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# “Who ain’t a slave?”: *Moby Dick* and the Ideology of Free Labor

IAN MCGUIRE

In October 1844, on returning to the United States after the four years at sea which became the basis of the majority of his early novels, Herman Melville discovered that his elder brother Gansevoort had become a political orator of national notoriety and a major figure in the Democratic presidential campaign of that year. Gansevoort Melville’s political preferences, as widely reported in the newspapers of the day, were for a post-Jacksonian populism which denounced the aristocratic foppery of the Whigs and urged the immediate annexation of Texas in the name of free, white labor. His patriotic invocations of the virtues of salt-of-the-earth republicanism and the American workingman were, that year at least, hardly matched. Described in contemporary reports as “the orator of the human race” and “the great New York orator” he addressed audiences of thousands throughout New York State and at Democratic meetings as far afield as Tennessee and Ohio. He coined the respectful, evocative and adhesive nickname “Young Hickory” for James Polk the Democrat’s presidential candidate and in August made a symbolic visit to the ailing Andrew Jackson. According to Hershel Parker, Melville’s most recent and most exhaustive biographer, Herman spent the final days of the campaign with his brother probably participating in a huge torchlight procession through Manhattan and listening to his climactic election-night address in Newark, New Jersey.<sup>1</sup>

This brief but intense experience of the 1844 campaign, when taken together with Melville’s later friendships with Richard Henry Dana Jr., author of *Two Years Before the Mast* and a leading member of the short-lived but

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<sup>1</sup> Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville, A Biography, Volume 1, 1819–1851* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 289–338.

influential Free Soil Party, Evert Duyckinck, editor and leading member of the Young America movement, and Senator Charles Sumner, notorious abolitionist and radical Republican, reminds us that Melville, for all his well-known political ambivalences, had an unusually direct knowledge of the ideology and rhetoric of antebellum republicanism. That *Moby Dick*, written six years later, is, in part, an engagement with this rhetoric and ideology has been quite widely accepted by recent critics,<sup>2</sup> and is indicated most famously by the “democratic God” section of “Knights and Squires”:

But this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; himself! ...

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities ... Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God! ... who didst pick up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles; who didst hurl him upon a war-horse; who didst thunder him higher than a throne.<sup>3</sup>

The question of exactly how and to what specific ends *Moby Dick* engages with antebellum republicanism remains, however, very much open. Does the novel echo the Democratic rhetoric of Gansevoort and his fellows, or does it, perhaps more probably, offer a critique of such thinking, and, if so, on what terms and to what ends? In this article I approach these questions anew, and, I hope, afresh by focusing specifically on free laborism, the crucially important economic element of Gansevoort’s antebellum republicanism, and on Melville’s examination in *Moby Dick* of the possibilities and limitations of that economic vision.

In “Loomings,” the famous first chapter of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael justifies his decision to ship as a common seaman, a job which, as Melville’s own early novels make clear,<sup>4</sup> was perhaps the closest a white American

<sup>2</sup> The classic attempt to link *Moby Dick* to prebellum politics remains Alan Heimart’s “*Moby Dick* and American Political Symbolism,” *American Quarterly*, 16 (April 1963), 498–504. More recent critics who have, broadly speaking, followed Heimart’s lead include Wai-Chee Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Politics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); James Duban, *Melville’s Major Fiction: Politics, Theology and Imagination* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983); Michael Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); and Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or The Whale* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 126–27. All subsequent references are cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>4</sup> In Redburn, Melville’s young narrator laments his shipboard existence thus: “Miserable dog’s life is this of the sea! commanded like a slave, and set to work like an ass! vulgar and brutal men lording it over me, as if I were an African in Alabama.” Herman Melville, *Redburn, His First Voyage, Being the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of a Son-of-a-Gentleman*

could then come to the experience of being a chattel slave, with typical casualness:

What does that indignity amount to, weighed, I mean, in the scales of the New Testament? Do you think the archangel Gabriel thinks anything less of me because I promptly and respectfully obey that old hunk in that particular instance? Who ain't a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about – however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is in one way or another served in much the same way – either in a physical or metaphysical point of view ... (6)

To be a slave, Ishmael suggests, is unavoidable since, if we are not dominated by a plantation owner or a ship's captain, we are all surely dominated by the Almighty. The reasoning is comically fallacious, of course, but Melville's point, here and probably throughout, is as much to provoke as to convince. In the context of the America of the 1840s and 50s, the question "Who ain't a slave?" is anything but innocent. It provokes, most obviously, because of the heightening – and by the time Melville published *Moby Dick* in the wake of the Compromise of 1850 quite fervid – sectional conflict which was manifesting itself through the vexed question of the status of new territories. It provokes also, and in combination with the above, because of the development from the 1830s onwards of a Northern free laborism which, in the context of the long dissolution of the artisanal mode of production, sought to combine the traditional Jeffersonian respect for the small farmer and workingman with a new enthusiasm (influenced inconsistently but significantly by the ideas of Adam Smith) for free-market expansionism. The argument was that the latter, in some form, now offered the best way for the former constituency to achieve the perennial post-Revolutionary ideals of social mobility and economic independence.<sup>5</sup>

Before it became a key element in the ideology of Lincoln's Republican party in the mid-1850s, this basic free-labor doctrine was claimed by many groups and interpreted in a wide variety of ways. For Whigs it was, on

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*in the Merchant Service* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1969), 66.

