

Moby Dick: *The ‘Great American Novel’ as a Questioning of National Ideology*

Though its subject is contemporary lyric poetry, Philip Metres’ recent book *Behind the Lines* begins with an observation about that ancient paradigm of the epic, Homer’s *Iliad*. Metres notes that Thersites, the “only voice of dissent” in the *Iliad*, is “dispensed with quickly” (Metres 2007: 1), abused both verbally and physically by Odysseus, “much to the delight of the other soldiers” (ib. 2) and, Homer assumes, to the delight of the poem’s audience. One of the key elements Metres identifies in war poetry, “the absence or ridicule of dissenting voices” (ib. 3), also characterizes national epics (such as the *Iliad* for the Greeks, the *Aeneid* for Rome, *Beowulf* for Britain, even the *Kalevala* for so peaceful a people as the Finns). Typically, a national epic is itself a war poem that features a protagonist who represents the people because of his prowess in battle. It looks, in other words, as though national epics become national epics less because they are belletristic than because they are bellicose. In any case, they seldom grant space to dissenting values. All the more interesting, then, that the “great American novel,” *Moby Dick*, the closest thing the U.S. has to a national epic, can be viewed (as the *Iliad*, for instance, *cannot* plausibly be viewed) as a narrative of dissent, spoken entirely by a dissenting voice. The speaker in *Moby Dick* asks us to call him Ishmael, the name of a dissenting voice from the Pentateuch, but could have urged us just as well to call him Thersites.

Eric Havelock (also speaking of Homeric epic) reminds us that war brings out “the essential mechanisms of a culture complex” (Havelock 1963: 139). In an oral society such as the one in and for which the *Iliad* was composed, the epic was “a necessity for government and not just a means for recreation” (ib.), which entailed that

the epic poet “exercise a degree of cultural control over his community which is scarcely imaginable” today. “His epic language would constitute a kind of culture language, a frame of reference and a standard of expression to which in varying degree all members of the community were drawn” (ib. 140). If Havelock is right, then the stance toward war that Metres criticizes is a tendency of the genre: epic, “in order to do its job for the community and offer an effective paradigm of social law and custom, must deal with those acts which are conspicuous and political,” and with actors of the type we call heroes. Which makes “the heroic paradigm... in the last resort not romantic but functional and technical” (ib. 168). In consequence, epic will be conservative, depicting a myth of origins that rationalizes and validates the status quo. It will depict an original victory of the values and identity that “we” – whoever is included in the presumed audience – most transparently share in common, in preference to the values and identity affirmed by dissent, namely either those that we share in common but not transparently, or those that we do not share in common but (purportedly) ought to.

No doubt the propensity of national epics toward conservatism should not surprise us, since the effect of the social function of epic, its role in constructing culture language and custom, is complemented and magnified by the dynamics of literary reception and preservation. The voices of those empowered by a state are more likely to be heard, valued, and preserved than are the voices of that state’s poor and disenfranchised, and those empowered by a state have the greatest stake in that state’s legitimation. Those who benefit most from existing social organization will be those most authorized to tell stories, and also best able to preserve and disseminate the stories they prefer. As Thomas R. Hietala points out, “critics of national policy seldom reach generations other than their own, for history... often records only the dominant voices of the past” (Hietala 2003: 272). That combination – epic’s role in shaping culture, and the dynamics of literary preservation – means that the conservatism of national epics in general should not surprise us, but also means that the dissenting voice of *Moby Dick* should.

Moby Dick, published in 1851, appeared at the height of expansionist fervor in the United States. In 1840 the United States covered

approximately one quarter of the geographical area it covers today, but in the 1840s “a form of expansionism novel in name, appeal, and theory made its appearance.” That form of expansionism took the name “manifest destiny,” which “meant expansion, prearranged by Heaven, over an area” the limits of which were not agreed on. “In some minds it meant expansion over the region to the Pacific; in others, over the North American continent; in others, over the hemisphere... It attracted enough persons by the mid-1840’s to constitute a movement” (Merk 1963: 24). John L. O’Sullivan coined the term in an 1845 editorial on the annexation of Texas, and his disdain for other nations’ dissent resembles Odysseus’ disdain for Thersites’ dissent in the *Iliad*: other nations, O’Sullivan contends, have interfered with annexation “for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (O’Sullivan 1974: 28).

