

REVOLVING THE VORTEX; or, Working through Trauma at Sea

The famous epilogue of Melville's *Moby-Dick* provides the necessary justification for the novel's very existence—a first-person account of the *Pequod's* sinking is possible, needless to say, because 'one did survive the wreck' (Melville, 2002a: 526). Ishmael thus emerges from the catastrophe visibly as a witness—and recall that he explicitly declares that he 'only escaped alone to tell thee' (526). But I propose to pay closer attention to Ishmael's exact physical position at the time of the wreck as he describes it (with remarkable detail for such a short passage) in the epilogue:

So, floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and in full sight of it, when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly, drawn *towards the closing vortex*. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. *Round and round*, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that *slowly wheeling circle*, like another Ixion I did *revolve*. (526) [emphasis mine].

His status as a (reliable) witness would seem guaranteed since Ishmael claims to have been 'floating on the margin' and 'in full sight' of the *Pequod's* disaster, but Ishmael also claims to have been drawn towards a 'closing vortex'. It is on this 'revolving' of Ishmael's that I now wish to focus so as to propose a broader reflection on the narrative strategies adopted by Melville in his 'wicked book'.

Despite the fact that Ishmael is a paradigmatic survivor (the only survivor of a disaster at sea *and* the only survivor of a tyrannical captain), his tale has not often been taken seriously

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as a survivor's narrative.¹ In this paper I intend to treat Ishmael in this way, using the image of the vortex as my guiding metaphor. Deploying contemporary trauma theory, I propose to look at this final whirlpool as an image that fortuitously captures two fundamental aspects of seafaring and of sea writing—elusiveness and circuitousness—and to show how this image aptly connects sea narratives and trauma narratives. With a focus on *Moby-Dick*, I aim to show how some of the ontological features of seafaring both reflect and are reflected by the epistemology of sea writing in ways that are strikingly resonant with the contemporary understanding of trauma. In what ways may our reading of *Moby-Dick* be affected by the final image of 'orphaned' Ishmael floating and revolving around a closing vortex? What are the implications of being caught in a vortex for recovery from trauma—and what are its implications for the transmission of traumatic memory?

THE VORTEX AS THE EMBODIMENT OF SEAFARING

A sea vortex, Paul Brodtkorb noted in *Ishmael's White World*, is 'a circular movement of water with a vacuum at the center' (Brodtkorb, 1965: 38). I will return later to the traumatic resonances of this definition, but let me first linger a little longer on how the emptiness or elusiveness that Brodtkorb's wording evokes accords well with the experience of seafaring. Not only is the ocean, as Hester Blum has noted, 'a landscape that cannot be tangibly possessed' (Blum, 2008: 215), but this elusive quality is also consistent with a second recurring feature of seafaring: adventurous seamen had to put up with 'the emptiness of an environment they had presumed to be full of interest' (117). This is in fact something that Ishmael

1 While Ishmael's status as a survivor has often been acknowledged in criticism, relatively little attention has been paid to the implications of this status in the novel's narrative strategies. In my MA thesis, titled 'The Witness of the Whale: Trauma, Witnessing and the Enigma of Survival' (2012), I proposed a reading of *Moby-Dick* as a survivor's narrative, deploying trauma theory to show how Ishmael's tale tells and performs trauma. Previous readings of *Moby-Dick* as a survivor's narrative include Janet Reno's *Ishmael Alone Survived*, which sees *Moby-Dick* as Ishmael's recovery process from trauma. For an enlightening exploration of the role of *Moby-Dick* in the transmission of cultural trauma, see Eyal Peretz, *Literature, Disaster and the Enigma of Power*.

the sailor discovers quickly. Recall how his initial desire to 'see the world' (Melville, 2002a: 71) is brutally, though good-naturedly, dismissed by Peleg, who shows him that in the open ocean there is 'not much' to see: 'nothing but water' (72). The passage is jocular, but Ishmael does not fail to note that the view from the weather-bow is 'exceedingly monotonous and forbidding' (72). Indeed, the experience of the surrounding emptiness is for most sailors unsettling, as Blum shows in her study of sea narratives in ante-bellum America, *The View from the Masthead*. In many fictional and non-fictional accounts, Blum observes, seamen reveal a strong sense of dislocation and desolation deriving from their encounter with the 'expanse of water' or 'trackless ocean' (Blum, 2008: 117). Moreover, this desolation is felt as a unique, 'sailor-specific' feeling. Consider, for example, the words of the keeper of a journal of the whaler *Doctor Franklin*:

Night watch, the first night at sea in a strange ship. *No one can tell!* Except those who have experienced it; the lonesome, desolate, forsaken sort of feeling that some poor sailors suffer from, on leaving [the] land for an uncertain period.²

Despite the promise of an all-encompassing perspective, the view from the masthead, then, offered nothing to see—only watery emptiness.

