

## HOUSE ORGAN

### Suffering a Sea-change

Thad W. Allen, the Coast Guard admiral in charge of the response to the spill, said Wednesday evening that the government had decided to try to put equipment on the ocean floor to take accurate measurements. A technical team is at work devising a method, he said. “We are shoving pizzas under the door, and they are not coming out until they give us the answer,” he said. Scientists have long theorized that a shallow spill and a spill in the deep ocean—this one is a mile down—would behave quite differently. A 2003 report by the National Research Council predicted that the oil in a deepwater blowout could break into fine droplets, forming plumes of oil mixed with water that would not quickly rise to the surface. That prediction appeared to be confirmed Saturday when the researchers aboard the Pelican reported that they had detected immense plumes that they believed were made of oil particles. The results were not final, and came as a surprise to the government. They raise a major concern, that sea life in concentrated areas could be exposed to a heavy load of toxic materials as the plumes drift through the sea.

—*The New York Times*, May 19, 2010

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:  
Ding-dong,  
Hark! now I hear them—Ding-dong, bell.  
—*The Tempest*, I-ii

Consoling Ferdinand for the loss of his shipwrecked father, Ariel envisions the exchange between humanity and nature as unfading, that is, outside the entropic decay decreed by the Second Law of Thermodynamics. This basic law of nature can be offset in certain corners of the universe, among them, life itself. With human life, the situation is more complex. If we exercise our creative power wisely, then a humanized nature, in which the transforming imagination brings the “sea-change into something rich and strange,” can further offset the Second Law and achieve yet lower entropy. Since entropy is the negation of form and art is the creation of form, the artist is potentially on the side that stands against the Second Law, as Shakespeare does here with his powers of language.

There are other potentials at our disposal and other kinds of sea-change that can violently accelerate the breakdown and collapse of ecosystems. These were conceivable by the Elizabethan mind, though it remained **unaware** of the possibility of a general ruin of nature. When Shakespeare represented something of this sort, it was as a slate on which human violence could be inscribed directly. Thus Macbeth:

Whence is that knocking?  
How is't with me, when every noise appals me?  
What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes.  
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas in incarnadine,

There is no suggestion here that the seas would remain corrupted over a very long scale and with chaotically unpredictable results—no idea, that is, that they could be invaded by “immense plumes . . . made of oil particles,” the combined work of the worst oil company in the world, BP, the frenzy to “drill, baby, drill” endemic to post-peak oil, the clamor of capitalists undergoing a severe accumulation crisis, and a cowardly, corrupt, and conniving state.<sup>1</sup>

It was not until some 250 years after the above lines were written that another great writer stepped forward to envision a relation between humanity and nature tending toward general ruin, with the human element of the relationship being brought down after sowing much devastation. It took the emergence of industrial capitalism on the soil of a nation-state configured around the expansive conquest of nature for this to happen. By 1850, the year that he composed *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville had lived 31 years within such a society, spending four of them on a remarkable series of sea-voyages, including some 18 months on a whaler.<sup>2</sup> A “whale-ship,” he wrote, “was my Yale College and my Harvard.”

The United States was at the time the world’s leading whaling nation, and whaling was a core element of its economy, and perhaps the most advanced in developing the forces of production. Whaling entailed an expansion and coordination of death-dealing technology, the means for breaking down the huge body of the prey into the different commodities extracted from it and storing them aboard the ship, and development of the complex hierarchies of labor necessary for this result.<sup>3</sup> Melville’s whaling ship was demonstrably capitalist. It hailed, however, from an intermediate era when production could be defined as *manufacture*, that is, when workers, poised between artisanal production and full industrialization, produced surplus value<sup>3</sup> while directly manipulating, or substituting for, the machines that were transforming nature into commodities.

After 1860, the introduction of steam propulsion and the cannon-fired explosive harpoon thoroughly changed the dynamics of whaling, with whales now towed beside the ship to port instead of being processed on board.<sup>4</sup> Thus the harpooners came before the harpoon-shooting cannon. This suited Melville’s purposes, enabling him to allegorically retool his ship, the *Pequod*, as a microcosmos in which the harpooners stood for the diverse

<sup>1</sup> Tim Dickinson, “The Spill, the Scandal, and the President,” *Rolling Stone*, No. 1107, June 24, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> A worthy study is Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Knopf, 2005). Delbanco also contributes an Introduction to the edition of *Moby-Dick* used here: (New York and Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992). The reader is strongly urged to look for a copy of the 1930 Random House edition, with 144 illustrations by Rockwell Kent.

