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Brian R. Pellar

*Moby-Dick*  
and Melville's  
Anti-Slavery Allegory

Foreword by J. Hillis Miller

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Brian R. Pellar  
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## FOREWORD BY J. HILLIS MILLER

Brian Pellar's *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* is by far the most complete, learned, and compelling reading of Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Pellar makes this reading from the perspective of a demonstration that this novel is what Melville called an "allegory" of the evils of slavery at the particular moment (1851) of the Fugitive Slave Laws. Those laws required all Northerners to return escaped slaves to their "owners" in the South.

A number of other scholars over the years have connected *Moby-Dick* with Melville's strongly held abolitionist views. Pellar's *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* is, among other things, an authoritative and comprehensive account of previous scholarship about this topic. Nevertheless, *Moby-Dick* is still not read or taught primarily with its secret allegory in mind. The publication of *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* will make it difficult for readers and teachers who "dive deep" into *Moby-Dick* any longer to ignore that allegory.

Pellar's methodology of interpretation is to focus in a given chapter on one or another episode in *Moby-Dick*; for example, the Spouter Inn chapter, or even to zero in on a separate word or phrase that recurs in the novel. That includes Melville's specific use of the word "allegory." Pellar then shows in each case how the detail in question links up with a wide and extremely complex system of other words or allusions. Examples are references to the *Book of Jonah* in the Old Testament, or to St. Paul's conversion in *Acts*, or to Hobbes' *Leviathan*, or, especially and in much helpful detail, to the arguments for and against slavery and the Fugitive Slave Laws in speeches (Garrison et al.) and in the media at the time Melville was writing *Moby-Dick*. Pellar seems to know the novel by heart,

as well as Melville's letters (especially to Hawthorne) and his other writings. The result is an extremely powerful and comprehensive reading of *Moby-Dick*. That reading is focused, in chapter after chapter, not on abstract themes but on the multiple meanings of words or phrases that have both a literal meaning (details of Ahab's hunt for the white whale) and an allegorical meaning (Melville's covert insertion in his novel of a dramatized polemic against slavery and in particular, against the outrage of those Fugitive Slave Laws).

Pellar's *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* is an extremely important book. All those who want to understand *Moby-Dick*, as well as those who wish to understand the history of slavery in the United States or its post-abolition history should read it. The legacy of slavery continues to this day. A recent brief and compelling essay in *The Nation* by Patricia J. Williams ("The Rituals of Racial Killing") reports that "The front page of *The New York Times*' April 21, 2015, edition featured a story estimating that approximately 1.5 million black men are absent from daily life in the United States, mostly through incarceration or early death."<sup>1</sup> To a considerable degree we have in the United States these days substituted prisons and police brutality for plantations.

*Moby Dick* and Brian Pellar's allegorical reading of it in *Moby-Dick and Melville's Anti-slavery Allegory* are not just matters of literary history. They are urgent reading for today.

## PREFACE

In 1991, while doing research for a literary project, I read *Moby-Dick* for the first time. I had seen the Houston film several times on TV while growing up as a boy in Massachusetts, each view being just as exciting as the last. I remember being absolutely fascinated by the movie, particularly with the white whale itself. My interest in that film, along with Star Trek and all the other sea story/adventure films and books, undoubtedly had a major influence in my decision to join the Navy and see the world. I soon dropped out of high school at 17 and enlisted in the US Navy. I then spent two years aboard the aircraft carrier the USS Midway (CV-41), where I was awarded a high school diploma at sea in the ship's fo'c's'le, and took my first college class, "Oceanography," as I crossed over the Equator. After serving aboard the USS Midway, I then spent a year and half on the remote Pacific Island of Guam.

