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Multum in parvo: Moby-Dick, the Swiss Army Knife, and the Poetics of Infinity

John G. Blair

“It is hard to be finite upon an infinite subject, and all subjects are infinite.”¹

Since my title has elicited skepticism among those who doubt that the Swiss Army Knife is mentioned in *Moby-Dick*, let me begin by acknowledging that I rely on the spirit of the text more than the letter. Literally, the epitome of knifeliness evoked therein by Melville came from Sheffield, but no reader of our time is likely to miss the aptness with which its 20th-century avatar from Switzerland is evoked in the process of characterizing the carpenter:

He was like one of those unreasoning but still highly useful, *multum in parvo*, Sheffield contrivances, assuming the exterior – though a little swelled – of a common pocket knife; but containing, not only blades of various sizes, but also screw-drivers, cork-screws, tweezers, awls, pens, rulers, nail-filers, countersinkers (Chapter 107, 388–9).

There are those who feel that *Moby-Dick*, in its literary kind, is also “a little swelled,” but the scale of the work becomes relevant here in the context of structure, the compact concatenation of tools shared by the Swiss Army Knife and *Moby-Dick* as a text.²

¹ “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850), as reprinted in *Moby-Dick* ed. Harrison Hayford & Hershel Parker (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1967), 551. This source provides all quotations from *Moby-Dick*, identified by chapter and page number within my text.

² Northrop Frye rightly identifies the relevant genre of *Moby-Dick* as, like *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* or *Tristram Shandy*, an anatomy, a form which almost inevitably follows the structure of openended sequence: 1, 2, 3 ... n. See *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 313. See also the extension of the concept in A. Robert Lee, “*Moby-Dick* as Anatomy,” in *Herman Melvil-*

The Swiss Army Knife as a structure incorporates a certain arbitrariness of scale: the officer's model has more blades and implements than the foot soldier's model, yet obviously both share the same basic structure. The structure of *Moby-Dick* has proved more elusive, though widely probed in search of an explanation for the peculiarities of a work which has never fitted very comfortably into standard categories, no matter what literary fashions have been in style.³ Investigating the ways in which the Swiss Army knife can be understood as a model for the fictional text will inevitably question the rationale for the length of *Moby-Dick*, which has exercised so many readers from would-be abridgers to faithful apologists.

Another issue at stake concerns the kind of glue that holds together the multiform parts of this text, hence a search for a coherent explanation of why in a work ostensibly dedicated to the search for "veritable gospel cetology" so much of what is said constitutes mere "higgeldy-piggeldy whale statement" (Extracts, 2). The Extracts and the Etymology, in this context, may prove proleptic simulacra of an interminably opened structure, in which case *Moby-Dick* will appear as unconcludable. Certain critics are indeed conscious of the "howling infinite" that Melville opens up for contemplation. For example, Morton L. Ross in a widely praised article rightly calls attention to some of Melville's favorite diction as negative and infinity-bound: "nameless," "measureless," "ungraspable," "boundless," "unfathomable," "illimitable," "resistless," and so on. To Ross "These terms hint at the outer limits of the chaos which Ishmael otherwise seeks to constitute, classify, and delimit."⁴ The problem with Ross's way of putting it is that negative diction pointing toward infinity can never even suggest a credible outer

le: Reassessments, ed. A. Robert Lee (London & New York: Vision/Barnes & Noble, 1984), 68-89.

³ So many critics have commented on the structure of this fiction that to list them would seem prohibitive. The tendency in recent years has been to distinguish sharply between Ahab's presence and Ishmael's. For example, John Seelye writes: "Ahab's quest is associated with the kinetic, linear element of the story - the onrushing narrative. The cetology chapters, with their relatively static, discursive movements, act to block and impede the forward movement of the narrative, much as the ideas which they contain qualify Ahab's absolutism." *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 63. My interpretation presumes the same distinction but reverses the weighting. Instead of privileging the narrative, I see Ishmael-narrator as centrally committed to an interminable cetology, an infinite regress from which narrative in the form of the Ahab-Pequod story saves him and his book.

⁴ "Moby-Dick as an Education," *Studies in the Novel*, 6 (1974), 70.

limit, despite Ishmael's heroic efforts. When he apotheosizes Bulkington for his dedication to landlessness, "the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God" (Chapter 23, 97), we have to take him at his words because nowhere in the text does he locate any thematic limit which might shelter humanity from the terrors of the unlimitable infinite. Even Ishmael's sometime conversion to "the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" in "A Squeeze of the Hand" (Chapter 94, 349) is belied by the evidence for his having returned to whaling yet again after his Pequod experience as we shall see shortly.

