



Pierre Senges  
*Ahab (Sequels)*

Here is a writer who is a wellspring of science, in which a jovial Cartesian devil is ever sinking and rising. His unaffected erudition finds itself threatened, then effectively blown to pieces, by an imagination and a humor that laugh in the face of sanctioned knowledge. —Éric Chevillard

RECIPIENT OF THE PRIX WEPLER (2015)

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Translated by Jacob Siefring & Tegan Raleigh



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## Ahab (Sequels)





Ahab: one step on his good leg,  
the next on a crude imitation.

*Fury and wavelets — the shipwreck according to its survivors*

You know *Moby-Dick*? the white whale, the lapping waves, the monster appearing, disappearing, making a huge splash every time it hides — well, does that story of a hunt ending in drama ring a bell? the characters, the walk-ons, the props, the wrought nails & the cut nails. And for scenery? the inevitable decor of ocean lending itself as panorama and as infinite container: three hundred million (a bit more actually) cubic miles of salt water combined with human flesh and fish of varying sizes, including fresh herring, hammerhead sharks, bottlenose dolphins and huzza porpoises, anvil-headed whales, clownfish, catfish, seahorses compared somewhere to lamplighters, beluga whales, pearl oysters, other oysters devoid of pearls, which will never have pearls and have come to accept this, monkfish, squid, the remains of the crusade of 1212, vermeil teapots sent to King Charles of England in 1633 but sunk between Burntisland & Leith — teapots followed subsequently (through the murky depths) by upright pianos, ingots of gold or more likely pickaxes belonging to fortuneless gold-hunters, slippers and night-shirts, birth certificates, death certificates, chess sets, toasters, revolving doors, polishing brushes, telephone tokens, Bibles translated into 120 different languages, the *Grand Albert* and the *Petit Albert*, books on etiquette, banjos, trumpets, harmonicas, ersatz crowns of Richard III, sailor's caps,

Elizabethan ruffs, burnt pages of Nikolai Gogol, a bust of Tiberius, Italian coffeepots and American coffeepots, a *Systematic Inventory of Marine Mammals*, sheet music by Jerome Kern, a libretto by Oscar Hammerstein, a victrola, a *Betta splendens* (one of millions), a clyster, Rita Flowers' pendant, the diadem of Toboso, a toiletry kit formerly belonging to Josef von Sternberg, another one to Erich von Stroheim, the entire shipwrecked *Chancewell*, the lost images of *A Woman of the Sea*, swordfishes Hemingway failed to catch, the outmoded clothing of Signor Da Ponte, the remains of Abissai Hyden's boat, all the ingredients of the Manhattan cocktail spread out, alas, too far apart from one another, televisions, washing machines, a short treatise on immortality that probably did not convince very many, a cello's bow, and  $x$  flower wreaths in homage to drowned sailors.

Those who say they embarked on the *Pequod* and remained there valiantly to its sinking, survivors in the middle of the ocean likened somewhere to sprigs of parsley in a bowl of chicken soup — those who for want of anything better to do managed to embark on the book, sometimes clandestinely, without paying, or being paid —, they all want to tell the story, no matter if it's for the thirty-sixth time, leaving out the important parts, enumerating useless details arbitrarily salvaged (saved from sinking at the last second, because at the time they thought them precious). When we ask them, even fifty years later, it doesn't take much urging, two glasses is all it takes, they offer up their fragment of *Moby Dick*, the sails, the captain's obsession, the hunt for one big fish, a stupefying obsession for everyone involved (worse even than the swooning of someone madly in love); they recount the miles traveled from the Strait of Matsmai to Cape Tormentoso, six or seven times what it takes to circle the globe, long sessions of oratory, the captain's tirades

(they remember a few syllables of them), and at the end of the last day of the chase, the absurd combat of a little bod-kin man against the whale's immense, rubbery skin. Then they speak of how they watched him die, how they died with him, honor be to those who were swallowed up: and their reports come to a stop there, at the idea of a collective death, at the words *sea burial*, when their audience ceases to believe their testimony. Among these survivor-raconteurs (astoundingly numerous in fact, even if they are spread about in wine bars very distant from one another, and rare), some are more credible than others: they all relate a second- or third-hand tale, but some of them have that look of sparkly-eyed apostles who once shook the hand of God disguised as a man, and were never the same after.

(*Sprigs of parsley in a bowl of chicken soup*: perhaps it's better to speak instead of grilled chestnut shells: dark and dry, inanimate, drifting — not a bad idea, but this is a minor point.)

