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Specious Bedfellows: *Ethnicity, Animality, and the Intimacy of Slaughter in Moby-Dick*

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Anxious to “make [his] Self an man,” Maine youth Joseph Loring swore off the lure of the California goldfields and shipped out on a New Bedford whaling vessel a month prior to *Moby-Dick*’s publication in the fall of 1851. A year and a half later, he proudly wrote to his mother that he had “struck 5 whales and ha[d] not gotten [his] head smashed yet.”¹ In fact, he was now so much less “green” that he could as readily “go on to a whale as go over the hill of an evening or escort a school marm to her place of abode.” Assuring her that his labors on board were equally serene, he gladly reported that his ship “is scelibrated for the harmony in which here officers and aftergard live [and] there has not bin a hard word be twine the officers or the Stewers the 14 months that wee have bin to gather.” Yet such sentimental scenes of domestic bliss appear as a cover for his unavoidable worry that, “Still an unlucky blow may make Sauce Pans out of me.” Torn between portraying his struggle with whales as manly graciousness and non-hierarchical camaraderie or as brutally dangerous sport against a worthy adversary, Loring hastily states the inescapable fact of his utter dependence on sperm whales in an aphorism worthy of Ishmael: “Yet by them I live or by them I die.”

In regaling his family with news of his voyage, Joseph Loring suggests that an apparatus of affect and domestic bliss mitigates his overwhelming dependence on creatures of the sea for his existence and earnings. His emphasis on the sympathetic feeling between crewmembers and his own vulnerability to sperm whales runs counter to dominant characterizations of the harvesting of whales and challenges accepted interpretations of the industry’s most famous literary tribute, *Moby-Dick*. Nineteenth-century whaling has been praised as the paradigmatic enterprise of masculine vigor, built of “exposure, privation, and danger, in comparison with which other field-sports are tame, safe, and

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¹ Joseph Loring, Joseph Loring Letters. MSS 188. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego.

effeminate.”² Similarly, many critics, perhaps most famously Ann Douglas, have characterized *Moby-Dick* as a shining beacon of masculine aesthetic accomplishment amidst a decade awash in feminine, sentimental drivel.³ In contrast to the proposition that Melville’s literary rigor managed to surmount the stultifying mid-century climate of saccharine literature espousing maudlin emotionality, I propose that Melville’s novel is a fully developed exploration of the deeply affective relationships that pre-industrial whaling ironically nurtured between whales and whalers through the very intimacy of the hunt. The multi-faceted discourse of sentimentalism saturates and in fact structures his *tour de force*.

For June Howard sentimentalism is an intellectual tradition that recognizes individual emotion as both a physiological and discursive event.⁴ Sentimentalism is frequently accused of inauthenticity. Nonetheless, the discourse makes transparent the dependence of the individual experience of feeling on commonly held conventions and is perhaps less trite than forthright. Sentimentalism unabashedly obscures any difference between the subjective and the objective, the individual and the social, the psychological and the somatic, the emotional and the rational, and the original and the mass-produced. Building on recent political, cultural, and literary studies of sentimentality, I demonstrate Melville’s indebtedness to sentimentalism despite the absence of weeping women in *Moby-Dick*.

By animating the feeling animal—a key trope of sentimentalism as it is manifested in mid-century natural history research and domestic ideology—Melville reveals the self-serving relations at the heart of the industrializing economy. He represents both whales and whalers as affective, emotional subjects deserving of empathy from the emerging middle classes who had voracious appetites for sperm whale oil. For Melville, the increased productivity of the hunt at mid-century threatens to imperil the familial feeling achieved between workers, an intimacy that Queequeg and Ishmael nurture in their “matrimonial” style at the Spouter Inn⁵ and that inspired Loring

² William M. Davis, *Nimrod of the Sea, or, the American Whaleman* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874), 156.

³ Critics who note the novel’s engagement with sentimentalism include Tara Penry, “Sentimental Masculinities in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*,” in *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, ed. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 226–43; and Elizabeth Schultz, “The Sentimental Subtext of *Moby-Dick*: Melville’s Response to the ‘World of Woe,’” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 42.1 (1996): 29–49.

⁴ June Howard, *Publishing the Family* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 256.

⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1988), 27; hereafter cited as NN MD.

to report to his mother that he “felt [his] boat was a happy home.” More generally, the industrialization of the northeastern states underway in the 1840s and 1850s provided the consumer economy with the goods, wealth, and gendered labor market necessary for the idealized construction of the domestic sphere as a safe harbor from the market pressures of the public world. Given that the principal market for sperm oil was in heavy industry—it was a superior lubricant for large-scale machinery—Melville chose an animal whose body lay at the very heart of industrialization. Antebellum naturalists relied heavily on the discourses of sentimentalism and recognized animals as capable of a wide variety of emotional and mental expression, and these attitudes were matched by the increasing prominence of pet-keeping as an affective relation that “came to stand as a reliable indicator of good moral character and, in particular, a person’s ability to care well for others.”⁶ Melville capitalized on these testaments to animal sentience by portraying Moby Dick and the other sperm whales as thinking, feeling subjects with the capacity for affective relations with each other and their hunters. This sentimental structure of interspecies intimacy enables Melville to shed critical light on the contradictions between the virtuous emotional ideals and compromising material demands of the emerging middle classes. His animals reveal the ways in which domestic feeling depended on using animal bodies and the exploitative, unsympathetic labor practices in the accumulation of whale oil. He shows how the mid-century demand for whale oil compels seamen to disavow the affective relationships with whales that the intimacy of the hunt has conditioned them to cultivate. In Melville’s caustic vision, sentimental sympathy emphasizes the progress of the emergent middle class at the expense of primitive subjects, both human and animal, who are deemed expendable.

