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"The Key to it All": Why Are We Obsessed with Ishmael, and Are Likely to Continue to Be Obsessed with Him?

Giorgio Mariani

- 1 Volumes have been written on Captain Ahab's obsession with the White Whale, and much has been said also about the character who records that obsession—a narrator who, as in the mechanism of the psychoanalytic transference, becomes himself obsessed not only with the White Whale, but with his own Captain as well. Yet, as my title indicates, I have chosen, for better or worse, to focus on a different kind of compulsive attachment. The focus here will be on *our* obsession, as critics and readers of *Moby-Dick*, with Ishmael. So, for the most part, in this essay the term "obsession" will be employed in its commonsensical meaning of being intensely preoccupied with someone or something—as when one is obsessed with, say, punctuality, or with setting the table in a certain way. But in what follows, the etymology of the term will also come into play. The word derives from the Latin *obsessio*, the past-participle stem of *obsidere*, "to besiege." So, obsession can also be understood as a siege, a blockade, a blocking up. While this is not the primary meaning of "obsession" I will be concerned with, lately, for some critics, Ishmael has indeed become a sort of obstacle to the proper understanding of the text, or else an obstacle to our desire to trace in the text a progressive or even a subversive politics. To anticipate what will be argued in more detail in the last part of this essay: the "discovery" of Ishmael in the 1940s and especially the 1950s by critics such as Charles Olson and Walter Bezanson seems to have solved a number of both formal and ideological problems. Yet nowadays not only have some readers (usually identified as the New Americanists) themselves "besieged" Ishmael both as character and narrator, but others have actually sought, if not to get rid of him altogether, then to demote him to a figure of secondary importance. In general, however, the focus will be on criticism—and especially criticism of *Moby-Dick*—as a kind of obsession in its own right. Literary critics, and especially the best among

them, are always obsessed with the objects of their study. And the more difficult and resistant the texts they interrogate are, the more obsessive critics are, and perhaps *must* be. Critics, that is, have no choice but to return compulsively to the text, time and again. They cannot let go of their desire to unearth meaning in what they read.

- 2 It is no accident that, when it comes to *Moby-Dick*, Melville critics often describe their hunt for meaning as a sort of replica of Ahab's (or Ishmael's) hunt for the White Whale. Indeed, as Lawrence Buell has observed, "so many notable works of Melville criticism... are also idiosyncratic sorties of highly personal stamp, different though their aesthetic and ideological proclivities are" (382). What Buell registers here, is a condition affecting to a greater or lesser degree all critics, both famous and less famous. We are all to some extent personally involved with a text when we write about it, and more so with certain texts that speak to us with a special urgency and/or challenge us with complex interpretive problems. This is the reason why, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham has done in a chapter on Edward Said in his book *The Character of Criticism*, it is legitimate to talk of "Criticism as Obsession" (Harpham 109-41). Harpham clearly uses the term in an honorific way, not to suggest there is anything pathological about Saidean reading practices, but, on the contrary, to highlight the seriousness with which Said engages the objects of his analysis, by often explicitly reading into them his own most personal preoccupations.
- 3 Having summarily clarified my understanding of the term "obsession," let us move on to Ishmael. From the perspective of literary historiography, the most interesting fact to note about Ishmael is that, until the 1940s, he played a decidedly minor role in critical discussions of *Moby-Dick*. While in the 1851 *Literary World* review, where he famously defined the book "an intellectual chowder," Evert Duyckinck had condemned Ishmael's "piratical running down of creeds and opinions" (265, 267), the critics who were largely responsible for the "Melville Revival" of the 1920s—critics like Raymond Weaver, the author of the first Melville biography, Carl Van Doren, and Lewis Mumford—preferred to focus on either Ahab or the Whale, or both. To them, Ishmael was mostly an example of the pariah, the outcast, and though the character's marginality sometimes reminded these critics of Melville's own neglect and isolation, they never dreamed of assigning Ishmael a heroic stature. As Clare Spark has shown in her mammoth study of the Melville Revival, the revivers were "Ahab-obsessed" (463), and Ishmael was of peripheral interest to them. An eloquent example of how dismissive of Ishmael the early revivers tended to be, can be found in D. H. Lawrence's 1923 *Studies in Classic American Literature*. In his essay on *Moby-Dick*, Lawrence curiously referred to Ishmael as "the only human being who really enters into the book," only to stigmatize him on the next page: "Human things are only momentary excitements or amusements to the American Ishmael. Ishmael, the hunted. But much more Ishmael the hunter. What's a Queequeg? What's a wife? The white whale must be hunted down. Queequeg must be just 'known,' then dropped into oblivion" (155, 156). There is no sense here that Ishmael may be *unlike* Ahab. If anything, Ishmael—notwithstanding his exceptional humanity—is perceived merely as another tool meant to serve Ahab's purpose. So, how did it come to pass that a generation of critics mostly obsessed—understandably—with the great White Whale and grim Captain Ahab's "active and courageous madness, that lies brooding and fierce, ever ready to spring to command"—as E. L. Grant Watson had described it in his 1920 *London Mercury* essay (136)—gave way to one that not only 'discovered' but by and large ended up falling in love with Ishmael?

