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## "Nothing But Blows": Herman Melville and the Contagion of Authority

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**“Nothing But Blows”:**

**Herman Melville and the Contagion of Authority**

**Senior Project Submitted To**

**The Division of Languages and Literature**

**of Bard College**

**by**

**Conrad Brittenham**

**Annandale-on-Hudson, New York,**

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## Introduction

In Chapter Thirty Six of *Moby Dick*, “The Quarter Deck,” captain Ahab rallies the *Pequod*’s crew behind his hunt for Moby Dick, met with no opposition other than from the ship’s first mate, Starbuck. After heatedly bickering for some time, Ahab mentions in an aside, “Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion” (168). What follows is Starbuck’s “tacit acquiescence” to Ahab’s demands. Though it is unclear exactly what the “something” is that comes out of Ahab’s nose, it is clear that this one-track-mind captain succeeds in infecting Starbuck with ‘it.’ Starbuck is powerless to hinder Ahab’s mission, even when given the opportunity. Such an exchange is not alien to Herman Melville’s works, let alone *Moby Dick*.

Melville frames the grip of authority as the result of contagion. Ahab, unable to subdue Starbuck through speech, shoots ‘something’ from his nose and accomplishes what he could not with words. While this “something” that changes Starbuck exists, it is still invisible, made physical only through its motion from out of Ahab, into Starbuck. Another phenomenon that is the result of an intangible, yet physical, exchange, is contagious disease. In many instances of one of Melville’s characters giving orders to another, there is a visible transfer involved, whether it is a kick, or “blow”, a breath, or a glare—people don’t do things simply because they are told to, but because they have to, against their will.

My project will discuss the various ways in which we can understand disease outside of its medical context and within Melville’s ideas about the passing of authority. Roberto Esposito, a contemporary Italian philosopher, argues in his text, *Immunitas*, that the category of

“immunization” can act as an interpreter between all phenomena in the world having to do with a “protective response in the face of risk” (1). Esposito is able to generalize intrusions including computer virus, immigration, and terrorism, through terminology relating to the body and its immune system. He uses the term of ‘immunization’ to describe the systematic ways in which a body protects itself from infection. Esposito argues that all matters of security can be discussed through a lens of ‘contagion’ and ‘immunization’ no matter the context: in any case, “what was healthy, secure, identical to itself, is now exposed to a form of contamination that risks its devastation” (2). A body or community is the same as itself; just as a body has certain inherent characteristics such as blood type and genetics, a society is similarly inherent to itself, be it through race, ideology, nationalism, or what have you. While appearing medical, this framework is broadly applicable. The scope of the framework of disease can go beyond that of biology while retaining the same meaning and significance.

Esposito uses the immune system as an ideological link between seemingly unrelated social phenomena, such as topics in immigration, cyber warfare, sovereignty, law, and violence—to introduce the idea of what it means to be “immune” and what it means to be “common” within the structure of society. It is through this type of lateral thinking that the link between disease and authority within Melville’s works can be found. Esposito is primarily concerned with how disease manifests in all these different modes. Disease is characterized primarily by how it moves around and how it infects. Using disease as an “interpretive category” as Esposito does his idea of immunization, this project will attempt an understanding of disease and the immune system beyond its purely biological context, and will focus on how the transference of authority within Melville’s novels works in similar ways to the transfer of disease.

Beyond biological contagion; ideas, people, and places, can act or be treated as harmful diseases. The spread of Communism was treated like an outbreak of disease. Combatting Communism looked like disease prevention; with the employment of tactics like quarantine, isolation, exclusion, and immunization. In the case of Berlin, the physicality associated with the spread of ideology becomes especially apparent in the formation of its dividing wall, acting as a boundary existing in the physical world intended to keep ideas separate. Even today, though the political response is not as rigid in its opposition to Communism, we still refer to its spread like it is an infectious disease. An idea, like a virus, is contagious. Disease imposes itself indiscriminately, yet people always seem to associate it with something beyond biology.

Roberto Esposito asks in the opening lines of his text, *Immunitas*, if there is a common phenomena between various examples which he summarizes under categories of “medicine, law, social politics, and information technology” (*Immunitas*, 1). Esposito argues that all these things can be examined using the “interpretive category” of “immunization.” He can chalk all of these events in their separate domains as hinged on “a protective response in the face of a risk” (*Immunitas*, 1). Any medical journal will describe the immune system as “a militaristic device, “defending and attacking everything not recognized as belonging to it” (*Immunitas*, 17). The basic function of the human immune system is to protect the ‘inside’ from the ‘outside,’ through all the various applications of the framework, it always deals with the “relation between ‘I’ and ‘Other’—between the immune and the common” (*Immunitas*, 17). The immune system immediately attacks anything that it senses is contrary to its host. Types of ‘invasions’ can range from viruses like smallpox or typhoid to organ implantation and blood transfusion. The immune system is extremely prejudiced and exact as a defense mechanism, and can even injure its host in

the process of defending it, as is the case with autoimmune disease, in which the immune system begins to attack things actually inherent to itself. Melville's interest in the idea of mutiny, especially within *Billy Budd* and *Benito Cereno*, is evocative of this "autoimmune" idea: how does one respond to a threat coming from *inside* the body?

A ship is a place of delicate balance; with no system of justice present outside of itself, it is crucial to maintain order. *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd* are two detailed imaginings of possible things that could go wrong aboard a regular vessel, due to complex and almost invisible changes in the power structure. Melville is highly critical of civilization's muddiness and complexity. He seems to find a wonderful simplicity in naval life, a simplicity that allows him to apply the problems in society as he sees them to a much smaller scale.

Everyone on a boat has a position and a task, as Esposito would put it, a *munus*: "an office—a task, obligation, duty" (4). A person who holds no office would in turn become *immunis*, "without office." In *Bartleby*, though Melville's short story is not this paper's focus, we are given an office, in which everyone has a specific *munus*. Bartleby, however, is interesting not because he fails to do his duty, but because he is so rigid in *only* performing his specific *munus*, that he becomes *immunus* to everything else, to basic life. The other characters are conversely so rigid in their roles as community members that they come to be defined by what they consume and what they do. Bartleby is an extreme of his coworkers, and eventually suffers imprisonment for refusing to leave his office, to *not* do his job. While Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut are *defined* by their jobs, Bartleby is nothing other than his job, and therefore no longer a member of the community. However, Bartleby's rigidity to only do as he "prefers" has an infectious effect



on the scrivener's coworkers, who begin refusing tasks in a similar manner. Such a shift in work ethic would never have occurred had Bartleby not given his coworkers, or infected them with, his behavior. Melville creates a dynamic in which a person is made "immune" through a strict adherence to his *munus*. Not even Esposito touches on this reversal, to hold a *munus* so strongly than you become *immunitas* to everything else. Bartleby's immunity in turn leads to his arrest, because society, the body, rejects everything that is contrary to itself. We see similar types of insubordination across all of Melville's works.

Perhaps a ship's delicate balance is best illustrated using the specific texts chosen for this project. The characters in each story have a defined role in the narrative of their texts as well as their position within the power structure of the vessel, yet each role always gets reversed or tampered with. Though Ahab is a captain, his personal mission runs contrary to mission of his ship. Billy Budd is a mere foretop man, but holds an uncanny influence over both his equals and superiors. Captain Delano, in *Benito Cereno*, is led to believe the *San Dominick's* captain controls the ship based only on appearance, though it is secretly Babo, masquerading as Cereno's servant, that controls the ship. C.L.R James, who wrote from the confines of Ellis Island, describes his Communist cellmate who, despite representing the ultimate political enemy of the United States at the time, was somehow the most respected and authoritative figure on the island. My first chapter will deal with C.L.R. James' experience on Ellis Island, both taking in his account and applying it to a larger framework of disease, paying special attention to the difference between 'community' and 'immunity,' as it is laid out fairly literally on the island. In the next chapter I will look at how authority is only gained through a process of contagion, by

reading various instances of authoritative infection in Melville's *Moby Dick*. The final section will deal with mutiny, both as a general concept and as how Melville understands it through his narratives. The last section will include readings from both Melville's *Billy Budd* and *Benito Cereno*, to show the subversiveness of superiority and its ability to transcend title.

## Chapter Two: Ellis Island: “Not a Pleasure Resort”: Community, Disease, and C.L.R.

### James

In the fourth section of C.L.R. James', *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways, The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*, James turns his focus to “a question of the alien and civil liberties” (*C.L.R. James*, 154). America's Department of Justice detained James on Ellis Island for six months in 1952, citing his writings on the history of Communism, “Negro Revolt,” the Haitian Revolution, and his translated life of *Stalin*, as well as his mild association with the Trotskyist Party, as justification to declare the man a political enemy and “alien” of and to the United States. Branded as a political prisoner, James was lumped in with the island's Communist detainees, who, ironically, “knew [James] personally as their open and avowed enemy,” because he had “written or translated books against them” (126). However, once declared an alien, it hardly matters of which specific category.

James' stomach ulcer gave him great trouble during his stay on the island. Trying to avoid friction with the authorities, he kept it to himself the best he could until it was no longer manageable. James asked an on-duty nurse if he could be fed the next day, to which she replied that it was “impossible because [James] was a ‘security patient’” (*C.L.R. James*, 136). James is finally admitted to a hospital, where he was “again back within the boundaries of civilization” (*C.L.R. James*, 140). By referring to the hospital as “within” civilization, James implies that Ellis Island is not civilization, but removed from it. The implication of this difference is that the rule of law can be bent on the island as opposed to in civilization, which explains how the injustices at Ellis Island are allowed to persist. At the hospital, James is “treated

like a sick man” and taken care of (*C.L.R. James*, 140). Contrastingly, on Ellis Island, he “was an alien, and as such entitled to no consideration whatsoever” (*C.L.R. James*, 140). James squarely frames his circumstance: “I was an alien. I had no human rights,” yet offers a Constitutional contradiction. The Constitution “forbids the limitation of the free speech and free expression of opinion of any person in the United States. It specifically does not say citizen: it says person, meaning anybody” (*C.L.R. James*, 163). So, being an alien still entitled him to be treated as a human being. The Constitution decrees that “anybody,” not only citizens, are to be treated according to America’s most basic rights. He cites the injustices against him as specifically violating the “First and Fifth Amendments.” However, in James’ framing of the hospital as being within civilization and Ellis Island as not, he implicitly acknowledges the disregard for law that is made possible by the existence of Ellis Island on the fringes of society. According to Esposito, a “threat is located...on the border between the inside and the outside,” so that it can be dealt with in ways that are not necessarily lawful. However, this fringe section of the law—in America’s case, Ellis Island—is built into the whole structure of a nation.

James asks, “what are the objective causes and what are the objective results” of his treatment and detainment on Ellis Island? He argues that America was designed to favor cases like his; the “whole system of law” in the United States is “an expression of a deep faith in civil liberties and were intended to help the alien” (*C.L.R. James*, 143). Yet, the “Department of Justice as a whole is now engaged in on a policy whose main aim can be described as the extermination of aliens as a malignant pest” (*C.L.R. James* 143). James evokes medical language to describe the Department of Justice’s persecution of aliens as akin to exterminating a diseased

animal. One step further and we have an immunitary apparatus, the law, combating a disease, an alien.

Roberto Esposito argues that “the immigration phenomenon...in addition to constituting a threat to the public order...is also commonly presented by the media as a potential biological risk to the host country” (*Immunitas*, 4). While immigrants can perhaps alter the “public order” of a nation culturally or politically, they can also pose a potential biological threat, which is why it is “perfectly understandable” that the most feared form of terrorist attack is a biological one (*Immunitas*, 4). The comparison between the law and the immune system crystallizes when thinking about the immigrant as a biological threat: an immigrant poses a biological threat to a nation, just as a disease poses a biological threat to an individual body. The distance between immigrant and disease begins to rapidly close in the conceiving of an immigrant as a biological threat. Just as the law fights against aliens, exterminating them like “malignant pest[s],” the immune system attacks disease as if “a militaristic device” (*C.L.R. James*, 143, *Immunitas*, 17).

James represents a disease, the uncommon, entering into the community of America. James writes that he “spared no pains to understand that United States and become a part of the American people” (*C.L.R. James*, 159). James taught himself to enjoy comic strips and B gangster pictures, rather than the “latest examples of cinema art,” because he believed in conforming to the American cultural tradition.

James, lumped into the role of a Communist, officially becomes “a violent intrusion into the body politic,” no longer an accepted part of the American “community,” but excluded from it in the name of its preservation. James is a contaminant moved to Ellis Island, “on the border between the inside and the outside” (*Immunitas*, 2). Though they share a cell, James immediately

distances himself from Communists by continually expressing contempt for their ideas; “how deep in me is the revulsion from everything they stand for” (126). However, James, confident the Communists knew of his aversion to them, did nothing to aggravate their relationship while detained together. During his stay, James chronicled the injustice that stemmed from a total lack of direction and organization on Ellis Island, in the form of his text, of both literary and political criticism.

James’ immigration hearing went against his favor in 1950. The “writer of the rejection” considered James’ writings on historical revolutions and Communism to look “very suspicious.” In response to his attorney’s claim that James is a writer, that writing books is what he does, the “writer of the rejection” says that “the founders of revolutionary movements...had been writers,” too (*C.L.R. James*, 155). The unnamed “writer of the rejection” simultaneously acknowledges a certain power that James has as a writer, and bars him from the United States. James includes in the chapter numerous reviews of his literature, lauding his ideas as “well documented,” “cannot be dismissed,” and “deserves some serious attention from anyone who is honestly trying to understand present Russian events” (*C.L.R. James*, 156). The inclusion of these reviews go to show that James disagrees with the justification for his detainment, and that others acknowledge his work as academic, not propaganda. The injustice against James is enacted by a prejudiced institution that fears his ability to change peoples minds, to infect and contaminate America—to take a homogenous community, and integrate it with new, foreign, ideas. James thinks this is ridiculous, but witnesses their fears executed by his Communist cellmate, M, who “had been writing a series of articles in the Communist press, giving case after case of flagrant injustice” (*C.L.R. James*, 131). James is viewed as being potentially dangerous because of his

academic writings about revolutionary movements, while, ironically, a self-avowed Communist is permitted to write about America's "flagrant injustice" for foreign publishing as anti-American propaganda. James, posing no threat to the United States, understands, "it is my books that the writer who rejected my appeal dwelt upon" (*C.L.R. James*, 158). The Department of Justice had nothing else to go on but James' writings; it is inarguable that James posed no threat, yet a copy of a book he wrote in 1937 (thirteen years before the hearing) was the final pin in his quarantined coffin.