In brief, Melville’s reliance on scientific and literary discourses of sentimentalism shores up the readers’ support for the novel’s critique of the increased production of the fishery during the 1840s and 1850s. He also enlists a paradigm that often served as a resource for male authors seeking to escape the strictures of domesticity: the language of orientalism.⁷ Melville turns to the genre that David Reynolds has called the “Oriental tale,” a language of mild reform that upset received notions of the naturalness and universality of Anglo-Christian norms through portrayals of “exotic” Eastern cultures as

⁶ Jennifer Mason, *Civilized Creatures: Urban Animals, Sentimental Culture, and American Literature, 1850–1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 13.

⁷ Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 231.

irredeemably other. The sperm whales, Ahab, and Fedallah and his crew embody the conventions of the genre.⁸ By casting Ahab and Fedallah as fatalistic Islamic despots, Melville identifies changing relations of production on the whaleship as an abuse of authority. Melville's orientalism also renders both the sperm whales and Fedallah as sensuous, cunning, and ultimately unfathomable creatures that at once anthropomorphizes the leviathans and further distances Western Asian peoples from the self-determination allegedly characteristic of American culture. On the one hand, Fedallah and his boatmen's murderous instincts that spur Ahab's suicidal quest to slaughter Moby Dick signal their alien fatalism, while on the other hand, the whalers identify the whales' racialized sexuality as evidence of their common capacities for sentiment and sympathy. As such, orientalism both enables and limits the egalitarianism of Melville's strategic animation of sentimentalism to show the costs of the industrializing fishery.

Sentimental Science

The gendered language of orientalism enables Melville to critique sentimental culture's demand for oil by both endowing a commodified animal with subjectivity and (through Fedallah's fatalism) heightening the brutality of the industry. To a contemporary reader, the notion that whales could have a developed faculty for feeling and sympathy (and that Asians might have less developed emotional traits than those from Northern Europe) would seem entirely plausible, for nineteenth-century animals were widely considered capable of cogitation and emotional expression.⁹ Indeed, Jennifer Mason has recently shown that the belief in the moral and intellectual capabilities of animals such as dogs, cats, and horses actually increased in the postbellum period. For example, animal menageries showcasing canines seemingly proficient in arithmetic and spelling had been a prevalent form of public entertainment since the late eighteenth century. Likewise, zoological gardens drew vast crowds, while scientific publications wondered aloud, "Is Man the Highest Animal?"¹⁰ Zoologists generally found that animals manifested a broad range of mental and emotional experience, including "imagination, memory,

⁸ David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 41–52.

⁹ See Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York: Pantheon, 1983) and Harriet Ritvo, *Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Richard Dean Smith, *Melville's Science: 'Devilish Tantalization of the Gods!'* (New York: Garland, 1993), 105; and C.S. Minot, "Is Man the Highest Animal?" *American Naturalist* 16.6 (1882): 511–12. The answer was a definitive "no."

homesickness, self-consciousness, joy, rage, terror, compassion, envy, cruelty, fidelity, and attachment” (Ritvo 36). This breadth of expression, in turn, was both symptom and cause of the belief that animals were capable of affective relationships.

Animals were often thought to be active participants in ameliorating interactions with the warm hearts and studied gazes of domestic keepers and scientific observers; however, human needs were privileged in these relationships. As historian Harriet Ritvo explains, the middle classes forming in the wake of commercial capitalism found that developments in science and industry afforded them a new comfort in their relations with animals, for advances in urbanization and animal husbandry had improved the technologies of animal control. “Animals became significant primarily as the objects of human manipulation,” and those creatures that knew their place as servants and companions in the well-off homes of the industrializing world were praised as emotionally and mentally advanced (Ritvo 2). An animal’s worth as a thinking and feeling subject was dependent on its ability to stimulate an emotional development proper to the domestic sphere. Household pets became a fixture of the middle-class home, as, in the words of Jennifer Mason, “the proper keeping of companion animals came to stand as a reliable indicator of good moral character and, in particular, a person’s ability to care well for others” (13). Conversely, according to Ritvo, zoology regarded large animals, which the middle and elite classes generally found difficult to control, as intelligent yet unruly creatures prone to wickedness and thus the natural enemies of mankind (26).