<sup>5</sup> The best discussion of Free Labor ideology remains Eric Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Of particular relevance to an understanding of Free Laborism before 1850 is the essay "The Idea of Free Labor in Nineteenth-Century America" appended to the 1995 edition. For important accounts of the variations and continuities within free labor thinking see Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 47–73, and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

occasion, combined with a belief in paternalistic government control and with moralistic denunciations of those classes who failed to succeed in the new market economy; for some early labor radicals it became a way of calling attention to and attacking an increasingly troubling class divide; and for mainstream Jacksonian Democrats like Gansevoort Melville it offered an effective political language with which to combine the two powerful, popular but ultimately contradictory aims of accelerating economic growth and furthering the lot of the common man. For all these groups, however, albeit with different emphases, one of the key tenets of free laborism was (contradicting Ishmael) that “we” are not and should not be slaves. Indeed, the great anxiety felt by almost all its advocates from the 1830s onwards was that free labor was under threat from both chattel slavery in the South and “wage slavery” in the North. “Wage slavery,” a term popularly used to suggest a permanent condition of wage labor from which there was no chance of rising to economic independence, was coined in Britain but took on increased force within America where, in Eric Foner’s words, “slavery was an immediate reality ... the small producer still a powerful element in the social order, and the idea still widespread that the wage-earner was somehow less than fully free.”<sup>6</sup> It seems even more likely that Melville had such anxieties in his satirical sights in 1850 when we realize that Ishmael further develops his justification of slavery in general through a justification of wage labor in particular:

Again, I always go to sea as a sailor, because they make a point of paying me for my trouble whereas they never paid passengers a single penny that I ever heard of. On the contrary, passengers themselves must pay. And there is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid. The act of paying is perhaps the most unfortunate infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us. But *being* paid – what will compare with it? The urbane activity with which a man receives money is really marvellous, considering we believe money to be the result of all earthly ills, and on no account can a monied man enter heaven. Ah! how cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition. (6)

For Ishmael, wage slavery, rather than being (as many free labor advocates argued before the Civil War) the iniquitous and un-American product of a particular economic system is, like slavery in general, simply a universal condition. The fierce political and economic divisions of the antebellum period, dramatized in the hotly contested definitions of slavery and freedom, which led eventually to civil war are here written off in two paragraphs, paragraphs which form the basis of Ishmael’s stance of ironic, humane disengagement, which he maintains through the entire novel.

<sup>6</sup> Foner, xvii.

There is, however, another major figure in *Moby Dick*, and the concerns of free-labor republicanism which Ishmael dismisses with such speedy irony form the burning core of Ahab's character. Ahab's refusal of mastery, articulated most forcefully in "The Quarter-Deck," "Who's over me? Truth hath no confines" (178) clearly partakes of a long literary tradition of meta-physical rebelliousness – Satan, Lear, Macbeth, Prometheus – yet it also just as certainly has a specific historical dimension, firstly, as a broadly American gesture and, secondly, as a gesture which engages quite particularly with the arguments and attitudes of a developing post-Jacksonian republicanism. By the 1820s and 30s, for example, Northern artisans, concerned to differentiate themselves from hired men and slaves and to assert their republican independence, in a gesture more muted than Ahab's but essentially similar to it, rejected the term "master" to describe a foreman or master-craftsman and began to substitute the more egalitarian "boss."<sup>7</sup> And in the 1855 "Song for Occupations" Whitman, a committed free laborite, asserted similarly his manly independence from economic lordship: "Neither a servant nor a master am I, / I take no sooner a large price than a small price ... I will/have my own way whoever enjoys me, / I will be even with you, and you shall be even with me."<sup>8</sup>

While Ahab's character clearly borrows from a variety of literary and historical figures, Melville's greatest debt is probably to Andrew Jackson himself – the founding father of antebellum republicanism and an archetype, like Ahab, of untutored and unstoppable American ambition. Whereas Ahab vows that he would strike the sun if it insulted him, in 1840 Andrew Jackson was seen by one supporter as simply replacing it: "I have seen a light arise in the West; and so brilliant was it that it dimmed and obscured all the lesser lights around it ... . Mr President, you and I shall never see its like again; we are too old. Such lights do not visit our earth but at rare and long intervals. I need not say to the Senate, or to this audience, that the individual I have described ... is Andrew Jackson."<sup>9</sup> In his 1962 study *Andrew Jackson, Symbol for an Age*, John William Ward makes the connection between Ahab and the President on the basis of the iron will which was the dominant characteristic of both. Jackson was described again and again during and after his lifetime as the "Man of Iron Will" metallic in his inflexible determination, a man whose physical infirmities, like Ahab's, served only to emphasize the

<sup>7</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 53–54.

<sup>8</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 89.

