# Windmills, Whales, and Democracy's Mad Enchanters

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# Windmills, Whales, and Democracy's Mad Enchanters

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Abstract: Melville's debts to Cervantes have received scant attention, but *Moby-Dick* bears the deep imprint of *Don Quixote*. In particular, Cervantes helped Melville clarify a problem he sensed in democracy and modernity: pervasive feelings of loneliness, aimlessness, and prosaicness leave individuals susceptible to madmen who promise to reenchant life with the regal fullness of fiction. While *Don Quixote* celebrates the comic possibilities of this hunger for fictionality, *Moby-Dick* highlights its tragic potential for disaster.

> If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces . . . Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God! . . . Thou who didst clothe with doubly hammered leaves of finest gold, the stumped and paupered arm of old Cervantes . . . Thou who, in all Thy mighty, earthly marchings, ever cullest Thy selectest champions from the kingly commons.
>
> Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851)

Melville's debts to Shakespeare and Milton have been amply tallied.[1] By comparison, strikingly few have considered why the narrator of *The Confidence-Man* ranks Don Quixote with Hamlet and Satan as literature's three most original characters, nor why Ishmael prays to the "great democratic God" of Cervantes as the muse of *Moby-Dick*.[2]

The novel is far more quixotic than critics have realized in its attention to the ambiguous power of madness and enchantment within democracies.[3] With Cervantes in his libraries, Melville dramatized a tension that still strains the present. First, *Moby-Dick* suggests with *Don Quixote* that democracy is noble precisely because it's a bit mad, challenging inhumane realities with unrealized fantasies of human dignity. In the same breath, both novels suggest that these very dreams can raze as much as raise a democracy, smoldering with demagogic potential in the hands of charismatic madmen.[4]

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## Ishmael's Prayer

Ishmael's prayer is modelled upon Tristram Shandy's: "Gentle Spirit of sweetest humour, who erst did sit upon the easy pen of my beloved Cervantes . . . and turned'st the twilight of his prison into noon-day brighteness" (noted in Mansfield and Vincent 665). Shandy refers to Cervantes' five years as a prisoner of war where he imagined the idea of *Don Quixote*. Ishmael adds John Bunyan and Andrew Jackson to his prayer to make this point more explicit: Bunyan, Cervantes, and Jackson were all humbly born soldiers and prisoners of war; all three used these experiences to craft narratives about charismatic everymen battling evil (in Jackson's case, the hero was himself); and ultimately, all three used these narratives to rise above their imprisonment and their humble origins. This is the obvious surface meaning of Ishmael's prayer: he calls upon a democratic God who liberates and exalts commoners through the powers of their own imagination. Ishmael intends to do the same for "meanest mariners."

The democratic power of the imagination has long been celebrated as the core of *Don Quixote*. In the old bachelor's fantasy of knighthood, "the values of democratic life acquire the resonance of nobility" (Fuentes 67): Quixote imagines prostitutes as princesses, slaves as freemen, peasants as governors, and lovers as equals, no matter their class differences, gathering all into what Ishmael calls a "kingly commons." Above all, *Don Quixote* exemplifies the democratic ideal that life is an imaginative "process of self-making" (Schmidt 31) as a middling hidalgo lifts modernity to the grandeur of epic and romance.[5] Before Ishmael's prayer, Melville does something similar for readers in "Etymology" and "Extracts," urging us to rank a common whaling ship with the stuff of scripture and literary masterworks. Ishmael does the very same thing in the chapters directly after his prayer when he describes the three mates and their harpooners as "Knights and Squires." Ultimately, Ahab is about to do the same for the entire crew as their "Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnoo" (363).

And yet, Cervantes' democratic "knight" is, like Ahab, famously mad. In fact, the power of their imagination lies precisely in its madness, its disregard for reality. Quixote's fantasy comedically injures and imprisons himself and others as much as it charms and exalts, and it ultimately ends as tragically as *Moby-Dick*: where Ahab is defeated by the white whale, Quixote is defeated by a fake "Knight of the White Moon" and spirals into a depression before regaining his sanity, renouncing his fantasy, and promptly dying of a broken heart. So when Ishmael calls upon Cervantes' democratic God to weave "tragic graces"—implying he's writing after the *Pequod*'s demise—he's foreshadowing:

the crew is about to experience a similarly tragic enchantment, endangerment, disenchantment, and death through a madman's fantasy of democratic dignity in defiance of an impersonal cosmos.[6]

*Moby-Dick* dramatizes these mixed feelings about democracy by reaching for the same word that obsessed Cervantes in its ambivalence: Ahab "enchants" his crew, for better and for worse. Starbuck gives Ahab his "enchanted, tacit acquiescence" (164). When the hellish fires of the *Pequod*'s furnaces—"the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul" (423)—lull Ishmael into a nightmare, he awakens "horribly conscious of something fatally wrong" and finds "the tiller was, somehow, in some enchanted way, inverted" (423). Amidst Ahab's defiant speech to the thunderstorm, "few words were heard from the enchanted crew" (506), frozen "in various enchanted attitudes" like the "skeletons of Herculaneum" (507) buried under lava.[7] Ahab's enchantment is compelling yet dangerous. Ishmael cannot explain "by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs" (187). Ahab takes the crew captive by captivating them.

Ishmael's prayer thus implies a darker democratic link between Bunyan, Jackson, and Cervantes: all three testify to the imagination's power to injure and imprison as much as exalt and emancipate. All three figures were interested in or associated with dangerous kinds of enchantment in a democratizing age.[8] Every character who meets Quixote concludes correctly that he's clearly mad, yet they find themselves like the crew of the *Pequod* inexplicably drawn into his fantasy. By the novel's end, Quixote is celebrated by thousands of fans. One lone voice of reason protests: "the devil take Don Quixote of La Mancha! . . . If you were a madman in private . . . it wouldn't be so bad, but you have the attribute of turning everyone who deals with you or talks to you into madmen and fools too" (IV.251).

Both authors suggest that their democratic madmen prove seductive, ironically, because modern democracies too often feel flat, prosaic, or "pasteboard." Walt Whitman rejected the old world's "high mimetic" stories of heroic aristocrats for a "low mimetic" love of the democratic average (to use the terms of Northrop Frye), but Melville and Cervantes suggest that others might find democracy to be too low, too dull, too rational, a vacuum of disenchantment begging to be filled with a madman's promise of re-enchantment. Democracy always contains the seeds of demagoguery.[9]

Recognizing the novel's quixotic concerns in turn yields new insights for longstanding debates about Melville's politics. A growing body of work emphasizes Ahab's democratic qualities and Melville's tragic vision of democracy, but Cervantes seems to have goaded Melville toward an even starker conclusion: democracy is not just tragic but rather mad, often absurd, careening between

tragedy and comedy, disenchantment and re-enchantment in ways both liberating and destructive.[10] Cervantes seems to have helped Melville anticipate certain insights from Max Weber: democracies are fueled by a volatile "dialectics of disenchantment and re-enchantment" (Kim). Democracies bolster disenchantment by subordinating citizens' divergent metanarratives to a lower liberal "commons," but they in turn leave many hungry for re-enchantment, susceptible to charismatic leaders with captivating metanarratives.