Combining popular ideas about the moral worth of domesticated pets with the wild disobedience of large animals, Melville’s novel appropriates conventions of animal emotionality and intelligence to criticize middle-class culture’s self-serving relations with animals through the graphic example of their reliance on sperm whale oil. In accordance with many of the natural histories of sperm whales that Melville relied upon, Melville insists upon the rational and emotional capabilities of cetaceans. Unlike these sources, however, Melville delights in showing how his unruly animal subjects confound human needs. “The Sperm Whale is in some cases,” Ishmael maintains, “sufficiently powerful, knowing, and judiciously malicious, as with direct forethought to stave in, utterly destroy, and sink a large ship; and what is more, the Sperm Whale *has* done it” (NN MD 206). Marine naturalists’ less enthusiastic tales of vengeful whales inspired Melville’s own portrayal. Frederick Bennett’s *Narrative of a Whaling Voyage Round the Globe From the Year 1833–1836*, one of Ishmael’s more reliable sources, describes the whales as willful, individualized

creatures, capable of the defensive actions of being “watchful and timid,” prone to “the act of listening,” and to “gazing up at the boats, in a manner which expressed an equal share of curiosity and suspicion.”¹¹ In the offensive mode, these powers of reason and forethought spell terrifying destruction to their pursuers: “he rather sought to attack them, whenever they approached him for the purpose of lancing . . . with much sagacity . . . approaching impetuously from a distance of about forty yards, he turned upon his back, raising his lower jaw to grasp the boat from above . . . [then] he struck the boat with a force that nearly overturned it” (265–66). Even the staid Thomas Beale, in his *Natural History of the Sperm Whale* (1839), admits that “[l]arge whales’ are however sometimes, but rarely, met with [that are] remarkably cunning and full of courage, when they will commit dreadful havoc with their jaws and tail.”¹²

A series of whaling voyages throughout mid-century met disaster at the jaws of powerful sperm whales like Mocha Dick, who alone destroyed 14 boats. Reports of these voyages no doubt also prepared the understanding of whales and other large marine life as willful creatures. Tales such as J. N. Reynolds’ “Mocha Dick: Or the White Whale of the Pacific” (1839) and Owen Chase’s *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whaleship Essex, of Nantucket* (1821) broadcast the exploits of whales purported to be Mocha Dick to an eager reading public, famously including Melville himself. Furthermore, partially inspired by numerous sightings of “sea serpents” off the coast of Massachusetts in the late 1810s and early 1820s, an entire subgenre of ocean monster stories emerged for the mass market, many of which attributed a variety of cognitive abilities to their leading marine monsters and delighted in their propensity to wield mass destruction (Reynolds 195–96).¹³ In other words, Melville’s exploration of marine zoology is part of a print culture tradition involving scientific publications, magazine sketches, and dime novels in which zoological knowledge of marine creatures and their viciousness are enlarded within the narrative structure of a sea adventure.

These fictional and cetological narratives both subvert and legitimate sentimental culture. On the one hand, their endowment of whales and marine monsters with a degree of independent thought was an accepted practice, but on the other, the narratives, and none more so than *Moby-Dick*, represent the whales in an affective, emotional, and intellectual exchange with whalers that

¹¹ Frederick Bennett, *Narrative of a Whaling Voyage Round the Globe From the Year 1833–1836*, vol. 1 (New York: Da Capo, 1970), 6, 265.

¹² Thomas Beale, *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale* (London: Holland Press, 1973), 51–52.

¹³ See also Howard P. Vincent, *The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 174. See, for example, Eugene Batchelder, *A Romance of the Sea Serpent, or the Ichthyosaurus* (Cambridge: John Bartlett, 1850).

challenges common conceptions of large animals. The context these narratives provide for the creatures' resistance to slaughter betrays a respect for their unwillingness to submit to human needs. These scientific and fictional texts exhibit both a horror and respect for the ability of sperm whales to antagonize human cultures. In Melville's novel, the whales' collective resistance to the fishery is exemplified by the spectacular individual resistance of the victorious Moby Dick and other sperm whales who "ac[t], not so often with blind rage, as with willful, deliberate designs of destruction to [their] pursuers" (NN MD 209). *Moby-Dick* manipulates the figure of the domesticated pet useful for developing its human owners' capacity for feeling and turns it against itself to situate whales in intimate and affective relations with one another in order to resist slaughter.

Specious Bedfellows

While pet-keeping and scientific practice promoted self-serving intimacy with animals, Ishmael makes it clear that whaling far exceeded either enterprise in its fleshy, sensual, and profitable communion with another species. Beale, for example, was unique among cetologists in having spent a brief stint on a whaling voyage in order to observe his specimen (Vincent 166). To Melville's narrator, even a naturalist with some experience on whaling ships had rather incomplete knowledge of whales. While phrenologists map the surface of the skulls of humans, "horses, birds, serpents, and fish" to ascertain the animals' emotional and mental qualities, Melville suggests that Tashtego's access to their cranial capacities is much more profound; he falls inside a whale's head (NN MD 345). Drawing one of many ironic allusions to whalers' sexual familiarity with whales, Ishmael boasts that nowhere "is the pre-eminent tremendousness of the great Sperm Whale anywhere more feelingly comprehended, than on board of those prows which stem him" (181). The bodies of whales and whalers interpenetrate: as whales chew human legs and humans chew whales for supper, humans wear whale-bone prosthetics and whales carry lances embedded in their flesh. Whalers thrust harpoons into the rolling backs of leviathans from the "crotches" of their boats and later find themselves enveloped in the foreskin of the whale (289). Ahab's crew "eagerly and impetuously" embrace their captain's announcement that the true purpose of their voyage is to hunt Moby Dick in part because they share Ahab's recognition of whales as living creatures with individual personalities, rather than nameless raw material (212). The ship's three harpooners are familiar with the whale's infamous "intelligent malignity" that inspired fear among whalers worldwide (183). Far from strong-arming the crew into undertaking a seemingly impossible task, Ahab easily

