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Because it's the alchemy of the *crossing*, the intersection, the braiding, far more than any chosen road: the encounter, the addition, the thick, unnamable, unreasonable, adherent richness of what comes between. Whether we want to or not, we get our feet wet. We are *open systems*: we are moved, changed, made more populous, made different: by things, people, places we may not have intended, did not choose. And that stunning, often inexplicable betweenness is what makes us, propels us, returns us to ourselves over and again as amazed strangers, and sends us again, seeking, outwards.

## Approaching Ahab Blind

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This is the story of my shock of recognition when I encountered *Moby-Dick* as a meditation on the profoundly *social* causes and consequences of disability's riotous affects. It involves the vexed pleasures of my identifications with the *Pequod's* lonely, yearning, destructive, hopeful, disappointed captain, and how they led me to think about a distinctly un-Ahab-like way of relating to people as a literary critic, a citizen, and, most fundamentally, a disabled person. That "way" has to do with one of the hardest pleasures I've grappled with lately, compassion, the striving for connection that is mutual without being equivalent, projective, and self-surrendering, an exchange of vulnerabilities and care that is at once generous and thorny. Before getting to that, though, I offer a coming-out narrative, a series of encounters with and in *Moby-Dick*, a confession, and, by way of conclusion, a challenge.

First, the coming-out narrative. I'm legally blind. When I was twenty-one, I underwent then-experimental laser treatments to remove aneurysms from my retinas. For two months twice a week, hundreds of laser shots, each like a hot needle, penetrated my retinas. And then, when those two months were finished, in a coughing fit I blew out a capillary weakened by the lasers, filling my left eye with blood, and required old-school surgery to replace the vitreous (the gel-like matter of the eyeball). As a result of the treatments and surgery, I now have no peripheral vision, poor depth perception and capacity for light adjustment, and when

I look straight ahead I see only the scar tissue from the lasers, like those scientific renderings of galaxies, but made of hundreds of shimmering purple lights, like the after-effect on the eye of a camera flash.

With the extraordinary help of friends, teachers, and family who taped my classes, read aloud to me, and typed my dictated papers, I finished college. Eventually my eyes began to adjust to seeing *around* the scar tissue: with the help of two overlaid magnifiers (and now with the inestimable help of Kindle's huge fonts), my eyes scan back and forth over a word, picking up small fragments of letters, until an entire word comes together, a task that is very slow and, after a couple hours, gives me a severe headache. And yet, despite everyone's sound advice against it, I not only started graduate school in English but, hardwired with an almost comic stubbornness and capacity for repression, decided to specialize in the field boasting the longest novels, nineteenth-century American literature. I have to admit that what drew me to the field at first *was* how long the novels are (I read the 180,242 words of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with Ann Douglas in my first semester, and then moved on to the 206,050 words of *Moby-Dick*). Adversity overcome is a hackneyed narrative but nevertheless experientially meaningful for those who live its pleasures.

But adversity is the gift that keeps on giving, and every effort to deny what separated me from other readers left—leaves—me, paradoxically, with a deeper sense of isolation. In my case, not only has my shame about being blind kept me from discussing its challenges with others who might share my experiences but the constant visual presence of the glowing scar tissue puts a literal and inescapable barrier between me and everything else. Above all, there's an affective isolation: the frustration when people ask me to read something I can't, the embarrassment of being greeted by someone whose face I can't see and therefore can't respond appropriately, the anxiety of entering a dark space and not knowing if there are stairs to fall down or walls to walk into; the resentment at those who can accomplish in a fraction of the time what it takes me days to finish; and, as a result of all these, periodic depression and anger, arising unexpectedly, out of proportion, often at the worst moments.

So when I found a sympathetic depiction of these emotions in an unexpected place, my pleasure was vertiginous. It was, to use a neologism Melville might have liked, the melancholy pleasure of *lonelessness*. That's what I felt when, after having not reread the book for some time, I came to chapter 100 of *Moby-Dick*, in which the *Pequod* encounters the