It is easy to read the enchanted victims of demagoguery as "those people," surely not us, far too clever to be swept into such madness. But both novels undermine their readers' posture of superiority. *Don Quixote* and *Moby-Dick* do to readers what their protagonists do to characters: they seduce us into their fictional worlds. I find myself captivated not just by *Don Quixote* and *Moby-Dick*, but by Quixote and Ahab themselves. Against my better judgment, I thrill when they refuse the flat, blank "pasteboard" world for what I know to be a fantasy. When Quixote and Ahab both claim their higher world has been hidden from our eyes by a wicked enchanter, I relish the chance to hate an archvillain I know to be fake. When both madmen rally their crews to "strike through" (164) reality, a "wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling" (179) is in me too. Their quenchless feud seems mine.

## Ahab and Quixote

Melville's "imaginative breakthrough" for the character of Ahab occurred when he realized that the "pathological madness" of those divorced from reality and the Lear-like "tragic madness" of those overwhelmed by reality "might be synthesized in a single character" with "a separation from reality so acute as to border on metaphysical hallucination, and directed toward an apocalyptic action beyond the boundaries of experience" (Milder 80). There is a precedent for precisely this kind of character: Cervantes's Quixote, pathologically and tragically mad in the end.

Consider how Ahab justifies his quest with the same mad reasoning as Quixote. The Knight of La Mancha's constant excuse for his illusions and defeats is that some evil "enchanter" has hidden the "real" world of chivalric romance from our eyes and replaced it with the "illusions" of the mundane. "Reality" is an illusion blinding us to a greater reality beyond. Ahab expands Quixote's line of reasoning to a cosmic, gnostic level. When first mate Starbuck denounces Ahab's mad desire for vengeance on a creature that acts from mere instinct, Ahab retorts that "all visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks" while "some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask" (164). Put

otherwise, nature might be mindlessly brutal, but not the malevolent gnostic demiurge who created it thus. Ahab's madness is quixotic to the core: the "whale" isn't merely a whale, just as the "windmills" aren't merely windmills—because they degrade and disgrace us, they must be the creation of a malicious, trickster god.[11]

Ahab takes up what Quixote calls his battle against an "abyss of oblivion" by refusing to accept the indifference and impersonality of a Copernican universe. Instead, he *makes* that universe personal by taking it personally, anthropomorphizing an impersonal universe into a malevolent demiurge—what he will later (in a moment of more self-awareness) call the "personified impersonal" (507). Ahab's madness is "not in his protest against a naturalistic universe," according to Robert Milder, "but in his hallucination of a 'personified impersonal' against which his 'queenly personality' can assert itself" (106). And yet, Ahab extends his "queenly" personality to his followers, offers them the chance to become nobles themselves by joining him in heroically striking through the demiurge's "pasteboard" world and perceive a higher reality beyond. This too hints at *Don Quixote:* the knight's pathetic helmet features a homemade vizor composed of nothing more than "pasteboard." In both cases, our protagonists urge followers to "perceive" (in fact imagine) a greater "reality" (in fact a fantasy) through supposedly "pasteboard" realities.

For both Ahab and Quixote, the higher "reality" beyond the mundane is a more personal, tender, and womanly world of beatific love (the spiritual realm beyond the Demiurge in Gnostic traditions). The wicked enchanter is at his most torturous when he prevents Quixote from witnessing the muse of his quest, the divine maiden Dulcinea. When ordered to find this divine maiden in Toboso, Sancho merely picks the first peasant girl he finds and declares that the wicked enchanter has made her and Quixote hideous to each other. Sancho's trickery, meant to end Quixote's obsession, merely emboldens the knight's mission to "disenchant" his beloved. Harry Levin notes that Melville's copy of *Don Quixote* often bore his pencil marks whenever Cervantes elevated Dulcinea as the goddess of Quixote's monomania (102).

Consider "The Symphony." Here, just before his fatal battle against Moby Dick, Ahab glimpses a feminine love that nearly persuades him to return home to his wife. He beholds a beautiful day where "the gentle thoughts of the feminine air" momentarily tempt him away from the "troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea" (542). He stands, for a moment paused from his fixation on the whale, "lifting his splintered helmet of a brow to the fair girl's forehead of heaven" (543). "Splintered helmet" echoes Quixote, whose helmet—half pasteboard, falling apart, a symbol of the imagination—is dashed to pieces by physics before his adventures begins. Ahab remembers his daughters

"Miriam and Martha, laughing-eyed elves," and feels a lovelier kind of magic when "that enchanted air did at last seem to dispel, for a moment, the cankerous thing in his soul" (543). But some "nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing," a "cruel, remorseless emperor," urges Ahab onward with his vengeance "against all natural lovings and longings" (545). He cannot rest in the love of his wife when he's felt the sharkishness of the world and his need for dignity beyond the domestic sphere.

Ahab's wife and daughters here parallel Aldonza Lorenzo more than Dulcinea: they are the real, earthly women who provide the real material for our protagonist's imagination but cannot satisfy him precisely because of their reality—they spur him toward a higher ideal, a Marian goddess like Dulcinea, representative of a loving cosmos. When Don Quixote declares that a "knight-errant without a mistress is like a tree without leaves," Melville noted in the margins: "a god-like mind without a god" (Levin 102). Dulcinea, in Harry Levin's words, becomes for Melville "the symbol of an elusive faith" (102).[12] Consider Ahab's soliloquy to the thunderstorm in "The Candles": he begs its sublime power to "come in thy lowest form of love" (507). When its fire blazes higher, Ahab speaks like Quixote lamenting Freston's power: "thou art but my fiery father; my sweet mother, I know not. Oh, cruel! what hast thou done with her?" (508). Ahab, like Quixote, hungers for a greater goddess: "there is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit [ . . . ] my scorched eyes do dimly see it" (508). The maternal divinity of "The Candles" is his Dulcinea: a loving goddess beyond the evil enchanter, a humane deity who indicts the impersonality of this visible world and draws Ahab onward.

Like Quixote, Ahab's mad personification of the impersonal has method and strength: "in that broad madness, not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished" (185). Cervantes likewise emphasizes how characters are always "amazed to see the medley [Quixote] made of his good sense and his craziness" (IV.223), never able to decide "whereabouts between wisdom and folly they ought to place him" (IV.220). Whether it be facing down lions or charging superior warriors, Don Quixote finds reckless strength in his madness: "here will I wait, fearless and firm, though all hell should come to attack me" (III.384). Ahab too finds strength in madness: "his special lunacy stormed his general sanity, and turned all its concentrated cannon upon its own mad mark; so that far from having lost his strength, Ahab, to that one end, did now possess a thousand fold more potency" (185).

In good part, the power of Ahab and Quixote's madness to dignify their followers lays squarely in their style. *Don Quixote* offered Melville a stylistic model for lifting Ahab's speech above the workaday world of whaling to the level of Shakespearean soliloquy: two centuries prior, Cervantes similar

elevated Quixote's speech above the rest of his novel's realism by bloating it with the antiquated diction of Arthurian romance. As one translator of *Don Quixote* notes, "the translator who uses the simplest and plainest everyday language will almost always be the one who approaches nearest to the original"—except for "Don Quixote's speeches" (Ormsby, I.9). At first, the gap between Quixote's language and his world is comedic. But as the tale progresses, Quixote's style accrues a gravitas that elevates him and other commoners above the rest of their prosaic world, stitching them into epic and romance just as Melville does with his mariners. So as Samuel Otter, Jennifer Greiman, and a growing number of critics note, style is a matter of political and cosmological importance for Melville. Upon reading Ahab's Learish thunderings, we readers echo the goatherd of *Don Quixote*: "who is this man who makes such a figure and talks in such a strain?" (II.374). Put otherwise, how can an impersonal universe explain such personality, such style? Quixote and Ahab thus enchant us because their style offers the prospect of seizing our own selfhood in defiance of a styleless cosmos.

