
Melville the Life: Accident, Coincidence, and Adjacency

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You might expect an essay titled “Melville the Life” to offer a biographical sketch. Granted, the crucial moments in this writer’s life would be easy to list: his childhood in Manhattan and move to Albany in 1830, his father’s death when Herman was twelve, his schooling and summers farming in Pittsfield, the relocation to Lansingburgh; his debating, dating, acting on stage, and voyage to Liverpool in 1839, which is the basis for *Redburn*; the trip to Galena and his bohemian month in New York City, which gave us parts of *Pierre*; his years whaling and jumping ship in Nuku Hiva; his mutiny, incarceration, and beachcombing in Tahiti, and his shop keeping in Honolulu, all of which gave us *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, and *Moby-Dick*; his stint in the Navy that shaped *White-Jacket*, his return home, writing of *Typee*, and oldest brother’s death; his furious production of fiction in a ten-year span, his further travels and reinvention of himself as a professional poet; his faltering marriage, loss of both sons, and twenty years in the New York Custom House; his late-life return to fiction, and his death, leaving behind hundreds of leaves of unpublished poetry and prose. We could track these moments in a chronology of Melville’s life, and yet leave out a great deal.

Melville biography measures the growth of a single consciousness as it works through the trauma of history: political, familial, professional. It addresses past crimes of grandparents and present enterprises of uncles as well as the ambitions and talents of mother, siblings, and cousins. But it also asks how Melville’s consciousness grew in relation to experiences with African Americans, Native Americans, and Polynesians, as well as sea-workers, office-workers, and field-workers. How did Melville’s empathies for the dispossessed contribute to a need to write, which, for him, was always an unstoppable engine of self-knowing, which invariably brought him to the “peculiar emotion” (*J* 50) of human consciousness itself.¹ Then, too, how did Melville

¹ Throughout his writings, Melville uses variants of the phrase “peculiar emotion” (including “stranger and stronger,” “special,” and “queer” emotion) in relation to his notion of consciousness. See Bryant *Melville* vol. 2, p. 858.

come to discover this strangeness in “other beings than man”—in nonhuman life and otherness, in the “universal cannibalism of the sea,” in the “delirious throb at the center of the All”—for if consciousness also transcends in the “All,” how is it so alien?² A biography also asks what kinds of writing evolved to give form to thought. Melville absorbed and pilfered from Moses to Matthew, from John of Revelation to Shakespeare, from Milton to Byron; he admired contemporaries like Scott and Cooper, Poe and Dickens, but could not emulate their “‘other’ way” (*Corr* 191).³ How, then, did he find his own “way” of writing: comic, tragic, cosmopolitan, picturesque, sexual and wordy, transcendent yet materialist, always giving voice to “peculiar emotion,” always retreating into voicelessness, treading the “marge” (*PT* 242) between symbolism and the modern. How does such an aesthetic grow out of history, culture, and a life?

The problem is not only to determine the parameters of Melville’s growth but also to practice biographical and critical approaches that model new and convincing ways of interpreting Melville. Often, literary biographers dismiss an author’s imaginative writings as evidence of a life; their role, it is assumed, is to chronicle, not interpret. Instead, biographical criticism treats writing and written works as life events so that textual patterns can reveal the interoperability of acts of the imagination and external circumstances. Fundamental to Melville biography is the sense of place—in his life and writing—and this reveals a sensibility enacted in three modes: accident, coincidence, and adjacency.

Accidental Tragedy: The Third Man

In “The Chase, Third Day” in *Moby-Dick* (Ch. 135, 497), Ahab steers closer to the now motionless, “strangely oblivious” white whale, who seems exhausted by the exertion of the chase but is perhaps waiting for his prey to catch up. As he nears, Ahab darts his harpoon; Moby Dick “spasmodically” rolls, canting but not capsizing the whaleboat. Ahab clings to the gunwale as the tipped boat rights itself. However,

three of the oarsmen . . . were flung out; but so fell, that, in an instant two of them clutched the gunwale again, and rising to its level on a combing wave, hurled themselves bodily inboard again; the third man helplessly dropping astern, but still afloat and swimming.⁴

Melville deftly evokes the simultaneity of these events: the dart, the spasm, the canting boat, the gunwale, the clutch, the accommodating wave, the captain saved (for now), the two returning oarsmen, the third left behind “afloat and swimming.” Consider the energy put into rendering the particulars of an accident. We have seen this bumping from the boat before, with Pip, but Melville draws no explicit connection.

² All references to *Moby-Dick* are from the Longman Critical Edition, edited by John Bryant and Haskell Springer, and are identified by chapter and page numbers. For “other beings,” see Ch. 79, 311; for “universal cannibalism,” see Ch. 58, 248; and for “delirious throb,” see Ch. 87, 343, also *R* 66.