- 4 Two answers can be provided to this question. One is explicitly cultural and political, and has been the object of considerable scholarly attention. The other has to do with a more general transformation in the history of English-language literary criticism. I will begin with the latter point, as it is the one that has been less investigated. In the same years that saw the slow rise of Melville from neglect to undisputed classic writer of the United States' literary tradition, another crucial figure of American literature rose to a belated prominence: Henry James. Now, it is hard to imagine something more distant from *Moby-Dick* than the Jamesian novel, obsessed as it is with issues of formal control and psychological realism. However, the critical prestige granted to the undisputed master of "The Art of Fiction" had consequences that went well beyond the appraisal of James's own work. As Fredric Jameson wrote decades ago, "the Jamesian invention of point of view (or better still, Henry James's codification of this already existing technique, his transformation of it into the most fundamental of narrative categories, and the development around it of a whole aesthetic)"—though coming into being "as a protest and a defense against reification"—ended up "furnishing a powerful ideological instrument in the perpetuation of an increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world, a world whose social vision is one of a thoroughgoing relativity of monads in coexistence" (221-22). The application of the Jamesian notion of point of view to Melville's novel was no automatic affair. The distinguished James scholar R. P. Blackmur, for example, in an oft-reprinted essay on Melville, originally published in 1938, argued that Ishmael was only "a false center" (73) because "a great part of the story escapes him, is not recorded through his sensibility, either alone or in connection with others" (84). This objection—which is sometimes raised even today—would be circumvented not by discounting its Jamesian premise, but, on the contrary, by sticking to it, so to speak, with a vengeance.
- 5 Walter Bezanson's "*Moby-Dick: Work of Art*" (originally published in 1953) was not the first occasion on which Ishmael rose to heroic proportions, but was the key critical intervention in that it firmly distinguished between, on the one hand, "forecastle Ishmael"—the young mariner who is only a member of the Pequod's crew—and Ishmael-as-narrator, the older, now experienced teller of the tale, engaged in the effort of imparting order and meaning to an adventure of which he is the sole surviving witness. By taking Ishmael at his word when he refers to his work as "Ishmael's mighty book," Bezanson revolutionized the world of *Moby-Dick* criticism. Whatever one wished to call the text—epic, novel, tragedy, or a hodgepodge of genres and styles—it all originated, *pace* Blackmur, from one unfolding consciousness: Ishmael's troubled self.
- 6 What needs to be added, as we shift to the second reason why Ishmael rose to prominence in the post-World War II period, is that all this by and large happened in tune with the social and cultural situation of a Cold War in which Jameson's "increasingly subjectivized and psychologized world" was ideologized as the proper space wherein a "free" subject could unfold its individual consciousness in an act of resistance against the tremendous totalitarian will of a Captain Ahab, now allegorized as an anticipation of the Communist Other menacing the free world. The Cold War reading of *Moby-Dick* as the ultimate victory of Ishmael's freedom over Ahab's totalitarian will, has been the object of a brilliant and by now classic essay by Donald Pease. Pease insists that Cold War critics pitted "the free play of indeterminate possibility" marking Ishmael's rhetoric against Ahab's world of "fixed meanings," thereby appropriating Melville's novel "to a modern scene of cultural persuasion"

(Pease, *Visionary* 271, 243). In an essay on the same topic, Geraldine Murphy marshalled further supporting evidence of the profoundly ideological and anti-Progressive, anti-Left leanings of many American "liberal" critics after the war (she focuses especially on the so-called New York Intellectuals). While Pease sees in F. O. Matthiessen's lengthy chapter on Melville in *American Renaissance* the unwitting prototype of the Cold War reading of *Moby-Dick*, Murphy points to Richard Chase's 1949 *Herman Melville* as the Ur-critical intervention that enlisted *Moby-Dick* in the ranks of the Cold Warriors.