### *The truth concerning the outcome of a struggle*

He had to leave his harpoon and cable behind: according to the most common version of the tale, the old captain [1910] plunged to the depths with the whale, he drowned while the whale acted out his cetacean agony, in other words his interminable death throes: spume, thousands of tons, & the soul rising heavenward in a spout of salt water.<sup>1</sup> In truth, Ahab let go of his prey almost immediately and rose right back to the surface: the witnesses should have been able to see him appear, joyful champagne cork, victorious, cackling

1. Since precision is called for, we should note that in this tale, which hardly differs from the aforementioned, commonly accepted & also older one, the principal action takes place in 1910.

with the cackle of miniseries villains when they triumph *in extremis*, immorally.<sup>2</sup> (To release his prey: the proof of his skillfulness? of his casualness? of his cowardice? of an infidelity that remains inexplicable after so many years of mutual pursuit? Or rather, despite his cursed captain's reputation, the proof of his impish luck, when Fortune, finally, at long last, bares its teeth.)

Ahab won't refute it: for two or three minutes, the time of a song, he and the whale were inseparable, and during those three minutes (he actually wants to call them a portion of eternity), he began to live a couple's life with the whale, amphibious and ephemeral, laying the ground for a common future six feet under, or six thousand feet under: the whale, continental, imperious, resplendent even in the depths, a stranger to every form of vulnerability, on the contrary, capable of swallowing almost anything, the boat and its passengers, the size of his stomach telling us everything we need to know about a creature's capacity to absorb life's shocks. (At least that was the impression the captain had over the course of those three minutes: during that time, he plugged his ears and felt as though he were giving up the ghost, drop by drop.) He was acquainted with sardines, the (pickled) anchovy somewhat, and with certain varieties of frittered cod, in brandade, but the whale, the white whale, Moby Dick in the flesh, he knows only from hearsay, and always at a distance; at the very end of his sailor's life, for as long as it took to harpoon him (if the witnesses are to be believed), to let himself be on the other end of that whale's harpoon, to go on the wildest but most clownish rodeo in the history of seafaring America, for the time it takes to drown, he must have put himself through a quick lesson in cetology:

2. *Immorally*: ignoble, and pleased to be so.

behavior, anatomy, form, muscle tone, everything, starting with that skin like nothing else, comparable to nothing, in which he thought he saw, embedded there long ago, maravedis from the days of the Catholic Monarchs. When the whale in turn took hold of the captain, he inspected him closely, he compared him to what he thought he knew of men: over the course of those three minutes, he gets a crash course too, but in anthropology: anatomy, appearances, intentions, the energy of despair, grotesqueness borne up by the buoyant force of Archimedes, virility and impotence combined, leatheriness notwithstanding, his belt buckle, and tenderness — the sweetbread at the bottom of his soul.

Three minutes, not one more: Ahab can't see himself circling the globe holding on to Moby Dick while holding his breath, breathing desperately every time he deigns to return to the surface, then once again plugging his nose and sustaining himself on whatever he can find, invertebrates, gelatinous delicacies — never in his life did he dream, cross his heart and hope to die, of being a pendant and of dangling, albeit loosely, from the whale's side, to prettify him: he much preferred separation. The story of the cable wrapped around his breast is but another legend, composed after the fact by the bookworms, ever in need of edifying epilogues: in all truth it got tangled around his ankle, and, what's more, around his bad one, which is to say his artificial one: to regain his freedom, he just had to unbuckle the two straps joining him, the captain, spiteful Ulysses, to his wooden leg — and after breaking free, the surface, the sea air.

Ulysses too, while we're on the subject, would tell to anybody who wanted to listen his own version of *The Odyssey*: late at night, after some pints, his belly round, his elbow dipped in the froth of the beer, his feet in the sawdust,

his gaze, how to put it? off in the haze beyond foamy pints, struggling to see the landscapes of his native country once again, clearly if at all possible, and in the landscapes, familiar faces. Ulysses in his cups, never (miraculously) without his thousand tricks, would establish his own account of the Sirens, before whistling their melody, or trying to — *C, E flat, G, A flat, B* — then segueing into other episodes. Less cunning, Ahab nevertheless had the presence of mind to abandon himself to Archimedes' principle, wheedling but always reliable, *va piano, va sano*, until he reached the shoreline — there's always a shoreline, somewhere, to permit the survivor of a shipwreck to tell the tale. The members of the crew ought to have seen him, it's not that complicated, a wretch in the sea coughing, spitting, stammering, searching his repertoire for a decisive retort, like Marc Anthony searching for a reply to Cæsar's cadaver; those imbeciles were already too busy to lament him: to repine or rejoice, go into mourning, lower the flag to half-mast, have the bugler play taps, and offer up the captain's sunken body to Legend.<sup>3</sup> (In other words, to make Ahab out to be the bogeyman we all know today: for eternity represented as standing on one foot, like a seahorse, but in a more heavy-handed style: one hand gripping both Testaments; the other, the saga of the Atreidæ.)