<sup>9</sup> Felix Grundy quoted in John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 139.

extraordinary force and determination of his mind. Melville describes Ahab at various times as standing like an “iron statue,” being “made of solid bronze” and as having both a voice and a soul of iron (134, 526, 582, 584), but the most extended linkage between the two men occurs in chapter 37, “Sunset,” where Ahab in melancholy mood looks out to sea and feels the weight of his command galling him like an “Iron Crown of Lombardy.” The reference is directly to the crown worn by Napoleon following his conquest of Italy in 1805, but the observation that the crown is made of iron and not gold and the peculiar twists of logic that follow in which Ahab imagines his own skull turning to solid metal, “aye, steel skull mine; the sort that needs no helmet in the most brain-battering fight” (182), indicates that Napoleon here, as frequently in America in the 1830s and 40s, serves principally as a means of meditating upon Jackson and Jacksonianism. (In 1829 Henry Clay, for example, in one of his frequent attacks on Jackson, compared the President’s operation of the spoils system directly to Napoleon’s unfair and dictatorial control over the French army, and in regard to this Clay’s biographer Robert Remini notes that in such speeches Clay “never failed to invoke the name of the French tyrant ... if at all possible.”<sup>10</sup>) The link to Jackson through Napoleon is only reemphasized by the fervent metallic imagery of the chapter’s final paragraph: “Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! ... the path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run” (183).

In the context of Ishmael’s mocking rejection of free-labor republicanism, Ahab’s ultimately disastrous voyage may seem primarily to dramatize the failure of the Jacksonian doctrine with which he is identified. Melville’s attitude to Jacksonian republicanism is, however, far from straightforward. He inherited from his family a deeply ambivalent attitude toward America’s seventh president who was idolized by Gansevoort but excoriated by older relatives who blamed him for Melville’s grandfather being removed from political office, and it is important to remember the extent to which Ahab is offered to us as a genuinely tragic hero. In *Redburn*, written about a year before *Moby Dick*, Melville parodies Jackson naming the most brutal and uncouth of the common sailors after the President and even having him claim descent from “Old Hickory.” There, *Redburn*, the protagonist, expresses mainly distaste for Jackson but also, importantly, a grudging respect for the mysterious power he wields over his fellows: “It is not for me

<sup>10</sup> Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: Norton, 1991), 349. It is also worth noting in relation to Ahab’s “steel skull” that the term *tete de fer* was used to describe Jackson during negotiations concerning French reparations, Ward, 158.



to say, what it was that made the whole ship's company submit so to the whims of one poor miserable man like Jackson. I only know that so it was."<sup>11</sup> By the time he wrote *Moby Dick* the respect had become a little less grudging and more awed, if still far from complete. Although the tone of the "democratic God" passage is hard to pin down, it probably consists equally of mockery and seriousness. Ishmael is an older and wiser Redburn, Ahab a more cultivated and convincing Jackson. Melville is less interested in ironising or mocking free labor republicanism (Redburn uses *Wealth of Nations* as pillow) and more interested in examining the reasons for its failure as an economic and political doctrine, and in exposing most specifically the contradiction at its hubristic heart. "He would be a democrat to all above"; Starbuck notes of Ahab, "look how he lords it over all below" (184). This was a not infrequent criticism of the republicanism of the time. In 1840 Orestes Brownson noted just this hypocrisy as the defining characteristic of the post-Jacksonian consensus: "The middle class is always a firm champion of equality when it comes to humbling a class above it, but its inveterate foe when it concerns elevating a class below it."<sup>12</sup> Six years earlier, in attacking Jackson himself, the Whig *National Intelligencer* makes the same sardonic point:

There are few powers exercised by the King of Great Britain which have not within the last nine years, been claimed, substantially, as powers inherent in the Executive of the United States, by those who damned and denounced, in the name of *Democracy*, all who dared to doubt either the omnipotence or the infallibility of the President.<sup>13</sup>

This possibility that the desire for masterlessness may only reconfigure rather than eradicate hierarchies of race and class is, I wish to argue, the key to Melville's understanding of Ahab's inevitable failure and the inevitable failure of the free-labor republicanism for which he largely stands. As recent historians have frequently pointed out, mainstream free laborism had a Janus face – encouraging the growth of free-market capitalism (and therefore industrial wage-labor), while at the same time speaking for traditional republican values of economic independence and self-determination.<sup>14</sup> Ahab's quest for Moby Dick is, from this perspective, always dangerously double-edged. He wishes to destroy the whale, but he also wishes in some sense (which I will return to in more detail later) to *become* it, or at least to become

<sup>11</sup> Melville, *Redburn*, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Cleveland: World, 1961), 274.

<sup>13</sup> *National Intelligencer*, 15 Mar. 1838, excerpted in Edward Pessen ed., *Jacksonian Panorama* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 322.

