

**Cosmopolitanism, Multiculturalism, and the
Promise of Literature**

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Abu Dhabi
October 21, 2009

When I was growing up, strangers would ask me, “Where are you from?” and I’d say, “New York” or “the upper West Side.” They’d look vaguely disappointed and then say, “No, I meant what’s your background.” I wasn’t really being disingenuous, though I was well aware what the first question really meant. It’s just that I never particularly identified with either of my parents’ cultural traditions. My father is a Parsee, born in Karachi, when Karachi was a part of India, and my late mother was a Filipino. They had met at the International House at Columbia University, my father coming from Pakistan to study mathematical statistics, my mother from the Philippines to study literature and drama. We spoke English at home, and my parents had gradually lost their fluency in their mother tongues (Gujarati and Tagalog, respectively). What I identified with was being *mixed* and being able to slip from one cultural context to another. To my Parsee relatives, I looked Filipino; to my Filipino relatives, I looked “*bumbai*”; and to my classmates—well, on the rare occasions when someone wanted to launch a racial slur, the result was usually a lame attempt to insult me as if I were Puerto Rican.

We weren’t particularly religious at home, though we did celebrate Christmas and made it a point to attend the Christmas Eve services at Riverside Church in New York, a few blocks up the street from where we lived. My mother sometimes liked to attend Easter services there as well. It was always assumed that I would become a Zoroastrian like my father. As my mother explained it, so that I could keep my options open. I could convert to Christianity but not to Zoroastrianism later, because Zoroastrianism didn’t accept converts. [A video clip of my navjote

ceremony begins showing now.] But, when the time came during third grade for my *navjote* ceremony to be performed, we couldn't find a priest. We kept hearing excuses along the lines of, "I would do it, but my mother-in-law is very old-fashioned." The problem was that my mother was a Christian—oddly enough a Protestant, unlike most Filipinos, because my grandmother had converted to a Pentecostal sect before my mother's birth.

Finally, as you've no doubt guessed from the video clip that I've been playing, we managed to secure the services of a priest from Mumbai who was traveling in the U.S. and spending some time in New York. Four years later, we had to go to London to have my sister's ceremony done. It was an early lesson in the dynamics of culture, though it would take me years to recognize it: my parents' marriage was an emblem of cosmopolitan cultural mixing, while the priests' belief in the importance of cultural purity served as an emblem of all the forces that are arrayed against cosmopolitanism.

So I suppose it's somewhat predictable that in recent years I have chosen to work on what I call "emergent literatures"—literatures that express marginalized cultural identities—and found myself increasingly interested in theories of cosmopolitanism. And that I've been fascinated for the past fourteen years with a text that combines the Zoroastrian and Christian traditions—*Moby-Dick*. What I'd like to do briefly today is to investigate the links among these various subjects and to suggest that one of the powerful things about literature is its promotion of cosmopolitan experience.

Let's start with the idea of emergent literatures. My conception of the emergent is inspired by the work of Raymond Williams, whose analysis of the dynamics of modern culture has served, I believe, as the implicit foundation for minority discourse theory in the 1990s and beyond. Williams characterizes culture as a constant struggle for dominance in which a hegemonic mainstream seeks to defuse the challenges posed to it by both residual and emergent cultural forms. According to Williams, residual culture consists of those practices that are based on the "residue of ... some previous social and cultural institution or formation," but continue to play a role in the present. This description is not meant to suggest that residual cultures should be considered "unimportant" or

“minor.” On the contrary, they are major parts of any cultural formation.

Emergent cultures are powerful, but at the other end of the spectrum. Williams characterizes emergent culture as the site or set of sites where “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created.” Moreover, he writes, “Since we are always considering relations within a cultural process, definitions of the emergent, as of the residual, can be made only in relation to a full sense of the dominant.” In other words, it makes no sense to think of the emergent apart from the dominant: the very definition, or self-definition, of the emergent depends on the existence of a dominant culture.

What I call *emergent literature* is therefore the literary expression of a cultural group that defines itself either as an alternative to or in direct opposition to a dominant mainstream. What makes the literature “emergent” is the fact that it portrays beliefs and practices that are taken to be “new” by the dominant culture, though in some cases they may in fact be thousands of years old.

