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THE POLITICS AND ART
OF HERMAN MELVILLE

MICHAEL PAUL
ROGIN

"Moby-Dick and the
American of 1848"



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CHAPTER 4

MOBY-DICK AND THE AMERICAN 1848

I

The ratification of the Mexican peace treaty in 1848, writes David Potter, "was an ironic triumph for 'Manifest Destiny,' an ominous fulfillment for the impulses of American nationalism. It reflected a sinister dual quality in this nationalism, for at the same time when national forces, in the fullness of a very genuine vigor, were achieving an external triumph, the very triumph itself was subjecting their nationalism to internal stresses which, within thirteen years, would bring the nation to a supreme crisis."

The news that Mexico and the United States had agreed to peace reached President Polk on February 19, 1848. Three days later, revolution broke out in Paris. While the Senate was considering the Mexican peace treaty, a Parisian mob forced Louis Philippe to abdicate. Evert Duyckinck's brother, George, was in Paris during the February revolution. He joined the crowd that sacked the King's throne room, and climbed over the barricades the next morning. George Duyckinck welcomed the February revolution as "the most purely democratic event that has ever taken place." "It is a proud thing now to be an American in Europe," he wrote his brother, "for our country leads the world."¹

President Polk called the 1848 French revolution "the most important event of modern times," and he was pleased that America was the first country to recognize the republic. Senator William Allen of Ohio introduced a resolution supporting the new government; it passed unanimously. Rallies were held around the country, like the one in St. Louis on April 28, for the "Nations of Europe Now Struggling for Freedom." The mayor and first citizens of St. Louis, and the city's ethnic groups, joined in that demonstration. The *St. Louis Republican*, in a full-page announcement, pictured the American eagle holding a banner, on which were written the names of Italy, France, Germany, and Poland.²

Republican joy was short-lived, however, for the Europe of 1848 disintegrated in class war. The Parisian citizens of February battled the poor in June. Middle-class anxiety about the social question weakened republican-

ism elsewhere, and made it more vulnerable to the return of the kings. "Internal stresses" also threatened the "external triumph" of American nationalism; those stresses revolved around slavery. John Quincy Adams fell senseless in the House on February 21, 1848. Henry Adams dated the end of the "ancestral and revolutionary chapter" of his education from his grandfather's death, and the nomination of his father as the Free-Soil candidate for Vice President later that year. Those events, wrote Adams, cast before them "the shadow of the Civil War to come." Adams saw "the year 1848" in America as the culmination and defeat of "the year 1776"; that was the relation between 1789 and 1848 in Europe.³

Slavery always stood in contradiction to the ideals of 1776. The Mexican War made that contradiction a threat not simply to the Declaration of Independence but to American institutions as well. The Presidential election of 1848 pitted the Mexican War hero, Zachary Taylor, against the foremost proponent of American expansionism, Lewis Cass. The commitment of both major parties to Manifest Destiny only raised the question of slavery, the question that American nationalism was supposed to bury. The conflicts over California's admission to statehood, the expansion of slavery to the other territories won from Mexico, and the return of fugitive slaves posed, by 1850, the gravest threat to the Union since its founding. There was a crisis over slavery from the Mexican peace treaty in 1848 through the passage of the 1850 Compromise and the enforcement of its fugitive slave provisions in 1851. Those dates, 1848-1851, also mark the initial triumph of the revolution in France, and its final defeat by Louis Bonaparte. Just as Bonaparte's coup destroyed French liberty in order to preserve the social order, so the Fugitive Slave Law betrayed the principles of the Declaration of Independence to avert a civil conflagration. In the wake of the Mexican War, slavery had threatened to destroy the Union. That is the moment I label the American 1848.

"I come to this session of Congress with melancholy forebodings," announced Jefferson Davis early in 1850, "that it might be the last of our Government." On January 1, a South Carolina newspaper announced, "When the future historian shall address himself to the task of portraying the rise, progress, and decline of the American Union, the year 1850 will arrest his attention, as first . . . marshalling . . . those hostile forces . . . which resulted in dissolution." A month later Henry Clay told the Senate, "I have never before arisen to address any assembly so oppressed, so appalled, so anxious." The Senate's anxiety was over disunion, and of "such a war," said Daniel Webster, "as I will not describe, in its twofold character." Everyone knew what Webster feared—fraternal carnage and racial massacre. "A war of brothers," warned Sam Houston, is "the most sanguinary of mortal strife. Consider the civil war that has raged between Austria and Hungary."

Houston was referring to the Hapsburg suppression of Hungarian independence after 1848. An American civil war, said Clay, would be worse. No war in history would be "so furious, so bloody, so implacable, so exterminatory . . . with such bloodshed and enormities, as that which shall follow . . . dissolution."⁴

The link between the bloodshed in Europe and the danger facing America was not lost on the Senate. It was raised as well, in the summer of 1850, in an anonymous essay in the *Southern Quarterly Review*. "California Gold and European Revolution" shared its explicit subject with America's political men, and its imaginative universe with *Moby-Dick*. The essay at once merged the topics of California gold and European revolution and tried to keep them distinct. It began with anxiety about the destiny of America, and tried to displace that anxiety onto Europe. Its splitting of America from Europe broke down, however, and the fate it envisioned for the old world returned to haunt the new.

The occasion of the essay was the discovery of gold in California. Alchemists dreamed that gold was the universal solvent, says the *Review*, and indeed it is the "solvent of social, political, and domestic ties." "All ties, all bonds snap" before the "passion for gain." "Universal greed" is the "one insatiable desire, preying like the vulture of Prometheus" on the vitals of the social body. "The holy affections of the fireside," we are warned, "loyalty and patriotism, and those local attachments . . . our duty to our parents, our children . . . our fellows, our country and our God, all vanish into thin air." "All that is solid melts into air," wrote Marx in 1848 about the corrosive impact of capitalism on social dependence and family life. Two years later the *Southern Quarterly Review* seemed to echo his words.⁵

Gold had been discovered in a new part of America, but the *Review* transferred the dangers it posed to Europe. "The passion for gain" characterized the European system, not the American. Europe was different from America, for there the passion for gain had created social classes. "The universal prevalence of the anarchical spirit, and the universal lust of revolution" sprang up in Europe from "the innermost substance of the social organization." European society was split between the wealthy few and the crowded, impoverished many, and "the passion which is mere greed with Dives, becomes the necessity and the tormenting demon of Lazarus." Poor man Lazarus of the gospel song, passive on earth, rose up to heaven, while the rich man, Dives, went to hell. The *Review's* Lazarus rose up in social revolution. The "hollow mask" of the French government hid the demon of poverty, said the *Review*. When it was stripped off, and the governments of Europe toppled after it, the European system faced the genie it had raised: "The lid has been removed from the cauldron; the giant has swelled to his huge and terrible proportions"; the giant, concluded the *Review*, signaled the demise of the old world.⁶

While the beast swelled up out of his European cauldron, "that new land of promise . . . the Canaan of Mammon," rose in the American West. "We follow the descending sun, to that land where the light reigns, while Europe is covered with darkness—to the new Eldorado, which was so recently the prize of American prowess, and has already become the apple of discord to the victorious States." The European conjurer let loose a demon that was destroying him; by contrast, the "Golden City" of San Francisco "arises as rapidly as rose by enchantment the single palace of Aladdin." Europe will "descend" into revolutionary darkness; America will "ascend" into the promised land.⁷

The invocation of Aladdin, a commonplace of American technological celebration, had acquired a hysterical edge by 1850. To bury the fears of servile uprising and civil war, fears generated by California gold, the *Review* resorted to a hyperbole of European hell and American heaven. But in that very rhetoric, catastrophe returned to American shores.

Europe's fate reminded the essayist of a tale from his childhood. It is the story of an enchanted rock in the Indian seas, which drew to itself like a magnet the bars, bolts, and nails of passing ships. The *Review* explains, "the luckless mariners were drowned—the dissevered spars, deprived of all bonds of cohesion, floated at the mercy of the waves. Such a rock may California prove to Europe." But "California Gold" points to California as a rock for America, not Europe. The gold with which it begins is American, the passion for gain is American, and to follow "the descending sun" to the West is to enter darkness, not light. "The golden prize of American prowess" in Mexico made California an "apple of discord" to American states, not European ones. "The Canaan of Mammon," fusing promise and corruption, is an explosively mixed metaphor. Europe may be mercenary, but America is the "slave of the dollar," and in spite of the author's conscious intention, his phrase evokes the acquisitive North, the slave South, and the conflict between them.⁸

The essay concludes,

We have had recourse to quotation, and metaphor, and allegory—but the language of ordinary intercourse is feeble to convey the narration of events wholly beyond the sphere of ordinary occurrence: and the vivid imaginations of fable, and poetry, and satire, have in our day become only the inadequate analogies of passing realities. In our day the dream and the vision have been less dazzling than the truth.⁹

The "poetry" of "California Gold" was surely "less dazzling than the truth." Perhaps a better fable would offer less "inadequate analogies" to American history. If the political essay used allegory, might not fiction offer more embodied poetry and superior history as well? In the *Southern Quarterly Review* an "insatiable voracity hunts for a world of gold." In *Moby-*

Dick an insatiable ship's captain hunts a white whale. Ahab, like the gold-hunter, "pursue[s] a phantom which elude[s]" him. He, too, abandons family, local attachments, and secular and religious restraints, as a Promethean vulture also gnaws at his vitals. "Every man's hand will be against every man," predicts the *Review* for the European future; Ishmael, the subject of the biblical prophecy, narrates *Moby-Dick*. Lazarus makes a revolution against Dives in Europe; he ships out on the American *Pequod*. "Poor Lazarus," shivering in front of the Spouter-Inn while Dives wears a "red silken wrapper," goes whaling "down to the fiery pit" to keep out the cold. Stripping away the "hollow mask" of European government reveals the "tormenting demon" of poverty; Ahab, possessed by his demon, strikes through the "pasteboard mask" of the whale. His quest gives him "magnetic ascendancy," as ship and crew revolve around his brain. But Ahab's magnet is the white whale, and it draws the *Pequod* to the fate of those fabled ships that sailed before it into the enchanted Asian seas.¹⁰

Allan Melvill had visited Europe in 1818. Like the *Southern Quarterly Review*, he saw the "bloody devastation" of war "grinding to the earth the face of the poor . . . tearing asunder the ties of nature, and annihilating forever the peace of families." America was his refuge from what he called the "charnel house" of Europe.¹¹ "California Gold" struggled to maintain the contrast between the European charnel house and American nature. But Herman Melville had found the ties of nature, the peace of families, and the fate of the poor more problematic in America. For Ishmael, "Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel house within." (*Moby-Dick*, 163) Seeking revenge against nature's charnel house, Ahab recreated it on the *Pequod*. Escaping from the past into the West, from social crowds into nature, from class conflict into racial domination, America escaped into a bloody Civil War. In flight from the American social body, liberal nationalism opened it up. The extravagant claims made for America as the home of republican ideals were called to account by the American 1848. *Moby-Dick* is the great work of art produced from that moment.

II

"Each manufacturer," warned a French deputy after 1830, "lives in his factory like the colonial planters surrounded by slaves." The deputy's French slaves were metaphoric, but the class civil war that he feared as the consequence of liberal revolution came to pass in 1848. American slaves were real, but neither servile uprising nor civil war materialized in America in 1850. Disunionist conventions assembled early that year, secessionists in Jackson's Nashville and abolitionists in Melville's New York. But they were still only

talking. Clay's warning against the enormities that would follow dissolution was just talk as well. Like the sea story Herman Melville began shortly after Clay's speech, the senator's hyperbole may seem to typify the "bombastic . . . poetic style" Tocqueville found among American orators, who inflated their language to compensate for the paltriness of their experience.¹²

"Others appeal to history: an American appeals to prophecy," noted a London periodical in 1821. Clay had no real June days, Roman uprisings, or imperial carnage to flesh out his anxieties. He accurately predicted, however, a civil war that dwarfed its counterparts in Europe. *Moby-Dick*—the only one of Melville's works to draw upon the prophetic books of the Bible—was prophetic, too. Marx's *Class Struggles in France*, Tocqueville's *Recollections*, Alexander Herzen's memoirs, and Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* all depict actual revolutionary struggles. *Moby-Dick* projects into imaginative space a world constructed from elements of the political discourse and social tension in which Melville was entangled. There is no realistic society on the *Pequod* made coherent by relations among its characters. The *Pequod* is unified symbolically, by the hunt for the white whale. But *Moby-Dick* is not a symbolist text which flees history to some deeper, universal pattern. Rather, it embodies the catastrophe prophesied in 1850, explores its sources, and comments on the efforts to escape it.¹³

Melville began *Moby-Dick* when the fears of disunion were strongest. The crisis lasted for months, and President Taylor died at its height. It was resolved finally in September, when the various components of the 1850 Compromise plugged the leaks, in Clay's metaphor, that threatened to sink the ship of state.¹⁴ The Compromise admitted California as a free state, permitted slavery in the other territories won from Mexico, abolished the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and established a harsh law for the return of alleged runaways. Then, as Melville was writing the climax of his tale, the crisis over slavery reached a climax as well. Lemuel Shaw was the cause. In April 1851 Shaw declared the Fugitive Slave Law constitutional and, in an action whose reverberations were nationwide, returned the first fugitive slave, Thomas Sims, from Massachusetts.

The interracial bond between Ishmael and Queequeg introduces *Moby-Dick*. Slavery was generating arguments for white racial superiority; Melville undercuts those arguments in the early chapters of his novel. Lemuel Shaw ruled in 1849 that Massachusetts's segregated schools fell within the "paternal consideration and protection of the law." Queequeg's education of Ishmael challenges Shaw's defense of racial separation. But *Moby-Dick* does not simply respond, in general, to slavery and racial prejudice in America. It is deeply enmeshed in the crisis of 1850. This was first suggested in the early 1960s by three scholars (working independently and stimulated, no doubt, by the reemergence of the racial issue in American politics). Each

contribution has value. Each, however, identifies individual characters in *Moby-Dick* with individuals in American politics, and then assigns to the text a determinate, allegorical meaning.