<sup>14</sup> See Laurie, 56.



like it. If Moby Dick, for example, is divine, as at times he clearly is, then Ahab in Peleg's memorable phrase is "a grand, ungodly, god-like man" (88). This paradox at the heart of Ahab's project makes its failure inevitable (as signaled in the novel by the repeated appearances of prophets of doom), while at the same time making any interpretation of that failure rather difficult. Is Ahab the monomaniac dictator finally brought down by his disdain for democratic nature? Or is he the incarnate democrat finally destroyed by the utopianism of his own strivings? Both readings, and subtle variations of them, have been offered.<sup>15</sup> Michael Paul Rogin, in the most sophisticated recent historical reading of the novel, seeks to resolve the paradox by seeing Ahab as a kind of all-purpose fanatic, combining in his one person the opposing extremisms which threatened the Union – fanatically egalitarian abolitionism, capitalist expansionism, and reactionary and aristocratic Southern slaveholding.<sup>16</sup> Despite the immense value of Rogin's ideas, I want to argue that the contradiction is better understood as emerging from one ideological position rather than several – from the republican ideology of free labor, an ideology broad and contradictory enough in itself to include the contrasting extremes implied by Ahab's behavior.

This connection between the contradictions typical of the free labor position and those most noticeable in Ahab's quest is best examined through the motif of whiteness. In "The Whiteness of the Whale" Ishmael addresses, not for the first time in the novel, the idea of the sublime, finding in the myriad possibilities of whiteness the ultimate possibility that nothingness, a primal nothingness, may, by it, be paradoxically bodied forth:

Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (212)

<sup>15</sup> Those who see Ahab as representing an expansionist capitalism include Heimart, "Moby Dick and American Political Symbolism"; C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (New York: Allison and Busby, 1953); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); and more recently Duban, *Melville's Major Fiction* and Carolyn L. Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race and Violence in Melville's America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980). In the opposing camp, broadly speaking, are Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, who sees Ahab's quest for Moby Dick as an attack on the commodity form, and Dimock, *Empire for Liberty*, who argues for an analogy between Ahab's fate and that of the American Indians. My argument here is that neither of these opposing critical positions is on its own fully convincing since Melville's purpose in *Moby Dick* is to explore the co-presence of both tendencies within Ahab and, by extension, within prebellum Free Laborism.

<sup>16</sup> Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 142–43.

It is a remarkable chapter, but this meditation on absence contains an absence within itself – an absence which (as if this was Melville’s point) is in its speechlessness as loud as any presence. Ishmael makes no reference to whiteness as a racial signifier. On the one hand, such a silence is perhaps to be expected, as Richard Dyer and others have shown, whiteness has almost always functioned in the West as the unspoken norm from which other racial identities deviate – being not itself a racial category but rather that against which “race” is defined.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, within a novel such as *Moby Dick* and an œuvre such as Melville’s in which motifs of whiteness and blackness are continually used to both structure the narrative and to connect (often ambiguously) the broadly moral with the specifically social and racial, the temptation to read Moby Dick’s whiteness in terms of race is hard to resist.<sup>18</sup> This is especially true in the light of David Roediger’s recent arguments concerning the role of whiteness in prebellum republican thinking.

Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness* describes how the republican ideal of free labor became increasingly attached to whiteness, as antebellum northern laborers, struggling to define themselves under changing working conditions, compared their lot to Southern slaves and frequently discovered in this comparison an identity and a dignity based upon their race. Despite the difficulties of their economic position, their whiteness was seen to signify a kind of freedom in comparison to “black” slavery. One result of this was, in Roediger’s words, to stall “a telling critique of hireling labor – a critique that might have built on and transcended the republican heritage.”<sup>19</sup> The antebellum working class clung to whiteness as the core of its identity even as, all around them, economic changes were making their ideal of free,

<sup>17</sup> There is a growing literature on whiteness. Dyer’s article “White,” *Screen*, 29: 4 (1988), 44–64, has been followed by, among others, Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control*, vol. 1 (New York: Verso, 1994); Mike Hill, ed., *Whiteness, A Critical Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Eric Lott, “White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness,” *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed., Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 474–95; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*; Michael Paul Rogin, “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice.” *Critical Inquiry*, 18: 4 (Spring 1992), 417–53; Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990), 127–61.

<sup>18</sup> Having said this, it is perhaps surprising how relatively little attention has been paid to Melville in recent discussions of whiteness, the most notable exception being Toni Morrison “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Winter 1989), 1–18. For a broader discussion of Melville and race see Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land*. <sup>19</sup> Roediger, 87.

independent, labor increasingly a thing of the past. Roediger finds in antebellum blackface one particularly telling consequence of these trends, as a white audience coming under the influence of a new industrial discipline looks back with equal measures of desire and contempt upon the blackness which it has defined itself against, but which now appears to embody the lost freedoms (social and moral) of the earlier artisanal phase. Such complex and convoluted understandings of whiteness are surely relevant to *Moby Dick* and to Melville who three years after *The Whale* wrote “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” the latter part of which explicitly explores the barrenness and inhumanity of the new industrial conditions via the repeated motifs of sexual sterility and ubiquitous, man-made, whiteness. De-eroticized and condemned to perpetual virginity, the factory girls in “Tartarus” become, to the eyes of Melville’s narrator, ever more pallid, blank, white, and ever more part of their machines: “Before my eyes – there, passing in slow procession along the wheeling cylinders, I seemed to see, glued to the pallid incipience of the pulp, the yet more pallid faces of all the pallid girls I had eyed that heavy day.”<sup>20</sup>