But this emptiness was not the only thing that drove a nervous sailor to distraction. Like Ishmael, another of Melville's narrator's, Wellingborough Redburn, learns early in 'his first voyage' that 'nothing was to be seen but water—water—water' (Melville, 2002a: 74), and even a peep at a foreign country in sight makes him mutter that he 'might as well have stayed at home' (146). However, with all his apparent naïveté, young Redburn seems to have grasped something else about the sailor's predicament:

2 Log 1033, held at the Whaling Museum Research Library in New Bedford, Massachusetts. I had access to this and other logbooks and sailors' journals during my stay in New Bedford as the 2012 recipient of the Walter Bezanson-Melville Archive Fellowship, granted by the Melville Society. I am grateful to the members of the Melville Society Cultural Project (Jennifer Baker, Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Wyn Kelley, Tim Marr, Christopher Sten and Robert K. Wallace) as well as to the staff of the Whaling Museum Research Library for their invaluable assistance.

'It was then, I began to see, that my prospects of seeing the world as a sailor were, after all, but very doubtful; for sailors only go *round* the world, without going *into* it' (155) [emphasis original]. Hence, if the sailors' prospects of seeing the world are deluded, it is so not only because of the barrenness and emptiness that surround them but also because in their journeys they are doomed to an inexorable circularity. Indeed, sea voyages were inherently circular—they ended where they had started. Whaling voyages, in particular, were non-linear and non-teleological. Or, rather, their telos—the whale—was in perpetual motion and the whale ship circumnavigated the oceanic landscape in chase.

As in the vortex, then, in seafaring and in sea writing elusiveness and circularity are not merely juxtaposed but inextricably blended to the extent that any aspiration of discovery (or of knowledge) seems unattainable. It is as if the empty and slippery immensity of the sea could be only indirectly and obliquely approached, as if only circumvention and circumnavigation could provide some degree of mastery over the sea's essential ungraspability.

THE VORTEX AND THE AFTERMATH OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

The vortex offers a powerful image of the drifting circularity peculiar to life at sea. But now I wish to continue exploring this vortical image in order to map its connections with the structure and aftermath of psychological trauma. The vortex in fact provides a powerful image of the spiral-like, ceaseless revolving around an event that cannot be fully known, since it was not fully grasped as it occurred, according to Cathy Caruth's formulation of trauma (Caruth, 1996: 91).

Building on Caruth's influential work on trauma as 'unclaimed experience', literary trauma theory, in the last twenty to twenty-five years has leaned on a model of trauma based upon the intrinsic unknowability of the traumatic event. Since the event is 'not assimilated or experienced fully at the time [of its occurrence], but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it' (Caruth, 1995a: 4) [emphasis original], trauma itself is conceived of as an epistemological challenge or '*affront to understanding*' (Caruth, 1995a: 153 [emphasis original]). In recent years postcolonial and cultural theory has taken issue with this psychoanalytical,

event-based model of trauma for its failure to account for certain phenomena, especially when we move from individual to collective trauma—and from Western to non-Western contexts.³ While I submit to the necessity of rethinking Caruth's formulations, I believe that retaining her theoretical model proves useful.⁴ For my purpose in this paper, the psychoanalytical model nicely elucidates how the very structure of trauma is replicated in the content and form of both fictional and non-fictional trauma narratives. In this sense, it is a fitting starting point to tease out the implications of my governing metaphor: the vortex.

