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## AHAB, ULYSSES, AND THE WHITE WHALE: VITTORIO GASSMAN'S ADAPTATION OF *MOBY-DICK*

At least since Cesare Pavese's short but penetrating essays on Herman Melville, Italian critics and artists have been tempted to emphasize the latter's greatness, and in particular the greatness of his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*, by way of comparison with the accomplishments of the classic (European) literary tradition. Objecting to those who constructed American writers as inescapably "barbarous," Pavese argued, "Melville is really a Greek. Read the European attempts to get away from literature and you feel more literary than ever, you feel small, cerebral, effeminate; read Melville, who was not ashamed to begin *Moby-Dick* with eight pages of citations (...) and your lungs are expanded, your brain is expanded, you feel more alive and more manly. And, as with the Greeks, no matter how dark the tragedy (*Moby-Dick*), so great are the tranquility and purity of its chorus (Ishmael) that we always leave the theater exalted in our own capacity for life" (57-58). One might say that Greek tragedy was Pavese's way of bringing Melville, and *Moby-Dick* in particular, back to the Mediterranean, an intellectual maneuver somewhat replicated in the review of Pavese's translation of *Moby-Dick* published by Elio Vittorini. Like Pavese, the Sicilian writer and critic refused to separate the "barbarian" from the "Greek" Melville, observing that what appears as barbarous and "primitive" in *Moby-Dick* is "in fact Homeric or Biblical" (127, my translation).

The notion of a "Greek" or "Homeric" Melville may be seen as having laid the ground for what is, to date, the most successful and popular Italian adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, Vittorio Gassman's 1992 play *Ulisse e la balena bianca*—Ulysses and the White Whale.<sup>2</sup> Gassman rewrites *Moby-Dick* as a tragedy whose "Homeric" implications are highlighted by the explicit comparison between Ulysses and Captain Ahab. Gassman's *Ulisse e la balena bianca* is of course, in John Bryant's words, a "fluid text." The play is "fluid" not only because, like all theatrical performances, it is based on a script whose meaning hangs to a considerable extent on the way it is actually performed by the actors on stage, but also because other features of the "text" are inherently unstable. Gassman's drama premiered in July 1992 in Genoa, as part of the Columbian celebrations, and it was staged in a vast area of the Genoa Expo, on a 40-meter-wide wooden machinery—a veritable ship-theater—designed by the well-known Italian architect Renzo Piano. The play's open-air setting on the sea-front and its huge stage, suggestive as they were, were castigated by some for their "gigantism," and at least one critic believes that the play gains, rather than loses, when staged in a normal theater (Raboni). In other words, the play as it was staged in Genoa, and later in Rome, Milan, Palermo, as well as in Paris and Argentina, is not exactly the "same" play.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in May 1993 RAI, the Italian public television, broadcasted a three-part film directed by Rubino Rubini, which added to the play itself a considerable amount of backstage material and was later (October 2010) released in DVD format. Needless to say, it is one thing to experience a play live at the theater, where your eye can focus more or less freely on

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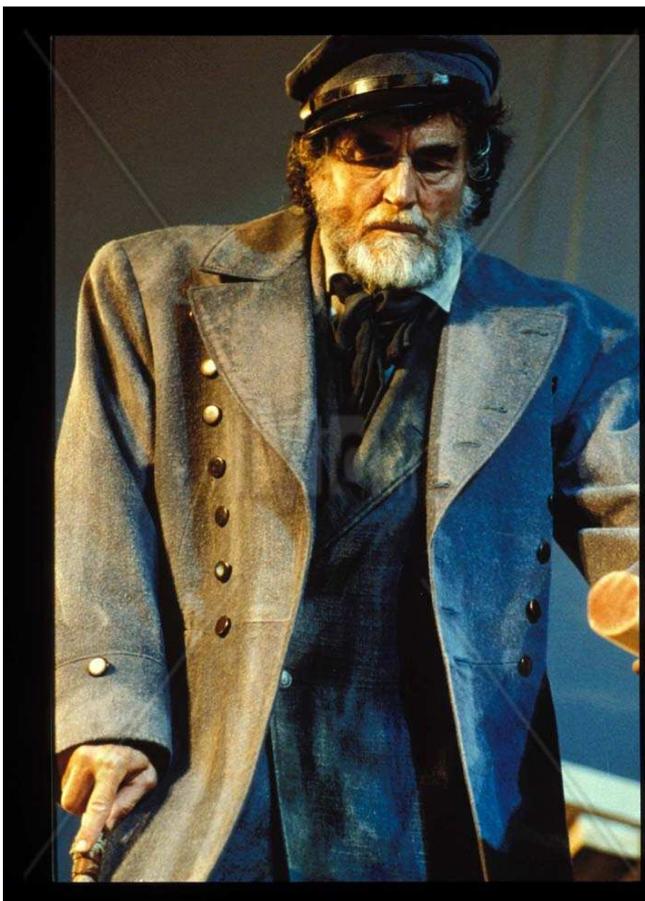
<sup>2</sup> The present essay is based on a paper presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Melville Society, held in Washington, D.C., in June 2013, and should be read as a companion piece to my discussion of another Italian adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, the Dylan Dog graphic novel *Sulla rotta di Moby-Dick*. See Mariani 2013 and, in Italian, Mariani 2011. I wish to thank Gordon Poole and John Bryant for their comments and questions on the paper I read in Washington, and Masturah Alatas for suggesting a number of revisions both in terms of content and style.