Emergent writing demonstrates the power of what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah calls “cosmopolitan contamination.” Cultures, in Appiah’s account, never tend toward purity: they tend toward change, toward mixing and miscegenation, toward an “endless process of imitation and revision” (“The Case for Contamination,” 52). To keep a culture “pure” requires the vigilant policing often associated with fundamentalist regimes or xenophobic political parties. (Or, sometimes, just the reluctance of a Zoroastrian priest, to perform a *navjote* ceremony.) Like Williams’s account of the interaction of dominant, residual, and emergent cultures, Appiah’s description of culture is all about “conversation across boundaries.” Such conversations, Appiah writes, “can be delightful, or just vexing: what they mainly are, though, is inevitable” (*Cosmopolitanism*, xxi).

Appiah is one of those theorists who are revising traditional understandings of the nature of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism has traditionally been described as a form of universalism that is directly opposed to the idea of nationalism. Appiah reminds us that the term, which comes from the Greek *cosmo polites* meaning “citizen of the cosmos,” dates back “at least to the Cynics of the fourth century BC.” According to Appiah:

The formulation was meant to be paradoxical, and reflected the general Cynic skepticism toward custom and tradition. A citizen – a *polites* – belonged to a particular *polis*, a city to which he or she owed loyalty. The cosmos referred to the world, not in the sense of the earth, but in the sense of the universe. Talk of cosmopolitanism originally signaled, then, a rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities.

Coined first in contradistinction to the idea that each citizen owed primary allegiance to his *polis*, or city-state, the term *cosmopolitanism* evolved, with the rise of the European nation-state, into an alternative to the idea of nationalism.

The literary scholar Bruce Robbins has argued that cosmopolitanism should be “understood as a fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole.” “Cosmopolitanism,” writes Robbins, “has often seemed to claim universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives” (1).

The German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant seems to have adopted this sense of the term in his essay “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” (1784), where he proposes as feasible the philosophical project of attempting “to work out a universal history of the world in accordance with a plan of nature aimed at a perfect civil union of mankind” (51). Kant, however, begins to alter his assessment of cosmopolitanism in the essay “Theory and Practice” (1793): after briefly setting forth the idea of a world republic bound by a “*cosmopolitan* constitution,” he then suggests as more feasible the idea of “a lawful *federation* under a commonly accepted international *right*” (90). Two years later, in the essay “Perpetual Peace” (1795), Kant theorizes that the only way to achieve permanent world peace is through the formation of a “*pacific federation*” of nations, a “general agreement” to “preserve and secure the *freedom* of each state in itself, along with that of the other confederated states, although this does not mean that they need to submit

to public laws and to a coercive power which enforces them, as do men in a state of nature” (104). Because it is organized around “cosmopolitan right” of “universal hospitality” (105) rather than a uniform set of laws to which all must submit, such a federation is pluralist: Kant grants the legitimacy of the “state,” which he describes as “a society of men, which no-one other than itself can command or dispose of. Like a tree, it has its own roots, and to graft it on to another state as if it were a shoot is to terminate its existence as a moral personality and make it into a commodity” (94).

In short, the movement from “Idea for a Universal History” to “Perpetual Peace” represents a shift in Kant’s thinking from the away from a universalist to a more pluralist conception of cosmopolitanism. This shift indicates a second way in which cosmopolitanism may be conceived: in contradistinction not only to nationalism but also to universalism.

The intellectual historian David Hollinger “distinguish[es] between a universalist will to find common ground [and] a cosmopolitan will to engage human diversity.” According to Hollinger,

Cosmopolitanism shares with all varieties of universalism a profound suspicion of enclosures, but cosmopolitanism is defined by an additional element not essential to universalism itself: recognition, acceptance, and eager exploration of diversity. Cosmopolitanism urges each individual and collective unit to absorb as much varied experience as it can, while retaining its capacity to advance its aims effectively. For cosmopolitans, the diversity of humankind is a fact; for universalists, it is a potential problem. (84)

I’d go further: cosmopolitanism conceives of difference, not as a problem to be solved, but rather as an opportunity to be embraced.

The cosmopolitan experience is all about finding sameness across gulfs of difference, but it is not about eradicating gaps in cultural experience: rather, it’s about bridging them. That’s why Appiah begins his book *Cosmopolitanism* by stressing the importance of *conversation* – “conversation in its older meaning of living together, [of] association”

(xix) and in “its modern sense” of simply talking with one another. The idea of “conversation between people from different ways of life” thus serves as Appiah’s primary model for cosmopolitan interaction.