With its insistence on the event's structural incomprehensibility and on the belatedness of the traumatic experience, psychological trauma has come to be understood in terms of absence: as in the vortex, there is a vacuum, a void (of knowledge) at the center of trauma. However, this absence at the heart of the traumatic experience would seem to be at odds with the 'repeated possession' to which Caruth alludes (Caruth, 1995a: 4). There would seem to be simultaneously too little and too much memory in trauma, since

3 The critique of the psychoanalytical model of trauma comes from different tendencies within cultural studies—from postcolonial to queer theory. An event-centered and dissociative model of trauma as that proposed by Caruth and others, such as Shoshanna Felman, inevitably leads, according to some, to the pathologization of trauma, which, in turn, undermines the force of the denunciation that the violence or discrimination at the root of the traumatizing event would deserve (see: for example Cvetokovic 2003). On the other hand, the pathologization proposed by trauma theory allegedly places excessive emphasis on narrative closure as the only way out of trauma, thereby dismissing non-narrative and even non-linguistic responses to trauma, especially from a non-Western context (see: Kabir 2014). This line of criticism seems somewhat unjustified to me, given that Caruth (1996) and others, for example Anna Whitehead (2004), emphasize precisely the tendency to resist unproblematic closure at work in many literary and artistic forms of expression that aim at the transmission of trauma. The psychoanalytical and neurobiological model of trauma is also believed to lead to an excessive homogenization of the traumatic experience (especially when we consider that trauma theory has traditionally focused on the representation of Euro-American traumas, namely the Holocaust), thereby dismissing the responses to and representations of trauma in non-European contexts (See Rothberg 2008).

4 See Rothberg 2008 for a compelling argument against the wholesome dismissal of Caruth's model in the effort to 'decolonize' trauma studies.

the survivor is haunted by the paradoxical intrusion of an event that she does not fully own, but this possession is misleading. Drawing mainly on the work of Pierre Janet at the turn of the twentieth century, trauma theory relies heavily on the notion of *dissociation*⁵ to account for the alternating or coexisting amnesia and hypermnesia in trauma. The dissociated state of consciousness *during* the occurrence of the traumatic event prevents the proper integration of the traumatic memory into narrative memory. The traumatic event, then, is ‘itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness’ (Caruth, 1995a: 152). Accordingly, the intrusion of traumatic memories in the form of re-enactments, flashbacks and nightmares remains unavailable to conscious control. The survivor is unable to consciously retrieve her traumatic past but, at the same time, intrusive, unwanted images haunt her present. The intrusive image points to an event—a vacuum—that was not initially experienced but that, paradoxically, feels all too real. It conveys ‘both the *truth of an event*, and the *truth of its incomprehensibility*’ (153) [emphasis original].

This inherent paradox of trauma—this all-too-present absence at its core—results in the spiral-like quality of any attempt at mastery of the traumatic past. The life of the traumatized survivor is disrupted by the uncontrolled intrusion of deceptively vivid traumatic reenactments and recollections which, their apparent vividness notwithstanding, cannot provide direct knowledge of an event that is not available for conscious recall. How is this elusiveness and contrasting immediacy to be reconciled? If the experience is not available for direct retrieval, how is the survivor to master her unclaimed experience? As in seafaring and sea writing it seems that trauma’s essential ungraspability could only be indirectly and obliquely approached. As in the vortex, there is a non-linear,

5 See Caruth 1995a, 151 ff. For an overview of Janet’s concept of dissociation, see van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995). Although I would not want to conflate psychological trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, the latter is being increasingly considered a dissociative (rather than anxiety) disorder, also according to neurobiological research. On trauma and dissociation see, among others, Judith Herman (1992); van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth (eds) (1996); and Rothschild (2000).

non-teleological but circumvented trajectory in the aftermath of trauma.

But this inherent paradox of trauma also explains the very form of many survivors' narratives. 'If trauma fiction is effective', Anne Whitehead claims, 'it cannot avoid registering the shocking and unassimilable nature of its subject matter in formal terms' (Whitehead, 2004: 83). Precisely because the traumatic experience is not wholly grasped while it occurs, being instead defined by its belatedness, the survivor's narrative (which is, precisely, a belated response to it) can be seen as 'the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to' (Laub, 1992: 57). But this is not a straightforward process, because the event the survivor strives to come to know was not fully assimilated in the first place. Trauma narratives involve—and often dramatize—the processes of 'acting-out' and 'working-through' trauma. Acting-out is a repetitive process 'whereby the past... is repeated as if it were fully enacted, fully literalized' (LaCapra, 2001: 148). Working-through, in turn, 'involves repetition with significant difference' (148); it 'means coming to terms with the trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it may be necessary and even in certain respects desirable or at least compelling' (44). While acting-out might be described as the unconscious, uncontrollable return or reenactment of the traumatic memory or experience, working-through entails the (attempt at) narrativization of the traumatic experience by the survivor. However, 'acting-out' and 'working-through' are best understood not as opposites, but as the 'intimately related parts of a process' (143):