For Willie Weathers, writing in a Southern publication, Jefferson was the hero of *Moby-Dick*. Jefferson praised American nature for producing such creatures as the giant whale; for Weathers, Moby Dick embodied the Union. Ahab was William Lloyd Garrison, mounting a monomaniacal attack upon it. Charles Foster, writing in the *New England Quarterly*, also identified the white whale with the Union. But he did not locate the danger to the Union among opponents of slavery. Daniel Webster, abolitionists charged, sold his soul to the devil by supporting the Fugitive Slave Law to gain the Presidency. Foster's Ahab was Webster. Alan Heimert stood closer to Webster and the Massachusetts establishment than to either abolitionists or Southern Unionists. He described a Webster who was popularly identified with American nature and the American nation. Heimert saw him in Moby Dick. The possessed, monomaniacal Calhoun, who would destroy the Union to enshrine slavery, died opposing Webster and the Compromise. He was Heimert's Ahab.¹⁵

These interpretations politicize *Moby-Dick* at the expense both of Melville's political imagination and of his actual subject. Were *Moby-Dick* simply a political allegory, then nothing would be lost by translating its representations back into their referents, for that would have been the purpose of writing it. Yet as a political allegory *Moby-Dick* remains, paradoxically, above politics, neither losing itself in political complexity nor transforming its political present into something new. Allegories take positions inside a given structure of controversy. Those who see *Moby-Dick* as a political allegory choose one side or another in the political debates; *Moby-Dick* undercuts all. It points to no fixed political truth above and outside its own story. Allegorical interpretations devalue the possibilities of meaning immanent in ordinary life; they bring transcendent meaning to it. Ahab performs that operation on life on the *Pequod*. He imposes allegorical control and determinate meaning, but he is a character in *Moby-Dick*, neither its author nor ideal reader.¹⁶

Interpreted as allegory, *Moby-Dick* concerns some world other than whaling. Interpreted as romance, *Moby-Dick* flees historical, social relations into whale-hunting adventure. *Moby-Dick* is indeed about a whale hunt. By that very fact, however, Ahab and his crew do not escape into nature. The *Pequod* brings with it the interracial society, the structure of authority, and the industrial apparatus of nineteenth-century America.

Bulkington, a sailor mentioned early in *Moby-Dick*, seems destined to play a prominent role in the narrative. "One of those tall mountaineers from the Alleghanian Ridge in Virginia," (33) Bulkington keeps to "the open in-

dependence of the sea." (99) Some critics have made him the hero of the story; in fact he disappears from it. Bulkington is the self-sufficient mountain man who leaves society behind. Were *Moby-Dick* simply a Western romance, it would be his story. It is Ahab's instead. Ahab received "all nature's sweet or savage impressions fresh from her own virgin voluntary and confiding breast." (75) But he was also a New Englander, descendant of the "Puritan fathers." Ahab's story shows what it would look like to return to the integrated world of the fathers under the conditions of capitalist industry, westward expansion, and slave labor. How could a world splintered by those processes be made whole? Ahab brought into view the political and social crisis opened up by Manifest Destiny and slavery, and grounded that crisis in capitalist expansion and possession. Before exploring the political debates of the American 1848, we must locate them in whaling.

III

"Of all countries in the world," wrote Tocqueville, "America is the one in which the precepts of Descartes are least studied and the best followed." Ishmael follows them on the *Pequod*. The Cartesian method, said Tocqueville, is "to escape from imposed systems" and inherited habits, and "to seek for oneself and in oneself for the only reason for things." That approach to the world breaks in half, into empirical, scientific observations on the one hand ("for oneself") and into contemplation of the unembodied soul ("in oneself") on the other. It creates a vacuum in America, wrote Tocqueville, between "very limited and very clear ideas," those of the scientist, and "very general and very vague conceptions," those of the romantic artist. "The space between is empty." Neither method, Tocqueville believed, could grasp the living "body social." Neither, by the same token, could grasp the body of the whale.¹⁷

Ishmael is first the cetologist, dividing whales into types and dissecting the whale's body with his mind. There is something prideful about this effort, the cetologist worries at the outset: ". . . to have one's hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing. What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this Leviathan! The awful tauntings in Job might well appall me. 'Will he [the Leviathan] make a covenant with thee?' " (117) God's tauntings do not daunt this empiricist, but his efforts are futile. The cetologist can take the whale apart, but his contractual method of combining individual parts cannot make the atomized body whole. Cetology may describe the dry bones of the whale, but it fails to possess its living body. "Though Jeremy Bentham's skeleton . . . correctly conveys the idea of a burly-browed utilitarian old gentleman," writes Melville, "nothing of this kind could be inferred from any leviathan's articulated

bones . . . the mere skeleton of the whale bears the same relation to the fully invested and padded animal as the insect does to the chrysalis that so roundly envelopes it." (215) Bentham's method dissolves the chrysalis of the body to give birth not to a butterfly but to a skeleton.

American Puritans, like medieval Europeans, read spiritual facts in natural facts. Their symbolizing mentality found God in nature and biblical history in American history. Scientific advances in Melville's time made such enchanted readings of nature more difficult. They killed nature, Bentham's skeleton implies, turning it from the mirror of God into a charnel house. The cetology chapters, in their failure to comprehend the whale, suggest natural mysteries beyond scientific dissection, and restore significance to nature.¹⁸

The cetologist has "very limited and very clear ideas"; he gets his hands into the whale, but fails to possess it. Ishmael on the masthead, rising above the world, falls victim to "very general and very vague conceptions." He is "narrowly shut up in himself," like Tocqueville's American, for he is deprived of "familiar objects of devotion" and "localness of feeling." There is not even a crow's nest, whose "little detailed conveniences" would locate the sailor in a tangible, circumscribed space. (133-34) "From that basis," to quote Tocqueville again, he "makes the pretension to judge the world." Ishmael's meditative whaleman, like Emerson's transparent eyeball, becomes "nothing." But in seeing "all," the "sunken-eyed young Platonist" fails to see the whales he was sent up to find. "[A]t last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature. . . ." (135-36) This "pantheist" resymbolizes nature, but as he does so the object world dissolves. The only life in him is the "rocking life" of the ship, "by her, borrowed from the sea." The "romantic, melancholy" young man rocks like a baby in his cradle. But he is not protected by the mother-sea and ship. Instead he hovers over "Descartian vortices," the empty swirls of Cartesian outer space. The sailor's vague, pantheist conceptions do not free him from his very limited, very clear body. His body betrays him, his foot slips, and his "identity comes back in horror" as he drowns.¹⁹ (135-36)

"Of modern standards-of-mast-heads we have but a lifeless set," Ishmael tells us early in the masthead chapter. These "stone, iron, and bronze men," like Napoleon, Washington, and Nelson, cannot sing out upon discovering strange sights, for they are detached from the world. "There is Napoleon," for example, "upon the top of the column of Vendôme . . . ; careless, now, who rules the decks below; whether Louis Philippe, Louis Blanc, or Louis the Devil." (132) Napoleon pays no attention to his imitators—Louis, the overthrown king of 1848, Louis, the socialist (whose abolished national workshops triggered the June days), or the man who was

president of the Second Republic when Melville wrote those words, Louis Napoleon. The Napoleon of Vendôme rose above the world by his achievements in it. Those in the living world below parody him; he ignores them. The meditative whaleman, who would rise above 1848 in spirit only, will not end as a monument either; he will drown in the sea.

Ahab's covenant with the crew, to hunt Moby Dick, follows "the Mast-Head," and rescues Ishmael from his pantheist fate. Moby Dick connects Ishmael's diffuse longing for union to an object. In the same way, since Benthamite cetology cannot depict leviathan, "[T]here is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going whaling yourself." (215) The failures of the observer to rejoin the living world, and to join it together, force Ishmael to participate in the hunt.

IV

"Don't you read it," Melville wrote his Pittsfield friend and neighbor Sarah Morewood about *Moby-Dick*. "It is not a piece of fine feminine Spitalfields silk—but is of the horrible texture of a fabric that should be woven of ship's cables and hausers."²⁰ The *Pequod* was no merchant ship, importing Allan Melville's silks for luxury consumption. Its story has a "horrible texture" because, as Melville's weaving metaphor indicates, it is a ship of workers. The *Pequod* is the single ship in all of Melville's stories on which a product is made.

Whaling was a celebrated colonial industry, Edward Everett told the crowd assembled to honor the Lowell mills. He wanted to acquire the aura of whaling for the new textile factories, as whaling profits had contributed to their capital. Ships' captains, including merchant-whalemen, were part of early New England's ruling elite. "Our whaling ships cover" the Pacific, boasted Thomas Hart Benton in his speech on the Oregon question. Benton wanted settlers and American sovereignty to cross the continent; he wanted American trade to follow the whalers to Asia. Melville wrote, "If American and European men-of-war now peacefully ride in once-savage harbors, let them fire salutes to the honor and the glory of the whale-ship, which originally showed them the way, and first interpreted between them and the savages."²¹ (100)

Commerce only introduced the benefits, continued Benton, that American expansion would bring in its wake. America would "wake up and reanimate the torpid body of old Asia," preached the senator, "and thus, the youngest people, and the newest land, will become the reviver and the regenerator of the oldest."²² Ahab rises above commerce, too, but he is the shadow side of Benton's regeneration. The "righteous souls" of his

whaling friends ashore would "have wrenched the ship from such a fiendish man! They were bent on profitable cruises, the profit to be counted down in dollars from the mint. He was intent on an audacious, immitigable and supernatural revenge." (156) What is the relationship between the profitable possession of the body of the whale, and Ahab's possession by it?

Melville introduces the whaling industry dramatically, with a chase and a kill. The book develops structurally, however, by drawing us at once back toward the genesis of whales and forward to the production of sperm oil. The workers on the *Pequod* participate in the "cannibalistic" hunting, killing, mutilating, and boiling down of the body of the whale. Let us replace the chronology of the tale with the chronology of the whale's transformation from its original birth in a state of nature to its final end as commodity.

Moby-Dick's origin, from that perspective, is the "enchanted pond" of pregnant, newborn, and nursing whales in which the *Pequod* is "becalmed." Agitated whales swim round the outer circles; the "center" signifies, for Ishmael, the "mute calm" "amid the Tornadoed Atlantic of my being." He continues, "and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve around me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy." (302-03) The nursing whales have suggested that image. But "the umbilical cord of Madame Leviathan" that still attaches some babies to their mothers also reminds Ishmael of the "fathoms of rope" which a harpoon attaches to a "stricken whale." (302) Here "baby man" (221) replaces the baby whale, but his object is to kill. There is worse to come. "Not seldom in the rapid vicissitudes of the chase, this natural line, with the maternal end loose, becomes entangled with the hempen one, so that the cub is thereby trapped." (302) Now predatory man takes the place of "Madame Leviathan." The scene of whale mothers and babies which has stimulated these associations divulges "some of the subtlest secrets of the seas." Ishmael calls it "young Leviathan amours in the deep." And it reminds him (in a footnote) that some Leviathans give birth to twins, and that the "Esau" sucks from one teat, the "Jacob" from the other. Ishmael continues, "When by chance these precious parts in a nursing whale are cut by the hunter's lance, the mother's pouring milk and blood rivally discolor the sea for rods. The milk is very sweet and rich; it has been tasted by man; it might do well with strawberries." (302-03)

Ishmael's "eternal mildness of joy" has been mixed with blood when he "bathe[s]" in it a few lines later. The whale has breasts enough for both Jacob and Esau; breast-blood is drawn, not by the rivalry of these baby-brother-nursers, but by the intrusion of man. The hunter harpoons the breast (in a footnote) while Ishmael enjoys his moment of "mute calm" (in the text). That moment is shattered, immediately, by a wounded whale with a cutting spade attached to his tail. "[T]ormented to madness, he was now

churning through the water, violently flailing with his flexible tail, and tossing the keen spade about him, wounding and murdering his own comrades." (303)

Entangled in a harpoon line, this whale spreads devastation. The rope, which whips men in *White-Jacket*, murderously connects them to whales in *Moby-Dick*. Hunting might seem to free sailors from the captain's whip by placing the harpoon in their hands. There is no flogging on the *Pequod*. But the "son of mortal woman" who chases whales is in even more danger from the harpoon line than is the bluejacket from the scourge. His boat is "rocking like a cradle" as he rows after the whale, and he sits amidst the "folds" and "complicated coils" of the line. When the harpoon is thrown, its rope may well catch around a sailor's neck as it whizzes out of the boat. "[T]hus hung in hangman's nooses," remarks Ishmael, "the six men composing the crew pull into the jaws of death, with a halter around every neck." (226) *White-Jacket* escapes the "necklace" which hung the *Somers's* mutineers; Ahab dies, strangled by the line which has reconnected him to *Moby Dick*. His death will bring full circle the process which began, genetically, when the harpooners replaced the umbilical cord by the harpoon line.

The *Pequod* leaves behind a "waifed" whale, at the end of the nursing-whales chapter, while it continues the hunt. A waifed whale is one in which a ship has left its pole, or "waif," as a mark of ownership. A whale is "waifed," in other words, after it has lost its home in the sea, and before it is taken on the ship. The waif is reclaimed when the crew is ready to go to work on the whale. In the course of this tale about the hunt for a white whale, other whales are chased and killed. They are lifted from the sea and suspended from the side of the ship. The blubber, at once the whale's "coat" and its entire being, is stripped from it like rind from an orange. (242, 244) Some drops into the sea to feed the sharks: Sailors devour whalesteaks by the light of whale-oil. "Mincers," dressed for their office, slice the whale's body into sheets. The mincer strips the skin from the whale's phallus, reverses it "like a pantaloan-leg," cuts holes for his arms, and then "slips himself bodily into it." Dressed in his "full canonicals," writes Ishmael, he is a "candidate for an archbishoprick." (324-25)

Melville's description of the whaleskin "cassock" is usually taken for a phallic joke. It is, Leslie Blumberg has shown, something more.²³ "The Cassock" chapter follows "A Squeeze of the Hand," where Melville squeezes the hands of his mates, mistaking them for globules of sperm. The phallus-skin armor replaces the "milk and sperm" into which Ishmael imagines himself and his fellows squeezing each other. (323) One is an image of homoerotic passivity which dissolves the self, the other of a borrowed, self-preserving, masculine aggression. Unlike *Redburn's* shooting-jacket and the white jacket, the cassock aggrandizes its wearer. The giant phallus is

an "idol." It provides the mincer with a power he would not have on his own. He needs the cassock to "protect him" from the whale's body that he is cutting into pieces. The cassock allows the mincer to produce sperm. (325)

After the sailors mince the whale, they burn the blubber in the hellish try-works. "Like a plethoric burning martyr," comments Ishmael, "... the whale supplies his own food, and burns by his own body... Then the rushing *Pequod*, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul." (326-27)

Melville calls the peaceful pod of nursing whales "The Grand Armada" to contrast it with the bloodthirsty Spanish fleet. Both armadas are the victims of their smaller foes, but while the Spanish have warlike intentions, the whales only become dangerous because of the aggression of their enemies. Although whales are peaceable unless attacked, Melville does not divide the cosmos between human violence and natural harmony. The human ferocity visited on whales reduces men to nature; it does not separate them from it. Sharks, wounded to keep them from devouring the whale, devour each other. "Not a modern sun ever sets, but in precisely the same manner the live sea swallows up ships and crews." The sea is not only a foe to "alien" man but also a "fiend to its own offspring," says Ishmael. "Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began." (221-22) "Cannibals? who is not a cannibal?" (240) The whaler, "owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals," (219) participates in this cannibalistic process. But Christian cannibalism differs from the cannibalism of nature, for "baby man" cannibalizes nature to escape from universal devouring, control the process, and use it for his purposes.