<sup>3</sup> On the evening the play premiered in Genoa there was a thunderstorm that obviously emphasized the tragic tone of the performance. The composer Nicola Piovani was so impressed with the sound of thunder that he decided to incorporate it in the play's musical score. (D. G., "Tuoni e fulmini, ma Gassman si lancia nella caccia alla balena," *Corriere della Sera*, 8 Luglio 1992, p. 24).



any detail on stage, and quite another to watch the same play on video, where it is the director who is guiding your eyesight, and hence influencing your reception of the dramatic action. Finally, there is the text of the play itself, published in book-form in 1992, with an introduction by the Italian critic Guido Almansi, which was actually released before the play's premiere and can be judged as an autonomous work of adaptation in its own right. Here, however, rather than discussing in detail the various "fluid" elements of Gassman's play, my attention will focus on some relatively stable features of both the text and the play. For the most part, my critical interest will concentrate on Gassman's idea of superimposing on what many would consider a quintessentially American tragic character like Ahab the (at least originally) European figure of Ulysses (a narrative choice replicated, though in a lower key, also in a more recent theatrical adaptation of Melville's work by Antonio Latella, titled simply *Moby Dick*).<sup>4</sup>

Let me begin with a concise description of the work under discussion. In constructing his play, Gassman relies heavily on those scenes—like "The Quarterdeck"—which Melville himself imagined as theatrical ones, as well as on a number of the several Shakespearian monologues the writer assigned to Ahab. Given the charisma of Gassman's figure, it is no surprise that the play would largely revolve around him.<sup>5</sup>



Picture 1. Vittorio Gassman as Captain Ahab

Ishmael—played by Gassman's son, Alessandro—makes his first appearance in the prologue, where he delivers his "call me Ishmael" speech. This scene, however, is preceded by one in which some street

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<sup>4</sup> Antonio Latella, who had previously acted in Gassman's play, wrote and directed in 2007 his own adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, casting as Captain Ahab another legend of the Italian theatre, Giorgio Albertazzi.

<sup>5</sup> It may be helpful to remind non-Italian readers that Vittorio Gassman, who died of a heart attack in 2000, was popularly known as *Il Mattatore* ("The Showman"), and is unanimously considered one of the greatest Italian actors ever, starring in dozens of important plays and movies.



