The Wrath of Ahab; or, Herman Melville Meets Gene Roddenberry

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April Selley writes in "Transcendentalism in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*" of the second *ST* series' prevailing ethos:

"Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" Ralph Waldo Emerson asks in his quintessentially American manifesto of Transcendentalism, the essay *Nature*. "Why not, indeed?" seems to be the answer of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which embodies Emerson's philosophy of optimism.... Above all else, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* suggests that order comes from Emersonian self-reliance in harmony with the goodness of the cosmos....

The Emersonian philosophy of the series is symbolically represented by the structure of the new starship *Enterprise*. Instead of solid walls, the ship has many huge windows looking into space. These suggest that the barriers between humans and the universe are breaking down.... [Some episodes] suggest that "space" is not "the final frontier"; the frontiers of time and of the current limitations on thought and sensory perception will also be conquered. One recalls Emerson's lines from *Nature*: "Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy." The "perfection of the creation" suggests that *evil is an absence of good rather than a force in itself....*

By citing these similarities between Emerson's philosophy and that of *ST: TNG*, however, I do not mean to suggest that Gene Roddenberry, creator of both the original and current *Star Treks*, read Emerson and deliberately set out to embody his principles. But Emerson's philosophy is deeply ingrained in our culture, and Roddenberry and other *ST* writers have had a knack for adapting American headlines, history and myths into entertainment. (31, emphases added)

Now, what I'd like to argue is two-fold: first, I would agree that Roddenberry's conception of the *Star Trek* universe does borrow from 19th century American literature—and more particularly, *STII: The Wrath of Khan* sits somewhere between mere allusion to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and an outright retelling; it is what I'd like to call an *oblique reconfiguration* of *Moby-Dick*. I do believe this reconfiguration is purposeful, as I will argue in a moment. However, while the plot merely borrows some few odd elements, at least one of Melville's original messages is translated wholesale into the *ST* film. My second point is that while the *TNG* series is indeed Emersonian, and in the ways described earlier, *The Wrath of Khan*, in the same way as does Melville in *Moby-Dick*, severely questions Emerson's Transcendentalism and sounds a warning for the true believer in the infinite progress and goodness of humankind.

In fact, *Moby-Dick* is rather a tragedy, and tragedy does believe in evil—active, malignant evil. One definition of tragedy, in part, would assert that conditions or circumstances cause death and loss, and often those conditions which look suspiciously like Fate have been created by humans in some remote past (we would do well to remember Oedipus). In this vein, so too does *The Wrath of Khan* invoke such tragedy—a tragedy of the discovery urge.

But first, I want to establish that these two texts speak the same language. There are many direct borrowings in *The Wrath of Khan*, and I'd like to note these quickly. To begin with, we have the seekers, James T. Kirk and Melville's Ishmael, both casting out on a ship for reasons having more to do with themselves than with the mission: Ishmael has his hypos; Kirk his depression on his birthday, the day the film begins. While Ishmael spent a sailor's thoughtless life optimistically plunging forward to explore strange new worlds, in these latter days—after his voyage on the fated Pequod—at *Moby-Dick*'s beginning he goes to sea motivated by something akin to depression: to keep from "methodically knocking people's hats off.... This is my substitute for pistol and ball" (3). Kirk, once the happy explorer on his 5-year

mission, now has settled for an admiral's desk-job, forced into command for the *Khan* journey by sheer accident. Kirk's only response to *The Wrath of Khan*'s predicament—he's being chased through space by a vengeful Khan who wants both Kirk's head and the deadly Genesis device—his only response is "I feel old." Nevertheless, Kirk does play a dual role with respect to *Moby-Dick*: if his motives are Ishmael's, Kirk is also the pursued—in Khan's eyes, the white whale to be destroyed.

Khan is the figure taken wholesale from *Moby-Dick*. Like Ahab, his motive is vengeance: Kirk, fifteen years previous to the story of this adventure (and actually 17 years earlier in the first series), has left him, his wife and crew on Ceti Alpha 5—has left them to a type of penal-colony fate in consequence of Khan's criminal monomania, his attempt to war against the Federation. Kirk, by the way, must live with his own consequences, too: while he has neglected to check back on Khan, Ceti Alpha 5 has become a wasteland, Khan's wife has been killed, and as a result, Khan blames Kirk for his life's disaster.

As with Ahab, Khan has been wounded, and vengeance is his only remaining goal. Both Ahab and Khan maintain control by a species of brutal, arbitrary power, Ahab bribing his men with the gold doubloon and with threats of mutiny charges, Khan insisting his people have "sworn to live and die by my command before [Chekhov] was even born." Like Ahab, Khan struts himself around his decks, single-visioned master of all he surveys: a type A personality with a grudge.