If whiteness signifies a new labor discipline, as Roediger suggests and “The Tartarus of Maids” seems to underline, then Ahab’s murderous hatred of Moby Dick – the ultimate manifestation of whiteness – testifies to his rejection of and resistance to that discipline (and is an example of the kind of “good” republicanism of which Roediger mourns the loss). Ahab’s famous vow to “strike through” the implicitly white “mask” can be read as a re-thinking of the logic of minstrelsy in which whiteness becomes a performance which conceals a more fundamental blackness within. “[A]s though,” Ishmael provocatively remarks in regard to his fellow passengers on the New Bedford ferry, “a white man were anything more dignified than a white-washed negro” (66). This logic of reversed minstrelsy is also apparent, although usually unremarked, in Melville’s famous appreciation of Hawthorne. “For spite of all the Indian-Summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne’s soul, the other side – like the dark half of the physical sphere – is shrouded in blackness, ten times black.”<sup>21</sup> It also spills over into

<sup>20</sup> Herman Melville, *The Selected Writings of Herman Melville* (New York: Modern Library, 1951), 209. This association is present in “Bartleby the Scrivener” where the ever-pallid Bartleby writes “silently, palely, mechanically,” and in Melville’s *White Jacket* (1850), although whiteness is not linked directly to industrial discipline, it is associated with both tyrannical uniformity (via the continual and painful whitening of the *Neversink*’s decks) and with a comically irksome and at times potentially fatal form of identity (via the jacket itself).

<sup>21</sup> Herman Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed., John L. Idol Jr. and Buford Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 107.

descriptions of Ahab's physical appearance, "black, terrible, Ahab," which make it clear that in taking on the embodiment of whiteness (in all senses) he is in league with the dark side and thus becomes in literal and metaphorical ways blackened. What do we make in a racialized context, for example, of the following description?

He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness. His whole high broad form seemed made of solid bronze and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus. Threading its way from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish. (134)

Ahab's overall skin color, like Queequeg's, is uncertain – blackened, bronze, tawny – but it is certain that only a thin streak of him is white. Ahab's adoption of blackness certainly owes as much to the legacy of Calvinism (as filtered through Hawthorne) as it does to the kind of cross-racial identification allowed for and sometimes achieved by the republican language of wage slavery.<sup>22</sup> But, as Winthrop Jordan and Toni Morrison have in different ways suggested, these two discourses of color are dialectically entwined within the American context.<sup>23</sup> Like the ambivalent logic of minstrelsy, Ahab's attraction to blackness – illustrated most directly by his association with Pip – both underlines the appeal and the freedom of blackness and marks it as profoundly Other. Despite these in-built limitations, we should give Ahab's anti-white crusade, and the republicanism from which it hyperbolically draws, its limited due. From one important perspective the hunt for Moby Dick is, or at least aims to be, antithetical to the system of antebellum capitalism in which whaling played a significant part. It is neither useful nor profitable. As Starbuck, surely the novel's most straightforward apologist for industrial logic, famously asks: "How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? It will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market" (177). Ahab's chest-thumping response invokes the kind of antimaterialistic individualism typical of much of the social critique of the 1840s: "Nantucket market! Hoot! ... let me tell thee, my vengeance will fetch a great premium here" (178).

<sup>22</sup> The best-known articulation of the religio-Gothic understanding of blackness in Melville is Harry Levin's *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1958); the usually unstated racial subtext of such ideas is usefully explored in Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*.

<sup>23</sup> Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Kingsport: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), and Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*.

If the republican desire for masterlessness could lead, on the one hand, to a turning away from whiteness (as it became increasingly associated with industrial discipline), on the other hand, it led, perhaps more strongly and frequently, to an aspirational quest for, or clinging to, whiteness as a guarantor of freedom. Although free laborism had an abolitionist wing, its attitude toward blacks and slavery was more often shaped by fears of economic competition than it was by an awareness of interracial class identity. These deep paradoxes, explored by Roediger and Eric Lott in relation to minstrelsy, are also apparent in Ahab's hunt.<sup>24</sup> Although I have been arguing that Ahab's hunt involves a rejection of capitalist discipline in favor of a radical embrace of blackness in all its senses, it is quite clear from another perspective that it does nothing of the sort. There is a sense, which I touched on above, in which Ahab not only wishes to destroy Moby Dick but also to *replace* him; and in this regard Ahab remains locked within a deeply racist and ideological logic which makes whiteness synonymous with freedom. In this sense his hatred is Oedipal, as we can see in Ahab's pledge to "dismember his dismemberer" and most strikingly in "The Candles" when Ahab addresses the lightning as a representative, like Moby Dick, of the Absolute: "Oh thou magnanimous! now do I glory in my genealogy. But thou art but my fiery father; my sweet mother I know not ... Leap! leap up and lick the sky! I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would be fain welded with thee, defyingly I worship thee!" (551). The side effect of Ahab's desire here for metaphysical upward mobility is, as Starbuck and Brownson suggest, a tendency to "lord it over all below." In his desire to achieve masterlessness by himself becoming Absolute master (rather than by eradicating mastery) Ahab is led to impose upon his crew a version of the machine-like discipline which was becoming ever more common in the factories of the 1840s. The references to Ahab as "Czar," "dictator," "despot" and so on are far too numerous to quote in full, but it is worth remembering his famous mechanical image of command: "my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve" (183). In this regard Ahab's managerial efforts clearly prefigure the unholy combination of iron discipline and massive natural power achieved in the paper factory of "The Tartarus of Maids" where the colorless female operatives are drained by and then absorbed into the devices they operate, and where the whiteness of the whale has been tamed, transformed and simplified into the utilitarian blankness of the great paper-making machine, "this inflexible iron animal," which strikes "strange