³ For recent scholarship on Melville’s reading and allusions, see Brian Yothers’s essay in this collection, “Melville’s Twenty-First Century Lives: Reception and Criticism,” and the Search Catalog at *Melville’s Marginalia Online* (melvillemarginalia.org).

⁴ See also, *Moby-Dick*, at the *Melville Electronic Library*. Portions of this essay are derived from Bryant, *Melville*, vol. 2, Chs. 67–68.

In the Epilogue, a few pages later, Ishmael identifies himself as the “third man helplessly dropping astern” (500). It has “so chanced” that he was saved by Queequeg’s coffin-life-buoy, which, also by chance, surfaces out of the maelstrom. Though Ishmael says “the Fates ordained” his survival, we reckon that our narrator has “escaped alone to tell” his tale only by accident. This ending suggests that if we are to comprehend Melville’s tragedy, we must as well comprehend the role accident plays in Ahab’s tragic demise and Ishmael’s random survival.

In one form or another, *accident* appears seventeen times in *Moby-Dick*, from the “unrecorded accidents” involving New Bedford whalers (Ch. 7, 50) who have perished at sea to the numerous “unimaginable accidents of the fishery” (Ch. 87, 346) replayed strategically throughout the narrative. Ishmael and Queequeg, two men of different races and classes, are thrown randomly together in bed and wake up “married” (Ch. 10, 63); Tashtego slips into the head of a sperm whale, which plunges into the sea, and he is saved, through Queequeg’s comic “obstetrics” (Ch. 78, 309); by whim Queequeg thinks he is dying and has a coffin made (Ch. 110); by chance he gets well, and the coffin is converted into a life buoy, which by chance saves Ishmael (Epilogue). Other accidents are more traumatic. Recall Ishmael’s “First Lowering” (Ch. 48) when an evening squall swamps his whaleboat and leaves his shipmates for dead, only to be rescued by the *Pequod*, which inadvertently capsizes the swamped boat. The industrial accident in “The Grand Armada” (Ch. 87) is more harrowing: a loosened cutting spade, attached by a tangled line to a panicked and flailing whale, slices through the air, mutilating mothers and nursing cubs. Accidentally, serenity becomes chaos.

Ahab’s life is bracketed by accident: a whale bites off his leg; when Ahab later hunts down that whale, he is garroted by a freak looping of the whale line, his body disappearing in an instant. Readers invariably puzzle over this swift departure, and for good reason. Driven by ambition and revenge, Ahab is finally undone not by his obsessions but by a technical mishap; his demise is not materially connected to his tragic blindness. His tragedy begins and ends by accident. But how do you make a tragedy out of accidents?

For Ahab, life has no accidents: his wound, his Lear-like obsession, his revenge, the Macbethian predictions of his demise, and his scientific hunt of the white whale in the vast Pacific are all foreordained by forces he willfully defies. For Starbuck, Ahab’s unfortunate wounding by a “dumb brute” motivated by “blindest instinct” was purely accidental (Ch. 36, 159). These two character-driven perspectives substantiate the novel’s fundamental plot-debate over whether existence is determined by fate or accident. To sustain this debate in his democratic tragedy, Melville weaves “unimaginable accidents” (Ch. 87, 346) throughout his narrative to make accident seem as plausibly fated as the fate of character.

Here, then, is the dilemma a writer faces. Tragedy is ripest when characters are intentionally complicit in their undoing. But because accidents are by definition unintentional, accidental actions diminish the tragic effect. Granted, accidents are horrible: a storm swamps your boat, the ship capsizes your boat, a line snaps and a whale’s head plunges with you into the sea, a whale bites off your leg, or you get bumped from your boat. Accidents are surely consequential, deadly, and sad, but, in terms of a plausible narrative, they are not, strictly speaking, “tragic.” Since Ahab wills the events that put his tragedy on course, we expect his blindness to cause his death. Instead, he dies by accident, which, at the last minute, puzzles the reader. Why risk puzzling readers? Is *Moby-Dick*, then, a flawed tragedy? Not really: Melville simply refused to write a Greek tragedy. (He would explore that option in *Billy Budd*.) An accidental tragedy like *Moby-Dick* works only to the degree that readers recognize that the universe itself is accidental, that it

has its own wayward logic, that given an accidental universe, accidents will probably happen and by necessity, and that the trauma of accident inflects character. Accordingly, Melville's challenge was to show how accident is as integral to what is tragic as it is to our lives.