Acting out and working through... constitute a distinction in that one may never totally be separate from the other, and the two may always mark or be implicated in each other. But it's very important to see them as countervailing forces and to recognize that there *are* possibilities of working through that do not simply loop endlessly back into repetition compulsion or go to the (illusory) extreme of total transcendence of acting out, or total transcendence (or annihilation) of the past. (150, original emphasis)

Working through trauma involves the integration of traumatic memories into narrative memory and it may or may not lead to recovery—but inasmuch as it *may* actually lead to recovery, it is desirable. However, working-through ‘is not a linear, teleological or straightforwardly developmental [...] process’ (148). Working through trauma doesn’t preclude the survivor acting out her trauma again, reliving her traumatic experience, or going back to seemingly integrated memories to find new ways to work them over. Working-through, that is, does not imply the total and definitive transcendence of acting-out—both phenomena may continue to be implicated in each other, in an ascending or descending vortical movement, in the aftermath of trauma.

MOBY-DICK AS A ‘TEXTUAL VORTEX’

The image of the vortex has allowed me to explore connections between two shared features of maritime life and writing on the one hand and of psychological trauma on the other: elusiveness and circuitousness. In what follows, I will tease out my metaphor a bit further, to propose *Moby-Dick* as a ‘textual vortex’, as the narrative of a survivor of trauma—the only survivor of a disaster at sea and the only survivor of a tyrannical monomaniacal captain. Trauma theory offers a fascinating key to decode one of the most perplexing features of the novel from the time of its publication—its unconventional form.⁶ A reading of *Moby-Dick*

6 Let me recall that *Moby-Dick* was defined by its contemporary reviewers as ‘an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact’ (anonymous review in London *Athenaeum* 1252, October 25, 1851: 112–13. Parker and Hayford, 2002: 597), an ‘extravaganza’, (anonymous review in London *Spectator* 24, October 25, 1851: 1026–27. Parker and Hayford, 2002: 599), a ‘singular medley of naval observation, magazine article writing, satiric reflection upon the conventionalisms of civilized life and rhapsody run mad’, a ‘strange mixture of smart observations, quaint philosophy, American vulgarisms, and grandiose writing’ (anonymous review in New York *Parker’s Journal* 1, November 22, 1851: 586. Parker and Hayford, 2002: 613). It is precisely the difficulty of setting *Moby-Dick* into a definite genre that accounts for the uneasiness of coeval reviewers and readers alike when confronted with the text. *Moby-Dick* was considered as a ‘wild book... such as we do not remember to have met with before in marine literature;’ ‘neither a novel nor a romance... not a romance, nor a treatise on Cetology. It is something of both’ (review in London *Britannia*, November 8, 1851. Parker and Hayford,

as a survivor's narrative may overturn traditional critical questions about Ishmael's survival: the urgent question being not why does Ishmael survive but, rather, *what does it mean for Ishmael—and for his narrative—to be a survivor*. But this kind of reading might prompt also fascinating questions as to the kind of discourse Herman Melville is enacting when choosing the voice of a traumatized survivor as the narrator of his 'mighty' book.

So why and how should trauma theory affect our reading of *Moby-Dick*? Significantly enough, as early as 1953, Walter Bezanson observed that '[Ishmael the narrator] recounts the coming adventures of young Ishmael as a story already fully experienced. *Experienced, but not fully understood*' (Bezanson, 1953: 654) [emphasis mine]. This formulation strikingly echoes Caruth's understanding of trauma. As though acknowledging his trauma in an 'unformulated' way, Bezanson sensed that Ishmael's need to explain himself 'in some dim, random way' (Melville, 2002: 115) revealed his urge to understand an experience not fully owned, and 'a confession of his inadequacy to find form' (Bezanson, 1953: 648). In what follows I will try to elucidate in what sense this 'inadequacy to find form' becomes the most telling sign of Ishmael's 'unclaimed experience'.