Manifest destiny is a “legitimizing myth of empire” that justifies American expansion and “implicitly sanction[s] the dispossession of all non-Anglo peoples on the continent” (Hietala, 255). To legitimate dispossession, though, would-be dispossessors must dehumanize those to be dispossessed. To make it plausible that a just God would decree that land be taken from “them” and awarded to “us,” “we” must be fully human, fully civilized, and “they” must not be. In this regard, Melville’s Ishmael takes Thersites’ role, articulating an oppositional stance, dissenting from the legitimizing myth and the premises it necessitates. His narrator, Ishmael, repeatedly recounts a similar pattern: he starts with a dehumanizing view of the non-Anglo other, but after an edifying encounter with that other comes to revise his original view, recognizing the other’s humanity. Melville’s Ishmael is more subtle and articulate than Homer’s Thersites, but he still dissents: he “shouts down” the dismissal of the non-Anglo other on which depends the legitimizing myth Melville’s contemporaries called manifest destiny.

Queequeg occasions many of Ishmael’s recognitions, and does so from their very first meeting. In that first encounter, Ishmael’s recognition of Queequeg’s humanity follows the pattern *Moby Dick*’s

readers soon come to recognize. The Spouter-Inn in New Bedford, where Ishmael has stopped on his way to Nantucket to ship out, does not have a room available, so he is asked by the innkeeper, “you haint no objections to sharing a harpooneer’s blanket, have ye?” (28). Ishmael reluctantly agrees, but then his fears begin to mount. The innkeeper manipulates those fears, warning Ishmael that “the harpooneer is a dark complexioned chap” who “eats nothing but steaks, and likes ‘em rare” (28), characteristics that lead Ishmael to want to know from the innkeeper “who and what this harpooneer is, and whether I shall be in all respects safe” in the room with him (31). Ishmael concludes, after being told that the harpooneer is late returning to the inn because he is out trying to sell a shrunken head, that “that harpooneer is a dangerous man” (32), and is only reassured by the innkeeper that the bed is big, not that the harpooneer is civil. After Ishmael reluctantly agrees to share a bed with the harpooneer, his first sight confirms his fears: “good heavens! what a sight! Such a face! It was of a dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there stuck over with large, blackish looking squares. Yes, it’s just as I thought, he’s a terrible bedfellow” (33). He looks different from me; ergo, he must pose a threat. As the harpooneer undresses, Ishmael, seeing that his whole body is tattooed, considers it “now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other” (34), a view confirmed by his worshipping an idol, “a curious little deformed image with a hunch on its back” (35).

Once Ishmael is *interacting with* and not only *observing* Queequeg, though, he immediately recognizes Queequeg’s civility. Queequeg responds calmly when the innkeeper (who had been summoned by a terrified scream from Ishmael) informs him that he will be sharing his bed with Ishmael. He motions for Ishmael to get in bed, and Ishmael concedes, “He really did this in not only a civil but a really kind and charitable way” (36). Further reflection leads Ishmael to conclude, “the man’s a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian” (36). The pattern is established: encouraged by the prejudices of his fellow Anglos, Ishmael will initially regard non-Anglos with prejudice, but then

after interaction with the person in question, Ishmael will come to recognize and acknowledge that person's humanity.

In Chapter 13, "Wheelbarrow," the pattern extends itself slightly, to include recognition by others besides Ishmael himself. "We borrowed a wheelbarrow," Ishmael tells us, "and embarking our things, including my own poor carpet-bag, and Queequeg's canvas sack and hammock," Ishmael and Queequeg, by this point bosom friends, "married" even, headed for the wharf, for the packet to Nantucket. "As we were going along," Ishmael reports, "the people stared; not at Queequeg so much – for they were used to seeing cannibals like him in their streets, – but at seeing him and me upon such confidential terms. But we heeded them not..." (61). Ishmael's acknowledgment of Queequeg's humanity has advanced far enough, and become visible enough, to incite others to begrudge it. Once on the boat, the pair suffers "the jeering glances of the passengers, a lubber-like assembly, who marvelled that two fellow beings should be so companionable" (62). Among those "boobies and bumpkins" was one that Queequeg notices "mimicking him behind his back." Ishmael continues, "I thought the bumpkin's hour of doom was come. Dropping his harpoon, the brawny savage caught him in his arms," and with an animal strength, "sent him high up bodily into the air; then slightly tapping his stern in mid-somerses, the fellow landed with bursting lungs upon his feet, while Queequeg, turning his back upon him, lighted his tomahawk pipe and passed it to me for a puff" (62–63). At this early point in Ishmael's narration of the incident, Queequeg still seems a savage who might kill over a perceived insult. But the story continues.