The whale's body, separate from man at the beginning of the voyage, is made into human products in its course. Workers disintegrate the whale's natural body and make it into objects of human consumption. They turn nature into cultural artifact. That process has two implications for the tale. In the first place, Melville has given the commodity, sperm oil, a history. He shows that the product exchanged and consumed ashore comes into being by the work done upon it. The commodity is not simply a given brought to table (like the food at the beginning of *Pierre*). Sentimental pastoralism excised human labor from a humanized nature. Melville returns to a prehuman, ocean wilderness, and places working men at its center.²⁴

A multiracial proletariat works on the whale. As a story about work, we shall see, *Moby-Dick* points to "mortal inter-indebtedness," (361) to political order and rebellion, to slavery and the social question. *Moby-Dick* also has a further implication. It connects commodity creation to Ahab's "lower layer" than the "Nantucket market," (139) the layer of revenge.

V

The sea devours and dissolves the object world; commodities provide humans with their sense of power over nature. Instead of being consumed, humans consume commodities. The white whale reverses that process. It drives Ahab back to the original human helplessness against which commodity creation defended. When Moby Dick shears off Ahab's leg, it reopens the wounds of nature's antagonism. Ahab is, his wound forces him to see, vulnerable to nature's power. Capitalist appropriation has failed him (as it failed Allan Melville), returning him to the devouring danger of mother nature.

The assault on Madame Leviathan and her babies initiates the commoditization of the whale. Ahab's dismemberment, the "bridal" which gives "birth" to his monomania, reverses that process. "Amid the chips of chewed boats, and the shrinking limbs of torn comrades," Ahab "swam out of the white curds of the whale's direful wrath into the serene, exasperating sunlight that smiled on, as if at a birth or a bridal." Then Ahab attacked the whale with his "six-inch blade," and Moby Dick, "sweeping his sickle-shaped lower jaw beneath him ... reaped away Ahab's leg..." (153-54) The merchant-captain fails to appropriate Leviathan's body. Instead, Moby Dick "devoured, chewed up, crunched" (74) Ahab's leg.

Ahab went crazy from his dismemberment, became delirious and directionless, and "his mates were forced to lace him fast, even there, as he sailed, raving in his hammock. In a straitjacket, he swung to the mad rocking of the gales." (154-55) Filled even more than most mariners with "half-formed foetal suggestion of supernatural agencies," (151) cradle-rocking Ahab formed his project of revenge. Returned to infancy, Ahab was reborn a monomaniac. He reinhabited the primitive desire to destroy the early source of all nurture and all disappointment. "His narrow-flowing monomania" abandoned "not one jot of Ahab's broad madness" (155); instead it focused Ahab's delirium on an object. Ahab's obsession defended him against chaos, against the panic of rage without a target. Whiteness dissolves the "visible spheres," Ishmael explains, and leaves only a void. Ahab organizes the object world, and saves his self, by attributing a constricted, determined purpose to Moby Dick.

That purpose also organizes the text. Like the *Pequod*, *Moby-Dick* is unified by emblems rather than by the social action of realistic characters. In a Balzacian, realist plot, insists Georg Lukács, every cog is human; when power is attributed to emblems, and they do human work, the writer has succumbed to animism. Allan Melville, the textile importer, succumbed to the animistic emblem of clothing. But his son, to repeat the metaphor Melville used both in *Moby-Dick* and about it, wove his own text. Melville's

symbolic method does not signify his failure as a realist. It rather reconstitutes an atomized society of isolated individuals, whose religious and political life remained under the sway of Puritan typology.²⁵

Emblems may acquire power at human expense. But humans symbolize by nature, and that activity comes into focus once the idea of a reality that preexists human language is discredited. Symbols empower the storyteller, and Ishmael uses them to make sense of his world. His symbolizing method both depends on, and departs from, the allegorizing approach of Captain Ahab.

Uncontrolled symbolization proliferates meanings endlessly, and that is what happens when the *Pequod's* crew examines the doubloon. Their various interpretations destroy any confident ground, either in a reality beneath the symbol or in a shared experience of it. When mad Pip looks at the doubloon he sees only the viewer. His "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (335) raises the specter of solipsist subjectivism.²⁶

Only Queequeg is untroubled by the meaning of objects, for he participates in nature unselfconsciously. Queequeg's text is written on his body; tattooed with hieroglyphics he cannot read, his skin and his clothing are one. In *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, at the end of *Moby-Dick* and in *Billy Budd*, the button is a locus of signification. Normally in Melville's fiction the button is a doubloon; Queequeg seems to take the doubloon for "an old button." (368) Queequeg does not read texts symbolically. He is still a mirror of nature; the other men on the *Pequod* are separate from it. Pip, like Ishmael's Platonist fallen from the masthead, has lost his identity in the objectless void. He looks at the doubloon and sees the other lookers. Ahab sees only himself in the doubloon, and imposes that self on the crew.

Pip's ego is disintegrated; Ahab's is fetishized. Pip—"tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings" (394)—is Ahab's mirror self. Unlike Ishmael, Ahab cannot afford to read natural and social texts symbolically, weaving together their various, linked meanings. Instead he projects a single, allegorical meaning on the white whale. The allegorist inhabiting a secure universe knows that his allegory is only a representation and not the thing itself. Ahab, defending against chaos, forces the whale to become what it is not. But Ishmael needs Ahab, for only Ahab's allegory gives *Moby-Dick* its narrative.

Ishmael narrates a romance action, rather than a realistic social action. Realist characters lack the power, in a disintegrated world, to generate a meaning-giving order. Ahab, the allegorist, succeeds where they would fail. Ishmael tells a story, whose symbolist pattern reworks the lived world, but the story which forces coherence on the text is Ahab's. The early chapters of *Moby-Dick* are divided between empirical descriptions of whaling and whales, and invocations of Ahab's monomania. The book becomes unified as

it approaches apocalypse. On the one hand, the bloodiest whaling scenes occur toward the end of the narrative, as if orchestrated by Ahab's growing frenzy. On the other hand, as Ahab acquires for himself the ferocity distributed throughout nature, the natural world grows more benign. By making the white whale its target, Ahab's malevolence unifies the text. Naturalistic description and Ahab's monomania join together seamlessly in the final chase. Ahab succeeds where a realistically drawn character would fail, and makes possible a narrative in *Moby-Dick*.²⁷

During one peaceful moment before the *Pequod* sights the white whale, "the rover softly feels a certain, filial, confident, land-like feeling toward the sea." The rover, Ishmael, was cast out from the land onto the ocean. Now, for a moment, he feels at home. The experience also returns Ahab to his family and childhood. He soliloquizes:

Would to God these blessed calms would last. But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof; calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm. There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:—through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling's father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them; the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it. (374-75)

As warp and woof weave the mingled threads together, Ahab takes all of life in. He inhabits a circular, eternal return of the stages of the life cycle, rather than the monomaniacal, linear direction of his imposed design. Becoming alive to experience, he feels, in a perfectly undefended way, the overwhelming force of loss. Ahab feels that flux and that loss at moments, but they threaten to unman him. Riven inside, he responds to loss with vengeance. Repudiating Ishmael's passive, symbolic whole, Ahab imposes a forced unity on the world.

Ahab's wound has awakened his anxiety over separation, and therefore has intensified his inner division as well. Prudent entrepreneurs keep separate market and family, body and soul, bourgeois (in Marx's terminology) and citizen. But when "Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock, rounding in mid winter that dreary, howling Patagonian Cape; then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad." (154) Normal men in the marketplace protect themselves by dividing body from soul. Ahab's longing for a merged dual-

unity splits him within. His interfused body and soul give "unbidden and unfathered birth" to an "independent being" within him—a Promethean vulture who feeds on his heart, a grizzly who gnaws on his paws. (168, 131) Ahab "wakes with his own bloody nails in his palms." The "eternal living principle or soul" in the body of Captain Ahab ties him to the white whale. He is alive only in his bond to Moby Dick. But that bond is not life-giving, and it cannot make the world whole, for what animates Ahab is his desire to destroy. Without his self-tormenting spirit, Ahab is a "formless, somnambulistic being," a "blankness." His obsession gives Ahab an "object to color"; it twins him with Moby Dick. (167-68)

The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. . . . all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby-Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. (154)

"[A]ll my means are sane, my motive and my object mad," Ahab recognizes. (155) "The conduct may be in some respects regular, the mind acute, and the conduct apparently governed by the rules of propriety, and at the same time there may be insane delusion, by which the mind is perverted." Lemuel Shaw, in *Commonwealth v. Rogers*, was describing a newly recognized form of insanity. Monomania began attracting notice early in the nineteenth century; it was the disease specific to a society of uprooted and driven men. The monomaniac, explained Shaw, knew the difference between right and wrong, but was possessed by a power which drove him to violence. He no longer controlled his own actions. In Melville's description of Ahab, "That before living agent, now became the living instrument." (155) "The mind broods over *one idea*, and cannot be reasoned out of it," in Shaw's. Shaw was, Henry Nash Smith has shown, characterizing the madness of Ahab.²⁸

The criminal who was innocent by reason of insanity, before *Rogers*, could not distinguish right from wrong. Shaw's purpose was to extend the insanity defense. Modifying the Enlightenment belief in the autonomy of the will, Shaw acknowledged powers that overwhelmed moral judgment. He was making law for individuals less governed by reason and contract, more driven by forces beyond their control. He was responding to what Henry Adams would later characterize as the shift from eighteenth-century will to nineteenth-century force.²⁹

Shaw did not permit monomania as an insanity defense, however, unless the criminal thought he was called by God. Those who acknowledged

the Father went to the asylum; those who rebelled against him went to the gallows. Shaw rescued only the madmen who still felt themselves possessed by the voice of legitimate authority. They were society's victims, in his distinction, not its destroyers.³⁰

The same year he decided *Rogers*, 1844, Shaw freed the slave, Robert Lucas, from the *United States*. The *Lucas* and *Rogers* decisions protected those who were still in the power of their masters. They offered no solace to Gansevoort Melville, who repudiated the political allegiances of Shaw and his father in 1844, and then went mad and died. Herman Melville returned home in 1844. Seven years later, while he was writing *Moby-Dick*, Shaw sent Thomas Sims back to slavery. Sims, unlike Lucas, had escaped from his master. The distinction Shaw made between Lucas and Sims was the one he had made in *Rogers*. Claims to freedom, by slaves against masters and monomaniacs against God, cost them the paternal protection of the law.³¹

"Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" (373) Ahab baptized his hickory harpoon not in the name of the Father but of the devil. The secret motto of *Moby-Dick*, Melville wrote Hawthorne two months after *Sims*, was "Ego non baptizo te in nomine—but make out the rest yourself." Melville stopped, Charles Foster has pointed out, before "patris." The word called attention to the fathers, Shaw and God, whom the motto repudiated.³²

Two years earlier, Melville had written the same motto in his Shakespeare volume which contained *King Lear*. He followed it with "Madness is undefinable—It & right reason extremes of one." As mad Ahab would strike through the pasteboard mask of Moby Dick, so (in the "Mosses") "Lear the frantic king tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of 'vital truth.'" Ahab's madness did not speak the entire truth. But his rebellion penetrated the defenses of law-abiding men, and reached the derangement at the heart of America. "[M]an's insanity is heaven's sense," Ishmael says of Pip. (322) Melville's father-in-law exculpated human madness that was obedient to heaven; Melville valorized madness as either satanic rebellion or heavenly truth. Shaw confined the God-fearing monomaniac. "Truth has no confines," says Ahab. "How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?" (139) Shaw's philanthropy kept the madman at a distance, and placed him under the judge's power. Ahab refused that condescension and claimed power for himself. "Delight is to him," preached Father Mapple, who "kills, burns and destroys all sin, though he pluck it out from under the robes of Senators [like Webster] and Judges [like Shaw]." (57) Ahab accepted Father Mapple's mission, and turned it against the fathers. "Where do murderers go, man! [asks Ahab.] Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?" (410) Neither the products of

Allan Melvill's marketplace nor the walls of Judge Shaw's asylum insulated society from the madman or Ahab from the whale.³³

VI

Capitalism transforms its environment, writes Joseph Schumpeter, by a process of "creative destruction." It proceeds not by the bookkeeper's mentality of rational cost-accounting, but by the spirit of risk and adventure. Starbuck, the owners' representative on the *Pequod*, speaks for the Nantucket market. His world is neatly divided between family at home and moneymaking at work. From Starbuck's perspective, Ahab has nothing in common with the economic man of the marketplace. For those sharing that view, Ahab's vengeance is merely a black version of the religious dreams of the citizen. But Ahab's "hark ye yet again,—the little lower layer," correctly points to a deeper motive than the rational pursuit of gain, not a higher one. Ahab carries to its extreme the egotistic, bourgeois desire for power, to be alone in the world and to possess it.³⁴

Starbuck's appeals were not simply inadequate to stop Ahab. They were inadequate to capitalism's historical task. Ahab, like other merchant-adventurers, has broken loose from the process that generated him. But he has done so by carrying its social logic to its limit. The capitalist transformation of America began about the time Melville was born, and it swallowed up his father. Allan Melvill had opposed the "universal joint stock company" of "Equality" in the name of an American "aristocracy."³⁵ Ahab refuses the "joint stock world" (67) of "mortal inter-indebtedness" (361) in the name of the self-made man.

The heroic captain of industry, impatient of all limits, wants to ingest the world and build it anew. He is impatient of all restrictions on his egotistic freedom. He stands at the juncture of capitalism and imperialism, "never satisfied by the fulfillment of a concrete interest," in Schumpeter's words, but possessed by an "objectless disposition . . . to unlimited forcible expansion." He claims the power of Aladdin, in the oft-repeated metaphor, to bring a new world into being. Appropriating nature's life-giving power, he makes the elements respond to his commands. There is unacknowledged defiance in those aspirations. Praising the humanly created miracle of the telegraph, Lewis Cass boasted, "We can now answer the sublime interrogatory put to Job: 'Canst thou send lightnings that may go and say unto thee, here we are?' Yes, the corruscations of Heaven man has reduced to obedience, and they say to him, here we are!"³⁶

Ahab, like Cass, reduces lightning to obedience. He orders the *Pequod*'s lightning rods kept above board during a storm. Then, seizing the links, he holds the lightning in his hand. Cass claimed God's power as if he were

making no challenge to God. At the same time (this was 1847), he warned that if America did not expand, it might face the turmoil of the "crowded communities" of Europe. Resistance to the American dream of freedom cast a shadow over Cass's optimism. Ahab wears the mark of that resistance—the "livid brand" of lightning—on his body. "A slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish," forms a "birthmark on him from crown to toe." (110) Father Mapple's "Father!—chiefly known to me by Thy rod" (57)—has coruscated Ahab. "The lightning flashes through my skull; my eye-balls ache and ache," he cries. (384) "Fire . . . wasted all [Ahab's] limbs." (110) He took the lightning inside him, and defied the "fiery father" whose scar he bore.

"Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? . . . Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? or his head with fish spears?" Ishmael alluded to these verses from Chapter 41 of Job; (279) Melville's Chapter 41 is "Moby Dick." Ahab understood the blasphemy, and the cost, of Cass's answer to God. He reveals the rebellion and the desire for domination entangled in the wish to be free.³⁷

Ahab's desire for mastery has lost its ground in any concrete, material aim, and taken possession of his self and his ship. He appears in America when the dream to have no master encounters resistance. The resistance which allowed Melville to create Ahab (like the anxiety underneath Cass's boast) came from slavery. American freedom was originally founded on the subjugation of peoples of color. *Moby-Dick* registers the dependence of American freedom on American slavery, and the threat of American slavery to destroy American freedom.

The capitalist world system began in the sixteenth century when Europeans seized the land and labor both of peasants at home and of the world's peoples of color. Marx gave the name of primitive capitalist accumulation to that process of forcible expropriation.

The discovery of gold and silver in America [wrote Marx], the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and the looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.³⁸

Capitalism, imperialism, and slavery were, at the origins of capitalism, symbiotically intertwined. Capitalist imperialism spawned merchant-adventurers, who lived both inside and outside of civilized society, and who were fascinated by the primitives they destroyed. American capitalism—the absorption of the mass of the population into commodity markets and the sig-

nificant spread of wage labor—was also imperialist and enslaving at its origins. The antebellum market revolution depended upon people of color.

Indian removal from 1814 to 1840 opened the West for land speculation, settlement, and commercial agriculture. Cotton, grown by slave labor on land recently expropriated from Indians, paid for the growth of American industry. Profits from the Asian trade supplied capital for New England railroads, and mobilized commercial elites in favor of westward expansion. Asian commerce, Indian land, and black labor promoted the spread of industry and the rise of wage labor in antebellum America.³⁹

The harpooners on the *Pequod*, writes Alan Heimert, “are representatives of the three races on which each of the American sections, it might be said, had built its prosperity in the early nineteenth century.” Stubb, who speaks in the Western idiom, has an Indian for his squire. Little Flask is perched on Daggoo’s shoulders, as the Southern economy rested on the Negro. And Starbuck, loyal to the New England commercial code, has a native from the Pacific islands to harpoon his whales.⁴⁰ The sectional, racial division of labor promoted capitalist development and political harmony in the early nineteenth century. That harmony exploded in the wake of the Mexican War.

Moby Dick, writes Melville, was not the first whale to be singled out for destruction. Others which had wreaked havoc were “systematically hunted out, chased and killed by valiant whaling captains . . . much . . . as in setting out through the Narragansett Woods, Captain Butler of old had it in his mind to capture that notorious murderous savage Annawon, the headmost warrior of the Indian King Philip.” (170) King Philip’s War, 1675–1678, broke the power of the Indian tribes of New England. Cotton Mather and William Hubbard interpreted that war, for the Massachusetts Puritans, as the biblical “hunting of the beast.” In Richard Slotkin’s summary, “The Indians are serpents, ‘generations of the dragon,’ and giants. . . . King Philip is compared to Og, to the Python, to a ‘great Leviathan sent to [the victors] for a *thanksgiving-feast*.’”⁴¹

Melville has Captain Butler hunt the “murderous savage Annawon.” He did not. Butler was the American officer who pursued “the monster Brant” after the siege of Fort Stanwix. That Mohawk chief was Colonel Gansevoort’s enemy, and Melville was reading about Butler’s pursuit of him in Brant’s biography. Shortly after he finished *Moby-Dick*, referring to that biography, Melville named his second son Stanwix. Consciously or not, he was collapsing Captain Benjamin Church’s chase after Annawon, in 1678, with Butler’s pursuit of Brant in 1778. He was passing that heritage on to his son, and to Ahab.⁴²

The line running from King Philip’s War through the siege of Fort Stanwix pointed backward to the Puritan extermination of the Pequod In-

dians. The Puritans justified the Pequod war as the elimination of those idolatrous tribes who occupied the promised land before God’s chosen came from Egypt. The line from the Pequods through Fort Stanwix pointed forward—by way of Andrew Jackson, New Orleans, and Indian removal—to the war against Mexico. “What was America in 1492 but a loose fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard by way of waiving it for his royal master and mistress?” asks Ishmael. “What at last will Mexico be to the United States?” (309–310) Mexico may have been an ordinary whale; Great Britain was something more. England was the “Sea-beast Leviathan” to Western expansionists in the 1812 War. Thirty years later they saw England behind Mexico, fomenting slave uprisings and Indian war on the Southwestern frontier. These charges were made against the mother country during the Revolution, and repeated during the War of 1812. “A conspiracy of five monarchs,” warned Allen of Ohio, again threatened American freedom. “Has our blood already become so pale that we should tremble at the roar of the King of Beasts?” asked Congressman McClernand. “If he crosses our path . . . his blood will spout as from a harpooned whale.”⁴³

Opponents of the Mexican War turned to the Bible, as had Cotton Mather before them. The message they found there reversed his. Theodore Parker attached a “Scripture Lesson” to his 1848 sermon on the Mexican War. It was the lesson of the fate of King Ahab, who coveted Naboth’s vineyard. When Naboth refused to sell Ahab his land, the king had him killed. Elijah prophesied Ahab’s doom, and Parker ended his biblical quotation with the appearance of Elijah before the king. Parker’s audience already knew the American implications of that story. It had been used first against the seizure of Indian land, and then applied to Texas and California. *The Taking of Naboth’s Vineyard* was the title of one pamphlet against Texas annexation.⁴⁴

Both the biblical Ahab and his American counterpart coveted native land. Their greed placed them at odds with the religion of their fathers; it turned them, in biblical exegesis and Whig propaganda, into the pagans they were out to replace. From that perspective, Melville’s Ahab led his primitive tribe of “mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals” (156) against the people of God.

“Those aboriginal whalers, the Red-Men,” sallied forth from Nantucket “to give chase to the Leviathan” before the *Pequod*. (27) “Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois,” says Ishmael (naming Joseph Brant’s nation). “Long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e., what is called savagery.” (219) The *Pequod* was “a cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies.” (72) Just as cannibals acquired the power of their enemies by ingesting them, so it was with the *Pe-*

quod. Her name expressed this reversion to barbarism. "None but a Pequod Indian," wrote Theodore Parker, could condone American "butchery" in Mexico. The Pequods were reputedly a bloodthirsty tribe. Half a century after the Puritans exterminated them, Captain Benjamin Church (in the incident alluded to by Melville) tracked down and captured the satchem Annawon at the end of King Philip's War. Annawon gave Church his wampum and headdress, writes Richard Slotkin, symbolically crowning him the new king of the woods. Slotkin calls the conquest of savages and the acquisition of their power regeneration through violence. That was how Andrew Jackson, defeating the Creek Indians during the 1812 War, acquired the name and the authority of Old Hickory. Melville, naming Ahab's ship the *Pequod*, paid ironic homage to the process.⁴⁵

The Indianization of the American Ahab corresponded to the paganism of the biblical Ahab. Ahab embodied the dangers facing America in 1850, and Theodore Parker returned to him in another sermon. "If I am rightly informed, King Ahab made a law that all the Hebrews should serve Baal, and it was the will of God that they should serve the Lord," preached Parker. "If they served Baal, they could not serve the Lord. . . . We are told that Elijah . . . came unto all the people, and said, 'If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him!' Our modern prophet says, 'Obey both. . . .'" Parker's modern prophet was the Massachusetts Judge Peleg Sprague. "Judge Peleg Sprague," sermonized Parker, "supposes a case: that the people ask him, 'Which shall we obey, the law of man or the law of God?' He says, 'I answer, obey both. The incompatibility which the question assumes does not exist.' . . . Such is the difference between Judge Elijah and Judge Peleg."⁴⁶

Elijah and Peleg are present on the Nantucket docks, when Ishmael boards the *Pequod*. Captain Peleg and Captain Bilbad (who has the name of one of Job's comforters) sign Ishmael on for the cruise, and Peleg first tells him of Ahab. When Ishmael remembers Elijah's prophecy, that the dogs will lick Ahab's blood, Peleg assures him it is safe to serve the captain. Ishmael returns to the ship with Queequeg, and Bilbad, giving the "Pagan" a missionary tract, tells him to "Spurn the idol Bell, and the hideous dragon." (87) Ishmael and Queequeg meet Elijah when they leave the *Pequod*, and he warns them against the voyage. Like Parker, and for the same purpose, Melville collects Ahab, Elijah, Peleg, and Baal together in America.

Melville knew the contemporary, political implications of an American Ahab, and of the prophecies of his destruction. The prophets appeared in ancient Israel when Solomon sultanized the Jewish kingship. They protested his transformation of the Jewish state into an Egyptian liturgical state, with royal favorites, priests, and foreign harem-women. Queen Maachah, alluded to in "The Cassock," made an idol of the phallus; her son de-

posed her and cut it down. Ahab, whose story is told in the next chapter of *Kings*, reinstated the worship of the excluded Canaanite divinities. He married Jezebel, a Phoenician Baal-worshiper, and she and her priests brought idol-worship to the Jews. They arranged vegetation rituals. They engaged in orgiastic celebrations of the old nature and mother deities. Their idolatry invested objects with powers that belonged only to Jehovah. Elijah called, against King Ahab, for a return to the ways of the fathers.⁴⁷

Were *Moby-Dick* an orthodox prophetic book, it would side with God and with the Hebraic and Puritan fathers against the worship of Baal. Melville actually tells a more complicated story: He baptized his "wicked book" in the name of the devil, not the Father. And his Ahab does not worship Baal; he seeks vengeance both against the God of his fathers and (like them) against the pagan deity of nature.

The biblical Ahab attended to the prophets of Baal. Melville's Ahab also brings false prophets on board the *Pequod*, Fedallah and his crew, and, as in the Bible, Elijah warns against them. As captain of an Indian-named ship, the American Ahab is tied to Baal, for American Indians had been seen as idol and Baal-worshipers since Puritan times. The Asian people of color inherited that attribution, but Fedallah worships fire, not animal and vegetable life. The biblical Elijah called fire down upon Ahab's prophets of Baal,⁴⁸ but fire is Captain Ahab's instrument, and he uses it in the hunt against Baal. Baal-worship, as the nineteenth century imagined it, was materialist and orgiastic. It set up androgynous or female gods, or (like Queen Maachah) appropriated the phallus-idol for women. "The abhorred white male" was an androgynous, pagan, animal God, but "Ahab did not fall down and worship it." (154) His marriage pillow is but thrice dented because he has repudiated the family, not for an orgiastic celebration, but for an ascetic hunt.

"The Israelites during the absence of Moses to the mount made a golden calf and fell down and worshipped it; and they sorely suffered for their idolatry," warned Andrew Jackson. His golden calf was the "monster Hydra" United States Bank, "coiling, like a huge sea-Serpent, its leviathan folds" around America. "Providence has power over me," said Jackson, "but frail mortals who worship Baal and the golden calf can have none."⁴⁹

"The flourishing cities of the West," warned Thomas Hart Benton, "are in the jaws of the monster!" "They may be devoured by it at any moment. . . . One gulp, one swallow, and all is gone." Jackson aimed to rescue America from the power of Baal. He promised "to draw every tooth and then the stumps" of the "mother Bank." (The *Pequod's* harpooners "drag out" a sperm whale's teeth. [263]) "I have it chained, the monster must perish," boasted Jackson. He believed he was returning the children of Israel to the virtues of their fathers, and slaying the demons of mammon and corrup-

tion. Ahab's appropriation of Old Hickory's rhetoric, however, suggests the indebtedness of such iconoclasm to the paganism it opposed. Ahab's hunt signals not a repudiation of idolatry, but its inversion.⁵⁰

The Protestant ethic, glorifying visible signs of grace, located saving power in material objects rather than in God. This fetishism of commodities replaced pagan idol-worship with a modern form of animism. It endowed material objects with magical, redemptive power, detaching them (in a Marxist view) from the human labor that produced them and (in a Protestant perspective) from the power of God that lay behind them. Possession of commodities, in bourgeois idol-worship, signified individual power and worth. Ahab, like a disappointed fetishizer of commodities, strikes through the visible signs of grace to destroy the governing, inscrutable power. He has fetishized the whale, assigning to it a power reserved (in the Calvinist view) to God. The monsters of antebellum politics, like Jackson's Bank and Ahab's whale, were centers of hidden power, which explained the bourgeois's failure to master the world. They have the power he wants, and the sensual materiality he experiences as resisting his will, and so he makes war against them.

Moby Dick may be the leviathan to whom Job's God speaks a love poem, letting Job know that such a grand object of desire is beyond his reach. It may be "a grand god" of the pagan world—"the white bull Jupiter, swimming away with ravished Europa clinging to his graceful horns." (412) Refusing to be the submissive Job who accepts God's power, Ahab will end as the ravished Europa instead.⁵¹

VII

As the biblical Ahab seized Naboth's vineyard, so America engrossed half of Mexico. But this triumph brought retribution. The *Pequod*, named for a tribe the Puritans exterminated, fell "into the hidden snare of the Indian" (140) in the end. The snare is prepared in the black communion, when Ahab's savage harpooners enlist the crew in their captain's mad hunt. Ahab arranges that ceremony under the sway of Fedallah's false promises. They reassure the captain that Moby Dick cannot kill him, and draw him on to his doom. Fedallah's body, lashed to Moby Dick, still precedes Ahab on the chase's final day.

Manifest Destiny lured America across the continent and to the shores of Fedallah's Asia. The agents of westward expansion, removing the Indians in their path, promised a life of egoistic independence. The snare into which Indians led white Americans was baited with independence; it trapped them in slavery. Manifest Destiny twinned whites with Indians and promised them freedom. That claim to freedom, in the wake of the Mexican War, twinned them with slaves.

Indians signified freedom in part because they could be gotten out of the way. Indian removal, unlike black-white relations, offered escape from dependence on others. Indian existence was also envied as itself free from restraint. As Tocqueville put it, "The savage is his own master as soon as he is capable of action. Even his family has hardly any authority over him, and he has never bent his will to that of any of his fellows; no one has taught him to regard voluntary obedience as an honorable subjection, and law is unknown to him even as a word. He delights in this barbarous independence and would rather die than sacrifice any part of it."⁵²

The opposite image was applied to slaves. "The Negro has lost even the ownership of his own body," to quote Tocqueville again. "If he becomes free, he often feels independence as a heavier burden than slavery itself, for his life has taught him to submit to everything."⁵³ Seeking the masterlessness of the imagined Indian, Americans feared they were placing themselves in the determined and dependent position of the slave.

The emergence of the controversy over slavery paralyzed American politics, for it posed the gravest of threats to the country. The issue endangered the Union, raised the specter of slave insurrection, and called attention (in proslavery apologetics) to the social question in Northern "free society."⁵⁴ As the citizen demand for freedom infected the European social order, so it threatened the organization of labor in the South. The American 1848 brought to the surface the buried connections between American slavery and American freedom.