## Ishmael and Sancho

Of all the people enchanted by Ahab, Ishmael is the most surprising as the ship's lone intellectual. But his submission is better understood when he's recognized as a descendant of Sancho Panza. Levin notes that "Melville gives the squire his most serious regard" in his marginalia (102), and while it may seem an insult to yoke enlightened Ishmael with scampish Sancho and his "blunt wit [ . . . ] always striving at sharpness" (II.18), many critics have noted that Sancho is "witty, wise according to his lights, affectionate and faithful . . . not without a certain manly dignity" (Lowell 183). In Ishmael, Melville gathers up several Panzian virtues and vices.

First, Melville uses Ishmael to frame what Lawrence Buell calls an "observer-hero" narrative: a story in which a lesser narrator observes the protagonist from a distance to emphasize their mystery and grandeur, just as Sancho does for Quixote. Relatedly, Sancho and Ishmael function as realist foils to their commanders' fantasies. In turn, they highlight the hazards of their commanders' quests. As Sancho views his master's madness in the "dry light of common sense" (Lowell 180), he serves as the exasperated voice of reason. As a novice whaler, Ishmael plays a similar role, initiating readers into the dangers of his Copernican-Darwinian world. He gives stakes to Ahab's stylish quest. "Over Descartian vortices you hover," he cautions, warning readers of "the subtleness of the sea" where "most dreaded creatures glide [ . . . ] treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure" (159), engaged in

a "universal cannibalism" (274). Sancho and Ishmael's clear sense of danger founds a deadly realism underneath their captains' enchanting dreams.

Both Sancho and Ishmael respond to these dangers with a desperate gallows humor. "Your grace should send such vows to the devil," Sancho declares in opposition to Quixote's latest fantasy, "for they are very dangerous to your health" (73). When they're beaten to pablum, Quixote promises a healing potion within two days. "And how many days," snaps Sancho, "does your grace think we'll need before we can move our legs?" (104). Tossed overboard in his first whale hunt, the bewildered Ishmael stammers with Panzian wit "I suppose then, that going plump on a flying whale . . . is the height of a whaleman's discretion?" (227). He concludes that "there is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" that rests content in "a cool, collected dive at death and destruction, and *the devil fetch the hindmost"* (228, emphasis mine). His very language here echoes Sancho, perpetually cursing in the devil's name: "it is a fine thing . . . crossing mountains, searching woods," Sancho concludes upon the end of their first adventure, "and *devil take the maravedi to pay*" (II.383, emphasis mine). Raymond Weaver thus notes that "when Melville sat down to write, always at his knee stood that chosen emissary of Satan, the comic spirit: a demoniac familiar never long absent from his pages" (27). Ishmael's "desperado" philosophy, laughing at the cosmos as "a vast practical joke" (226), inherits this daimon from foulmouthed Sancho as a blend of the Shakespearean fool and the anti-heroes of the Spanish picaresque.

In their humor and realism, Sancho and Ishmael clarify their captains' insanity. "I hold my master Don Quixote to be stark mad," Sancho declares, "beyond all question . . . he is cracked" (III.367). Ishmael likewise recognizes "crazy Ahab" and his "frantic morbidness" careening toward a "quenchless" feud (184). For that very reason, both can't quite explain why they follow such masters. "If I were wise, I should have left my master long ago," Sancho reflects, "but this was my fate, this was my bad luck; I can't help it, I must follow him" (III.368). Ishmael likewise wonders how "a wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (179).

## Democratic Isolation

While Ishmael and Sancho cannot precisely say why they're enchanted by Quixote and Ahab, careful readers can. Similar forces goad them toward acquiescence. Sancho initially agrees to accompany Quixote because the madman insanely promises him, at minimum, nothing less than his own island (Arthurian squires have received far more).

Ishmael's desire to escape depressive "hypos" seems a quite different motive, but similar forces needle him seaward. All members of the *Pequod*, he remarks, are already governors of their own metaphysical islands, "*Isolatoes* . . . not acknowledging the common continent of men . . . living on a separate continent of his own" (121). Ishmael most of all is an isolated "island governor" before he meets Queequeg. Put simply, Sancho seems a progenitor of Ishmael's woes: he's a dependent peasant eager to be an independent island, while later moderns like Ishmael have obtained their figurative islands—call it Protestant selfhood, Cartesian subjectivity, bourgeois individualism, or democratic self-reliance—and found them wanting.

These parallels are strengthened in each character's comments on slavery. When Sancho learns that he might govern an island in Africa, he laments that his "vassals would be all black" (II.85) but cheers himself up with the prospect of selling them into slavery. The passage is ironic. Cervantes himself was a galley slave and condemned the suffering of African slaves, so he means for readers to scoff at Sancho's depravity. Doubly so from the other obvious irony in the passage: Sancho's desire to be a slavemaster has already enslaved him to Quixote's delusions. Melville once more seems to make Ishmael the sad realization of Sancho's desires. Before he encounters Queequeg as an antidote to western civilization, Ishmael justifies the prospect of submitting to a captain's orders by declaring "who ain't a slave?" (6). Ishmael feels that he lives in a world where everyone has become Sancho, enslaved to their desire for insular independence. Sancho suffers from the delusions of a peasant aiming to become a master, Ishmael from the alienation of seeing that delusion widespread throughout society. Retrospectively, if not in the moment, perhaps Ishmael knows that he too will soon tumble into the same Panzian irony: despite his pre-voyage sense of his own supposed slavery, he, like Sancho, is about to be hexed by a madmen, along with all the isolatoes "federated along one keel" (121) under Ahab's strange spell.[13]

Ishmael and his mates' isolation is further emphasized and exacerbated by the absence of women, echoing Quixote's search for a non-existent goddess and Sancho's separation from his wife and daughter. While Starbuck grimly watches the crew succumb to their captain's black mass, he laments that they "have small touch of human mothers in them! Whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea." (169). As the bacchanalia grows, so does the sailors' desperation for women. They break into a drunken song that laments in the first line "Farewell and adieu to you, Spanish ladies! Farewell and adieu to you, ladies of Spain!" (173). (Here too, the specificity of "Spanish" ladies may be a nod to Dulcinea.) As the lack of women drives the men mad, a Dutch sailor begs "avast dreaming of their lasses" (174).