<sup>24</sup> Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

dread into the human heart, as some living panting Behemoth might” (209).<sup>25</sup> In his quest for absolute whiteness/freedom Ahab may invoke and use the multiracial crew, as Northern Republicans invoked the lot of Southern slaves, but this invocation functions as often as an invidious comparison by which Ahab reestablishes his superiority as it does as a suggestion of identity. “The permanent constitutional condition of the manufactured man,” Ahab asserts in “Surmises”, “is sordidness” (231).

After 1865, the Republican desire for independence was so contaminated by the twin infections of racial divisiveness and capitalistic laissez-faire that the American working class was almost defenseless against the extension of wage labor. It became increasingly clear to a more class-conscious labor movement that the free labor ideal served rather than resisted the forces of industrial expansion and exploitation. Through most of *Moby Dick*, however, this possibility (of free labor as an element of capitalist ideology) remains hidden, as Ahab considers himself and is considered fanatically outside the norm. Only the fact that, throughout, Ahab continues to whale as normal raises some questions. Ishmael notes the peculiarity three times, and in “Moby Dick” suggests, with a significance which is easy to overlook, that Ahab’s monomania may actually make him a better captain, that, in other words, the apparently antithetical tendencies of revenge and profit, freedom and wage-labor, may in some way coincide:

Nor is it so very unlikely, that far from distrusting his fitness for another whaling voyage, on account of such dark symptoms, the calculating people of that prudent island [Nantucket] were inclined to harbor the conceit that for those very reasons he was all the better qualified and set on edge, for a pursuit so full of rage and wildness as the bloody hunt of whales. (202)

This possibility – that whaling as a commercial enterprise may be wed at some level to a crazed Prometheism – cuts both ways, serving to question the bland rationalisms of Starbuck’s Christianized capitalism, but also undermining Ahab’s own apparent radicalism, hinting that his efforts to escape the logic of commerce, like those of mainstream free laborism, have served in some way only to further it. Emerson makes broadly the same point about prebellum capitalism in “Wealth” where he associates (favorably) capitalism with madness and monomania: “how did North America get netted with iron rails, except by the importunity of these orators who dragged all the prudent men in? Is party the madness of the many for the gain of the few?”

<sup>25</sup> *The Selected Writings of Herman Melville*, 209.

This speculative genius is the madness of the few for the gain of the world.”<sup>26</sup>

The implications of this linkage between whaling and revenge are fully and climactically explored near the end of the novel in “The Symphony” where Ahab, touched by the mild beauty of the weather begins to question his own purposes. Starbuck immediately seizes on these doubts and argues for an abandonment of their voyage: “Oh, my Captain! my Captain! noble soul! grand old heart after all! why should anyone give chase to that hated fish! Away with me! let us fly these deadly waters! let us home!” (591). Starbuck here, as always, is motivated by a sense of the distinction between the sane quest for profit and what he feels the voyage has become – the insane drive for revenge, but at this point Ahab crucially does not recognize such a distinction. His powerful but temporary regrets focus on his *entire career*, his forty years of whaling, his life given up to the service of capital:

Aye, I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck; and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey – more a demon than a man! – aye, aye! what a forty years’ fool – fool – old fool, has old Ahab been! Why this strife of the chase? why weary and palsy this arm at the oar, and the iron and the lance? how the richer or better is Ahab now? (591)

In this and the following speech the hunt for Moby Dick is only the epitome of a career characterized by its grinding pointlessness, “Forty years of continual whaling” (590). The distinction which both he and Starbuck, from opposite positions, assumed now collapses as the hunt for Moby Dick becomes an extension rather than a repudiation of his professional duties. Ahab is trapped, enslaved (“Oh Guinea coast slavery of solitary command”) by his position within an economic order the ubiquitousness of which it seems he has only just understood.

Although momentarily tempted by Starbuck’s alternative of domestic leisure (which as the ideologically sanctioned opposite to the masculine world of work within an industrial division of labor may not truly be an alternative at all) he cannot finally escape the logic he has followed for so long. Although now, on the eve of the final chase, he understands that the republican ideal of masterlessness is untenable since his efforts to be free merely form part of an economic continuum – an industrial system in which the ideology of/desire for freedom may play a crucial role – he ultimately abandons himself to that newly revealed system as understood in metaphysical

<sup>26</sup> Brooks Atkinson, ed., *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 1992), 626.



terms: "Is Ahab Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living not I" (592). It is a crucial juncture because it shows Ahab (echoing Hamlet and Macbeth) abandoning as bankrupt the philosophical idea of free will, and, by implication, the economic idea of free labor. The three days of the chase seal Ahab's fate, a fate which prefigures and reveals the mechanisms of the eventual fate of antebellum republicanism (finally succumbing to the economic forces it hoped to combat but in many ways actually served), but in effect his republican quest in all its ambiguity is already over.