peddlers (one of them dressed as Uncle Sam) lecture to a crowd about the marvels of the great Leviathan. Their function is, presumably, that of replacing analogically both the “Extracts” and the cetological chapters. In the prologue, we also see several women on stage—the very first words of the play are indeed pronounced by a female voice—and in particular a prostitute, who tries to attract Ishmael’s interest. The first act follows, with Ishmael meeting Peleg and Bildad, and with Fedallah subsuming Elijah’s role as a prophet of doom. Then the *Pequod* sails and Ahab, the three mates, and the three pagan harpooners enter. The real object of the voyage is disclosed, and the hunt for Moby Dick begins. In the second act, the whiteness of the whale is the object of a lengthy conversation between Ahab and Ishmael. Interestingly enough, some of the speculations on whiteness that in the novel are attributed to Ishmael—for example, the lines on “the heartless voids and immensities of the universe” (165)—are stolen in the play by Ahab. This is a good example of Gassman’s decision to increase Ahab’s dramatic and intellectual weight (and let me note in passing that Latella’s 2007 script has gone even further in what I would describe as the Ishmaelization of Ahab). The captain’s isolation, as well as his increasing ruthlessness are then underscored by contrasting him with Starbuck as well as by Ahab’s refusal to heed Captain Gardiner’s request to join the *Rachel’s* search for his missing son. The clash with Moby Dick follows and after the catastrophe has taken place, Ishmael—back in Nantucket—delivers parts of the novel’s epilogue in conversation with Peleg and Bildad. The same woman who opened the play—and who has been on board the *Pequod* all along—comes back to deliver yet another speech on the symbolic and philosophical import of the sea, the land, and the mystery of life. Then, the prostitutes of the early scenes reappear, and drag Ishmael away. As the crew of the *Pequod* silently comes back on the stage-deck, Gassman, no longer limping, is resuscitated in order to deliver Ulysses’ Dantean monologue.

The key idea of the play is of course Gassman’s decision to showcase the Promethean figure movingly described in *Inferno* XXVI as a man who dared to venture beyond the confines of the known world, “per l’alto mare aperto.” While Dante placed Ulysses in hell, the memorable lines he put in the mouth of the Greek hero to spur on his crew have been often reinterpreted as a standard romantic and existential manifesto:

Considerate la vostra semenza:  
fatti non foste a viver come bruti,  
ma per seguir vertute e canoscenza (*XXVI. 118-20*)<sup>6</sup>

As my Sapienza University colleague, Piero Boitani, has argued in his book *The Shadow of Ulysses*, “Dante’s Ulysses is certainly one of Ahab’s relatives, one of his ‘figures’ several times removed” (89). Both are marked by an audaciousness that is simultaneously “ungodly” and “god-like,” both embark on forbidden, blasphemous expeditions, both eventually suffer shipwreck and annihilation. From an intertextual perspective, Boitani suggests, we could read Ahab as “Ulysses’ unhired killer” (90)—as a hero that Melville pulled out of the depths of the *Inferno* to grant him the chance of taking revenge on the Other who has already condemned him to a life of eternal suffering for his act of disobedience.

Gassman’s idea of bringing Dante and Melville together may be justified not only on artistic but on scholarly grounds as well. Both Lea Newman and, more recently, Dennis Berthold (60-94, 127-29, 135-42, 145-48) have shown Melville’s extensive use of Dante’s *Commedia* in *Mardi*, and a number of Dantean echoes have been singled out by various scholars also in other Melvillean texts, and especially in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. Boitani himself has also returned to, and developed, his earlier observations on the connections between Ahab and Dante’s Ulysses in an essay entitled “Moby Dante?” His argument is that, even though “not the slightest marginal mark accompanies *Inferno* 26 in Melville’s Dante” (438), when Melville read *Paradiso* 27, he highlighted two tercets that refer back to “The unwise passage of Laertes’ son” and to Gades (Cadiz), a toponym to which the translator Henry Cary appended the following footnote: “See Hell, Canto XXVI, 106” (440). Boitani has no doubts: “Yes, Melville knew the canto of Ulysses fairly well” (440). On the other hand, he admits that the question of “how, if at all, did it affect *Moby-Dick*?” (440) is more difficult to answer, though

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<sup>6</sup> In John D. Sinclair’s translation, “Take thought of the seed from which you spring: you were not born to live as brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge” (327).



he insists that, once all the relevant evidence has been weighed, one must conclude that “the Ulyssean *imaginaire* is deeply embedded in *Moby-Dick*’s fabric” (442). In particular, Ahab himself is, in Boitani’s view, “an ultra Ulyssian Ulysses”—a point already adumbrated in a 1983 essay by Jorge Luis Borges, who noticed the “deeper affinity” between “the infernal Ulysses” and Ahab, and who submitted that “both fictions” had to be seen as “the process of a hidden and intricate suicide” (quoted in Boitani 444).<sup>7</sup> Both Boitani and Guido Almansi in his introduction to the text of *Ulisse e la balena Bianca* (Gassman 14), quote Borges approvingly, thus endorsing the legitimacy of Gassman’s choice. Whatever one may ultimately think of the play, its evocation of Dante’s Ulysses should not be dismissed as an attempt to domesticate Melville’s text for an Italian audience but as a sound, legitimate way of reminding both spectators and readers that Ahab can be seen *also* as yet another shadow of the archetypal character first created by Homer. Ahab’s anxiety, dread, courage, daring, and fury are to some extent as old as Western civilization itself, and Gassman should be applauded for bringing this point home to an audience certainly larger than the small readership of literary-critical essays.