Slavery, Edmund Morgan has argued, insulated the colonies from the dangers posed by the European poor. One reason whites could claim natural rights in 1776 was because the bulk of propertyless American workers were in chains. Black slaves could not apply the Declaration of Independence against their rulers at home.⁵⁵ To attack slavery, in the American 1848, was to endanger both Southern society and the Union. To leave it alone, once it was an issue, was to acknowledge that freedom for some Americans required the enslavement of others. Perhaps that symbiosis was more than a political arrangement, necessary to save the Union. Perhaps it spoke to the character of American freedom itself. *Moby-Dick*, rooting Ahab's freedom in the enslavement of his crew, raised that possibility.

Ahab "did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that went before him." His rule, according to interpretations of the first book of *Kings*, initiated a line of wicked rulers; God punished the Jews for their wickedness with the Babylonian captivity. Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of Babylon, carried the Jews into slavery, and the scholarship of Melville's day identified the Babylonian Bel with the Phoenician Baal. Melville made the same connection in *Clarel*, describing the enslavement of Israel. The suffix of Jezebel's name, together with her licentious reputation, cemented the connection between Baal and Bel, Ahab and Babylon. Aboli-

tionists like Theodore Parker identified slavery with Baal-worship and America with Babylon. The "whore of Babylon," target of the American children of Israel since Puritan days, had seized power in Parker's America. Melville's Ahab hunts Baal, but he rules over an ascetic Babylon.⁵⁶

Solomon himself enslaved those Hittites whom the Jews had not destroyed; the Puritans who sold the Pequod remnant into slavery were following his example. Melville connected those two bits of history in *Clarel*, his epic poem of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He compared the modern, Palestinian Arabs to the Hittites and Pequods; they were, thought the American, converted-Jewish pioneer, Nathan, "slaves meriting the rod." Melville implied that the punishment of the Hittites and Pequods made the biblical and Puritan fathers no different from their foes. Most Americans were blind to that possibility. But many did find worrisome another biblical precedent, the Pharaoh's enslavement of the Jews. They feared that the slaveholding nation of Israel was following Egypt's path.

Negroes were "the children of Israel," said Abraham Lincoln, held in "Egyptian bondage." The question of slavery, complained Thomas Hart Benton, was like one of the biblical plagues Jehovah visited on Egypt. Benton elaborated, "You could not look upon the table but there were frogs, you could not go to the bridal couch and lift the sheets but there were frogs." Ishmael insists that his own description of a whale's power to sink ships is meant seriously, and Benton could have said, with him, "I had no more idea of being facetious than Moses, when he wrote the history of the plagues of Egypt." (171) But Benton's wish that the "black question" would go away allied the American pioneers, his "children of Israel," with the Pharaoh. Benton may not have been aware of one biblical exegesis, in which the frogs bit off Egyptian phalluses. Like the Egyptians, nonetheless, he feared the emergence of "this black question forever on the table, on the nuptial couch, everywhere," from the watery social depths.⁵⁷

The frogs, like the white whale, called to account a nation which held slaves. But Ahab, unlike Benton, refuses to wish away the monster that had chewed off his leg. Instead of avoiding the leviathan, he pursues it. He thereby appropriates for himself, and enforces on the *Pequod*, the power he attributes to Moby Dick. Ahab's demand for freedom enslaves his crew. It leads not to anarchy but to order. Ahab's obsession unifies a society fragmented by human claims to power. The whaling industry disintegrated leviathans, but it could not restore wholeness to the world. Ahab creates, from leviathan's natural body, the *Pequod's* organic, communal, social body.

VIII

Ahab is the first and only captain with commanding personal authority in all Melville's fiction. Mutiny or desertion is central to the action of *Typee*,

Omoo, *Mardi*, *White-Jacket*, *Benito Cereno*, and *Billy Budd*—every other tale of the sea but *Redburn*. Mutiny takes place offstage in *Moby-Dick*, on the *Town-Ho*, as if to contrast the subversive threat from democratic man on that ship with Ahab's power on the *Pequod*. Two-thirds of the crew typically deserted from a whaling ship. Sailors deserted on Tom Melville's four whalers, whose routes roughly paralleled the *Pequod's*.⁵⁸ But the *Pequod* never touches land once it leaves Nantucket. No one abandons the *Pequod* but Pip, and the punishment which drives him mad is to be abandoned in return. A perfectly ordered and isolated shipboard society—the dream of Alexander Mackenzie and Guert Gansevoort—sails alone in nature on its westward quest—the dream of Gansevoort Melville. Society (the traditional domain of the novel) and the sea (subject of romance) join together in diabolic harmony.

Steelkilt and his mutineers are "sea-Parisians" on the *Town-Ho*. Behind their "barricade," they reenact the June days of 1848. (204) White-Jacket's natural rights, claimed against an arbitrary *Town-Ho* officer and his whip, generate an ugly revolution. Ahab recontains shipboard class divisions, as we shall see, by calling up primitive racial instincts. He mobilizes destructive impulses in the service of authority, thereby avoiding the dangers consummated on the *Town-Ho*, of servile insurrection and civil war.

Political authority, in liberal theory, derived from social contracts among equal and independent men. Such compacts, as 1848 in Europe and America brought forcefully home, were insufficient to bind either individuals or individual states into a body politic. Liberalism split off community from its marketplace model of economic and political life, into the citizen ideal on the one hand and familial bonds on the other. The process of making a product on the *Pequod* undercut that liberal image of society. Melville placed work and hierarchical authority, not contractual agreements among equals, at the center of economic life. He showed that value derived from the appropriation of nature, not from commodity exchange. Ahab's power originated from the human hierarchy on the whaler, and the ship's domination of nature. But Ahab was no ordinary captain. He made transcendent the two sources of maritime authority rooted in civil society and insufficient by themselves to command obedience—the familial structure of formal naval rank, and the marketplace contract for a percentage of the whaling voyage profits. Ahab placed Guert Gansevoort's institutional hierarchy in the service of Gansevoort Melville's democratic expansion.

Ahab fused the two paths taken from the breakdown of the eighteenth-century paternal family order—that of democratic equality, and that of familial hierarchy. To avert disunion and slave revolt, the return to the fathers required new social bonds, not merely a disembodied citizen ideal. Ahab created from the contradictory impulses of political life a new, meaning-giving, communal order. He went back to the Protestant, covenantal roots

of the liberal social contract, and made them demonic. He thereby reformed the splintered fragments of Jacksonian Democracy into an organic whole.

The Mexican War shattered the Jackson-Van Buren alliance between Northern Democrats, Southern planters, and Western farmers. It split Jacksonian Democracy in four parts—into Free-Soilers, secessionists, Young America expansionists, and conservative, proslavery Unionists. Calhoun had run for Vice President with Jackson in 1828, broken with him soon after, and then used his position in the Tyler administration to promote Texas annexation. Van Burenites blamed Calhoun for depriving their leader of the 1844 Presidential nomination. Gansevoort Melville, sabotaging Van Buren in Jackson's name, could thus be seen as transferring Old Hickory's mantle to Calhoun. From that point of view, which is Alan Heimert's, Jackson, Calhoun, Gansevoort Melville and Ahab cohere. Calhoun, however, was no expansionist by 1848, since he feared contamination by newly acquired peoples of color. Moreover, Free-Soilers, who also claimed descent from Jackson, were twinned with the secessionists they opposed. Like the "monomaniacs" of the South, the "fanatics" of the North made slavery their obsession. The two factions, wrote Thomas Hart Benton, were twin blades of the shears that together would cut up the Union.⁵⁹

Young America, burying slavery under westward expansion to preserve the Union, was faithful to Jackson's memory. But once the slavery issue had surfaced in the West, the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny was as explosive as that of secession and Free-Soil.

Each fragment of Jacksonian Democracy offered a partial and divisive solution to the American 1848, and Ahab derived from no single one alone. Rather he reunited them all into a new, communal body, which also contained within it the industrial core of patriarchal New England Whiggery—Webster and Shaw—and then led that ship of state to its doom. Political figures who exposed one connection between American slavery and American freedom suppressed another. Ahab stands as a reproach to and culmination of them all.

Like the slaveowner and Indian-fighter Andrew Jackson, Ahab acquired authority over his white equals by appropriating the power of people of color.⁶⁰ The intimate, violent bonds of race shattered conventional limits on the *Pequod*; Ahab's "pagan kinsmen" (141) sanctified his rule. They did so in two ceremonies, one early in the tale and the other near its end. The first ritual formed an "indissoluble league" (141) on the *Pequod*, shifting the purpose of the voyage from profit to revenge. The second blessed the weapon the new community will use.

Ahab "revive[s] a noble custom of my fisherman fathers" in the first ritual. He forms a circle with his crew, and passes around a flagon of grog,

"hot as Satan's hoof," from which all drink. The mates cross their lances and Ahab, reversing the worldly hierarchy, appoints them "cup-bearers to my pagan kinsmen." Harpooners and mates drink communion from the "murderous chalices" of the harpoon sockets, and swear death to Moby Dick. (140-141)

Ahab christens his hickory harpoon in savage fire and blood in the second ritual. He welds it in the Parsee's "fire" and baptizes it, in the name of the devil, in the harpooners' "baptismal blood." (372-73) Melville transferred Andrew Jackson's Old Hickory baptism in "the fire and blood at New Orleans" from Polk to Ahab. The hickory pole was, thanks to Gansevoort Melville, the emblem for Polk. It was carried in Democratic parades, raised at Democratic rallies, and hoisted aloft in Democratic barbecues. It appeared everywhere in what Herman Melville, writing to Polk, called "the memorable general election" of 1844. Melville was reminding the President of the "signal services" his dead brother had rendered Young Hickory. He appropriated those services for Ahab.⁶¹

Redburn split Gansevoort Melville between the aristocratic brother ashore and the savage Jackson at sea. Ahab was Jackson's inheritor, but Ishmael's "inseparable twin-brother" (253) on the *Pequod* was the real savage, Queequeg. "You would a good deal rather not sleep with your own brother," remarked Ishmael, when he was offered Queequeg's bed to share at the Spouter-Inn. Melville must have shared his bed with Gansevoort one night in 1839, for after he woke, he wrote his brother, "What the Devil should I see but your cane along in bed with me." Gansevoort's cane supported his bad leg; Jacksonian politics cured it. Melville gave Ahab two canes on the *Pequod*, the whalebone leg and the hickory harpoon, and Ahab baptized the latter in the devil's name. Ahab's false leg is "a cane—a whalebone cane," (114) and his harpoon supports him, too. "The point of a hickory pole," in congressional oratory, bedeviled the British leviathan. "The sound of his ivory leg, and the sound of the hickory pole" (373) rang together when Ahab walked the decks of the *Pequod*.⁶²

The hickory harpoon, in Herman Melville's imagery, is to strike through Moby Dick. It replaces Ahab's "flesh and blood," sensate, vulnerable, "old lost leg." (361) "From the keen steel barb" of that harpoon, "lashed in conspicuous crotch, so that it projected beyond the whale-boat's brow," there issues forth a "pale, forked fire" during a lightning storm. Ahab seizes the burning harpoon and waves it like a torch. "All your oaths to hunt the white whale are as binding as mine," he shouts, and blows out the flame. (385) The mincer adorns himself with the "pantaloony-leg," whaleskin phallus to cut up leviathan. At once invulnerable phallus and leg, he can safely do violence to the body of the whale. The role played by "the cask-sock" in the production of sperm oil is played by the hickory harpoon in

Ahab's revenge. At the cost of giving up his own body-part, Ahab acquires a seemingly invulnerable weapon. The sensuous leg belonged to Ahab; the weapon possesses him. It fetishizes the instinctual, savage sources of Ahab's authority.

"Thou just Spirit of Equality," not ancient lineage or noble status, "pick[ed] up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles; [and] . . . thunder[ed] him higher than a throne!" Ahab, like Jackson, is a "champion" selected "from the kingly commons." (105) Proponents of Manifest Destiny after Jackson, like Polk, Stephen Douglas, Thomas Hart Benton and Lewis Cass, also spoke for equality. But these Western men of the people lacked Old Hickory's kingly stature. Benton opposed the extension of slavery and the others tolerated it, but all wished the issue would go away. They inherited the racial roots of Jackson's politics without his ability to exploit them.

Young America expansionists, following Jackson, tried to bury slavery under Manifest Destiny. Cass and Douglas insisted that the slave question was political rather than social, and favored leaving it to popular sovereignty. Desperately separating the political question of freedom (to vote) from the social question of work, their rhetoric betrayed the explosive connection between them.

"Our fathers" made a revolution, said Cass, for the right of territorial self-government. Cass called the effort to prohibit slavery in the territories "a revival, almost in terms, of the discussions between the parent country and the colonies" which "led to our revolutionary struggle and to our separation from England." It "carries us back to some of the worst doctrines of the middle ages—to those feudal times"—"as if the rights of sovereignty were anything and the rights of man nothing."⁶³

Europeans as well as Americans were demanding popular sovereignty, and Cass connected the territorial right to vote on slavery with the revolutions of 1848. Cass was a leading supporter of the European revolutions. He introduced a motion recalling the American minister from Austria, to protest the Hapsburg suppression of Hungarian independence. The debates over American slavery and European revolution were carried on side by side in Congress, and, like other speakers, Cass used the occasion of one subject to speak on the other. Opposing the prohibition of slavery in the territories, he explained,

The doctrines we have heard advanced upon this subject are precisely those which are at war with human freedom in Europe, and which have achieved a temporary triumph in Hungary, in Italy, and in Germany; and they are maintained and illustrated by the same, or kindred arguments. . . . *We are sovereign . . . and thence it follows that these unfortunate communities may be sold into slavery*, and so on to the end of the chapter, from Poland to Oregon. And human rights are thus frittered away and sacrificed.⁶⁴

Cass demanded the "human right" to choose whether to hold slaves. A community denied that right was itself (the emphasis is his) "*sold into slavery*." "Almighty God," said Cass, "gave us our rights, and . . . gave to our fathers . . . the will to assert them." Now "despotic power" in Europe and America threatened political freedom. The return to the fathers' revolution, for which Cass called, enshrined the freedom to hold slaves.⁶⁵

Cass apotheosized the Declaration of Independence in the name not of black emancipation but of the white right to enslave. Ahab acquires that freedom in dominating his crew. Cass refused to acknowledge the nature of a social order in which freedom rested on slavery. Melville shows us that order in *Moby-Dick*. There is, of course, no popular sovereignty on board ship, just as there was none for slaves. Instead, freedom for the master to pursue his goals mobilizes the crew in his service.

