



FRONTIER AS SYMPTOM: Captain Kirk, Ahab, and the American Condition

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Every Friday night at 7:00 p.m., the voice of the intrepid James T. Kirk came out of a blackness dotted with distant stars just as the bow of the ship USS *Enterprise* swung into view: "Space, the final frontier," he declared, drawing upon the fund of romanticism surrounding the American ideal. But for the bold and daring Kirk, the frontier wasn't just a new territory beyond civilization: the frontier consisted of the very reaches of outer space, vast and indeterminate. Inevitably, the ship and its crew travelled great distances at light speed in their tall ship, mapping the universe as it unfolded before them. As often, the crew was mapping regions of the human soul, as their encounters with other life forms forced a confrontation of differences. In dealing with the strange and unfamiliar, the explorers of new worlds and new civilizations were also probing the depths of the human soul. Like any good work of science-fiction, Gene Roddenberry's quintessentially American television show explores the intersection of outer space with the inner soul, a space shaped through social interaction and personal experience. Kirk's ambiguous introduction, an echo of Frederick Jackson Turner's critique, reminds Americans of psychological effects of the frontier upon their collective imagination, which penetrates this space of the unknown and imposes order upon it. As a translational buffer between civilization and wilderness, the frontier beckons to the individual, evoking the best and worst characteristics one possesses, and functioning as a test of mettle and character. Because Americans see the frontier as a challenge, it persists as a force which defines, and is defined by, the collective national character.

If one considers the space of the mind as the space which each person carries within himself or herself, then that psychic territory is comprised of all of the lessons that an individual's parents and teachers taught, all of the beliefs and knowledge passed on, and all of the expertise that the individual acquires through experience. Beginning as a blank, that inner space takes shape through living within a community, learning the basics, and eventually constructing the interior space through the primacy of language. Through this symbolic system, all of the other structures (values, morals, beliefs) become incorporated into an overall medium which facilitates participation in the social collective. Inherent in any such system of ideology are a number of boundaries which both unite the community and identify outsiders. Language's primacy lends it the power to include and exclude,

since individuals who do not know the language, or the dialect, or the commonest expressions, identify themselves as dwelling outside of that linguistic boundary. If their values differ, if their morals differ, their clothes, and so on, they remain outside of the cultural boundaries of a given social collective. Outside of those who intentionally defy convention, the people who have no direct knowledge of the boundaries represent the others, and define the line of demarcation for a cultural frontier.

This learned network of boundaries and psychic structures define our being, and instruct our involvement in the world. The socially and experientially molded mind can only see what it has learned to see. Although human signs of natural facts are largely arbitrary, human inner space relies upon them to fix stabilized points, ascertaining the regularity of the world. In moving about in that world, people cast the constructions from their inner spaces out into the world, and give symbolic definition to the world they encounter. There is a reaching out from the mind into the real world with a symbolic understanding of what it must contain, relative to what it actually does contain. At the threshold where the two realms meet, the real and the assumed, exists a rarefied space of negotiation between the outer world and our engagement with it. As the old conundrum goes, the linguistically arbitrary tree might fall in the woods, but if there is no human present, will the falling tree make a sound? In one sense, with no person to perceive the fall, there can be no ensuing sound. The human presence interprets the sound, just as a person projects a construction into the space where the tree falls. The tree will, in fact, fall regardless, and leave traces of the event behind, but the perception of it—the sound, the tremor, the spectacle—requires a human observer who will be a full participant in the event by mentally giving shape to it.

Between the outward reality of events and the inward perception of those events, there is a buffer of engagement. All of the internalized ideas, opinions, and values constitute the inner space of the individual, and meet the world in that buffer. Consequently, new events must be perceived and categorized according to already existing patterns. There are no truly new experiences, since the human psyche anticipates and partially constructs those engagements with reality. A case in point is the earliest of Americans, who shaped the New World before they had set foot on it. William Bradford, writing in his journal of his first encounter with the New World, told of how the first Puritans “fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven” [Bradford: 61], only to find themselves surrounded by “a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of beasts and wild men” [62]. It was no welcoming port, there were “no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodies; no houses or much less towns to repair to” [61]. Everything familiar was far distant, everything threatening and hostile lay just beyond the gaze. To Bradford—constructed as the Separatist, the Puritan, the European—the land posed a challenge to the faithful to succeed in their work, in God’s work.

