of mankind, to another sailor it may be the face of prejudice. Indeed, the Pequod is crewed by caucasian Christendom’s outsiders, and all may see a different horror in the whiteness of the whale.

Since they see such evil “visibly personified” and “made practically assailable” in the whale, Ishmael—and evidently numerous crewmembers like him—rally to Ahab’s frenzied cause of vengeance. In “The Whiteness of the Whale”, Ishmael confesses specifically that because the “whiteness of the whale... above all things appalled” him (Melville 118), his “shouts had gone up with the rest” (Melville 112). Thus just as Ishmael’s outsider-status prompted his horror at whiteness, the whiteness horrified him *so* deeply that he thus “gave [him]self up to the abandonment of the time and place...” even as he “could see naught in that brute but the deadliest ill” (Melville 117). For Ahab’s part, in “The Quarter-Deck” he cites a philosophical basis for his hunt quite similar to Ishmael’s in “The Whiteness of the Whale”. Ishmael references “that other theory of the natural philosophers” that suggests that all other early hues besides whiteness are “but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without” (Melville 122). Ahab, to Starbuck and before the entire crew, proclaims similarly that all visible objects are “as pasteboard masks,” that, “To [him], the white whale is that wall...” and “if man will strike, strike through the mask,” then the “prisoner” could “reach outside” (Melville 103). In Ahab’s own words, then, *Moby Dick* makes practically assailable those “subtle

demonisms of life and thought” which whiteness represents. Hence Ahab finds eager recruits in the *Pequod*’s crew of cannibals and castaways.

In a stark contrast from Ahab’s castaway crew, Starbuck’s insider-status in Christendom prompts his unmindfulness of any horror in whiteness, which in turn drives his opposition to the vengeful hunt. Indeed, Starbuck’s Nantucket family and steadfast Quakerism make him mainstream society’s insider amongst Ahab’s crew of outcasts. Unlike Ishmael who had “nothing particular to interest me on shore”, (Melville 1) Starbuck’s return is longingly awaited by his young wife and son (Melville 72). Such husbandry gives him active belonging in Nantucket’s mainstream society. But it may be Starbuck’s Quaker piety that most distinguishes him from the pariahs and pagans he commands. Shortly after Ahab’s devilishly prideful declaration that he would “strike the sun if it insulted me”, the first mate remarks “Oh, God! to sail with such a heathen crew...” That Starbuck, firstly, cries out to God, and secondly, that his concern is about the “*heathen* crew, [emphasis mine]” demonstrates how alone he feels in his particular faith aboard the *Pequod*. Next he apostrophes dramatically that God—“blessed influences”—might give him strength: “Stand by me, hold me, bind me, O ye blessed influences!” (Melville 107). Hence Starbuck’s differing religious faith and young Nantucket family distinguish him among the crew of Christendom’s outsiders.

Starbuck’s Quaker piety leads him not to abhor the whale’s whiteness as Ahab’s crew of castaways does. These Nantucket Quaker values, for example, shape his attitude towards whiteness in his response to Ahab’s initial declaration of intent to seek revenge on the white whale: “[Moby Dick] simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems *blasphemous*” (Melville 103, emphasis mine). In calling the

whale a “dumb thing,” he testifies that he doesn’t see the “intelligent malice”; Starbuck is blind to any such horror in the whiteness. When Starbuck asserts that the whale acts on “blindest instinct,” he denies that whiteness represents anything meaningful; he denies that killing the thing would “strike through” some certain “mask”. Indeed Starbuck denies the entire moral value of Ahab’s goal, asserting that it is “blasphemous”! Thus it is Starbuck’s caution against blasphemy—which he learned in mainstream Christendom—that prompts his total unmindfulness of the potential horrors of the whiteness of the whale. Note further that during Ahab’s announcement—“It’s a white whale, I say... skin your eyes for him, men” (Melville 102)—it is pagan cannibals Tashtego, Daggoo, and Queequeg who “at the mention of the wrinkled brow and crooked jaw [Moby Dick’s features] they had started as if each was separately touched by some specific recollection” (Melville 102). That it is three pagan sailors who acknowledge familiarity with the white whale, and at once declare war on it, suggests further that it is Starbuck’s unique insider-status in mainstream Christendom that makes him the *only* mate unmindful of whiteness’s horrors.