That infinity was on Melville's mind at the time of writing is clear from the epigraph to this study, which is drawn from his essay in praise of Hawthorne written in the summer of 1850 as the work on *Moby-Dick* gathered momentum. In the original context Melville is drawing the essay to a close rather playfully by implying that he can never say enough in praise of his as-yet-unmet friend-to-be. But that very same problem turns out to be crucial in the construction of the book subtitled "The Whale." How could a writer ever create a book that was appropriate to the scale of such a subject? How could he "get it all in?" Indeed Ishmael-narrator's overall aim is explicitly to make a book "up to" the whale, though this project by its very conception may prove impossible.

From his mighty bulk the whale affords a most congenial theme whereon to enlarge, amplify, and generally expatiate. . . . Since I have undertaken to manhandle this Leviathan, it behooves me to approve myself omnisciently exhaustive in the enterprise; . . . How, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk (Chapter 104, 378-9).

Here our cheerfully punning writer-narrator is exercising a habitual self-mockery of his enterprise, but the operative word is ALL. Any book written to whale scale would be unprintable, unbindable, unreadable, and, of course, unsaleable. A whale-book spelled out in the placard capitals school teachers used in the early 19th century to parade their pupils through spelling bees would stretch from New England to the other side of the world and perhaps beyond.⁵ Taken literally, the ALL-

⁵ A set of placard capitals that illustrates the proper chirography for a whale of a

project is palpably impossible, a subject not to be spoken of without a jocularity appropriate to assuring that both writer and reader acknowledge how preposterous the idea is.⁶ Taken literarily, however, the ALL-project may not seem simply foolish since literature has means to transcend the literal by way of the figurative. The project itself, in short, generates the need for figuration, itself compactly figured in the Swiss Army knife.

Multum in parvo, a phrase apparently invented in the 18th century as the motto of *The Gentleman's Magazine*⁷ and used in 19th-century advertisements for Sheffield knives, aptly echoes the paradoxical sleight of hand by which literature figuratively escapes its apparent limitations. In the present case the most obvious limit is the impossibility of pursuing and testing all knowledge about either *Moby Dick* or the whale in general. A second-level approach would appear more manageable. That project would involve trying out the explanatory power of the variety of tools wherewith human beings have sought to carve out useful knowledge, whether about whales or anything else. Tools for knowledge are clearly less numerous than facts and presumably more manageable within a textual structure. Blade after implement, then, the Swiss army knife epitomizes this intellectual-literary endeavor as focused through Ishmael-narrator.

If Ishmael mocks the ALL-project even in the act of stating it, he nonetheless goes to great lengths to test against the whale the viability of diverse philosophies, codes of knowledge, and approaches to making sense of phenomena. In every case the figurative tool, whatever its origins, is shown to be inadequate to describing, interpreting, or otherwise capturing the whale. Conceptually speaking, then, as of some point adding to the number of screw-drivers, tweezers or rulers available offers no further promise of success, given the large number of possibilities tested and found wanting.

The structure of such a project constitutes an openended sequence obedient to the formula 1, 2, 3 . . . n. Not only is there no inherent limit

book is preserved in the schoolhouse of Hancock Shaker Village, a few miles west of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, from the period when both Melville and Hawthorne visited the Shakers. Each capital letter takes a card roughly 20 cm by 30 cm.

⁶ This "godly gamesomeness" of Ishmael's acquires fresh resonance in Warwick Wadlington, *The Confidence Game in American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), esp. Chapter 3.

⁷ I am grateful to Peter de Bolla of the University of Geneva for this information, which improves on the OED.

in the amount of whalelore that might be considered, but there turns out to be no inherent limit to the number of cognitive strategies for knowledge about whalelore that might be tested. The ostensibly more limited project proves no easier to close: a smaller infinity remains nonetheless interminable. As we shall see in time, the length of the actual series will be determined by factors extrinsic to itself. For the moment it is essential to acknowledge now my own problems of exposition as a critic who would speak of such matters which is homologous to the difficulties facing Ishmael, who would try all the interpretive tools he can think of. In Ishmael's words: "It would be a hopeless, endless task to catalogue all these things. Let a handful suffice" (Chapter 24, 99). But how many instances suffice to make the point – either for Ishmael or myself?