James treats America's immigration policy as a blindly prejudiced machine that churns innocent people out of the country for no reason other than its xenophobia. He references a young American citizen that had been arrested after running away from home, and was on the cusp of being sent to another country before a *prisoner* intervened. This prisoner, M, a Communist cellmate of James', holds tremendous influence on the island with both detainees and guards, because of his steadfast commitment to justice for both groups. James' intention in writing this book is to point out the absurdity of the American immigration system as he sees explicated on Ellis Island. Using Herman Melville's work to ground his more radical political ideas in existing American literature, James attempted to make a case for his release. Melville's ideas and criticisms of civilization are applicable to James' arguments, and Melville in 1952 is accepted as a great American author. If *Moby-Dick* is already regarded as a 'great American novel' by this time, then Melville's ideas must be considered inherently 'American.' Knowing this, James sets his arguments up in line with Melville's writing, thereby designating the origin of his own thinking as coming from the American tradition. Establishing a basis for a political argument in the literary canon of America has the effect of both establishing precedent for James'

claims and exposing the American government as being entirely un-American and hypocritical in its persecution of immigrants.

James is careful to back up his claims with the authority of his experience. So he sets out to write this book on *Moby-Dick* arguing that Melville's great American novel endorses an idea of common humanity and brotherhood, and that America should to. First, we must define the 'great American novel'. John William DeForest in his famous essay from 1868, "The Great American Novel," attempts to define the great American novel as "the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence," there must be "a national breadth to the picture, truthful outlining of character, natural speaking, and plenty of strong feeling." DeForest's believes the task of writing such a novel is one of "painting the American soul," somehow capturing the essence of an "American" identity, creating a recognizable and inarguably accurate portrait of "American existence." DeForest's criteria writes off many candidate novels as too regional, as only capturing a part of America, not its whole.

Lawrence Buell points out a paradox in DeForest's conception of the Great American novel, "De Forest risked self-contradiction in taking for granted that there must be such a thing as an "American soul" when the literary evidence to date, by his own say-so, argued the opposite" (Buell, Lawrence). How can DeForest argue both that there exists an "American soul" and that no author has been able to accurately portray (or create) it? Benedict Anderson in his text, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, argues that "the explosive interaction between capitalism, technology and human linguistic diversity," as catalyzed by the invention of the printing press, created basic "formal models" in literature, that, though naturally occurring, could then be "imitated...and consciously exploited in a



Machiavellian spirit” (Anderson, Benedict, 46). DeForest’s elusive “American soul,” through Anderson’s thinking, is only possible through the aggregate evolution of American literature since the canon’s conception, be it through news, political policy, fiction, and so on. So, while DeForest argues, in 1868, that the “American soul” has not *yet* been accurately portrayed, Anderson and Buell acknowledge the possibility, from DeForest’s standpoint, of its existence, hidden somewhere, pervading through the canon, infecting a nation with a sense of identity.

Anderson summarizes the final point of his argument, “the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which...set the stage for the modern nation” (Anderson, 46). If a ‘nation’ is an “imagined community,” then its national character, far from being reflective of actual reality, can too be imagined. As Homi K. Bhabha puts it in his text, *Nation and Narration*: communities “depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature generally plays a decisive role,” (*Nation and Narration*, 49). “The rise of European nationalism,” Bhabha writes, “coincides especially with one form of literature—the novel” (*Nation and Narration*, 49). The notion of a nation having an identity is one that generally stems more from fantasy than as a reflection of true events or sentiments. The imagined character of a nation then begins to define the nation as it exists in reality. The idea of a national ‘identity’ is inarguable and powerful; despite “the immense influence that nationalism has exerted on the modern world, plausible theory about it is conspicuously meagre” (*Imagined Communities*, 3). Somehow, such an immense aspect of modern civilization is able to consistently elude concrete definition.

All of these thinkers seem to agree that national character is in large part due to historical literary influences, thus making the prospect of the ‘Great American Novel,’ a novel that encapsulates the essence of Americanness, a possibility. C.L.R. James’ attempt at an alternative reading of *Moby Dick* is nothing new, as Lawrence Buell writes. Since the novel “achieved GAN status,” (GAN is Buell’s acronym for “Great American Novel”), it has been continually appropriated and referenced in social and political formats. The very fact of *Moby Dick*’s endurance as social commentary over a century after its publishing attests to the book’s incisive timelessness. C.L.R. James, aware of *Moby Dick*’s presence in American culture, uses this to his advantage—arguing on the behalf of American ideals from the position of a Communist alien detainee, James hopes to illuminate what he sees as the incontrovertible hypocrisy of America’s Department of Justice, that Ellis Island is where the American ideal fails.

James zeroes in on the hypocrisy he sees at Ellis Island by looking at the body of guards. The prejudice on Ellis Island existed only on an institutional level. The guards’ attitudes toward their inmates clearly showed that they did not work on Ellis Island out of a vehemence for immigrants. James argues that the DoJ didn’t supply these men with a sense of American identity, of any kind of purpose behind their mission. James’ Communist cellmate, M, gains a peculiar influence on the island because he made up for this lack of purpose by advocating for justice on a continual basis. The guards witnessed M’s commitment to humaneness in the face of their employers’ oppression and respected him for it, while in turn losing respect for the DoJ. James is certain that, had the DoJ offered any sense of reason or purpose behind its seemingly senseless immigration policy, M would not have gained such infectious influence and regard.

“But any shred of national pride, any consciousness of the role that America now plays and must forever play in the visible future of society, any sense of the past history of the century, what it claims, and, also, what it is being tested by in the eyes of hundreds of millions all over the world, would have dictated that the security officers be given, on the very lowest conceivable level, some sense of direction, some elementary consciousness, however primitive, that a Department of Justice stands for justice. That is precisely what gave M his astonishing influence, intangible but none the less real. He stood for something, stood for it like a rock. None of the men who knew him will ever forget him. But instead of direction, of some principle, the security officers received from the men who directed policy nothing but blows” (150).

James often writes in lists, supplementing his arguments with long clauses of example and related ideas. In one sentence, James writes that the Department of Justice does not stand for actual justice. The argument itself comes from the authority of someone detained by this Department of Justice, privy to what he understands as a lack of commitment to its own name. However, the argument, coming from a detainee of the Department being criticized, could easily be written off as the biased opinion of a prisoner looking for a way out. James simultaneously has the credibility of a witness and the lack of objectivity of a detainee. It is perhaps because James is aware of being perceived as biased that he feels the need to turn his arguments into absolutes—facts rather than assertions. Before arriving at an argument, James lists off a number of traits, arguing that had any of them actually existed on Ellis Island, it “would have dictated... some elementary consciousness [among the guards]...that the Department of Justice stands for justice” (15). James works backwards, deducing from the attitudes of his guards that the DoJ lacks “any shred of national pride, any consciousness of the role that America now plays...any

sense of the past history of the century, what it claims, and, also, what it is being tested by in the eyes of hundreds of millions all over the world” (150). He argues that the existence of these traits “would have dictated” that the security officers recognize the DoJ as standing for justice, but that this is not the case. James’ argument broadly implies that any system or institution must adhere to certain principles, regardless of what they are, in order to engender a sense of direction among its constituents; the DoJ is making a mistake that any similar institution in any similar circumstance could also make. James applies a broad theory about the nature of authority specifically to his circumstances, framing his thoughts on the matter almost more as universally applicable strategic advice than personal grievance. Had the DoJ stood for any of these things—national pride, a sense of the “role of America,” it would have been revealed in the very attitudes of the guards. The lack of these principles among the guards is a byproduct of their lacking on an institutional level.

He states these traits as objective necessities, using America’s superpower proclamation against itself. Despite “what it claims,” and “what is being tested...in the eyes of hundreds of millions all over the world,” America lacks “any consciousness of the role that [it] now plays and must forever play in the visible future of society”; if it claims to be the greatest country in the world, it should act like it. James points out a disparity between the American ideal, as stated by its history and government, and its actions. James does not address what America specifically stands for, but what it “claims” to stand for, a “claim” that is being “tested” by the rest of the world. A place like Ellis Island is representative, to a degree, of the rest of the world; the detainees, who in this way represent a fraction of the “eyes” around the world testing America’s “claim,” see first hand that the claim holds no real significance. All James can see from Ellis

Island is the American government's utter disregard for its own values, which he vaguely frames in a simple checklist, almost implying that anyone could run Ellis Island more efficiently and with more direction and purpose just by employing a basic understanding of America and human nature. James doesn't feel a need to explicate what America's "claim" even is, maybe in an attempt to highlight its absence. It is in the guards' apparent lack of direction and purpose that James perceives the void vacated by American values. James uses words such as "shred" and "very lowest conceivable level" to show how the DoJ does not even accomplish a minimum, that even the smallest adherence to these ideals would be effective. He argues that a commitment to ideals, "however primitive" (i.e. a caveman could do it), would be at least something.

James concludes in his next sentence, "That is precisely what gave M his astonishing influence," referring to the crux of his argument in the previous sentence as "that." The "that" then takes on a whole sentence of meaning, and becomes the explanation of M's influence on the island, "intangible but none the less real" (150). James does not choose to make M the subject of the first sentence. The sentence is structured in a way that shows M's influence as an effect, not a cause, of the problem that the DoJ makes no effort to prove its commitment to justice. "That," James' argument in the first sentence, is "what gave" M his influence. M's influence took form within a void of principle and purpose on the part of the DoJ; he stood for something in a place that stood for nothing, and was able to contaminate and exert his authority over others using his steadfast sense of purpose.

Another aspect of James' listing is that he often rewords what's already been said, though not to a point of redundancy. The guards needed "some sense of direction, some elementary consciousness" espoused by the DoJ to believe in its cause. James equates "direction" with

“elementary consciousness” not to be philosophical, but to get his point across. James’ critique of Ellis Island is singular in its purpose yet intangible enough to require lengthy explanation, so he employs as many avenues of thinking about the issue of “purpose” as possible, hoping that at least one of them will resonate with a reader. James wrote the text as a plea for his release—his desired audience consists of senators and diplomats with enough political leverage to help his cause. James’ entire pursuit, insofar as he is trying to change the minds of his captors, is one of infection. By showing *Moby Dick* to be a true American novel, then to contrast the reality of America with its own ideals, and finally to show the blatant injustices of Ellis Island, James’ hopes to change people’s minds about ‘aliens’ in general. By repeating words, and rephrasing ideas, James’ gives a sense of his desperation, and also makes his arguments seem like objective facts that he is tired of having to explain. M’s writings reach the foreign Communist Press, despite the iron bars and cells at Ellis Island; James hopes to use *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* to a similar effect.

The DoJ does not supply an ideal to which its guards can adhere, instead, “the security officers received from the men who directed policy nothing but blows” (150). James characterizes the degrading tasks passed down from the department heads to the guards as “blows.” The DoJ doles out these “blows” instead of supplying the sense of purpose that James sees as crucial in making the guards not feel “useless.” James’ use of the word “blow” is noteworthy because it attaches a physicality to the transference of authority. A supervisor exercises authority in assigning a person to a task, otherwise that person would have no reason to comply. In giving out a task, a transfer occurs—the assignment is binding yet not physically so.

Tasks in the workplace can be essentially good or bad, enjoyable or not—James chooses to refer to a degrading type of task as a “blow.”

The Oxford English Dictionary’s primary definition of “blow” is “A stroke, esp. a firm stroke; a violent application of the fist or of any instrument to an object” (“blow, n.1.” OED Online. Oxford University Press, December 2015. Web. 6 March 2016.) This definition of blow is partially applicable, because there is a certain violence in receiving a degrading task, although not necessarily physical. James is interested in applying physical location to the intangibility of emotional cause and effect, so “blow” as a physical act makes up at least one half of James’ intended use. The next definition of “blow” suggests a comparison to the word “stroke,” which better accounts for the intangibility of the action. Many of the definitions of “stroke” use the word “blow” to characterize what is essentially a ‘hit’ of some kind; one thing bluntly impacting another. The bluntness of the strike is important, because it results not in blood or gash, but in a bruising, lingering pain accompanied by a signifying mark. So, what constitutes a blow, is a negative transference of some kind, the receiver of which feels a dull, lingering, pain that is betrayed by a lasting mark. The intent of a “blow” is not to cause death or permanent injury, but to make a point, to show strength, and to exert authority, to infect.

The Oxford English Dictionary includes in its second definition of “blow” an example from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Edgar, the legitimate son of Gloucester is being framed by his illegitimate brother. Gloucester asks Edgar, “What are you?” to which he replies, “A most poor man made tame to fortune’s blows” (*King Lear*, 4.6.210-211). Edgar says that he is unlucky, referring to his constant adversity as “fortune’s blows.” Similarly to C.L.R. James’ use, Edgar uses “blows” to describe general misfortune and degradation. Edgar tells his father that he is

“made tame to fortune’s blows,” that the consistency of the blows have actually degraded him to a lesser state, “tamed” him. Though his adversity is an act of Fortune, somehow these “blows” produce a domesticating result. Persistent degradation engenders subservience. “Fortune” cannot physically injure Edgar, yet the writing characterizes it as so doing. Edgar’s “blows” from “fortune” work similarly to the “blows” received by the guards from the DoJ on Ellis Island. While Edgar thinks he is merely unlucky, the guards know that their “blows” come directly from their superiors. The persistence of “blows” is consistent in either case—a continual beating down eventually reducing the victims to lesser states of being, leaving them bitter and lost, yet begrudgingly subservient.

Melville’s knowledge and respect for Shakespeare’s plays, especially *King Lear*, is shown in his 1850 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s collection of short stories, *The Mosses from an Old Manse*. Melville compares the public’s perception of Hawthorne to that of Shakespeare, who his audience revered because of his outstanding ability to produce theatrical, dramatic, and engaging work. Melville argues that Shakespeare’s true worth can be found in “those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality:--these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare.” Melville lauds both writers for their abilities to conceal great truths behind beautiful imagery and prose. Melville goes on, writing of Shakespeare, “Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth.” Melville characterizes “vital truth” as “sane



madness” to show that something need not make any sense in order to be true. The truth is not only hard to see but is “madness...to utter.” Such a claim seems true enough with regard to M, “mad as Ahab,” who seemed to have “stood for what vast millions of Americans still cherish as the principles of what America has stood for since its foundation,” but “in all that he was doing” was in reality “pursuing his own purpose” (*C.L.R. James*, 132).