Speaking of shadows, however, one must admit that—if it weren’t for the title on the posters of Gassman’s play and on the cover of its published script—it would be difficult for even the most attentive reader or spectator to catch the shadow that the Ulysses archetype is meant to project over Ahab. True, the very first words uttered by Ahab in Act One are a long quotation from Tennyson’s poem, “Ulysses.” This insert, along with the other quotations from Nietzsche, Jimenez, Alberti, Lucretius, Ferenczi, Holderlin, and Pessoa peppering the text, are obviously meant to suggest the archetypal and intertextual nature of both the play and the Ahab figure. Yet, while these poetic fragments may be seen also as yet another stand-in for the novel’s “Extracts,” or for the many learned figures invoked by Ishmael in his Leviathanic narrative, the extent to which they resonate with the Ulysses archetype is speculative at best. The reader/spectator is obviously encouraged by the play’s title to read or watch the play thinking all along that the Ahab character is a reincarnation of Ulysses. However, if we leave out the Tennyson quotation and the recitation of Dante at the very end of the play, the Ahab-Ulysses relation—which one would expect to be central to the play—is hardly investigated. It’s as if Gassman had stated a thesis—an intelligent and to a large extent a-defensible thesis on both aesthetic and scholarly grounds—but had not really bothered to support it with much concrete evidence. This problem is magnified by the fact that, until the very end of the play, the spectator does not know that Gassman’s Ulysses is Dante’s character rather than Homer’s, and while these two figures are obviously in some ways related, the distance between the Greek Odysseus and Ahab is by all accounts great. A spectator watching the play with the hero of the *Odyssey* in mind would be, I think, hard put to find any trace of the wily, practical, home-sick Homeric character in Gassman’s proto-existentialist Ahab.

There is, however, a more severe problem with the Ahab-as-Dantean Ulysses concept—a problem that even an admirer of Gassman’s dramatic text like Almansi has acknowledged, and that to my mind even Boitani’s erudite discussion of Ahab as “an ultra Ulyssian Ulysses” does not entirely solve. The object of the Dantean Ulysses’s quest is clearly and unequivocally knowledge—he moves beyond the boundaries of the known world “per seguire vertute e conoscenza.” Ahab’s motive is revenge: he has no desire to “know” the whale. His longing is to “*strike through the mask*” (140, my emphasis) not to discover what lies beyond “the wall” that is *Moby Dick*. Indeed, Ahab wants to carry out his revenge notwithstanding his awareness that, beyond the wall he wishes to demolish, there may be “naught.” Ahab’s revengefulness is what makes of him a less attractive romantic and humanist icon than Dante’s Ulysses. On the other hand, one could argue that Ahab is Ulyssian in the crafty ways he employs to lord over the crew and bend his mariners’ wills. However, the manipulative skills that Ahab seems to borrow from Homer’s Odysseus are no part of Dante’s Ulysses, who does not view his men instrumentally and, on the contrary, addresses them as his equals. He does not consider them “brutes” but individuals who share his love of virtue and knowledge. The distance between Ahab’s violent impulse and Ulysses’ transgressive, yet in some ways admirable, desire, is perhaps nowhere detectable with more clarity than in one of the most interesting passages of Boitani’s book on the Ulysses

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<sup>7</sup> Three years before Borges’ essay, however, Dante’s Ulysses had already been compared to Ahab by Thomas Werge: “Melville’s dramatization of Ahab’s ‘angelic imagination’ echoes Dante as strikingly as Ahab’s voyage echoes that of Dante’s Ulysses” (143).



myth in Western literature. In the final pages of his study, Boitani recalls how, in his *If This is a Man*, Primo Levi tells the story of how, unexpectedly, during one of his terrible days in Auschwitz, Dante's "canto di Ulisse" surfaced in his memory. As Levi tries to tell about this Canto to his fellow prisoner Pikolo, he is struck by the deep significance that the tercet beginning with "Considerate la vostra semenza..." [Take thought of the seed from which you spring] acquires for him, at that particular moment, in that particular place, "as if I heard it for the first time, like a trumpet blaring, like God's voice." What is in Dante's original text the voice of a sinner condemned to eternal damnation, is here reinterpreted by Levi as "God's message" to "all suffering men," and in particular to the inmates of the extermination camp (Boitani 1994, 159).<sup>8</sup> It would be hard to imagine Levi being so moved by any of Ahab's words. Ahab, of course, may well be as much of an intellectual as Dante's Ulysses. He may also have, as Peleg puts it, "his humanities," but the dictatorship he exerts over his crew as well as the madness of his quest are, I think, far removed from anything we know about Homer's as well as Dante's Ulysses.