Cass claimed the protection of the Constitution against those fanatics who would sink the ship of state. He insisted that, "Like the cliffs of eternal granite which overlook the ocean and drive back the ceaseless waves that assault its base, so will the Constitution resist the assaults that may be made upon it." But Cass sensed, in spite of himself, that the right to vote on slavery would not protect the Union, and that he was salvaging a constitutional right from its wreckage. He continued, "We shall cling to this Constitution as the mariner clings to the last plank when night and the Tempest close around him." Popular sovereignty was not just too fragile to withstand the storm; it invited it. Applied in Kansas, Cass's doctrine forced slavery into the open, and led to the Civil War. Like the secessionists and abolitionists against whom he contended, Cass was sailing the ship of state into catastrophe.⁶⁶

Far from defeating "Disunion's Gorgon Crest," as Sam Houston promised, popular sovereignty drew America toward it. Californians had adopted "as the emblem of their land, Minerva springing full-armed and mature from the head of Jove." The *Southern Quarterly Review* approved that choice, but it hoped that the new state would not place "the repulsive, Gorgon-bearing aegis" on Minerva's shield. Minerva represented the miraculous, virgin birth of California, its genesis in the discovery of gold. But the *Review's* wish betrayed its fear—that the new state had short-circuited political pregnancy and labor unsuccessfully, and that Minerva would bring the Medusa head of slavery in her wake. There is no escape from Medusa on the *Pequod*. Ahab captains "a heathen crew that have small touch of human mothers in them. Whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea, the white whale is their demigorgon." (143) The gorgon, in this juxtaposition of Starbuck's, replaces the sailors' mothers. Ahab is "Cellini's cast Perseus" (109), who stands on Medusa's naked body and holds aloft her severed head. "Perseus . . . the first whaleman" also "harpooned the monster" leviathan and res-

cued Andromeda. (283) But Ahab fails to slay his leviathan. As Minerva with the gorgon shield, California stood at once for the dream of total freedom and the social fact of slavery. Moby Dick is the gorgon who gives birth to Ahab's vengeance and will destroy his crew.⁶⁷

Southern fire-eaters welcomed the destruction of the American ship of state. They made the Wilmot Proviso, which would have prohibited slavery in all the formerly Mexican territories, into a cause for secession. "Everywhere in the slave States, the Wilmot Proviso became a Gorgon's head," wrote Thomas Hart Benton, "the synonyme of civil war and the dissolution of the Union." "They shout hosannas to the 'Union,'" responded Alabama Congressman S.W. Inge. "They know it is a word of inspiration to every American citizen . . . a word of idolatrous worship, engraved upon the altar of our political temple. As the Persians fall prostrate before the rising Sun, so we are expected to bow to the omnipotence of a word." Secessionists were iconoclasts, moreover, in the name not only of slavery, but of their own right to be free. "I am a Southern man, and slave-holder," said Calhoun. "I would rather meet any extremity upon earth than give up one inch of our equality. . . . What, acknowledge inferiority! The surrender of life is nothing to sinking down into acknowledged inferiority!"⁶⁸

"He would be a democrat to all above; look how he lords it over all below!" Starbuck says of Ahab. (143) The "free citizens" of slave states," charged Thaddeus Stevens, were "despots" over slaves. Master on his plantation, like Ahab on his ship, the planter felt victimized by external forces—abolitionist conspiracy, nationalist state, corrupt terms of trade—enslaving him from a distance. Knowing from experience that "acknowledge[d] inferiority" meant slavery, the master refused to submit to anyone. At the same time, he defended slavery as an organic, hierarchical social relationship. In June 1848, under the pressure of efforts to prohibit slavery in the territories, Calhoun attacked the Declaration of Independence. All men were not created equal, he insisted, and he blamed that false doctrine both for the present "anarchy" in Europe and for the attacks on American slavery. Nevertheless, the "political equality" of masters required constitutional guarantees of their right to hold slaves. Calhoun demanded the freedom of slaveholders to take their "property" to the West.⁶⁹

Calhoun opposed the 1850 Compromise because it refused to guarantee slavery everywhere. He died in that struggle, the Compromise was passed, and it seemed to save the Union. Ahab's *Götterdämmerung*, Alan Heimert believes, is derived from Calhoun's. One need not entirely accept that view to recognize the South Carolinian as a major source for Ahab. "The influence of his mighty mind over his weak physical structure" struck those who heard the old man speak against the Compromise. His "skeletonlike" hands and his "emaciated body," Heimert shows, reappear in Ahab. Melville had already satirized Calhoun, as the figure of Nulli in *Mardi*. Nulli's eyes, like

"twin Corpusant balls," derived from Calhoun; Calhoun's "eyes, bright as coals," "in action fairly emitting flashes of fire," reappear in Ahab. "His eyes glowing like coals, that still glow in the ashes of ruin; untottering Ahab," on the final day of the chase, "lifted his splintered helmet of a brow to the fair girl's forehead of heaven." Calhoun, too, in his dying battle against the Compromise and the Union, struggled "to overcome the infirmities of a sinking body: *It was the exhibition of a wounded eagle with his eyes turned to the heaven in which he had soared, but into which his wings could never carry him again.*"⁷⁰

Calhoun's power, his contemporaries agreed, came from his logical, abstract intelligence. The physical resemblance between Ahab and Calhoun is seated in their war of mind against body. Calhoun, the "cast-iron man, who looks as if he had never been born, and could never be extinguished," reappears in Ahab's wish that the carpenter make him a man "fifty feet high . . . no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains." (360) Calhoun was a "mental and moral abstraction" because he had to divide the political mind from the social body. He resolved the contradiction between political equality and property in slaves by radically separating politics from society. Society, for Calhoun, was the realm of force. Social subordination was necessary, he argued, to protect the freedom of those in the political arena. "Mr. Calhoun regards slavery as the only secure foundation for Republican institutions," commented Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. "Outside of this insane idea he cannot reason, and whatever he says is tinged with it as the fundamental notion of his mind. It was necessary to remember this when listening to his speech [against the Compromise], in order to avoid the impression that he was actually crazy."⁷¹

Ahab shared Calhoun's monomania. By mobilizing the workers on the *Pequod* in the service of his obsession, he exposed the deranged symbiosis between political masterlessness and social slavery. That symbiosis was a familiar abolitionist target. Abolitionists graphically depicted the red and black bodies sacrificed to the expansion of slavery. "That young giant, strong and mocking, sits there on the Alleghenies," intoned Theodore Parker, "bustling with romantic life."

His right hand lies folded on his robe; the left rests on the Bible's open page, and holds these sacred words—All men are equal. . . . That stripling giant shouts amain: "My feet are red with the Indians' blood; my hand has forged the Negro's chain. I am strong; who dares assault me? I will drink his blood, for I have made my covenant of lies, and leagued with hell for my support."⁷²

Nevertheless, abolitionists also opposed the 1850 Compromise and assaulted the Union. "If this Union, with all its advantages, has no other cement than the blood of slavery, let it perish," said John Hale in 1848. Like

Alabama's Inge, Hale would smash the idol of the Union in the name of the right to be free. Southerners demanded that slavery go everywhere, complained Benton, Northerners that it go nowhere. "So true is it that extremes meet, and that all fanaticism, for or against any dogma, terminates at the same point of intolerance and defiance." "Those who plotted the dismemberment of the great Republic," charged Representative Charles Ezra Clarke of New York, were "monomaniacs, who, in hot pursuit of one solitary idea, rush furiously over a communion table." "The Ship of State," warned one supporter of the Compromise, "approaches the awful maelstrom of disunion."⁷³

"All the time, when Mr. Webster was telling us the ship of State was going to pieces," responded Parker, "he was calling on us to throw over to Texas—that monster of the deep which threatened to devour the ship of State—fifty thousand square miles of territory, and ten millions of dollars; and to the other monster of secession to cast over the trial by jury. . . ." Parker, for his part, would make war on those monsters. As he imagined it,

Slavery, the most hideous snake which Southern regions breed, with fifteen unequal feet, came crawling North; fold on fold, and ring on ring, and coil on coil, the venomous monster came; then Avarice, the foulest worm which Northern cities gender in their heat, went crawling South. . . . At length they met, and twisting up on their obscene embrace, the twain became one monster, Hunkerism.⁷⁴

"Where shall I find a parallel with men who will do such a deed?" asked Parker, referring to the return of the fugitive Thomas Sims to slavery. "Come, brood of monsters, let me bring you up from the deep damnation of the graves," he intoned. "Bring up the greatest monster of the human race," and his infamy would be less than those who reenslaved Sims.⁷⁵

The "monster of the deep" who sent Thomas Sims back to Georgia was Lemuel Shaw. His decision against Sims, the first to return a fugitive slave from Massachusetts, was also the first to declare constitutional the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. It saved the Compromise and (many thought) the Union, at the expense of reenslaving free men. Parker appealed against *Sims* to "our fathers [who] fought and bled on yonder Hill." He indicated Bunker Hill, where Melville's grandfather had fought; his own was a veteran of Lexington. Parker called on Boston, in the name of the fathers, to slay the monster of slavery. He preached like Father Mapple. Ahab assaulted leviathan in the name of the devil, not of the Father. Although Parker claimed to speak for authority, unlike Ahab, his appeal to the fathers threatened to destroy their Union.⁷⁶

Parker called, in his sermon, for the destruction of the Baal-worshipping slavemaster, King Ahab. He imagined himself as the Elijah who had pro-

phesied Ahab's doom. But that very apocalyptic appeal made Parker himself into an Ahab. "It is not possible to suppress the idea of freedom," the minister insisted, "but it is possible to destroy a State." "You may make your statutes; an appeal always lies to the higher law," Parker told supporters of the Fugitive Slave Law. "Your statutes cannot hold him," he continued, reminding his audience of God's invocation of leviathan in his answer to Job. "While it is calm, you may laugh, and say, 'Lo, I have chained the ocean!' and howl down the law of Him who holds the universe as a rosebud in His hand." The rosebud, in Parker's metaphor (like the ship of that name in *Moby-Dick*), was at the mercy of God and the sea. Whether Parker called upon God's ocean, or presented himself as a monster-slayer, he spoke as a prophet of destruction.⁷⁷

Parker shifted the idea of freedom from a political right for whites to a civil right for slaves. That made him not merely the prophet of servile insurrection and civil war, but their instigator. (Within a decade, he would help finance John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry.) European 1848ers joined political freedom to nationalism; but the freedom demanded by the European poor divided the nation, for it set one class against another. Abolitionists, applying the Declaration of Independence against slavery, played that divisive role in America.

Parker opposed the "despotic idea . . . that one man has a natural right to overcome and make use of some other man for his advantage." That may seem to make him a critic of shipboard masters like Ahab, as well as of lords of the lash. But at the same time that Parker opened up the social question in the South, he buried it in the North. Southerners were beginning to expose the coercive character of so-called free society. The capitalist had the natural right to buy labor, wrote George Fitzhugh, the propertyless worker to sell it. Parker pretended there were no labor relations in the North. He contrasted the slaveowner's power over men to the free man's power over nature. "Instead of kidnapping a man who can run away," he explained, the North "kidnaps the elements, subdues them to its command, and makes them do its work. . . . It lays hands on fire and water, and breeds a new giant." Science freed men from "slavery to the elements," and built "iron vassals" to serve them. Parker was proposing the same domination over nature that the master exercised over his slaves. Northerners created and ruled over artificial men, in Parker's images, not real ones. Parker, Cass, and other enthusiasts for technology imagined it would replace human labor.⁷⁸

Far from separating the exploitation of nature (in the West) from control over men (in society), as Parker imagined was possible, Ahab showed how the one facilitated the other. In a "joint stock world," Ishmael imagines Queequeg thinking, "we cannibals must help those Christians." (67) It is an unsettling set of juxtapositions. The joint stock company points backward to

Allan Melville's milieu, those eighteenth-century commercial relationships in which partners shared unlimited liability. Carried forward to work relations among a nineteenth-century international proletariat, such partnerships become the model for the monkey rope that will tie Ishmael to "his own inseparable twin-brother, Queequeg," "in a joint-stock company of two." (253) But mutual dependence is risky (as Melville's fate showed his son), since one flawed human must rely on another. "Men may seem detestable as joint stock companies; they are heroic in the ideal," comments Ishmael. (215) He is speaking for Ahab. Ahab curses "that mortal interindebtedness which will not do away with ledgers." (361) "The Guinea-Coast slavery of solitary command" (408) has prepared Ahab to mistrust interdependence and seek domination. He does so by infusing the traditional prerogatives of master over slave with the modern magic of technology.⁷⁹

Work relations on the *Pequod* point away from isolated independence and toward fraternity. Ahab resists fraternity by manipulating mechanical power. "My one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve," he exults, after he has sworn the crew to hunt Moby Dick. (142) Ahab has gained "magnetic ascendancy" over the sailors (175), for he has "shocked them into the same fiery emotion accumulated within the Leyden jar of his own magnetic life." (141) Later, Ahab refuses to navigate with scientific instruments, and throws away the quadrant. That is because he has acquired its power for himself.

Ahab exploits the technological sublime, the terrifying, awe-inspiring power of man-made inventions. In so doing, however, he shows that he is in the power of the machine. "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run," he says. (142) The image is the negative of American hopes that technology would empower free men.⁸⁰

The telegraph, wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes, gave America a "network of iron nerves which flash sensation and volition backward and forward to and from towns and provinces as if they were organs and limbs of a single living body." Nationalist expansion was justified in organic terms ("Contiguous territory, however remote, must eventually melt into one government . . . as in the human body, where the heart and the head govern all the members"), and railroads would provide a "vast system of iron muscles which, as it were, move the limbs of the mighty organism."⁸¹

Such images short-circuited historical time and geographic distance. They made the eighteenth-century Newtonian machine into an organism, and brought it to life. A mechanistic vocabulary spoke to contractual relations among individual property-owners. Organic, corporate images sanctified nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. Ahab transformed the traditional shipboard society of master and slave into a modern, industrial body.