- 7 Given the numerous explicit or implicit comments that Chase makes on the political situation of pre- and post-war America, it would be hard to miss the extent to which Chase turns *Moby-Dick* into a moral and ideological apologue on the dangers of Ahab's "righteous monomania" (13). Chase sees Ahab not only as "the American cultural image: the captain of industry and of his soul," but as "the good American progressive" (43). The term "progressive" was in those days unmistakably loaded—it was a throwback to the Popular Front of the 1930s and early 1940s, when struggles and hopes for social reform were high. So, while Chase must on the one hand admit that Ahab is indeed one type of American, he also clearly indicates that his fanaticism is a form of ideological hubris typical of those "progressives" who believe in the inevitable improvement of the human condition. Ishmael is then important—indeed crucial—to Chase's reading of *Moby-Dick* because he provides the model for *another* type of American—for the "liberal" American who embraces "a kind of thought that is open-minded, skeptical, and humanist" (viii). And that this is for Chase the model of the *true* American is made evident by his claim that "in so far as we are Americans, we are Ishmael and we cannot afford to evade the responsibility of recapitulating in our art and our morals Ishmael's self-education. We are all Ishmael; but without Ishmael's education we become not Bulkington, the democratic hero, but Ahab.... or, like the confidence-man, the Laodicean liberal-progressive, an intellectual whose sweet voice denies or misrepresents the exigencies of Ishmael's education" (41). The political and ideological work that the character of Ishmael was meant to perform in Chase's reading of *Moby-Dick* could not have been more explicitly stated.¹
- 8 At this point, however, I would like to complicate the picture I have been drawing. There can be no doubt that the cultural context of the Cold War played a major role both in stimulating politically-inflected readings of *Moby-Dick* and, more specifically, in setting up an ideological contrast between Ahab and Ishmael that would soon harden in what Michel Foucault would have described as a "discursive formation" (Foucault, *Archeology* 31ff). Since the 1940s, it has become simply impossible to discuss Melville's novel without referring at some point to the tension between Ahab's and Ishmael's visions of the world. But while Cold War culture, with its Manichean opposition whereby—as Pease deftly puts it—all contrasts "can be read in terms of 'our' freedom versus 'their' totalitarianism" (*Visionary* 245), is certainly the necessary political and historical background against which the Ishmael obsession took shape, the historical record shows that critics began to trace an ideological distinction between the narrator of *Moby-Dick* and its monomaniacal hero *before* the advent of the Cold War. Pease himself acknowledges this much, when in a footnote he writes: "I realize that Matthiessen was not writing during the time of the Cold War, but I wish to argue that his *American Renaissance* helped to create the postwar consensus on American literature as Cold War texts" (*Visionary* 296n). This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the subtle argument Pease makes in support of his reading of *American Renaissance* as a "consensus formation" (*Visionary* 247) text. I will only say in passing that much as I

admire his interpretation of this major critical text as an illustration of the aesthetic-ideological conflict between two different kinds of Matthiessens—the progressive-socialist dissenter, on the one hand, and the consensus builder, on the other—I remain doubtful about the extent to which *American Renaissance* may have set the premise for a Cold War understanding of American literature.²

- 9 Be that as it may, many of the critics who turned to Ishmael as Ahab's counterforce—and especially those writing before the start of the Cold War—did so in response to moral, and especially religious, reasons, more than in obedience to some implicit political script (which is not to say, of course, that their criticism should be seen as apolitical). In his posthumously published 1944 *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of the Mind*, William Ellery Sedgwick, for example, spelled out the contrast between Ahab and Ishmael in far more explicit terms than his Harvard colleague Matthiessen had done. Sedgwick found in *Moby-Dick* two distinct types of action, one Shakespearean, the other Dantean. The former was centripetal and tragic, and had Ahab at its center. The latter, centrifugal and passive, was Ishmael's province. Sedgwick admitted that while Dante cultivated a triumphant view with love as the motor of the universe—"l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle"—Melville's Ishmael would find "at the core of creation, not love but destruction" (Sedgwick 88). However, Ishmael has "a freedom of spirit" that enables him to resist "the strong attraction he feels for Ahab" (Sedgwick 125). Ishmael thus embodies, in Sedgwick's view, the intellectual position articulated in chapter 85 of *Moby-Dick*, where the narrator declares, "Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards both with equal eye" (Melville 334). The idea that these two characters who never exchange a word in the novel embodied opposite world views, shaped also the Kierkegaardian reading of M. O. Percival, who found in Ishmael the fear and trembling he saw missing in Ahab. Against the latter's refusal "to be submitted unto God" (112), Percival saw Ishmael lending his own identity to his companions "even to the point of having none or little himself.... Spiritually he is everywhere and nowhere, observing and comprehending" (127).
- 10 But of course, Ishmael was also the key figure in a famous study which, unlike Sedgwick's and Percival's, continues to be read to this day: Charles Olson's *Call me Ishmael*. Though published only in 1947, a first draft of the text had been completed in 1940—before the appearance of *American Renaissance*, that is. When Olson returned to it in 1945, he apparently "didn't rework the book and started fresh"; in his own words, the text was "written at a clip, starting April 13th, 1945, and finished before the first A-bomb, 1st week in August that same year" (as quoted in Charters 9). As Olson scholar Ann Charters puts it, in his book Olson "speaks throughout as Ishmael. Ishmael is the mask he assumes in the drama of his book about Melville and *Moby-Dick*.... Olson's Ishmael is Olson" (23-24). In Olson's view, while Ishmael must not be identified with Melville, because he is "fictive, imagined, as are Ahab, Pip and Bulkington," he is nevertheless "so like his creator. But he is not his creator only: he is a chorus through whom Ahab's tragedy is seen, by whom what is black and what is white magic is made clear. Like the Catskill eagle Ishmael is able to dive down into the blackest gorges and soar out to the light again" (Olson 57, 68).
- 11 Though, as even as sympathetic a reader as Ann Charters has observed, there are blind spots in Olson's study, one thing is clear—at least to me. The clash between "(black art) Goetic" and "Theurgic magic" (52ff), which Olson found in one of Melville's annotations