British whaler *Samuel Enderby*. Ahab shouts his \$64,000 question—hast thou seen the damned White Whale?—and, when the other captain replies by raising a prosthetic arm, Ahab, overcome with excitement, orders a boat to convey him to the other ship. In his excitement, however, Ahab, who himself wears a prosthesis, “had forgotten that since the loss of his leg he had never once stepped on board of any vessel at sea but his own, and then it was always by an ingenious and very handy mechanical contrivance peculiar to the *Pequod*, and a thing not to be rigged and shipped in any other vessel at a moment’s warning” (Melville 1259). “So,” Melville writes, “deprived of one leg, and the strange ship of course being altogether unsupplied with the kindly invention, Ahab now found himself abjectly reduced to a clumsy landsman again; hopelessly eyeing the uncertain changeful height he could hardly hope to attain” (1259–60). Here Melville gives us a very different Ahab than in the rest of the novel—abject, reduced, clumsy, and, so terrible it gets repeated, “hopelessly eyeing” what he could not “hope to attain.” Yanked from his enthusiastic forgetfulness, *this* Ahab—so different from the willful tyrant we’re more familiar with—is startled and confused, realizing in a moment that the world he’s chosen is no longer *his* (he has become “a clumsy landsman again”).

The emotions Ahab experiences in this moment of crisis are familiar to me. Here’s my own moment of hitting the waters without a leg to stand on. Recently at MLA I was to speak on a panel I was looking forward to with tremendous excitement. When the time came, however, I couldn’t find the room, as the numbers were above the doors where I couldn’t read them, and I was too embarrassed to ask for help—I can’t see faces or read name tags so I’m in a constant state of anxiety at conferences that I’ll confuse a friend for a stranger or vice versa, which usually keeps me from addressing anyone until spoken to first—until it was too late and the halls were empty. I did ultimately find the room, thanks to a member of the cleaning staff who rushed over after I fell down a short flight of stairs. But then, to my embarrassment, I found that the panelists had waited for my arrival to start, so all (annoyed) eyes were on me as I rushed up to the dais, where the moderator asked me to go first, which meant I didn’t have time to check the lighting. So when I reached the podium it was too dark for me to read the paper. I started to freak out and my hands began shaking to the point where I couldn’t hold the paper, from which I was uselessly attempting to read, so I put it down and tried to improvise. Train wreck. So bad people tweeted about it. Em-

barrassed, confused, reduced, *hopeless*, I found myself in the same boat as Ahab.

I've done a lot of thinking about that most un-pleasurable moment at MLA and its relation to my identification with Ahab and his disabled affects. For starters, it made me take seriously—as an object of analysis and not just a comic assumption—Ahab's negative affects and what the novel tells us about their causes and consequences. For weeks after that convention I was angry: at the people in the hallways who must have seen me running around squinting up at room numbers but didn't ask if I needed help; at the other panelists who, seeing me struggle, didn't offer to read the paper; at the audience members who tweeted about my mortifying performance. But below all that anger was loss and fear. Every task in my life—particularly my professional life—involves enormous amounts of reading. If I really *can't* read—enough, as much, at all—how can I be the person I've spent my life working to be? These are the foundation-shaking questions I can usually ignore in order to keep going as if the fear is groundless, but every stumble, every bewilderment, brings danger to the surface, and when the flight instinct isn't an option, fight is what there is. But where—and to what degree—is anger legitimate? Directed at whom? And if anger is surrendered to its more vulnerable core affects—loss, anxiety, fear—what other kinds of responses might prevent the catastrophic consequences when Ahab *can't* dial it back?

Again, Melville offers some answers. While most readers focus on Ahab's imperious rage as the unquestionable core of his being, Ishmael gives that rage a back story, explaining, “every little untoward circumstance that befell him, and which indirectly sprang from his luckless mishap, almost invariably irritated or exasperated Ahab” (1260). Suddenly the nearly psychotic “monomania” that seems to *cause* the novel's ill-fated events has a deeper cause in the difficulties Ahab constantly encounters due to his lost leg. But *that* cause, too, has an origin in “every little untoward circumstance.” A good number of those “circumstances” are material—an unsteady deck, the fragility of whalebone, severely diminished mobility—but some are also interpersonal. And here things get interesting, because Melville is not (only) representing the crew as the innocent brunt of Ahab's rage but is also suggesting that, insofar as they help define Ahab's experience, *all* aboard the *Pequod* are responsible for his disability. Another way of saying this is that Ahab is reminded of his “mishap” not only by the injury itself, or by its cause (the whale), but by the responses of those around him.

