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**The Will and the Whale: Glory and the Horizon of
Defiance in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick***

The discovery of America was primarily a voyage into the unknown. Thus, encompassing all the dangers explorers and later settlers and immigrants would encounter, departure to America was a real challenge. Not only the ocean was full of dangers, but settlement in America was as great a challenge since the land was as wild as the indigenous people that populated it. Thus the first settlers of America were brave adventurers who took great challenges and sought glory at all costs. Their glory resides in the foundation of the American nation and the way they tamed America's wilderness to adapt it to their needs.

At the national level, the glorious War for Independence was a fruitful challenge for Americans. Moreover, the westward expansion of the 19th century was a further challenge for Americans who were looking for fertile and rich lands. Besides, the expansion of capitalism and the containment of communism during the cold war was also a challenge that glorified America as the world's superpower.

At the political level, the American character takes pride in achieving glory after great challenges. Abraham Lincoln's challenge, for instance, was to preserve the Union and emancipate Blacks and his glory resides in the emancipation proclamation (1863) and the end of the Civil War (1865). Franklin Delano Roosevelt's challenge was to remedy the financial crisis and his glory was the New Deal (1933-1938).

However, some historical defeats have deeply affected America's hubris such as the attack on Pearl Harbor (1941) during World War II, the American involvement in Vietnam or more recently the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. The rise of the United States of America as a world power has imbued the American character with feelings of superiority. This excessive pride renders failure an indigestible reality that extends the American horizon of glory in such a way as to strive to achieve glory, in this case imperialism, at all costs. Imperialism, in this sense, is not necessarily a primary objective but is the result of the strife to attain glory.

The theme of the rising glory has often been celebrated eloquently in American prose and verse. In *Some Thoughts on Education*, William Smith accentuated the eminence of erecting a college in New York City and maintained that such educational institutions are a source of glory to Americans when he stated that

We [Americans] have the Experience of all Mankind for our Guide, and the Advantage of seeing by what Steps others have toil'd, slowly to the summit of GLORY and EMPIRE ; and therefore cannot be ignorant that Foundations of this Kind are of the last Consequence to the Being and Well being of Society. . . .¹

Worth citing in this passage is William Smith's use of 'glory' and 'empire' successively, as though to mean that 'empire' is the summit of a nation's glory, and thus outlining a horizon for American glory.

The question that is raised in this paper revolves around the nature of such horizons and whether they are reachable or impossible to

¹ National Humanities Center, William Smith, *Some Thoughts on Education*, with Reason for Erecting a College in this Province, and Fixing the same at the City of New-York, 1752_ EXCERPTS.

reach. An elementary understanding of the working of planetary bodies implies a realization that it is not possible to catch the horizon because it is an abstract phenomenon based on the curvature of the earth. Figuratively speaking, however, the reachability of a horizon is determined according to the connotative meaning associated to the word horizon. I use the word horizon, here, in two different ways. With regard to glory the term horizon is used in the above-mentioned meaning; however, concerning the theme of defiance I use the term horizon to mean the limits of man's desires and interests. Since this question is quite difficult to answer without defining the scope of horizon, I shall limit this study to one work of fiction, namely Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). This proceeds mainly from the fact that the main theme in this American classic is the protagonist's strife to attain the horizon of glory through the refusal to delimit the horizon of defiance to Nature in a Schopenhauerian pessimistic style.

Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851) is a book of adventure describing the journey of a whaleboat to hunt down a huge white whale named Moby Dick. Ahab, the protagonist of the novel and the captain of the *Pequod*, embodies the American hubris since the victory of the whale over the *Pequod* is unthinkable and any eventual defeat does not invite withdrawal but generates further risky adventures to reach glory.

In *The American Mystery: American Literature from Emerson to Delillo*, Tony Tanner suggests a specific and limited framework for *Moby Dick* by confining its possibility of being understood and interpreted exclusively to mid-nineteenth century America. Tanner suggests that

[*Moby Dick*] is a book which could only have been written in America and, arguably, only in the mid-nineteenth century, when America seemed to stand at a new height, or new edge, of triumphant dominion and expansionary confidence in the western world." (Tanner 2000: 63).

Tanner also points out that during Melville's life the country arose from a colonial society to a world power with its own history and mythology. There were also colossal advances in technology—the

development of the railroad, telegraph, and telephone enabling easier travel and communication.