to his volume of Shakespeare's works, may be decoded as the confrontation between two models of national identity. Ahab's black magic, on the one hand, stands for the American desire to dominate space. In a passage that sounds as an explicit rejection of the scene of cultural persuasion described by Pease, Olson outright condemned one of the pillars of national mythology: "To Melville it was not the will to be free that lies at the bottom of us as individuals and a people.... Like Ahab, one aim: lordship over nature" (13). White, "Theurgic" magic, instead, is what Ishmael embraces, thus becoming for Olson the prototype of another, alternative kind of American identity. Melville "had the power to find the lost past of America, the unfounded present, and make a myth, *Moby-Dick*, for a people of Ishmaels" (15). This formulation sounds remarkably similar to the one I quoted earlier from Richard Chase's study of Melville, and though the "Ishmaels" Olson had in mind were not of the same cast as Chase's anti-progressive "Ishmaels," what is of interest to us here is the fact that both Olson and Chase saw in Ishmael a "representative American" able to resist the pull of Ahab's destructive design.

12 To sum up, considering that in the 1930s the status of both Melville and *Moby-Dick* remained uncertain—a typical essay on this topic, appearing in 1938, was titled "*Moby Dick*: Curiosity or Classic?" (Berkelman)—and that the New Criticism was rapidly becoming the dominant critical and pedagogical method at most US universities, those who fought for the canonization of Melville had to prove that the text by now largely acknowledged as his major claim to fame, was not only culturally but artistically sound. If it could not be argued that *Moby-Dick* was constructed as a Jamesian novel, at least more attention could be paid to its structure and to the way the story was told. This meant that critics had to turn to Ishmael, and over a little more than a decade he went from being dismissed as a "false center" (Blackmur 73) to becoming "the key to it all" (Melville 22). But there were also excellent cultural, political, and ideological reasons behind the turn to Ishmael, as his "freedom" and survival could be read as a repeal of Ahab's totalitarian will. What must not be forgotten, however, is that interest in Ishmael not only predates the advent of the Cold War, but characterized all those critics who wished to see in the novel a cathartic national drama. Not all critics may have been as literally obsessed with Ishmael as Olson was. Yet there can be no doubt that in the age that saw the rise to power of figures like Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin, critics felt a need to displace Ahab from the dominant position he had so far occupied, and hence, turned to Ishmael. So, before being appropriated by the consensus and containment culture of the Cold War, Ishmael's "choric function" (58) became important not only to Olson, who may be said to have re-imagined Ishmael as the unacknowledged father of Projective Verse, but to critics who—unlike Olson—were busy "trying to save Melville for Christianity," to repeat verbatim what Walter Bezanson told me in a 1986 interview at his house in Princeton. A spate of studies published between the late 1930s and the early 1950s, in fact, focused on the religious themes in Melville's work, and even though not all of these authors tried to prove that Ishmael was the bearer of an explicit Christian message, many would see Ishmael—as R. W. B. Lewis did, in his influential *The American Adam* (144-59)—as a transitional figure who prepared the ground for Melville's return to the gospels in his posthumous *Billy Budd*.³

13 If we now turn to the decades in which the Melville industry, as Harry Levin humorously put it, "might almost be said to have taken the place of whaling among industries of New England" (vi), we will see that if several critics have remained faithful

to the tyrant-Ahab-versus-free-Ishmael allegorical script, others have become increasingly uncomfortable with it. On the one side we can find various efforts to read into Ishmael pressing cultural and political preoccupations. Just to name a few, we go from Robert Zoellner's interpretation of *Moby-Dick* as an ecological counter-epic, in which Ishmael manages to reconcile himself with a cosmos that is both destructive and creative, to William Spanos' vision of Ishmael/Melville as a "postmodern" narrator whose tale should be understood "as the announcement of a groundless counterhegemonic discursive practice of collective resistance" (275); from Christopher Sten's reading of Ishmael as the hero of a spiritual quest alternative to Ahab's warrior-hero epic, to Michael Vannoy Adams' juxtaposition of Ahab's interpretation of the world as penetration against Ishmael's masturbatory dissemination of meaning. The readings on offer are legion, and, taken together, they provide enough evidence that many *Moby-Dick* readers have become—in a good way, of course—quite obsessed with Ishmael. But is it really in a good way?