Moby-Dick's on-shore chapters unfold smoothly, with Ishmael the sailor as their protagonist. The reader seemingly sets out on a whaling adventure. However, just as the Pequod leaves the port and the real adventure should begin, Ishmael the sailor all but disappears and the promised adventure seems to find trouble starting. Ishmael the narrator takes over the scene, and his struggle to find form becomes 'one of the major themes of the book' (Bezanson, 1986: 185). Interestingly, Bezanson comments, '[i]t is as if finding a temporary form would in itself constitute one of those 'meanings' which Ishmael is so portentously in search of' (185). Form is yet another way of searching for meaning, for understanding an experience that was not fully grasped as it occurred. Ishmael's struggles to find an apt form to tell his tale mimic his attempts to work through his trauma.

2002: 601). Even amongst the positive reviewers, the questions of form and of narrative structure were a constant concern at the time.

While most of the on-shore chapters follow a conventional novelistic structure, fairly early in the *Pequod's* voyage the reader is confronted with a conspicuously non-novelistic form: the dramatic chapters. This unexpected shift to the dramatic mode has puzzled readers and critics alike: why should Ishmael suddenly turn into a playwright? This thorny question, I contend, might find a valid explanation when seen through the lenses of trauma theory. Drama is indeed an apt form to convey the sense of non-mastery typical of trauma: the (traumatic) past is performatively relieved, or acted out, as if it were fully present. In drama the director-narrator manipulates the elements of the story for 'the "actor", who is bound to enact a drama that, although at some point in the past it happened to her, is not hers to master' (Bal, 1999: ix). In this way, the dramatic mode mimics the reenactment of the traumatic experience, the powerful and uncontrollable intrusion of traumatic memories in all their non-narrative quality, rather than their integration by the survivor into her narrative memory. In the dramatic center of *Moby-Dick* we see Ishmael the sailor in the hands of Ishmael the narrator, who acts as the stage manager, the director of a staged experience that is not sailor-Ishmael's to master. By thus staging the scene in a dramatic form, rather than in narrative discourse, Ishmael seems to be *acting out*, rather than *working through*, his traumatic experience.

Significantly, these behavioral reenactments seem to be triggered by what we might consider reminders of the stressor—the main two dramatic sequences are clustered around two pivotal scenes in *Moby-Dick*, and in particular, around the 'twin centers of gravity in ordering the structure of the Ahab theme' (Bezanson, 1953: 652): 'The Quarter Deck' (Chapter 36) and 'The Candles' (Chapter 119). Even as the dramatic chapters are instrumental to the characterization of Ahab as a tragic hero, both 'The Quarter-Deck' and 'The Candles' represent key moments in Ahab's authoritarian relationship with his crew as well as in the course of the very chase of Moby Dick—two crucial junctures, that is, in Ishmael's traumatic experience. Recall that 'The Quarter-Deck' represents the announcement of Ahab's—and the *Pequod's*—vengeful hunt. It is after all in this chapter where the name 'Moby Dick' (Melville, 2002: 138) is mentioned for the first time. And Ahab's

rhetoric, his rant to an awed crew, is so compelling that, as Ishmael tells us in a following chapter, '[Ahab's] hate [for the White Whale] seemed almost theirs' (158). In 'The Candles' a typhoon is coming 'from the very course Ahab is to run for Moby Dick' (380). The typhoon and the corpusants are taken by Starbuck as ominous omens—but Ahab won't heed the mate's warnings. Ahab, though, will need to impose his authority over the crew once again since on this occasion it is Starbuck's thoughts that 'seemed theirs', and Ahab has to confront a 'half mutinous cry' (383). While 'The Quarter-Deck' signals the start of the catastrophic 'fiery hunt' of Moby Dick, 'The Candles' represents a missed opportunity to abandon it. Since these chapters mark two fundamental turning points in the overarching plot (both in terms of Ahab's authority and of the hunt for Moby Dick), they might easily act as reminders of the stressor and hence trigger Ishmael's reenactment.