As shown, James finds the Department of Justice’s lack of commitment to justice astonishing. Equally astonishing is the Communist, M’s, role as the main perpetrator of justice on the island. Many of the prisoners are good people, but M is a driving force for ethically conscious institutional change. He is not merely sympathetic, but committed enough to take action. James takes an opportunity to critique the Department of Justice in terms of its strategy, arguing that its lack of direction, lack of “any of shred of national pride, any consciousness of the role that America now plays and must forever play in the visible future of society,” leaves its guards, the tools of its policy, without any sense of purpose, without any real understanding of their job beyond its physical task of maintaining a detainment center. The guards were not made to feel as if a significance existed behind their work. James observes the outward attitude of the guards, that “[they] are only doing a job here,” yet takes this admission as a betrayal of their real feelings, that they knew it wasn’t “just another job,” and that they wanted to “make it clear that they were not to be held responsible for the general policy” (149). The guards try to separate themselves from their superiors as much as possible—this does not suggest a unified body. The Department of Justice is unconvincing in its purpose both to its own guards and its detainees, “These men are as much victims of the anti-alien policy of the Department of Justice and the disorder in the administration as the unfortunate aliens themselves” (147). James claims that the

guards are “as much victims” of anti-immigration policy as the people that the actually policy targets. In one sense equating the plight of the guards and the detainees seems to suggest a kindredness of position and role, that the guards are in some way detainees. The DoJ directs “anti-alien” policy, by definition, towards aliens. However, by framing both aliens and guards as “victims” of the “anti-alien policy,” by using the same word “victim” to describe the affect on both guards and aliens, James implies that they *are* the same. While the policy affects each group differently insofar as their are political entities, its effect is the same on them insofar as they are human beings. By setting up the guards and detainees as similar bodies on the island, James attempts to widen the gap between policy makers at the institutional level and the men who are expected to carry it out.

For James’, America’s immigration policy is idiotic. The intention, he asks, challenging the reader to disagree, of the entire system, can only be interpreted as a procedure to “break down barriers...to declare to the alien, and to American citizens...that the United States took upon itself the responsibility of seeing that as far as possible was treated as a potential citizen?” (141). He claims that the Constitution undeniably intends to award “every possible opportunity” for an alien “to make as good a case for himself as possible” (141). James argues that the poor treatment of immigrants is a product of a new version of America that is disregarding its own foundation. The implicit goal behind immigration policy is the continued protection of America. The law acts as an immune system to the body of the United States, “law is located at the point of indistinction between the preservation and exclusion of life” (*Immunitas*, 10). America’s preservation is only possible through the exclusion of ‘uncommon’ types of life, “aliens.” To America, these immigrants represent “a violent intrusion

into the body politic,” and, as with all examples of contamination, are always located “on the border between the inside and outside, between the self and the other, the individual and the common” (*Immunitas*, 2). Ellis Island perfectly captures this relationship between common and individual. Detained on an offshore island, in political and physical limbo, these aliens are neither inside America, or outside of it—they exist where any form of contamination always has to exist, explains Esposito. The law as a mechanism works just as an immune system, rejecting foreign presence to avert contamination of the body. By trapping these aliens on Ellis Island, they are “between the inside and the outside,” not able to contaminate America, but also no longer a threat, because they are still in America’s grasp.

Ellis Island is perhaps the result of another of Esposito’s claims, that “life can be protected from what negates it only by means of further negation” (*Immunitas*, 16). A contaminant threatens to negate life, so life responds by negating the contaminant. The Department of Justice treats the immigrant as a contaminant that must be negated from the body, America, to its border, Ellis Island. However, America’s forefathers intended an easy process of assimilation for immigrants coming to the United States. James understands through their policies in the Constitution what kind of nation they intended America to be, a place of opportunity accepting to all those who seek it—a country in which being an American has more to do with an ideal than with race and nationality. James however sees immigration policy as a shift in the opposite direction, an attempt to create an exclusionary homogenous society out of the United States—“instead of something good being acquired, something bad has been taken away” (*Immunitas*, 8).

James sees the body of guards at Ellis Island as “a very representative section of the American people,” that is to say, “a cross section of the American lower middle classes” (145). As representative of a statistical mean, it is the views of these guards that American domestic policy should aim to voice, yet James sees a disparity between the two. He claims that no trace of America’s political attitude towards aliens could be found in the guards personal attitudes towards the detainees. James writes of the guards as accommodating and even pleasant. The rigidness of the law, the immune system, in place, was as detrimental to the guards as the detainees, resulting in a disillusion Esposito sees as “more than metaphorical in illnesses labeled appropriately as autoimmune diseases, in which the warring potential of the immune system is so great that at a certain point it turns against itself” (*Immunitas*, 17). The “warring potential” of immigration policy exceeds even the standards of the bodies expected to carry that policy out on a daily basis. The guards are expected not only to witness the bureaucratic oppression of the detainees but to be party to it, to enforce it. James, as well as Roberto Esposito in a more general sense, knows this to be damaging to a body as a whole.

Government policy blankets the prisoners of Ellis Island as “aliens,” yet James sees in the officers “that consideration for and interest in the individual human being as a personality, which is the distinguishing characteristic of American social life” (146). American domestic policy does not match with the “old traditions of the United States,” in which men had an “old sense...of being members of an integrated community” (146, 92). An “integrated community” is one that is not homogenous, that includes different types of individuals. The community is not “common” to itself simply by nature, but by harmonious circumstance. The “old traditions” of the U.S. reflected the amalgamation of multiple groups into one community, in which being an ‘alien’ was

impossible because everyone was an alien—immunizing foreignness by making it an integral part of the body, just as one uses a form of a disease to immunize against infection from a more virulent strain—“the body defeats a poison not by expelling it outside the organism, but by making it somehow part of the body” (*Immunitas*, 8).

The officers on the island did not treat the inmates as aliens, but as people. James understands America’s distinguishing social element as a keen interest and respect for the individual. The attitude of the officers in this way sharply contrasts the cold prejudice of American immigration policy. James writes that one would expect “callousness, brutality and above all national arrogance” from guards tasked with guarding so-called enemies of the state, amidst the “deafening thunder in the world outside against aliens, and against Communist aliens in particular” (146). The guards respectful behavior is psychologically interesting because they have no social obligation to respect their inmates, they are even at war with some of them. Oftentimes people given this sort of power are prone to abuse it. The guards most likely did not see the prisoners as radical thinkers and political threats, but as the men that they looked like and acted as, yet to the Department of Justice they were only ‘aliens’.

One phenomena of the political disconnect between immigration policy and the “very representative section of the American people” James sees as the guards is the resulting authority of his Communist cellmate, M. M has a singular ability to influence the policies of the island as they relate to the conditions of the other prisoners. He would fight for the better treatment of other detainees, often to his own detriment. Yet, James recalls that the guards “respected M for the way he conducted himself and his uncompromising stand on elementary human decency” (132). M’s unwavering sense of decency was more a token of his personhood to the

guards than his Communist alien status. In the same way, the list of books C.L.R. James had written are the only sort of material the Department of Justice needed to brand him as a political threat. While the guards, the people on the ground, choose to see personality, the government chooses to see through generalization and label. James' primary concern throughout the rest of his criticism is the lack of placed importance on individuality in the emerging political and social sphere. The shift away from individualism occurs at the institutional level, one disconnected from the events that it governs and responds to. The guards are the tools of the government's policy but they do not embody its prejudice.

James understands M's exerted influence on the island as "a powerful demonstration...of the Communist, the man of purpose, in action" (130). The institution of Ellis Island became the physical result of a botched policy on immigration, and only served to emphasize America's prejudiced exclusionary practices. It was disorganized; people wound up there accidentally, the medical facilities were not adequate, distinctions between types of detainees were vague, and conditions were poor. The guards did not share in the same vicious zeal of the Department of Justice, and were constantly subjected to unfortunate and degrading tasks. M filled the void of reason and understanding on the island with his commitment to making it a better place. James understood that M's actions were a result chiefly of circumstance, that beneath his humanity was an underlying purpose of extending the influence and appeal of Communism. James comments that a man like M in charge of Ellis Island, namely any Communist, "would subject both officers and the men he championed to a tyranny worse than anything they could conceive of" (132). M, with the limited capabilities at his disposal as a detainee, used the unmistakable immorality of

Ellis Island as a tool to advance his own interests, to expose America's ideology as worse than Communism's.

M had been writing for the Communist Press during his time of Ellis Island, "giving case after case of flagrant injustice" (131). M tells James that "Americans will ignore such things at their own peril" (131). Despite being detained for his political ideas, M is allowed to write for the Communist Press about the injustices of the American system. James sees in this great stupidity on the part of the American government and great genius in M's conviction and power. After the DoJ sustains criticisms concerning the conditions on Ellis Island, the F.B.I asks M to write a report on just that, to which he happily accepts, relishing in the opportunity to confirm the criticism. James cites the Department of Justice's "officers and armed guards, its bolts and bars, its thick walls and its power," as not being enough to avoid "moral [defeat] by one single Communist repeatedly" (131).

James' describes M's moral high ground as allowing him to intellectually overpower the Department of Justice, despite its physical ability to detain his body. Though M is detained, he has a great deal of influence and maneuverability on the island. People ask him for help, anti-Communists and guards alike, because "he acted like a human being, and not as a Communist" (133). M's influence cannot be physically detained, because it is not physical. James understands this power as coming from M's steadfast conviction towards justice on the island. James spends much of the earlier sections of his book describing Captain Ahab similarly to M. Ahab is powerfully elemental, transcendent of all social consideration and limitation: his conviction is pure. The quarantine of Ellis Island is irrelevant to people like M, of which there are few, because they have some sort of ascendancy over people.

The department heads write off the detainees, in James' words, as "a body of isolated individuals who are in reality seeking charity" (150). The guards, experiencing these people as human beings on a daily basis, acted "not as individuals but as a body of men, not only human but humane" (150). James describes the humanity of the guards not as a product of individuality, but as one of collectivity. The guards united not through their allegiance to the Department of Justice or their mistrust of aliens, but through a sense of common humanity. The people who know "what is wrong [on Ellis Island] and how it is corrected are first of all, the ordinary prisoners, and the security officers," because they understand the shortcomings of the physical reality of immigration policy. However, while understanding the issues from experience, "These officers deal with the fundamental problem every day." Guards are responsible for upholding government policy, but they have no mode of discourse in which to engage with it. Amazingly, it is the Communist M who is most capable of bringing about institutional change, only because "he stood for something, stood for it like a rock" (150). Not the guards, not the department heads, but the Communist, alien, detainee.

Officials for whatever reason allowed M to publish his articles abroad, likely because they did not perceive the writings as threatening. M focuses on the injustices of Ellis Island and American immigration policy, "nobody could challenge them, because he had all the facts, and wrote with the authority of someone who was actually in the place which he was writing about" (131). M's credibility to his audience, as a prisoner on the island about which he criticized, made him a singularly influential figure on and off the premises. He wrote facts that the guards nor prisoners had any reason to disagree with. M had credibility on the island. He "could give advice to prisoners" and even "overrode or won over some sympathetic guards," in



cases of prisoner injustice. M's commitment to humanism worked well because the problems of human indecency on the island he took issue with were objective, inarguable. Sometimes M's gesture would be as simple as taking a rattled prisoner for a short walk. James even recalls M raising "his voice in anger" after seeing a neglected man in filth. A guard cannot easily, as a fellow human, discredit M's anger at such a simple, yet correctable, injustice. "M protested violently" if officials placed underage boys amidst "homosexuals and criminals" (129). No one can argue that young boys should not be placed among convicted criminals. James mentions that M would go straight to the guards if he "could not reach officials" in these cases, and the guards would often acquiesce (129). M's ability to bypass the officials in a matter of institutional grievance is proof of his ability to infect the guards. How could they side with an institution that would mix a young child amongst people who might harm him? The only other authority figure to turn to was M. When guards see that a prisoner, fighting for this basic right of a young child, is not able to get through to officials, they become inclined to listen to and respect him more than they do the official policy that seems to be making these simple instances of basic justice harder to achieve. Though the prisoners had to face the injustices of policy on Ellis Island, guards had to not only watch their suffering but act as a part of it.

These men witnessed continuous injustice while working under an institution that named itself after justice. Such a relationship creates the possibility of someone like M, "the man of purpose," to gain real influence. M does not buy his influence over the guards with a paycheck like the Department of Justice, but moves them viscerally as human beings through infection. James sees this as "the crowning irony" of Ellis Island. While "the United State Department of Justice is grimly pursuing a venomous anti-alien policy," it only manages in "disrupting and

demoralizing its own employees desperately trying to live up to their principles,” (154). The guards, guided by a vague idea of themselves as Americans, feel a tepid patriotism, while, “the despised aliens, however, fiercely nationalistic, are profoundly conscious of themselves as citizens of the world” (154). The guards, on paper, are Americans tasked to guard political aliens, but their hearts aren’t in it. The detainees, however dire their straights, are “profoundly conscious of themselves.”

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C.L.R. James writes callously that “the voyage of the Pequod is the voyage of modern civilization seeking its destiny” (19). In his maxim he refers to the Pequod as a means of understanding how modern western civilization, namely America, is supposed to proceed in time and history. The statement also indirectly makes a claim about the purpose of *Moby-Dick*, that it too is an exercise in political and history criticism and commentary. James frames Captain Ahab as fighting against the “destruction of human personality” that is spurred by the “fearful mechanical power of an industrial civilization” (11). Ahab, in this battle, is an “individualist,” someone who’s own principles clash against those of common society. The newfound industrial capabilities of America in the 19th century diluted the importance of the individual by mechanizing production—people used as instruments toward a goal of monetary gain. Ahab’s role as captain of the Pequod is to create a purpose that others can follow beyond economic gain. James’ understands Melville as arguing that America must rally behind a goal beyond monetary enterprise. The chasm that exists in the absence of a this common goal can easily be filled by ideas that seem mad.