- 14 There is a sizable contingent of Melville critics who think otherwise. To them, Ishmael is an obsession in the etymological sense of the word I mentioned earlier. Ishmael is in this case seen as literally blocking other readings of the novel. By fixing our attention on his apparently congenial, open-minded personality, we are prevented from understanding the pernicious ideology that, perhaps unwittingly, he serves. In short, the Ishmael who in the 1940s and 1950s was a champion of American democracy is now denounced as a participant in the build-up of an American literary canon that wished to transcend questions of race, class, and gender, and was ultimately functional to the imperial project of the US. This much, I suppose, could be heard in the background of my discussion of Donald Pease's critique of Cold War appropriations of *Moby-Dick*, and has been further articulated in the work of other scholars usually identified as the New Americanists. To them, not only is Ishmael an ideologically suspect 'representative' American but, more to the point, he *does not* embody an alternative to Ahab, as he never really manages to distance himself in a convincing way from his mad Captain. Pease, for example, asks "whether Ishmael, in his need to convert all the facts in his world and all the events in his life into a persuasive power capable of recoinning them as the money of his mind, is possessed of a will any less totalizing than Ahab's" (*Visionary* 271). Similarly, Priscilla Wald has observed that "when Ishmael ends *Moby-Dick* with Rachel's searching for her children he paraphrases a gospel that itself repeats Jeremiah in fulfillment of the prophecy. Repetition, in Matthew, is authorizing and authenticating. But in *Moby-Dick* it is a reflection of Ishmael's internalization of Ahab, of his need, that is, to find meaning in chance events, such as his survival" (125).
- 15 Analogous conclusions are reached by a critic outside the New Americanist circle, Franco Moretti. In his reading of *Moby-Dick* as world epic, Moretti argues that, far from being the conduit of Bakhtinian polyphony, Ishmael's voice is a
monologic device...: one voice, omnipresent and situated at a level where no other can respond to it, and thus call it into question.... [T]he ambition of the narrator is precisely this: to take the multifarious codes of nature and culture, and to demonstrate that they are all to be found in the moral super-code. To take polyphony, in other words, and reduce it to a single language: ultimately, to eliminate it altogether. (Moretti 62-63)
- 16 What these and other like-minded readings share is a common understanding of Ishmael's complicity with the hegemonic culture of his—as well as our—times. For the New Americanists, Ishmael cannot separate himself from a nationalist project he may

at times decry, but eventually comes to accept. For a critic like Moretti, instead, Ishmael is the controlling voice of a text that, in its effort to represent not so much the nation but the world-system of an incipient globalization, endorses the homogenizing processes of capitalism and imperialism.

- 17 In a way what these skeptical readers wish to argue is that if we take Ishmael as our guide, we risk becoming blind to the text's ideological effect. Though, as Moretti puts it, Ishmael's monological rhetoric has a benign and friendly ring to it, it is nevertheless all-encompassing and all-engulfing. So, what to do? How can we, as both critics and readers, stop being obsessed with Ishmael? Pease, for one, opts out of the text, so to speak, by finding in Melville's correspondence with Hawthorne "a visionary bond enabling him to oppose Ishmael's obsessive-compulsive attraction to Ahab with a friendship grounded in genuine fellow feeling" (Pease, *Visionary* 275). Others have insisted that the only way out is to resist the all too easy identification of Melville himself with Ishmael and realize that his creator was aware of his character's shortcomings.⁴ While, for the record, I count myself among those who do not believe that Ishmael and Melville should be seen as the same person, I am also aware that since he is the narrator of the story, it is unlikely that, as students of *Moby-Dick*, we will ever let go of a *need* to be obsessed with him. But my account wouldn't be fair if I left out of the picture those who love the novel, and yet, with varying degrees of intensity, dislike Ishmael, and have endeavored to read *Moby-Dick* by pushing him to the margins.
- 18 One such reader was of course C. L. R. James, the author of *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways. The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*, originally published in 1951. Largely ignored for decades, the book has now become a kind of minor classic in the Melville critical pantheon, despite being—or perhaps precisely because it is—an intensely personal book. Written by James as he was detained on Ellis Island, awaiting to know whether, as a non-citizen, he would be deported or not, the book is an enthusiastic reading of Melville's work, intertwined all along with James's political vicissitudes. Of late, much has been written about it. Here, what must be noted is that this book is in a way a "Cold War text," too, not only because the world James lived in was that of the Cold War, of which he himself was a victim, but because he explicitly connected Ahab's dictatorship to both Fascism and Stalinist Communism. Unlike the Melvillian Cold Warriors, however, James did not see Ishmael as the voice of freedom—far from it. To James, he was only "a completely modern intellectual who has broken with society and wavers constantly between totalitarianism and the crew" (46), whereas "[i]t is clear that Melville intends to make the crew the real heroes of his book, but he is afraid of criticism" (24). The reason behind this reading undoubtedly lies—as Donald Pease has forcefully argued—in the imaginary linkage between "the revolt that had not taken place on the *Pequod* with the possible future repeal of the McCarran-Walter legislation" (Pease, "Doing Justice" 19). But if this explains why James elevates the crew to heroic stature, it does not automatically translate into a sound interpretation of *Moby-Dick*. The text harbors only faint traces of Melville's supposed desire to make the crew "the real heroes" of his novel.
- 19 A more radical effort to reframe the whole issue in a new way is to be found in Chapter 4 of Robert Tally's *Melville, Mapping and Globalization*. The title of this chapter—"Anti-Ishmael"—is unequivocal. In Tally's view, insofar as we continue to consider Ishmael as the point of origin—Eric Auerbach's *Ansatzpunkt*—of the novel, we will never be able to grasp the extent to which *Moby-Dick* is a text whose geographical and cultural referent