He floated: what else would you want him to do? for many nautical miles, navigating by the Sun's position, then at night by Cassiopeia — the Snake, the Swan, the Pneumatic Machine, finally the Bag of Coal. On his back, by night,

3. The captain floated a long time: to float well like that takes calm, an abnegation we hardly expected from him — it would have been more likely to see him sink straight down, definitively, an old dagger sharpened a thousand times and chained to an anvil, serving him first as a memento, then as his fate.

always floating, so as to be able to sleep, like a fugitive, Ahab has nothing better to do than contemplate the stars and take part in dialogues of Ahab with Hercules, or Ahab with Castor, or Ahab with the Little Dipper, which, tenderly (the tenderness of the good fairy, hovering over Pinocchio's crib — you can't get any cornier than that) shows him the way homewards, toward terra firma. Borne along by his odyssey's momentum, once he sets foot on land he totters, as Sindbad or anyone else in his situation would; you'd think that was the lingering effect of alcohol, the painful morning hours after a night of drunkenness — neither the captain, nor hypothetical Sindbad, nor any other hypothetical navigator would be able to say to what degree that drunkard's walk was the seafaring epic's movement continued on terra firma: one would need time for the demonstrations, the lyricism of a poet of the sea, which is not always welcome (Ahab could be emphatic sometimes, "in the spin-drifts," and he wouldn't have wanted to be bombastic, too).

*Back on dry land Ahab reneges in style*

From here on out, no more sailing for him: he already gave [1910] quite a lot of himself, with the generosity of those who a) have nothing to lose, b) act regardless of the cost, c) don't notice the passing of time, d) don't know how to do anything else, e) are resigned to being what they are, f) think that by blind passion they will discover one day or another their life's purpose underneath a rock or behind some door, g) are chained to themselves and their station in life. From now on, Ahab is resolved to stay on dry land: not even the wood of the docks, which is stable, but still a bit too unsteady: rocks, tar, asphalt, cigarette paper, fields as far as the eye can see, the interior of the country, pebbles, the

Rockies, and, for water, just enough to fill a bucket (points e and g are inexact, attributable to the Ahabian penchant for flourishes).

He knew how to renege in style (once more) — in fact, he's one of the boldest renegades this Earth has ever brought forth, on its continents: a renegade to himself, coldly turning his back on himself, forgetting himself, ignoring himself nonchalantly, which quite surpasses renunciation or simple betrayal (but think how joyful that must be: to become a recidivist is, in his eyes, as good as learning a new tap dance move: a supplementary lightness, a string on his bow, say, and the possibility of a slipping off in yet another direction). He was a sailor, indeed; salt gathered in the corners of his lips, in the hollows of his ear, and in his belly button, he let himself be corroded along with his ship, amidst the fumes of iron oxide; his life was rolling and unsteady, always pitching this way and that, incessantly changing, in response to the waves and resilience of his ships: the horizontal line, he no longer knew it, he had renounced it first, God second (already there were renunciations, just as we excommunicate those who have slipped away from us); he remembered the horizontal line the way one recalls a memory that's already passed into legend, or the tales of other sailors (when he rediscovered it on dry land, he didn't quite recognize it, for he was looking at it askew: he had to get his land-lubber reflexes back). During his life as a sailor, he's to have set foot on land (if the calculations are correct, if the legend is true) three times total, no more: once in Nantucket, once in Egypt, once in China, where he crushed the toes of a Sinologist (he would have preferred a Jesuit), the rest of the time, for better or worse, loyal to the waters of the sea. Now look — here he is far from all that, in the middle of the city:<sup>4</sup>

4. Its streets are somehow familiar to him.



no longer can he tell port from starboard, he doesn't even want to try, no one will ever ask him to distinguish between halyard and clew, which makes his life so sweet; without trying to, he forgets the laws of navigation, headwind, tailwind, what it means to luff into the wind, the cordage, the draft, and the billowing of the sails; it's been months since he's seen a parrot up close, even longer since he last fed one, and longer still since he had a good chat with one — and in the restaurants where he dines, he sends back anything resembling a cockle.<sup>5</sup>

*Fifty tons of grief (50% fat)*

"A sudden feeling of emptiness" the day when Moby Dick, still proud of his last battle (three men into the water) realizes that the captain has concluded his hunt, not just temporarily, but forever, and gone back to dry land: many long minutes go by, during which the immense fish experiences first pride, then relief, and after relief, a regal peace, after regal peace, a meditation on tranquility, then doubts about the real reasons behind this silence: whether it bodes well or ill. For his part, Ahab's thoughts circle back to it every time a memory of the whale returns, unexpectedly, whether because of a donut that floats to the surface or the outline of a mass of seaweed glimpsed on a bed of crushed ice at the fishmonger's: for the whale, Ahab's departure must signify a broken heart weighing nearly a ton (he immediately feels bad: *a one-ton heart* is a mistake no cetologist sailor should make — and *broken heart* is in poor taste).