James explains that the foundation of Ahab's mission to hunt Moby Dick is to "trample" the American principle that all "free enterprise should produce goods for sale," and that men, in helping themselves and their country, should strive to make as much money as possible (5). According to James, capitalism and free enterprise limit the human experience to material and currency. Ahab's mission to hunt Moby Dick will not "yield" many "barrels" of oil as Starbuck puts it, but, as James sees it, "would solve all that was troubling him" (12). The purpose of Ahab's scheme is simply to have a purpose at all, to have something to strive towards that is deeper and more significant to the human experience than money and comfort—something worth dying for.

Purpose, claims James amidst a running comparison of his, is what made Hitler and the Nazis so successful. A society needs to have experienced the throes of catastrophe to realize that its system must be overhauled. Hitler saw such an opportunity in Germany; only because of the simple purpose to restore Germany's greatness did his atrocities seem justifiable and even sane. The process of conscription into a mad scheme such as Ahab's or even Hitler's seems a difficult sell, almost impossible to explain through traditional modes. Ahab possesses a singular power over the Pequod's crew, one that seems to explain their willingness to aid his hunt. The power he holds over them seems to manifest in physical and personal ways, as if he is simply a carrier of some greater, unseen notion, that they are powerless to resist. James is adamant that Melville is "[preoccupied] with personality," that the writer attempts to understand the larger issues of American society as the trickle down effect of its loss of placed importance on the creative mind of individual. He understands Ahab's monomania and Ishmael's need to "get to sea as soon as I can" as the result of their incapacity to exist within the common modes of society; their sickness

is “rooted...in an unbearable sense of social crisis” (*Moby Dick* 2, MCR 91). Perhaps this “sickness” is at the root of the Pequod’s crew’s willingness to aid Ahab in his mission, they are made willing through infection.

These “blows” that James describes work similarly to Ishmael’s opinion of degrading tasks doled out aboard a ship. Ishmael mitigates any feeling of abasement by having “the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is in one way or another served in much the same way...and so the universal thump is passed around, and all hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content” (*Moby-Dick*, 5-6). Ishmael is satisfied in performing a degrading task, knowing that he is not alone in having to carry it out, no matter “however they may thump and punch me about,” he acts not as an individual in obeying the assignment but as part of a body of men. Ishmael is able to approach this “thump” from “a physical or metaphysical point of view,” because everybody aboard the ship receives degrading tasks as well as they receive physical blows. The conditions of authority aboard a ship explicate the nature of this “thump,” or degrading acts in general, be it physical kick or an unpleasant assignment—everybody is subject to it. Just as the line aboard a ship makes literal the constant threat of death, the physical “thump” makes literal the transfer of authority from superior to subject. By using “thump” both physically and metaphorically in describing a sailor’s treatment aboard a ship, Ishmael closes the gap of physicality opened by James’ use of “blows.” Ishmael equates a “thump and punch” with a “universal thump,” suggesting that they are not so different though one is physical and one is not. In the next chapter we will see how Melville uses these “blows” to describe the process of infection.

## Chapter Two: Contagion in Melville's *Moby Dick*:

“Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion.” (Chapter 36, *The Quarter-Deck*).

Captain Ahab reverses the *Pequod's* original directive from one of hunting many whales for monetary gain to one of hunting a single whale, for personal gain. Starbuck, Ahab's first mate, who “came here to hunt whales, not [his] commander's vengeance,” is concerned (167). As Ahab admits that Starbuck isn't scared of “the jaws of Death” or of the white whale's “crooked jaw,” he narrows the distance between the metaphorical jaws of Death and Moby Dick's jaw to zero. The coupling of “jaws” suggests that Ahab understands death in terms of the white whale, as its physical representation, and goes to show how all-consumed he is in his purpose.

As the “best lance out of Nantucket,” Starbuck's dignity is not at stake. The *Pequod's* crew expresses acceptance and fervor for the mission, save for the demurring Starbuck. Ahab appeals to Starbuck with a mixture of anger and compassion, leaving nothing left in the mate's countenance but an “enchanted, tacit acquiescence” (169). Ahab **reflects** on his new control over Starbuck, “Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion” (168).

Ahab is correct; Starbuck only opposes Ahab through demur beyond the moment of inhalation. Though it is unclear exactly what the “something” is that shoots from Ahab's nose, the airborne matter clearly succeeds in its infection of Starbuck. Flared nostrils are emotionally indicative of passion or anger. Ahab's use of medical terminology (“dilated”), however, implies control, not tantrum. Dilation, applied to pupils or blood vessels, is a process of widening a

passage in order to let something through. Though the captain had been incensed, he softens his tone with Starbuck, telling him, “what is said in heat, that thing unsays itself.” Ahab’s nostrils, though, remain dilated even after his anger subsides, suggesting that their widening is not a symptom of rage, but an essential mechanism for the “something” to pass through.

Steven Connor, in a piece titled “Whispering Music,” deals with the varying implications of types of ‘breath’. The primary differential is between consciously voiced breath and unconscious breathing, such as a cough or laughter. Connor’s subject matter is relevant, because whatever shoots out of Ahab’s nose, into Starbuck’s lung, is an expression of breath. It is unclear, however, how conscious Ahab is of what he does to Starbuck. The contagion process of shooting “something” into the mate’s nose brings about the intended result for the captain of making Starbuck subservient. Yet, the sentence reads not as ‘Ahab shot something out of his nose,’ but, “something shot from my dilated nostrils,” as if it happened beyond Ahab’s control, but nonetheless to his benefit. A cough, or involuntary breath, exists “to expel irritant matter,” while premeditated voice is used “to express thought or feeling” (Connor). The infecting agent, the “something,” occurs as an example of what looks like involuntary breath. It shoots out of Ahab’s nose like a sneeze.

The image applied to this moment between Ahab and Starbuck makes their exchange not one of appeal, but of contagion. Ahab’s angry rant infects Starbuck by changing his disposition from rebellious to obedient. A diseased sneeze, in a hypothetical biological situation, will infect whatever inhales it. Melville’s conception of this moment conflates these two types of ‘infection,’ by applying the physical motion of a sneeze to the abstract effect Ahab’s speech has on Starbuck. The conflation results in an abstract sort of infection through biological means.

According to Connor, ‘voice’ is controlled breath, channeled in such a way as to express meaning. A cough, on the other hand, is air forcibly projected. Though voice is the product of control, it is not necessarily more meaningful than its involuntary counterpart. Ahab’s involuntary breath, according to Connor’s logic, could represent a bodily need to expel “irritant matter,” as if phlegm, or could have more to do with the transference of something—his authority over Starbuck is treated as the result of contagion in the same way as disease. Ahab’s authority, while airborne, travels from nose to lungs, instilling an obedience to Ahab in Starbuck. The transference however does not account for what the “something” was while it still remained within the captain, however. For certain types of disease to spread they must already exist within a host—we don’t get this connection with Ahab. Instead, the “something” seems to become a disease exactly at the moment of its transference to Starbuck, a disease only because it is contagious. Ahab’s betrays in his aside that he did not expect to shoot something out of his nose. It is important that the “something” is not voluntarily shot from Ahab, that it is more a result of expunged matter forcing its way out.

Ishmael’s observes in Chapter Forty-Four that, when Ahab wakes from “vivid dreams,” a “chasm seemed opening in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship...” (44: The Chart). Ishmael refers to a “chasm” within Ahab, from which “fiends” and “flames and lightnings shot up.” The “chasm” is Ahab’s source of power, his sense of purpose. It is from this “chasm” that he controls the crew. Ahab’s aspect is often characterized as fiery and awesome, but Ishmael goes as far as ascribing these affectations as physically existing within the man, looking for a way to burst out of him. Ishmael considers

that Ahab's convulsions and wild cries, "perhaps, instead of being the unsuppressable [sic] symptoms of some latent weakness, or fright at his own resolve, were but the plainest tokens of its intensity" (44: The Chart). Using the language of disease, Ishmael brushes off the possibility that Ahab's peculiar outbursts were a sign of deteriorating health, but that they were the proof of his purpose, not "fright at his own resolve" but the "tokens of its intensity." Ishmael sets up two possibilities, one that attributes Ahab's convulsions to a schizophrenic fear of his own dedication, of himself—and another, that these wild cries are the plainest expression of the intensity of his resolve.

Ahab's "unsuppressable symptoms," contrary to most symptoms of disease, make him strong instead of weak. Ishmael distinguishes the Ahab that initially goes to sleep with the one that "burst from it in horror again." What causes the 'second' Ahab to burst from sleep "was the eternal, living principle or soul in him," the sheer intensity of his individualism, purpose, and resolve. C.L.R. James reads Ahab's outburst as "his common humanity flying from the monster that had overcome it" (15). Ahab's release of his 'commonness' with humanity represents Esposito's relationship between the common and the immune. Ahab, in changing the course of the *Pequod* is pushing himself away from the community of civilization, making himself immune. While being uncommon *within* civilization results in a C.L.R. James-like circumstance in the hospital, Ahab is able to separate himself from the laws of society because he isn't confined within its borders. He is in the same legal area as Ellis Island, still a part of America, but far enough from its rules and regulations. This intensity within Ahab is destroying the captain's "common humanity," slowly turning him into nothing other than a tool in the completion of his own scheme. Ahab's body is inseparable from his purpose. The Ahab that



chases Moby Dick is that which is separated from civilization—that which makes him “common” to “humanity,” struggling against the original Ahab, a whaler in the Nantucket Fishery, very much a part of the society that part of him is breaking from. James explains the paradox of Ahab fleeing from society aboard a vessel of capitalism:

“A human spirit which finds itself cramped in a situation where it can find no outlet for its energies and yet is unable to find any objective reason for a dissatisfaction of which it is often not conscious, builds up in itself an image which is the direct opposite of what it hates.”

Ahab, the human spirit, is trapped between his crippling dissatisfaction with the world and his lack of objective reasoning to explain such a dissatisfaction. Ahab’s “unsurpressable symptoms” are the result of his separation from the community. He becomes an ‘alien,’ a ‘threat’ to society even. According to James’ thinking here, such a disparity between dissatisfaction and its root cause creates an image in the subject’s mind that he in turn directs all his aggression towards. For Ahab, that image is Moby Dick. Ahab hates society and has no care for money or comfort. He fixates on a creature that he is supposed to kill for money, but chases it for vengeance instead.

Ahab, through his dissatisfaction with the world, turns to killing a whale, and is able to get others to do the same. By removing himself from society and capitalistic gain, Ahab turns himself, according to Esposito, into a contaminant. He is a threat to American standards only because his own ideology firmly opposes them. The whaling vessel itself evokes the superfluous nature of civilization, that an entire fishery exists in the name of collecting expensive oil used for

cosmetics and lighting. However, he uses this capitalistic instrument, the *Pequod*, as his primary tool in pursuing a very un-capitalistic enterprise, one that will yield him no material gain, but has the potential to “solve all that was troubling him.”

C.L.R. James says of his cellmate, M, “Now a man had to be blind and deaf not to see that whatever were the rights and wrongs of any particular case, here was a powerful demonstration, before a specially selected audience, of the Communist, the man of purpose, in action” (C.L.R. James, 130). While Ahab might not be a Communist, he is a “man of purpose,” whose “powerful demonstration” before Starbuck, leaves the feeble first mate powerless to resist pursuing his captain’s purpose. The “rights and wrongs” of Ahab’s scheme become irrelevant amid his “powerful demonstration,” because it is the sheer conviction, not the specifics of what it will achieve, that is so powerful and infectious.

Steven Connor introduces laughter as a subcategory to the cough by way of its involuntariness. While not a method of expelling irritant matter, laughter occurs unpredictably, as a reaction. Before Ahab sneezes into Starbuck, he points to the crew; “See Stubb! he laughs! See yonder Chilian! he snorts to think of it” (167). Ahab’s chiding of Starbuck, his mere suggestion of the mate’s cowardice, brings the crew to laughter. Connor’s point that “the cough is far from inexpressive,” is adequately shown as true through these expressions of Ahab’s crew members. Ahab entices the men to chastise the first mate for skulking from the hunt. They join in not through voice but through inarticulate, visceral, expression. Stubb’s laughter implies amusement, perhaps with Starbuck’s alleged cowardice, though Chilian’s “snort,” as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is enacted “in order to express contempt, disdain, or other feeling.” These

two types of involuntary breath are in fact used consciously and with purpose, making them even more expressive of their sentiment than words might have been.

Ahab informs Starbuck, “Stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tost sapling cannot, Starbuck!” comparing the first mate to a “sapling” in the midst of a “hurricane.” That is to say, Starbuck is alone in disagreeing with Ahab, and as a sapling, is powerless against the “hurricane” of “general,” opinion. The “hurricane” used to describe the crew’s opinion is significant within the context of breath, as Starbuck, standing in silence, is bombarded with a laugh from Stubb, a snort from Chilian, and “something” shooting out of Ahab’s nose—all amounting to forceful expressions of breath, of air, towards a lone dissenter, a sapling. Ahab tries to get a word out of Starbuck, but ultimately decides it is “thy silence, then, that voices thee.” Silence holds the same significance as a verbal statement—through the calculated withholding of breath. Ahab assumes Starbuck’s silence marks a “tacit acquiescence.” It is unclear why the mate chooses to remain quiet, other than that he is powerless to do otherwise.

Starbuck does in fact find an opportunity to derail Ahab’s mission, but talks himself out of it. As the mate waits outside Ahab’s door next to a rack of muskets one night, in him “there strangely evolved an evil thought” (386). Starbuck picks up the musket that Ahab had once pointed at him, remarking, “[Ahab] would have killed me with the very thing I handle now” (387). Starbuck wonders to himself while holding his musket “boldly,” about the possible merits of killing his captain. Certain that if Ahab’s mission continues “it would make him the wilful murderer of thirty men and more,” Starbuck even suggests that he might be doing Ahab a favor (387). The crime of killing “thirty men” “would not be his,” if murder stopped him from ruining the *Pequod*. Starbuck, unsure of himself, wonders if “heaven” is “a murderer when its

lightning strikes a would-be murderer in his bed” (387). The question seems unanswerable.