However, if the dramatic chapters perform the compulsive phenomenon of acting-out, I will next show how they also replicate the convoluted process of working-through trauma. Unlike other, strictly dramatic chapters in *Moby-Dick*, 'The Quarter Deck' and 'The Candles'—which, by the way, introduce the main dramatic sequences—are themselves a mixture of narrative discourse and dramatic devices. 'The Quarter-Deck' begins with a stage direction, which is nonetheless followed by narrative discourse: the narrator follows Ahab while he walks the deck. As he is about to disclose the true purpose of the *Pequod's* enterprise, the narrator seems to leave the floor to the characters. Their reactions are then unmediatedly registered: the narrator only indicates who is speaking and it is the characters who comment, via explicit or implicit asides, on what is happening on deck. The following four chapters are purely dramatic—soliloquies in which the narrator is completely absent.

In this way, the dramatic chapters and sequences mimic how behavioral reenactments—acting-out—can also happen once the integration of traumatic memories into narrative—working-through—has begun. If, singularly taken, these chapters dramatize Ishmael's acting-out (the literal intrusion of traumatic memories), then the narrative-dramatic chapters illustrate how compulsive reenactments may counteract complete mastery. Moreover,

when viewed jointly and within the economy of the text, the dramatic chapters aptly replicate the meandering, looping, coiling process of working through trauma. Just as 'The Quarter-Deck' and 'The Candles' intersperse narrative discourse with dramatic devices and just as the dramatic chapters and sequences represent 'behavioral parentheses' in the narrative flow, *Moby-Dick's* narrator seems to fall back into acting-out precisely when he seemed to be already well into working-through. The dramatic chapters are preceded by some attempt to narrativize, and likewise followed by narrative discourse, but this does not entail a straightforward, teleological process. Like a *mise en abyme* of the entire narrative, then, both the narrative-dramatic chapters and the dramatic sequences reproduce in miniature the novel's overarching structure, inasmuch as they show that acting-out and working-through may never be completely separated and may always be implicated in each other in the aftermath of trauma. While attempting to integrate, that is, his traumatic memories into narrative memory, Ishmael recurrently relapses into traumatic reenactments and repetitions.

In the narratives of the traumatized, repetition mimics the aftermath of trauma, inasmuch as it, as Anne Whitehead has put it, 'suggests the insistent return of the event, and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression' (Whitehead, 2004: 86). On the one hand, then, repetition relates to acting-out in the sense that it evokes the literal recurring and uncontrollable return of the traumatic memory. On the other hand, working-through also involves repetition, but with significant difference, in a looping movement aspiring to mastery, that implies (or requires) a continuous going back-and-forth one's own unclaimed experience.

In this sense, like the dramatic chapters, the cetological center performs the traumatic compulsive repetition as well. Even if disseminated throughout the narrative, the intrusive, haunting image of the whale becomes ubiquitous in the long, central section in which Ishmael digresses on virtually every aspect and issue connected to whaling. Ishmael's incursions into cetology and whalecraft reproduce the intrusion of an image or idea, something akin to a traumatic flashback—and let me just recall here that for Cathy Caruth, 'to be traumatized is precisely to be *possessed* by an image or event' (Caruth, 1995a: 4–5). But at the same time

the cetological chapters also mirror the survivor's need of going back to the past repeatedly in order to make sense of her traumatic, unassimilated experience. Psychiatrist Judith Herman has argued that 'reconstructing the trauma story also includes a *systematic review* of the meaning of the event' (Herman, 1992: 178) [emphasis mine]. Through the intrusive (and fragmented) image of the whale, then, Ishmael seems to be systematically reviewing his traumatic experience—using the trial-and-error method, as it were—to grasp the meaning that escaped him at the time.