is not the nation, but, instead, the whole world, or, better, the world-system that the rise of globalization revealed to such an astute observer of the planetary scene as Melville. Tally builds his reading on Moretti's interpretation of *Moby-Dick* as a world epic and sees the text as "a baroque and encyclopedic work that attempts to supersede the national in aesthetically representing a postnational world" (48). While he agrees with Moretti that world epics should be considered as the symbolic form of globalization, Tally also feels that "Moretti underestimates the degree to which these 'sacred texts' may resist the very idolaters who have placed them prominently at the national altar" (48). However, the work's subversive energy cannot be found in Ishmael, as to Tally all "Ishmael-centric" readings of *Moby-Dick* try to fit the narrator into a "national narrative framework" where he "conforms to the principle of the Adamic American hero, innocently voyaging into experience" (51). To circumvent this problem, Tally proposes that, rather than locating *Moby-Dick's* *Ansatzpunkt* in the narrator's friendly "Call me Ishmael," we seek it in those opening sections of the book which not only students usually skip over, but most scholars, too, tend to overlook. If we realize that before Ishmael speaks, we must go through the sections "Etymology" and "Extracts," we will also understand that in the beginning of *Moby-Dick* was the Whale. As Tally argues,

Tracing the line from 'Etymology' to the last lines of 'The Chase—Third Day,' the very figure of the whale seems to undermine, or literally *overwhelm* or *roll-over* the personal and national narratives that appear to begin with the opening sentence of 'Loomings.' By starting with 'Etymology,' we see a *Moby-Dick* that is not the tale of a young man's errand into the wilderness and his providential return to safety, but the roiling epic of a world of error, of uncertainty, and of horror. (59)

- 20 By steering clear of Ishmael-centrism, Tally believes, we can tap into the truly subversive energies of the novel, which must be liberated from the national(ist) context in which the critical obsession with Ishmael has long confined it, and left free to float within a world-wide, *post-national* ocean.
- 21 To what degree is Tally's unquestionably intelligent and original reading convincing and useful? Useful it certainly is, as it literally forces us to recontextualize the whole novel in a fresh and original way. Tally's close attention to the opening sections of Melville's work is especially praiseworthy, and many will likely agree with his proposition that it may indeed be time for all Melvillians to start talking more about *Moby-Dick* as part of *world*—rather than only US—literature. Whether his reading is altogether convincing is another matter. When Tally argues, for example, that "[t]hroughout the novel, Melville associates the whale with language" (Tally 55-56), and points to "Cetology" as a textbook illustration of such strategy, is he not referring to a "system" invented by Ishmael? Tally rightly notices that "Ishmael-centric readings of the novel mostly take for granted that the author, Melville, speaks in the voice of Ishmael" (77), but is the scholar not doing exactly the same whenever he admiringly quotes from the novel to support his readings? When he argues that "Melville" turns whales into books, or when he praises Moby Dick's infinitude, is he not quoting from Ishmael's narrative, postulating all along that Melville speaks in Ishmael's voice? Tally claims that "'Ishmael' might be thought of as one of many *conceptual personae*, to borrow a term from Deleuze and Guattari" (61). I am not qualified to say how sound this claim is, but one wonders if thinking of Ishmael as a figure of the same ilk as Nietzsche's Zarathustra or Dionysus would really make him any less central to the narrative's unfolding.