Stopping a murderer through murderous means is not a correction of the dead offender’s problem, it is a perpetuation of it. Starbuck, a devout Quaker, realizes this in an instant when he asks himself, “would I be a murderer, then, if,”— cutting himself off before “placing the loaded musket’s end against the door” (387). Starbuck’s mental back and forth seems like a predictable moral conundrum in his circumstance, though what’s actually at play is Starbuck’s mitigation of his own inability to disobey Ahab. The mate’s actions and thoughts create an illusion, both to himself and the reader, that a moral decision is taking place, when in reality he’s hit a brick wall—Starbuck “cannot oppose [Ahab] now,” even if he doesn’t realize it.

Stubb, after complaining to Ahab of the loud noise his ivory leg makes against the deck late at night, reflects, “[I] was never served so before without giving a hard blow for it” (*Moby-Dick*, 129). The sailor has never been chewed out so badly, even by a superior, without retaliating physically. Ahab’s ‘serves’ Stubb after being criticized by him, leaving the sailor equal parts enraged and humbled. Stubb finds himself at a bizarre crossroads of not knowing “whether to go back and strike him, or—what’s that?—down here on my knees and pray for him?” (129). Ahab approaches an argument with Stubb with the same ‘that’s-that’ ending as he employed with Starbuck, ordering the sailor to “be gone, or I’ll clear the world of thee!” (129). Not unlike Starbuck’s “tacit acquiescence,” Stubb “involuntarily retreated” (129). Stubb is a fairly hot-headed character who does not take kindly to harsh words or criticism, yet is forced into an “involuntary” retreat by the “terrors of [Ahab’s] aspect, without so much as a word.” Stubb’s retreat is as involuntary as Starbuck’s silence. Furthermore, Stubb’s mid-sentence question, “what’s that?” suggests that some other voice gives him the idea to get down on his knees and

“pray for him.” Stubb’s own conflict surprises him to the point of not recognizing himself. Both Stubb and Starbuck are forced to reverse their very essence of character in order to acquiesce to Ahab’s. Starbuck, a whaleman through and through, is forced to abandon the hunt for spermaceti in search of his “commander’s vengeance,” and Stubb, a man with too much pride, is forced to retreat, tail between his legs.

Asking himself of Ahab, “is he mad?” Stubb traverses, from shock at how he had just been “served,” to reverence for his captain. The mate changes tune and wonders if Ahab has “what some folks ashore call a conscience; it’s kind of a Tic-Dolly-row they say—worse nor a toothache” (129). Here, Stubb treats consciousness as some sort of affliction common on shore, not so much at sea. Stubb says the “Tic-Dolly-row,” a term most likely referencing *trigeminal neuralgia*, a nerve disease, is more painful than a toothache. As soon as Stubb concludes, “I don’t know what it is, but the Lord keep me from catching it,” the contagion of authority suddenly becomes relevant once more in the same way as it was with Starbuck.

Ahab succeeds in infecting Stubb with his authority. Starbuck, similarly, caught “it,” the “something” that shot off Ahab’s nose. Stubb uses the same vague language in describing what the “it” or the “something” actually is. He only knows that he does not want to catch it. “He might as well have kicked me, and done with it,” Stubb argues that Ahab’s harsh words could have been substituted with a kick, to the same effect. Whatever the case, “coming afoul of that old man has a sort of turned [Stubb] wrong side out,” something changes in him after this interaction with Ahab. Stubb, not wanting to overthink things, obeys his “twelfth” commandment; “sleep when you can,” and takes a nap.

After dreaming about the incident, Stubb softens, “after all, it was not much of an insult, that kick from Ahab” (131). Powerless to retaliate, and to save his own sense of dignity, Stubb is forced to change his opinion of the whole exchange. When trying to kick Ahab in his dream, Stubb “kicked [his] right leg off!” (131). The dream seems to put Stubb and Ahab’s row into a physical framework, in which Stubb’s “involuntary retreat” becomes him “kicking [his] leg off” instead of hitting his mark, Ahab. Stubb is unable to retaliate, neither vocally nor physically. Citing the difference between a “living thump and a dead thump,” as being between being hit by a live limb and an ivory leg, Stubb feels less slighted. Telling all of this to Flask, no doubt in order to save face, Stubb reminds his colleague that “a blow from the hand, Flask,” is “fifty times more savage to bear than a blow from a cane. The living member—that makes the living insult, my little man” (131). By reducing Ahab’s ivory leg to no more than a cane, Stubb feels less insulted by the kick, which, by the way, only occurred in his dream. Stubb, unable to attack Ahab, needs to make it clear that he does not feel insulted, so that he doesn’t look like a coward.

Ishmael takes time in *Surmises* to ponder Ahab’s relationship to the crew. A surmise, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is an idea “that something may be true, but without certainty and on very slight evidence” (“surmise, n.” OED Online). Ishmael regards his lack of omniscience with honesty, but delivers an incisive reading of Ahab’s intentions. Ishmael observes that Ahab’s primary tool is his men, “and of all tools...men are most apt to get out of order” (*Surmises*, 214). Men, while effective, are difficult to control.

M, “as mad as Ahab,” through his commitment to human justice, was really only “pursuing his own purpose” (*C.L.R. James*, 132). M, given his circumstances, employs the only

tools at his limited disposal to advance his own purpose. Appearing to use “the American tradition against those who were supposed to be its guardians,” M would just as easily have subjected “both officers and the men he championed to a tyranny worse than anything they could conceive of,” had it “suited his purpose” (132). M makes himself into the crowning irony of Ellis Island, a Communist more dedicated to human rights than America’s Department of Justice. However, M’s commitment to justice is just as calculated as Ahab’s commitment to the *Pequod*’s “nominal” purpose. James writes that “the men whom [M] had helped and others who had seen his actions had told him or passed the word to him that as soon as they reached home they were going to join the Communist Party” (C.L.R. James, 132). M created political converts through his commitment to justice, a commitment that James would argue the Communist Party stands in direct opposition to. Yet, M knows, just as Ahab, that an end goal as mad as Communism, or as mad as killing Moby Dick, must be broken down into sensible parts, it can never gain a following while it remains in a state of overarching insanity.

In *Billy Budd*, the narrator gives a simple explanation for the origins of mutiny: “reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances” (*Billy Budd*, 54). Rebellion begins with mundane disapproval among the crew regarding its treatment aboard the vessel, and grows into “irrational combustion” (*Billy Budd*, 54). Ishmael recounts a tale of mutiny aboard a ship named the *Town-Ho*’s, to a group of Dons in Lima.

Ishmael tells the Dons of Lima that he knows the tale is true, because he has “seen and talked with Steelkilt since the death of Radney” (268). The interaction to which Ishmael refers occurs as the *Pequod* meets the *Jeroboam* at sea, and “it turned out that the Jeroboam had a

malignant epidemic on board, and that Mayhew, her captain, was fearful of infecting the Pequod's company" (322). We know that Steelkilt is aboard the *Jeroboam* through Stubb's exclamation, "That's he! that's he!—the long-togged scaramouch the Town-Ho's company told us of!" (323). The wording, "a malignant epidemic," on board the *Jeroboam* seems singular, as if contained, despite it being an infectious disease. Steelkilt's contagious cries for mutiny had infected the *Town-Ho*, and he had made his way with a number of men to Tahiti, where he boarded the *Jeroboam*. It is not far off, therefore, that the "malignant epidemic" referred to is actually Steelkilt himself. Captain Mayhew, aware of Steelkilt's contagious authority, is fearful of spreading the epidemic to the *Pequod*, even though "himself and the boat's crew remained untainted" (322). Steelkilt showed, while on the *Town-Ho*, that he only attacks in retaliation, that if his commands are obeyed, he has no reason for violence. Steelkilt's fair, yet strong, authority over the vessel, amounts to the captain and crew remaining "untainted," because they are subordinate, which in turn leaves Steelkilt placated.

In Ishmael's story of the *Town-Ho*, the relationship between Steelkilt and its first mate, Radney, evokes that of Billy Budd and Officer Claggart. Ishmael prefaces the history of these two sailors by explaining how "when a person placed in command over his fellow-men finds one of them to be very significantly his superior in general pride of manhood, straightaway against that man he conceives an unconquerable dislike and bitterness" (252). Like Billy Budd, Steelkilt, though subordinate to Radney, is undoubtedly "superior" in "pride of manhood." Radney is superior to Steelkilt in name, but the opposite is true on a deeper level. The disproportional structure of authority created by this type of dynamic creates "dislike and bitterness" immediately, "straightaway," as if a reflex. The intangible sort of superiority Steelkilt possesses



is the same as the Communist M's, and Radney's power only goes as far as the Department of Justice's does on Ellis Island. Further likening Steelkilt to Billy Budd and to M, Ishmael tells us that "Steelkilt was a tall and noble animal with a head like a Roman, and a flowing golden beard...and a brain, and a heart, and a soul in him...which had made Steelkilt Charlemagne, had he been born son to Charlemagne's father" (252). The descriptions of Steelkilt's height, his "noble" aspect, his "heart" and "soul," all serve to liken him to Billy Budd, who is so often described in such regal terms, and who we know to be fair-haired. The comparison to Charlemagne implies Steelkilt's great power, authority, and resolve. Steelkilt would have been a perfect substitution for Charlemagne had he been born in the emperor's place. However, having been born as Steelkilt, the "Lakeman," he is subjected to "Radney, the mate...ugly as a mule; yet as hardy, as stubborn, as malicious" (252). Ishmael reduces the story to one of a great emperor and a mule, in which the mule is in charge. Radney "did not love Steelkilt, and Steelkilt knew it" (252). There is no specific reason for Claggart and Radney's hatred of Billy and Steelkilt, respectively—their hatred represents a fundamental incapacity for its object, a natural reaction of the "ireful" type to its polar opposite.

Radney, embodying the hypothetical "old hunks" that Ishmael describes in "Loomings," orders Steelkilt, exhausted from pumping water, to "get a broom and sweep down the planks, and also a shovel, and remove some offensive matters consequent upon allowing a pig to run at large" (253). Radney orders Steelkilt, a "captain of one the gangs," who "should have been freed from any trivial business not connected with truly nautical duties," to sweep the deck with a broom and dispose of pig feces with a shovel. Ishmael knows, as Steelkilt knows, as "any man who has gone sailor in a whale-ship will understand," that "the order about the shovel was

almost as plainly meant to sting and insult Steelkilt, as though Radney had spat in his face” (253). Just as Stubb considers that Ahab’s vociferation could just as well have been a “kick,” Radney’s offensive task is no different from having “spat in [Steelkilt’s] face” (253). Ahab’s vocal kick, and Radney’s vocal spit, each amount to a “blow,” in the way C.L.R. James understands the word in his criticism of the Department of Justice. Ishmael can take a blow knowing that it is just the “universal thump” being passed around. Steelkilt, perceiving in Radney a stack of “powder casks” about to explode, is overcome with a “strange forbearance and unwillingness to stir up the deeper passionateness in any already ireful being” (253). Steelkilt, out of “strange forbearance,” tells Radney coolly, taking Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” approach, that “sweeping the deck was not his business, and he would not do it” (254). Vouching for his freedom, Steelkilt distinguishes “his business” as different from “sweeping the deck,” and once again calls on Ahab’s use of the *Pequod’s* “nominal task” to aid his own crazed purpose.

Ahab disguises his quest for Moby Dick as the *Pequod’s* original whale-hunting mission. M advances his political beliefs by committing himself to being a purveyor of justice on Ellis Island. Steelkilt understands that Radney’s hatred doesn’t come from a justifiable place, and is confident that he can exemplify the mate’s unnecessary hatred to the rest of the crew. Steelkilt points to “three lads,” the “customary sweepers; who, not being billeted at the pumps, had done little or nothing all day” (254). There are three able bodied, rested, underling sailors, whose regular duty it is to sweep the decks, yet Radney insists on Steelkilt. Steelkilt makes an inarguable case against his superior, just as M does on Ellis Island. Obviously these three young sailors are better suited to sweep the decks than Steelkilt, just as it is obvious that a young boy should not share a cell with older criminals on Ellis Island—in both cases the superior officers

failed to see this, and in so doing lost the respect of their employees. By coupling these instances, the Department of Justice's mistreatment of its detainees begins to look as unjustifiably hateful as Radney's disposition toward Steelkilt, and Claggart's toward Billy. C.L.R. James likely relished in the possibility of this comparison.

Steelkilt's fatigue from pumping water from a leak in the ship is a "practical grievance" because the *Town-Ho*'s captain refuses to dock the ship and have it properly fixed. His disapproval of Radney's task is a "personal grievance" that could be easily righted, but isn't. As Radney attempts to literalize his vocal blow by use of his hammer, Steelkilt evades the blow and, "the next instant the lower jaw of the mate was stove" (255). Radney's last ditch effort to infect Steelkilt with his authority is in vain; because Radney is a mule and Steelkilt is Charlemagne, the infection can only work in Steelkilt's favor. Steelkilt warns the captain, "not a man of us turns to, unless you swear not to raise a rope-yarn against us" (258). He is willing to work fairly for the captain only if he receives promise that no one will be beaten. In the same instant, Steelkilt identifies him and the crew as one body of men, in opposition to another body, their superior officers. After asking the crew, "what say ye, men?...A fierce cheer was their response" (258). Steelkilt, in an instant, by showing Radney's hatred to have no basis and by showing a resolve against injustice, rallies the entire crew to rebellion, he infects them with his authority and purpose. Steelkilt promises to only "lift a hand" in retaliation, and agrees to go "down into the forecandle" for the meantime. He asks for the approval of his men, and even though "most of them were against it; but at length, in obedience to Steelkilt, they preceded him down into their dark den" (258). The men are rallied to rebellion, even though "most of them were against it." Therefore, the only factor determining their rebellious actions is an "obedience" to Steelkilt, a

sickness that he instilled within them. Such a type of obedience is consistent with other instances of this sort in Melville's works: authority that is imposed through infectious means. As soon as Radney is shown to be a mule, and Steelkilt to be Charlemagne, the shifting allegiance of the crew comes as naturally as the wind.

In *The Jeroboam's Story*, Stubb describes a man "wearing redundant yellow hair" and having a "deep, settled, fanatic delirium...in his eyes," whom he immediately identifies as Steelkilt from *The Town-Ho* (323). It becomes quickly clear that "according to [Stubb's] account and what was subsequently learned, it seemed that the scaramouch in question had gained a wonderful ascendancy over almost everybody in the *Jeroboam*" (323). The *Town-Ho's* story tells a similar tale, of how a "certain man among her crew" was able to take control of the crew. The word "ascendancy" is often used in describing Ahab's intangibly powerful influence over the men of the *Pequod's* crew. However, the "scaramouch in question" is not introduced as Steelkilt, but as Gabriel.