Originally dealing with the adventures of the wandering sailors whose main objective was to hunt down Moby Dick, this work of fiction expresses the Schopenhauerian philosophical mindset of its author. Therefore, the character of Ahab is a reflection of Schopenhauer's man, who is never happy and always disappointed. In his quest to take revenge of the whale that bit off his leg, the obsessive captain of the *Pequod* has qualities of the Shakespearean tragic hero. Ahab bitterly refused humility and went on a self-destroying journey whose objective was to glorify his genius. In a most Schopenhauerian way, when Ahab was about to attain his goal, it was only to be disappointed and shipwrecked in the end. Once again, Moby Dick, the symbol of nature's creativity, is destructive, inextinguishable and victorious over man's hubris.

Ahab is smarting over his submission to Nature's Will and is overwhelmed with grief. His challenge to Nature has no limits as he reveals that he "would strike the sun if it insulted [him]" (Melville 1994: 167). What is more, when Starbuck condemns Ahab's desire to take revenge on "dumb brute . . . that simply smote [him] from blindest instinct" (Ibid) as blasphemous, Ahab considers blasphemy to be no vice. In fact, for Ahab the white whale is not just a "dumb brute" but a façade behind which skulks the "inscrutable thing", the real enemy of Ahab. For the most part, Ahab is a static character who does not change throughout the narrative because of his *idée fixe*. Ahab is engrossed in realizing his ambition of killing Moby Dick with gay abandon and getting the kudos emanating therefrom.

Ahab views the relationship between Man and the Universe in a dialectical way that ultimately builds up his defiance to the essential powers of the universe. Father Mapple, a venerable man of God and a harpooner in his youth, sets the tone for the novel through his sermon in the "Whaleman's Chapel." The text for the sermon is the Old Testament story of Jonah and the whale. Jonah tries to escape his responsibility to God only to discover that God is omnipresent and reigns everywhere. Swallowed by a whale during a storm at sea,

Jonah's submission to God's will become the *sine qua non* of his salvation. God's message to Jonah is: do not sin and if you do repent properly. The main lesson that should be learnt from this story is that the obedience to God lies in the act of disobeying of ourselves. Mapple states, "And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists" (Melville 1994: 58). Throughout this sermon, Father Mapple invites us to consider the results of defying God's authority. Jonah's tribulation definitely proceeds from the sin of disobedience. What Jonah learns is that he should put aside his vanity and reconcile himself to God's will.

The sermon of Father Mapple acts as a *prolepsis* that foretells the misfortune of Ahab whose experience with the white whale is a historical reproduction of Jonah's story but whose ending differs greatly from the latter. What makes the endings of the two stories dissimilar is the act of repentance. While Jonah repents in the whale's guts, Ahab sins in different ways but is never contrite. His most abominable sin is portrayed in chapter 128 through his staunch refusal to help captain Gardiner in his search for his fastest whaleboat that has been lost, with his son aboard, after it ran into Moby Dick. Ahab's chilling response to Gardiner's pitiful plea for help was "Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time ... I must go" (Melville 1994: 498). Had Ahab used the modal "can", the reader would have considered his refusal to help as a matter of incapability that is more or less excusable. However, the negative statement "I will not do it" shows Ahab's willingness not to help and the modal "will" indicates his strong will to achieve his only goal at any cost; and the cost here is other peoples' lives. The contrast between Jonah's adventure and Ahab's pinpoints the infinite defiance of Ahab to Nature as he is remiss of his responsibility and duty for everything but his desire to take revenge of Moby Dick. However, no matter how immeasurable Ahab's challenge to Nature is, it does not suffice to defeat the "inscrutable thing" that triumphs at the end by sending Ahab to death.

Moby Dick exhibits many affinities with Schopenhauer's thoughts mainly through the conception of pessimism as emanating from people's pursuit of happiness. In his *Studies in Pessimism*, Schopenhauer asserts:

A man never is happy, but spends his whole life in striving after something which he thinks will make him so; he seldom attains his goal, and when he does, it is only to be disappointed; he is mostly shipwrecked in the end, and comes into harbour with masts and rigging gone. And then it is all one whether he has been happy or miserable; for his life was never anything more than the present moment always vanishing; and now it is over (Schopenhauer 1923:35).