Ahab is not fated to fall so much because of his arrogance, blindness, ambition, revenge, or any of the expected causes of a tragic hero's fall. Nor is the deeper cause of these flaws located in the accident of the material wound he suffers. He falls because, in the logic of trauma, he necessarily replays the accident that maimed him by obsessively and reiteratively jeopardizing himself and crew. The crew—think of alcoholic Perth, racially abusive Stubb, slipping Tashtego, lunatic Pip—follows him because they, too, have been traumatized—in their former lives, in their relations to each other, in their perilous workplace, in their abandonments at sea—they, too, are castaways in an indifferent, accidental universe. And how does biography bring us closer to understanding this writer's dilemma?

One of my goals in writing *Herman Melville: A Half Known Life* is to link the centrality of accident and trauma in Melville's writings to traumas in his life, not only the obvious loss of his father but also the more everyday traumas of having to survive adolescence, sibling rivalries, conflicts with mother, uncles, cousins, and the tumults of race, sexuality, and economy in a precarious democracy. Given, then, the pattern of accident woven into the fabric of *Moby-Dick*, it is fair to ask whether a young man we may call "Herman," in taking himself to sea, actually experienced or witnessed the whaling accidents that landed in his novel; and, if he did, we must further ask how the older man, who in becoming the writer we call "Melville," transformed those life experiences into the fictional replaying of accidents in his writing.

In this regard, *Moby-Dick* is biographically challenging. Although Melville's early works—*Typee*, *Omoo*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket*—are autobiographical, *Moby-Dick* is a purposeful departure from them in almost all formal, aesthetic, and philosophical ways, so that even though the novel is based on the most dangerous work experience in Melville's life, and although the book is riddled with verifiable whaling facts, we cannot naively assume that vivid details—the swamping of a boat, the flailing of a cutting spade, the bumping from a boat—are autobiographical. That said, neither should we dismiss them as pure invention. Rather we must be open to the likelihood that all literary invention is necessarily informed in some way by the contingencies of experience and the probabilities of accident. The problem for the biographer is how to extract what is critically useful from Melville's whaling experience for the broader interpretation of *Moby-Dick*. Which brings us to "crazy-witty" Pip (Ch. 99, 385).

The most memorable accident in *Moby-Dick* befalls the cabin boy Pip in "The Castaway" (Ch. 93, 366). The adolescent African American normally keeps to the ship, but when Ahab assigns him to Stubb's whaleboat, suddenly he must perform the work of men. Inexperienced, he leaps into the sea when a harpooned whale inadvertently bumps his boat. Tangled in the harpoon's line and lashed to the side of the boat, Pip is strangled as the whale surges forward. After some ruthless deliberation over what to do for the choking boy, Stubb reluctantly cuts the line so that "the whale was lost and Pip was saved." Later, Stubb warns Pip to "Stick to the boat," adding "We can't afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama." The trauma of whaling is compounded by the trauma of racism.

Stubb later repents of the racist joke, but his careless commodification of Pip inaugurates the boy's madness. When, in a second lowering, the same accident recurs—and this time, as promised, Pip is left floating alone to die—his alienation is completed. Almost drowning, he envisions a "primal" underwater world; he sees the origins of all creation and "God's foot upon

the treadle of the loom,” and because of his immersion into “invisible spheres ... formed in fright,” he appears in the visible sphere of the crew to be insane (Ch. 93, 367 and Ch. 42, 184). In the final third of the novel, Melville transforms the “brilliancy” of Pip’s blackness into inscrutable expressions of the strange consciousness of a mystic visionary (Ch. 93, 365). Pip’s manic rambling lures Ahab toward sanity, but Ahab will not abandon his quest, and Pip fails to prevent the tragic hero’s demise.

Pip is one of Melville’s most moving inventions, artfully weaving race and metaphysics into the fabric of his accidental tragedy. An invention; but, nevertheless, Pip’s leap is based on an actual accident that occurred during Herman’s time on board his first whaling ship *Acushnet*. The event is not recorded in any logbook or other official whaling document, news item, or letter but comes to us as a marginal annotation in a copy of the 1851 British version of *Moby-Dick* titled *The Whale*. Melville had presented the three-volume edition as a keepsake to his *Acushnet* shipmate Henry Hubbard, who had visited the author in Pittsfield around 1853, two years after the publication of *Moby-Dick*. The volumes stayed in the Hubbard family library until their emergence in 1977 (“The Hubbard Copy of *The Whale*,” in NN MD 1005–20).

