

A Stoic Source for the Monkey-Rope

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I identify a probable source for Melville's striking image of the "monkey-rope" (*Moby-Dick*, ch. 72) in his reading of the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca. In a passage in his essay "On Peace of Mind" (*De Tranquillitate Animi*), Seneca argues forcibly that "all our whole life is a servitude" and exhorts us to bear up under our state of bondage with fortitude. Seneca's passage would have furnished Melville not only the striking metaphor of life-as-bondage that he adopts in the chapter "The Monkey-Rope," but also a philosophical basis for recasting his preoccupations elsewhere in *Moby-Dick*. In order to argue the allusion, I briefly survey Melville's knowledge of Seneca; identify the translations of "On Peace of Mind" known to have been in his possession; and call attention to the consonance of language and imagery between Seneca's and Melville's passages.

In a famous passage in chapter 72 of *Moby-Dick*, "The Monkey-Rope," Ishmael waxes philosophical about the rope that ties him to Queequeg, who is below the ship cutting in on the back of a slippery whale. He imagines that the precarious bond allegorizes the human condition:

It was a humorously perilous business for both of us. For, before we proceed further, it must be said that the monkey-rope was fast at both ends; fast to Queequeg's broad canvas belt, and fast to my narrow leather one. So that for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake. So, then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed.

So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death. Therefore, I saw that here was a sort of interregnum in Providence; for its even-handed

equity never could have sanctioned so gross an injustice. And yet still further pondering—while I jerked him now and then from between the whale and ship, which would threaten to jam him—still further pondering, I say, I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die. True, you may say that, by exceeding caution, you may possibly escape these and the multitudinous other evil chances of life. But handle Queequeg's monkey-rope heedfully as I would, sometimes he jerked it so, that I came very near sliding overboard. Nor could I possibly forget that, do what I would, I only had the management of one end of it.*

*The monkey-rope is found in all whalers; but it was only in the Pequod that the monkey and his holder were ever tied together. This improvement upon the original usage was introduced by no less a man than Stubb, in order to afford to the imperilled harpooneer the strongest possible guarantee for the faithfulness and vigilance of his monkey-rope holder. (320)

The peculiar image invites commentary, but the passage has not been satisfactorily explained. The problem lies not in attributing meaning to it but rather in accounting for the origin of the picture of life-as-bondage: Why did Melville choose this particular allegory, when he could have chosen any?¹ Mansfield and Vincent (764) note that the idea of the lifeline itself was suggested to Melville by Francis Allyn Olmsted, *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage*; they (764–5) ask us to compare with the passage a description of slave-ships in Thomas Hope, *Anastasius* (Sealts no. 282), and of a hanging, in R. H. Dana, Jr., *Two Years Before the Mast* (Sealts no. 173). They are right to find the theme of servitude in the passage, but their findings elucidate Melville's technique for depicting the scene rather than its allegorical (or metaphysical) basis. In this note I call attention to a probable Stoic source for the image of the monkey-rope in a text of the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca. Before looking at the Senecan passage, however, a preliminary word on Melville's use of philosophical sources will be useful.

Melville's general predilection for Stoic ideas has been observed, and so have his specific borrowings from Seneca, which are rather extensive in some cases.² Yet in spite of this acknowledgment of Melville's debt to Seneca, there has been no attempt at a comprehensive accounting of Stoic and Senecan influence on *Moby-Dick* or on any others of Melville's writings. This gap in the extant scholarship is a loss for all of Melville's interpreters, and not only those interested in his use of philosophical sources: Stoic philosophy would have offered Melville compelling and original conceptions of (among other things) nature, god, fate, providence, and human freedom, and

Seneca's urgent, figurative language and fondness for paradox in particular would have furnished him a means of provocatively reimagining the human condition. On a small scale, the coherence and force of Melville's imagery may depend upon the identification of its Stoic or Senecan provenance; on a large scale, Stoic theology and metaphysics might allow us to nuance our understanding of important but often generically understood themes in his work, such as the relationship between human and nature. This note is a small contribution to a Stoic accounting of *Moby-Dick*; it will also attempt to provide more texture to our understanding of what Melville's engagement with Stoicism might mean.