whips his men (except Starbuck) into a state of frenzied excitement at the prospect of destroying one individual whale. “A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine,” Ishmael proclaims in words that rewrite Ahab’s monomania as an affective bond between whaler and captain in the shared pursuit of a cunning rival (179). Assuring Starbuck that he is not abusing his power by repurposing the *Pequod’s* mission, the captain reflects, “Are [the crew] not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale?” (164)

Workers on Melville’s whale-ship develop relationships with their prey and with each other in a homoerotic, artisanal mode of production that enables them to enjoy the fruits of their own labors. Ishmael ironically celebrates this intimacy in “A Squeeze of the Hand” (Ch. 94):

I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; . . . I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; . . . I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say . . . let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (NN MD 416)

If sentimentalism privileges the individual who has the capacity for feeling, then this is perhaps sentimental literature’s most orgiastic scene. Ishmael’s physical, emotional, and social feelings are so stimulated by sensual contact with whalers and whales that it matters not whether the joyous substance between his fingers is a co-worker’s living hand or the lumpy congealed oil extracted from a leviathan’s corpse. Indeed, over the course of the novel, the harvesting of the whale body is often indistinguishable from sexual relations. Lest the bestial promiscuity of these relations escape the reader’s notice, the carpenter enters to hammer it home: “Stubb always says [Ahab’s] queer; says nothing but that one sufficient little word queer; he’s queer, says Stubb; he’s queer —queer, queer; . . . queer, queer, very queer. And here’s his leg! Yes, now that I think of it, here’s his bedfellow! has a stick of whale’s jaw-bone for a wife!” (NN MD 472). To the carpenter, Ahab’s all-absorbing feeling for Moby Dick is so overpowering that Ahab is wedded to his sentiments for the whale, a relation that has found Ahab eager to possess a whale, prosthetically, in his body. Hunted and rendered, the dead whales have lost their bodily boundaries. Whalers become agents of (re)production through a laborious exchange that climaxes as the whaler and whale penis dissolve into one another when the mincer dons the animal foreskin to protect his human flesh from the fires of the try-works. This system of masculine sexuality and production supersedes the

reproductive capabilities of women or living whales. In *Moby-Dick's* aqueous world without women, dead whales are the generative seeds.

The crew's sentimental affections with the whales augment the whalers' share of the voyage's profits. However, the increased demand for oil at mid-century triggered shifts in the condition of labor and the dynamic of the hunt. The harvesting of sperm oil increased rapidly during the four years Melville was at sea in the early 1840s; between 1855 and 1859 production multiplied fivefold.¹⁴ Ishmael charges that whaling had become a profit-driven enterprise that, like the railroad and canal-building industries, turns to the global labor force to supply the "muscles" of the operation, while reserving the well-paid positions requiring "brains" for native-born sons (NN MD 121). Maximizing revenue thus heightened hierarchies at sea. Economic historians Lance Davis, Robert E. Gallman, and Karin Gleiter have shown that this so-called golden era of U.S. whaling did not represent a financial boon to sailors. During the highly productive 1840–43 and 1855–58 periods, the real wages of U.S. whalemens fell as a result of new technology on board that enabled agents to turn to unskilled Americans and international workers (Davis *et al.* 192). Ishmael thus indulges in a bit of nostalgia for earlier forms of the harvest when he opts to ship from Nantucket, which by the early 1820s had ceded its status to New Bedford as the world's chief whaling port (19). Of course, the higher yield of the oil that literally greased the machinery of capitalism had a dramatic impact on the lethality of the industry as well. The numbers of whales killed reached extraordinarily high levels; one nineteenth-century chronicler estimated that U.S. whalerships destroyed 292,714 cetaceans between 1834 and 1872.¹⁵

Melville registers the human and animal costs of this increased pursuit of the whales in terms of sentimentalism's discourse of idealized relations with animals. In Ishmael's vision, the process by which, in Michael Gilmore's words, "a living part of nature is transformed into an object of human consumption" is achieved through the physicality of the hunt.¹⁶ Whalers observe, participate in, and thwart all stages of whale life, from interrupting the "submarine bridal-chambers and nurseries" where whale calves are birthed to the killing of sick, aged whales, from whose eye sockets "protruded blind bulbs, horribly pitiable to see" (NN MD 389, 357). The *Pequod* meets young, innocent sperm whales who are so frightened as to be "suddenly domesticated" and to assume the

¹⁴ Lance E. Davis, Robert E. Gallman, and Karin Gleiter, *In Pursuit of Leviathan: Technology, Institutions, Productivity, and Profits in American Whaling, 1816–1906* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 17.