The key question that Gassman's choice of calling attention to Ahab as Ulysses raises is that of the relationship between the Western desire to know the world and the violence against the Other that this desire seems to inevitably bring with it. Is the play suggesting that—as Adorno and Horkheimer argued in a famous section of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—this thirst for knowledge which, though sinful, appears in Dante's Canto as all too human, must inevitably turn violent and murderous? Is *Ulisse e la balena bianca* an attempt to underscore the fact that, no matter how originally pious his intentions to pursue "vertute e canoscenza," Western man ultimately falls prey to his imperialist hubris? There are some signs in the play's conclusion that this may be the case. Before Gassman comes on stage to recite Dante's lines, in her final speech the woman who has traveled with the *Pequod* notes that "Nothing is similar to itself / if nothing is stable; the only stability / rests with the mysterious violence / that upsets everything / so that from past ruin / a new life may spring" (Gassman 117, my translation). Though here violence appears first and foremost as part of nature itself, by underscoring its creative potential the drama seems to contextualize the tragic outcome of the *Pequod*'s voyage within a relentless cycle of violence from which no one is exempt. Whether one agrees with my impression that this passage implicitly assimilates human violence to the "mysterious" one of blind nature, or not, it would be difficult to deny that, by having Ulysses come on stage *after* the final catastrophe, the play institutes an ambiguous relation between the Greek hero and his American avatar. Of course, this choice makes a certain narrative sense, in that the Ulysses who delivers the speech is the one cast into hell after his shipwreck by the shores of the "tall mountain" of Purgatory. Ulysses is allowed to speak only after Ahab has undergone his own shipwreck, so that the two may be assimilated as one shadow speaking to us from beyond the grave. Yet, by giving Dante's Ulysses the last word in the play, rather than posing the question of how, from an at least relatively humane Ulysses we get to an imperialist, furious, dictatorial Ahab (as would have been the case had Ulysses come on stage at the *beginning* of the drama), Gassman's script seems to condone, or at least bypass, the mad captain's murderous monomania by emphasizing his, and Ulysses', "humanities."

This is not to say that the play ignores the more problematic traits of the Ahab figure. Indeed, Gassman has stated in an interview that "my Ahab roots for the whale. We should learn from the whales, who never make war on one another" (Cappelli, my translation). I think it is interesting that Gassman does not say that the play takes sides with Moby Dick, but that *his Ahab* does. Here Gassman seems to build on Borges' remarks regarding the "common suicidal impulses" shared by Dante's Ulysses and Ahab, as if the latter's ultimate desire were not so much to kill, as *to be killed* by the White Whale. This reading finds some support, I think, in the way in which Gassman has chosen to represent the final physical battle between Moby Dick and Ahab. Needless to say, the problem of how to represent the whale in as limited a space as that of a theater, no matter how spacious the latter might be, is one shared by all dramatic adaptations of the novel.