I propose that a passage from Seneca's philosophical essay "On Peace of Mind" (*De Tranquillitate Animi*) stands behind the image of the monkey-rope. Melville owned two books of Seneca's writings, both of which contain versions of the passage I propose. The older of these, Thomas Lodge's³ comprehensive translation of Seneca's moral and natural-philosophical works,⁴ includes "On Peace of Mind" in full. I quote the key passage from it in Lodge's translation:

But it may be thou art falne into some troublesome and difficult course of life, and ere thou knewst it; some fortune either publique or private hath entangled thee, in such sort, as thou neither canst loose or break the bonds. Think with thy selfe, that such as are fettered at the first can hardly beare their shackles or the irons on their legs, but afterwards being better resolved doe suffer the same, and conclude to endure them patiently, necessity teacheth them to sustaine them constantly, and custome easily. Thou shalt find in whatsoever kind of life it be, delights, remissions, and pleasures, except thou hadst not rather thinke thy life evill, then make it hatefull. The greatest good that we have received by nature is, that she foreseeing how many troubles wee are to endure in this world, hath found out a remedie to lenifie the same, which is custome, which in short time maketh the greatest evils familiar and supportable; no man could endure it if the continuance and sence of adversitie were as bitter as it is at the first. For we are all of us coupled by fortune, some of us have a goulden and easie chaine, some a more base and sordide intralment. But what skilleth it, what is it? all of us are environed with the same guard, and they that enchain others are enchained themselves. It may bee thou thinkest that the chaine which is tyed to the left arm waieth not as much as that on the right. Some are enthralled by their honours, othersome by their base estate. These are made subject to anothers emperie, others are vassals to themselves; there are some that are confined in one place, others that are arrested by those charges that are committed unto them. All our whole life is a servitude, we ought therefore to accustome our selves to our condition, and no waies to complaine of the same, and to apprehend all those commodities which are about us. (645)⁵

Melville's other volume of Seneca was an excerpted and paraphrased collection of moral writings translated by Roger L'Estrange.⁶ L'Estrange freely recombined portions of different works of Seneca to create a sort of philosophical pastiche organized by topic.⁷ A dislocated paraphrase of the passage from "On Peace of Mind" is found in the section L'Estrange entitles "Three points to be examined in all our Undertakings":

If it so happen that a Man be tied up to Business, which he can neither loosen nor break off; let him imagine those Shacles upon his Mind to be Irons upon his Legs: They are troublesome at first, but when there's no Remedy but Patience, Custom makes them easy to us, and Necessity gives us Courage. We are all Slaves to Fortune; some only in loose and golden Chains, others in strait ones, and coarser: Nay, and *they that bind us, are Slaves to themselves*; some to Honour, others to Wealth; some to Offices, others to Contempt; some to their Superiors, others to themselves: Nay, Life itself is a Servitude: Let us make the best on't then, and with our Philosophy mend our Fortune. (102, emphasis in text)

I will offer some observations to strengthen the suggestion that one or both of these Seneca passages is the source for the allegory of the monkey-rope.

I begin with a few suggestive philological considerations. First, the philosophical nature of the passage in "The Monkey Rope" is indicated by the words "metaphysically . . . conceive." Although this remark need not be taken to imply an allusion to any particular philosophical doctrine, it is notable that where the language of "metaphysics" appears elsewhere in *Moby-Dick* it is in a stretch of the text that self-consciously engages with Greek and Roman philosophical doctrine and adopts a thoroughly Stoic posture. I refer to the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, "Loomings," where the adjective "metaphysical" appears twice (4, 6). That chapter is demonstrably Stoic: Melville mentions Cato (1), probably the most famous Stoic of them all, and—more importantly for our purposes—"Seneca and the Stoics" (6). It is the only reference by name to Seneca in *Moby-Dick*, and it is not by chance: Norsworthy has very plausibly identified a direct allusion to Seneca on the same page in Ishmael's wry question: "Who aint a slave?" On the next page (7), one will note two references to the "Fates," and one to "Providence." The "Fates" (capital-F) are a distinctly Stoic idea (see below), and by proximity to them we should think that "Providence" is Stoic rather than Christian. Melville employs the Stoic concepts in "Loomings" to fill out the backdrop of metaphysical determinism that according to Ishmael motivates his whaling journey.