What both Ahab and Khan want is absolute control, however—especially control over the mysterious element that has literally and figuratively "bitten" them. Ahab wants mastery of the mysterious sea and its hieroglyphic, unreadable white whale; Khan wants mastery of the Genesis device—a machine that can create new life on dead planets and can, of course, destroy everything in its path. Dr. McCoy recognizes the God-aspiring monomania of anyone who would use such a device, saying, "According to myth, the earth was created in 6 days. Now, look out"—with Genesis, we can create and destroy at the same time.

Richard Slotkin has looked into this trait of American fiction—the recurring theme of regeneration through violence, whereby the male hero of American fiction finds his way—and himself, too—by destroying what comes in his path (*Regeneration Through Violence*). I'll return to this line of reasoning in a moment. For now, we should look at the way Ahab and Khan die. In their breakneck monomania, both die by their own devices: Ahab is caught by the monkey-rope of his own ship, tied to the harpoon he uses to spear Moby-Dick: as the whale speeds off, Ahab is pulled to his death. Khan, of course, dies in the explosion of the Genesis device, detonated to kill Kirk.

Yet *STII* does more than thematically parallel Moby-Dick. The film, in fact, insists that we don't forget the novel. Very early in *STII*, when Chekhov first inspects the downed ship on what the Federation believes is Ceti Alpha 5 (and before he gets the tip-off that he's on Khan's ship, when he finds the emblem, "Botany Bay"), he scans a shelf of books with a flashlight. Lying on top of the shelved books is a book placed horizontally, so its binding can be read: *Moby-Dick*, it boldly says.

Further, the Quarter-Deck chapter (36) of *Moby-Dick* has Ahab explain why he can't stop hunting this whale: "He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it" (164). As Khan's son in *STII* asks his father why he pursues Kirk against his better judgment, Khan replies, "He tasks me, he tasks me, and I shall have him." One more example of direct borrowing will suffice: just before his death, Ahab speaks to Moby-Dick. "Towards Thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; To the last I grapple with thee; from Hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee" (571-72). By now predictably, at the end of the film as Khan sets off the Genesis device, two closely placed scenes quote Ahab's exact words: "To the last, I will grapple with thee.... From Hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee."

There is more, of course, than these direct borrowings, and this more is what Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* more than Slotkin could interpret for us. For we have the long-beloved Spock, the dark, alien *Other* who acts as blood brother and sacrificial lamb to Kirk, as Lane Roth points out in his study of this archetypal brotherhood ("Death and Rebirth" 160). A mystic, Spock, as he reminds us, has no ego, a feature that makes him lovable, malleable, and extremely foreign and impenetrable. The mysterious, tatooed Queequeg of *Moby-Dick*, dark-skinned blood brother to Ishmael, is also a mystic with no regard for his own physical needs, as we see when he keeps his painful, 24-hour Ramadan (The Ramadan, Chapter 17). In spite of their differences, both Queequeg and Spock maintain a loving, brotherly peace with their white counterparts—so loving, in fact, that Fiedler recognizes this recurring trope in American fiction as homosocial and homoerotic: remember that Queequeg and Ishmael sleep together,

whisper long into the night, and at one point touch foreheads while Queequeg says "we are married now" (The Counterpane, Chapter 4). And for those who know the *Kirk and Spock* stories, fanzine spinoffs of the original series, deeply graphic and pornographic, the Kirk-Spock relationship's latent homoeroticism can't be denied.

Spock's death in *STII* is therefore a very touching and, indeed, *loving* scene, cleaned up by Hollywood by the transparent aluminum wall between them. Here Kirk has to be restrained from breaking into the sealed-off engine core, he is so distraught over Spock's dying. Kirk sheds tears; Spock, barely avoiding tears himself, places his hand against the transparent wall against Kirk's (in the Vulcan four-fingered V-farewell), and as he slides down the glass to his death, Kirk slides with him. When Spock dies, the camera pans away to show the two men "leaning" against one another, spent with the emotion of the scene. What Hollywood denies these two—overt love during life—they gain in death, a substitution Fiedler would recognize.

The dark Other provides the female component——domestic, assuring, approving, and finally, sacrificing. Indeed, it is Queequeg's coffin that saves Ishmael's life at the end of *Moby-Dick*. Spock knowingly sacrifices himself to save the ship, and in his case, everyone is saved, while as Ishmael says, "I alone survived to tell the tale." But the emphasis on the coffin can't go unnoticed now. Just after Spock's burial at space, his coffin is shot out into space, landing on the Genesis planet, at which point a new star lights up in the sky, brightly. Music swells powerfully at this point, and the *immediate* regenerative function of this death is reinforced when, shortly after this scene, Kirk says, "I feel young."