Herman and Henry had shipped out of Fairhaven together in January 1841; they became watchmates and fast friends. Herman jumped ship after eighteen months; Henry completed the ship’s four-year voyage in 1845. During their 1853 visit, the two reminisced about the *Acushnet*, and afterward, Melville also composed his “*Acushnet* Crew Memorandum,” a list of their shipmates and what befell them. The memorandum tells us that the two former shipmates had much to discuss. The copy of *The Whale* that Melville presented to Hubbard on that day is equally revealing of what seems to have transpired in their conversation. Chances are Hubbard never read Melville’s novel; nevertheless, the presentation copy contains one annotation, inscribed by Hubbard in pencil; it is curious evidence of Hubbard’s connection to his friend who had become a famous author. On the page in “The Castaway,” where Pip’s first leap occurs, Hubbard wrote: “Pip—Backus—his real name. I was in the boat at the time he made the leap overboard” (NN MD 1006, 1008 fig. 2). Hubbard’s eyewitness account confirms that Melville did not fully invent Pip’s leap; he based it on a real event and person.

The singularity of this notation in the Hubbard *Whale* also suggests that, during their visit together, Melville inquired about Backus, brought up the subject of Pip, and opened Volume 3 to “The Castaway” to show Henry Hubbard where their Black shipmate’s traumatic leap was put into words. Backus’s leap was an important memory for both, vivid enough for Melville to retell it in *Moby-Dick* and to share the chapter with his old friend. We can also infer that Herman did not witness Backus’s leap personally but heard of it secondhand from Henry, during a subsequent night watch together. In this scenario, the information filtered through Henry is replayed in three adjacent places in Herman’s mind: the Pacific of 1841–1842, the fiction of “The Castaway” of 1851, and the visit of 1853.

Little is disclosed in Hubbard’s annotation about Backus: Was he tangled in the line or left behind? If tangled, was Stubb’s racial wisecrack one that Stubb’s prototype John Hall actually made at the time? Or was it a quip circulated by the crew? Or invented by Melville, giving the event a racial context? Once rescued from the accident, did Backus suffer, as does Pip, a mental breakdown or some other crisis of masculinity regarding his putative cowardice or worthlessness? Whaling documents offer no answers, but some details are enough to get us thinking. Because he does not appear in the *Acushnet*’s original crew list, the seaman John Backus may have signed on at the ship’s first Pacific mooring in the Bay of Santa, Peru, in June 1841 (Heflin 72).

In his “*Acushnet* Crew Memorandum,” Melville discloses the news, given to him by Hubbard, that the “little black” later jumped ship at San Francisco, well after Melville’s own Marquesan desertion in July 1842 (NN MD 1002–3). Melville’s note confirms Backus’s race and size but says nothing about his age, brilliance, or mental state. Chances are Backus was not a cabin boy but a young Black seaman, smaller than any of the *Acushnet*’s three other, older Black men, who like Herman, were among the tallest in the crew. To whatever degree the races mingled in the forecastle, rigging, and whaleboats, white Herman and Black Backus spent a year together in the Pacific, in close quarters.

The biographical revelations regarding John Backus, first recorded in the 1988 Northwestern-Newberry edition of *Moby-Dick*, add to the material evidence of the presence of African Americans in Melville’s workplaces. From them, we can infer more about his growing empathy for dispossessed peoples, or what I call Melville’s black consciousness.⁵ However, Backus’s leap from his whaleboat seems only incidental to the role that accident plays in Melville’s plotting of his accidental tragedy. The pattern of accidents in *Moby-Dick* suggests that Melville had experienced enough “unimaginable accidents in the fishery” to inspire his fiction and leave it at that, with no need to locate his inventions in biographical specifics. What benefit to interpretation arises, then, from knowing that African American John Backus was bumped from a boat? The answer has less to do with finding a source for Pip than with how Melville revised Backus in *Moby-Dick* and how he replayed the accident in a writing process that resulted in a symbol of race, capitalism, and democracy, and of Melville himself. But to see more clearly the critical relevance of this focus on Melville’s creative acts, we need to shift gears from accident to coincidence.

Coincidence and Tragedy: The Third Man Replayed

At first, coincidence might seem to be much different from accident. Is not a coincidence nothing more than two or more accidents happening at the same time? Even so, one compelling difference brings us back to Melville’s abiding concern for the nature of human consciousness. Whereas accidents are immediately identifiable as mishaps regardless of participants, a coincidence exists only when its participants become mutually aware of the accident of circumstance as a shared experience; it exists because of a sudden, fortuitous mutual consciousness. That awareness is an unsettling “peculiar emotion.” A moment in Melville’s second book *Omoo* (1847) clarifies.

Omoo picks up where *Typee* leaves off with a matter-of-factness that belies the first book’s melodramatic conclusion. In *Omoo*’s opening, the rescued protagonist says nothing about his harrowing escape from Typee warriors that has put him on board the *Julia*. Instead, he notices two sailors on deck, both of whom he has met before—a young man from Liverpool, an old man from Rio—and he digresses on “the curious coincidences which often befall the sailor”:

And here we were again:—years had rolled by, many a league of ocean had been traversed, and we were thrown together under circumstances which almost made me doubt my own existence.