Another potential clue to the Stoic character of our passage is Ishmael's mention of "Providence." "Providence" is ubiquitous in Seneca's writing and

Stoic philosophy more broadly, where it is technical. It denotes the destined unfolding of events in the world, and is explicitly identified with Nature, God, and Fate (or the Fates).⁸ Providence is so important in Stoic philosophy that Seneca in fact wrote an essay called “On Providence” (*De Providentia*), which Melville read and marked in his copy of Lodge (Leyda 285). One may simply peruse the editions of L’Estrange and Lodge to acquire a sense for the frequency with which Providence and related ideas appear in Seneca’s writings (and certainly not only in the essay “On Providence”).⁹ It is also important to note in this connection that Seneca and other Stoics could use “Fortune” to refer to “Providence,” as is found in the passage from “On Peace of Mind” cited above.¹⁰ Finally, one may observe in passing a rare direct allusion to Stoicism in the closely following chapter 75 (“The Right Whale’s Head—Contrasted View”) and feel compelled to ask:¹¹ did Melville have Seneca on the brain?

Besides the linguistic evidence, there is a forcible consonance of imagery between the Seneca and Melville passages that commends the hypothesis of a Senecan source. Ishmael makes the point *à propos* of the monkey-rope that we are always and inextricably bound to other mortals; our agency is limited so that even the most careful person is still bound to others and has only partial control over his or her fate. Ishmael’s musings are framed chiefly as an impartial metaphysical observation, although they have a didactic undertone: in the perilous circumstances in which he utters them, Ishmael most immediately means to encourage himself and the reader to appreciate their “Siamese connexion” and bear up under whatever “injustice” it presents. Ishmael voices here a kind of pessimistic but courageous philosophy. Seneca’s thesis regarding humans’ bondage to others is nearly identical to Ishmael’s (though Seneca does not limit his remarks to interpersonal relations); but whereas Ishmael leaves the moral of his tale implicit, Seneca explicitly connects the imagery to the need to endure one’s state of bondage with fortitude. His insistence that the condition holds for all (Lodge “for we are all of us coupled by fortune” / L’Estrange “we are all Slaves to Fortune”) anticipates Ishmael’s claim that “this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes.” Again, Seneca’s attempt to ward off an objection (Lodge “It may bee thou thinkest . . .”) may anticipate Ishmael’s (“True, you may say . . .”). The fundamental point of contact between the passage in “The Monkey-Rope” and that of Seneca’s “On Peace of Mind” is in sum the notion of the human condition as social and metaphysical bondage. In this connection it is worth noting both Scott Norsworthy’s suggestion that Seneca figures elsewhere in *Moby-Dick* where the human condition is connected with servitude (“Who aint a slave?” Ishmael asks in

“Loomings,” 6) and Dawn Coleman’s argument (especially 77–81) that Stoic philosophy shaped Melville’s understanding of contemporary black slavery. These findings would certainly agree with the spirit of the passage in “The Monkey-Rope” and be mutually corroborated by it.

But despite his debt to Seneca here, Melville is not a passive recipient of Stoic philosophy. As with so much else that he touches, he recasts and updates Seneca’s metaphor in order to reflect his own preoccupations. In “The Monkey-Rope,” Melville reinterprets the metaphor of servitude in three specific ways that reflect broader concerns in *Moby-Dick*. The first is the bond of marriage: “for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded.” This language recalls and even re-enacts the Spouter-Inn wedding of Ishmael and Queequeg that was to join their fates in the coming whaling voyage (51–52). What is more, the harrowing marriage of the monkey-rope serves as a pointed contrast to the euphoric conjugality of milking sperm (415–6). “For better or for worse” indeed. The second is the bond of brotherhood: “So, then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother” (see also “Siamese connexion”). This imagery resonates not only with the theological confraternity that Ishmael proposes to Captains Beleg and Bildad before setting sail—the “First Congregation of this whole worshipping world” to which “every mother’s son and soul of us belong” (88)—but also with the “fraternity” (361) of whalers that stretches back through the ages and ties them to various understandings of divinity (for example, Vishnoo on 363). Finally there is the bond of cash. The monkey-rope is a “joint stock” affair (see also this phrase at 62) with mutual “liabilities,” and its perils can be likened to those of a business relation with a banker or apothecary. As Ishmael jinglingly reminds the reader elsewhere (“cash would . . . cashier Ahab” 213), the lure of profit has brought the *Pequod*’s whalers aboard; the ship’s cargo of spermaceti is their salary, and each man will draw from it in proportion to his assigned lay. The monkey-rope speaks to the financial motivations which induced the men of the *Pequod* to sign on, and which continue to give them common cause in their labors, as well as to the broader web of economic obligations and interests that send the world-wandering whaling vessels out of port (on the last point see especially chapter 24, “The Advocate”).