The kinds of conversations that Appiah has in mind are much more than simple chit-chat or the exchange of pleasantries. They are dialogues in which we are willing to put our central beliefs on the line: we commit ourselves to conversations in which we are willing to have our minds changed about cherished beliefs and values. Why? Because, like all human beings, we are fallible. We are imperfect beings who can never be assured that we have either the whole truth or the best account of the way that the world works. Appiah describes this as the doctrine of “*fallibilism*—the sense that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence” (*Cosmopolitanism* 144).

Appiah describes fundamentalisms of various kinds as forms of “counter-cosmopolitanism,” because rather than embracing cultural difference and recognizing multiple points of view, fundamentalists insist on cultural purity and believe that there is one true way of being in the world to which they hold the key (*Cosmopolitanism* 143). Counter-cosmopolitans, on the other hand, refuse to put their beliefs on the line. They believe that they have a special purchase on truth, and nothing you can say will persuade them to alter their beliefs. For example, Puritans like William Bradford and John Winthrop who left England for North America in the early seventeenth century believed they were practicing the one true religion, which was their form of Calvinist Christianity. They believed that they were God’s chosen people, that they alone were “elect”—chosen by God for salvation. Ironically, the idea that human beings are fallible was one of the Puritans’ foundational beliefs, but unlike cosmopolitans, they didn’t believe in human perfectibility. Sin was the result of the grievous error known as the Fall of Man, and nothing that human beings could do could repair this error. Salvation occurred only because God was merciful, not because human beings deserved it. In Appiah’s terms, what they practiced was “universalism without toleration” (140).

This kind of fundamentalism represents a challenge for cosmopolitanism: if cosmopolitanism is predicated on conversation, what do you do with people who refuse to talk? Left to their own devices, cultures tend toward mixing rather than purity, but cosmopolitan thinkers

remain acutely aware that what Appiah calls “counter-cosmopolitanism” can be found at every level of culture and therefore recognize that the natural tendency of cultures toward cosmopolitan mixing is not enough to guarantee that cosmopolitan perspectives will prevail.

For example, multiculturalism as it has been institutionalized in the United States over the past two decades often manifests counter-cosmopolitan tendencies. Multiculturalists share the cosmopolitan’s appreciation for diversity, but often push their commitment to pluralism so far that it creates a cultural impasse. The result is a reluctance to speak across cultural boundaries. Like cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism promotes diversity and respect for the cultural traditions of others, but too often it over-emphasizes the idea of pluralism. Multiculturalism, writes Hollinger, “respects inherited boundaries and locates individuals within one or another of a series of ethno-racial groups to be protected and preserved.” Hollinger argues that multiculturalism thus “differs from cosmopolitanism in the degree to which it endows with privilege particular groups, especially the communities that are well established at whatever time the ideal of pluralism is invoked.”

The logic of contemporary multiculturalism goes something like this: I like my culture (because it’s mine), but I respect yours. I want you to respect mine. I prefer mine (because it’s mine), and I imagine that you prefer yours (because it’s yours). I really can’t comment on your culture, because I don’t belong to it. I cherish my longstanding practices and values, and out of respect I’ll refrain from commenting on your longstanding practices and values. If I happen to find some of your longstanding practices and values distasteful or even repugnant—well, we’ll just agree to disagree. As Hollinger puts it, this “conservative form” of multiculturalism “takes the form of a bargain: ‘You keep the acids of your modernity out of my culture, and I’ll keep the acids of mine away from yours.’”

Emergent writers realize that such a bargain is not only undesirable but also untenable. The contemporary U.S. emergent writing that I study tends to set itself against the idea of cultural purity that lies behind contemporary U.S. multiculturalism and identity politics. What I want to suggest in the second half of my talk, however, is that this argument about cultural purity is not itself merely a contemporary phenomenon. I will

suggest to you that the text that is often considered to lie at the heart of the canon of American Literature as it has been constructed and taught over the past eighty years—Herman Melville’s 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*— does this as well: it sets itself against the ideas of cultural purity that were prevalent in the 1850s, and it can be read as a warning against the ideas of cultural purity that are prevalent today. To put it another way, *Moby-Dick* was an emergent text in 1851 and is an emergent text today in 2009—in both cases because of its links to cosmopolitanism.