Understandably, satisfaction is ephemeral, and therefore Arthur Schopenhauer concludes in *The World as Will and Representation* that, "there is no end to striving ... there is no measure or end to suffering" (Schopenhauer 1969: 309). In this case, Ahab's character is a reflection of Schopenhauer's man: he is endlessly striving to reach Moby Dick and hunt it down only to be half-satisfied when the *Pequod* reaches it but is unable to catch it. Therefore, pessimism reigns at the end.

Moby Dick further aligns itself to Schopenhauerian philosophy in its depiction of the protagonist's madness and his monomaniacal pursuit of the White Whale, in this case his own horizon of glory. Capturing and killing Moby Dick is a matter of glory as its resistance to all whaleboats is admirably noticeable. The Captain of *Samuel Enderby* says to Ahab looking at his ivory leg "there would be great glory in killing him, I know that; and there is a ship-load of precious sperm in him, but, hark ye, he's best let alone; don't you think so, Captain?" (Melville 1994: 420). What builds up Ahab's obsession to kill Moby Dick is his stubborn refusal to admit the limitations of human powers. In fact, Ahab is conscious of his mad chase of the white whale when he concedes that he is "madness maddened", and is ready to go against Nature's current to defy the whale. Introduced by captain Peleg in chapter 16, captain Ahab is a man of few words but deep meaning as "he's a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab doesn't speak much, but when he does speak, then you may well listen"(Melville 1994: 92).

Melville's conception of wisdom as being a source of woe leading up to madness further aligns him with Schopenhauer who portrays madness as an outlet to suffering people. Schopenhauer suggests:

the mind tormented so greatly, destroys, as it were, the thread of its memory, fills up the gaps with fictions, and thus seeks refuge in madness from the mental suffering that exceeds its strength, just as a limb affected by mortification is cut off and replaced by a wooden one (Schopenhauer 1969: 193).

In this sense, Schopenhauer regarded the ravings of Shakespeare's tragic heroes Ophelia and King Lear to be examples of this, and undoubtedly would have judged Ahab as an equally suitable exemplar. In support of this argument, it might be pointed out that Shakespeare, in particular, and Elizabethan tragedies are a presiding spirit whose eminent influence on the composition of *Moby Dick* is concrete. David Cope distinguishes three kinds of hero-villains during the English Renaissance:

The good man trapped in circumstances either of his own making or beyond his ability to control (as with Lear and Hamlet), and the overreacher – either a good man tempted by his pride or ambition into the role of the villain or Machiavel (as with Faustus, Macbeth, and in his own peculiar way, Melville's Ahab), or an unscrupulous Machiavel whose rise both horrifies and fascinates us, and whose fall is an occasion bringing relief to the audience (Cope 1999: 5).

The connection between *Moby Dick* and *King Lear*, for instance, has always been highlighted by scholars such as Charles Olson, Matthiessen or Julian Markels². Therefore, it follows that Ahab, categorized as a tragic hero, has been modeled as Shakespearean tragic heroes. Following this line of thought, Matthiessen contends that "Shakespeare's conception of tragedy had so grown into the fibre of Melville's thought that much of his mature work became a recreation of its themes in modern terms" (Matthiessen 1968: 435). Although Melville aficionados have particularly drawn a connection between Captain Ahab and *King Lear* in terms of tragedy as both had fashioned a world that led to their final destruction, *King Lear*

² For a comparative study between captain Ahab and *King Lear* see Julian Markels' *Melville and the politics of identity: from King Lear to Moby Dick* (1993) and Charles Olson's *Call me Ishmael: a Study of Melville* (1947).

represents the good man who is trapped in circumstances of his own making while Ahab is a perfect example of the Machiavellian overreacher, as noted earlier, and this brings Ahab closer to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Both Ahab and *Macbeth* have an overreaching obsession to control their destinies and become imbued with cruelty when they deal with characters who dare to oppose them when they discover their real intentions or threaten their success. An example of this is Banquo who is killed in *Macbeth* in order to deprive him and his progeny from kingship or Starbuck who is threatened with a musket by Ahab when he suggests that the ship must abandon chasing the Whale.