¹⁵ Eric Jay Dolin, *Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America* (New York: Norton, 2007), 420.

¹⁶ Michael Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 118.

ideal position of the sentimental animal, the honored pet of hearth and home: “Like household dogs they came snuffing round us, right up to our gunwales, and touching them Queequeg patted their foreheads; Starbuck scratched their backs with his lance” (387). Starbuck’s use of the harpoon, the prime apparatus of the hunt, to treat the animals as domestic pets highlights the irony of their intimacy. Fastening a hempen cord to a whale during the hunt, sailors are attached to the whales while they are “writhing and wrenching in agony” (356), a link like the “monkey-rope” that once “wedded” Ishmael to Queequeg while he “flounders” about on the carcass of a whale (320, 319). Seizing the era’s recognition of animal sentience, Melville creates sensational death scenes that find crews’ bodies “bespatter[ed] . . . with showers of gore” exploding from the wounded and panicking animals (358). Melville poses sperm whales as cherished domesticated pets that are also subjected to great pain. He brings to life the cruel intimacy of sperm whale hunting, a dualism that would challenge his reader’s sympathy and effectively critique an economic basis of elite, mid-century prosperity.

Evolving Sympathy

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville shows how the economic imperative for heightened production of sperm oil at mid-century contradicted the emotional virtues of sentimentalism, a critique accomplished by turning sentimentalism’s trope of the feeling animal against itself. Instead of a submissive puppy that domestic culture employs for the psychological development of its children, Melville gives us monstrous leviathans that form affectionate bonds with one another for survival. These whales also maintain unsettling, sensual relations with whalers, in which the industry struggles to maintain the upper hand required for increased sperm oil hauls. While the fishery demands machine-like precision, the whalers are engaged in intimate relations of reproduction and exchange that result in whalers and the whales evolving a kind of kinship.

The often-overlooked theories of Lamarckian evolution, an important site of the convergence of literary and scientific manifestations of sentimentalism, encourage this portrayal of familial feeling between whale and whaler. Based in part on the work of the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829), U. S. Lamarckism proposed that all organisms possess a desire, sympathy, and will that enables them to direct their own growth and then pass on the mental and physical results of their habitual experiences to the next generation. The classic (albeit oversimplified) illustration of Lamarckism’s principle of the inheritance of acquired characteristics is the assertion that a giraffe possesses a long neck from centuries of stretching upward to tall treetops for food. For Ishmael, the paradigmatic example of the ability to

inherit the experience of one's ancestors is an apple dumpling: "hell is an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling," he informs Queequeg; "and since then perpetuated through the hereditary dyspepsia nurtured by Ramadans" (NN MD 85). In Ishmael's orientalist language, habit shapes the body and its hereditary material, for one's experience is passed to descendents, who similarly merge habit and inheritance as in Lamarckian evolutionary thinking.

Critics have widely documented the influence of sentimentalism in *Pierre*. Using the language of evolution, Melville characterizes the eponymous Pierre as an elite child who had the "choice fate" of "being born and nurtured in the country," a bucolic paradise possessing "scenery whose uncommon loveliness was the perfect mould of a delicate and poetic mind."¹⁷ The land that had been shaped by his noble relations in turn spurs his further development, following the logic of a Lamarckian incorporation of external conditions so complete that the evolutionary result is the close relation between the hero and his horses: "The two colts were [Pierre's] particular and confidential friends; born on the same land with him, and fed with the same corn, which, in the form of Indian-cakes, Pierre himself was wont to eat for breakfast . . . They were a sort of family cousins to Pierre, those horses; and they were splendid young cousins" (NN *Pierre* 21).

Just as fellow feeling between horse and human stimulate their evolution into familial relations in *Pierre*, men's affiliation with whales in *Moby-Dick* produce bodily changes that are transmitted to future generations of "whalemen" (NN MD 180). Key players on the *Pequod* have been hereditarily fitted for the role of whale-hunting by the experiences of their ancestors: Flask, "a native of Tisbury, in Martha's Vineyard . . . somehow seemed to think that the great Leviathans had personally and hereditarily affronted him"; "Tashtego's long, lean, sable hair, his high cheek bones, and black rounding eyes . . . all this sufficiently proclaimed him an inheritor of the unvitiated blood of those proud warrior hunters, who, in quest of the great New England moose, had scoured, bow in hand, the aboriginal forests of the main" (119, 120). Captain Ahab, too, is the incarnate legacy of Nantucket whaling. Furthermore, generations have prepared the special fear that the whiteness of Moby Dick inspires in the crew, for the "hereditary experience of all mankind [has not] fail[ed] to bear witness to the supernaturalness of this hue" (192). Ahab and Moby Dick's dedication to one another has evolved into a physical transformation, a familial resemblance between the captain's "ribbed and dented brow" and the "wrinkled brow" of the whale, between the "ghastly whiteness" of the whale's skin and Ahab's stark

¹⁷ Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1971), 5; hereafter cited as NN *Pierre*.

white whalebone leg (160, 162, 189). On account of this physical replication, Ahab comes to berate his compulsion to murder Moby Dick as the degenerate desires of “cannibal old me” (545). Furthermore, the others onboard similarly co-evolve with the whales. “Oh, God! to sail with such a heathen crew that have small touch of human mothers in them!” Starbuck laments, “Whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea” (169). That the crew is in majority non-Western and non-white makes their humanity especially provisional, easily destabilized by their bestial relations in the open sea that distance them from their biological descent from “human mothers.”