(O 6)

⁵ Throughout this chapter, I capitalize Black to refer to specific individuals of African descent, including the African Daggoo and African American Pip, but use the lower-case in “black consciousness” to indicate that Melville’s empathy to inhabit specific individuals of color gestures toward a general human condition of dispossession.

Curious enough is how three men, briefly acquainted on separate ships, docked in separate Atlantic ports, might happen upon each other on board a third ship, moored off a remote island in the vast Pacific.

The marvel of these details and their irrelevance to the opening storyline of *Omoo* suggests that the coincidence is not an invention but the remembrance of an actual life event of 1842 intruding into Melville's 1847 narrative. You might compare the "circumstances" of this coincidence to three motes of dust vibrating on the surface tension of a glass of water, bumping each other separately, then a year later bumping again but this time all together. And if humans were mindless motes governed solely by random vibrations, this comparison would pertain. But we are conscious motes, and our awareness of time, place, self, and otherness makes the accidental coming together of three men seem more like the sudden, memorable, unexpected consciousness of a shared identity. But the peculiarity of this collectivity of coincidence is not what Melville recalls. Rather, the effect of the coincidence is that it has "almost made me doubt my own existence." The momentary recognition has taken him out of his insulated subjectivity into a broader human consciousness that briefly unites him with two other men from separate worlds, and yet Melville's third-man protagonist in *Omoo* shrinks from this awareness: it shakes his belief in himself.

This sudden conflict of consciousnesses—self and other—and the recoil into self-doubt (a form of nonexistence) is what Melville, in a more exultant mood, would call a "shock of recognition" ("Hawthorne and His Mosses," *PT*, 249). But in *Omoo*, the shock of coincidence is the discovery of an apparently threatening similitude that in pulling time, place, and mind together heightens our self-consciousness toward self-annihilation. A "peculiar emotion" indeed, and Melville's permitting it to intrude into his narrative—his allowing a biographical moment to invade his fiction—prompts us to consider the role of coincidence as a rhetorical strategy, one that Melville uses more effectively in *Moby-Dick*.

In a travel narrative like *Omoo*, the coincidence of three acquainted sailors, from different worlds, landing on the same boat, in the vast Pacific is a perfectly suitable opening for a book that makes every effort to instantiate the *Robinson-Crusoe*-like randomness of a picaresque. But paradoxically, in crafting an accidental tragedy like *Moby-Dick*, Melville must steer clear of coincidence, or seem to. The dilemma is that while accident can be familiarized so that readers will accept the accident of Ahab's death as a plausible example of an accidental universe, the plausibility and necessity of Ahab's tragic, trauma-induced obsession is diminished if we take Ahab's finding of Moby Dick—a single mote in a vast ocean—to be just coincidental.

Melville labors famously to discount such coincidences by bringing whaling facts into his fiction. He demonstrates that whales have regular feeding grounds, that they migrate seasonally and predictably from one to another, that they have idiosyncratic spouts, markings, scars, even old harpoons embedded in their flesh that make them readily identifiable, and that they dive and surface like clockwork. Not only does Melville's use of these facts render whaling and sea life in his narrative more realistically than you might expect from a novel misleadingly labeled by critics as "romantic," but they also validate the reasoning behind Ahab's reasoned pursuit and thereby enhance the credibility, not madness, of his tragic quest. Thus, in *Moby-Dick*, Melville minimizes coincidence, even though in other works—we can add *Redburn*, *Israel Potter*, and *The Confidence-Man* to *Omoo*—coincidence plays significant roles. That said, Melville's avoidance of coincidence is not entirely complete in *Moby-Dick*. Which brings us back to Pip, Backus, and biographical criticism.

What is most coincidental in *Moby-Dick*, Melville sedulously conceals. It is the coincidence of three accidents, involving three men bumped from three different boats, at three different times: Pip, Ishmael, and Ahab. Throughout the narrative, these three figures barely interact on stage: Pip and Ahab connect only at the end; Ishmael only observes and never connects. But they experience a similitude of event. Pip is first to be bumped; Ishmael is the unnamed “third man” bumped on the final day of the Chase; and Ahab is not so much bumped as taken off his boat, tangled up in a fouled line just like Pip. Ishmael—the novel’s binding consciousness who routinely exposes hidden commonalities between humans and whales—is oddly silent on this particular similitude. Given the explicit identification of other “unimaginable accidents” throughout *Moby-Dick*, the bumping from a boat, though common enough, is the least remarked of accidental occurrences. Additionally, in “The Line” (Ch. 60), Ishmael explains the peril of the whizzing whale line and the consequences of its being poorly coiled in the tub, preparing us for Pip’s near-death strangulation and Ahab’s death by “hemp” (Ch. 117, 437), some thirty and sixty chapters later, respectively. Leap and line make as potent a symbol as whiteness and whale. But after “The Line,” Ishmael refrains from further digression on its meaning; the symbol lies dormant within the plot of Melville’s accidental tragedy. While Pip and Ahab act out their common “madness” in stagey dialogue, Ishmael’s link to them—his own bumping from a boat—is so tangential in the final scenes of mayhem and only obliquely explained in the Epilogue that readers must re-read the previous chapter to find that, like Pip and Ahab, Ishmael has been bumped; he is the third man who “was dropped astern.” Why does Melville spend so much energy in concealing the coincidental bumping from the boat of these three memorable characters?