Those challenges came not from the land itself but from the interpretation of the land based upon socially fashioned knowledge. Bradford and the others knew somewhat of the land before they arrived. The New World was not unheard of in Europe, and had by 1620 taken

considerable shape in the collective European mind. Map makers had taken the intelligence from seafarers and developed maps which purported to illustrate the world, the sea, the rarely visited lands. Some of the most thought-provoking conceptions of space come from a reading of maps from before the 17th century, which create fictions of definitive structures in a world governed by order, law, and divine guidance. Maps of the Atlantic Ocean project a confident knowledge of the space of the earth and its water, even when those spaces are left blank. "A map, while purportedly representing a pre-formed reality, has the effect also of *constituting* that reality, especially in places that are not encountered during the everyday lives of the map's viewers" [Steinberg: 35]. Hand in glove with such spatial constructions go the authoritative catalogs of knowledge. A volume like the *Aquatilium Animantium Icones* (1560) assumes an authority through its seeming thoroughness in exploring the subject of the ocean's denizens. It lists a variety of fish, fowl, and other creatures which make their homes in the ocean. It also fabricates a number of sea monsters which combine features of land animals with scales, tails, fins, and horns. Dwelling within the imagined spaces of the blank, some of these creatures look very human, some of them are huge as whales, all are frightful. This community of investigators, such as they were, assumed that such creatures **MUST** have existed, and so projected them as fact. In a real sense, these creatures did exist, becoming ingrained in the collaborative imagination through their symbolic representation.

Maps and catalogs did, in subsequent centuries, assume a higher degree of comparative realism, as the community of inquiry updated its body of knowledge. Yet the well-educated and well-read Puritans arrived in the space of the unknown with an almost absolute knowledge of what they would find in the Bay Colony: their education, their religious convictions, and their participation in the collective imagination of Europe informed their expectations. They were, from their perspective, leaving civilization to enter upon a hostile frontier with no roads, buildings, or agriculture, but with beastly animals and savage Indians. Such territory was theirs to invade and conquer, and they accepted their mission with religious zeal. And yet there were other ways to read and construct the New World. Compare Bradford's perspective of the howling wilderness with that of the aboriginal dwellers, for whom the New World was centuries old. The tribes who had dwelt and flourished on the shores of Massachusetts experienced a presence of plenty. The land where they planted corn, caught fish, grew tobacco, hunted game, and raised children assumed very different values resulting from a divergent cultural perspective. Experience, tradition, and custom had established for the tribal peoples very different boundaries which defined the tribes' spaces of sociability and movement. Corn and tobacco were, with some variety, gifts from the corn woman; the land and the seas contained all varieties of spiritual beings who had their own "medicine" and warranted respect; outsiders were recognized by their differences in language and costume. Spatially, the native peoples constructed their world very differently from the Christian newcomers, even if they, like the Puritans, also actively shaped the space of their domains. All humans do; it is unavoidable. "To be alive intrinsically and inescapably involves participation in the social production of space, shaping and being shaped by a constantly evolving spatiality" [Soja: 177].

Places take on their own significance for different groups, but the site which has become a part of the national myth is the frontier. Because the frontier is more of an unfixed idea, it resists being co-opted, remaining a locus with a nebulous identity. The western frontier, for example, at one point in American history lay at the extreme edge of Ohio, before time and expansion moved the marker further west. That unfixed space has, according to Frederick Jackson Turner, shaped the idea of the American more than any other, comparable space, exactly because it is indeterminate, and therefore functions more symbolically than topographically. When the nation had no fixed borders or boundaries, and the western part of the continent remained unmapped by western settlers, there was a regular movement away from civilization and toward the unknown. This fluctuating, unfixed frontier suggested unlimited potential, unexplored possibilities, and freedom from restrictions. Psychologically, the western frontier was America's great unknown, and also one source of its hope, inspiration, and greatness.

Turner's frontier, as a space of psychological negotiation, is not precisely where humanity conquers nature, but where both forces come to terms through compromise. Initially, however, the vast force of nature proves more formidable than the settlers who enter into the new space with all the trappings of their previous lives. "The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin" [Turner: 61]. The layers of knowledge and cultivation must be peeled away in the name of endurance and survival, replaced by a new knowledge arising from adaptation to new demands. But each wreaks an effect, and once the new experience and the new settler have come to terms, both are notably altered. "Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of Germanic germs, any more than the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American" [61]. From Turner's perspective, the very fact of endurance and survival makes the American, proving the righteousness, strength, and sagacity of the survivor. But more basically, the American was willing to strike into that unsettled space which divided civilization from the savage wilderness, risking his or her fate by crossing into that unknown—making a home where no one had gone before. The pioneers that Turner idealizes were, by their ambitious sense of adventure, establishing a pattern which had become a definitive "symptom" of the American.