Since he doesn’t accept its justifications in the supposedly evil whiteness of the whale, Starbuck accordingly dissents from the hunt. In the chapter “Dusk”, for example, Starbuck thinks to himself that the White Whale is the “demigorgon” of “such a heathen crew” — in other words Starbuck supposes that they worship the whale like an underworld deity. But as the “Moby Dick” chapter explains, far from an object of the heathen crew’s worship, the white whale is the embodiment of a perceived evil which they rebel against: “Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred White Whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it” (Melville 115). Thus Starbuck, from his mainstream Christian perspective,

misunderstands the hunt, mistaking rebellion for worship. Moreover, with his eager wife and child awaiting his safe return, loyal Starbuck cannot sponsor the perilous hunt, especially if it “will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market” (Melville 113). Hence while Ahab’s crew of pariahs and pagans eagerly hunt the white whale, Starbuck’s Quaker faith and Nantucket family both motivate his dissent.

Most interestingly, this same insider piety that spurs Starbuck’s dissent also prompts his failure to thwart Ahab’s murderous mission, both in “The Quarter-Deck” and in “The Musket”. When Ishmael introduces the first mate, he remarks that Starbuck’s “far-away domestic memories of his young Cape wife and child... [did] restrain the gush of dare-devil daring” (Melville 72). Ishmael thus explains that shore-bound belongingness and family obligation, nowhere among the castaway crew, in noble Starbuck had restrained the daring that surely drove the others on their suicidal crusade. Ishmael continues that Starbuck, “while generally abiding firm in the conflict with seas... cannot withstand... more spiritual terrors... from the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man” (Melville 72). Indeed Ahab is such a mighty man and certainly enraged; such a foe, combined with an insider’s moral scruples regarding mutiny and murder, conspire against Starbuck to stay his hand even when he has a chance to stop mad murderous Ahab. Accordingly, when concluding his war-proclamation about “striking through the mask,” Ahab remarks that “Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion,” to which “lowly” Starbuck mutters simply “God keep me!—keep us all!” (Melville 103). Just as Ishmael explained, Starbuck, no rebel indeed, puts up little fight against the enraged and mighty captain—though he may lead them all to their deaths.

In “The Musket,” Starbuck’s piety completes his failure to thwart Ahab. On his way to Ahab’s cabin to report a fair wind, as Ishmael tells it: “Starbuck was an honest, upright man; but out of Starbuck’s heart, at that instant when he saw the muskets, there strangely evolved an evil thought... with its... good accompaniments.” After all, Ahab’s continued leadership would “make him the wilful murderer of thirty men and more... If, then, he were this instant—put aside, that crime would not be his... A touch, and Starbuck may survive to hug his wife and child again.—Oh Mary! Mary!—boy! boy! boy!”. Thus, Starbuck’s thoughts of his Nantucket family—his unique ties to mainstream society—motivate his reasoning that shooting Ahab could save many lives onboard and at home. But note how his Nantucket-bred Quaker piety ultimately stays his hand at the pivotal trigger. Ishmael tells us that “Starbuck seemed wrestling with an angel... he placed the death-tube in its rack”. By “wrestling with an angel,” Ishmael means that Starbuck at that moment was grappling with the “more spiritual” forces that Ishmael earlier explained that Starbuck “cannot withstand”. Indeed with the musket in his hands Starbuck confesses that “I can’t withstand, thee, then, old man” (Melville 325). Hence just as an insider’s family ties motivate Starbuck’s opposition to the hunt, an insider’s Christian piety seemingly enables Ahab’s unholy quest towards its murderous and suicidal end.

Indeed, among Ahab’s crew of outcasts, Starbuck is the true Ishmael; his differing insider-status prompts not only his ethical dissent to Ahab’s mad mission, but most interestingly, the untimely collapse of his will to foil it. Since Ahab’s castaway crew share his resentment against whiteness, they rally with him against Moby Dick. But since homegrown Starbuck is unmindful of whiteness’s horrors, he sees only blasphemy in the hunt. In the end, the same Christian morality that spurs his dissent also prompts his failure to correct the Pequod’s unholy

and suicidal course. Indeed, the Pequod's crew of "renegades, castaways, and cannibals" are outsiders in society—but in Pequod society, it is Starbuck, staid, steadfast man of family and faith, who is the outsider; even as the shouts go up around him he sees little horror in whiteness and musters no fervor for the hunt. Ahab and Starbuck, then, are the same man in two periods of life: the dutiful whale hunter serves initially as an insider who treasures his domestic ties—but decades of ocean-bound isolation make the whale hunter not of the very society that he so wearies himself to enrich—wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?