This statement might come as a surprise to the emergent writer Maxine Hong Kingston. Toward the end of the first chapter of her novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, Kingston’s protagonist Wittman Ah Sing addresses a rant to the reader that invokes the famous first words of *Moby-Dick*: “‘Call me Ishmael.’ See? You pictured a white guy, didn’t you?” Kingston’s novel suggests that the dilemma of whether or not to introduce one’s race was not something that Herman Melville faced, both because Herman Melville was the kind of white, male, property-owning person whose status as a rights-bearing individual was never questioned and because *Moby-Dick* now sits at the center of the U.S. canon, considered by many readers to be the “Great American Novel.”

But it wasn’t always so. In fact, when the novelist John William DeForest coined that phrase in the 1890s, the book that he felt came the closest to being the Great American Novel was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s bestselling antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (published in book form the year after *Moby-Dick*). In fact, at DeForest may not even have thought of *Moby-Dick* as a novel: in many libraries at the time he wrote it was classified, instead, as a treatise on cetology, the study of whales. As the literary scholar Paul Lauter has argued, the writer that we currently know as “Melville” was in fact constructed by critics during the so-called Melville Revival of the 1920s:

“Melville” was constructed during in the 1920s as part of an ideological conflict which linked advocates of modernism and of traditional high cultural values—often connected to the academy—against a social and cultural “other,” generally, if ambiguously, portrayed as feminine,

genteel, exotic, dark, foreign, and numerous. In this contest a distinctively masculine, Anglo-Saxon image of Melville was deployed as a lone and powerful artistic beacon against the dangers presented by the masses; creating such an image entailed overlooking issues of race, eroticism, democracy, and the like, which have become commonplaces of contemporary criticism. (6)

But why was Melville in need of reclamation? Because, when *Moby-Dick* appeared in 1851, it was an emergent text.

For one thing, it is formally experimental. It begins with a section called “Etymology” that comically listed the word for whale in a variety of languages—from Hebrew to the South Seas tongue Erromangoan. This was followed by a long selection of “Extracts,” taken from a variety of different sources high and low, from Genesis through Thomas Hobbes down to a couple of Nantucket whaling songs. The first chapter introduces to an enigmatic, encyclopedically minded, somewhat depressive narrator, who asks us to call him “Ishmael” and who will spin for us a sea yarn—a tall tale to beat all tall tales. Moreover, the novel is thematically adventurous as well. It soon goes on to demonstrate how this narrator, Ishmael, befriends and becomes bosom buddies with a South Seas harpooner and cannibal named Queequeg, embracing racial and cultural otherness.

Literary critics sometimes use the term “horizon of expectations” to denote the set of rules and expectations with which readers greet a new text.¹ The reader’s horizon of expectations is the product of the reader’s social, cultural, historical, aesthetic, and personal contexts. *Moby-Dick* openly challenged the dominant horizon of expectations for a novel. Melville negotiated with both the dominant literary culture and dominant national culture—and lost, only to be revived some seventy years later as an exemplar of the dominant culture, the centerpiece of an American national literature that, its proponents argued, could match the European national traditions for excellence.

As Lauter suggests, in valorizing the novel, *Moby-Dick*’s early twentieth-century champions focused on one aspect of the novel’s emergent perspective—its formal experimentation—but excluded what

was emergent about the novel thematically, namely its cosmopolitan perspective. The model of cultural interaction dramatized by the novel seems to anticipate both Williams's and Appiah's descriptions of cultural conversation and negotiation. Melville's narrator calls himself "Ishmael," a reference to the Biblical outcast, the illegitimate eldest son of the Prophet Abraham (Peace Be Unto Him), traditionally believed to be the progenitor of the Arabs. As you all know, "Ismail" plays a central role in Islamic tradition: he is reunited with Abraham (Peace Be Unto Him) and together they rebuild the Ka'ba, the holiest place in the Islamic world. For Melville, the name "Ishmael" signifies someone who stands outside of the dominant Western Biblical tradition. In the novel's epilogue, we learn that, as the whaleship *Pequod* is being dragged down into a vortex after its final, fatal confrontation with the whale Moby Dick (sorry if I've spoiled the ending for any of you!), Ishmael is saved precisely by being at "the margin of the ensuing scene" (427).

Melville's Ishmael is an outsider throughout the novel, a first-time whaler who hails not from a traditional whaling town, but from New York. People who haven't read the novel are often surprised to learn that its first chapter takes place in Manhattan.