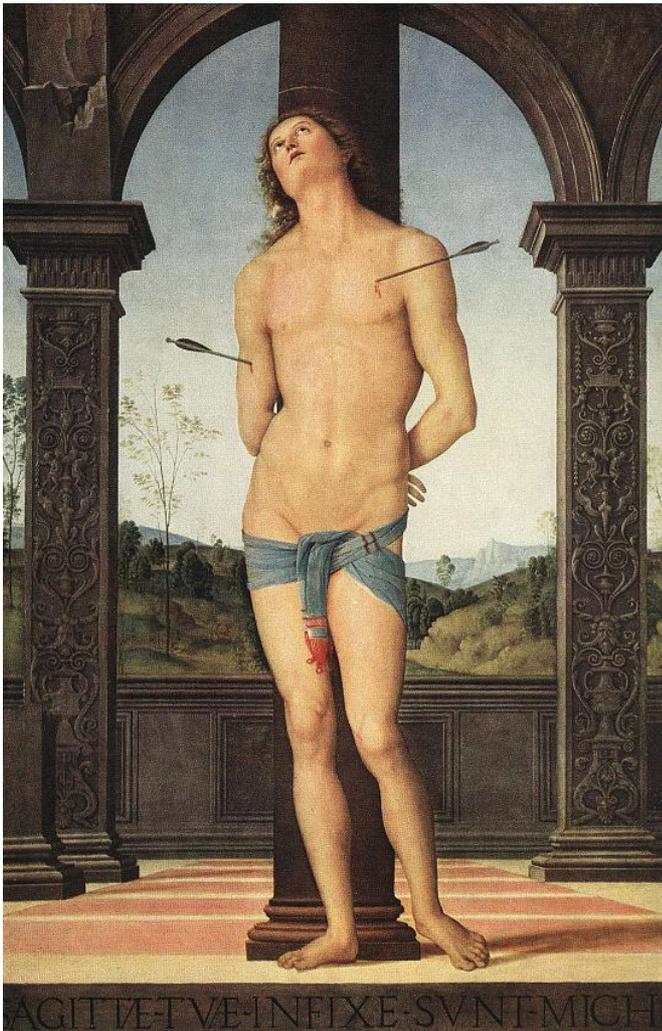
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<sup>8</sup> As Risa Sodi has written, for Levi "The Greek hero's resounding exhortation to "seguir virtute e canoscenza" (*Inf.* 26.120) is the quintessence of the anti-Inferno" (202). While in the *Commedia* Ulysses is "revered poetically though condemned theologically," and "addressed only by Virgil, not Dante the pilgrim," for Levi and Pikolo the Greek hero's exhortation is "a *fugiamus animo*, a chance to flee the concentrationary universe with their minds" (202).

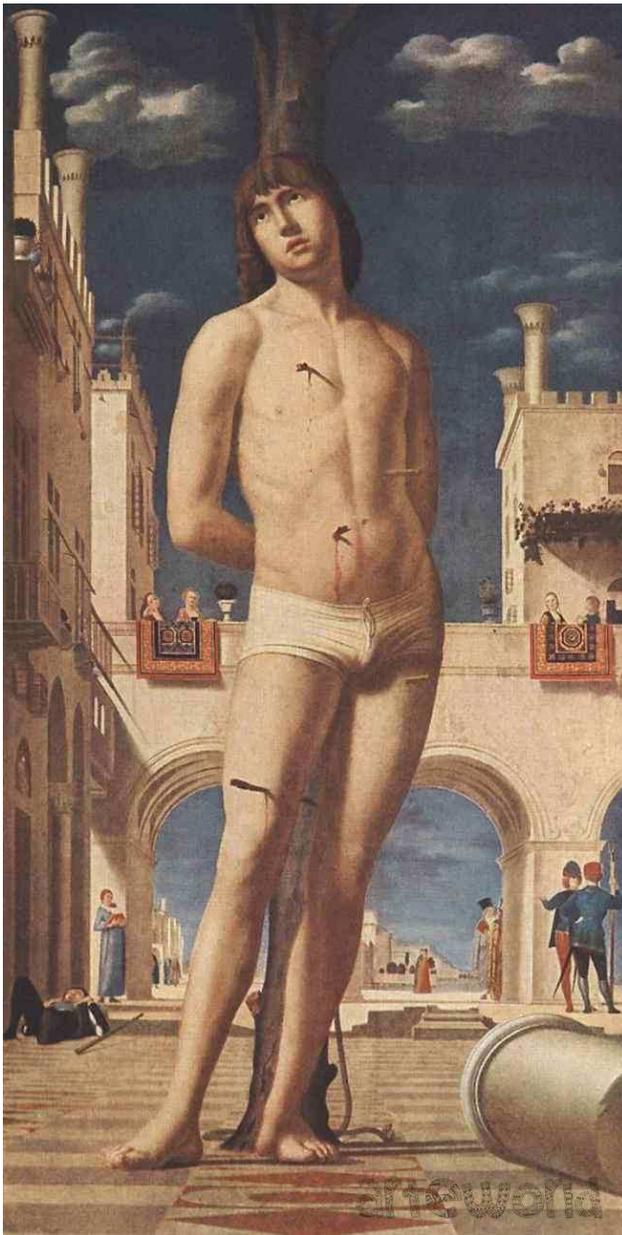


Gassman's choice is quite radical. His whale is impersonated by a muscular ballet dancer in leather corset, with spears sticking out of his body.<sup>9</sup>