Starbuck recognizes that the crewmembers have come to view the universe in their own lonely image. The Stravinskian dance ends when a Spaniard, "mad or drunk" (177), taunts Daggoo with racial slurs. Pip escapes and begs the "big white God" to protect him from "men that have no bowels to feel fear" (178). Melville extends Sancho's desires for island mastery to the crew (and society) at large, implying that the democratic dreams of self-reliance can curdle into dreams of supremacy that atomize society into sickly souls and lonely competitors, friendless prey for charismatic leaders who promise not just dignity and camaraderie, but power over others and total self-reliance. In spite of their skepticism and realism, Sancho and Ishmael thus succumb to their masters' fantasies because they're isolated in a distinctly modern, distinctly democratic way.[14]

## Democratic Uncertainty

Sancho and Ishmael's democratic isolation leaves them doubly susceptible to enchantment because it breeds not just loneliness, but also a debilitating sense of subjectivity and uncertainty. *Don Quixote* has long been hailed not merely as a proto-democratic text but, relatedly, as a "founding text of the modern era" in its attention to subjectivity and ambiguity as hallmarks of "the experience of the disenchanted world" (Jauss 9). (Here it vies of course with *Hamlet,* published just two years prior.) In the words of Lionel Trilling, *Don Quixote* highlights how "the conflict of social classes becomes the field of the problem of knowledge, of how we know, and of how reliable our knowledge is" (202–3). Put otherwise, for Cervantes, in a democratic age, the line between fact and fiction has itself become a matter of debate between potent imaginations. Milan Kundera puts it best: "as God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe, Don Quixote set forth" into a world where "the single divine Truth [has] decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men" (6).[15]

Melville explores this idea into *Moby-Dick* most explicitly in "The Doubloon" when Ahab and the mates all interpret a golden Quito doubloon—"so Spanishly poetic," crowned with the word REPUBLICA—according to their own personalities. The doubloon's smooth lines and images—like Melville's style as a whole, in Otter's analysis—unexpectedly become full of ridges and gaps. Like the reference to Spanish girls upon the Quarter-Deck, the doubloon's Spanish provenance seems a quiet nod to *Quixote*. Stubb traces the doubloon's conquistador path through the Americas in "your doubloons of old Spain, your doubloons of Peru, your doubloons of Chili, your doubloons of Bolivia," just as Quixote has often been compared to the conquistadors with their fever dreams

of new worlds.[16] More so, the subjectivity-reflecting doubloon, made of gold, especially seems to echo Quixote's famous insistence that a common brass barber's basin is actually the mythical golden helmet of Mambrino. Just as Ahab sees his own tortured sublimity in the doubloon, Quixote sees his own knightly greatness in the basin, "really and truly Mambrino's helmet" (Cervantes 193), though perhaps melted into a basin by "someone who was unable to recognise or realise its value" (Cervantes 149).

Here Quixote snipes at Sancho who decides that the basin is worth nothing more than its monetary value—"a real of eight if it is worth a maravedis" (I.362)—just as Flask sees nothing but sixteen dollars in the doubloon. Cervantes casts Sancho as the vulgar realist, spokesman for a disenchanted bourgeois world that values only subjective economic valuations over the "madness" of any higher meaning, magic, or myth. In "The Doubloon," *Moby-Dick*'s narrator likewise hints at Melville's similar frustrations: "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way" (430). Of course, the narrator protests too much. Melville is ironic here too, implying that perhaps this is precisely the kind of universe we have, emptied of all meaning but that which we can sell to individual tastes. Thus mad Pip gets the last word when he declares that the only truly objective interpretation one can make of the doubloon is its subjectivity—"I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (434)—which ultimately ends in nothing more than its monetary value: "so they'll say in the resurrection . . . Oh, the gold! the precious, precious, gold! the green miser'll hoard ye soon!" (435). The problem, then, isn't precisely a lack of meaning but an excess that makes metanarrative and objectivity more elusive than ever.

Though it's not stated that Ishmael is our narrator in "The Doubloon," it's a tenable possibility, given his observations on subjectivity elsewhere—most prominently in "The Whiteness of the Whale" where he concludes that whiteness terrifies because of its "indefiniteness" (195). As Ishmael spirals between the multiple symbolic meanings of whiteness, he's ultimately horrified by its "dumb blankness, full of meaning" (195), as if the cosmos were a vast blank page that can mean anything and thus nothing: "a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink" (195). Put simply, Ishmael rejects Ahab's view of the universe as demonic / anti-theistic and anticipates a more (post)modern, subjective, and impersonal universe defined by the "impossibility of stable interpretation in language" (Otter, 122). All this attention to subjectivity supports Greiman's argument that Melville was particularly sensitive to democracy's tensions and paradoxes, in particular Jacques Rancière's claim that "the

very ground for the power of ruling is that there is no ground at all" ("Melville in the Dark Ages").[17] Or in the words of Paul Downes, Melville felt that "there is no justice (and no injustice) outside of the social," that "our vision of the world" in a democratic age "is a necessarily mediated vision" (329), a relativist sense of power that disturbed readers of Hobbes and Melville alike.

The inescapable subjectivity of Cervantine democracy is partly what cultivates Sancho and Ishmael's skepticism, irony, and realism, but when this subjectivity becomes a haunting "ungraspable phantom," when skepticism nibbles a bit too deeply into their souls, it can also breed a hunger for certainty and belief. When asked why he willingly follows a man he knows to be mad, all that Sancho can conclude is that "above all I'm faithful" (III.368). Sancho is a skeptic in the classical Pyrrhonian sense, one who careens between doubt and faith, realism and optimism, empiricism and idealism equally. Sancho is an unwilling prophet and priest, a Moses, a Jonah, a Paul, summoned to mediate between modernity's noonday and Quixote's dreams. Consider how Quixote praises Sancho: "he doubts everything and believes everything; when I fancy he is on the point of coming down headlong from sheer stupidity, he comes out with something shrewd that sends him up to the skies" (360).

To "doubt everything and believe everything" is an equally good description of Ishmael. Lulled into a transcendentalist rapture on the top-mast, he nearly plunges into the sea. He breezily "builds meaning, then coyly subverts it, . . . constructing and deconstructing" (Milder 88). Ishmael himself proclaims simultaneously his "doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly" that "makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye" (MD 374). Milder reads this as "a third position" between faith and doubt: "agnosticism—the Everlasting Maybe" that "only speculates . . . with comic exaggeration" (90–1). Like Sancho, "his thinking is not a pathway to settled truth but a process of taking the world provisionally and by pieces, squeezing it for what it will yield" (Milder 92). And like Sancho, he has "only his candor, wit, resilience" to protect him on a quest where he might not gain his goal but might accept that "the journey itself was (almost) a sufficient compensation" (96).

Here Ishmael's *bildung* is the inverse of Sancho's. Sancho is overpowered by his affection for Quixote—"I love him dearly"—while Ishmael succumbs to Ahab through "the dread in my soul" (179). Sancho is elevated as he absorbs Quixote's eloquence, intelligence, idealism, and creativity—"thou art growing less doltish and more shrewd every day," Quixote remarks, and Sancho agrees: "Your worship's conversation has been the dung that has fallen on the barren soil of my dry wit" (III. 123). By contrast, Ishmael's bondage to Ahab is a monstrous reverse: Ahab seizes on his alienation to drag him down. Melville

maintains Cervantes' premise—a skeptic marred by modernity finds purpose in a madman—but he flips the trajectory. Sancho rises, Ishmael falls.

## Fantastic Realities

Quixote and Ahab enchant their mates not just because they promise to defeat democracy's isolation and uncertainty. As an increasing number of scholars have emphasized, Quixote and Ahab's enchantment runs deeper than totalitarianism precisely because it's not an imposition but a more hegemonic affair, a democratic promise accepted more or less freely by the enchanted.[18] When Sancho protests that "all you tell me about chivalry, and winning kingdoms and empires, and giving islands" are mere "pigments or figments" of Quixote's "addled" imagination, Quixote retorts that his fantasies merely "seem to be illusions and nonsense and ravings . . . not because it really is so, but because there is always a swarm of enchanters . . . [that] destroy us; thus what seems to thee a barber's basin seems to me Mambrino's helmet, and to another it will seem something else" (II.11). Quixote effectively argues that modern subjectivity, rather than being a natural facet of a democratizing era, is instead a satanic magic that tricks peasants and prostitutes into thinking that they can't be squires and ladies. Quixote promises to "disenchant" this magic and reveal the "reality" of a kingly commons.[19] It works. Sancho agrees to continue onward despite the threat of more injuries.