The term "symptom," although one common to psychology, applies appropriately because the frontier does function as Freud defined it: as a sign of a persistent condition. More slippery, and more provocative, is Lacan's shifting definition of the *sinthome*, which constituted sometimes a metaphor, sometimes a unit of dysfunction, and sometimes a fact which should be treated skeptically. All of these elements have their moment in the conception of the American frontier as a psychic space. Turner's insight was to make this very connection between the unknown and the American identity, observing that the ambiguity of the western frontier shaped the American identity. It meant not just an area of unsettled territory where

homesteaders could begin a new life, where various indigenous tribes still roamed, and where untold natural resources lay in wait for the entrepreneur. This frontier produced an effect along the civilized east coast as well, suggesting the unlimited potential of the American nation, its untapped riches, its unexplored reaches, its prospects. America was a work in progress, and the frontier constituted the nation's id. Adopting the frontier as a part of the nation's being meant allowing it to shape the general outlook upon the world. What makes the frontier a particularly American concept is not the space itself, but how that space calls to Americans, draws them toward exploration of the boundary, and commits them to passing beyond it. If nothing is determinate, all possibilities are open, and destiny awaits. The frontier is a symptom of America because it invokes a repeatable response to embrace and shape that destiny.

The frontier has always been a proving ground for Americans, and as such it had to assume different shapes. It served the national consciousness, but not all Americans could venture that far from home. Local frontiers had to take the place of the distant one. Horace Greeley could encourage Americans to broach the great frontier by telling them to go west, but there were other challenges to be overcome within one's village, one's home, and even one's heart. Legacies and traditions from the American past remained deeply rooted in that national consciousness as well, and were likewise worthy of exploration. The best writers of the period undertook this work by examining the constitution of the American soul and its predilections. Perhaps the best literary exploration of the American heart was written by Herman Melville, who considered the darker implications of the American spirit, particularly in his novel *Moby Dick*. The protagonist Ishmael undertakes for himself the study of the American heart, observing and questioning its foundation and its resources. On land, he is fed up with the rigorously defined life, and so turns to the sea to vent his spleen upon the firmament which bears no constructions. The ocean, for him, is a frontier ripe for conquest, a fascinating space which beckons to him as it calls to the beach-goers flocking to the seashore.

But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land; loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice. No. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand—miles of them—leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues—north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. To me, does the magnetic virtue of the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them thither? [Melville: 13]

Ishmael knows it is not the magnetic virtue of the compass, but the magnetic draw of the vast ocean itself, that frontier to the east beckoning incomprehensibly, which attracts his landlubber compatriots. The great ocean, for the land-bound, becomes the dark, the mysterious, the sublime. It is a realm pregnant with symbolic possibilities because it has a vast richness that remains unknown and (from the shore) unknowable. In running up to that boundary between land and sea, the sea goers immerse themselves in the experience of the mystic and the sublime, part awe and part terror, which both attracts and repels. Looking toward the ocean, the sea goers turn

their backs to the civilized, constructed spaces of the farm, the village, the home, wherein are contained their families, their friends, their congregations, and all of the other social groups which collectively have given the land its meanings. While that constructed space lies at their backs, what lies spread before them is a space which can suffer few solid constructions, and remains largely unfathomable. The land is solid, the ocean shifting; the land constructed, the ocean indeterminate. Americans rush to this boundary between land and sea, between the established and the foreign, and contemplate the "magic in it" [Melville: 13].

Despite Ishmael's contempt, he also, like his land-bound fellows, establishes boundaries and constructs social spaces from the material of his internalized values. If we all must construct our spaces, Ishmael too is governed by the morals, laws, and beliefs he was raised with. Outside of those constructed spaces lies the frontier, where alternatives of thought and action exist. For Ishmael, who has yet to ship out, the realm of the frontier meets him head-on in the guise of the tattooed islander Queequeg, "a native of Kokovoko," a place which "is not down in any map; true places never are" [49]. Practically hidden from western view, such an island represents an exceptional frontier. It is perhaps because of this reason that Ishmael, "born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" [65], feels compelled to penetrate and master the frontier that Queequeg represents. The good Presbyterian wants to be tolerant and understanding of his bunk mate's otherness, but finally he cannot muster the tolerance when he finds the man violating what he deems basic decency. Religion is a matter of faith, and often has no province in rational thought; Ishmael seems to acknowledge this idea. But he also is rooted in his western heritage, and asserts that any religious practice, taken too far beyond the norms of western civilization, becomes a form of madness. "I have no objection to any person's religion, be it what it may," he claims, until such practices make a man "really frantic" [91]. When that happens, the good, pragmatic American in him is obliged to step in.

'Queequeg,' said I, 'get into bed now, and lie and listen to me.' I then went on, beginning with the rise and progress of the primitive religions, and coming down to the various religions of the present time, during which time I labored to show Queequeg that all these Lents, Ramadans, and prolonged ham-squatting in cold, cheerless rooms were stark nonsense; bad for the health; useless for the soul; opposed, in short, to the obvious laws of Hygiene and common sense. [91-2]

Because this islander has violated Ishmael's sense of propriety, he has placed himself outside of the normalized, constructed space of western civilization. And in his view, Queequeg views Ishmael with "a sort of condescending concern and compassion, as though he thought it a great pity that such a sensible young man should be so hopelessly lost" [92]. Each man has constructed a view of the universe based on one's knowledge and upbringing, and each man remains loyal to it, but it is Ishmael, the American, who feels compelled to try to correct Queequeg's view. Within the confines of their hotel room, the men struggle to construct that value-laden space according to their own cultural imperatives.