- 22 At any rate, though Tally dresses it in contemporary theoretical/philosophical garb, his point is nearly as old as *Moby-Dick* itself. When he observes that “most readers persist in naming the narrator ‘Ishmael,’ in thinking of him as one voice, and in assuming, despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary, that the narrator is one and the same person throughout *Moby-Dick*,” (63) he essentially reiterates R. P. Blackmur’s complaint about a large portion of the story “escaping” Ishmael—except that what to Blackmur was a flaw is a strength to Tally. However, leaving aside the fact that Tally does not tell us by which other name we should refer to a narrator we have thus far naively called Ishmael, it is certainly no news that there are a number of scenes in the book (the chapter “The Chart,” for example, where Ahab muses on sea maps in the privacy of his cabin) that Ishmael could not have witnessed. So, how does Ishmael claim to know what he cannot have seen with his own eyes? The answer provided to this question over half a century ago by Glauco Cambon, in a short essay appearing in *Modern Language Notes*, is that since Ishmael is not a mere witness, but also an *artist* and a writer, he sees what he cannot see with the eyes of his *imagination*. I continue to find this, by and large, a satisfactory answer. Others, of course, may feel otherwise, and insist that it is indeed not possible that the narrator is one and the same person throughout *Moby-Dick*. But then, *who* speaks when Ishmael is supposedly silent? Unless one assumes that the novel wrote itself—much as we may be enamored with Barthes’ notion of “the death of the author”—there is only one answer to this question: Melville. So, we are back where we started. We get rid of Ishmael because we do not want him to be confused with Melville, only to replace him with... Melville himself!⁵
- 23 It is time to draw some tentative conclusions. Of late, several books and essays have called for a post-critical and post-theoretical turn in literary studies. Complaining that we are too often obsessed with unveiling the secret workings of oppressive ideologies hidden within literary texts, or with placing texts within larger theoretical/historical contexts, critics as diverse as Rita Felski and Joseph North (as well as many others) have called for an abandonment of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” and/or for a return to more “personal” methods of reading. I suppose that from a post-critique perspective one may want to argue that while critique feeds obsessive (“paranoid”) reading practices (and vice versa), post-critique turns to the personal (and the “reparative”) to circumvent the obsessions of critique. But if there is one moral to be drawn from the argument of this essay, that moral is that “obsessive readings” are very often an intensely *personal* affair. To critics like Charles Olson, Richard Chase, C. L. R. James, but also to more recent ones like, say, Robert Zoellner and William Spanos, Melville’s *Moby-Dick* matters a great deal on a passionate, personal level, and yet the “personal” here is also, and explicitly so, *political*. The historical-political context in which each critic operates, and to which he or she responds, is by no means dispensable—it is the precondition for the individual’s involvement with the text, and critics make no mystery about that.
- 24 One of Felski’s complaints is that critiquers focus too much on “power” and not enough on “love,”⁶ but whatever the value of such a broad claim, I do not think that is true of most Melville criticism. Even those critics who may dislike Ishmael, for example, find something else in the text worthy of being liked—even loved. Obsessive as they at times might be, the readings of the critics who stand out in the Melvillian canon may be seen, I submit, as being *both* “paranoid” and “reparative,” and never one or the other. Perhaps the work of both Melvillians and those whom Merton Sealts liked to call

"Melvillains" (see Spark 312, emphasis mine), could be better described as a form of "eloquent obsession." I am referring here to a book which Marianna Torgovnick edited in 1994—*Eloquent Obsessions: Writing Cultural Criticism*—aspiring to overcome the gulf between the rigors (and "the coolness, the aloofness," 2) of so much academic discourse, on the one hand, and more personal, intense, and engaging forays into cultural criticism, on the other. As we can see, rather than condemning academic critical discourse for being too obsessive, Torgovnick berates it for not being obsessive *enough*. In her introduction, Torgovnick declares that "[w]riting cultural criticism involves not wild or strange obsessions, but eloquent ones—examined, reasoned, persuasive, and shaped," as if she felt a need to temper the whole idea behind the volume (8). By so doing, she seems to undermine the force of her own argument: after all, isn't there always something "strange" and "wild" about an obsession? If criticism is too eloquent, doesn't it lose its most appealing obsessive side? In short, my impression is that Torgovnick risks ending up in the same cul-de-sac of those post-critiquers who imagine the institutional and the personal at loggerheads. At any rate, much Melville criticism can be imagined as a form of eloquent obsession precisely because it is both wild and reasoned, often strange and yet shaped.

- 25 As this essay goes to print, the publication of *Ahab Unbound. Melville and the Materialist Turn* may suggest that the Ishmael obsession may be coming to an end, and hence the prediction in my title would no longer hold. As the blurb recites, this remarkable collection, edited by Meredith Farmer and Jonathan D. S. Schroeder, "leaves [Ahab's] position as a Cold War icon behind, recasting him as a contingent figure, transformed by his environment—by chemistry, electromagnetism, entomology, meteorology, diet, illness, pain, trauma, and neurons firing—in ways that unexpectedly force us to see him as worthy of our empathy and our compassion" (cover copy). While this book appeared too late for me to comment on it in an extended way, perhaps its focus on Ahab does not necessarily marginalize Ishmael. Even when he is not perceived as an explicit foil to his captain, several essays in the volume show that, in important ways, Ishmael corrects Ahab's vision. As indicated by the sheer fact that in the book's index an entire column is devoted to Ishmael and only a half column to Ahab, the first consequence of rethinking Ahab in new, productive, and surprising ways—as this book does—is to prompt us to reconsider Ishmael's own outlook, not to shelve him as a secondary character. That, I believe, we can never do. Why? For a simple, all-too-obvious reason. Ishmael is not only an important presence in the story—he is its narrator. *Everything* in the text is filtered through Ishmael's consciousness.⁷ If we think that is not the case, then we need to explain who speaks when Ishmael is supposedly silent. Melville? As I indicated above, to distinguish between Melville and Ishmael may be important, but to argue that there are two (or more) narrators *within* the text seems logically—or, perhaps better, *narratologically*—impossible. So, much as we may understandably turn to Ahab (or other characters) as the object of our more or less eloquent obsessions, are we not always in some sense following Ishmael's footprints, as he, too, struggled "in some dim, random way" (Melville 179) to make sense of his adventure? Are we not, that is, obsessing over his own obsessions?