In the original formula rooted in Aristotle's definition of tragedy the tragic hero, usually of noble birth, is neither entirely good nor very evil and his ruin is the result of tragic weaknesses or error in judgment. A true tragedy rests upon six qualities. These are Hamartia, hubris, anagnorisis, peripeteia, nemesis, and catharsis³. Of these six main traits of tragedy, *Moby Dick* embodies every one. First, Ahab's tragic flaw is a result of his overreaching obsession to kill Moby Dick that is rooted in his excessive pride. Ahab's anagnorisis is well illustrated in chapter 132 entitled *The Symphony* throughout Ahab's understanding of the determined shape of the life he has created for himself with an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he² has abandoned. Ahab experienced peripeteia; a reversal of fortune, for he was once a healthy man and his way of life was reversed when he lost his leg to Moby Dick on one whaling voyage. Moreover, Ahab's own attempt to challenge his nemesis results in his downfall as the hemp line of the captain's harpoon lodges around his own neck. Indeed, as readers we cannot avoid feeling pity for Ahab who engages in his own destruction. Thus, Melville's *Moby Dick* resembles

³ Hamartia is the tragic flaw that causes the downfall of the tragic hero that is the consequence of hubris which is extreme pride. Anagnorisis is the recognition made by the tragic hero concerning his errors or weaknesses. Peripeteia is the reversal of fortune. Nemesis is a fate that cannot be avoided or escaped. Catharsis is the feeling of overwhelming pity that the audience or readers are left with after witnessing the hero's downfall.

Shakespeare's '*tragedies of pride*', to use G.R. Eliott's⁴ words. It can thus be said that Ahab is a slave to his passion. Ahab resembles Shakespeare's tragic heroes, according to Kenneth Muir, who emphasizes Campbell's thesis⁵ that "Shakespeare's tragic heroes are slaves of passion" (Muir 1979: 14).

Ahab's madness might also be understood in a Faustian context throughout the description of Ahab as a New England Faust whose quest for forbidden knowledge sinks the ship of American humanity in *Moby Dick*. One might rightly argue, then, that captain Ahab's horizon i.e., hunting down the white whale, is unattainable. In other words, the more Ahab comes near the horizon of glory, the further it recedes. Another theme testifying to the unattainability of the horizon of glory in *Moby Dick* is the battle against evil for the novel echoes Schopenhauer's belief that the world is all one 'Will', but that the 'Will' is evil and unchallengeable. *Moby Dick* describes the predominance of evil and metaphysical destructive forces and human impotence to defy them. In this sense, even human nature is evil unless it is controlled by consciousness. Schopenhauer was keen in explaining this idea when he made a distinction between the 'diabolical' and the 'bestial': "[n]o animal ever torments another for the sake of tormenting; but man does so, and it is this which constitutes the diabolical nature which is far worse than the merely bestial" (Pritchard 2003: 45)

Thus, the vision of the world's inherent evil nature developed by Melville as well as Schopenhauer is well grounded according to Greg Pritchard, in Hsòn Tzu's writings where he noted that "Man's nature is evil ; goodness is the result of conscious activity". Schopenhauer's vision is akin to Tzu's one in that both believe that 'Will' is evil and the only redemption for humanity is embedded in resistance or what is called the denial of the 'Will'. Likewise, *Moby Dick* offers the way to

⁴ George Roy Eliott uses this phrase in his work *Flaming Minister: A Study of Othello as Tragedy of Love and Hate*, AMS Press, 1953.

⁵ Cf.. Lily .B. Campbell, (1961). *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, Taylor and Francis.

salvation through controlling the sharkishness⁶ within us all to deny the dark impulses of the 'Will'. In this expression lies a strong similarity between Melville's "'government' of 'sharkishness'" (Pritchard 2003: 34) and the Schopenhaueran principle of the 'Will-less' person.

Moreover, Ishmael draws attention to "the full awfulness of the sea," its "universal cannibalism", which, in turn, becomes symbolic of "the demonism in the world". For Ishmael, the tranquil beauty of the sea only conceals "the tiger heart that pants beneath it". Moby Dick also represents the evil side of nature and Moseley asserts that it "personifies the ineffable "intangible malignity" of life itself" (Moseley 2009: 10).

In its allegorical sense, Moby Dick stands for the mysterious power and devilish malice of existence and the incapability of the most creative human activity to surpass its powers. Mumford expressed this idea well when he stated:

The white whale stands for the brute energies of existence, blind, fatal, overpowering, while Ahab is the spirit of man, small and feeble, but purposive, that pits its puniness against this might, and its purpose against the blank senselessness of power (Mumford 1970: 38).