5. On one leg, the life of a *picaro* and a door-to-door salesman — anything, so long as it's on dry land.

*Back on dry land Ahab rids himself of salt and of his wooden leg*

He gets his wooden leg replaced for a ridiculously low price: he learns to accept his hobble, it suits his character, and his unsteady humors, and it inspires commentaries, including his own — but to hop is a more awkward maneuver: a few yards if he has to, if he ever has the talent to choreograph it all, striking a kind of balance between comedy and Nosferatu-style terror, but after a few steps there's no contest, clownishness gets the better of dread. Another leg, for three dollars, in the shop of a furniture dealer who, while he waited, was nice enough to saw off the foot of an imitation Louis XVI side table made in Oregon, too short by a third of an inch, oh well, perfection can always wait till tomorrow. Rid of salt, he ventures into the city,<sup>6</sup> that of New York, New York, due west, turning his back on the ocean (let it sink into oblivion: let it storm, let it lap, let it foam and crest to amuse itself in the middle of nowhere, let it swallow up ocean liners whole, little does he care, the captain leaves it behind for fields of rye, "there he'll sow the seeds of the epic"). More realistically, he heads north up Broadway, having a banana for each of his three meals, then a pretzel or a bagel bought at the corner of such-and-such street and avenue; with every step, more a landsman, not a plowman exactly, but in any case a pedestrian on the sidewalks; back in the city, he relearns the mysterious rules that govern it, those of traffic, those of politeness. His first years back on land are years of reintegration and adaptation (he should have known that was coming), in other words, years of humiliations, accompanied by instruction, followed by obedience, strategies of effacement,

6. 40° 42' 28" North, 74° 01' 43" West (Trinity Church, near Wall Street).

of mimicry, of extreme caution, then cunning, the progressive use of codes, of all those tacit rules assembled in a city at the same place and time like a legion of three thousand citizens waiting for the theater doors to open the night of a premiere, in the rain, between the light of the marquees and the cars' headlights.

The work-day week: odd jobs: no way he's going to prepare fish filets or crack open oysters and lay them out on a carpet of seaweed and ice: he would sooner be a blacksmith, or perhaps even a puller of teeth, if there's still a market for that, if that kind of trade still exists at the time of the first pneumatics. After forging horseshoes he becomes a shoeshiner, an iconic position, so close to shoesoles the whole livelong day, with an unrestricted view of details that might otherwise go unnoticed, which would have been a shame; he learns to wax the entirety of the leather surface without touching the laces, he acquires the ability to distinguish with a quick glance brown from maroon, maroon from chestnut, and six or seven nuances of black, bloody black never completely black (cherry black, prune black, petroleum black, sepia, old inkblot black, burnt paper, stump black, charcoal): in twelve months of shining shoes, he might have acquired the vocabulary of a minor master in the Academy of Fine Arts. (That's what he tells himself over and over again to maintain his dignity: the most wretched jobs all have their respective *savoir-faires*, and competence in the back of a greasy spoon can also be a trap, as one calls upon it when one needs a reason to feel proud — even swinging a bag of garbage into a dump truck with the poise of a golfer demands careful attention to one's stance, to balance, elasticity, looseness, and strength: to the swing of a golf champion we could happily add the precision of the basketball player.) After that, a deliveryman for blocks

of ice, plodding up staircases to the top floor, the ice block on his shoulder wrapped in a towel (at every door people greet him not like the Messiah nor as one of the Magi, but with the exact recognition that's due to him, no more, no less; his customers greet him as their equal, for those buyers of blocks of ice are likely deliverymen, too). After that, hotel porter: this being a form of social climbing, the proof of free enterprise and the freedom to succeed: shaved twice daily, dressed in red and yellow with a hat shaped like a hat box, and dissimulating the captain's age under, what's that? an air of adolescent jest. He opens and shuts the hotel door before and after families, then remains standing there like one of the hotel decorations, as he blindly counts the quarters in his pocket with his fingers — when he's not opening and closing, he sets the revolving doors spinning, which is so much more fun: practically the beginnings of an artist's (a musician's) life.

Later, he becomes a kitchen hand, a saucier, peeler, and prepper in a French restaurant — every morning, he has that real or unreal nightmare of braids of garlic being unloaded by the ton by the service door, and on the other side of the door, the Léons and Raymonds relaxedly chopping and chatting and singing old Batignolles tunes as if they were stuffing bales full of cotton: the same gesture repeated over and over, till they die. Braids or not, Ahab stays in the kitchen, savoring the steam from the hot oil, hearing the exotic names *consommé* and *blanquette*, knowing or thinking that he knows the different stages a cheese goes through, all those Gallic hierarchies, from *blanc*, *frais*, and *mou* on up through *noir*, *sec*, and *solide* like a hockey puck on ice: he sees the milk curds giving way to mold, and the chef would like to bask in that mold, he associates it with the smack of the

tongue against the palate to make his sip of wine the more exultant (so he says). He also dreams that he had to raise frogs, and then chase after them, late nights when ten snobs came to play at being Old World artists seated around a table, lovers of the *persillade* they came to love in Paris; truth be told, most of the time he doesn't do anything but pour pots of boiled vegetables into a cone-shaped colander: the French call that a *chinois*, and they retain their seriousness (in truth their humor dates back to Louis XIV).