For Southern Unionists, the "STEAM-ENGINE . . . [was] the most

powerful instrument by far of pacification and commerce, and therefore of improvement and happiness, that the world has ever seen." It "promised . . . to make the whole Christian world, at least, one great family." But the home of industrial capitalism was Northeastern Whiggery. Daniel Webster, a "steam engine in trousers," was its spokesman.⁸²

Although both Northern and Southern Unionists hoped that technology would harmonize the sections, Northerners went further. Fearful that a centralized, national state would upset slavery, Southerners insisted on the constitutional compact among the states as the basis for political obligation. Northerners like Webster proposed new, organic, national ties. The Kentuckian Clay defended the Compromise as a mutually advantageous sectional bargain. Webster had already, in his 1830 speech against nullification, shifted the Union's bonds from a contract among states to a national sentiment. As sectional conflict deepened, so did Webster's emotional appeal. He called for a Union which went beyond the "compact" to "fraternal feeling." He repudiated the "bonds of legal corporation" for the "unseen, soft, easy-sitting chains that result from generous affections and from a sense of common interest and common pride."⁸³

Webster's "unseen, soft . . . chains" would not bind the Union. They became visible around the Massachusetts courthouse, even as he spoke, to prevent antislavery mobs from freeing Thomas Sims. Judge Shaw stooped beneath "the chain on the neck of the Commonwealth," as Parker called it, to decide the fate of the slave. "See the court-house in chains," preached Parker. These chains were unsanctified, for neither Webster's pieties nor Shaw's obeisance to the state had the force to hold the Union together. Melville imagined a demonic reunification instead. Webster and Shaw still grounded their state in relations among individual property-owners. Spokesmen for that sort of capitalism—Peleg, Bildad, Starbuck—have lost political power on Ahab's ship. Drawing on his destructive intimacy with nature, on the savage's instinctual power, and on a transforming, technological magic, Ahab merged his "thirty isolatoes" into a communal body.⁸⁴

Sailing east from New England, the *Pequod* inherited and reversed the mission of the *Arbella*, which had sailed west to the New World two centuries earlier. "Christ and his church make one body," preached John Winthrop on board the *Arbella*. His "spirit and love knits all" the disordered limbs together. The members of Winthrop's community formed "one body in Christ"; Ahab formed his crew into members of his own body. The "thirty isolatoes" "federated along one keel" (108) when the *Pequod* leaves Nantucket, like the "crown of thirty stars" on Theodore Parker's giant Young America, equal the number of states in the federal union before California. "They were one man, not thirty," when they sighted Moby Dick. "All the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear; guilt

and guiltiness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to. . . . 'Ye are not other men, but my arms and legs; and so obey me.' " (418-19, 427) By hunting the beast, Ahab created—in the opening words of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (which Melville quoted in the opening extracts of *Moby-Dick*)—"that great Leviathan, called a Commonwealth, or State—in Latin, Civitas)—which is but an artificial man."⁸⁵ (14)

IX

"In that day, the Lord with his sore, and great, and strong sword, shall punish Leviathan, the piercing serpent, even Leviathan that crooked serpent, and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea." Melville quoted that passage, from Isaiah 27:1, in the extracts to *Moby-Dick*. (12) "And . . . the great trumpet shall be blown," Isaiah 27:13 continues, ". . . and the outcasts in the land of Egypt . . . shall worship the LORD in the holy mount at Jerusalem." The Egyptian outcasts were Jewish slaves. The Jews were also enslaved in Babylon, and since the dragon ruled Babylon, Isaiah was also taken to prophesy its fall. The weeping Rachel appeared to Jeremiah as the Jews were carried into Babylon. His vision was interpreted as a promise of their deliverance from slavery. The prophecies of the Old Testament were, in Puritan biblical exegesis, fulfilled in the New Testament. In Revelation a woman and her child escape from the Beast into the wilderness. Puritan theology interpreted the woman and child as the antitype of Rachel and her promised seed. On a heretical reading, the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael also prefigured the escape in Revelation. That parallel would derive New Testament deliverance not from Isaac's children of Israel but from Ishmael, linking the outcast Ishmael, progenitor of American slaves, with the outcast and liberated Jews. Michael Gilmore believes that Melville intended *Moby-Dick* as such a reading of the Bible. On that interpretation, Babylon's fall and Ishmael's rescue would signify the emancipation of the slaves.⁸⁶

When the Fugitive Slave Law was enacted, preached Theodore Parker, Negro mothers of Boston "wept like Rachel for her first-born, refusing to be comforted."⁸⁷ The cruising ship *Rachel*, "weeping for her children because they were not," (402) rescues Ishmael from the wreck of the *Pequod*. The *Rachel's* captain has lost his twelve-year-old son (who is the age of Melville when his father died). The captain is "pale in the very buttons of his eyes." He looks to Stubb as if someone has taken his "best coat." (400) Coat and buttons, in Melville, connect father and son; here they underline the loss. The *Rachel's* captain has lost his son to Moby Dick, and the white whale will take Ishmael's captain as well.

The sinking of the *Pequod* creates a "vortex," but this time it is not a

"Descartian" one, and it does not pull Ishmael down. From the "button-like black bubble" at its center, Queequeg's coffin shoots up. The *Rachel* finds Ishmael on it. (432) The twelve-year-old son is dead; so is the savage brother, and so is Ahab. Together their deaths rescue Ishmael. Read optimistically, that ending prophesies the liberation of the enslaved black children of Israel. It restores the outcast Ishmael to the Christian fold. But even if that hope is offered, it comes at a large price. Ahab, his whalebone leg shattered and a mist before his eye, fails to "slay the dragon that is in the sea." He becomes leviathan and is destroyed. Ishmael escapes the graves of the fathers to report the destruction of the American Babylon.⁸⁸

God told Abraham, "[C]ast out thy bondswoman and her son," the *Southern Literary Messenger* reminded its readers in January 1851. Had Abraham disobeyed, imagined the author of "Isaac and Ishmael," his progeny would have reproduced the story of Cain and Abel. Abraham loved his "child of nature," insisted the *Messenger*, but Isaac was "the future patriarch of his chosen nation, with whom his covenant was to be established." Worst of all, continued the author, Abraham might have cast out Isaac. What was the modern design equaling that one

if not exceeding it, in folly, want of natural feeling, in wicked disregard of God's word, and in manifest opposition to his providential plans? *The dissolution of our Union, for the sake of a handful of bondmen*. Is not our country the Isaac . . . the child of promise given to [the world] in its old age? Our nation is to enter Canaan as certainly as the Hebrews once did. . . . And shall any inferior nation stop us in our heaven-marked course? Can any nation do it? Did the red men arrest us? And who removed them from our fathers, but the God who planted our fathers here?—the same God that has made us increase by the same manifest destiny by which he has made them wane and fade away? And shall the black man stop us? If one must yield, are we not right in saying—the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the free? And who will set themselves . . . against God and say—let Ishmael be favored though discord reign—though the blood of Abel should be shed again—in spite of God's appointed order, let the son of the bondwoman divide the inheritance with the son of the free[?] . . . Let Isaac be sent forth into the wilderness to perish[?] . . . Who by their action say all this? Those who dishonor the graves of their noble fathers by refusing to abide by the compact they made for themselves and their children . . . who would pull down with unhallowed hands the fair fabric of the Union.⁸⁹

Lemuel Shaw agreed that the constitutional compact guaranteed slavery in perpetuity. He honored that compact, in the name of the Union, when he returned Thomas Sims to bondage. His son-in-law sent the ship of state "forth into the wilderness to perish," and Ishmael alone survived. Those

who killed the red man and enslaved the black met their manifest destiny in *Moby-Dick*. "I have written a wicked book and feel spotless as the lamb."⁹⁰

If the end of *Moby-Dick* imagines the end of slavery, then the price is the destruction of the ship of state. Alternatively, the sinking of the *Pequod* may save the Union from its monomaniacal enemies, but the price is the perpetuation of slavery. In April 1851, before Melville finished *Moby-Dick*, Shaw handed down his decision in *Sims*. It announced the end of the judge's opposition to slavery on grounds of natural right. In America as in Europe, the liberal fathers had promised political freedom. Shaw's earlier decisions—freeing himself from positive law and slaves from their masters—spoke to that promise. But when freedom threatened the social order, as in the European 1848, the fathers drew back. In a courthouse surrounded by chains, Shaw insisted he was bound by legal precedent and federal law to deny *Sims* his freedom.⁹¹

Shaw's decision raised a storm of protest, reported by the *Pittsfield Sun*, in Boston and New York. On April 10 Theodore Parker delivered "The Chief Sins of the People," his attack on the *Sims* decision, before a packed Boston house. Parker preached against the Baal-worshipping, proslavery King Ahab in this sermon. The sermon's "brood of monsters" who swallowed Thomas *Sims* was, like King Ahab, a familiar application of scripture to the slavery crisis. It would be a large coincidence, however, if Melville had placed Ahab, Peleg, and Elijah together in Nantucket without knowing that Parker had just located them all in Boston.⁹²

Other evidence in *Moby-Dick* also suggests the impact of Shaw's ruling on the climax of Melville's tale. Melville conceived the final confrontation between Ahab and the white whale sometime in the first half of 1851. He may well have written his last chapters only after returning from a trip to New York in June. When New York antislavery leaders William Seward and John Van Buren wrote public letters protesting the *Sims* ruling, the *New York Herald* responded. Its attack on "The Anti-Slavery Agitators" began,

Did you ever see a whale? Did you ever see a mighty whale struggling . . . in the terrible current of the boundless ocean, that was hurrying everything above and beneath it . . . to some final but awful catastrophe? . . .

Such a scene . . . resembles, to some degree, the present condition of this mighty republic. . . . This fair republic has been launched on a current, which is now rolling us on, with its dark and hideous waves, to some frightful destiny . . . the ultimate dissolution and destruction of this great Nation . . . and to the commencement of scenes of a revolutionary character.⁹³

Abolitionist fanatics "have caused this mighty current and groundswell of political excitement," said the *Herald*, "which is hurrying everything . . .

to the tomb of dissolution, and civil war. . . ." Abolitionists might destroy the Union, but human agitators could hardly raise a storm that would sink a whale. The *Herald's* metaphor undercut its argument. In Melville's alternative ending, a whale sinks the fanatic. If one reads the ending of *Moby-Dick* in the light of the *Herald's* intention, then the white whale sank the *Pequod* and the Union was saved.⁹⁴

Melville worried about the plausibility of his own ending. Shaw decided *Sims* in the first week of April. That same month he sent his son-in-law a copy of Owen Chase's narrative of the sinking of the *Essex* by a sperm whale.⁹⁵ Melville had read that narrative a decade earlier, on the *Acushnet*. He cited it in *Moby-Dick*, to convince readers that the white whale could sink the *Pequod*. Together, Shaw's gift and the news of *Sims* must have made a powerful impression upon Melville. Two paragraphs before he introduced Chase's narrative, Melville associated the whale's power to sink ships with the Egyptian plagues that freed the Jews from slavery—and, on the page preceding, substituted Joseph Brant's pursuer (after the siege of Fort Stanwix) for Annowan's (in King Philip's War). (170–71) Melville's family connections to Indian dispossession and slavery were leaving their mark on his fiction.

Seamen believe the tale of the *Essex*, Melville noted when he received Shaw's gift. "Judge Shaw and other landsmen acquainted with Nantucket believe it," too. As he returned *Sims* to slavery, Shaw announced his faith in the whale. Ahab refused confinement of the sort Shaw offered in *Rogers*; Shaw sank him in *Sims*. The *Essex* was also the name of Commodore Porter's ship, which had sacked Typee, and the sinking of that *Essex* would have punished American imperialism. But in the metaphor with which the *Herald* responded to *Sims*, and perhaps for Shaw and Melville as well, the whale signified the Union's victory over its monomaniacal attackers. From that perspective (in Melville's ending, Shaw's ruling, and Webster's words), "fanatics at the North and secessionists at the South" smashed against the power of the Union.⁹⁶

Addressing "my young friends of Albany" (in a speech reprinted in the *Pittsfield Sun*), Webster praised Shaw's decision in *Sims*. The senator not only stood with "the unanimous opinion of Massachusetts, herself, expressed by" her supreme court; he also embodied the Union. Indeed, Webster seemed to embody American nature itself. The people, said Emerson, look on Webster "as the representative of the American Continent." He was "titanic, colossal, continental." "He spouted like a whale and roared like a leviathan," Emerson commented, when he observed the senator seasick. Admirers compared Webster's massive brow to the dome of St. Peter's. Melville borrowed such descriptions for his caricature of Webster in *Mardi*. There he compared the "St. Peter's grand dome" of Saturnina's brow to the

head of a sperm whale. "Of erections, how few are domed like St. Peter's! Of creatures, how few vast as the whale," proclaims Ishmael. As the sperm whale resembles "the New England rock on the sea-coast," so Webster was as massively American as "the rocks of our hills."⁹⁷

Abolitionists, said Webster, "are disposed to mount upon some particular duty, as upon a war-horse, and to drive furiously on and upon and over all other duties. . . . If their perspicacious vision enables them to detect a spot on the face of the sun, they think that a good reason why the sun should be struck down from heaven." "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me," said Ahab. (139) Like Webster's fanatics, he rebelled against the natural order. Webster reaffirmed that order. He even insisted that "the law of nature, of physical geography" would thwart the expansion of slavery. Slavery could not take root in the barren Southwest, Webster reassured Free-Soilers, and he ridiculed the human effort to prohibit it there: "I would not take pains needlessly to reaffirm an ordinance of nature, nor to reenact the will of God."⁹⁸

Stretching nature to cover both Union and antislavery, Webster opened up the fissure between them. Slaves could mine the Western mountains. "Webster's Fugitive Slave Bill," as Thoreau labeled it, deprived accused fugitives of jury trials, forbade their testimony, and remunerated commissioners who returned them to slavery. Webster personally supervised arrangements for the trial and return of Thomas Sims. Three days after the captured slave was whipped in Georgia, the senator defended his return. "A long and violent convulsion of the elements has just passed away, and the heavens, the skies, smile upon us," Webster proclaimed. "Every citizen feels that he is a man."⁹⁹

Webster welcomed Louis Kossuth to America, after the defeat of Hungarian independence. Kossuth was the 1848er who had led the fight for a free Hungary. Webster appealed for aid to Hungary, and spoke with another architect of the 1850 Compromise, Stephen Douglas, at a banquet in Kossuth's honor. Webster endorsed the political principles of 1848, but that did not disguise his retreat from those principles when they endangered order at home. "Wilt thou welcome the Hungarian hero, and yet hold slaves?" asked Parker. To obey the law and return fugitive slaves, Parker charged, was to imitate the Austrian general in 1848, who told his soldiers they had the legal duty to attack Hungary. The Pittsfield *Sun* celebrated Thomas Sims's reenslavement, and then rejoiced in "The Escape of Madame Kossuth" from Hapsburg confinement. "What a mockery," commented the *Tribune* on *Sims*, "must be the pretense of sympathy with Kossuth, Mazzini, Mitchell or their compatriots by the craven soul who can thus hound on his fellow citizens."¹⁰⁰

Melville surely borrowed characterizations of Webster for the white whale, as Alan Heimert has claimed. It is also correct, as Heimert and other critics have done, to situate *Moby-Dick* in the apparent resolution of the

slavery crisis by the 1850 Compromise and *Sims*. But that does not make Melville's apocalypse offer hope (as it does for the critics) either to the Union or to the slaves. Webster's brow as Saturnina resembles a sperm whale's, but his big head is empty; Saturnina is a windbag. Moby Dick's grandeur, by contrast, is purchased at the price of the whale's indifference to human concerns. Webster may have had the size "of the Pyramids," and his oratorical silences may have been monumental. But Webster offered reassurance; Moby Dick's "pyramidal silence" (273) did not. The activity of whaling is an "Egyptian mother"; one of the offspring with which it is pregnant is Ahab. (100) Enslaved Jews built the Egyptian pyramids, but though Ahab assaults the "high, pyramidal white hump" (153) of Moby Dick, he frees no slaves. The sphinx head of the whale "has seen enough to make an infidel of Abraham"; (248) no Abraham on the *Pequod* answers the riddle of the sphinx and resanctifies the children of Israel. Americans had moved their nation of Israel into nature. But Webster's nature, in spite of his protestations, no longer enshrined human freedom. He and Shaw were shifting the meaning of nature away from individual natural right and toward the organic power of the state.¹⁰¹

This shift was necessary, they believed, precisely because the state could not rely on unbreakable laws of nature. While no man could strike the sun, Webster knew, men could destroy the Union. "Alas gentlemen, human structures, however strong, do not stand upon the everlasting laws of nature. They may crumble, they may fall. . . . And when they shall crumble and fall, the political catastrophe will resemble that which would happen in the natural world were the sun to be struck out of heaven." Because human institutions were fragile, they had to be infused with the permanence of nature.¹⁰²

"I am looking out for no fragment upon which to float away from the wreck," announced Webster in his speech for the Compromise. "I speak today for the preservation of the Union." Webster and Shaw stood with the Union to keep it from sinking in the sea. Owen Chase's narrative was as likely to have reminded Shaw of the fragility of human institutions as of the power of the Union. It would have underlined Webster's warning against shipwreck, in the Albany speech supporting Shaw's judgment in *Sims*. Webster concluded that speech with an extended, versified, nautical figure of speech. "A wise and prudent ship master makes it his first duty to preserve the vessel that carries him and his merchandize," said Webster, "preserve the Constitution which bears him . . . [and] keep [the ship of state] off the rocks and shoals."