Recall, for example, the two *Enderby* sailors who “did not seem to bethink them that a one-legged man must be too much of a cripple to use their sea bannisters” (1260). Or recall the captured old blind whale, for whom “pity there was none. For all his old age, and his one arm, and his blind eyes, he must die the death and be murdered” (1176). In both scenes, Ahab is associated with a whale (the one-armed whale and the one-legged captain, the latter lifted aboard ship on a blubber hook), and a fatally fast one at that. Ahab’s exclusion from social recognition becomes evident even in the rhetorical style of *Moby-Dick*. In the chapter called “Ahab’s Leg,” Ishmael struggles rhetorically with the dissonance between his understanding of Ahab’s prosthesis and that of the captain himself. For the former, the loss of Ahab’s leg becomes *metaphysical*, an allegory of “all heartwoes, a mystic significance” from which the reader might learn that “both the ancestry and posterity of Grief go further than the ancestry and posterity of Joy” (1288). Yet this effort to abstract and generalize Ahab’s particular experience comes smack up against Ahab’s insistence on not only the specificity but the materiality of his disability. Ahab left the *Samuel Enderby*, Ishmael reports, in such haste that he meets with “some small violence to his own person,” namely, he “lighted with such energy upon a thwart of his boat that his ivory leg had received a half-splintering shock” (1288). To Ishmael’s eye the crack seems insignificant, “yet Ahab did not deem it entirely trustworthy. And, indeed, it seemed small matter for wonder that for all his prevailing mad recklessness, Ahab did at times give careful heed to the condition of that dead bone upon which he partly stood” (1288). Ishmael here undergoes a conceptual upheaval—whereas metaphysics made from material previously seemed “matter for wonder” to a narrator whose signature style is allegorical meanderings, suddenly the resistance to metaphysics of Ahab’s prosthesis—“with all the studs and joints of jaw-ivory”—becomes the wonder. Without the power of metaphysics, Ishmael becomes tongue-tied (1290). A refusal of recognition becomes a breakdown of representation, as Ishmael can only shrug his rhetorical shoulders, relinquishing his myth-making tools to Ahab’s more immediate needs, and stating, “But be all this as it may; let the unseen ambiguous synod in the air, or the vindictive princes and potentates of fire, have to do or not with earthly Ahab, yet, in this present matter of his leg, he took plain practical procedures;—he called the carpenter” (1290). The “matter” of Ahab’s leg is precisely what’s the matter with Ishmael’s reckoning of what matters, and on whose terms.

So yes, Ahab has reasons to be angry. The problem, however, is that when his situation *is* recognized, Ahab doesn't acknowledge it. While Ahab stares hopelessly at the seemingly insurmountable side of the *Samuel Enderby*, its Captain Boomer, seeing "at a glance how matters stood," orders his men to stop lowering the rope ladder and to lower the tackle instead (1261). And, despite his abstracting inclinations, it is Ishmael who notices Ahab's dilemma in chapter 100 and reports sympathetically on his emotional state.

Refusing to recognize compassion, Ahab is also incapable of extending it, as we see in his first encounter with Captain Boomer. Ahab's pleasure at meeting someone he believes shares his experience matches my own in encountering Ahab blind. But Ahab's insistence that Boomer represent an uncomplicated, triumphant experience of disability prevents him from seeing the other captain's shame, anger, and loss, and therefore also keeps him from recognizing his own.

Prior to this encounter, Ahab's only interest in other ships and their captains has been to find the exact whereabouts of Moby-Dick. But his meeting with Boomer is different. Rather than asking immediately about the whale, Ahab draws attention to the prostheses they both wear: "let us shake bones together!—an arm and a leg!—an arm that never can shrink, d'ye see; and a leg that never can run'" (1260). Anticipating a story of triumphant determination (no running, no shrinking), Ahab demands of Boomer, "'Spin me the yarn'" (1261). But despite his apparent forthrightness—waving the prosthetic arm in response to Ahab's call—and his jovial response to Ahab's demand for a story—"Give me a chance then,' said the Englishman, good-humoredly"—Boomer is not as self-accepting as he first appears (1261). Rather than telling the story himself, he cries, "'Bunger boy, spin your part of the yarn,'" turning the narrative over to the ship's surgeon (1262). What ensues is a series of interruptions by Boomer, who belittles and baffles his surgeon with interpolations like, "'Bunger, you dog, laugh out! Why don't ye? You know you're a precious jolly rascal'" (1263). The story is serious: a spur from a harpoon attached to Moby-Dick catches Boomer at the shoulder and rips down the length of his arm before emerging at his wrist, leading to gangrene and amputation. But Boomer refuses it the gravity Ahab's urgency demands, not because he has reconciled himself to his injury but because humor, for Boomer, appears to be a way of keeping the ongoing *experience* of the loss at bay. The fact that Boomer can simply order up a recital of what he calls "the arm story" suggests that it serves