*Gentleness and inertia of water: Moby Dick's soft grudge*

The adventures of Scarface and of Little Caesar are frenzied on terra firma, they are fatal after high-speed pursuits: since they don't take place in the ocean, they don't benefit from the gentleness of its waters, which makes the most impulsive gestures seem to have the slowness of a dance long premeditated: there can be no haste there, nor any just as deplorable premature fervors, and no irritation, apart from the rage of the squid, and even then, its ink cloud still floats, by its essence — it is aggressive, but in undergoing dilution it proves the indeterminacy of its causes, which renders it almost elegant. At the bottom of the ocean, you must know, many months separate the intention from the blow dealt, and seeing as this whale is slow, a defeat takes years before it becomes an occasion for rancor: a little hesitation suffices to let long months elapse, some seasons chock-full of expectancy: two or three times round the planet through the warm seas and through the icy seas under a bluish ceiling, and one more year, more bated breath (we had better call that *circumspection*), before deciding to pass definitively from hypothesis to combat.

*Ahab on dry land — boot leather and donut dough*

From where he is standing (a cobbler's shop), the captain has time, like Spinoza before him, to reflect, nay, rather to perfect his reflections: he (the descendant of Abraham, that is) used to grind his glass pieces to transform them through silica dust into such beautiful, diaphanous bubbles, crossed by a surely divine light, both charitable and vulnerable at once; he must have been not a little proud to make such beautiful symbols for an honest salary day after day. The captain, another descendant, but of exiles like those from Ireland, raging and unfortunate, all postulants and sons of Prometheus, every one of them as opaque and raspy as Spinoza's bubble was translucent, our man Ahab re-nails shoe soles in a perfume of leather glue, his nails cut short but dirty still; all day long he turns over old boots at the bottom of which, in the bend of the boot, the leather calyx religiously retains odors of the plantar arches (there is always a client to remind him of: man's essence, the sweat of his brow sunken down just that far). He unnails, he re-nails, he threads the needles, he cuts the leather, he lets it dry, the lighting is poor, and during that time he advances his Ethics, of which no one will ever hear. After the whale comes the time of introspection: twelve hours a day spent refurbishing boots for time-pressed clients, the mind floating almost as free as, say, a goldfish in its bowl, he has all his leisure to study Ahab, Ahabism, Ahabicity, the Ahabian gesture, the Ahabesque style, the sickness and syndrome of Ahab. Perfectly anonymous down here, the soles of his shoes laid out before him, passing incognito under the name of McNamara (that or another) borrowed from a cabin boy lost to the sea after slipping on a bar of soap, he happens however to have some news of himself, by way of memories:

he compares his lost reputation to the smoke wafted from a half-extinguished cigar from the far end of the world, reaching him in a softened form, almost sweet, almost benevolent.

He makes donuts (for others than himself, other “valiant workers,” the kind who take pride in their insomnia — from very early in the morning, till very late at night): fishing in the oil for lumps of dough consoles him no doubt for the whale hunt: a victory every time, every catch successful, with the skimmer, the absorbent papers, and to bless the capture, a dash of sugar, just three flicks of the wrist, no more; he feeds the masses with the help of miles of dough (when he was chasing the sperm whale, he used to say he was filling up the millions of oil lamps of a city like Boston — those who know him will say he always had a keen sense of consequences, he made such a big deal of them). He sells newspapers (under the roof of a cramped, all-season hut, ecumenically stocking parish bulletins and magazines of nude girls, in pink corsets); every night he battles sleep behind the hotel counter in order to be able to extend his feeble hospitality to business travelers arriving late on the wrong train: two half-specters, traveler and night guard, greet each other under a somewhat yellow, somewhat green lighting, the traveler coming to seek sleep under his sheets, the guard multiplying his tricks to stay alert: cross-words and horror novels not sufficing, one has to resort to cold water, or reach a stage of lucid sleeplessness through reason.<sup>7</sup> He gives blood, of course: for a fixed fee and for a lukewarm, heaven-sent lunch, gone in a flash; thoughtlessly, he fills up transparent sacks, with the vague & bewildered

7. There exist quiet oysters / No quiet oyster is fun / Some oysters are no fun at all.

sentiment that he is at long last fulfilling the destiny of Jesus (who used to give His blood too, in all four directions, found sandwiches enticing, and renounced his pride three times before the cock's crow every morning and, apart from a feeling of dismay (or rather: wariness), didn't leave many traces behind).