Despite no one being infected aboard the *Jeroboam*, and the "half a rifle-shot" distance between the two vessels, Mayhew "conscientiously [adheres] to the timid quarantine of the land," and refuses to come into direct contact with the *Pequod*. Ishmael's use of "quarantine" is the only time in which the word appears in the entirety of *Moby-Dick*. The most relevant definition of quarantine, is an "isolation imposed on newly arrived travellers in order to prevent the spread of disease" ("quarantine, n." OED Online). Steelkilt, after abandoning his former captain of the *Town-Ho*, makes him swear that he will stay marooned on an island for six days before setting sail again, most likely to give Steelkilt enough time to get away without fear of

being chased. The assigned six day period is a kind of quarantine imposed on the *Town-Ho's* captain, using isolation to aide Steelkilt's "specific purpose" of escape. Perhaps Steelkilt imposed the quarantine himself, not allowing the crew to interact with other ships because they might cry for help, give away his mutiny. Or, perhaps Mayhew is simply aware of Steelkilt's power over men, and does not want to extend the same oppressive and contagious authoritativeness to another innocent ship.

Once the connection is made between Steelkilt and his new self, Gabriel, Ishmael's statement in "Loomings" becomes once more relevant. Ishmael asks, "What of it, if some old hunks of a sea-captain orders me to get a broom and sweep down the decks?...Do you think the archangel Gabriel thinks anything less of me, because I promptly and respectfully obey that old hunks in that particular instance?" (5). Now that we understand the Gabriel of *The Jeroboam's Story* is equivalent with Steelkilt, Ishmael's reference to the "archangel Gabriel" in reference to sweeping down the decks is given deeper meaning. Gabriel, or Steelkilt, *would* judge Ishmael for obeying "some old hunks of a sea-captain," because he did not obey Radney's order to "get a broom and sweep down the planks."

The disparity between Ishmael's question and Steelkilt's resolution seems to boil down humanity into two groups. Melville sets Ishmael and Gabriel up in opposition to one another; Ishmael will obey and sweep down the deck, but Gabriel refuses. However, before Gabriel is introduced as a character, we have Ishmael rhetorically asking if he would judge him for obeying such an order, a "blow," seeming to imply that he wouldn't. The distinction between

rebelliousness and subservience is perfectly captured through the different approaches Ishmael and Gabriel take to “blows.”

The source of Steelkilt’s “ascendancy” aboard the *Town-Ho* can be located to a series of hisses he delivers when faced with a flogging. As the captain prepares to bring the rope down on Steelkilt, he says, “in a sort of hiss, ‘What I say is this—and mind it well—if you flog me, I murder you!’” (261). The Lakeman hisses once more, and the captain raises the rope again in preparation, at which point, “Steelkilt...hissed out something, inaudible to all but the Captain; who, to the amazement of all hands, started back, paced the deck rapidly two or three times, and then suddenly throwing down his rope, said, ‘I won’t do it—let him go—cut him down: d’ye hear?’” (261). Steelkilt “hissed out something” that forces the captain into submission. The “something” that Steelkilt hisses out is reminiscent of the “something” that “shoots” out of Ahab’s nose. Only here, the something is ‘hissed’ out, though it still remains a “something,” that produces the same effect in Steelkilt’s captain as it does in Starbuck. Steelkilt already threatened the captain with death, so his final hiss could not have been a reiteration of the same threat, or else the captain would have retreated before. The fact that the “something” is “inaudible” to everyone but the captain makes the potential words of the hiss irrelevant—for the purposes of this argument there were no words at all, only something hissed. A hiss is a “sharp spirant sound” used “to drive or send away with or by means of hissing” (“hiss, v.” OED Online). It as an expression of “disapproval or derision.”

Stephen Connor writes in “Whispering Music” that “the cough is neither the only nor even perhaps the most conspicuous of these incursions of the raw, errant or otherwise unvoiced

air into the economy of voice” (*Whisper Music*, 2). Earlier we discussed the cough in opposition to voice, as being “unvoiced,” an expression forcibly projected instead of calculated. The “hiss” is another “incursion” of “unvoiced air,” as well as “the lisp, the gasp, the sigh, the rasp,” and “the whistle” (*Whisper Music*, 2). “In all of these,” Connor writes, “the meaning comes from the involuntary nature of the sound, a sound not subdued or wholly suffused by the operations of voice. In such sounds, the air is not expressed, pressed out into audibility, impressed into audible shapes and postures, but seems rather to be escaping, as though through a rent or gash” (*Whisper Music*, 2). Steelkilt’s “hiss,” according to Connor’s logic, is the result of an “escaping, as though through a rent or gash.” Such a characterization of the “hiss” is helpful in understanding it as an infective process, because it implies that something, “something,” from within Steelkilt, made its way into the captain, and altered his actions, rendering him subservient instead of superior. The captain shows the same involuntary recoil as Stubb and Starbuck do in response to Ahab.

Gabriel tells a story that is inconsistent with what Ishmael told the Dons at Lima. A vial of “laudanum” hangs from Gabriel’s neck, which is “a name for various preparations in which opium was the main ingredient,” or some type of medicinal anesthetic. Gabriel describes how, “with that cunning peculiar to craziness, he assumed a steady, common sense exterior, and offered himself as a greensand candidate for the Jeroboam’s whaling voyage” (323). Steelkilt, according to his own description, seems a lot like Ahab, who forces “himself to evince all his well known passionate interest in the general pursuit of his profession” (*Surmises*, 216). Steelkilt must assume a “steady, common sense exterior” in order to convince his men that he is worth taking orders from. Ahab’s pursuit of *Moby Dick*, nonsensical as it is, requires a “cunning peculiar to craziness,” in which an irrational scheme is accomplished through rational means.

Gabriel's "insanity broke out" as soon as *Jeroboam* lost sight of land. Ishmael attempts to put Gabriel's ascendancy over the crew in sensical terms: "the unflinching earnestness with which he declared these things;—the dark, daring play of his sleepless, excited imagination, and all the preternatural terrors of real delirium, united to invest this Gabriel in the minds of the majority of the ignorant crew, with an atmosphere of sacredness" (324). What Ishmael describes as captain Ahab's "aspect," the thing that terrifies his crew, is parsed out in his description of another powerful figure, Gabriel. The interplay between "earnestness" and the "preternatural terrors of real delirium" seem to be at odds. Steerkilt is so convincing, despite his "sleepless, excited imagination," because of his extreme earnestness. Like the Communist M, who "stood for something, stood for it like a rock," Steerkilt's "wonderful ascendancy" comes from a place of rigid purposefulness (*C.L.R. James*, 150). It is this rigidity of character that gives them their "sacredness," power, and authority. In the next chapter we'll look at further examples of subversive power in the form of Melville's mutinies.



### Chapter Three: Mutiny and the Subversion of Power in Melville's *Billy Budd* and *Benito*

#### *Cereno*

Billy Budd's voyage takes place in "the summer of 1797," not long after the April "commotion at Spithead followed in May by a second and yet more serious outbreak in the fleet at the Nore" (Billy Budd, 54). The "commotion" referred to at Spithead is a mutiny that became infamous in the British Royal Navy. The second at Nore, an "outbreak," "The Great Mutiny," just a month after, was likely catalyzed by the initial uprising a month previous. The term "outbreak" is key because it is usually used to describe the spread of a disease. What started as a "commotion" at Spithead, a singular incident, became an "outbreak" once it hit Nore, because it was suddenly realized to be contagious. It could not have been at "outbreak" at its point of conception, because it had yet to spread.

Captains operating in the wake of these calamitous mutinies are certainly on edge after noticing how insurrection can spread from ship to ship, as it seemed to have done in Spithead and Nore. Thus, every captain believed it could happen to his ship. Mutiny, the motivation for uprising, is as contagious as disease, and has a higher infection rate amongst a group of unhappy sailors suffering blows from their paranoid superiors. These sailors spend much of their time fulfilling orders and sitting idle. The occurrence of a mutiny signals that a crew is more concerned with its own wellbeing than with the greater notion of the British Royal Navy. They no longer see themselves proudly as British soldiers, but men who are being taken advantage of. Such a discontent spreads easily aboard a vessel because each crew member is subjected to the same essential treatment. Discontent then breeds the realization that, as in most power structures, given that a minority governs a majority, the potential success of an uprising is almost

guaranteed. In moments when the crew would be “assigned to batteries,” the narrator notes that some lieutenants “felt it incumbent on them...to stand with drawn swords behind the men working with guns” (*Billy Budd*, 59). The men in charge are so aware and fearful of mutiny, fixed with the impression that it must be taken care of, that their ship must be vaccinated, before the threat manifests, that they draw their own weapons after ordering the crew to draw theirs. Roberto Esposito understands this precaution as “precisely how the law immunizes the social system as a whole: substituting uncertain expectations with problematic but secure expectations” (*Immunitas*, 48). Captains, unwilling to face the unknown, learn to expect what they dread, not “eliminating instability, but...establishing a stable relationship with it” (*Immunitas*, 48). Fear of insurrection became a part of the central strategy of how to control a crew. Ironically it is the transpiring lack of trust that helps to muster the mutinous intentions captains seek to quell.

A lack of trust creates a pervasive sense of risk that is not necessarily tied to a real threat—action based on the threat of a threat. Roberto Esposito writes in his text, *Immunitas*, “risk is precisely what sets off the mechanisms of alarm, and therefore, of defense meant to protect it [the body]” (*Immunitas* 14). Esposito uses “body”, though the quote here is applied to a ship. Esposito writes that “contagion” is the primary and constant threat to an immune system. A sovereign nation works similarly to the body, its code of law acts as its immune system, its borders as its skin. A ship, representing a commonly appearing power-structure in Melville’s writing, given the strict code and rigid containment of its members, works almost literally like a body.

Upon infection, “what was healthy, secure, identical to itself, is now exposed to a form of contamination that risks its devastation” (*Immunitas*, 2). Esposito argues that a “threat of this type is constitutionally inherent to every form of individual life, as it is to all forms of human aggregation” (*Immunitas*, 2). Contamination is a threat that can occur on multiple levels, “biology, law, politics, and communication” (*Immunitas*, 2). A human body is only a biological example of what contamination can do. Esposito argues that this same process occurs in every form of “individual life,” or on a biological level, as well as in “human aggregation,” of which a whaling-ship is an example. The ship, like a nation, or a computer, shares many base-elements with the body. A boat is self-contained—anything relevant that happens occurs on board. A ship’s crew submit to its code and its mission as a collective body. So, just as the human immune system works to protect its body, a ship’s officers work to protect their ship from insurrection either coming from without or within.

A captain wants to squash a mutiny while it still remains in its ‘potential’ stage, before showing any signs of actual manifestation. So, the captain feels a need to predict, to assume the mutinous intentions of his crew regardless of evidence, and strategize accordingly. All of this amounts to a strained relationship between authority and crew characterized by suspicion and lack of trust. The ambiguity of the threat of mutiny only serves to intensify the alarm and preparation among captains. Suddenly, these sailors are no longer the valiant soldiers of the Royal Navy, but a bunch of bored mariners subjected to unfair treatment, who want to go home.

Lieutenant Ratcliffe impresses Billy onto a war ship, the H.M.S. *Bellipotent*, from the Handsome Sailor’s current position as foretop man on a merchant ship named the *Rights-of-Man*. The narrator makes the irony of Billy’s transfer especially apparent as the Handsome Sailor

waves goodbye to his old ship and says, “good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*” (*Billy Budd*, 49). Of course, due to the more stringent command structure aboard a warship, Billy is both saying goodbye to his old merchant ship and only somewhat metaphorically bidding farewell to his most basic human rights. As Lieutenant Ratcliffe boards the *Rights-of-Man*, looking for a conscript, he “pounced” on Billy “before the merchantman’s crew was formally mustered” (*Billy Budd*, 45). Ratcliffe chooses Billy in a deliberate yet almost subconscious manner, choosing him before witnessing the full stock of sailors, “and only him he elected.” The narrator admits to not knowing Ratcliffe’s motivations, whether he took only one man after noticing the *Rights*’ crew as already being short staffed, or because the other men “showed to ill advantage after Billy,” however, the ambiguity seems to further suggest the narrator’s understanding of a deeper, intangible nature behind Ratcliffe’s “spontaneous choice.” Ratcliffe’s choice might only have an appearance of spontaneity, given the narrator’s remarks on the nature of the “Handsome Sailor” it might seem appropriate that Ratcliffe was always going to choose Billy based only on his aspect and character.

The narrator notes that “Billy made no demur,” and adds that any protest would have been as “idle” as that of a “goldfinch popped into a cage” (*Billy Budd*, 45). The presence of a “goldfinch” brings Melville’s intentions as a writer into the fold. The narrator’s metaphor compares the futility of protest against conscription to that of a small bird being put in a cage. Other than the comment such a comparison makes on the prison-like nature of a war ship, it also alludes to a Biblical trope. Leo Steinberg, in an article on “The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art,” treats the goldfinch as a premonition of the Crucifixion. Describing *Madonna and Child*, by Pinturicchio, Steinberg draws our attention to an infant Christ spreading the wings

of his pet goldfinch, which he understands as “an image of the Crucifixion produced in child’s play” (Steinberg, Leo). Steinebrg argues

that because the Crucifixion is partly the defining feature in the story of Christ, depictions of all points in his life tend to include hints and foreshadowings of the event. The playful act of a child therefore becomes a prophetic image. Melville in comparing Billy to a goldfinch, likens the sailor’s innocence to that of Jesus Christ in a comparison that is all but exhausted in literary criticism. Lyon Evans Jr. wrote an article for the *New England Quarterly* that



wrestles with Melville’s relationship to Christianity, both in terms of literature and faith. Evans lists the “explicit parallels between Billy and Christ” in a parenthetical, “(in Billy’s prelapsarian innocence; in the hanging scene, the imagery of which is drawn from the New Testament accounts of Christ’s Resurrection; in the supposed supernatural character of Billy’s death)” (*Too Good To Be True*, 325). The parallels are so well-documented they can be reduced to a digestible list. However, the goldfinch image Melville gives us upon Billy’s impressment is an untapped parallel between Renaissance depictions of Christ as a young child and Billy “Baby Budd” (*Billy Budd*, 44). Both uses of the goldfinch indicate the imminence of an execution, though exercised

in the innocuous image of a goldfinch, and both stories result in an unjust, highly symbolic, yet necessary, execution.