Something similar happens in "The Whiteness of the Whale." When Ishmael faces the "atheistic" indefiniteness of modern subjectivity, he recoils and retreats into Ahab's knightly, godly battle against the impersonal world, personified as a quixotic-gnostic "enchanter" who secretly tortures us—"the demonism in the world" (194). From thence forward, Ishmael will follow Ahab unto disaster because Ahab allows "all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down" to become "visibly personified, and practically assailable in Moby Dick" (184). Ahab enchants his crew democratically: he vents broadly "shared experiences" (Milder 81) of modern uncertainty, suffering, and meaninglessness in order to shape these inchoate ills into a heroic battle against a personal enemy intent on denying them dignity, even if said enemy isn't literally real. Melville "lead[s] us by degrees into empathy with a defiance we intellectually know is fantastic, egotistical, and self-destructive," making Ahab's feud "seem the reader's own" as existential "frustrations that had been repressed are raised to consciousness, then licensed by Ishmael's own exhilaration" (Milder 82).

Put otherwise, Melville understood how "the American political imaginary" was "transmitted not by edict and argument so much as by tales and

telling" not just because he was "acutely attuned to the stories that Americans tell about themselves" (Frank 4) but because he had learned from Cervantes the human addiction to narrative, especially when it promises to make sense of senseless suffering and subjectivity. Quixote and Ahab guarantee one of democracy's core promises—a world that grants dignity and meaning to all—without the risks of subjective and uncertain meaning. Subjectivity, per Quixote and Ahab, is an illusion which one can disenchant and "strike through."

In effect, they promise that one can have democracy's cake and eat it too. Melville had a "subversive commitment to political possibilities opened up by narrative proliferation and reorientation" (Otter 4), but like Cervantes, Melville hints that narrative can disorient as much as reorient and subsequently imprison as much as liberate. With Cervantes, Melville hints that we are all Ishmael's children and Sancho's grandchildren, democratically bound and unsettled by our unsteady mix of faith and doubt, eager amid such isolation, ambiguity, and inaction for someone to sculpt our aimless and varied frustrations into purposeful, plotted direction. "Of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol," Ishmael concludes: "wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" (195).

In sum, if life within modern democracies is something like a blank page, Quixote and Ahab offer the salvation of a metanarrative.[20] Ahab seduces his crew precisely because his madness offers them something that democracy and modernity might in fact lack for Melville: a universal story. Rather than Ahab-as-villain and Ishmael-as-hero, Ishmael voices democracy's pitfalls as much as its potential, while Ahab offers an alternate possibility that, though mad, speaks to democracy's discontents. As much as it is a "democratic tragedy," in Milder's words, *Moby-Dick* is also a story about democracy as tragedy, a noble dream that by design cannot offer meaning in any eternal or universal sense. (One definition of democracy might be a begrudging acceptance of disagreement.)

As Sancho and the *Pequod* aimlessly skim the surface of a pasteboard democracy, Quixote and Ahab offers a deep dive, a true plot. Melville repeatedly emphasizes Ahab as a character of depth, "used to deeper wonders than the waves," with a "larger, darker, deeper part" (185) that Ishmael can't illuminate because "all truth is profound" and Ahab's "dive[s] deeper than Ishmael can go" (187). Ahab's mad profundity was shaped in part by Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus:* Teufelsdrockh likewise aims to dive into cosmic profundities to reach an "everlasting yea." This goal, as in *Moby-Dick,* is not far from madness, "a discerning of the Infinite in the Finite, of the Idea made Real; which discerning again may be either true or false, either seraphic or demoniac, Inspiration or Insanity" (Carlyle 88).

But it is impossible to sort Quixote and Ahab into one of Carlyle's two categories; they are neither entirely seraphic prophets nor demoniac madmen.

They're both, sometimes in the same breath as "ungodly, god-like" figures. Carlyle thus diverges from Cervantes in an important way: he believes that spiritual strivers like Teufelsdrockh can achieve a revelation of unambiguous and absolute truth in their madness, a mystical "everlasting yea," a *real* delirium, a *divine* infinity "superadded" to the "petty domain of the Actual" (98). Elsewhere Carlyle praised Don Quixote as "an artist hero" and "a model of heroic equanimity" (Cumming 86), his "illusions" in reality a higher romantic reality.

In part. But this also misses the obvious anti-romantic comedy in Cervantes' novel: there is indeed something illusory about these illusions, something unreal and often disastrous within reality. Ennobling as they may be, illusions, fictions, and dreams are phenomenologically and pragmatically real, Cervantes implies, but not literally real. Romantic readers like Carlyle have long overlooked the degree to which Cervantes' reality remains thoroughly disenchanted even at the heights of Quixote's charisma. The Knight of Sorrowful Countenance can reenchant for a spell, but he always runs back into a brick reality, especially in his death. Melville followed his lead as "the most completely disenchanted of all American writers" (Weaver 338). Ahab's fantasy brings dignity and purpose but also death.

On the other hand, these fantasies bruise reality as much as they're bruised by it. Just as they can never be absolutely real in the Carlylean sense of an "everlasting yea," nor can they be absolutely unreal. Cervantes insists that falsehoods and fantasies are always in tension with truth, distinct from reality but not entirely so, "para-realities" or "quasi-realities" that are *somewhat* real, *somewhat* not. Cervantes especially highlights this when Quixote descends into the Cave of Montesinos, a central and most mysterious chapter that will perplex the novel's own characters. Quixote vows like Ahab to the sphynx that "even if [the cave] reached to the bottomless pit he meant to see where it went" (III.244). Quixote is lowered six hundred feet into the Earth for a half hour. He's reeled up, asleep. When he wakes, he's convinced that he saw ancient heroes trapped in the cave by yet another wicked enchanter, all of them awaiting the "disenchantment" that Don Quixote has promised the world at large. The cave is Cervantes' symbol for not just Quixote's mad mind but the human psyche more broadly, addicted to fiction even in our sleep, with strange and dreamy depths where the line between fact and fiction blur.[21] Clearly Quixote was dreaming in the cave. But he's been daydreaming his entire adventure, and his dreams have become a sort of reality. Sancho later asks a "prophetic" monkey whether Quixote's vision in the cave was real. The monkey declares (via human "translator") that "the things you saw, or that happened to you in that cave are, part of them false, part true" (III.285). The contrast between whether Quixote merely "saw" these things or whether they actually "happened to [him]" further emphasizes

the ambiguity as Cervantes repeats his favorite point: fiction is false *and* true in the same maddening and often disastrous manner of dreams. As one of Sancho's subjects notes when he's shocked by the simple man's intelligence, "every day we see something new in this world; jokes become realities, and the jokers find the tables turned upon them" (IV.106).