as the kind of repeated narration that trauma theory tells us gives apparently coherent content to the disordered and often blank experience of survivors. As with such survivors, Boomer's recollection of the events is occluded, psychic disorganization becoming literal blindness; at the moment the spur grabs his arm, Boomer tells us, "I was blind as a bat—both eyes out—all befogged and bedeadened with black foam" (1262). But Boomer's constant disruptions suggest his need to resist the traumatic closure of the story, and his resentment of the doctor who represents Boomer's lack of self-command (his jokes at the doctor's expense occur at each point in the story where Boomer takes a medical turn for the worse). And defensive humor sometimes becomes outright hostility. Bunker tells Ahab that Boomer "spins us many clever things," but also that his captain, like Ahab, "flies into diabolical passions sometimes" and that Boomer has had the end of his prosthetic arm shaped as a hammer's head to vent his rage—like Ahab—on his crew (1263; 1263–64).

Not surprisingly, given how close this all cuts to the bone, Ahab soon grows irritably impatient with the "byeplay [*sic*] between the two Englishmen" (1264). The irony, however, is that Boomer *has* in important ways reflected Ahab back to himself: both men experience turbulent emotions because of their amputations, both choose at times to hide their prosthetic bodies from public view (Ishmael tells us that on first approach Boomer's arm was "hidden" beneath the folds of a cloak), both desire recognition (Boomer's calling to Bunker to tell his story) yet refuse it when it's offered. The problem is, first, that Ahab has asked Boomer to recognize ("d'ye see?") what the latter does not *want* to see, *and* that he has, in the bravado of his toast to their prostheses, denied the abjection, loss, and bewilderment he has, just moments before, experienced, and which *he* does not want to recognize (1259–60). Ahab, in other words, has denied Boomer's compassionate recognition, both because he can't recognize Boomer's trauma without acknowledging his own and because the excessive pride he has developed to compensate for his own vulnerabilities makes him unable to see how others *do* respond to him compassionately (an emblematic moment is Ahab insisting on helping to "hoist his own weight by pulling hand-over-hand upon one of the running parts" of the blubber tackle, even though the *Enderby* sailors are raising him "carefully" [1260]). Refusing to recognize compassion, in short, Ahab becomes incapable of receiving or, worse, extending it, perpetuating the isolation that made his encounter with Boomer so exhilarating in the first place.



So what would it take to let Ahab off the hook? Again, I return to my experience at MLA. When I stopped being mad at other people, I realized that of course I was mostly angry at myself. Why hadn't I asked someone to read the paper for me when I realized I couldn't? Why had I not put aside my embarrassment and asked someone in the hall to help me find the room? Why didn't I insist that we put off starting for another five minutes until I got a better light, or that someone else read first? Why did I care what people tweeted? Pride, yes, of course. But something more disturbing than that, too. And here's the confession: I don't trust people very much. Receiving compassion is not just a question of suspending pride; it's a matter of extending generosity. And when push comes to shove, I have a hard time being generous enough.

But I see where that lack of generosity gets people, myself and Ahab not least of all, so I'm taking tentative steps to give my inner Ahab a life-jacket. After MLA I did what I should have done three decades ago: I registered with a state agency for the visually impaired and started occupational therapy, most significantly training in walking with a low-vision "stick." The stick is a sign to others to keep an eye *on* me (I have been hit a few times by bicyclists and even once by a car driver who assumed I could see them in my periphery and would step back). But it's also—and this is the hard part for me—a sign to keep an eye *out* for me, to the fact that I may not know where I'm going, or what's in front of me, or what traffic signs are signaling, or whose face I'm looking at. It's a sign, in short, of what I've spent thirty-five years denying: that I may need help.

My first extended experiences walking with the stick were during six weeks I spent in London this past summer. I anticipated lots of gawking, annoyance, even the occasional rude remark, and I can't pretend there wasn't a bit of that. But mostly I experienced what I could never have anticipated. Late one night, leaving the theater, I got terribly lost. Not seeing other pedestrians and unable to read street signs, I got more and more frightened until I finally saw and hailed a taxi. When I got in, shaking, near tears, I blurted, "It's scary getting lost when you're blind," to which the driver responded, "You're safe now. I've got you." We talked as we drove along about the cityscapes of London and New York, where he hoped to visit soon with his wife, and when we arrived at my building he got out to help me to the door. I'll admit that it crossed my mind that the driver knew I couldn't see where I was and that the drive was taking a little longer than seemed necessary. But when I asked about the fare, he said, "No, I don't accept money from mates." Another afternoon,