By having readers re-read in order to identify Ishmael as this “third man” bumped, the text has them enact the same kind of sudden discovery of similitude that is inherent in coincidence; the text produces a “shock of recognition” that, through readers, Ishmael, Pip, and Ahab have a shared consciousness, and that the coincidence of events happening to them is itself symbolic of an ungraspable fourth identity that transcends all three. It says, without saying it: we are wrapped in lines and rapped by existence; we are self-aware and rave (Pip), erupt (Ahab), and meditate (Ishmael) over the indifference of the universe and the certainty of our nonexistence. In this view, the rhetorical strategy is to engage readers more actively in the apperception of a symbol of the simultaneity of consciousness and annihilation.

Granted, this reading experience of Melville’s rhetorical strategy can happen without recourse to biographical criticism. That said, biography alters the reader’s experience of the text and augments interpretation. Recognizing, for instance, how coincidence as an event was powerful enough to intrude into *Omoo* as an idea opens up Melville’s way of writing fact into his fictions. The added vector of identity linking Melville to the diminutive Black sailor John Backus uncovers more fully Melville’s strategy of concealment, his crafting of symbol out of self, and his making of Pip. More than a point of common recollection, the story of Backus was a moment of bonding for Melville and Hubbard, and the emotional energy of that moment points to how Melville might have transformed Backus into Pip when, in the spring and summer of 1851, he completed his novel.

How Melville transformed Backus into Pip is only one of many developmental moments in Melville’s evolving black consciousness. We cannot ignore any white writer’s presumption in writing of and for any character of color, especially since such presumptions have historically perpetuated invidious stereotyping and allowed more seemingly benign stereotyping to pass

uncritically. In addressing the matter of racial appropriation, Toni Morrison argues that while “There is no escape from racially inflected language,” writers of all colors are obliged “to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language” (Morrison 13, 38). Melville’s writings contain racial inflections, and they would be equally hobbled in representing antebellum life if they lacked them. They give visibility to Black, underclass, ethnic, and disabled characters that were, again in Morrison’s words, “invisible” in most nineteenth-century literature. Melville’s inflections of “racially inflected language” are deeply personal and yet rhetorically strategic, and his invention of Pip is a remarkable “unhobbling” of the imagination from racist stereotyping, made all the more remarkable when put into a biographical context.

To understand how Melville transformed John Backus into Pip, we should consider the problem of infantilization when a white writer converts an actual Black man into a fictional boy. The problem is complicated by the fact that whaling ships did not routinely enlist cabin boys—such body servants and waiters were more often found on naval craft—nor were cabin boys necessarily Black. Melville’s first whaling ship *Acushnet* had no cabin boy, and its three original African American sailors were grown men. The ship’s cook was the 38-year-old William Maiden. The two others were experienced “seamen”—Thomas Johnson and Enoch Read—both in their twenties. Like Melville, who was about 5’9”, these three Black sailors were among the tallest aboard the *Acushnet*. John Backus joined the crew a year after the ship sailed out of Fairhaven, and probably to fill a space created when 5’4” boatsteerer David Smith deserted in Santa, Peru. If Backus replaced Smith, he did a man’s job regardless of his size. Why turn the Black man into a Black boy?

Whereas the *Acushnet* had no cabin boy, the *Pequod* has two. In addition to Black Pip is “the white waiter” Dough-Boy (Ch. 34, 149). Though Dough-Boy is a steward, not a cabin boy, he seems equally adolescent and, like Pip, much younger than the rest of the crew, also subservient, always fearful, and small enough to be snatched up by Daggoo and bodily thrust into a wooden trencher. Ishmael calls him a “match” for Pip, in size and age if not color and character. Together Dough-Boy and Pip are a racialized diptych, and the white lad is found wanting. Dough-Boy is indolent and dull, unlike the vibrant and ebullient Pip. Dough-Boy is an irregular spear-carrier in the first half of *Moby-Dick* who vanishes from the action. Pip, however, becomes a black thread sinuating the remaining narrative.