Melville’s departures from Seneca do not, in the final analysis, vitiate the potent image of life-as-bondage; they rather enrich it with the addition of mutually strengthening themes. By encompassing the relations of marriage, kinship, and business, Melville shows us how a Stoic metaphysical insight is refracted through the many social dimensions of human life and ultimately embodied in the bonds that tie us together.

Notes

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¹For a sampling of recent attempts to interpret the allegory in reference to themes in *Moby-Dick* and others of Melville's writings, see Royster 315 (monkey-rope as economic bond), Banta 33–36, Bryant 76–78 (as sexual bond), Weinauer 337–39 (as interracial bond), Flannery 27–41 (as sexual bond), Cotkin 136–37.

²For a concise introduction to Stoic themes in Melville, see Sealts, *Herman Melville's Reading in Ancient Philosophy*, 159–67. (Though Sealts would later revise and expand his studies in Melville's use of Plato—see *Pursuing Melville* 23—he apparently did not do so in the case of Seneca and the Stoics, except incidentally.) For Melville's near *verbatim* borrowings from Seneca in *Mardi*, see Braswell. For an allusion to Seneca in *Moby-Dick*, see Norsworthy. The call for renewed attention to Stoic themes in Melville's writings is echoed also by Coleman, who studies several important points of contact between Seneca's writings and *Moby-Dick*.

³For the life of Thomas Lodge, see the biographical articles of Walker.

⁴According to Sealts, *Melville's Reading*, Melville owned an autographed, marked, and annotated first edition of 1614 (Sealts no. 457). The book was described to Sealts by its owner Carl Haverlin, and subsequently lost in a fire that destroyed Haverlin's library on 4 January 1954. Leyda believes that it was in fact the second edition of 1620 that Melville possessed, not the first (285). Here I follow Sealts in using the 1614 edition.

⁵Conventional citation of the passage is Sen. *Dial.* 9.10.1–4, of which the best recent Latin edition is Reynolds 1977. In quoting Lodge, I have regularized his u's and v's.

⁶Melville's copy of L'Estrange was the fifteenth edition of 1746 (Sealts no. 458). It is now in the New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Gansevoort-Lansing Box 336. Melville gave the book to his brother as a birthday present on 26 January 1854, with the inscription: "My Dear Tom, This is a round-of-beef where all hands may cut & come again." See Parker 193 on the gift.

⁷L'Estrange claims in his note to the reader that he has "reduced all his [sc. Seneca's] *scattered Ethics* to their *proper Heads*" (unpaginated). He in fact appropriates the basis for his principal divisions from five major works of Seneca: "Of Benefits" = *De Beneficiis*, "Of a Happy Life" = *De Vita Beata*, "Of Anger" = *De Ira*, "Of Clemency" = *De Clementia*, and "Epistles" = *Epistulae Morales*. (See the index of L'Estrange.) The remainder of Seneca's works, among them *De Tranquillitate Animi*, are disassembled and spliced into the five headings.

⁸For the identification of Providence with Nature, God, and Fate(s) in Stoic philosophy, see Furley 448–51 and Algra. For a strong statement of this identification in Seneca's own writings (available to Melville in Lodge's edition), see *Natural Questions* 2.45 (tr. Hine): "They recognize the same Jupiter [sc. god] as we do . . . Do you want to call him fate? You will not be mistaken . . . Do you want to call him providence? You will be right . . . Do you want to call him nature? You will not be wrong."

⁹Both L'Estrange and Lodge customarily capitalize these words in order to show that they are technical for Stoic philosophy (thus "Fates" and not "fates"). This practice may have suggested the capitalization of "Providence" and "Fates" to Melville.

¹⁰The synonymy of the terms trades on the fact that everything is conditioned by providence, with fortune, as an individual's particular lot, no exception. Melville would have known the potential equivalence of Providence and Fortune from his readings: in Seneca's "On Providence," for example, "fortune" (*fortuna*) repeatedly stands in for "providence" or "fate," especially but not only where an event is good or bad for someone (i.e. either "good fortune" or "misfortune").

¹¹See Melville 335. It is the second of two appearances in *Moby-Dick*; the other is in "Loomings" (see above). The references to Locke and Kant in chapter 73 ("Stubb and Flask Kill a Whale") may also be germane (327).

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