He minds his compass and his way; . . .
At helm he makes his reason all,
His crew of passions all submit;

Thus—thus he steers his barque, and sails
On upright keel to meet the gales.

Fearing for the Union's survival, Webster and Shaw could not allow any biblical plagues to free American slaves. Two months after *Sims*, three weeks after Webster's admonition to the young men of Albany, Melville baptized *Moby-Dick*. Together with Webster and Shaw, he called attention to the chasm that was opening in American politics between the fathers' idea of freedom and the fathers' state.¹⁰³

George Washington was the model helmsman on Webster's ship of state. Washington, said Webster, was the "living, speaking, animated form" of the spirit of the Constitution. Henry Clay held a fragment of Washington's coffin before Congress, to warn against the Union's destruction. Queequeg is "George Washington cannibalistically developed," and his coffin saves Ishmael. Alan Heimert, who suggested Melville's appropriation of Washington for Queequeg, reads that transfer of authority hopefully; more likely its meaning is ironic. Clay denied that he intended the fragment of the coffin to stand as a "sad presage" of the Union's fate; it may have done so in *Moby-Dick*. And the shift from a white father of his country to a colored savage required a wrenching unraveling of American history. Queequeg mocks George Washington's pretension to speak for nature; Moby Dick, who is nature, does not speak at all. When Shaw speaks in *Sims*, he speaks against freedom. *Sims* and *Moby-Dick* alike deprive human freedom of its natural ground.¹⁰⁴

Nature sanctified the beautiful revolutions of 1848. Its meaning shifted when those revolutions turned ugly. The sea symbolized the dangers of nature in America. Urban women embodied the threat from nature in revolutionary Paris. In February, George Duyckinck had ridiculed the English fear that the Parisian workers were "tigers or griffins or monsters more horrible." But, Duyckinck recognized, "the 'ouvriers' have gained the victory and the country is in their hands." Duyckinck rightly feared the labor question as "a rock on which . . . the Republic may split." Writing from England after the June days, Duyckinck contrasted "the horrors of the rebellion in Paris" with "the enthusiasm and hopes of the latter days of February." "Heads were stuck on pikes or swords and women danced about them," he claimed. He reported the June days as a female reign of terror.¹⁰⁵

Eugene Delacroix had painted a woman "Liberty Leading the People" to honor the 1830 revolution. There is but a single bourgeois among Delacroix's people, however, and he was quickly endangered in 1848. Both Delacroix's crowd and his female figure become menacing. Antirevolutionary 1848 cartoons depicted blindfolded Liberty as a whore. Revolutionaries, by contrast, celebrated female emancipation. Alexander Herzen, the Russian

radical living in Paris, watched women participate in the festival of the streets, while "the gloomy and alarmed faces of their husbands" looked on. Herzen was an 1848er; Delacroix might have been one of the husbands. T. J. Clark has brilliantly charted the disturbing impact of 1848 on the French painter. Delacroix complained that women who wore masculine drawers attacked the rights of man. His description of a fly, lying on its back while it defeats a spider, makes the battle a parable of human sexual relations. Delacroix painted women who unmanned men. He became obsessed between 1848 and 1851 with sexual and familial disarray.¹⁰⁶

Delacroix feared the power of women. Tocqueville showed his disturbance at the breakdown of political forms with images not of women but of water. The leader of the revolution emerges, in the *Recollections*, from a sewer. Revolutionary crowds "flood" the chamber of deputies, and wash its members away in a "torrent." Fear "transmogri[ies]" the president's body "into a sort of liquid," "a shapeless mass." Tocqueville ended his *Recollections* in the midst of the Second Republic's turmoil. Delacroix, argues Clark, prophesied the return of order. He painted "Apollo Victorious over the Serpent Python" on the ceiling of the Galerie d'Appollon. The allegory, in his words, depicted "the triumph of light over darkness and over the revolt of the waters." The sea-serpent's revolt, writes Clark, is "formless and impotent, subdued by Apollo, the sea awash with corpses." But the whirling forms of the Apollo ceiling catch up the hero in their movement; the stillness of restored order, after the battle, still lay in the future. Louis Napoleon finally ended the French 1848 with his 1851 coup. Then the peasants saw him as a force of nature, according to Marx, "an unrestricted governmental power that protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above."¹⁰⁷

Webster wanted his Union to acquire such naturalized power. It could not do so in a nation half slave and half free. Slavery divided the American union, and Ahab couldn't kill that leviathan. Delacroix painted nature as a charnel house, which is what Ishmael calls it in *Moby-Dick*, but the forces of light were victorious in Delacroix's painting. Alexander Herzen saw only the triumph of death. Exiled in Geneva, he reflected on the sacrifice of the 1848ers to their failed revolutions: "We know that Nature disposes of individuals; later, sooner, with no victims or on heaps of corpses, she cares not. . . . Tens of thousands of years she spends building a coral reef, every spring abandoning to death the ranks that have run ahead too far."¹⁰⁸

Herzen longed to see slow, anguished progress in the building of the reef, but his metaphor sacrifices his conscious purpose to report what he has seen: the defeat of 1848, the return of kings everywhere in Europe, and the triumph over civil society not of the political dream of freedom, but of the state. Politics and nature will be allied, not in political emancipation but in

the necessity of force and blood. Nature, once the repository of the rights of man, now reclaims men's bodies. No longer God's gift to man, she rules as pagan deity.

"The New World of the United States," Herzen imagined, "knows nothing at all of our agonies." "Anyone, who can put off from himself the old Adam of Europe and be born again a new Jonathan, had better take the first steamer to some place in Wisconsin or Kansas," proposed the Russian exile.¹⁰⁹ The 1848ers who left Europe for Kansas would shortly bleed there, however. To readers of *Moby-Dick*, Herzen's image of nature will be familiar, for his epitaph for 1848 is Melville's epitaph for the *Pequod*: "Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago." (431)

X

"The year '1852' has come to be universally regarded as a liberator and an avenger," announced the lead article in the January 1852 number of the *Democratic Review*. The *Review* had been chief promoter, for a decade, of literary nationalism and Manifest Destiny. It also championed 1848. By 1852 the European revolutions were defeated, and the slave controversy threatened nationalism and continental expansion at home. "[S]et off the names of Cavaignac and Cass, of Ledru-Rollin and Van Buren . . . [of] Napoleon . . . [and] Webster," wrote its editor, George Sanders, "and the histories of the French and American republics for these four years . . . have been identical." 1848 was a year of triumph, Sanders reminded his readers. In America "the story of Aladdin seemed about to be realized by our conquests on the Pacific." In Europe, monarchs were overthrown. But now "the millions bent down in European servitude" in Germany, in Rome, in Hungary and throughout the continent looked to Young America for liberation. "Young America awakened from its sleep of years" would save "Young Europe" from tyranny.¹¹⁰

Sanders was trying to act on that program. In Paris in 1848, he made connections with the revolutionaries. After their defeat he promised Kosuth to send a ship, loaded with arms and 1848ers, to overthrow the European kings. President Franklin Pierce appointed Sanders the American consul in London in 1853. He sent Sanders's Young America colleagues, John L. O'Sullivan and Pierre Soulé, as ministers to Portugal and Spain. Sanders hosted a Washington's Birthday dinner in 1854 for Ambassador James Buchanan and seven European 1848ers. Mazzini, Garibaldi, Kosuth, Arnold Rugé, Herzen, Orsini, and Ledru-Rollin formed this Anacharsis Cloots deputation. O'Sullivan had already met with Ledru-Rollin to plot the overthrow

of monarchy in Portugal, Spain, Italy and France. Louis Napoleon's assassination was to initiate the regicides; America would acquire Cuba and other Caribbean possessions as a result. Sanders called for Bonaparte's assassination in letters to the *London Times*. He used his home as a communications center for the revolutionary exiles.¹¹¹

The Young Americans in Europe fell grotesquely short of their goals. Sanders scandalized London, as Gansevoort Melville had several years earlier. He was refused confirmation as consul, and O'Sullivan was eventually recalled. Sanders's deranged rhetoric of 1852 presages this failure in Europe. Not only was European monarchy resurgent, he warned, it also threatened the citadel of American freedom. "This Brutus of years," as Sanders called 1852, comes "to extinguish under the very dome of the capitol the imperial principles of the modern Caesar." It comes as "a gigantic Brutus, armed with the power to chastise the unjust, and kill the usurpations of men, to bring death to tyrants and freedom to nations. It comes, and monarchs prepare to anticipate it."¹¹²

The "young giant," Stephen Douglas, was Sanders's Brutus. "Eighteen-fifty-two and the Presidency" initiated the editor's campaign for his nomination. Sanders warned, "the fate of the monarchies of the world depend [sic] upon the American presidential election of 1852." Sanders attacked "so beggarly a sire as fageydom" in the Democratic party. "Old Fageydom" was "a grim and blowy Spectre, its hoary hair streaming with the small devils of every political vice, a male gorgon. . . ." Neither Sanders nor Douglas slew this gorgon, however. Douglas was an expansionist and an 1848er, to be sure, but his Presidential nomination eight years later would signal the crisis of the Union, not the triumph of Young America.

Anticipations of defeat augmented Sanders's hysterical grandiosity. The "democratic principle . . . stripped of every cloak, and muffle, and mask," he proclaimed, "means Cuba, and all the islands on the main and in the Gulf; it means Canada and all north. . . . [I]t means *full expansion*, North, South, West, and moreover East." Seeking to reconnect European revolution to American expansion, Sanders urged Young America to mount a crusade against European monarchy. "Young America," he insisted, is "determined to approach the hoary monster in his very stronghold . . . and . . . crush him."¹¹³

"His sentiment is forced," announced a book review by Sanders at the end of that January 1852 issue. "His enthusiasm is forced. And . . . his . . . vanity is immeasurable. He will either be first among the . . . tribe, or he will be nowhere. . . . From this morbid self-esteem, coupled with a most unbounded love of notoriety, spring all Mr. Melville's efforts, all his rhetorical contortions, all his declamatory abuse of society, all his inflated sentiment, and all his insinuating licentiousness."¹¹⁴

These words, of course, exemplify the political romance of the *Review*, not of the book. Others also dismissed *Moby-Dick* but not with Sanders's fury, for Melville spoke to no one more intimately. A few years earlier Evert Duyckinck had called in the *Democratic Review* for a literature faithful to "our people, our institutions, and national character." Like his friends, O'Sullivan and Melville, Duyckinck thought "foreign writers positively hostile to our people"; like them, he thought that America's political superiority would open the way for a national literature.¹¹⁵

Duyckinck identified native materials with a literature of national celebration. But when the great literature emerged, from the wreckage of the American 1848, it held up a mirror into which neither Sanders nor Duyckinck was willing to look. In *Moby-Dick* Young America in literature appropriated, heroicized, and exploded Young America in politics.

Duyckinck reviewed *Moby-Dick* nervously. He liked the "humorous," "quaint," and "picturesque" descriptions of the sperm whale fishery; he did not like Ahab. Melville canceled his subscription to the *Literary World*, and satirized the editor in the Young America chapter of *Pierre*. Melville may have dreamed that his "wicked book" would cause a large scandal. He may have hoped, like the biblical prophets, that by dramatizing the course on which the nation was embarked, he could alter its destiny. Instead he was ignored. Reviewed with hostility, *Moby-Dick* sold badly. Its reception ended Melville's hope, expressed in the "Mosses," that the democratic artist could speak in a voice that the American democracy could hear. Melville's ambitions for popular success and political impact went smash in the wake of *Moby-Dick*. *Pierre*'s "Young America in Literature" registers his defeat.¹¹⁶

Young America, however, was not the beneficiary of *Moby-Dick*'s failure. Sanders's hysteria, and his European machinations, signified the end of Young America as a movement for national regeneration. Slavery, the issue which Young America tried to avoid, dominated politics in the 1850s; it dominated Melville's work as well. But slavery took Melville in the opposite direction from the one in which it took the country. Slavery confirmed Melville's isolation, decisively established in *Moby-Dick*, from the dominant consciousness of his time.

Shaw's decision in *Sims*, abolitionists charged, made the Declaration of Independence a lie. "The Declaration of Independence makes a difference," Melville had written Duyckinck two years earlier. Republicans adopted rhetoric very much like Melville's to attack slavery. They raised the slogans of political emancipation that the 1850 Compromise failed to lay to rest. 1848 dealt a decisive blow to revolutionary liberalism in Europe. The struggle against slavery, fought under the banner of the right to be free, revived natural rights in the American North; exiled 1848ers fought in the Civil War.¹¹⁷

Melville's Declaration of Independence, however, went down with the *Pequod*. Ahab's exploded dream of masterlessness left behind it no alternative to the "slavish shore," (99) to Shaw's imprisoning judgment in *Sims*. The omnipotence of slavery drove Melville back from political emancipation to a place inside the institutions of domesticity, work, and exchange in civil society. White-Jacket attacked slavery as a "barbarous relic" of personal "feudal aristocracy." Melville's fiction after *Moby-Dick* found slavery everywhere in the democratic future.

Ishmael did "lower . . . his conceit of attainable felicity" after *Moby-Dick*, from "the intellect or the fancy" of Western regeneration to "the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country." (323) Ishmael urged that shift on his readers after squeezing sperm with the crew. Some readers think he is choosing his comrades against his mad captain, in the quoted passage; in fact, he is choosing the family against them all. Ishmael is in flight not only from Ahab's dream of freedom but from male camaraderie as well, and his advice offered Melville no peace. It led him in *Pierre*, White-Jacket's plea notwithstanding, to "train his murderous guns inboard" against the mother, the near-wife, "the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, [and] the country" at Saddle Meadows.¹¹⁸