For my purposes, likening Billy Budd to Jesus Christ is neither here nor there except in terms of each person's sacrifice. For Renée Girard, treatment for the "infection" of violence comes in the form of "prophylactic procedure," something that can attack the issue before it even comes into being, a preventative measure. Roberto Esposito agrees, saying that a community is only able to distance itself from its own tendency towards violence because "an immunitary device...has been put in place from the very beginning" (*Immunitas*, 38). That device for Esposito brings his argument back into medical terminology, specifically by applying the theory of inoculation to an abstract concept such as violence, treated as a disease. If we treat violence as a disease affecting society, there must be social 'cure,' or 'vaccine' that could prevent it or get rid of it. Girard argues that the community must be "injected with a minute amount of violence" in order to prevent against a "full-fledged" attack (38).

The two theorists ground such an idea of inoculation in what they call the "sacrificial victim," or the individual whom violence must be directed at to prevent a "universal flood" of violence (37). This redirection of aggression serves to inoculate a society from its own tendency towards it. Violence's fluidity gives it a potential to be as unprejudiced as disease in what it infects. Just like disease, violence exists everywhere, leaving it up to the governors of a community to either inoculate their people from it or let them fall victim to it. The role of the sacrificial victim "prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself," otherwise the violence would be directed inward: "it is a shift of violence from same to other" (39). Such a shift exists merely as a redirection of violence, something Girard might even categorize under his

own term of “surrogate victim,” in which, through misunderstanding, one victim is sacrificed in place of another—a sacrifice is always required, though the object of that sacrifice is less important than the act itself. If violence is not able to reach its intended goal then it redirects elsewhere.

The pointed contrast between the *Rights-O-Man* and the *Bellipotent* suggest a deeper meaning behind Billy’s impressment. The *Bellipotent*, a warship, is infected with violence in the way Girard understands it, and is in need of an outlet. Billy’s impressment is a “prophylactic procedure” insofar as he is able to quell the crew’s tendency toward violence, as mentioned earlier, “the body defeats a poison not by expelling it outside the organism, but by making it somehow part of the body” (*Immunitas*, 8). The immunitary device put in place must “subtly contradict” its host, as Billy, who “recoil[s]” from violence like a “horse...suddenly inhaling a vile whiff from some chemical factory,” does aboard the *Bellipotent*. Billy’s impressment, furthermore, is a kind of quarantine from his rights as a man. Just as C.L.R. James explicates a difference between Ellis Island and “civilization,” Billy, in being taken from the *Rights* is being taken away from “common” humanity, and placed amongst a subservient body of men. He is a goldfinch “popped in a cage”; Billy’s presence aboard the *Bellipotent* is a virtual imprisonment.

As the two officers, one a merchant captain the other a military lieutenant, meet in the cabin, Ratcliffe “unceremoniously invited himself...to a flask from the spirit locker, a receptacle which his experienced eye instantly discovered” (46). Ratcliffe, who we now know is an experienced drinker, finds the “spirit locker” as quickly and unconsciously as he picks Billy out from Graveling’s crew. Captain Graveling puts Ratcliffe’s one-sided transaction into stark terms, “you are going to take my best man from me, the jewel of ‘em” (46). Once again, Billy is

compared to some lustrous object, a jewel, but the comparison is backed up more concretely by the claim that Billy is Graveling's "best man;" Billy is not just a pretty face, but an effective sailor. Ratcliffe, who knows nothing of Billy other than what he can see, responds, "yes, I know."

Billy first boarded his ship in "black times," and "it was like a Catholic priest striking peace in an Irish shindy" (47). Given the historically insurmountable tensions between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, Graveling's simile once more gives extreme credit to Billy's effect on people, that not even a label of Catholicism could dull his calming influence among a group of Protestant Irishmen. The following part of Graveling's comparison is telling of the way Billy's influence manifests, "not that he preached to them or said anything in particular, but a virtue went out of him, sugaring the sour ones" (47). It is Billy's very presence that "strikes peace," not anything he says or does. Billy's "virtue" is as infectious as mutiny. Though the two engender opposite results, they are made of the same stuff, and spread like infectious diseases. The "virtue" that "went out of" Billy is similar to the "something" that shot from Ahab's "dilated nostrils." Whatever "went out of" Billy created "peace" during "black times," just as whatever shot out of Ahab's nose engendered Starbuck's subservience despite the mate's best efforts to rebel.

The narrator further exemplifies Billy's extraordinary power in describing the "buffer of the gang," the one crew member immune to Billy's virtue. The "big shaggy chap with the fire-red whiskers" would chastise Billy, but once, after "insultingly" giving Billy "a dig under the ribs...Quick as lightening Billy let fly his arm" (47). Billy, who had "reasoned with him in a pleasant way," is not violent, but the obstinate sailor's little dig caused the Handsome Sailor to viscerally react, to "let fly his arm," as if something had been holding it back; his arm flew out as



if suddenly released from a tight grip, like water released from a opened dam. “Will you believe it,” Graveling posits, “the Red Whiskers now really loves Billy—loves him, or is the biggest hypocrite that ever I heard of” (47). Just as Ahab states, “Starbuck is now mine,” after infecting the Quaker mate, Billy turns Red Whiskers’ hatred into love, or scares him into feigned affection. Either way, the change in Red Whiskers comes after a violent, blunt, punch—that, though the narrator does not use the word, works strikingly similarly to a “blow.” Billy’s intangible power is unmistakable after he punches Red Whiskers; though he could not alter the aggressive sailor’s attitude through the “virtue that went out of him,” a physical transfer, the punch, changes Red Whiskers on a fundamental level. Usually when this sort of blow aboard a ship comes from a superior to an inferior officer it signals a tactic of attaining acquiescence beyond vocal enticement. A blow is a final message for an inferior to either obey or submit to any and all consequences. However, Billy, though not a superior officer, is able to achieve the same result with his certifiably unconscious punch to Red Whisker’s chin.

Another sort of “blow,” in the way C.L.R. James would understand the word, occurs in the very conscription of Billy by Lieutenant Ratcliffe. Graveling, an English merchant under allegiance to the King, is subject to the wartime rules of impression at sea, a circumstance Giorgio Agamben would classify under the “state of exception.” “The State of Exception,” as one of the ways Agamben writes about it in *Homo Sacer*, is a “temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*). The British Crown uses the Spithead and Nore mutinies as grounds for a “factual state of danger,” and the “temporary suspension” of the very laws the Crown aims to protect allows for Ratcliffe to legally

kidnap Billy. The lieutenant knows that Graveling has no choice but to hand over Billy, yet patronizes him;

“His Majesty will be delighted to know that in a time when his hardtack is not sought for by sailors with such avidity as should be, a time also when some shipmasters privily resent the borrowing from them a tar or two for the service; His Majesty, I say, will be delighted to learn that *one* shipmaster at least cheerfully surrenders to the King the flower of his flock” (48).

Ratcliffe’s backhanded attempt to quell Graveling’s displeasure gives a similar sense of the lack of enthusiasm within the Royal Navy to what C.L.R. James witnesses on Ellis Island. The lack of enthusiasm, lack of “avidity,” is characterized by a disconnect between the ambitions of the state, the institutional governing body, and those over whom it governs. Firstly, “His Majesty” will never be “delighted” with Graveling’s acquiescence because it’s simply not information worth reporting to a king. The sentence reveals that the two officers converse at a time when sailors are not signing up for the navy with as much “avidity,” or enthusiasm, as “they should be.” Clearly the Royal Navy’s nationalistic message is not a rallying cry for young Englishmen, establishing a disconnect between the authority of the English Empire and the people that it consists of. Because of this lack of enthusiasm, the process of conscription is more heavy handed amongst British ships, yet no one can make a fuss or argue against the practice, because it is law. Captains “privily resent the borrowing” of their men; “privily” indicating that they keep their resentment to themselves, allowing it to stew and grow into possibly mutinous intentions. “Borrowing” is a

softening term, as these men are in all likelihood never returned, either because they are killed or otherwise. The most patronizing element in Ratcliffe's words is the "cheerfulness" he ascribes to Graveling's handing over of Billy, like a mother telling her child to eat broccoli against his wishes, and to enjoy it. But at the end of his little statement, Ratcliffe once again makes reference to Billy as the "flower of the flock," an affectation that now needs little explanation. Graveling is given no sense that Billy's conscription is necessary for the good of England, that the King personally appreciates the gesture—he receives in return only the condescendingly appeasing words of an officer who knows that Graveling can either say yes, or become something of a traitor to the King. The connection between Graveling, a merchant, and Ratcliffe, a lieutenant, is made out of words, affectation, and title. There is no real sense of bond between the two sailors under the glory of their empire—their connection is as fictitious as Ratcliffe's use of "borrowing" and the fake pleasure he ascribes to "His Majesty."

Billy Budd, the "cynosure," of whom "noble descent was as evident...as in a blood horse," (a blood horse being one of the utmost pure genealogy) has a similar effect within any power structure he finds himself in, as M the Communist does on Ellis Island. M, among the "main body of men" had "a tremendous reputation" because of his continual acts of humanity in opposition to the Ellis Island staff. M's writings about the "flagrant injustice" on Ellis Island reached the Communist press, and "nobody could challenge them, because he had all the facts, and he wrote with the authority of someone who was actually in the place which he was writing about" (*C.L.R. James*, 131). While Billy is able to "sugar the sour ones" and exude "virtue," M infects through his writing and reputation. People trust M's writing because he writes with the "authority" of firsthand experience, and because he displays a commitment to justice on a daily

basis—all things that are visible and verifiable. People trust Billy because his very aspect illuminates his character; M is made trustworthy through his actions and position. However, the King, and the Department of Justice, merely exist to these men as institutions, the only interaction between them comes in the form of orders, or “blows.” Just as the idea of mutiny can spread and snowball from ship to ship, M was able to get his account of the “injustice” on Ellis Island out into the world, despite all of Ellis Island’s “officers and armed guards, its bolts and its bars, its thick walls and its power, it was morally defeated by one single Communist repeatedly” (*C.L.R. James*, 131). What C.L.R. James and Melville both understand is the contagious nature of authority. Superiority does not necessarily reflect the visible channels of a power structure. Physical structures like cells and iron bars, armed officers, and so on, are reflections of the *lack* of power held by Ellis Island’s Department of Justice. M only requires a typewriter and a commitment to human justice to exert his extreme and intangible authority on the island. Power is not created or given, it cannot be “vainglorious”—it is inherent. The invisible nature of power, while in part accounting for its intangibility, also serves to emphasize its physicality. Authority is gaseous, able to permeate “bolts,” “bars,” and “thick walls” it moves from person to person as if infecting them with a disease.

During the making of a mutiny, as “reasonable discontent” grows steadily out of “practical grievances,” a crew will realize its physically advantageous position in the power structure of their ship. At the top there are few, and many at the bottom, who, in the British Royal Navy, experience “reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances” (*Billy Budd*, 54). Such “discontent,” according to the narrator, is “reasonable” and “practical.” Small things, perhaps qualms over the distribution of work, or pay, or that there isn’t enough food, or that the

food is bad—all amount to “practical grievance,” and rightly so, but they are severely basic needs to be met for men giving their entire lives to their country’s Navy. These “practical grievances,” given the monotony of seafare after many months afloat, in the case of the Spithead and Nore mutinies, “had been ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel from France in flames” (*Billy Budd*, 54). There are phrases about straws and camels’ backs, but the narrator chooses “irrational combustion” as the catalyst for mutiny. The discontent among men grew and stewed, from grievances not unlike Captain Graveling’s over losing his best man, to a point of violent combustion. The shift occurs as soon as a crew becomes conscious of its physically superior abilities, as a collective body of men, over its superiors, who, by this point the men have realized are only superior by title, that a show of force would easily flip the balance of power.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing phases in the process of a mutiny is the “stewing” period, in which a crew “privily” mulls over its “reasonable discontent,” amazed and disheartened that requests so “reasonable” should not be met by its superiors. This is the incubation period. Everyone or most of everyone likely feels the same way, as they are all treated equally; yet, they might feel afraid of the consequences for insurrection, or frightened that confiding in another crew member could prove a fatal mistake. The crucial aspect in these men is that they feel detached, purposeless—the lure of patriotism gone, these men are left with nothing to think about other than their own discomfort. However, their discontent is strictly individual at this point. It only takes one purposeful individual, call him M, or Ahab, or Billy Budd (though the Handsome Sailor would never incite a mutiny), to sway a group of disarrayed men, to give them the purpose that they need in order to act. C.L.R James understands this process of

disillusionment as why dictators like Hitler can rise to power, or how captain Ahab can command a ship; “That Ahab was so passionately devoted to something (no matter what it was) this was what overwhelmed Starbuck” (*C.L.R. James*, 51). To James, and to this idea, the “(no matter what it was)” is crucially important. It is not the goal of the purpose, but the purpose itself. People will rally behind anything, as long as they feel like they are a part of it. A sense of purpose is easily understandable as ‘infectious’ in the colloquial sense of the word, but it once looked at, purpose and authority transfer in ways comparable with biological disease, especially in the way Melville so often characterizes it. Billy’s “virtue went out of him,” “something shot out of Ahab’s nose”—Melville continuously frames the effect authority has on people as a transference of something physical.

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In Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, Captain Delano, upon meeting Benito Cereno, believes the man to be sick, noting that the Spanish captain’s “national formality” is “dusked by the saturnine mood of ill-health” (42). There are certain pleasantries expected between captains during a gab that Cereno does not perform, but Delano makes an exception for a man so obviously stricken with sickness. Delano sees Cereno’s “biting his lip, biting his fingernail, flushing, paling, twitching his beard,” as all “symptoms of an absent or moody mind” (42).