Melville’s whale-ship functions as a kind of domestic space that physically transforms its workers through Lamarckian processes of self-directed desire and cultural transmission. For the Nantucketer, on board, “*There* is his home; *there* lies his business, which a Noah’s flood would not interrupt, though it overwhelmed all the millions in China” (NN MD 64). While Ahab, for his part, left “but one dent in [his] marriage pillow,” he has not been lacking a sleeping companion: “at nightfall, the Nantucketer, out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales” (544, 64). Pierre inherited the legacies of conquered pastoral scenes and equine cousins jointly descended from noble stock, but Ahab has been nurtured by the stalking of sperm whales in the “man-like sea” (542). In his paean to “The Dying Whale” (Ch. 116), he registers his sympathy for both whale and sea: “Born of earth, yet suckled by the sea,” he exclaims; “though hill and valley mothered me, ye billows are my foster-brothers!” (497). Similarly, the star whale-hunter of J. N. Reynolds’s “Mocha Dick,” who in this telling fells the mighty leviathan—stories of Mocha Dick surfaced for another two decades—transforms into a hybrid of human and whale:

Indeed, so completely were all his propensities, thoughts, and feelings, identified with his occupation; so intimately did he seem acquainted with the habits and instincts of the objects of his pursuit, and so little conversant with the ordinary affairs of life; that one felt less inclined to class him in the genus *homo*, than as a sort of intermediate something between man and the cetaceous tribe.¹⁸

Habitual “feelings” and “intimate” relations with Mocha Dick, far removed from the influences of shore life, have rapidly unseated the hunter’s humanity in this tale that inspired Melville’s own. Ahab, it seems, was not alone among fictional whale hunters in finding himself a hybrid cannibal.

¹⁸ J. N. Reynolds, Esq., “Mocha Dick: Or the White Whale of the Pacific: A Leaf From a Manuscript Journal.” *The Knickerbocker* 13.5 (1839): 378.

The “Dark Hindoo Half of Nature”

Charges of hybridity that destabilized one’s claims to the “genus *homo*” had particular purchase at the time Melville’s novel appeared. Conflating the categories of “race” and “species,” widely influential ethnologists such as Samuel Morton and Josiah Nott understood phenotypic differences as evidence of distinct species of human that allegedly descended from different ancestors. As if manipulating the contemporary collapse of “species” and “race,” Melville racializes the whales and Fedallah’s crew members according to contemporary tropes of orientalism. The discourse of orientalism was widely influential at mid-century, and as such critics as Dorothee Finkelstein and Timothy Marr have shown, Melville’s literary adaptations of knowledge of the Near Eastern and Islamic world were some of the most complex of the period.¹⁹ Frequently detailing Eastern mores and character, Melville enlists a vernacular of mystery, sensuousness, and diabolism that both structures and undermines his critique of Western sentimentalism and its affiliated modes of production.

Orientalism’s repository of sexualized and gendered thinking paradoxically enables Melville to bestow his whales with the capacity for feeling and sympathy. Ishmael repeatedly associates Moby Dick and the rest of “his race” with metaphors, similes, and allusions to Asia and the Middle East to construct leviathans as idols of pantheistic devotion, brandishers of barbarous cruelty, and epicures of sensuous pleasures (NN MD 201). Gendered “Eastern” bodies become capable of heroism, pain, and sympathetic feeling. Male sperm whales are “Grand Turks,” “luxurious Ottoman,” and “Bashaw” who, when not “lazily undulating” in the open sea, are surrounded “by all the solaces and endearments of the harem” (392, 391, 283). Female whales are passive, “characteristically timid,” and “comparatively delicate . . . concubines” who “are not one third of the bulk of an average-sized male” and know their domestic roles in “submarine bridal-chambers and nurseries” (393, 391, 327). Most famously, leviathan females would do Harriet Beecher Stowe proud for their mastery of sympathy: “strike a member of the harem school, and her companions swim around her with every token of concern, sometimes lingering so near her and so long, as themselves to fall prey” (394). Young male sperm whales are excused for their individualist tendency to flee for their own lives, for they are distinguished by their physical strength that makes them “capable of individual recognition from his hunter, even as a white-bearded Mufti in the thronged thoroughfares of Constantinople” (201). Marr notes that

¹⁹ Marr 249; see also Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein, *Melville’s Orienda* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

Turks, in Melville's corpus, are represented as dualistic figures, both cruel and despotic rulers and leisurely and sensual lovers (Marr 221). The sperm whales, predominantly aligned with Turkish peoples, embody these complexities. They are sublime creatures, both desiring and sensuous and yet unfathomably cruel. This characterization at once renders the whales epic, overwhelming, and ultimately incomprehensible foes while endowing them with the capacity for desire, pleasure, and sexual feeling that challenges their status as commodities.