What Slotkin calls regeneration through violence I would cast somewhat differently. On the one hand, this reading only recognizes a stronger strain, in American fiction, of the cathartic value of tragedy: death purifies the soul through fear and pity. On the other hand, the particular tragedy of this American trope—and one that Melville, at least, recognized—is the sacrifice of the dark-skinned Other. 132 years after Melville wrote, we were still telling the tale, in 1982, of the dark and light brothers, made better for each other, but one made dead for the other. In these stories of exploration and "discovery"—these ship voyages designed to reveal the heroes' inner geography more than the land before them—we still believe there's a frontier out there, penetrable and usable for our own needs. Indeed, to believe we can go out in a ship to discover strange new worlds is an Emersonian notion. Yet while Emerson's anachronistically Enlightenment *dictum*, "whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy," proffers the Transcendentally optimistic reading of manifest destiny, *Star Trek II*, following *Moby-Dick*, takes a hard look at the cost of American exploration: spiritualizing the physical—tending more to the *idea* of discovery than the actual facts—might well, as Melville satirically suggests, drop one right over the edge of the real, physical world, right into "Plato's honey head," to "sweetly [perish] there" (344).

STII, then, by repeating the warning against thoughtless Transcendentalism, reviews and offers up again a Moby-Dick made clearer—perhaps even more pertinent—to a still-exploring twentieth century. To read *Moby-Dick* after *Star Trek*'s intervention is to know less pity for Ahab, to see the potential for caricature illuminated in the screen version, Khan. Because of the favorite Spock's death,[1] post-*Star Trek* readers of *Moby-Dick* now recognize in these two journeys a critique of discovery. Both *Moby-Dick* and *The Wrath of Khan* contain their own warning, which turns out to be a caution against the Transcendentalist injunction "to boldly go where no one has gone before." The warning: to carry your own vision into that new frontier comes with a price, and that price is the loss of that part of yourself which is best, the Queequeg, the Spock. That control over the frontier has been, in fact, tragic.

Postscript

After fourteen years of slumbering in the deep, *Moby-Dick* surfaced again in the 1996 *Star Trek: First Contact*, the first *Star Trek* film to feature the *Next Generation* cast exclusively. Even the 1986 *ST IV: The Voyage Home*—an adventure-quest comedy about whales—had avoided the essentially tragic *Moby-Dick* as subtext. *First Contact*, however, has the Enterprise crew take on the Borg, a cybernetic race that "assimilates" all species in its path and a long-time nemesis from the *Next Generation* series.

Nameless—the Borg have a collective identity, greeting others with, "We are the Borg"—and all but faceless behind their cybernetic implants, the Borg stack up as fair candidates for the inscrutible Moby-Dick's role. And having once captured and assimilated Captain Jean-Luc Picard, the Borg have earned Picard's enmity, serving up a reasonable background to a Kirk-vs-Khan-style battle to the death.

In these respects, it stands to reason that on board an Enterprise more than half assimilated by the Borg, Picard, having won a minor victory in destroying the almost-complete Borg homing-beacon, but having no

reasonable alternative for complete victory other than escaping from and then destroying the Borg-infested Enterprise—it stands to reason that Picard would opt for the perverse alternative of remaining on board ship to fight. So obvious is it even to Lili, a character from twenty-first-century Earth, that Picard seeks revenge against the Borg for his own torture, she calls him "Captain Ahab." At the end of a tense argument, Lili offering the rather Starbuck-like rationale that all the humans remaining will live if they only abandon ship, Picard succumbs to reason, citing Ahab's vengeful words: "If my heart were a cannon I'd burst it upon him." But with irony, for Picard hears in these words the death wish Ahab ignores.

Yet Picard is not Kirk, as *The Next Generation* is not classic *Trek*, and the result in *First Contact* is a peculiarly misplaced motive in this scene. Uncharacteristically macho, Picard's outburst of vengeance rings somewhat hollow for a character whose customary procedure is patient diplomacy. Perhaps it is only a nostalgic glitch, then, that has brought *Moby-Dick* into the machinery of the film series at present, though something further may follow of this role in future films.

Note

[1]A personal note: during the first day of the first theater run of *STII: The Wrath of Khan*, I heard grown men sobbing in the audience at Spock's death.

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