Cervantes was the first writer to dramatize all the comedic and disastrous potential of the tension between fact and fiction exacerbated by the uncertainty inherent in democratic societies. When Quixote reveals that he gave real money to the imaginary specters in the Cave of Montesinos, Sancho exclaims, "is it possible that . . . enchantments can have such power in it as to have changed my master's right senses into a craze so full of absurdity!" (III.261–2). The line is comical because Sancho unknowingly describes himself: his own good sense has been transformed into foolishness countless times under the entirely real power of Quixote's dream. In response, Quixote calmly (and correctly) insists like a proto-Jamesian: the things he saw will "make thee believe" (III.262). Quixote simply states what has already happened: Sancho has long believed in Quixote's dreams.

## Real Fantasies

*Don Quixote* and *Moby-Dick*'s tragic endings clinch the tension between fantasy and reality. A mysterious "Knight of the White Moon"—in fact a well-meaning friend who aims to end Quixote's fantasies and bring him home—challenges Quixote to battle, demanding he abandon his knighthood if defeated. When Quixote loses, he honors the agreement, per chivalric code, and drifts back to his village, disillusioned, his fantasy shattered. His depression deepens upon his deathbed until he is disenchanted once and for all. "I was mad, now I am in my senses; I was Don Quixote of La Mancha, I am now . . . Alonso Quixano" (IV.361), he confesses, dying, begging Sancho's mercy: "Forgive me, my friend, that I led thee to seem as mad as myself" to think there "still are knights-errant in the world" (IV.360).

Sancho feels anguish at these words, as do readers; we who long laughed at Quixote's madness now suddenly regret its end and our return to a reality that now seems lesser. "The foolishest thing a man can do," Sancho laments, "is to let himself die without rhyme or reason, without anybody killing him, or any hands but melancholy making an end of him" (IV.361). He desperately urges Quixote to reclaim his madness, confident they'll "disenchant" Aldonza and finally see Dulcinea, Melville's symbol of an absent God. With Sancho, we too confess that we have long believed in Don Quixote, that life without dreams

of goddesses, personal worth, and benevolence, mad though they may be, is a lesser reality indeed.

And yet, that reality remains. The story ends. Quixote, "Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance," becomes sane, then dies. For as much as he blurs the border between fact and fiction, he maintains them to the end. Quixote cannot fully realize his fantasies—he must either maintain or renounce his madness. As Quixote himself confesses in his sanity, "all that nonsense . . . until now has been a reality to my hurt" (IV.359). The fiction was real, but only as fiction, as something not entirely real, just real enough to destabilize one's relationship with reality in painful ways. Per Miguel de Unamuno, this is the tragedy which Don Quixote exemplifies for humanity: by definition, our noblest fantasies and dreams are in reality never fully realizable.

Ahab comes to a similar tragic realization in his end. As the *Pequod* sinks with all hope, Ahab declares "Oh, now do I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief" (571). He too becomes a "knight of the sad countenance" when he realizes his dream of human dignity is powerful in exact proportion as it exceeds reality. In a word, Ahab, like Quixote, finally sees the great gap between his dream and reality, and in this moment, he dies like a god. "What vindicates Ahab, finally, is not what he does, or nearly does; it is what, through the arduousness and pain of attempting it, he becomes," Robert Milder concludes, in this moment of "self-apotheosis" (111). So ironically, Ahab becomes extraordinary in his insistence on the ordinary need for a dignified existence. Ahab embodies "an aristocratic spiritual truth" not exactly as "counterforce to Ishmael's democratic truth" but as its paradoxically highest exemplar. Ahab and Quixote become men of extraordinary imaginative power with the charismatic ability to enchant others with their vision. In a word, they are artists, exemplifying the image of their creators.

Cervantes and Melville speak for all true believers, all writers and readers who have felt the sting of fiction's fictionality as we fall in love with falsehoods that end and dash us against reality, penniless and broken when they promise more than reality can offer. Cervantes thus leaves us with an irresolvable tension: perhaps reality can only be ennobled by unrealities—by fictions, falsehoods, insanities, delusions, and dreams—para-realities that divorce as much as deepen reality. Put more precisely, Cervantes anticipates Hans Vaihinger's philosophy of the "as if"—the concept that we make sense of experience through what we recognize to be metaphors and fictions that we can only ever act as if they were real. Carlyle's divine delirium is not an option. There is always a gap between reality and the fictions we use to survive it, a gap often comic, ultimately tragic, overall absurd. In the words of Camus, Don Quixote

is an "eminent creation of art" because he reaches for "immeasurable nobilities" with insufficient "earthly hands" (102).

Melville keeps closer to Cervantes and Camus than Carlyle on this point. He seems to allow for the possibility of Carlyle's divine delirium when he notes that "man's insanity is heaven's sense" (414)—but the cost is self-destruction. Consider poor Pip, whose dive into the divine dissolves his selfhood until there's no Pip left to embrace an "everlasting yea." Inversely, "ungodly, god-like" (79) Ahab maintains his selfhood within an impersonal universe by insanely personifying it and setting himself against that universe as "madness maddened!" (168). The pros and cons of Ahab and Pip—"one daft with strength, the other daft with weakness" (522), both of them destroyed in the end—contrast with Teufelsdrockh's unambiguous victory in achieving a "true" fantasy. If the universe is truly indifferent to the needs of human selfhood (as Teufelsdrockh at first suspects), Melville implies that any human attempt to find an everlasting yea within such a universe faces two options, both destructive. One can either mystically submit to total ego-dissolution like Pip, untenable so long as we must function as a conscious, separate self. Or, more sublimely and dangerously, one can take up the Quixotic-Ahabian option and insist upon the self's fantastic desires, which comes with dignity and power but also anthropocentrism, injuries, abuse of others, a tragic end, and an ultimately absurd defiance of life's ambiguity.

All of this speaks to recent debates about the degree to which Melville can be considered a realist and materialist. Most prominently, K. L. Evans argues that "it has been a mistake to push the thesis that in *Moby-Dick* Melville laments the ontological chasm between mind and matter" (13) because for Melville "meaning always evolves from the combination of human ingenuity and fidelity to the facts. Far from being caught on the horns of a dilemma, as many Melvilleans have argued, Melville shows how the sensible world and the human mind are inextricably bound up with each other in the creation of meaning" (15).[22] I agree and disagree. To see the Quixotic shape of *Moby-Dick* is to see that both sides have a point. Don Quixote would fully agree with Evans' definition of realism—"to picture real life is not to copy life" but to "imitate something that cannot be perceived" (8), something beyond the mundane—but *Cervantes*, I think, would not. With Melville, rather, he dramatizes a tension between our fantasies and reality, the ways in which there is indeed a link between the two, but also a gap that stretches and strains that link. Or to shift the metaphor, Cervantes and Melville dramatize the way in which art and reality bleed into each other in ways both vital and painful.

Cervantes cinches this theme when he gives the last word to another one of Melville's favorite characters: Cid Hamete Benengali, the fictional Moorish

historian who—so says the narrator—first "recorded" the "true history" of Don Quixote in Arabic, to be discovered, translated, and polished by our narrator into the story that we read today. Cid Hamete is Cervantes' central agent for metafiction, assuring us that the story of Don Quixote, unlike the fantastic stories of his beloved chivalric romances, is history and thus unambiguously true. Of course it's not. Cervantes uses Hamete to pull a metafictional "gotcha" on readers: we laugh at Quixote for believing that romances are true, but Hamete forces us to recognize that we too are captivated by a mad fantasy we want to be true.