Coming back to *Moby-Dick* with a different perspective in 1991, one tempered by both the sea itself and my subsequent university experience, I dove into the actual words of Melville anew. But as I read along, completely engrossed by the brilliance of the writing and the splendor of an ocean and shipboard imagery awash in the memory of my own experience, the term "black blood" unexpectedly sprang up at me from the page and dramatically altered the course of my life. At that crucial moment, when Ahab vented his need to drive his harpoon deep into the heart of Moby Dick, I felt instinctively that those two words seemed more than just a descriptive or symbolic "moral" term that Ahab was projecting in his immense hatred and need for revenge. Instead, what became instantly apparent was the strong covertly racial dimension that he seemed to have

imparted to the image – that is, an albino whale that should be as black as the other black whales being hunted. And then remembering that Ishmael had compared the “gloom toward the north with the darkness toward the south” in the “middle” of the street, I realized that I might have discovered something quite interesting – particularly in light of Melville having written the book at the time of slavery, a divided nation, and the Fugitive Slave Laws.

Excited by my findings and not wanting to be influenced by what others thought, I wrote in a vacuum, staying away from all critical approaches to the book. After exploring these ideas on my own, I then went to the stacks and found that Weathers (1960), Foster (1961), and Heimert (1963) had also come to the same conclusion that slavery and the Compromise of 1850 were reflected within *Moby-Dick*.<sup>2</sup> However, they had mostly focused on Ahab as personifying, in order, Garrison, Daniel Webster, and Calhoun, and did not go too much further than this. Heimert, however, recognized the “Ship of State” motif and many other important details concerning Melville’s attitude toward slavery.

In addition, I also later discovered Sidney Kaplan’s (1968) essay, “Towards Pip and Dagoo: Footnote on Melville’s Youth,” as well as his (1953) essay, “Lewis Temple and the Hunting of the Whale.” I also found Karcher’s wonderful (1980) *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America*, which strongly evidences “that slavery and race are crucial themes and that concentrating on them not only takes us to the heart of the text, but radically transforms our perceptions of its total meaning.” I also discovered Morrison’s (1989) essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Berthold’s (1994) essay, “*Moby-Dick* and American Slave Narrative,” Otter’s (1999) *Melville’s Anatomies*, Delbanco’s (2005) *Melville: His World and Work*, and several excellent essays on Melville and race by Bradley (1997), Levine (1999), Burns (2006), Fanning (2006), Oshima (2006), and Rampersad (1994). All of these explore aspects of Melville’s attitudes toward race, and in some, attempt to expand on the anti-slavery themes of Weathers, Foster, and Heimert. All of these and others explore Melville and race/slavery, and, indeed, compliment and provide a foundation for my own work (particularly Rogin’s and Karcher’s books, which are solid in their approach to Melville’s attitude toward slavery and the threat it posed to the Ship of State). However, none of them identified Melville’s allegory of man as whale and the Pequod as Ship of State engaged in a slave hunt, an allegory in which I found myself in completely uncharted waters.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, I discovered a paper by Sidney Kaplan (1951) that discussed an 1852 boat named the *Moby Dick* that was involved in the Underground Railroad. It was this paper and a subsequent follow-up paper by Sandra Petrulionis (2002) that provided some additional links between *Moby Dick* the boat, *Moby-Dick* the novel, and the capture and freeing of fugitive slaves, and thus I added an extra chapter detailing these vital connections.

Soon after reading Petrulionis, I discovered Wallace's (2005) very penetrating "*Douglas and Melville: Anchored Together in Neighborly Style*." In addition to showing the parallel lives of these two great men and how they might have influenced one another, Wallace gives credible evidence of, and shows keen insight into, the anti-slavery subtext of Melville's work. To my surprise, I found that Wallace also mentions the schooner *Moby Dick*, though only briefly.