What I find striking about this image of the white whale is its resemblance to the classic iconography of Saint Sebastian, the Christian martyr who was tied to a post and shot by arrows by Diocletian's soldiers in 288 AD. One need only think of the paintings by Il Perugino now at the Louvre, by Andrea Mantegna, also at the Louvre, and by Antonello da Messina, now in Dresden. Not only is *Moby Dick* likened to a Christian martyr, but the play's whale inspires little or none of the terror on which Ishmael insists in the novel. The whale-dancer moves gracefully on stage and finally takes Ahab away in a sort of embrace that, to my eyes at least, is more peaceful than resentful. In this final scene, one does indeed get the impression that Gassman's Ahab "roots for the White Whale." Ahab's desire to fight Moby Dick is here re-imagined as a longing to belong to the whale, to become the martyr that the whale is.



<sup>9</sup> The final confrontation between Ahab and the White Whale can be viewed in the six-minute excerpt from the play available on the Internet: "Ulisse e la Balena Bianca." *YouTube*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sq2MCRy34>



Picture 2. From top left to bottom, the San Sebastian paintings by Il Perugino (The Louvre), Andrea Mantegna (The Louvre), Antonello da Messina (Dresden)

This could be seen as one of the ways in which the play tries to mediate or recombine the two contrasting objects of Ulysses' and Ahab's respective quests. As Almansi noted in his introduction to the script, a final evaluation of the play must rest with how "in the actual dramatic transposition, the two themes would bleed into each other" (16, my translation). As I hope it should be clear from what I have been saying so far, I am not convinced that the play succeeds completely in bringing together the Melvillean and the Dantean characters. From a drama so ambitiously titled one would have expected a more thorough investigation of how these two different figures can be considered to be at bottom similar. Instead, we have only some vague suggestions concerning the extent to which Ulysses' thirst for "virtue and knowledge" may overlap with Ahab's monomania. Here I think that a perusal of Adorno's reading of the *Odyssey* would have been helpful. For Adorno, while Ulysses is already an embodiment of the rational man who can calculate means and ends, and can thus turn his technological imagination against the mythic powers of an "old" social and natural universe, he is also the prototypical Western man, who dialectically falls prey to a new mythology requiring the sacrifice of the self, of its impulses and instincts. In short, Odysseus can defeat the Syrens, the Cyclops,



Circe, and other monstrous figures only by taking refuge into an anticipation of the iron cage of modernity. As Stefano Petrucciani has written in his introduction to the Italian translation of Adorno's interpretation of the *Odyssey*, "in order to get rid of sacrifice as an archaic institution, the price to be paid is that of re-enacting the sacrifice within the self" (22, my translation). The play, instead, operates on the basis of an older, archaic notion of myth-as-destiny, and the woman's final words are from this point of view unmistakable. They evoke an inexorable cycle of guilt and punishment from which no redemption can come, and the same of course applies to Ahab/Ulysses' words, which, moving as they may be, come to us—literally—from hell.

My reservations about this aspect of Gassman's play have nothing to do with its degree of fidelity to the "original" novel. In fact, I think that given Gassman's premise, his play would have benefited by being more explicitly, to quote Linda Hutcheon, "an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (8). Unfortunately, to my mind at least, the intertextual engagement is simply not extended enough. In particular, what I find missing in the realization of the idea of Ahab as an avatar of Ulysses is an awareness of the ironic situation in which the hero is caught, and which Adorno underscored in his interpretation of Odysseus as a hero and yet a victim of the "dialectic of enlightenment." Rather than highlighting the substantial failure of Western man's attempts to liberate himself, the play prefers to insist on a tragic framework that is archetypally sealed. Thus, what in the end comes through as ironic is that, by evoking Dante's Ulysses, the revenge motif is stolen from Ahab and handed back to an inscrutable divine order whose foremost imperative is the punishment of man's transgressions, whatever these may be. The strategic placement of the Dantean monologue at the end of the play is eminently un-ironic—it evokes a metaphoric rather than a metonymic relation between Dante's Ulysses and Melville's Ahab, which emphasizes similarity at the expense of difference.

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