Like his earlier sea narratives, *Moby-Dick* has its roots in personal experience: while still living in New York City, Melville wrote a letter to his English publisher, Richard Bentley, dated June 27, 1850 in which he described his new book as "a romance of adventure, founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries, and illustrated by the author's own personal experience, of two years & more, as a harpooner" (533). Melville's scene of writing becomes his narrator Ishmael's scene of writing. By mid-1850, however, Melville had decamped from New York and moved to New England. Ishmael follows that pattern, decamping in the second chapter for "Cape Horn and the Pacific" via New Bedford and then Nantucket.

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville takes liberties with his "own personal experience" that far outstrip the liberties he had taken in his earlier books. Melville had sailed west around Cape Horn in the whaleship *Acushnet* in the spring of 1841, but he sends Ishmael in the other direction: east around the Cape of Good Hope. Melville deserted from not one but two whaleships. He left the *Acushnet* at the island of Nukahiva in the

Marquesas, where he would spend a month, before escaping to join the crew of the whaleship *Lucy Ann*, an experience that would form the basis for his novel *Typee* (1846). The *Lucy Ann*, however, was an unhappy ship: a faction of its crew was in open rebellion against the ship's captain and Melville decided to take that group's part, which resulted in his spending several days in jail on Tahiti. Contrary, therefore, to his own experience, Melville has Ishmael follow his captain to the bitter end, with nary a thought of mutiny even as it becomes clear to him that Ahab is "crazy," suffering from "monomania" and a "broad madness" (156–57).

So why not just begin Ishmael's whaling voyage in a whaling town, with Ishmael on the door step of the Spouter Inn? Why set the opening chapter set in New York? The question becomes even more important if we take the opening chapter to be a kind of philosophical overture, in which Ishmael sounds the notes that will recur like leitmotifs throughout the narrative that follows.

I suggest that Melville opens the novel in the insular city of the Manhattoes in order to align Ishmael's perspective with what the intellectual historian Thomas Bender calls "the historic cosmopolitanism of New York" (186). Unlike New England Puritanism and Jeffersonian agrarianism, which Bender describes as "the most influential myths of America" (185), New York's cosmopolitanism does not "reject the idea of difference" (186); indeed, according to Bender, "Very early in the city's history, difference and conflict among interests were acknowledged as not only inevitable but perhaps of positive value" (190). Bender attributes this perspective to the city's Dutch origins: "If religion inspired the Puritans and if the dream of plantations and wealth drove the Virginians, the practicality of trade engaged the first settlers of New Amsterdam" (192). Likewise, Russell Shorto argues:

What matters about the Dutch colony is that it set Manhattan on course as a place of openness and free trade. A new kind of spirit hovered over the island, something utterly alien to New England and Virginia, which is directly traceable to the tolerance debates in Holland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and to the intellectual world of Descartes, Grotius, and Spinoza. (310)

The literary scholar Andrew Delbanco is among those who have argued that the urban culture of New York had a decisive impact on Melville's writing: "New York," writes Delbanco, "broke open Melville's style [and] opened his mind as well to the cosmopolitan idea of a nation to which one belongs not by virtue of some blood lineage that leads back into the past, but by consent to the as-yet-unrealized ideal of a nation comprehending all peoples . . . in a future of universal freedom." (119).

In the novel's first chapter, which is called "Loomings," the narrator Ishmael begins to establish a pattern of association among the ideas of water, cosmopolitanism, and Zoroastrianism. "Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy?" In drawing attention to the Persians' veneration of the sea, Ishmael makes a link between the cosmopolitanism promoted by whaling and the ancient Persian religion. Later in the novel, Ishmael writes, "I freely assert, that the cosmopolite philosopher cannot, for his life, point out one single peaceful influence, which within the last sixty years has operated more potentially upon the whole broad world, taken in one aggregate, than the high and mighty business of whaling" (98). Ishmael here aligns himself with the cosmopolite philosopher by providing that philosopher with the salient example that he has been missing: for Ishmael it is not too outlandish to believe that the way to what Immanuel Kant called "perpetual peace" might be pioneered by whaleships.

This experience of connection is what Ishmael tells us he craves at the end of the first chapter: describing himself as "tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote," Ishmael tells us, "I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts. Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it—would they let me—since it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in" (4). Two chapters later he will meet the man who will become his "bosom buddy," the "wild cannibal" Queequeg. Ishmael is saved at the end of the novel because he is able to hang onto a life buoy that Queequeg had intended to be his coffin and had carved with the likeness of the tattoos that cover his body. Symbolically, it is Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg, his ability to reach out across

cultural difference, that has saved him.