He collects garbage (always at dawn, he takes pride in tidying up the scene before serious matters begin); he sells sewing machines, that's part of the pilgrimage necessary to make oneself into a self-made man, a battle-hardened man, whose comforts nobody can reproach — the pedal-driven machine lugged door-to-door is abnegation, vocation, humility as prelude to pride, the tribulation after which he will be allowed to strike it rich, like swooning at the gates of paradise after wearing only clogs with no socks (and the hair shirt); he lifts up countless cardboard boxes, carries pianos, shoos away rats, plasters posters on display boards with a roller dipped in glue, avoids the fish markets like the plague but agrees to clean out the chicken coops, after which, the temptation is great at nightfall to become a taxi driver, his steering wheel, his compass, his foghorn, the need to know the streets crossing one another at right angles as intimately as his own heart: thus to triumph in the avenues after having conquered the Weddell and the Ross gyres.

In the meantime, he lets go of Moby Dick: let no one ever come and speak to him of that immortal grudge: two weeks after having set foot on dry land and heading up Broadway to 70<sup>th</sup> St, he can consider the whale as a childish diversion and the name Moby Dick as the name of one of the seven dancers with plump legs at a neighborhood theater, like those who will soon belt out the first tunes by Cole Porter.<sup>8</sup>

8. For example *Something's Got to Be Done* in *See America First*, February–March 1916.



The white that was to have haunted him for a half century [1916] more and to have been his remorse after epitomizing the grudge, followed him not too closely but not too far off either, just six steps behind, and called itself to his memory at such and such a street corner, and eventually ended up knocking at the door of his macabre, clinical, hotel room, at the bailiff's hour (it knocks at the door, white, white in person, devoid of form and face, and addresses itself to him, tone on tone like plainness itself: death lying on the mortal) — oh yes, all that awful white has shamelessly been confused with the boldest reds and yellows of here below; presently it constitutes the colors of toothpaste on the brush, for amusing hygiene; and in little bursts, it occupies corner laundromats, sometimes the cuffs of shirtsleeves: but Ahab pardons those sleeves, he pardons shirt fronts, too.<sup>9</sup>

He abjures the sea, he forgets the smell of dead fish combined with that of burnt oil and rust, he renounces them unilaterally, let others be nostalgic for such decaying things; he forgets how a one-legged man compensates for the listing of a ship, never again will he know how to fold up a sail (supposing he ever did know how); he considers Moby Dick as just one humpback among thousands of humpbacks dragging their bellies from the Sargasso Sea to the deserts of the Indian Ocean and back. (Forgetting the whale, believe you me, nothing could be easier for him: without a model before him, he even forgets what white, grey, and blue whales look like; he would have to rack his brains, unsuccessfully, to draw a freehand outline of a fish, a compromise between an oval and a triangle.) The stature of a real farmer, at present: a man of the earth, a stranger to the sea air, a boy from the back country for whom an oar, you will

9. We'll have more to say of this shade of white later.

have guessed, is just a grain shovel — his wooden leg's no longer a story of a sailor's combat with monsters, but an accident at the mill, as happens so often around here, in the land of machines carried away by their own momentum.

*Hypotheses on the origins of a cetacean grudge*

Moby Dick is no longer a white whale, but a white whale with a grievance — his intelligence should gain from that, you might even say that the appearance of consciousness in the history of Evolution was triggered one fine morning by a grudge: before that, just an adorable, opulent, mammalian stupidity; after, the onset of tormented intelligence, seated on a thorn, attentive to the least noise, strident and unsatisfied, burrowing ever deeper, beginning with himself, into himself, in the hopes of finding some consolation or the explanation for his anger. Moby Dick comes almost to sharpen himself:<sup>10</sup> vengeance is a new object for him, the need to understand drives him to combine other forms of reasoning with all variety of grudges, the melancholic grudge, or craving for justice, or accountability, competition, mimicry, or the reversal of the Stockholm syndrome, then voracity, planning the perfect crime, a preliminary draft of a portrait of humankind — and that is how the desire for vengeance drives him to conceive first of anthropology, then the Law, the Law from the point of view of the whale, then an Ethics “deploying its corollaries from Polynesia to the Bay of St. Lawrence.” In the fellowship of cetologists, the most zealous put forward (put forward, then cherish) the hypothesis according to which Moby Dick would have been able, if he had had the time, to rewrite the chapters of the

10. It's not that simple: his sharpening is warped by sleep.

*Phenomenology of Spirit* (still others claim *The Critique of Pure Reason*; they quarrel amongst themselves, and meanwhile the question of whether the whale is male or female gets neglected once more).