Eric Foner has argued that Reconstruction marked a "decisive moment in fixing the understanding of free labor as freedom of contract in the labor market rather than ownership of productive property."<sup>27</sup> Although the rhetoric of republican independence continued to be used for some time after this, by the 1870s it had become by and large an impossible goal. Freedom increasingly meant the freedom to sell one's labor, the freedom, in Marx's terms, to alienate oneself.<sup>28</sup> If Ahab's fate dramatizes the impossibility of free laborite success, Ishmael's narration offers both the ironic refutation of free labor's primary principles and the preliminary sketch of an alternative social philosophy based upon an implacable duality within the individual subject. We are all slaves from Ishmael's point of view, as I have mentioned, but we are also, as he points out in "The Whale as a Dish," all cannibals: "Go to the meat-market of a Saturday night and see the crowds of live bipeds staring up at the long rows of dead quadrupeds. Does not that sight take a tooth out of the cannibal's jaw? Cannibals? who is not a cannibal?" (327) Ishmael's vocabulary of slavery and cannibalism echoes that of antebellum, proslavery writers such as Fitzhugh, Hammond, and Calhoun who characterized Northern capitalism as rapacious and inhumane compared to the patriarchal regulation of the South. Ishmael's "Who ain't a slave?" echoes James Hammond's assertions that all Northern laborers were in fact slaves and, "Cannibals? Who is not a cannibal?" prefigures Fitzhugh's 1854 attack on the capitalist North, *Cannibals All! or Slaves Without*

<sup>27</sup> Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, xxxvi.

<sup>28</sup> For Marx's most thorough discussion of alienation see the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," for his most telling critique of "freedom" under capitalism see "On the Jewish Question." Both are included in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975).

*Masters*.<sup>29</sup> Ishmael, however, is not an apologist for chattel slavery and, although he uses similar Hobbesian paradigms to characterize shipboard society, he goes on to clearly universalize them; there is no alternative Southern or otherwise. The meaning of Ishmael's paradoxical yoking of slavishness and cannibalism (a term which I take to be like "sharkishness" an image of violent mastery), lies not in the residual ideology of plantation slavery but in the emergent logic of Northern industrial capital. "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" makes this connection clear.

In this chapter, Ishmael discusses the duality of cannibalism and slavery explicitly in terms of property rights and situates it at the heart of a capitalist subjectivity which bases itself upon an individual's ownership of his/herself as a piece of private property. To be a fast fish is to be possessed ("What are the sinews and souls of Russian serfs and Republican slaves but Fast-Fish, whereof possession is the whole of the law"), whereas to be a Loose-Fish is to be liable to possession ("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? What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk?"). Since the reader of *Moby Dick* is unlikely to be either a Russian serf or a Republican slave we may assume that when Ishmael asks, "What is the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish. And what are you reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?" (434–35), the kind of "fastness" he is referring to is self-possession (what Emerson refers to in "Experience" as "the capital virtue of self-trust"). And if fastness refers to self-possession, looseness must refer to the ability to give up that ownership – in terms of political economy to alienate oneself. This is surely what Ishmael is referring to when he describes "The Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World" as "Loose-Fish" – he is making the point made by Marx and others that the freedoms available under market capitalism boil down to the freedom to sell one's labor, to alienate oneself. For the reader to be both fast and loose, as Ishmael asserts, means the same as everyone being both a slave and a cannibal – we both own ourselves as property and are able to exchange our labor, to be possessed or owned by others – anathema to republicans but, in C. B. McPherson's terms, the definition of possessive individualism and the basis of capitalist subjectivity.<sup>30</sup>

This sense of dualistic division – social, psychological, philosophical and physiological – is central to Ishmael's narrative. "There is no quality," he

<sup>29</sup> See Foner, 66, and, for a more detailed account of proslavery thought, Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

<sup>30</sup> C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

tells us, “that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself” (59). The motif of contradiction – the fragrant ambergris within the rotting whale, the “appalling ocean” surrounding the “verdant land”, the whale skeleton meshed with living vines – is returned to continually.<sup>31</sup> The crucial difference between Ahab and Ishmael in this regard is that while Ahab rails against the divisions, Ishmael accepts and works with them (although he certainly does not go as far as the later Emerson and see them as part of a larger divine unity). This contrast between the novel’s two main figures is the difference between a traditional republicanism which set itself against European class-divisions (encouraged by permanent wage-labor), and a post-bellum republicanism which held such divisions to be inevitable. That Melville personally favored the latter line of reasoning is strongly implied by the narrator’s observation in “Poor Man’s Pudding” (1854) that:

Those peculiar social sensibilities nourished by our own peculiar political principles, while they enhance the true dignity of a prosperous American, do but minister to the added wretchedness of the unfortunate; first, by prohibiting their acceptance of what little random relief charity may offer; and, second, by furnishing them with the keenest appreciation of the smarting distinction between their ideal of universal equality and their grindstone experience of the practical misery and infamy of poverty – a misery which is, ever has been, and ever will be, precisely the same in India, England and America.<sup>32</sup> (176)

If Ishmael’s acceptance of divisions as constitutive of human nature and society is seen in terms of social class (as above) we may be tempted to criticize him as a political quietist. If it is seen primarily in racial terms, via his friendship with Queequeg for example, we might be led to applaud Ishmael’s multicultural tolerance, his acceptance of differences. And if it is understood philosophically we might denounce him as a relativist, applaud him as a pragmatist, or perhaps merely note his efforts as an early example of the post-Hegelian assault on a metaphysics of presence. Each of these perspectives has its own validity, but my point here is that they are all entwined with Ishmael’s embrace of a particular economic paradigm (which Ahab rejects) which accepts as definitive human beings’ ability to alienate themselves via wage labor and their consequent tendency, linked to this alienation, to be, in the broadest sense, both cannibals and slaves.

<sup>31</sup> For other very useful but less historically focused perspectives on Ishmael’s obsessive and unstable dualities see Carolyn Porter, “Call Me Ishmael, or How to Make Double-Talk Speak,” *New Essays on Moby Dick*, ed., Richard Brodhead (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and Sharon Cameron, *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> *The Selected Writings of Herman Melville*, 176.

At this point it is tempting to ask what form this linkage takes, what exactly takes precedence: does the material economy produce the metaphysical divisions (cannibal vs. slave) or is the former, following on from Hegel, just an historically specific form of the latter? We may certainly wish to ask this question, but it is one that Melville's novel stresses can never be conclusively answered. *Moby Dick* argues above all for circularity and instability. "There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause ... But once gone through we trace the round again" (535). Ishmael's articulation of this circularity is woven into a specific economic ideology, as the vines weave the ribs of the whale, but whether circularity precedes, emerges from, or simply coincides with that ideology, it finally exceeds and overwhelms it, rendering questions of origin and of end impossible to answer. (Whether flesh produces spirit or spirit precedes flesh, Melville cannot know and will not guess, "O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies" [340]).

This sense of the excessive, unmanageable, and unproductive nature of the philosophical instability produced and/or reflected by capitalist alienation is most crucially what differentiates Melville's understanding of these economic changes from Emerson's. Both share the Hegelian technique of moving social/economic conflict inside the individual subject, but, while Emerson imagines that newly constituted self as progressive, triumphalist and entirely suited to an emerging capitalism, for Melville, always suspicious of transcendentalist optimism, the self, Ishmael, remains awkwardly mournful and bereft. In "Experience," for example, Emerson makes the initially baffling death of his son, Waldo, a vehicle for transcendence. Such material losses, he suggests, can eventually be made good if they are seen as an element in a larger movement, first spiritual then capitalistic, where loss dialectically produces gain. Gansevoort Melville died less than eighteen months after the climactic election-night speech in Newark, his loss painfully recalling for Herman and the rest of the Melvilles the earlier and equally premature loss of their father Allan. While Emerson compares Waldo's death to the loss of an estate to suggest its initial insignificance to him (later abstracted, then overcome), Allan Melville's death was preceded and to a degree precipitated by the actual loss of an estate – his financial ruin which sent the family away from New York. The difference is telling – if the material is for Emerson that which must be left behind then dialectically reclaimed by the spiritual, for Melville the two realms repeat rather than redeem one another. The movement is circular not dialectical. "We thrive by casualties" Emerson puns in "Experience," but for Melville, biographically

and in his fiction, the great casualties of youth merely prepare for the greater casualties of age. As Wellingborough Redburn notes of his own youthful disappointments: “never again can such blight be made good; they strike in too deep, and leave such a scar that the air of Paradise might not erase it.”<sup>33</sup> And along the same lines, Ishmael, going to sea to escape suicidal despair embarks on a voyage which he points out, as punningly as Emerson, is itself the epitome of grieving: “But no more of this blubbering now, we are going a-whaling, and there’s plenty more of that yet to come” (12). So, while Melville is like Emerson in that he naturalizes a division which is, at least to a significant extent, historical, his view of nature offers no way of transforming this loss of a unitary self to gain. As *Moby Dick* tells us several times, the cruelty of the human world is only matched by the cruelty of nature itself. The dialectical teleology of Emerson is thus replaced by a stoic circularity profoundly antithetical to the larger progressive implications of the economic tendencies – wage labor and possessive individualism – which the novel on one level works so hard to endorse. While Emerson’s circles, in an image of the American economy and polity, expand ever outward to new horizons, Melville’s remain stubbornly, resistantly fixed: “Round the world! There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings; but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through numberless perils to the very point whence we started, where those that we left behind secure, were all the time before us” (258).

<sup>33</sup> Melville, *Redburn*, 11.