Interestingly, the way that the novel uses the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg reverses the pattern established by one of the central sources for the novel and thereby heightens the novel's commitment to cosmopolitanism. While Melville was in the South Seas, he met the son of a man named Owen Chase, who had been the first mate on a boat named the *Essex* that had been sunk by a whale years earlier in November 1820. Chase had written an account of the disaster and its even more disastrous aftermath, and his son gave Melville a copy. Once the *Essex* was sunk, the survivors were left only with their much smaller whaling boats, which were not designed to travel long distances on the open sea. And then they had a decision to make: would they go to the nearby Marquesas, which were thought to be the home of cannibals? Instead, they decided to try to sail to the shore of South America, a voyage of more than three thousand miles on the open ocean that would take at least two months. In the end, the men began to starve and die dehydration, and to save themselves the survivors had to become precisely the thing they feared the most: they became cannibals, eating the flesh of their dead companions in order to stay alive. On one of the boats, they had to draw lots and ended up killing one of the boys on board. Chase and those in his boat finally made it back to Nantucket in June 1821. The captain's boat makes it back three months later.

So here we have a story of the sinking of a ship by a whale that becomes a story about avoiding cannibalism only to engage in cannibalism. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville reverses the pattern of the *Essex*: the narrator confronts the cannibal early on in the pages of the book – and befriends him. The novel then moves forward to the confrontation between whale and ship. And, as I've already mentioned, in the end it is this friendship, symbolically, that saves him.

Ahab, the famous captain of the *Pequod*, comes from a background that is rather different from Ishmael's. He hails from Nantucket, a small, isolated island thirty miles south of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The island became a refuge for Quakers, who were persecuted by the Puritans in early seventeenth-century Massachusetts for their dissident beliefs. Ishmael never openly identifies Ahab's religious affiliation, though most readers tend to assume that the captain has been raised as a Quaker. Ahab,

after all, is from Nantucket, and Ishmael tells us

that the island [was] originally settled by that sect; and to this day its inhabitants in general retain in an uncommon measure the peculiarities of the Quaker, only variously and anomalously modified by things altogether alien and heterogeneous. For some of these same Quakers are the most sanguinary of all sailors and whale-hunters. They are fighting Quakers; they are Quakers with a vengeance.

Punning on the phrase “with a vengeance,” Ishmael suggests that whaling has become a powerful agent of cultural change, forcing a pacifist sect to become murderous and bloodthirsty, at least where whales are concerned. And, of course, whenever readers encounter the word vengeance in *Moby-Dick*, they associate it with Ahab. So most readers take the paragraph that follows, ostensibly a description of the co-owners of the *Pequod*, Captains Peleg and Bildad, to be a foreshadowing of the captain whom we have not yet met, Ahab:

So that there are instances among them of men, who, named with Scripture names—a singularly common fashion on the island—and in childhood naturally imbibing the stately dramatic thee and thou of the Quaker idiom; still, from the audacious, daring, and boundless adventure of their subsequent lives, strangely blend with these unoutgrown peculiarities, a thousand bold dashes of character, not unworthy a Scandinavian sea-king, or a poetical Pagan Roman.

Ishmael leaves us to infer Ahab’s Quaker heritage, from his actions and his speech. All we know of Ahab’s upbringing we hear from Captain Peleg who tells us that his naming was “a foolish, ignorant whim of his crazy, widowed mother, who died when he was only a twelvemonth old” and that has name inspired “the old squaw Tistig, at Gayhead” to predict that “the name would somehow prove prophetic” (78).

Ishmael’s reticence about Ahab’s religious background allows

Melville to use “Ahab to explore the fate of human dignity in a world seemingly controlled by an enraged Calvinist God,” as T. Walter Herbert argues in *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* (1977). Like the Quakers, Ahab rebels against the Calvinism practiced in Massachusetts, but the terms of his dissent are wholly set by Calvinist theology. When Ahab reveals his true purpose to the *Pequod*'s crew in the chapter called “The Quarter-Deck,” he tells his first mate Starbuck that he sees in the white whale “outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him” (140). “Inscrutable,” of course, was a key term for American Puritanism: “Because Calvin took refuge in God’s ‘incomprehensible majesty’ when taxed as to his justice, the term ‘inscrutable’ became a catchword of orthodox polemic,” writes Herbert (122). Ahab, in other words, is caught up in precisely the same questions about the relation between predetermination and free will, and between God’s sovereignty and human agency, that animate Puritan theology from John Calvin to Jonathan Edwards. Moreover, like the Puritans who seek signs of God’s providence in daily events, Ahab’s monomania—his single-minded obsession with the whale—leads him to live in a haunted world of symbols, for (as Ishmael notes) “to any monomaniac man, the veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings” (195).