A complaint to the Captain leads to a confrontation between the Captain and Queequeg, but the confrontation is interrupted by an accident that spills the bumpkin overboard. With competence and valor nothing short of heroic, Queequeg rescues the bumpkin from drowning, after which "All hands voted Queequeg a noble trump" and "the captain begged his pardon" (64). Ishmael finds himself asking in wonder, "Was there ever such unconsciousness? [Queequeg] did not seem to think that he at all deserved a medal from the Humane and Magnanimous Societies." But Ishmael's report of Queequeg's behavior ("He only asked for water – fresh water –

something to wipe the brine off; that done, he put on dry clothes, lighted his pipe, and leaning against the bulwarks, and mildly eye[d] those around him") ends with an attribution to Queequeg by Ishmael of the reversal of values Ishmael himself continues to experience, and to which the others on board have been forced (at least briefly) to consent: Queequeg, Ishmael decides, "seemed to be saying to himself – 'It's a mutual, joint-stock world, in all meridians. We cannibals must help these Christians'" (64). From the dangerous other teetering at the brink of murder, Queequeg has become the noble savage who possesses all the best virtues of civilization without having to be taught them by civilization.

This type of recognition in *Moby Dick* differs from the anagnorisis of Greek tragedy, in which the recognition occurs too late to stop the fatal results, but occurs in the protagonist whose hubris brings about the tragic fall. The recognition in *Oedipus* occurs late, and in Oedipus himself. In *Moby Dick*, the recognition occurs early, but occurs in the speaker, whose role is much more like that of the Greek chorus than of the protagonist. It is Ishmael, not Ahab, who recognizes humanity in other humans (though it would be interesting – another paper! – to consider in this light Ahab's recognizing humanity in the whale). Ishmael's pattern of coming to recognize the humanity in non-Anglo others, and thus of portraying them as fully human despite their treatment by others, is repeated throughout: in the three harpooneers, in the old cook, in Pip.

There are other ways in which Melville portrays dissent in *Moby Dick*. For example, chapter 54, "The Town-Ho's Story," makes dissenting Steelkilt its protagonist. I want to avoid conveying the impression, though, that the relevance and value of *Moby Dick*'s dissent is confined to the past. Although the term "manifest destiny" is used with less frequency today, we still stand in need of the recognition *Moby Dick* provides. That recognition was timely, but is also timeless, posing a challenge not only to such of its predecessors as Homer but also to legitimizing myths as they embed themselves in culture today.

By encapsulating the sense that "it was manifest or evident that the United States was destined to expand 'from sea to shining sea,'" the concept of manifest destiny "portrayed America's expansion in

terms of destiny and fate,” offering a “mythic interpretation of American expansion” that “remains widely popular,” even if the term is invoked less often and even though “the facts simply do not support it” (Joy 2003: 83). The same elements that compose the concept of manifest destiny still have popular appeal: they were foregrounded, for instance, in the legitimizing myth invoked by George W. Bush in his statements leading up to the American invasion of Iraq. I will cite only one such speech as representative; in it Bush appeals to destiny, for instance: “I’m going to take our time to make sure we get the policy right, no matter what part of the world we’re in. But I understand that freedom has called us into action -- I mean, history has called us into action to defend freedom. I understand where we stand now in history. We have an obligation to the future. And this great country will not shirk its obligation.” He depicts the full humanity of “us”: “You need to know there’s a lot of people working a lot of hours to protect us. A lot of good folks that work in the federal government and the state government and local governments, doing everything they can to chase down every possible lead, every hint that somebody might be fixing to do something to the American people.” He also depicts “them” as less than fully human: “And they’re out there. The killers are out there. And that’s all they are, by the way. They are nothing but a bunch of cold-blooded killers, who hate America because we love freedom. They hate us because we love the values of freedom of religion, freedom to speak, freedom to campaign the way you want to, freedom to assemble. They can’t stand that.” We must fulfil the divine purpose on earth by imposing ourselves on an ever wider area, without clear boundaries: “I believe we can achieve peace by being strong and determined in parts of the world where peace seems to be far away. I believe we can achieve peace in the Middle East. I believe we can achieve peace in South Asia. I believe this great nation, by being strong and determined and standing on principles and adhering to our universal values, can help the world achieve peace.” As with an appeal to manifest destiny per se, Bush’s appeal envisions peace as occurring not through reconciliation with an other regarded as one’s equal, but through expansion into the other’s domain, subduing or eliminating

an other regarded as less than human, managing people and places that cannot manage without us.

Moby Dick is consistent in its dissent from this approach. Its narrator, Ishmael, repeatedly alters his own understanding when confronted with a non-Anglo other, coming to recognize that other as fully competent and fully human. Given the long and firmly established tradition in national epics of excluding dissent, such embracing of dissent is surprising in “the Great American Novel.” For those of us who value Thersites’ point of view at least as much as Achilles’ point of view, who finds dissent at least as patriotic a posture as jingoism, this aspect of *Moby Dick*, its acknowledgment of the non-Anglo other and its questioning of the most prevalent legitimizing myth of empire, is much to be valued.

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