<sup>3</sup> Not through the sale of labor power for wages, however, which would have been impossible on voyages that could last as long as three years. Rather, exploitation was exacted by giving members of the crew shares of whatever profit they created, while driving the scale down as much as possible, as Melville describes acutely in Chapter 16 of *Moby-Dick*. For Marx on “manufacture,” see Volume I of *Capital*. *Moby-Dick* was published in England shortly after Marx arrived in 1848. It was heavily panned, and I know of no evidence that Marx knew of it, though I like to think he would have enjoyed it greatly.

<sup>4</sup> For a survey of whaling in modern times, see Eric J. Ziegelmayer, “Whales for Margarine: Commodification and Neoliberal Nature in the Antarctic,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 19, No. 3, September 2008, pp. 65-93.

peoples subjugated by empire: Polynesian Queequeg, American-Indian Tashtego, African Daggoo—and with prefigurative irony, the Arab hidden by Ahab, Fedallah. The laws of accumulation are enacted on the whaling ship, as is the entire history of colonization and conquest and the spectacle of workers following a charismatic fascist to their doom. The *Pequod*, then, is not just a ship or even a factory, though it is certainly that. It is also suitable to represent the whole of American society<sup>5</sup> and indeed civilization itself, which will sink like the doomed ship if present arrangements continue to bind the population to capital as tightly as the crew of the *Pequod* became bound to Ahab's monomaniacal chase of the White Whale.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever it might have represented, the *Pequod* in fact was a highly mobile mid-nineteenth century off-shore oil rig. It had to be, as the principle source of energy in those days was of animal origin, in other words, “non-fossil fuel,” mainly from whales and above all, the great sperm whale. Spermaceti oil was the highest value commodity produced by the industry; and as up to three tons of the stuff could be taken from the head of a large male, the wealth gained by whaling is no mystery. The oil was chiefly employed in lamps to illuminate the homes and streets of cities; other functions included the lubrication of machinery and the making of candles, all essential use-values for a growing society. 1850 marked the zenith of the whale oil market. It also stood on the brink of a radically different mode of extraction, of much vaster hydrocarbon sources from long-dead vegetation. This now heads toward its dénouement in catastrophic events like the Deepwater Horizon rupture.

To say the least, the sperm whale was no ordinary animal. At the pinnacle of the oceanic food chain with a range spanning the seven seas and an intelligence, strength and purpose that enabled it to bring down the boats set upon the job of killing it,<sup>7</sup> the sperm whale was in effect the King of the animal kingdom. This allowed Melville to fashion his allegory into the saga of humankind's violent conquest of nature, with Ahab as its apotheosis. The *Pequod*'s chase opens upon capital's immemorial antecedent in Paleolithic hunting bands (said to be responsible for the extinction of many mammalian species), and therefore, its common root with warfare and male hierarchies. *Moby-Dick* is a treatise on the male psyche. No major work of fiction has been so bereft of humanizing female influence, its homoerotic moments notwithstanding, and therefore none reveals so clearly the demonic principle of command embedded in totemic Ahab, who had not pearls for eyes but a whale jawbone for a leg—and who would go down to his death bound to the animal he chased.

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<sup>5</sup> “*Pequod*, you will no doubt remember, was the name of a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct as the ancient Medes.” [p. 77.] Melville knew that hardly anybody remembered the Pequot Indians, who were nearly wiped out in 1635 by the first large-scale massacre of aboriginal people in North America—and today are avenged with their enormous and very profitable Foxwoods casino in Connecticut.

<sup>6</sup> C.L.R. James wrote an extraordinary study of *Moby-Dick* while interned at Ellis Island in the 1950s awaiting deportation: *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1953, 1978). He saw Ahab as a prefigured totalitarian dictator along the lines of Hitler, and the fate of the *Pequod*, that of Nazi Germany.

<sup>7</sup> The SS *Essex*, destroyed by a sperm whale in 1820 with major loss of life, was a major stimulus to Melville's story; as was the putative existence of a monster albino whale, “Mocha-Dick,” much talked about by whaling men of the time.

Melville sought to ennoble the renegade and castaway workers, and did so brilliantly. But he also showed their susceptibility to the spell cast by mad Ahab. Never think, Melville tells us, that the laws of accumulation can be reduced to the dry calculations of economists, accountants, and technocrats. That's why he put first mate Starbuck (Yes, *that* Starbuck) aboard as the avatar of on-shore practical reason, to be swept away by the roar of organized male violence under the direction of Ahab. The rationalized lunacy of Starbuck's loyalty to the market system fits into the lunacy of that system itself as refracted through demonic Ahab.

But what's this long face about, Mr. Starbuck; wilt thou not chase the white whale? art not game for Moby Dick?"

"I am game for his crooked jaw, and for the jaws of Death too, Captain Ahab, if it fairly comes in the way of the business we follow; but I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance. How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? it will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market."