Moby-Dick, therefore, can be seen as a collision between Ishmael’s New York cosmopolitanism and Ahab’s brand of fundamentalism, a mutated form of the old-time Calvinist doctrine.

“The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run,” thinks Ahab to himself in the “Sunset” chapter (143). That fixity of purpose would seem to mark Ahab as a counter-cosmopolitan thinker who is uninterested in points of view other than his own.

To pitch the novel’s central dilemma as simply a battle between cosmopolitanism and counter-cosmopolitanism, however, would be too easy and insufficiently Melvillean. What Melville’s novel dramatizes is the difficulty of achieving a truly cosmopolitan culture, by presenting Ahab as a failed cosmopolitan thinker. This perspective gives us one way

of accounting for the many parallels between Ahab and Ishmael. Commentators have long remarked that there are significant similarities between Ishmael and Ahab, both of whom see the world as a system of signs and portents to be deciphered. Both of them can be seen as inheritors of the haunted Calvinist imagination.

Both of them, however, are also marked by cosmopolitan experience. Ishmael, as we've seen is "tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote," and he "love[s] to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts." Ask a casual reader of the novel, however, which character is most often linked to the idea of "torment" and you'd no doubt hear "Ahab." Moreover, Ahab's experience with the remote, forbidden, and barbarous surely outstrips Ishmael's: "Mark ye, be forewarned," Peleg tells Ishmael: "Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales" (78).

On one of those forbidden shores, Ahab discovered Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion that Ishmael describes as fire worship: not only is his personal harpooneer the Parsee Fedallah, but Ahab also reveals in the late chapter called "The Candles" that once "on these seas" he "as Persian once did worship" the "clear spirit of fire" (382).

It isn't clear where Melville discovered Zoroastrianism, but as Millicent Bell has demonstrated, it is likely that much of his depiction of the religion in the novel comes from his reading of an English translation of the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* written by French Enlightenment *philosophe* Pierre Bayle. Melville had purchased the translation early in 1849, and he wrote to his friend Evert Duyckinck: "I bought a set of Bayle's Dictionary the other day, & on my return to New York I intend to lay the great old folios side by side & go to sleep on them thro' the summer" (Bell 626). The literary scholar Millicent Bell has argued that "in the learned pondering of the first of the *philosophes*, Melville must have discovered a state of mind remarkably like his own. Here was another who asked of the systematic philosophies of his times the unanswerable: 'Why hath God wrought evil in the world?'" (627). The essays in Bayle's *Dictionary* are marked by an abiding interest in the kind of dualism present in Zoroastrianism and later on in the thought of the Manicheans, a dualism that, as Bell puts it, "admitted the dynamic power of the force of

evil.”

Many scholars now argue that Zoroastrianism is the earliest of the revealed religions, predating Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and influencing all of them. Zoroastrianism evolved from fire worship. “Zarathustra addressed a nation who venerated fire and worshipped the ancestral deities of the Indo-Europeans,” writes Paul Kriwaczek in his book *In Search of Zarathustra*. “He proclaimed that there is only one true God, Ahura Mazda, and he identified the source of all evil in the world as the Lie (*Druj*)—later to be personified as Angra Mainyu or Ahriman” (213). Although Zarathustra “did not preach the adoration of fire” (Kriwaczek 213), in Melville’s time the Zoroastrians were known as fire worshippers, because the priests who institutionalized the religion after Zarathushtra’s time reverted to some of the earlier ways in order to attract adherents.

But Ahab discovers what later scholars would argue: that Zoroastrianism and Christianity are part of the same broad tradition of religious thought. Spurned by the Christian God, Ahab is also spurned by the clear spirit of fire: “Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance” (382). Interestingly, although the fact that Ahab has a peg-leg is for many readers the most important physical fact about Ahab, it is in fact that scar mentioned her to which Ishmael’s attention is drawn the first time he sees Ahab. And now, late in the novel, its source is revealed, as if Ahab’s former Persian rites are somehow crucial to his character. And where the cosmopolite philosopher whom Ishmael invokes pursues peace and mutual cooperation, Ahab pursues its opposite: revenge and mutual destruction.