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NOTES

1. Lately, Christopher Castiglia has argued in favor of a "post-Cold War" reading of Chase's book on Melville. While Castiglia does not find Pease's critique of Cold War readings of *Moby-Dick*

"wrong," he also maintains that Chase "staunchly criticized the tendencies in American culture that led to Cold War conformity" (219). While I agree that one may choose to extricate Chase's study from its Cold War context and learn from the valuable insights it has to offer (there are quite a few in his study), I remain unconvinced by the picture of a Chase who simultaneously belongs to and transcends the politics of his age.

2. While Matthiessen's study is to some extent ideologically complicit with a number of American mythologies, it was not perceived as an inspiration by the Cold War critics who became prominent from the late 1940s onwards. For example, Chase made him a polemical target in his book on Melville, and Charles Feidelson, in the opening pages of his *Symbolism and American Literature*, positioned himself explicitly against Matthiessen by arguing that "the vital common denominator" of nineteenth-century American authors was not to be found in their "devotion to the possibilities of democracy" (as Matthiessen would have it), but in their "devotion to the possibilities of symbolism" (3-4).

3. According to Cody Marrs, "books such as William Braswell's *Melville's Religious Thought* (1943) and Ronald Mason's *The Spirit Above the Dust* (1951)" may well be considered in hindsight as works of "postsecular" criticism (Marrs 9).

4. An eloquent supporter of this view is James Duban, whose *Melville's Major Fiction: Politics, Theology, and Imagination* has not always received the recognition that, in my humble opinion, it amply deserves.

5. We may of course argue that Ishmael is not an "author" either in Roland Barthes' or Michel Foucault's sense ("What Is an Author?"), and he should not be seen as "a retroactive construct intended to restrict the meanings associated with his name" (Robbins 108). But depriving Ishmael of the title of 'author' is not the same as denying that he is the story's only narrator.

6. Felski believes that the idiom of critique "narrows and constrains our view of what literature is and does; it highlights the sphere of agony (conflict and domination) at the expense of eros (love and connection)" (17).

7. This is not to say that Ishmael's is an "organic" consciousness, free from contradictions, nor that he is necessarily always a reliable narrator. It is simply to say that he is the novel's *only* narrator. So, even if, unlike Moretti, we conceive of Ishmael's voice as polyphonic rather than monologic—as Carolyn Porter does, for example—this does not cancel the narrative centrality of his voice.

ABSTRACTS

Rather than focusing on Ahab's or Ishmael's obsession with the White Whale, in my essay I wish to explore the reasons why critics have become obsessed with Ishmael. This critical obsession began to emerge in the 1940s, after the Melville Revival, when, as Clare Spark has shown, critics were mostly "Ahab-obsessed." The emergence of Ishmael-centric readings of *Moby-Dick* is usually connected to the rise of the Cold War, but I intend to suggest that—important as the search for a cultural consensus engendered by the aftermath of the war undoubtedly was—other factors help explain the critics' understanding of *Moby-Dick* as, primarily, "Ishmael's mighty book." In particular, the concurrent rediscovery of Henry James's aesthetics of the novel explains why critical attention shifted to the narrator's perspective, ideologically constructed as a space of "freedom." But while, for the most part, I employ the term 'obsession' in its commonsensical meaning of being intensely preoccupied with someone or something, in the last part of my essay

the etymology of the term also comes into play. The word derives from the Latin *obsessio*, the past-participle stem of *obsidere*, "to besiege." So, obsession can also be understood as a siege, a blockade. Indeed, of late, for some critics Ishmael has become a sort of obstacle to the proper understanding of the text. The "discovery" of Ishmael in the 1940s and especially the 1950s seems to have solved a number of both formal and ideological problems. Yet nowadays not only have some readers (usually identified as the New Americanists) themselves "besieged" Ishmael both as character and narrator, but others have actually sought, if not to get rid of him altogether, then to demote him to a figure of secondary importance. The story I wish to tell reveals that the recently much debated dichotomy between "ideological" and more "personal" reading may ultimately be untenable.

INDEX

Keywords: Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, Ishmael, literary theory, cultural criticism, American literary history

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