In 2007, I finished writing the book; however, several incidents occurred (including a very serious illness) that caused me to set it aside. It was only recently, with the encouragement of Professor Victor Mair (who had asked to read my manuscript) that I returned to update it with current scholarship. With renewed interest, I went back to the stacks and found to my delight that a lot has been written recently about the connection between Melville and his anti-slavery sentiments. The journal *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* published an interesting paper by Fruscione (2008) called "What Is Called Savagery: Race, Visual Perception, and Bodily Contact in *Moby-Dick*." *Leviathan* also published a series of papers that addressed Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville, which led me to Levine and Otter's (2008) *Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, a book that contains several papers that further explore Melville's attitudes of race and his anti-slavery stance. A paper by Gleason (2008) entitled, "Volcanoes and Meteors: Douglass, Melville, and the Poetics of Insurrection," demonstrates a strong connection between the metaphors of volcanism/fire and the institution of slavery, which strongly confirms my earlier findings and overall thesis, particularly as it relates to my understanding of Melville's self-professed claim in *Moby-Dick* of the "hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled" in (June 29, 1851 letter to Hawthorne).

Other papers/books that I just recently found that corroborated Melville's anti-slavery stance included Kopacz's (2011) "*Cultural Sweat: Melville, Labor, and Slavery*," Stuckey's (2009) *African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick*,

Decker's (2009) "'Who Ain't a Slave?': *Moby-Dick* and the Slave Narrative Tradition," Taylor's (2011) "*Limbs of Empire: Ahab, Santa Ana, and Moby-Dick*," and Schuller's (2010) wonderful "*Specious Bedfellows: Ethnicity, Animality, and the Intimacy of Slaughter in Moby-Dick*," which explores Melville's appropriation of cetacean intellectual and emotional capability in *Moby-Dick* – an appropriation that I feel gets to the "heart" (to borrow appropriately from Karcher) of the book: the symbolic connection in *Moby-Dick* between black whales and black men. Other excellent and more recent books/essays that deal with Melville and slavery/race include Christopher Freeburg's (2012) *Melville and the Idea of Blackness: Race and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century America*, John Bryant's (2014) "How Billy Budd Grew Black and Beautiful: Versions of Melville in the Digital Age," Homer B. Pettey's (2003) "Cannibalism, Slavery, and Self-Consumption in *Moby-Dick*", Erin Pearson's 2014 UC Irvine dissertation, *Savage Hunger: Cannibalism and the Discourse on Slavery in the United States and Caribbean*, Brian Yother's (2015) "Melville's Reconstruction: 'The Swamp Angel,' 'Formerly a Slave,' and the Moorish Maid in 'Lee in the Capital,'" and Tom Nurmi's (2015) "Shadows in the Shenandoah: Melville, Slavery, and the Elegiac Landscape."

Lastly, and serendipitously, I recently chanced upon Bernard's (2002) essay "The Question of Race in *Moby-Dick*" (in a footnote to Fruscione's [2008] "What Is Called Savagery: Race, Visual Perception, and Bodily Contact in *Moby-Dick*"). Bernard also noticed a connection between black whales and black slaves. Though he couldn't go into very much depth in his 20-page paper, I feel that his keen insights into Melville's book helps confirm my own independent and earlier findings on the book's hidden allegory and helps to establish a strong anti-slavery theme that I feel is woven into *Moby-Dick*.

To return to that initial link that I had made between *Moby-Dick* and the allegory of the fugitive slave hunt many years ago, the more I thought about it and read the novel, the more this seemed to make both intuitive and empirical sense. I spent a considerable amount of time in 1991–1992 exploring and evidencing this anti-slavery allegory in my journals, and then a couple of years later while getting an MFA in English at UC Irvine. After reading my work, distinguished Professor J. Hillis Miller encouraged me to dive a bit deeper into this issue and publish my findings. This essay is the fruit of that labor. May it prove to be as exciting and enjoyable to you as it has been for me.

## NOTES

1. *The Nation* (May 18, 2015), p. 11.
2. In citing other scholar's findings, I use the term "also" to denote material that I had found independently.
3. Bradley and Wallace came close, though, as will be noted later.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank Chief Hunt, my former chief from the USS Midway, CV-41, for letting me know, in that distinctive naval vernacular, that when tackling any kind of writing assignment, it's more noble to plow your own sea-lane. I am also grateful to the crew's library onboard the USS Midway – a small secluded island unto itself, that nourished the mind and soul amidst the hustle and bustle of swarming men and machines in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

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