The explanations made so far allude to Ahab's incapability to reach his horizon of glory because of two factors. Firstly, Ahab's uncontrolled 'Will' results in an unconscious action, namely, furthering the chase by the end of the novel although high risks put the *Pequod* with its crew in danger. Secondly, Ahab could not reach the horizon of glory for the brute energies of existence surpassed his might. What is more, it is Ahab's obstinacy to admit his inferiority to Moby Dick that resulted in his tragic flaw.

In chapter 28 entitled "Ahab", he is introduced as the "supreme lord and dictator" (Melville 1994: 128). Ahab has been seen as the

⁶ According to Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby Dick*, there is nothing lower in terms of morality than the shark, and thus one of the novel's main theses is the 'sharkish' nature of both humanity and nature, "an intertwined combination", according to Pritchard, "of vulnerability and cannibalism" (Pritchard 2003: 39).

forefather of the twentieth century totalitarian dictators. His despotic behavior is representative of his thirst to reach glory and power. Besides, Herman Melville had successively described American imperialistic attitudes through Ahab's megalomaniac behavior as well as through the multi-ethnic politicized space of the *Pequod*. Melville situates the non-white characters of *Moby Dick* against the white narrator as 'ethnic others'. In fact, "this ethnic othering", Rachel Blumenthal claims, "entails a dangerous politics of racial separation, hierarchizing, and colonization, yet simultaneously allows for and even encourages a social critique of nineteenth century white American imperialist attitudes toward non-white peoples" (Blumenthal 2006: 1).

An instance of such stereotypical attitudes towards non-white races is demonstrated in chapter 72 throughout the different tasks assigned to white character Ishmael and Polynesian dark-skinned Queequeg when they captured the whale. To insert the blubber hook, Queequeg had to straddle the floating whale and stab the hook into its back. For this purpose, Queequeg is tied to the boat by a 'monkey rope', he is tethered to one end and Ishmael stands steadily in the boat at the other end. This scene stands for a metaphorical epitome of American imperialism. This is well explained by Blumenthal, who contends that:

Queequeg, the ethnic "Other," is tied to a moral and political lifeline held in the hands of Ishmael, the white American. At any moment Ishmael may tug on the rope or release it, sending Queequeg to his death. In this model, Ishmael is the imperialistic ruler, the monkey rope is the politics, government, and religion he installs, and Queequeg the powerless native forced to submit to the will and force of the man who holds the "imperial" rope (Blumenthal 2006: 6).

Ergo, in much the same way as Ahab imposed the purpose of the *Pequod's* voyage through his dictatorial capability of convincing the crew; the United States of America imposed its democratic crusade. The expansionary mission of exporting American ideals of democracy, freedom and equality to other parts of the world is heavily reliant on the enlistment of citizens who are not all the time willing to participate in battles they do not really support.

As a conclusion, I would like to draw attention to the recurrent theme of the unattainability of horizons through Stephen Crane's poem *I Saw a Man Pursuing the Horizon* (1895) that reads

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round they sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
"It is futile," I said,
"You can never —"
"You lie," he cried,
And ran on.

In fact, the publication of *I Saw a Man Pursuing the Horizon* might have provided an occasion for a rapprochement on cultural grounds between Herman Melville's ideas and Stephen Crane's vision. The unnamed man's obsession with chasing the horizon is the same as Ahab's. He simply declares his interlocutor to be a liar denying him any comments or negotiation. This reminds us of Ahab's dictator attitudes towards Starbuck and the crew. Crane's poem also depicts a theme of blindness and ignorance that Melville portrayed through Ahab's monomaniacal chase of the white whale.

Finally, *Moby Dick* can be viewed as a good adaptation of the Aristotelian tragedy that confirms Schopenhauer's philosophy of pessimism. Tragedy, in this novel, is the consequence of Ahab's unwillingness to accept the pessimistic reality that happiness is ephemeral. Although Ahab reached the limits of the horizon of defiance represented by his final death as a result of his invincible challenge to the Whale, he could not reach glory because of his vulnerability in the face of nature's will represented by the white Whale. Thus, the final moral of *Moby Dick* is that the only way to redemption is to control the 'sharkishness' within us and to resist the impulses of the evil 'Will'.

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