*Ahab on dry land — visit to right angles*

Ahab, a specialist of greasy donuts or an irritable shoemaker in shades of Havana brown, now becomes a stranger to the world of whales: incapable of distinguishing one species from another, confusing sperm whale with surimi, port with starboard, easterly with westerly, thalassos with pelagics; the *Pequod* he imagines as a hard liquor, Moby Dick as an inexpensive brand of cookies (wafers, cream, vegetable oil), Starbuck as a preacher on 42<sup>nd</sup> St, and the undertow as a sort of overcoat; he gives away his last sailor's sweaters to some volunteers for the Newark orphans, poor as can be, crying a little, their noses running, just what's required of recognition and splendid ingratitude on the part of the beggar before his benefactor (the way back to dignity is through the renunciation of gratitude); he casts into the Hudson all that still remained in his pockets and risked making himself, on the 85<sup>th</sup> floor of those towers, into an old, wretched sailor consumed by nostalgia for the Roaring Forties, and dreaming of one thing alone: telling his listeners standing silent on the other side of the curtains how he saw Tierra del Fuego one March morning through the fog, no more tangible than a cat's tail. On the contrary, he wants to dedicate himself to a new mythology of Earth: he wants stories of humus, dry trees, mosaics of dehydrated soil, the mountains, the salt deserts, the day spreading out over an ocher expanse; leaving the corner of Broadway and his leather punches behind, he could choose to sit & balance himself

as best he can upon an ass with a mattock slung over his shoulder and his beard hanging down to his navel, and be taken for a trapper, a gold nugget in each hollow tooth (but what does he know about trappers? and us, what do we know of them, what remains of them?). Tomorrow, the hillside, its tufts of grass, the scree, the wasp's nests, the hardy and intoxicating flora, the blue and white spruce, the Methuselah tree, and soon, the lichens, the dicotyledons, not a grouper in sight, thank God, no catfishes, none of those uncertain and treacherous viscosities of the seafloor, where nothing is exactly as it looks — if need be, Ahab converts to the proper religions, he gets dubbed a hermit, grain on grain, ochre against ochre, desiccated too, deeply mysterious, so accustomed to solitude that he no longer expects anything from anybody: not rain, not the social worker coming regularly to the side of the mountain to take out of their lairs the old orthodox monks gnawed by vermin, forgotten by the tax authorities. The hillside, the desert, or else the big city: an urbanism at first savage, then calculated, major works and minor details, millions of souls cleverly mingling with one another, top to tail and side by side, coiled and folded (and also iterative, alternative, intermittent, and successive) — America's city, sufficiently on edge, and above all delighted to relax and without scruples to roll out its orthogonal pride over millions of acres. (The catfish is not to be eaten, one dissects it with disdain in one's plate with one's fingernails, provided that one has fingernails like claws — the hardest part is then to consider what's edible, what's not, and to do so with seriousness (though neither humor nor seriousness improves the taste of the catfish).)

The megalopolis (let's be grandiloquent): after the ocean and its jellyfishes, a true kindergarten, Ahab could detect dangers there by reasoning, one thousand per acre, which

would make his stroll not a jot less pleasant — according to his meager and unreliable memories, the ocean was fleeting, unpredictable, spineless, then in the next moment, vindictive, then falsely enchanting, always unkept promises of the islands of Calypso and coral reefs: and above all, the infamy of the ocean can be gauged by the infamy of its inhabitants. The city, on the other hand, is sincerity itself (at least that's the captain's view of it: and this gives us some idea of his fatigue at this time in his life): sharp angles, visible at sunrise, at sunset and all the livelong day, cleanly reflecting the sky if it is uniform and blue; the height of the towers is not the mark of contempt or arrogance, it is the upwards continuation, with a touch of hieratism, of certainties acquired at ground level: certainties of the elevator repairman (or of the window-washer who hoists himself up by the strength of his arms). Ahab knows that if he bothered to, he would find hostility itself in certain alleyways, the laws of hostility, fighting for food, the division of species into predators and prey, the final degree of pragmatism, its fulfillment or its corruption, it depends; out a row of dormer windows someone would show him two adorable old men tenderizing one another with two snug chokeholds.<sup>11</sup> To that we might also add one-eyed cats, dead dogs, the obese person lifted up by six firemen and brought out on a stretcher into the light of day, a broken windowpane, the bartender, the meatloaf, the laundry, the laundry line, the return of the husband who's drunk and of the husband who isn't, Homeric verses singing the shuttering of the factories, commerce, gutted pieces of furniture, an adolescent sleeping under a fire escape, bleeding wounds, no pharmacy,