"Nantucket market! Hoot! But come closer, Starbuck; thou requirest a little lower layer. If money's to be the measurer, man, and the accountants have computed their great counting-house the globe, by girdling it with guineas, one to every three parts of an inch; then, let me tell thee, that my vengeance will fetch a great premium HERE!"

"He smites his chest," whispered Stubb, "what's that for? methinks it rings most vast, but hollow."

"Vengeance on a dumb brute!" cried Starbuck, "that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous."

As Ahab makes clear in the next passage, the notion of vengeance conveys more than getting back at Moby-Dick for the damage he caused to the captain's leg. The problem is ontological, and endemic to human being. We won't be able to develop the implications here; but as it helps us get to the roots of capital, and indeed, the whole pathology of our relation to nature, the deeper recesses of Ahab's madness deserves some register:

Hark ye yet again—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. [Chapter 36.]

The word, "person," comes from the Latin—*per sonare*—to speak through. Through what? Why, a mask, such as is worn throughout Classical theatre. So the self is divided, between the mask we present to the world and what speaks through it. It is an ancient fracture, opening upon the being and pathology of our relation to nature—which is mute to that form of the self known as the Ego and goes unrecognized by it, breeding hatred and vengefulness. Some day political economy and political ecology will catch up with Herman Melville in understanding such matters.

## Sea Change in the Fast Lane

Organized male aggression, shaped into hierarchies perpetuating vengeance and employing ever more sophisticated technological means in the service of accumulation, was drawn by Melville into his narrative of enmity toward nature called *Moby-Dick*. But of course the narrative does not end with the blowback of a defiled and assaulted nature as the rage of a White Whale. Rather has it spread, ramifying into the nightmarish wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their apotheoses at places like Auschwitz and Hiroshima. And it goes on still, in the spreading disasters through which the ecological crisis is inscribed. Ergo Chernobyl, Bhopal, Katrina, the Niger Delta suffering Shell and Ecuador suffering Chevron, the Alberta tar sands, and today, Deepwater Horizon, and all the other calamities in between and to come. And do not forget the silent defilements taking place every day and everywhere, as toxic plumes seep throughout nature, entering ecosystems, corrupting them, and sowing general ruin.

How could Ariel sing “Full Fathom Five” today, as coral disintegrates in acidifying oceans and pearls disappear with the pollution of oyster beds?<sup>8+</sup> Corrupted seas bring corrupt sea changes in turn. The fundamentals of ecosystems, indeed, our very bodies, have been altered through intrusion of alien substances, many from petroleum derivatives. Changed into plastics and endless commodities wrapped in plastic, they enter flesh, insinuate themselves in physiology, and induce disease—which is to say, radically enhance entropy and accelerate the heat death of our planet. Each of us carries 100-200 alien compounds in our plasma and lymph, those fluids within that reproduce the ancient seas out of which life arose. Stuff floats within our bodies for which a billion years of evolution has left us unprepared: substances that are the products of late capitalist death-genius, powered by oil and the fabricator of oil.<sup>9</sup>

And it’s not just our flesh. Today the great whales have become our brethren in the worst way possible, as common victims. What industrial whaling has been unable to do, namely, bring sperm whales to the brink of extinction, the toxic clouds are succeeding in doing. As a recent study shows, “Sperm whales,” like humans at the top of the food chain, “feeding even in the most remote reaches of Earth’s oceans have built up stunningly high levels of toxic and heavy metals, according to American scientists who say the findings spell danger not only for marine life but for the millions of humans who depend on seafood.” As one expert puts it, “the whales absorb the contaminants and pass them on to the next generation when a female nurses her calf. ‘What she’s actually doing is dumping her lifetime accumulation of that fat-soluble stuff into her baby,’ he said, and each generation passes on more to the next.”<sup>10</sup>

Beholding such ruin, poor Ariel could only, I think, weep.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/pearl/oysters.html>.

<sup>9</sup> One example among many: L. Hovander, T. Malmberg, et al., “Identification of Hydroxylated PCB Metabolites and Other Phenolic Halogenated Pollutants in Human Blood Plasma,” *Archives of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology*, Vol. 42, No. 1, January 2002, pp. 105-117.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Max, “Toxins Found in Whales Bode Ill for Humans,” *Associated Press*, June 24, 2010.

As the Pequod descends, Melville adds a somber reminder of the enmity toward nature that propelled the fatal search for the White Whale.

But as the last whelmings intermixingly poured themselves over the sunken head of the Indian at the mainmast, leaving a few inches of the erect spar yet visible, together with long streaming yards of the flag, which calmly undulated, with ironical coincidings, over the destroying billows they almost touched;—at that instant, a red arm and a hammer hovered backwardly uplifted in the open air, in the act of nailing the flag faster and yet faster to the subsiding spar. A sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-gasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.

Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.

—Joel Kovel