The expository, digressive chapters on the whale's anatomy, activity and on whaling history and technicalities, might then be seen as Ishmael's struggle to understand himself—and to make himself understood. After all, this is what Ishmael seems to anticipate in Chapter 32, 'Cetology':

Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harborless immensities. Ere that comes to pass; ere the *Pequod's* weedy hull rolls side by side with the barnacled hulls of the leviathan; at the outset it is but well to attend to a matter almost indispensable to a *thorough appreciative understanding* of the more special leviathanic revelations and allusions of all sorts which are to follow. (Melville, 2002: 115) [emphasis mine] The *Pequod* has just set sail, and her crew has been introduced. But just before the *Pequod* takes on her vengeful errand, Ishmael feels the need to interrupt his narrative to explain (to) himself. He seems to be aware that his systematizing effort is 'no easy task' (115) but it is an ambitious one: nothing less than '[t]he classification of the constituents of a chaos' (115). Even though Ishmael 'promise[s] nothing complete' (116), he arrives quite straightforwardly at a definition of his subject matter: 'a whale is a *spouting fish with a horizontal tail*' (117). However, the matter is far from settled. By the end of the chapter, Ishmael warns that 'this system [will] not be here, and at once, perfected' (117). 'Cetology', then, announces Ishmael's repeated, systematic reviews of his object of analysis.

In his interruptions of the narrative flow by expository or speculative digressions, Ishmael enacts the 'repetition with significant difference' to which I alluded earlier. Ishmael is 'going back to problems, working them over [...] transforming the understanding of them' (LaCapra, 2001: 178). He seems to have entered an endless loop in which he is compelled to rework, reconsider his assumptions, see the seemingly settled issues from different angles—with shifting tone and formal experimentation. Interestingly, Judith Herman has argued that '[t]he traumatic event challenges an ordinary

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person to become a theologian, a philosopher, and a jurist' (Herman, 1992: 178). In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael acts as a theologian, a philosopher, and a jurist indeed—as well as a historian, a cetologist, and a playwright—returning to his traumatic theme from several contradictory perspectives, circumventing that 'ungraspable something' at the center of his quest.

Ishmael's reviews are systematic but also fragmentary. In his incursions into cetology, whalecraft, and whaling history, Ishmael dissects his object of analysis with a surgeon's precision. In each cetological chapter, Ishmael specializes in a particular section of his broad subject matter and offers a different perspective—a new (re)view of his subject matter. The fragmentation is most evident when it comes to the body of the whale, where Ishmael seems to be accomplishing his captain's desire to 'dismember [his] dismemberer' (Melville, 2002: 143). Ishmael devotes separate chapters or sequences of chapters to the whale's head, his brain, his skin, his penis, his tail and his spout, thereby suggesting the intrusion of fragmentary yet vivid images (traumatic memories) that lack narrative context and, accordingly, the impossibility of knowing the traumatic event in its wholeness—the struggle, that is, to integrate those vivid, frozen images into a coherent narrative.

This fragmentation suggests that the actuality of the traumatic event cannot be grasped in its wholeness, but only through its interrelated fragments, its details. Interestingly enough, in this fragmented or partial vision Ishmael very much resembles his own object of analysis. Recall what Ishmael has to say about how the whale experiences his surrounding environment:

the peculiar position of the whale's eyes, effectually divided as they are by many cubic feet of solid head, which towers between them like a great mountain separating two lakes in valleys: this, of course, *must wholly separate the impressions* which each independent organ imparts. The whale, therefore, *must see one distinct picture* on this side, and *another distinct picture* on that side; while *all between must be profound darkness and nothingness* to him. (Melville, 2002: 262) [emphasis mine] Ishmael seems to share the whale's perceptual proclivities, favoring the juxtaposition of fragmentary and distinct details. The vividness and accuracy of such details might suggest that traumatized Ishmael understands too much, but this is a misleading impression. Conversely, their very uncontrollable intrusiveness and their decontextualized nature prevent him from having a thorough, straightforward knowledge of his experience—he shows a deep and vivid knowledge of every component

of the whale and of whaling but he finds trouble having a coherent, all-encompassing understanding.

With his shifting tone, with his formal experimentation, with his fragmented analyses, Ishmael, like Redburn, seems doomed to go *round* his subject matter, without going *into* it. Indeed, Ishmael himself has to admit that all his approaches seem to be revolving around an ungraspable something—a sort of vacuum—at the center of his (dis)course: ‘Dissect him how I may, then’, he says, ‘but I go skin deep; I know him not, and never will’ (Melville, 2002: 296). In addition to mimicking the disruptive effects of the traumatic memories in the survivor’s everyday life, Ishmael’s repetitions and narrative fragmentation also mimic the disruption of (narrative) chronology and the intermittency of traumatic recall and narrativization, of acting-out and working-through, of his traumatic past. Like many traumatized survivors, Ishmael seems ‘reduced to living an endless present’ (Herman, 1992: 89) in which chronology cannot be linear, but only circular.