Just as the whales are made formidable enemies through the racialist language of orientalism, Fedallah and his "gamboge ghost[s]" are cast through tropes of Eastern passivity, degeneracy, and decay as untrustworthy figures entirely submissive to their fate (NN *MD* 325). Their composite "Oriental" bodies come to symbolize the haunted, hunted, and colonized elements of the trade, a doomed inertness that highlights, by contrast, the active relationships the other whalers cultivate with each other and their prey. Melville leaves no visual cliché of pan-Asian comportment untouched to introduce Fedallah to the reader: he is "swart, with one white tooth evilly protruding from its steel-like lips," and wears a "rumpled Chinese jacket" and "wide trowsers." Moreover, "crowning this ebonness was a glistening white plaited turban" (217). Like the sperm whales, whose essence will always escape even the most careful observer, the "yellow boys" are shadowy, mysterious figures unknowable to Western eyes, an ontological lack so totalizing that the rest of the crew find themselves "half uncertain, as it seemed, whether indeed [Fedallah] were a mortal substance, or else a tremulous shadow cast upon the deck" (219, 537).

Many critics have noted that Fedallah functions as Ahab's double, driving himself and the captain toward their death, united "as one man" (NN *MD* 499). But Fedallah is also the twin of Moby Dick, solidifying a kinship between the leviathans and his crew that the best arbiters of whale-meat are quick to identify: "whether it was that Ahab's crew were all such tiger-yellow barbarians, and therefore their flesh more musky to the senses of the sharks,—a matter sometimes well known to affect them,—however it was, they seemed to follow that one boat without molesting the others" (566). Fedallah's fate similarly suggests that his link to Moby Dick is a matter of corporal affinity. When his dead body reappears, it is entangled in the hempen ropes that are wrapped around Moby Dick, as if united with his kind in death. Animating the trope of orientalism enables Melville to paradoxically humanize the whales while simultaneously casting Fedallah and his crew as their counterparts.

Fedallah is thus a corporal double of Moby Dick and part of a triad of familial resemblance between himself, the white whale, and Ahab. Nevertheless, Melville maintains important differences between Ahab and Fedallah. As Marr notes, many of Melville's sea novels cast captains as oriental despots to enable his call for workers' rights on board. Similarly, Ahab is called "Old Mogul" and is characterized by other allusions to powerful personages in the Near East, as well as with reference to Ottomans, Mughals, Tartars, Bedouins, and pre-Islamic eastern populations (Marr 224–29). Yet in this novel, the captain is not an entirely unsympathetic figure. Indeed, Melville "spares some of Ahab's 'humanities' by displacing the captain's perverse destiny and haunted fatalism onto Fedallah's spectral body" (Marr 231). Through the language of orientalism, Melville sketches brutal hierarchies that have displaced an idealized notion of associative labor relations: "Ahab seemed an independent lord; the Parsee but his slave" (NN MD 538). Finkelstein usefully proposes that "Fedallah" can be traced to the Arabic word "fedai," meaning a person who offers his or her own life as a sacrifice to a higher power, an idea that attracted significant attention at the time Melville was writing *Moby-Dick* (Finkelstein 239–40). Many Westerners interpreted the *fedai* figure as an unfeeling, dangerously submissive subject who possesses the self-resignation Melville ascribes to Fedallah. Ahab, by contrast, periodically struggles to free himself from his fate of pursuing the white whale. In these moments, Melville enlists sentimentalism's emphasis on affective relations in order to humanize Ahab. Tortured by his intense attachment to Moby Dick, Ahab laments that he "never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels," a capacity for self-reflection that Fedallah apparently lacks (NN MD 563). Furthermore, Ahab indulges in classic scenes of sentimental manhood—shedding a tear for his whaler's life that "admits but small entrance to any sympathy from the green country" of his Nantucket home (544). Meanwhile, unsentimental Fedallah drives him ever closer to the kill, spurring the captain on in his pursuit that willingly endangers the lives of his entire crew. Fedallah, at once slave and master, bears the weight of both the mysterious and mechanistic elements of the hunt that violate "all natural lovings and longings" between whalers and whales and crewmembers and their captain (544).

In this use of orientalism to set up the captain as both a representative and a victim of despotism, Melville enlists the sympathy of the reader, as well as unsentimental Starbuck, for Ahab. He thus elicits from the reader the fellow feeling he endorses on board, a staple technique of sentimental fiction. Furthermore, through the language of race and religion, the problems on the *Pequod* are rendered larger than the license of a captain to abuse his crew or the relentlessness of the drive for profits, but become a larger, mythic battle

between the capacity for mutual feeling allegedly represented by sentimental culture and the propensity for slaughter characterized through orientalist tropes of Western Asia. As in sentimental literature more generally, Melville connects individual feelings to larger social structures in order to frame his critique of whaling in terms at once personal and epic.