My first instance is Chapter 99, "The Doubloon," since it offers a structural microcosm of the basic problem. A total of nine crewmembers respond to the doubloon and see themselves in it as surely as ever Narcissus confronted the forward projection of himself. Starting with the second interpreter, Ahab, the order or presentation follows roughly the hierarchy of authority on board with Pip coming last, but Ishmael-sailor comes first, defining the relevance both of his young-sailor self and his narrator's perspective.⁸ At first Ishmael speaks largely in the past tense, signaling that we are to take his discourse as describing the physical doubloon he saw as a young sailor; it is presumably an accurate portrayal of what would have been visible to any observer on board the Pequod. In his second paragraph, however, Ishmael without warning shifts to the present tense, signaling the synchronic unconfined time frame dominant in his narration: "And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth" (Chapter 99, 358). Granted the pun on "certain," Ishmael is here reaffirming his basic motivation for going a-whaling in the first place and its continued relevance to his present attempt to write his way into some way of understanding whales and such. All this chapter, and indeed the whole exercise, can offer is, in the words of Stubb, "another rendering now; but still one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see" (362). The parade of doubloon interpreters yields some insight into their personalities and outlooks, but none into the doubloon itself. In Pip's summation it boils down to a grammatical paradigm: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (362). In short neither narrator nor reader has made any progress in

⁸ John Seelye is simply wrong when he excludes Ishmael from the list of major characters who interpret the doubloon; Ishmael's description is intimately expressive of his habitual interpretive stance in relation to phenomena. See *Melville: The Ironic Diagram*, 67.

understanding the world, though the structural pattern of an opened sequence of alternatives has been exemplified in compact form: *multum in parvo*.

In terms of the figure of the Swiss Army Knife, a series of blades has been tried and found wanting. They just can't cut the mustard. Both narrator and reader are invited to feel that it would be pointless to extend the number of characters who join the parade. Simply adding another instance or two would offer no promise of progress in the desired direction. This same realization applies to a whole array of attempts to come to terms with the world which in an opened series structure the vast middle of *Moby-Dick*.

Ishmael-narrator tries and finds wanting all sorts of codes, philosophies, myths, epistemic strategies that human beings have developed for interpreting the significance "that lurks in all things." These are necessarily figurative in that they inevitably go beyond the literal. The most literal-minded and materialist interpreter of all, Flask, even makes a mistake in figuring out how many cigars the doubloon could buy (361), reminding us that such orders of reality as well are subject to interpretation, or in this case, miscalculation. Naturally Ishmael cannot test all possible interpretive schemes, but he must try out enough so that he himself and the reader can feel confident that there would be no point in continuing.

Ahab, of course, embodies the single most compelling worldview that surfaces in Ishmael's story so that Ahab's paranoid-heroic quest to locate the higher powers in or behind the white whale quite understandably dominated readings of *Moby-Dick* for a long time.⁹ But even his domineering personality encounters the catastrophic limit of what he can master. From the point of view of Ishmael-narrator his experience as a young sailor dragged along in Ahab's wake has not sufficed to drown his fascination with the "problem of the universe" (Chapter 35, 139). As Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., suggested two decades ago, he apparently returned to whaling again even before the renewal of his experience represented by the act of writing.¹⁰ In addition to these further experiences at sea, he has had time to accumulate a great deal of reading about whales in particular and the universe in general so that as narrator-author he is

⁹ More recently, say for twenty years or so, interpreters have emphasized the role of Ishmael-narrator as the locus of formal coherence. See, for example, Edgar Dryden, *Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), esp. Chapter III.

¹⁰ See *Ishmael's White World: A Phenomenological Reading of Moby-Dick* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1965), esp. 102-3.

prepared to try out a much wider range of interpretive tools than his younger sailor self could possibly have conceived or tested himself. These are richly constitutive of the so-called cetological chapters of *Moby-Dick*; in them the blades and augers and measuring sticks of the mind are tried and, each in turn, found inadequate to the task.

Though an exhaustive list may remain beyond reach, I can at least exemplify the limitations Ishmael-narrator finds in the tools he tests. With an Ishmaelian sense of the arbitrary ordering of any such endeavor,¹¹ one might as well begin with a visual representation, whose inescapable limitation is stated explicitly after several chapters evaluating existing portraits of whales:

Any way you look at it, you must needs conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like (Chapter 55, 228).

Alternative approaches to the whale remain open, of course, including direct experiential engagement as in Ahab's hunt, but such persistent attempts to stick it to the whale come to ends which are profoundly unsatisfactory.