Even if the structure of *Moby-Dick* is not strictly circular, it is quite clear that, in various ways, Ishmael enacts a circular discourse. And, as John Bryant observed, ‘circles more than whiteness are the novel’s dominant symbol’ (Bryant, 1993: 190). Paradoxically, while the hunt for Moby Dick is teleological and straightforward, the account of it is not. In ‘The Quarter-Deck’, Ahab’s design is made very clear:

Aye, aye! And I’ll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway maelstrom, and round perdition’s flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, men! To chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. What say ye, men, will ye splice hands on it, now? I think ye do look brave. (Melville, 2002: 139) And yet in the subsequent chapters Ishmael’s account seems to deviate from his captain’s route. He seems to be circumnavigating, avoiding the unspeakable and dreaded experience he is precisely struggling to master. Ishmael circuitous tale performs the very paradox of trauma narratives: the struggle between the impossibility of telling an unassimilated experience and the imperative to tell and thus understand it.

In his tale Ishmael invites the reader to accompany him in ‘the devious zig-zag world circle of the Pequod’s circumnavigat-

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ing wake' (Melville, 2002: 169). And, indeed we actually follow her devious cruise. Ishmael the narrator is not telling his story while comfortably sitting at his desk. Conversely, he wittingly leads us across different cruising grounds: we follow her route 'north-east towards the island of Java' (225), and then 'from the China waters into the Pacific' (361) into 'the heart of the Japanese cruising ground' (372) and then south-eastward, 'towards the Equator' (392), where the *Pequod* is finally 'on the White Whale's own peculiar ground' (393). Each cruising ground will see a different approach to Ishmael's experience—he will, in turns, reenact his past, review it, diving into cetology or whalecraft or history. But, as a whole, the *Pequod*'s circumnavigation offers the ultimate trope for Ishmael's sea narrative and of his oblique, circumvented, vortical approach to his traumatic experience.

ENDLESSLY REVOLVING THE VORTEX?

Ishmael is the only survivor of a disaster at sea—and the only survivor of a tyrannical captain who 'enslaved [the crew] to the race' (Melville, 2002: 414). In the preceding pages I have deployed trauma theory along with the image of the whirlpool to show how Ishmael effectually registers, and replicates for the reader, the shocking nature of his ungraspable survival in formal terms. I have proposed a reading of *Moby-Dick* as a 'textual vortex', since throughout his 'mighty book' we see Ishmael repeatedly looping back to his 'mighty theme'. If, in the epilogue to *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael technically escapes the 'closing vortex', he apparently remains a prisoner—and makes us prisoners—of that ever-revolving wheel.

But, what does it mean for a survivor of trauma to be the prisoner of an ever-looping vortex? Is there a way out of the vortex? And if so, is that way out desirable? Although I have been using a psychoanalytical model of trauma, my reading of *Moby-Dick* does not necessarily lead to pathologization or to an obsession with healing. On the contrary, Ishmael's narrative, like other trauma narratives, shows precisely a possibility of working-through that recognizes why acting-out might be necessary, desirable, and even compelling, as LaCapra would have it, displaying a sort of 'fidelity to trauma'. When integrating his traumatic memories into narrative Ishmael seems to refuse to consent to complete

mastery—he does not want to ‘understand too much’ (Caruth, 1995a: 154). On the contrary, his convoluted tale avoids the loss ‘of the event’s essential incomprehensibility’ and maintains ‘the force of its *affront to understanding*’ (154) [emphasis original].

By presenting *Moby-Dick* as a ‘textual vortex’ I want to highlight how Ishmael’s is a ‘non murderous response’ (Peretz, 2003: 77) to trauma. At the same time, my reading gestures to the ways in which Herman Melville rejected dominant discourses and languages of mastery and proposed, anticipating the contemporary understanding of trauma, ‘a speech that is not simply the vehicle of understanding, but also the locus of what cannot yet be understood’ (Caruth, 1995a: 155) through Ishmael’s voice.

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