Dough-Boy is comic relief and might have been originally destined for some kind of soul-changing bump, instead of Pip. But at some point, Melville dumped rather than bumped white Dough-Boy, and rather than retroactively substituting Pip for Dough-Boy in the first half of the novel, Melville let the white waiter stay on, and he appears, as does Bulkington (another figure who famously disappears in *Moby-Dick*), to be what Harrison Hayford calls an “unnecessary duplicate.” Whether Dough-Boy and Pip are an intended or accidental couple, the biracial pairing represents a departure from Black stereotyping.⁶ But this strategy of the racial diptych could be just as easily realized with adult sailors—as in fact we find with the nobly indifferent African Daggoo and nervy white Flask—without creating an improbable set of cabin boys, contrary to whaling practice and the realities of the *Acushnet* crew. Why Melville turned Backus into Pip has as much to do with age and identity as race.

⁶ Melville may have drawn upon Black and white schoolmates Pompey and Neddy Mellish in Cornelius Mathews’s *Big Abel and Little Manhattan* (1845).

Turning the adult Black Backus into young adolescent Pip clearly risks racist infantilization, but Melville's efforts to establish sympathy for Pip's vulnerability early on in the racial brawl of "Midnight, Forecastle" (Ch. 40) give the character far more dramatic, indeed tragic freight than the older, larger, more mature Black figures in the *Pequod's* crew. The "strange sweetness" of Pip's later "lunacy" (Ch. 110, 419) further ages his character, giving him preternatural insight and prophetic power regarding Black and white relations that go beyond adult meditations. Pip's role as a wise child pushes the boy beyond white and Black stereotyping. Moreover, making Pip not just a child but a young adolescent—about twelve or thirteen—puts him at Melville's age when his father, Allan Melvill, died. Pip's youthful vulnerability, sane insight, and mad prophecy required the voice of a boy younger than white Dough-Boy, and a voice inflected by the threat of death and madness, expressing the trauma of dispossession: Melville would seem to have chosen a Black version of himself.

Another conversion—the changing of John Backus's name—says more about the risks of racial appropriation and Melville's choices in rendering Pip. Backus's last name is likely a slave name derived from "Bacchus," the Roman god of wine, fertility, theater, and madness. Coincidentally, the name would perfectly suit Pip's musicality, joy, theatricality, and "crazy-witty" wisdom; or perhaps too well. Melville did not take this easy option, probably because he wanted to avoid using the names of real people in his fiction. Moreover, its evocation of Jim Crow minstrelsy would have distracted from Pip's brilliancy. He chose to nickname his cabin boy "Pippin," abbreviated to "Pip," which instead denotes both a seed and an attractive, admired person.

Appropriating Black Backus, converting him into a boy, changing his name, making him over in Melville's self-image of a fatherless orphan, giving Pip words and rhythms of Black speech but steering clear of Jim Crow minstrelsy: this is the risky business of a white writer crafting hidden humanities shared between himself and the vulnerable and traumatized Black Pip. Melville's choices in revising Backus into Pip reveal his inner urgency to identify with a black consciousness of dispossession and yet to steer clear of presuming to inhabit a particular Black life. Nevertheless, from these external biographical facts and internal revision facts, we can discern a concealment of identity among Black orphan Pip, white orphan Ishmael, and the orphaned third man Herman Melville, playing out the trauma of his early adolescent father-loss. Exercising our ability to read a text both biographically and aesthetically shows how Melville used writing to unfold his black consciousness and "unhobble" his imagination from the constraints of racism.

Our decades-old resistance to biographical criticism would have us dismiss an interpretation that finds meaning in Melville's demonstrable insertion of himself into Pip, not so much for its speculation as for the assumption that the facts regarding John Backus's race, age, and leap, as well as Melville's transformation of Backus to Pip, are extraneous to the text of *Moby-Dick*. Texts, it is presumed, have meaning independent of the life that made them. Our notions of a writer's life should not dictate interpretation. But studying the intersection between life and text—placing written works in their biographical context—nevertheless deepens as it sharpens our practice of historicism—by which I mean the interpenetration of individual and culture in the study of imaginative writing—and it better enables us to discern the dynamics of appropriation and invention. In short, biographical criticism enables new ways of reading a text historically.

Adjacency: Place, Mind, and Symbol

Let me conclude with a thought on “adjacency” in biographical criticism—its focus on place and its utility in addressing the connections between life events and the writing process. The term reveals certain precincts of Melville’s creativity, his remarkable leap, let’s say, from concrete places and events (a seaman jumping into the Pacific) to immaterial symbol (a merging of self, other, reader, and “All”).