A second avenue to knowledge that Ishmael tests was prestigious in his day as well as ours: science. In particular the chapter entitled "Cetology," sometimes maligned as supererogatory, plays a key role in evaluating the biological taxonomies which occupied so much scientific attention in the 18th and 19th centuries. Ishmael's critique in effect asserts the fruitlessness of the whole endeavor:

It is some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera, that I would now fain put before you. Yet it is no easy task. The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed. . . . Nevertheless, though of real knowledge there be little, yet of books there is a plenty. . . . It is by endless subdivisions based on the most inconclusive difference that some departments of natural history become so repellingly intricate (Chapter 32, 117, 118, 121).

Unexpectedly, these once musty issues are still alive today. The 1980s have seen revisionist biologists (the "cladists") complain that the established taxonomic categories are unconvincing because they fail to define precisely and identify consistently the characteristics which are theoretic-

¹¹ Ishmael's sense of arbitrary order in his presentation surface in asides such as "this seems as good a place as any" (Chapter 33, 128).

cally the basis of the classifications.¹² These are precisely the grounds on which Ishmael refuses confidence in science and decides that he might as well rely on the homely wisdom of his fellow Nantucket whalers, who observe that the whale is a spouting fish with a horizontal tail. Ishmael's ultimate judgment on science, "Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable" (Chapter 79, 292), is as *au courant* as contemporary scepticism about the scientific objectivity.¹³

After Ishmael's strenuous testing shows up the limitations in these two tools for human understanding, a third trial directly engages word-mongering, which is endemic to literature: the attempt to make sense of the stuff of the world by a careful use of words and the distinctions they generate. Ishmael's attempt to define the character of the whale's spout serves as a crux:

But why pester one with all this reasoning on the subject? Speak Out! You have seen him spout; then declare what the spout is; can you not tell water from air? My dear sir, in this world it is not so easy to settle these plain things (Chapter 85, 312).

In short the grounding of words in relation to things is itself so problematic that any conclusion based on such distinctions is necessarily suspect. Small wonder that our punster-narrator leaves the issue in mistiness: "Still, we can hypothesize, even if we cannot prove and establish. My hypothesis is this: that the spout is nothing but mist." (313).

Another source of understanding dear to literature gets its comeuppance in Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," when symbolism turns out to offer only ambiguity and unresolved questions:

Is it by its indefiniteness it [whiteness] shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? . . . And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt? (Chapter 42, 169–170)

The opened series of rhetorical questions itself echoes the inconclusiveness of symbolism as cognition.

¹² See, for example, Tom Bethell, "Agnostic Evolutionists: The Taxonomic Case Against Darwin," *Harper's*, Vol 270, No 1617 (February, 1985), 49–61.

¹³ The seminal text here is Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

The formula which controls the structure of my discourse as well as the vast center of *Moby-Dick* (and my Swiss Army Knife) is 1, 2, 3 . . . n. A large and undeterminable number of further instances might be examined under "n." The "cetological center," whose testing procedures dominate the text from Chapter 23 through Chapter 106, is spacious and rich in examples. Like Melville I feel uncertain of just how many instances will suffice to communicate my point. Also like him I worry that my reader might feel that I have cut short the presentation for lack of examples. Nonetheless space and the editor's patience are short so I proceed more summarily.

Law as an instrument of truth and justice is tested in terms of a whaler's distinction between free-floating whale carcasses which are marked for ownership and those which are not:

These two laws touching Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish, I say, will, on reflection, be found the fundamentals of all human jurisprudence; for notwithstanding its complicated tracery of sculpture, the Temple of the Law, like the Temple of the Philistines, has but two props to stand on (Chapter 89, 33-34).

After the ominous allusion to the Temple of the Philistines which Samson brought down, Ishmael proceeds to list historical examples which demonstrate again and again that law boils down to power games of possession or non-possession.

Exegesis of texts is a venerable intellectual strategy useful over the centuries to sustain favored interpretations of honored texts so Ishmael understandably weighs its worth:

Another reason which Sag Harbor (he went by that name) urged for his want of faith in this matter of the prophet [Jonah], was something obscurely in reference to his incarcerated body and the whale's gastric juices. But this objection likewise falls to the ground, because a German exegeticist supposes that Jonah must have taken refuge in the floating body of a *dead* whale (Chapter 83, 307, Melville's emphasis)

In short if a single argument from a single "authority" can produce a nonsensical reading which would be incompatible with other aspects of the larger Jonah story, then it is far from constituting a reliable source of knowledge. Ishmael implies that all too many interpretive endeavors proceed self-cancellingly by means of "the best of contradictory authorities" (Chapter 82, 306).