11. That being said, sea animals all have a sense of premonition, which renders them suspicious.

the organization of markdown sales as indistinct from resignation and craftiness, the hope of a joy sought out then found or counterfeited by haggling over things frankly ridiculous, in bargains considered the equivalent of a party and in the windfall of two dress shirts for the price of one. The captain could lead his visitors through the alleyways, greeting every one-eyed cat by its first name and offering his absolution to the wayward girls, if he chances on any (no guarantee), he would point out the laundry lines, where they begin, where they end, comparing them to his hammocks, and then the squirrel on the line, sash-windows looking into kitchens, the steam of meals or of laundry, tired women, little boys dreaming of vehicles not knowing if the pleasures of combustion will win out over those of the trip, or vice versa. He would play the know-it-all, ethnologist to the poor, sing the fable heard elsewhere, the one of the poor on the outskirts of town, in the backyards, he would point with his finger to the fissure running through the façade and to the hole in the vein of the arm (his learned gaze, his comprehension residing therein); he would tell you how families recognize the belly of a pregnant girl without touching it and prophesy with their index finger the eighteen years ahead — having done all that, Ahab would allow himself to be more virtuous still, a rhapsode observing minuscule beings, attentive to the beauty of shipwrecks, of survivors, and of food sealed tight in stubborn packaging; he alone would see imperceptible beauties, he would see elegance or in its absence accidental forms of grace, the colors of bedroom curtains, or five centuries of Spanish culture epitomized in a frying pan; by raising up the cat flaps, he would bring talents rushing out, lovers of music, library clerks, archivists, war veterans who had the war tattooed on their arms, proofs of love, marks of respect, traces of palms on handrails, and

beautiful, honorable resentments for they involve memory, secular conflicts, almost becoming legend, some patience, some abnegation, but also incompatible prides; then a flower in a vase, and in another bedroom the exact reproduction of the *Madonna of the Annunciation*: a teenage girl, reading *Superman*, the proof of her virginity, a lily, a transparent glass, a dormer window looking out on the exterior, caution, fear, disbelief, a blue sweater verging on black, and at the door a young, handsome, golden blond simpleton, in pointy shoes, come to transmit a message: an invitation to the cinema.

*Ahab in the city — joyous absence of destiny*

And now that his whale is gone, and he has comically outlived his death, finding himself alone back on land, he must carry on his way, let's put it like that, while dispensing with all manner of ends. That could lead him into the life of a dishonorable vagabond — on the contrary, he intends to perfect his aristocracy and take destiny's absence as a precondition to a fully realized life.

Is it possible to live without always orienting himself [1912] in the direction of a white sperm whale — the sperm whale at the far end of the street? To reach that other extremity, playing here the part of destination, the pedestrian can count on the force of habit alone, one foot in front of the other: the absence of destiny should not be for him an absence of a reason to live, and the pedestrian walking down the sidewalks of these whaleless streets needs to have spirit enough to convert that absence of destiny into casualness: a freedom approximate to that of the single person on Sunday in their shirttails and slippers, all their griefs accomplished, done, like their duties, all their debts settled, in any case lain aside for a long while, gone with his last ship,





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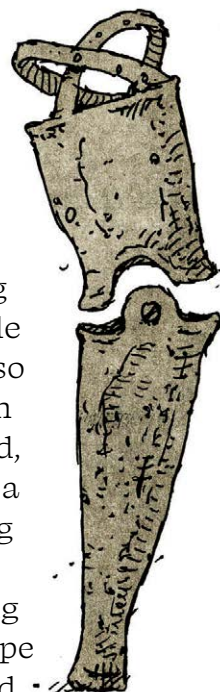
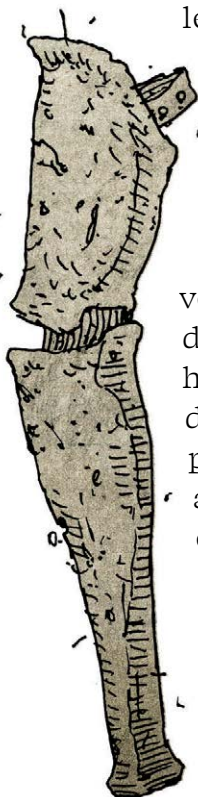
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The reader will find here the true aftermath of the adventures of Ahab, self-described captain, survivor of his last fight against a giant fish. We will see how this retiree with a wooden leg tried to sell his whale story to the highest bidder – in the form of a Broadway musical, then a Hollywood script. Along the way, we will encounter Cole Porter & his chorus girls, but also Cary Grant, Orson Welles, Joseph von Sternberg & F. Scott Fitzgerald, drowned in his alcohol, as well as a host of producers, shady to varying degrees. We will remember the passage of young Ahab embarking at seventeen for London in the hope of playing Shakespeare there, and the circumstances that presided over the meeting of the librettist Da Ponte with Herman Melville in 1838. We will learn, ultimately, the best way to make the Manhattan cocktail a success and with what tenacity the indestructible Moby Dick seeks revenge on his nemesis.



Translated by Jacob Siefring & Tegan Raleigh