Remunerative Death

While Ahab fears that his pursuits are fundamentally removed from Nantucket's warm hearths, Joseph Loring's tendency to link whale hunting with New England mores and manners strikes much closer to the mark. Increased levels of production and the specter of the unfree laborer, such as seen on the *Pequod*, were material conditions that enabled the middle-class home to emerge as a site of psychological and emotional development. The middle class increasingly relied upon feeling and sympathy for the less fortunate as strategies to mitigate the unpleasant knowledge of the social relations their increasing prosperity and leisure depended on. This collective refusal to see the material conditions that made the formation of the middle class possible is precisely a reason for Melville's mocking attitude toward the culture of sentiment, a tone achieved through irony and the oriental tale motif. He signals the paradox of sentimentalism's reliance on animal death by associating the hunt with civilization's alleged opposite, oriental depravity. He associates Eastern religious traditions with passive, unthinking fatality to emphasize the death in which whaling voyages traffic. For example, the try-works, where the remains of the whale's body are boiled down, is the novel's most developed vision of "industrial hell."²⁰ It is a machinery haunted by "an unspeakable, wild, Hindoo odor about it, such as may lurk in the vicinity of funereal pyres" (NN MD 422). Furthermore, all the deaths in *Moby-Dick* take place in the prime hunting grounds of the "uncivilized seas" off the eastern coast of Asia, sacrifices to what Ahab calls the "dark Hindoo half of nature" that compels him on his singular quest for the white whale (179, 497).²¹

Melville turns the rhetoric of sentiment against itself to pose the worth of an animal useful to the white middle class not as an esteemed pet, but as a source of cash in the form of high quality fuel and capital as a pure lubricant for industrial machinery. Merging the language of sentimental reform with the cultural relativism of the "Oriental tale," Ishmael asks, "who is not a cannibal?" and weighs the dependence of domestic culture on the corpses of animals:

²⁰ Robert K. Martin, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 84.

²¹ Russell Reising and Peter J. Kvidera, "Fast Fish and Raw Fish: *Moby-Dick*, Japan, and Melville's Thematics of Geography," *The New England Quarterly* 70.2 (1997): 291.

Look at your knife-handle, there, my civilized and enlightened gourmand dining off that roast beef, what is that handle made of?—what but the bones of the brother of the very ox you are eating? . . . And with what quill did the Secretary of the Society for the Suppression of Cruelty to Ganders formerly indite his circulars? It is only within the last month or two that that society passed a resolution to patronize nothing but steel pens. (NN MD 300)

Melville's narrator delights in the irony that domestic comforts rely on animal death. Yet the importance of goose-derived commodities to mid-century refinement is negligible in relation to the role of the sperm whale and its valued oil, a contradiction Melville relishes during one of several scenes that fill readers with sympathy for the suffering, expiring whale. "For all his old age, and his one arm, and his blind eyes," Ishmael narrates of Flask's injured leviathan, "he must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all" (357). To be sure, scenes of heroic death were a mainstay of the sentimental literature publishers, and readers were buying it in droves. However, those scenes were also moments of divine transcendence, in which angelic children or doting fathers traded in their temporary mortality for eternal bliss. For the whales, however, death is remunerative rather than redemptive.

Melville is part of a tradition of scientific and popular writers that ascribed the powers of sympathetic identification and judicious intelligence to whales, an endowment seen as both magnificent and terrifying. Melville deploys the scientific and sentimental trope of the feeling animal in order to demonstrate the contradictions between middle-class ideals and the economic structure in which they are enmeshed. Instead of a child who cares for a kitten in order to develop her capacity for feeling, Melville relates how whalers evolve over generations alongside their suboceanic prey. Whalers' intimate, fleshy encounters with whales at once uphold the ideals of sentimental feeling while demonstrating middle-class domestic culture's refusal to acknowledge the material conditions that enables their class formation. The ideologies of sympathy and sentiment, he shows, precisely relied upon an emergent mode of production that incurred high human and animal losses—a price that his middle-class readership should not be willing to pay. However, the language of orientalism provides Melville with the negative referent that structures his call to conscience. He frames the *Pequod's* registered crew in sentimental relations with whales and to some degree each other that, however self-serving, are based on an ethos of self-development and communion. Their strivings are represented as a far cry from the fatalistic self-resignation allegedly characteristic of adherents of Eastern religions, an allusion compounded by the

orientalist association between the Eastern world and death. Challenging the collectivity of Melville's remarkable efforts to give a commodity an emotional history and an offshore labor force an epic narration, ethnicity, species, and sentimentalism become specious bedfellows bound around the neck of Moby Dick like Fedallah's twisted and torn body.²²

²² For invaluable encouragement and advice, I heartily thank John Bryant, Shelley Streeby, Lisa Lowe, Winnie Woodhull, the readers at *Leviathan*, L. Chase Smith, Neel Ahuja, Elizabeth Steeby, Aimee Bhang and the "Whales, Species, Nature" panel at the Melville and Douglass Conference, New Bedford, Mass., June 2005.