Should my listing of instances go on? I could cite the futility of scholastic reasoning in Chapter 83, "Jonah Historically Regarded," or the mocking of traditional orthodoxies in Chapter 69, "The Funeral," or the absurdity of quantification, which yields numbers so meaningless

that they ultimately boil down to "simple child's play" in Chapter 103, "Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton." Once again, "it would be a hopeless, endless task to catalogue all these things" so a handful must suffice.

Ishmael similarly tests and finds wanting madness, statistics, allegory, metaphor, religious enthusiasm, history, prophecy and so on. Sooner or later both he and we must acknowledge that even the most persistent attempts to find trustworthy access to the reality of the whale must be abandoned as hopeless. At that point his examples must seem to have excluded no promising possibility and to have ranged so widely that no further instance holds out promise of more favorable results. Like my own listing of examples, his goes on till he anticipates that all parties are convinced that going further would add nothing significant.

The order in which Ishmael presents these instances is less important than the range he covers. Ishmael orders us to "look at this matter in other lights; weigh it in *all* sorts of scales" (Chapter 24, 99, my italics). He lets us learn through his example how our readings cannot expect verification no matter how far the opened sequence of possible epistemic strategies is extended. When that realization finally seems inescapable, there is no way out except to return to "what there may be of a narrative in this book" (Chapter 45, 175). That is, once there is no point in pursuing any more tools for knowledge, the Ahab story itself serves as a means for Ishmael-narrator to escape from infinite regress. That story line does go somewhere: to its catastrophic end. Then the book can end because narrative has provided a refuge from interminability.

Even so, Ishmael's quest and its implications continue without inherent limit beyond the confines of the text. He ends the Epilogue with the final reiterated metaphor of circular movement which, if it keeps him alive, gets him nowhere. It issues into yet another all-embracing perspective: all human hearts, at one time or another, will feel the pull of this chase for the phantom significance (Chapter 52, 204). There is no predicting from *Moby-Dick* when Melville would become convinced that there was nothing to gain by turning more stones, by testing yet another approach to the world, searching for a more effective Swiss Army Knife.¹⁴

The impact of this reading of *Moby-Dick* is to reformulate the terms in which we conceive structure as a Melvillean strategy. The length of

¹⁴ In fact that point was reached six years later at the point of a nervous breakdown with the last fiction Melville was to complete during his lifetime. See John G. Blair, *The Confidence Man in Modern Fiction* (London: Vision Press, 1979).

the work reflects the extraordinary lengths to which Ishmael-narrator is willing to go to test a dazzling variety of possible approaches to the whale and to knowledge in general. As far as I know, no one has yet, in print or in person, suggested that the text is too short. Until someone comes forward to defend seriously such a proposition, I must conclude that Melville succeeded remarkably well since no one seems to disagree with the implicit judgment that nothing would be gained from a prolongation.¹⁵ This mastertext, then, ultimately depends on the paradoxical magic of figuration: though *multum* may be written *in parvo*, as *Moby-Dick* demonstrates again and again, yet no matter how extensive the work, it seems paltry in facing up to the realities it tries to figure out.

¹⁵ I have devised a short test whereby any reader can evaluate this proposition. Imagine that you are Herman Melville who has just finished *Moby-Dick* when the mail brings in a magazine which announces new facts: in the Himalayas fossil whales have been discovered which show that 50 000 000 years ago whales were leaving land life to become sea creatures (actually reported in *Science* in early 1983). Should you hold up the manuscript already overdue at the publisher's? Adding one more whale fact would change nothing unless it led you to modify the categories of your understanding of whales. In Piaget's cognitive terms "assimilation" of the new fact to established categories would not modify understanding and at some point no further "accommodation" of categories to facts would seem necessary. For a discussion in depth of these terms as applied to literature, see Marie Christine de Montauzon, "William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Interpretability: The Inexplicable Unseen" (doctoral diss. University of Geneva, publ. Bern: Peter Lang, 1986).

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The Carpenter: "He was like one of those unreasoning but still highly useful, *multum in parvo*, Sheffield contrivances, assuming the exterior – though a little swelled – of a common pocket knife; but containing, not only blades of various sizes, but also screw-drivers, cork-screws, tweezers, awls, pens, rulers, nail-filers, countersinkers." – Chapter 107, "The Carpenter," *Moby-Dick* (1851)