As we have seen, the basic parameters of accident and coincidence, which are recorded phenomena in Melville’s life, also shape a historicist interpretation of an evolving consciousness evident in Melville’s writing. Adjacency enables us to imagine how dispersed places associated with accident and coincidence, which exist in external experience, are brought to internal proximity in mind. In this regard, adjacency is a mental, perhaps even neurological, condition, a function of memory and the less comprehensible mechanisms out of which symbols are constructed. How is it that a writer made inexplicably fatherless at age twelve witnesses in young manhood at first or second hand a shipmate leap into the sea and in certain later acts of writing transforms these facts of life into a symbolic affinity between himself, a Black cabin boy, and an angry captain-father? Somehow, either in the neurons and glia of the brain or in some associative process of mind these factors of self, shipmate, father; of bumping, leaping, strangulation; of orphan, race, and dispossession stand adjacent to one another. Whether this adjacency is the result of traumas that place them all in proximity in some unique sector of the brain where the need to write is located, or whether some associational mechanism stimulated by the writing process seeks out randomly dispersed but similarly coded memories and links them together simulating what seems to us an adjacency: These questions take us beyond biography and criticism into the mechanics of creativity. Perhaps we must leave it to neurologists to consider how trauma, memory, and symbol interact. For now, adjacency seems a good enough model for finding useful critical correspondences between life experiences and the writing of imaginative works.

Concrete evidence of the mental processes of adjacency recur in Melville’s travel journals where place often evokes place. For instance, in his January 3, 1857 entry, Melville describes the interior of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. He writes: “At one moment seeming in the Mammoth Cave. Subterranean gorges, &c. Then as in mines, under the sea. The stooping & doubling. I shudder at [the] idea of ancient Egyptians. It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah” (*J* 75). At the very least, the biographer in me exults over this entry because it offers the only evidence we have that Melville visited Kentucky’s Mammoth Cave during his 1840 trip home from Galena, Illinois. The literary critic exults because the “shudder” Melville feels inside the pyramid is the “peculiar emotion” of adjacency. It is a physical manifestation of an inner “shock of recognition” that connects place to place with the invention of monotheism, an idea that would not emerge until decades later in the 1891 poem “The Great Pyramid,” where the name of “Jehovah” has been transformed into the symbolic “I AM” (*PP* 315–16).

The biographer-critic in me marvels at the journal entry’s ramble among displaced places. “At one moment,” we are “stooping & doubling” in Mammoth Cave, and standing in galleries overlooking the cave’s “Subterranean gorges, &c.,” which triggers the unexpected invention of undersea mines, which in turn are associated with Egypt, pyramids, and God all in one “shudder.” Melville’s manuscript meditation on nature and art in “The Great Pyramid” extends these

associations in ways yet to be assessed. Suffice it to say, journal and poem record an evolving consciousness whose identifiable “places” constitute an adjacency in mind of claustrophobia, fear, desire, god hunger, and self-awareness.

Consider, again, the contrived coincidence of Pip, Ishmael, and Ahab being bumped from their boats, at three different places and times; and yet the conscious shock in our discovery of their similitude, via the added news of John Backus’s leap, urges us to look for connections, and a meaning emerges that feels like a symbol of identity. The implication is that “at one moment” in his creative process, Melville placed a version of himself beside the versions of the real Backus and fictional Pip; they became adjacent in his mind. Perhaps, too, the mental work expended in this process of adjacency excites another place in mind associated with an aesthetic notion of “the tragic.” Perhaps, in fact, there are no places in mind, only communicative energies. As a critical term, “Adjacency” will not explain why places, times, and events come together in mind. For now, it is a useful trope for imagining how personal experience, the aesthetics of symbol, and the making of tragedy interoperate. Surely, a digital mapping of the real spaces in time that Melville experienced linked to textual places in marginalia, journal entries, novels, and poems will someday visualize the networks of Melville’s adjacencies to assist the study of the intersections of life, neurology, neurodiversity, and literary interpretation and to help explain this phenomenon in writers and readers alike.

Biographical criticism brings life events, memory, and creative process into interpretation. What connects these places in the mind is the evolving consciousness of the writer living a life. Biography is forbidden territory in traditional criticism, but territory worth exploring. As literary, cultural, and digital scholars seek new ways to integrate biography and interpretation in the analysis of texts, critics need not become biographers themselves to perform such analysis. Indeed, all of the biographical materials used in this chapter have been hiding in plain sight for decades, readily available to readers, and waiting for critical use. Like any form of practical criticism, biographical criticism takes practice. For me, accident, coincidence, and adjacency are useful coordinates for the mapping of Melville’s creative consciousness. But this exercise is only one approach to biographical criticism. Regardless of approach, our common critical goal is how to integrate the fragments of life and text in our interpretations of writer, writing, and culture.

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