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Listening to Melville with an Equal Eye: Relational Hermeneutics in *Moby-Dick*

William Homestead
Independent Scholar, USA

In *Why Read Moby-Dick?* Nathaniel Philbrick describes Melville's slowly unfolding narrative as "encyclopedic and detailed," "maddeningly digressive," a "magnificent mess," and a "most quirky and demanding ride."[1] For Philbrick, these are not criticisms but reasons for the novel's greatness, along with Ismael's nuanced voice, which, of course is Melville's. Taking the ride and reading *Moby-Dick* is an open-ended and rewarding challenge. In many ways, questions drive the narrative, questions that are inevitably maddening and messy and demand our time.

Melville's "call me Ishmael" opening line establishes a "methinks" subjectivity that foregrounds the complexity of interpretation. Ishmael ponders the draw of water and the sea, asking metaphysical and mystical questions. He asserts a universal, "Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever," yet this assertion is a fount for ongoing exploration.[2] That exploration includes self-questioning on free will versus the call of the wild, "wonder-world" of whaling, and then proceeds to the wild-like intricacies of New Bedford and more self-questioning as he looks for a cheap inn.[3] Ishmael displays a fertile mind and searching soul that also establishes an openness to listening.

A revealing entryway into reading *Moby-Dick* is Martin Buber's relational ontology, which Melville, via Ishmael, turns into a living (on the page) relational hermeneutics. Buber makes a distinction between I-thou and I-it orientations, with an I-thou attitude perceiving others as having subjectivity and aliveness while an I-it

[1] Nathaniel Philbrick, *Why Read Moby-Dick?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).
[2] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, edited by Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 17.
[3] Ibid., 20.

attitude treats others like objects. Buber admits that I-it relations are inevitable, but more complete knowing comes from I-thou relations marked by listening and learning.[4] There is an ongoing tension between I-thou and I-it relations in the novel, especially via Ishmael and Captain Ahab, who is less open and illustrates the dangers of an I-it dominant world.

I-thou and I-it orientations and attitudes should be understood as a situational spectrum. Plenty of interpretative insights emerge from applying a Buberian relational hermeneutics to the unfolding situations of *Moby-Dick*, which are often tense, sometimes amusing, and always revealing. For example, Ishmael finds the cheapest New Bedford Inn, encounters Queequeg, the mysterious harpooner, and ends up sharing a bed with him. The scene is both humorous and telling as they warm up to each other. Ishmael is initially taken aback by Queequeg's island otherness, but comes to see him as a fellow thou: "What's all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—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 to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian."[5]

Ishmael is clearly willing to listen to, learn from, and be transformed by others. A lesson of Queequeg is this: there is no real difference between so-called savagism and civilization. Melville continually plays with and plays out that tension, as well as Ishmael's openness to the vast sea versus the I-it isolation of the ship and being stuck with Ahab. Ishmael is driven by the mystery of the sea and deadly yet wondrous whales, which stimulate curiosity, reflection, and risk; Ahab is driven by obsession stimulated by revenge. And that is one of the reasons that Ahab so starkly stands out: he is more comfortable with I-it monologue rather than I-thou dialogue.

There is over one-hundred pages of build up to Captain Ahab finally making his entrance on the deck of the *Pequod*. Ishmael shares a first impression: "So powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab affect me, and the livid brand which streaked it, that for the first few moments I hardly noticed that not a little of this overbearing grimness was owing to the barbaric white leg upon which he stood."[6] Peg leg Ahab is damaged physically, but as the narrative progresses his grimness reveals a damaged psyche; he is filled with woe and is described as megalomaniacally mad. Yet Ahab is also filled with will and soon manipulates the crew with charismatic rhetoric:

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[4] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufman (New York: Scribner's, 1970).
[5] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, edited by Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 33.
[6] Ibid., 103.

he convinces them to be on board with his obsession to hunt down the white whale Moby Dick.[7]

Treating Moby Dick as an "it" deserving of death is a powerful motivator. Rage and revenge are also powerful motivators. Ahab even wears down the skeptical Starbuck, his first mate and an emblem of conscience, with his hate: "God keep me!—keep us all!"[8] But it is not hard for Ahab to convince the crew to take his side, or to take on his obsession: "Ha! Starbuck! But the deed is done! . . . God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death."[9]

There is an alluring transcendence in hate; the othering of Moby Dick unites the crew. There is also an alluring transcendence in love. And there is a long history of I-It transcendence rooted in hate and I-thou transcendence rooted in love. The feeling is similar: losing ourselves in something larger. But love ultimately transcends hate, as the unity of everyone, including seeing all species as kin, is much larger than the unity of a specific group. The crew's choice, if you can call it that, is the latter, which is no doubt influenced by the isolation of the ship. They are unable to make a distinction between unity inspired by their oceanic view and being one with Ahab's cramped obsession. Starbuck again: "My soul is more than matched . . . she's overmanned; and by a madman!"[10] Even Ismael is momentarily seduced: "A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud was seemed mine."[11] But he soon recovers when he once again realizes Ahab's quest is based in hate.

Ahab is symbolic of the dangers of an I-it attitude, as well as falling for this attitude, or being seduced by it. Shadow darkness and ego fears all too easily come to the surface when prodded by Ahab's seductive rhetorical tricks. Ahab stokes and feeds on darkness and fear; yet, he is not a monster but human with monstrous traits. Near the end of the novel, he revels in a lovely day and then states, "Thinking is, or ought to be, a coolness and calmness," but then he continues, "our poor hearts throb, and our poor brains beat too much for that."[12] Ahab is a self-reflexive thinker who contemplates himself amid the universe, but his addled heart and brain sees no meaning in it and thus he is ultimately a limited thinker.