Louis from Singapore took my arm in the National Gallery to tell me about a play he had recently seen produced locally about the invention of Braille, advising me to tell the box office I'm blind so they'd discount my ticket. Another time, at an intersection where I couldn't see the pedestrian signal, a young woman carrying flowers asked if I needed help. As we walked along, she told me about the fight she had had with her roommate, for whom she had bought the flowers, and asked my advice on how to set things right. At the espresso bar where I sat most afternoons, Jonathan, the owner, would sit with me to chat about our childhoods, mine in New Jersey, his in Paris, and by the end of my stay my pastries were on the house. Most astonishingly, I was waiting patiently one afternoon for an outdoor table at a different cafe and, when one finally came open, a group of people rushed from inside and grabbed it. The owner, seeing what had happened, brought a table out from inside for me, at which point a person from that group took his chair and moved to my table, apologized for his friends, and began talking with me about his work in environmental consulting. When he asked what I was reading and I said *Moby-Dick*, he told me that he had a long-standing interest in the whaling industry and especially in—wait for it—Samuel Enderby.

These encounters have demonstrated for me people's willingness to overcome embarrassment, suspend self-interest, open vulnerabilities, and spread—I'll go ahead and say it—goodness. They're still difficult to accept—I'm shy with strangers, I don't like people to touch me, I very often couldn't care less about other people's problems—but I'm starting to see the pleasure in them. Part of that pleasure comes in recognizing what I may be offering by accepting help.

Etymologically, "compassion" means "to suffer together," even "to undergo together." What is it to come together, under the sign of vulnerability, in compassion? In the encounters in London, as the object of people's compassion I believe I enabled their becoming who they wanted to be. They were risking their own vulnerabilities, which weren't the *same* as mine (or each other's) or necessarily equivalent, but affectively *proximate*, a ground on which communication could be started. I think I became an occasion for their expressions of and reflections on other—better—versions of themselves; they reoriented themselves in relation to me, to their surroundings, to their own selves. I gave them, to use a metaphor Melville might approve, different moorings. I think that explains why when the people I encountered in London were helping me,

they, in almost every case, began telling me something about *themselves*, especially about other places and times, about their aspirations and commitments. And I think they were grateful for the opportunity to be vulnerable through compassion, as signaled by their repeated efforts to give me something back, whether it was a fare, a pastry, or a story. For a moment, in the middle of a busy day, in a crowded city, people found themselves a little unsettled, adrift, unsure. But they took the risk of reaching out and, however difficult it was, I was willing to be the destination of that reach.

These are small moments, and they might seem trivial in these difficult times. But I think it's the *smallness* of them that makes them worth pausing over and taking pleasure in. I argue in *The Practices of Hope* that a dangerous effect of much literary criticism today is that, from the best intentions, it traffics in clear and absolute oppositions, allowing for uncomplicated and often ungenerous generalizations that ignore what, when we aren't being critics, we know about people (perhaps especially ourselves) and their complicated, difficult-to-characterize intentions, complicities, and beliefs. My worry is not only that these critical tendencies habituate us to abstractions and generalizations that make suspicion our fallback disposition but that they reproduce (indeed, give a radical veneer to) what are essentially the same rhetorical habits lacerating democracy today: they represent the world in terms of us and them, absolute virtue and extreme ignorance or worse, with no common language or interests, no need to listen or explain, no compassionate gestures of understanding and self-reflection. I think we need to reassess the small, specific moments of relational life if criticism is to become more compassionate and therefore have immediate, tangible consequences.

A lot of people these days, for a variety of reasons, are feeling like Ahab: caught in an inescapable mishap, bewildered, angry, maybe even hopeless. More vulnerability, more generous compassion, at such times may seem like the worst possible prescription, especially if we look at vulnerability and compassion the way Ahab does. After he returns from his meeting with Captain Boomer, Ahab, having cracked his prosthesis in his hasty exit, needs the *Pequod's* carpenter to make him another leg. Bemoaning the fact that, "proud as a Greek god," he must stand "debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on!" Ahab curses what he calls "that mortal interindebtedness" (1297). Denying the "unaccountable, cunning life-principle," Ahab can see assistance only as debt, and debt only as

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weakness (1293). But as my London encounters show, it is far better, far *braver*, to give ourselves to our positive, pleasurable, transformative attachments to the world, and especially our generous and compassionate attachment to each other.

**Work Cited**

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