Ahab’s cosmopolitanism takes him to Persia and back, but ultimately reverts to the fundamentalism from which he began. By the novel’s end, he has collapsed Christianity and Zoroastrianism, eradicating the differences between them. Ironically, Ishmael’s cosmopolitanism is rooted in the insular isle of the Manhattoes, but it proves to be anything but insular. Ahab’s attempt at cosmopolitan thought fails because it is ultimately rooted in the self, whereas in Ishmael we find a viable cosmopolitanism defined through its interactions with others—with other

characters in the narrative, like Queequeg, and ultimately with the novel's reader.

I was pleased to discover recently that the scholar Aristide Zolberg, who is not from my discipline but is rather a political scientist, wraps up his study *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (2006) with a discussion of what he calls "The Melville Principle." Zolberg makes a case "for restraining the power to exclude, grounded in the necessity for liberalism to adapt to globalization by developing a more 'cosmopolitan' orientation" (p. 454). He then argues that

the gist of a more radical argument on behalf of open borders was set forth a century and a half ago by Herman Melville, when the Great Hunger drove hundreds of thousands of destitute Irish out of their country, prompting the emergence of a wave of xenophobia on the American side and a spate of proposals for restricting immigration. As against this, Melville, who had recently served as a sailor on an immigrant ship, urged that the door be kept open. (455)

The "Melville principle" is expressed by a quote from the novel *Redburn*, published the year that Melville began to write *Moby-Dick*:

Let us waive that agitated national topic, as to whether such multitudes of foreign poor should be landed on our American shores; let us waive it, with the one only thought that if they can get here, they have God's right to come; though they bring all Ireland and her miseries with them. For the whole world is the patrimony of the whole world; there is no telling who does not own a stone in the Great Wall of China. (Zolberg 455).

Zolberg does suggest that Melville's "generous stance was predicated on the knowledge that Ireland contained but some 6.5 million people, and that there were just so many sailing ships available at any given time to bring

the Irish to the United States” (456). Zolberg argues that the realities of the modern world have rendered that kind of calculation obsolete. Unlimited immigration is simply not an option for wealthy nations, which would quickly sink to the level of poorer nations if they were overwhelmed by immigrants.

And yet, the Melville principle remains a principle worth adapting and promoting. For, as Zolberg concludes, “immigrants who feel welcome rarely set out to destroy their new home” (459). Being able to welcome immigrants requires the native to regard difference as an opportunity rather than a problem: it requires a cosmopolitan perspective. It is this perspective that *Moby-Dick* dramatizes for us in all of its complexity.

Moby-Dick bears out Appiah’s belief that cosmopolitanism is both “an adventure and ideal” (*Cosmopolitanism*, xx). Ishmael’s adventure on the high seas with Captain Ahab vividly dramatizes the obstacles to cosmopolitanism—and the terrible cost of failing to achieve cosmopolitan ideals. And that makes it emergent in 1851—and today.

I want finally to suggest to you that one of the things that *Moby-Dick* shares with all great literature is precisely its ability to enable its readers to experience difference. The promise of literature is that it takes us out of our own subjectivities and into the subjectivity of another; or, perhaps more precisely in the case of a novel, it leads the reader to open his or her consciousness to the consciousness of another. We experience different ways of thinking, through literature different ways of being in the world than those we are used to. Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael the narrator is asking to engage in little thought experiments: what would it mean, he asks at one point, to think of Queequeg to be a cannibal version of George Washington? What would it mean if Queequeg—the very embodiment of otherness in the novel—were more like one of America’s great heroes than most Americans?

Moby-Dick is full of such moments, but I want to suggest that every great novel, every great work of literature, asks us to participate in something like a thought experiment. In a variety of ways, sometimes through style or form, sometimes through subject, literary texts can bring us face-to-face with difference and then even closer—perhaps we might say, mind-to-mind. They ask us to think, “What if?” to engage in thought experiments in which we experience difference. And that, I want to

suggest, is how great literary texts promote a cosmopolitan perspective. The promise of literature is the promise of cosmopolitanism.

Notes

1. The concept of the “horizon of expectations” was first theorized by Hans Robert Jauss in “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory.”

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