Toward his journey's end, Quixote himself, believer *par excellence*, begins to doubt and needs to know if his vision in the Cave of Montesinos was "the truth or a dream" (IV.256). He asks a supposedly prophetic bust, who replies like the prophetic ape that "there is something of both in it" (IV.256). Quixote is relieved to have affirmation, but the doubt is irrevocable. The narrator intrudes upon this enchantment with a gloss from Hamete, who declares that the bust's "prophecy" was in fact just a man hiding underneath the statue, playing yet another prank on credulous Quixote. Hamete once more serves as the voice of reason by disenchanting a moment of enchantment "not to keep the world in suspense, fancying that the head had some strange magical mystery in it" (IV.257). And yet, this is precisely what Cervantes has done to us for the entire book: enchanting us with something that isn't real. Once more Cervantes uses Hamete to make an ironic point about fiction: we moderns are likewise doubters desperate to believe the fantasy in our minds, in this case the story of *Don Quixote* itself.

In so many words, Cervantes said it well before Flaubert: Don Quixote *c'est moi*. "For me alone was Don Quixote born, and I for him," Hamete finally admits in the novel's final lines. "It was his to act, mine to write; we two together make but one" (IV.364). Like Hamete, Ishmael is a more intellectual presence who both doubts and believes in Ahab's ungodly, godlike greatness, who bears its testimony to the world as he "escaped alone to tell thee" (572). But tell us *what,* exactly?

If we listen to Hamete and Ishmael, perhaps we hear a warning: "leave at rest where they lie the weary mouldering bones of Don Quixote, and not attempt to carry him off" (IV.365) for another adventure. But here too Hamete is not Cervantes, who uses Hamete for one last bit of metafictional wit: "My desire," Hamete concludes, "has been no other than to deliver over to the detestation of mankind the false and foolish tales of the books of chivalry" (IV.306). Cervantes winks one last time at readers in the next line: these nonsensical books of chivalry "are even now tottering, and doubtless doomed to fall forever," says Hamete, thanks to "my *true* Don Quixote" (IV.365, emphasis mine).

In this final line, it's hard to keep track of all the levels of fictionality as the reader trips in a tangle of metafiction: a fictional history within a story about stories that in Part II becomes a story to which fictional characters react.

And yet, somewhere in this tangle of fiction is some kind of truth. And that's Cervantes' point. The human need for stories, exacerbated in disenchanted democracies, crashes into a world that resists stories. In such societies (doubly so in the digital age), narratives pile up until it becomes difficult to say where reality stops and fiction starts. Through Cervantes, Melville highlights how life is and isn't like a story, how we thus crave a story for our own lives in the midst of such an ambiguous universe. Both *Don Quixote* and *Moby-Dick* end with gravity: a mad knight sunk into the reality of a grave, a silly literary tradition stumbling over the "true" "history" of a sillier knight, and a ship sunk by democracy's hunger for metanarrative. If Sancho is Ishmael's ancestor, Cid Hamete is another. Ishmael is named for the biblical orphan who becomes father to Hamete's Arabic race, a new people with new stories, but without a promised land.

## *Notes*

[1] Charles Olson was among the first to systematically document Melville's debts to Shakespeare. Two years after Olson came Nathalia Wright's seminal *Melville's Uses of the Bible* (built upon more recently by Ilana Pardes). Merton Sealts Jr.'s "The Records of Melville's Reading" and *Melville's Reading* remains more broadly foundational, as is Wilson Walker Cowen's vast eleven-volume dissertation on Melville's marginalia (and his essay on "Melville's Discoveries"). Henry Pommer wrote one of the first book-length studies of Milton and Melville, built upon more recently by Robin Grey and Douglas Robillard in consultation with Hershel Parker. Lawrence Roger Thompson had much to say about Milton in *Melville's Quarrel With God.* Concurrently, scholarship on Melville's marginalia is booming with the digital database of *Melville's Marginalia Online* (ed. Norberg and Olsen-Smith), an invaluable resource that contains Melville's 1853 edition of *Don Quixote.*

[2] In 1947, M.F. Heiser mistakenly concluded that "on Cervantes there is nothing but silence from Whittier, Whitman, and Melville" (430). In the next decade, Harry Levin and Stanley T. Williams briefly noted the obvious parallel of Ahab and Quixote's monomania. But "other alleged obligations," Williams concluded, "are nebulous." (225) Scholars seem to have taken him at his word. From the 1950s to 2020, little more was written beyond fleeting mentions of the above passages. José de Onís was an early dissenter in 1974, insisting that *Moby-Dick* could not be understood without *Don Quixote*, but his work—written in Spanish—has been neglected in Anglophone scholarship. Most recently, Rosa Angelica Martinez has noted Melville's explicit references to Cervantes in "The Piazza," *Clarel*, and *Benito Cereno*, but says little of *Moby-Dick* despite a note that Melville was "*Don-Quixote*-obsessed" while revising the novel (213). Timothy Donahue is the first in recent years to address the oversight with the compelling argument that *Moby-Dick* "offers a Cervantine account of globalization" (426).

[3] My argument depends on two definitions of democracy, one institutional and boring, the other idealistic and thrilling. First, Democracy is a system of government characterized by eight procedural commitments laid out by Robert Dahl most clearly in *Polyarchy* (1971): the right to vote; the right to be elected; the right of leaders to compete for votes; free and fair elections; freedom of association; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; and institutions authorized by votes. It is precisely this boring, "flat," and subjective quality which Melville and Max Weber suspected leaves democracies ripe for charismatic madness. Ahab appeals to a second more common, social, and aspirational definition of democracy as the ideal of liberty and justice

for all. According to Dalton, Shin, and Jui, "most citizens do not think of democracy primarily in procedural or institutional terms, as the literature on democratic theory would suggest" (6). This is the hunger which Quixote and Ahab feed in their quest to reimagine an impersonal and subjective universe as a "kingly commons" freed from democracy's prosaic and polyphonic tedium.

[4] Melville owned the 1853 edition of the Jarvis translation, likely acquired in 1855 when he inscribed the year and his name in the volume—four years after the publication of *Moby-Dick*. But Melville had access to *Don Quixote* in the years he wrote *Moby-Dick*. First from the New York Society Library, a haven for Melville in 1848 to early 1850. According to its 1850 catalogue, the Society Library held a copy of the 1755 translation of *Don Quixote* by Tobias Smollett, whom Melville praised in *Omoo* ("what a debt do we owe you!") and to whom he was sometimes compared by critics (Parker, v).

Melville also likely encountered Quixote through a second source: his mentor Evert Duyckinck's vast family library, which Melville used often in the years prior to *Moby-Dick*. This collection was eventually gifted to the New York Public Library, whose catalogues indicate that the Duyckincks owned a copy of the 1700–1703 Motteux translation of *Don Quixote*, Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism* (Boston: J.P. Peaslee, 1829)—listed on p. 19 of the 1854 Duyckinck catalogue—and *The Adventures of Timothy Peacock* (Middlebury, Knapp, & Jewett, printers, 1835), described as "a series of amusing adventures of a masonic Quixot." Most importantly, Duyckinck's father published the Jarvis translation of *Don Quixote* for American readers in 1825.