Ahab's I-it hermeneutics is too narrow. It is telling that he can't figure out Queequeg, calling him a "devilish tantalization of the gods!," while Ishmael's I-thou

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[7] Ibid., 130-136.
[8] Ibid., 133.
[9] Ibid., 135.
[10] Ibid., 136.
[11] Ibid., 144.
[12] Ibid., 402-403.

relations with him reveal more and more, yet Queequeg defies complete knowing.[13] An incomplete hermeneutics is inevitable but not working to be more complete, more whole, is dangerous for all involved. And we are all involved amid the unity-in-diversity of life on our wondrous, watery planet. But the crew is involved with, caught up in, and doomed by the obsessive I-it attitude of their captain.

We are incomplete in good and bad ways: good in the sense of not-knowing and honoring otherness; bad in the sense of not honoring listening practices that allow us to know more. I-thou dialogic listening is necessary for being more whole; but Ahab, and those influenced by him, are incapable, or incapacitated. A lesson of Ahab: we all suffer when incapacitated by a willfully incomplete hermeneutics, or because of physical and psychological damage.

Ishmael is educated by experience and always interpreting and learning while Ahab's self-awareness is drowned out by narrow-minded bias. But the I-thou and I-it relations in *Moby-Dick* extend beyond Ishmael's open-ended "methinks" ponderings and Ahab's white whale death stare. Whales are treated like "its," but so are people. On the ship, the diverse crew is not judged by color but by ability; yet they are exploited pawns in the lucrative I-it economic game of whaling. The *Pequod's* owners are supposedly Quakers but Ishmael remarks that "a man's religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another."[14] Wealthy whites have the money; people of color provide most of the muscle.

Melville's metaphysical and mystical questioning also does not include an embrace of an uncritical oceanic oneness, as "whales must be seen to be killed."[15] Whale ship captains don't want a Platonic idealist or pantheist in the crow's nest, who may be "lulled into opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie . . ."[16] Buber moved from mysticism to dialogue; he does not deny "ecstatic" religious experiences of unity, yet he's critical of the escapist attitude that sometimes issues from it. Instead of bringing I-thou relations to whole existence, there may be a fleeing into "detached feelings of unity of being, elevated above life . . ." For Buber, in such "higher hours" the other disappears and "the great dialogue between I and thou is silent; nothing else exists than his self, which he experiences as *the* self."[17]

Buber is rooted in relationship, which assumes distance, as well as a dialogic relationship of oneness that focuses on heightening our experience of this world.

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[13] Ibid., 351.
[14] Ibid., 69.
[15] Ibid., 128.
[16] Ibid., 129.
[17] Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), xv-xvi.

Melville is also rooted in relationship although his focus is often dark and existential. There are two translations of *I and Thou* from the original German, a 1937 version by Ronald Gergor Smith, who translates "du" as the more theological sounding "thou," and a 1970 version by Walter Kaufman, who translates "du" as the existential sounding "you." Smith's "I-thou" suggests we should seek the sacred in each other and what we have in common; Kaufman's "I-you" suggests we should respect each other's difference. These are interrelated truths and Buber is open to both, but these differing translations reveal the complexity of interpretation.

Melville, as a searching agnostic, seems to lean toward "I-you" more than "I-thou," but both are on the other end of the spectrum from I-it relations. Again, Melville plays out these tensions, which are questions of meaning, via Ishmael, who longs to know more amid a largely uncertain world, and Ahab, whose rage against Moby Dick may be interpreted as rage against meaninglessness; his response to the absurdity of life and certain death is to find meaning in his obsession and purpose in revenge.[18]

Ishmael begins a cetology classification book, but always comes back to not-knowing: "God keep me from completing anything," he states, "The whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught."[19] Ishmael asserts that we ultimately know little, yet his I-thou ruminations throughout the novel consistently take us out of the darkness. He even celebrates "democratic dignity" and "divine equality" that "radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute."[20] Yet such appeals to a great Thou are counter-balanced by evidence of an I-it universe of existential absurdity: "There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke . . ."[21]

Despite knowing "a draught of a draught," *Moby-Dick* supplies many detailed I-it facets of whales (like blubber) and whaling (like how to kill).[22] But Ishmael also shares more: gazing at the head of the sperm whale "you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature."[23] Of course, in this moment the whale ceases to be an object but a fellow thou, in the sense of a fellow being and unfathomable awe-inspiring other. Nature, after all, is indeed living.

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[18] Nathaniel Philbrick, *Why Read Moby-Dick?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 57-59.
[19] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, edited by Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 118.
[20] Ibid., 97.
[21] Ibid., 179.
[22] Nathaniel Philbrick, *Why Read Moby-Dick?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 71.
[23] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, edited by Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 262.

Life is a strange mix of knowing and not-knowing: "There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method."[24] Or, as Ishmael further puts it when contemplating the visible and invisible: ". . . rainbows do not visit the clear air; they only irradiate vapor. And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuition now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray . . . Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye."[25]

A lesson of *Moby-Dick*: To listen and learn more of the strange mix that is life we must continually turn an equal eye to I-thou and I-it relations.

[24] Ibid., 272.
[25] Ibid., 280.