Though Delano notices apparent sickness in the Spanish captain, these “symptoms” he attributes to the man seem hardly linked to any disease, nor does an “absent or moody mind” specify any sort of common virus. Delano even considers Cereno as a “hypochondriac abbot,”

both likening the authority of a captain to a priest, and referencing the man's general nervousness and palpably poor health, as if to say he could be a man whose disease is entirely mental, though nonetheless real. Delano, in his inquisitiveness, learns that "a tendency to some pulmonary complaint appears to have been lately confirmed," though this 'confirmation' is perhaps another scheme of Babo's to make Cereno's situation more believable. Delano's actual guesses as to the biological condition of Cereno are more conjectural, while his observations on the captain's aspect are more on point. Cereno's "voice was like that of one with lungs half gone"; clearly something afflicted the man. Delano takes pleasure, however, in what he perceives as the loyalty of Babo, "less a servant than a devoted companion," who would give "his master his arm," or take "his handkerchief out of his pocket for him," and so on, little acts of kindness that seem extraordinary when bestowed upon a sickly superior.

Delano, "a person of singularly undistrustful good nature," gives Cereno the benefit of the doubt, ascribing the Spaniard's "sour and gloomy disdain" to the "harassing effects of sickness" (37, 43). Delano had noted that "in former instances," he'd noticed "peculiar natures on whom prolonged physical suffering seems to cancel every social instinct of kindness" (43). Certain people cannot keep their minds free from physical pain, their bodily ailment being so great a discomfort that it effects the patient's mental state. "Prolonged physical suffering" can do more than make a man moody, however. Discomfort, "reasonable discontent" and "practical grievances," as we learn in *Billy Budd*, can be enough to catalyze a full-scale mutiny. The narrator chooses to use "physical suffering" in place of "sickness," which is the term Delano readily ascribes to Benito Cereno. Perhaps this characterization is meant to explain that, just as

Cereno's physical suffering eclipses his "instinct of kindness," the "physical suffering" of his captives could engender a similar, more dangerous, moodiness.

The narrator and Captain Delano both characterize the dire circumstances aboard the *San Dominick* as the result of some sort of sickness. Benito Cereno's "individual unrest" is at first "noted as a conspicuous feature in the ship's general affliction," or in other words, the captain's sickness seems to resonate with the sickness aboard the ship (43). Cereno's "distempered spirit was lodged, as before hinted, in as distempered a frame" (43). The Oxford English Dictionary offers a definition of "distemper" as being "A disorder, a disease, an ailment (of body or mind)" ("distemper, n.1." OED Online). The narrator offers that both Cereno's "frame" and "spirit" are "distempered," implying a difference between the two, spiritual and physical—though in Benito Cereno's case both are diseased, his aspect and his spirit. As we see in *Billy Budd*, there is a connection between aspect and personality—in the case of Benito Cereno that connection manifests in his sickly presence and "sour and moody disdain." Delano also conjectures that Cereno's attitude might be an attempt, as is common among those experiencing "prolonged physical suffering," to make Delano "partake of [his] fare," to share in his misery. Such an impulse on the part of Cereno reflects what a crew would feel after having been exposed to "prolonged physical suffering," and after having been denied solutions to their "reasonable grievances"—to make their superiors to "partake of [their] fare." The goal of a mutiny is to flip the balance of power, to make the captain suffer in the same way the crew had suffered.

Delano entices Cereno to explain the making of his situation. The reader learns by the end of Melville's story that Cereno's account is actually Babo's formulation, who stands right beside the captain throughout the tale's entirety. Whenever Cereno, in his story, touches on



something that seems of Babo's invention, he is thrown into a "sudden fainting attack of his cough," that Delano confirms to himself is "brought on, no doubt, by his mental distress" (46). In these moments Babo would "sustain him," and offer him assistance, be it a sip of water or some support. However, in performing these loyal tasks, Babo, is "at the same time keeping his eye fixed on his face," looking directly at Benito Cereno, his 'master,' as if silently warning him against coming clean to Delano. The power of these glance show that Babo is superior to Benito Cereno, even though Cereno is on paper the captain of his ship. Babo uses Cereno's status as captain to fool Delano into thinking that no mutiny took place.

At one point in the story, Cereno makes special thanks to "those Negroes...who...have, indeed, conducted themselves with less of restlessness than even their owner could have thought possible under such circumstances" (47). Such a statement is clearly a direct order from Babo, a rehearsed attempt to throw Delano off the mutinous scent, and afterwards, almost on cue, "here he again fell faintly back" (47). Cereno's sickness is not a virus, but the result of mutiny—he, though a captain, is infected with subservience to Babo. Cereno is expected, as a captive on his own ship, to convince Delano that he really is in charge of the *San Dominick*, that the ship's disheveled state is a result of unavoidable sickness rather than violent mutiny. In all instances when Cereno references the "fever" or "scurvy" that infected his boat, these words could be exchanged with "mutiny," both grammatically and contextually, to achieve the same result. The fabricated story intended to fool Captain Delano works mainly by substituting "fever" for "mutiny," and it almost works perfectly.

Cereno tells of the "malignant fever" that was "induced, or at least aggravated, by the more than scanty allowance of water" (46). Part of Cereno's admission could be true. A scant

water ration constitutes a “practical discontent” that could, combined with “the excessive heat of the lengthened calm,” incite a mutinous fervor. The “fever” he describes as being brought on by this lack of water, killed “whole families of Africans, and yet a larger number, proportionally, of the Spaniards, including, by a luckless fatality, every remaining officer on board” (47). It is suspicious that this “fever” was so surgical in its killing of more Spanish men than African, and, by what Cereno attributes to a “luckless fatality,” every single commanding officer. A successful mutiny carried out by captives on board a ship would have an exactly similar result. Benito Cereno, the captain, once removed from a position of authority due to the death of most of his crew and all of his officers, is a meagre tool in the mutiny’s alibi. “Fever” works as a perfect substitute for “mutiny” because the two occur in similar ways. Here, in the case of the *San Dominick*, where the actual events amount to hearsay, the result, and not the process, of the mutinous fever, is shown. Additionally, in *Billy Budd*, the narrator’s reference to the “outbreak” of mutiny at Nore, uses medical language that could be used to describe the outbreak of a fever. By offering two different stories of how the *San Dominick* came to its current situation, Melville hints at a kindredness between the spread of mutiny and infectious disease.

Knowing in advance, as the reader does, that the *San Dominick* is a mutineered ship, the vicissitudes in Captain Delano’s sizing-up of the boat as it approaches are telling of the invisible nature of authority in the way Herman Melville characterizes it. First, “almost” thinking the ship as “nothing less than a shipload of monks,” Captain Delano quickly realizes it is a Spanish merchant ship transporting slaves, and “other valuable freight” (39). As the boat draws even nearer, Delano is able to observe the “slovenly neglect pervading her”; the “battered and moldy” forecastle “seemed some ancient turret long ago taken by assault, and then left to decay” (39).

Even here, Delano unknowingly reveals the true story of the *San Dominick*. After seeing the foreign ship from three different distances, Delano's characterization quickly descends from a ship full of monks, to a valiant Spanish vessel, to something of an ancient ruin—a vestige of some former glory. The ship looks decrepit and decayed, “covered with dry tindery sea moss,” its balconies “tenantless” (39). Something is observably amiss about the ship, like Benito Cereno's frame, it is “distempered,” but with what it is unclear. The faultiness of perception is adequately shown in how Delano's idea of the foreign vessel changes as quickly as it approaches. But, the narrator writes, “the principle relic of faded grandeur” was the “oval sternpiece,” depicting “a dark satyr in a mask holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked” (*Benito Cereno*, 39).

A satyr, the mythological figure usually depicted as half-goat, half-man, holds its “foot,” not ‘hoof,’ on the neck of a “writhing figure,” not necessarily a fellow satyr, though nonetheless “masked.” The victim writhes, indicating resistance, but clearly to no avail—this victim will never overcome its oppressor. Though there is a clear winner and loser in the depiction, one holding its foot over the other's neck, the two figures only exist in terms of a winner-loser dynamic; each wear a mask that shrouds their personal identities beyond who is in control of who. That is to say, these two figures' entire characterization's are reduced to which one has authority over the other. The symbolic sternpiece serves as a useful image in considering ‘Captain’ Benito Cereno and his ‘loyal servant,’ Babo (quotes here used to show that their respective titles are now meaningless) , who Captain Delano even admits, not realizing his own irony, “slave I cannot call him” (47). Throughout the short story, Babo is in control. Throughout Delano and Cereno's conversation, Babo keeps careful watch over the captain, who is now a

captain only in name, as Babo hopes to quell Delano's suspicions. The interchangeability of sickness and mutiny in their fabricated story echoes the masked figures—the method is practically irrelevant, because the result is the same.

## Conclusion

Donald Trump recently called for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on,” at a time when the U.N. has 650,000 Syrians registered as international refugees (*The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*). El Salvadorian health officials “are urging women not to get pregnant until 2018 in an effort to halt a surge of birth defects,” caused by the rapidly spreading Zika virus in South America (*The New York Times*). Hacking, now a “culture” of its own in China, “is used to break into private networks, track online dissent back to its source or steal trade secrets,” and attacks have been vehemently combatted by the U.S. (*The New York Times*). All of these phenomenon in the world can be categorized as “a protective response in the face of risk” (*Immunitas*, 1). That risk, in all cases, “has to do with trespassing or violating borders” (*Immunitas*, 1). In our increasingly globalized world, we are more connected than ever. Our newfound connectivity brings with it an exaggerated sense of the risk of contamination. Donald Trump feels that all Muslims should be help suspect for the actions of few, and so he calls for total exclusion. The Zika virus, an actual biological disease, has prompted officials to recommend that people don’t travel to infected areas, and to put off pregnancy if already in one. These two instances are seemingly unrelated, but they essentially call for the same thing: quarantine, dealing with the problem by completely isolating oneself from it.

Edward Jenner, the father of the vaccine, discovered that immunization is only possible by incorporating a disease into the body, instead of fighting against it. As Esposito puts it, “the body defeats a poison not by expelling it outside the organism, but by making it somehow part of

the body” (*Immunitas*, 8). The CDC has confirmed that no vaccine exists yet for the Zika virus, fair enough. But Donald Trump treats immigrants like poison, less than human, otherwise he could not make such sweeping general statements and plans for their status in the U.S. I want to be clear that I do not agree with him on this. Large-scale immigration is a scary prospect for a country, but ultimately a good one. In freely accepting foreigners a country immunizes itself against the ideas put forth by exclusionary politicians like Donald Trump. His ideas, too, are infectious, because of their simplicity, promise of good fortune, and deliverance. However, life “cannot be preserved except by placing something inside it that subtly contradicts it” (*Immunitas*, 8). Just as using too much Purell weakens an immune system by keeping a body too clean, too inherent to itself, keeping a nation homogenous creates the risk of contamination. If the contamination is sanctioned and openly accepted, then it is no longer contamination, because the contaminants are already inherent to the body.

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“It is curious,” Melville writes in *Hawthorne and His Mosses*, “how a man may travel along a country road, and yet miss the grandest, or sweetest of prospects, by reason of an intervening hedge, so like all other hedges, as in no way to hint of the wide landscape beyond.” Anyone walking along a country road may pass by a hedge, and see it only as a hedge, by not considering what it shrouds. Melville sees not a hedge, but what the hedge hides—imagining what *could* be on its other side. As much as a hedge hides what lies beyond its dense leaves, it also provides a certain implication that there is something beyond it. By obscuring the “wide landscape,” the hedge implies that there is even a landscape at all. The very nature of a blocked field of vision creates proof that there is something to be obscured.

In response to Hawthorne's praise for *Moby-Dick*, Melville writes, "You did not care a penny for the book. But, now and then as you read, you understood the pervading thought that impelled the book—and that you praised" (Melville). Melville describes truth as invisible and impossible to describe. Rather, it 'pervades' throughout a text, only discernible in aggregate. Melville, because he appreciates a similar aspect in Hawthorne's work, assumes that his peer will appreciate his own attempts in the field. Melville admires Hawthorne for his ability to speak truth through writing. Melville even seems to be saying that words are barely significant at all, only important as long as they can point to, but not explicitly show, a deeper truth.

Melville notes, in his *Mosses*, how Shakespeare uses the "mouths" of his various characters to arrive at truth. The "mouth," once again brings back the importance of "voice" in the articulation of ideas. Melville does not refer to these characters' voices, but rather the vessel that carries them, their "mouths." However, the "he" speaking through these "mouths," is Shakespeare.

"Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them. Tormented into desperation, Lear the frantic King tears off the mask, and speaks the sane madness of vital truth." (*Hawthorne and his Mosses*)

Shakespeare's characters are vessels for his own thoughts. Steven Connor writes that "all voice is shaped breath," but I'd like to take his theory one step further, and treat the written word as an expression of voice, of breath. If a cough is involuntary; a spoken word, "channeled breath," then the written word must be something even more precise and premeditated.

In an excerpt from Nathaniel Hawthorne's journals from 1856, he offers a brief reflection of a recent interaction with Herman Melville. He writes that Herman, "as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated'; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation, and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief." (*Melville's Short Stories*, 232). Melville, by Hawthorne's own admission, looking "a little paler, and perhaps a little sadder," had not found the critical reception he had hoped for. However, in a letter to Hawthorne years earlier, Melville writes, "I say your appreciation is my glorious gratuity," that Hawthorne's praise is more than enough, because, in general, "we pygmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended" (*Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, November 17th, 1851*). Melville once again gets into his hedge metaphor, calling his and Hawthorne's writing "paper allegories" that are "but ill comprehended," and that it does not matter, because they have each other's admiration. It is a powerful enterprise to use literature in expressing one's own voice. Reading a text allows its author to get inside your head, in a way almost akin to a kind of contagion. C.L.R. James uses his book to enact real change in the world. He figured that, if he was convincing enough, someone would take up his cause.

Hawthorne writes, "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other." (*Melville's Short Stories*, 232). Hawthorne's comment is a beautiful summation of Melville's problem, that one can witness him try to figure out through his literature. One thing you can say about all of Melville's character is that they all believe in something, strongly. Ahab is mad with belief, to a point of monomania. But, Ishmael, one might argue, doesn't believe in anything. These two are the antithesis of one another, one wrapped with passionate, insane, purpose; the other so wrapped in unbelief that all



he can think to do is go to sea, where he doesn't have to make as many choices as on land.

Melville, not sure whether to believe or not believe, uses the two characters as tests of different world views. And who ultimately survives? Perhaps, the “pervading thought” in *Moby Dick* is an encouragement to do one or the other, but to its fullest extent. Ahab takes his belief to the bottom of the ocean, and Ishmael just floats on.

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