More broadly was the pervasive Anglo love of Cervantes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See John Bryant, who notes the proliferation of pantomimes, musicals, tributes, and spin-offs: *Joseph Andrews* (1742), whose subtitle clarifies that it was "written in imitation of the manner of CERVANTES, Author of Don Quixote"; *The Infernal Don Quixote* (1801); *Sancho, or, The Proverbialist* (1816); *The Political Don Quixote* (1820); *Female Quixotism* (1829, owned by Melville's mentor Evert A. Duyckinck)—not to mention an 1807 tract titled *Don Quixote*, written by a Harvard student on a rebellion against campus food.

[5] My emphasis on *Don Quixote*'s proto-democratic themes is not atypical. Schmidt notes that this is a "conclusion shared by many leading Cervantes scholars" (31).

[6] Shortly after his prayer, Ishmael further hints that something is off when he describes the crew's "almost *frantic* democracy" (emphasis mine), an adjective that still connoted mental imbalance in Melville's day. Ishmael rightly senses that the crew is, like him, unfettered yet unstable, about to become spellbound by Ahab's satanic eucharist *in nomine diaboli*. Some critics have missed these ironies. Hershel Parker presumes that Ishmael's prayer is entirely and sincerely Melville's own, modelled on the rhetoric of American literary nationalists to "portra[y] Jackson as all but deified" (19). David Reynolds similarly argues that Melville was the most devout democrat of the American Renaissance, a proto-Whitman "driven by an intensely democratic urge to absorb and fuse contradictory elements in American culture" (275). Melville was clearest on his mixed feelings about democracy in his letters to Hawthorne, but ultimately, he protested too much (Corr. 190–91). Put simply, while Melville believed in the rights and dignity of humanity, he held no illusions about real humans' potential to be undignified. As my mentor Robert Milder noted in conversation, "his experience as a sailor taught him to make distinctions. Some meanest mariners, and renegades, and castaway were precisely that."

[7] When Ahab refuses to help Captain Gardiner find his lost son, the captain "start[s] from his enchantment" (533) and hurries away in horror.

[8] In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian is repeatedly warned to steer clear of the Enchanted Ground as his last and most difficult test precisely because it is the most common and pleasurable: after many hard battles, it tempts him to simply rest and forget his trials with the "overpowering delight" of "charms, spells, and incantations" (Ivimey 213). Bunyan voiced an anxiety that would grow stronger into the nineteenth century: the fear that a bourgeois age of growing democracy, individualism, and material prosperity would lead to spiritual sleepwalking and instability ripe for demagogues. (de Tocqueville II. 341)

Melville's contemporaries similarly described Andrew Jackson as an enchanter who wielded nigh magical and perhaps dangerous power over sleepwalking masses. In 1840, a writer in the *Democratic Review* recounted how "this high and bold spirit exercised upon me, from the first interview, the power of an irresisitable [sic] spell" (qtd. in Parton 223). Josiah Quincy hated how he "wrought a mysterious charm on old and young" (363). More than once, critics even turned

to *Pilgrim's Progress* to lambast Jackson's sinister charisma, for example, in an 1844 Whig political cartoon titled "Pilgrim's Progress," Jackson drags his successor presidential candidate James K. Polk and his running mate George Dallas upon an ass toward "Salt River" – a figure of speech for political disaster – as he insists that "the honor of travelling in my company ought to satisfy you." See: *American Political Prints, 1766–1876*, Library of Congress: https://loc.harpweek.com/LCPoliticalCartoons/DisplayCartoonMedium.asp?SearchText=&UniqueID=%2029&Year=1844.

[9] One can consider Carlyle as a counter-example. His distaste for democracy's meanness fueled his *Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. My thanks to Robert Milder for suggesting Whitman, Carlyle, and Frye.

[10] Jennifer Greiman's recent book is the best summation to date of debates about Melville and democracy. As she notes, critics have long agreed that democracy is central to Melville's work, but few agree on how. Ultimately, Greiman concludes that the only consensus we can draw from this dissensus is that it reflects Melville's own mixed feelings about democracy as a paradoxical thing, riven by contradictions both fertile and destructive (7–8).

[11] On the gnosticism of *Moby-Dick*, see Vargish (272–277), expanded by Milder (107–108).

[12] Charles Olson notes this passage too in *Call Me Ishmael*. Like others, he notes Melville's reading of *Quixote* in 1855 but doesn't consider earlier readings (66, 88, 103).

[13] Such irony hints at Melville's own complex and ambivalent feelings toward political demagougery and American slavery. While he celebrated democracy and abhorred the tyranny of master over slave, he also implied elsewhere that democracy could in fact give birth to mastery. See for instance the "Prose Supplement" to his Civil War poetry in *Battle-Pieces*.

[14] Georg Shulman makes a similar point in "Chasing the Whale" from *A Political Companion to Herman Melville,* ed. Frank. My thanks to Jennifer Greiman for pointing me to the essay.

[15] See also Angus Fletcher, "Quixotic Governance," which argus that *DQ* Part Two enshrines the comedy of heterodoxy and pluralism, while later eighteenth-century novelists like Henry Fielding embrace this value as central to modern republics. For other Cervantes-centered theorists of the novel, see René Girard, Ortega y Gasset, and Viktor Shklovsky.

[16] See Unamuno, 272–277; Babelon; de Armas Wilson, 218; Hernández, 110–137; Nava, 136; Laguna, 60–66.

[17] Like many critical theorists, Rancière has elsewhere written on Quixote as exemplary of this tendency in democracy. In the words of Andrew Gibson, Rancière inherits "not the comic victim of the worldly, the figure of fun beloved of eighteenth-century England . . . but the melancholic, modern European version of the Knight of the Sad Countenance that runs from Unamuno through Ortega and Lukacs to Foucault. Quixote willfully manufactures correspondences between art and life" (73).

[18] Robert Milder argues that "within the fictively realized world of *Moby-Dick*, it is hard to condemn Ahab as morally or spiritually wrong" because his objection is against the world opposing human flourishing with "a tyrant's unsanctified power" (105). Most recently, the aptly titled recent essay collection *Ahab Unbound* likewise seeks to redeem Ahab from his role as "a Cold War icon" of totalitarian tyranny (Farmer 2). Therein, Donald Pease echoes Milder's conclusion that Ahab's command of the crew is "not an imposition of [his] tyrannical will or an expression of the crew's will—it is the shared coproduction of both" (Farmer 25).

[19] Martinez brilliantly parallels Melville's interest in the Helm of Mambrino as a symbol of how different perspectives turn violent when there is a tension between masters and the dispossessed (216–217).

[20] Here too Cervantes and Melville anticipate Max Weber. See Kim.

[21] Elsewhere, the same word used to describe the cave—an "abyss"—is often used to describe the extremity of Quixote's mind: "God keep thee in his hand, poor Don Quixote," prays the curate, "for it seems to me thou art precipitating thyself from the height of thy madness into the profound abyss of thy simplicity." (III.11) Later, the narrator tells us that Sancho too suffers from this "abyss of his ignorance" (III.123).

[22] Evans argues that we've missed "*Moby-Dick*'s capacity to heal the rift between the literal and the allegorical, body and mind, self and world" by insisting "that the true innovation of Melville's writing is its power to reconcile disparate and seemingly incompatible points of view" (15). Neither seems right to me. *Moby-Dick* neither heals nor reconciles. It splits and drowns and shrieks, in the words of one early critic: "The language fairly shrieks under the intensity of his

treatment, and the reader is under an excitement which is hardly controllable." "Moby-Dick; Or, The White Whale," *The Critic,* Vol 22, 1893.

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