Once on the ship, however, the sailors form a new collective which forges a very different perspective, one which values seamanship more than cultural proprieties. Many of the social constructions of the individual must be reshaped in order to accommodate the new conditions on the shifting space of the ocean. The “magic” which drew people to the ocean dissipates as they develop a pragmatic relationship with the sea. Sailors like Ishmael must experience the ocean as a semiotic space, one which supports constructions necessarily imposed upon it for the sake of navigation, steering, and survival, “a space that, like land, shapes and is shaped by social and physical processes” [Steinberg: 10]. The variety of expressions the ocean bears are “read” by seamen as a kind of language made of signs, with their own currency and depth, much like the signs of any system of communication. Waves have varying consistencies, skies predict future weather, currents indicate patterns and directions, stars assist in placement. The ocean is a fluid and unfixed space, and like the landed frontier, enforces its own rules. The job of the mariner is to learn to read the ocean’s signs and act within the confines of its rule-governed boundary. This interlocutor speaks to its adherents through revelations, and communes with those who make the best effort at comprehension of the often incomprehensible.

From these interactions between learning human and demanding nature comes a different, tersely crafted form of language, the sharing of which promises the hope of survival to the entire ship-bound community. Ishmael, as a novice to this way of life, would have had to endure a linguistic indoctrination comparable to Jack Cremer, seaman and storyteller. “Other seamen”, Cremer explained, “began to learn me to call names, which was the first Rhudiment of that university, the first big step into the world of the deep-sea sailor” [Rediker: 162]. The space aboard ship was a world unto itself, a hybrid of the territorial and the uniquely marine, constructed through language.

But this terse, accurate, and technical language also expressed a set of social relations...And maritime speech had to be mastered before a man could become a fully accepted member of the fraternity of deep-sea sailors. The language of the sea provided a broad basis for community, linking the top and the bottom of the ship’s hierarchy [164].

Values, morals, assumptions, beliefs, superstitions, and perspectives contained neatly within the language provided a culture not only for functionality but for a social order and structure comparable to home. “A late-seventeenth-century seafarer observed that a ship is not improperly called a wooden world” [155], wherein the space of the home territory reproduces itself in small.

This ship is the only place where the ideological truck from home can matter. On board, among the crew and passengers, the habitable ration of space takes on a collective significance. Yet because all systems of knowledge are collectively formed, they remain subjective and prone to whim. Ishmael admits that any system of absolute laws, founded upon rational fact and common sense, amounts to a guess, the subject of Melville’s chapter on cetology. His encyclopaedic accumulation of information would seem to be solidly rooted by “the best and latest authorities” [Melville: 117],

and yet what this chapter accomplishes is the questioning of that very authority which pretends to know. Those authorities, “the great Cuvier, and John Hunter, and Lesson, those lights of zoology and anatomy” [117], write many books, but what Ishmael makes clear is that these books contain few facts. Not having factual knowledge does not prevent them from producing texts. Rather, it would almost seem a prerequisite. “Of the names in this list of whale authors, only those following Owen ever saw living whales; and but one of them was a real professional harpooneer and whaleman” [117]. Their lack of expertise does not prevent their assuming the mantle of authority. With this precedent, Ishmael himself proposes to set out a brief study of the subject himself, admitting lapses in his knowledge by saying, “I am the architect, not the builder” [118]. While he feels competent to metaphorize the subject of whales, he will not construct, or build, a body of knowledge that has no foundation. And he accomplishes this feat by making of the whales different sizes of books, the folio, the octavo, and the duodecimo. Whales, like books, have differing sizes, and more importantly they carry signs which can be read and interpreted for meaning. While the authorities produce books devoid of whales, Ishmael’s study produces whales full of books. Ishmael’s project is at once prescient and absurd, at least as absurd as writing a book about which one knows nothing.

At once American and a critic of American tendencies, Ishmael tangles with the apparent tensions between authority and obeisance, between knowing in advance and learning through experience. Clearly, an individual needs to hold dearly onto certain assumptions to live, and yet no person can know everything about the world. This ocean-going philosopher accordingly pokes fun at those who would describe the whale without having seen it, as he criticizes human systems of organization, and as he ridicules the entire human understanding of the largest creature on earth. Ishmael at least knows that he does not know the whale in its entirety, and accepts it as an unknown, a product of the sublime deep. “Though neither knows where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints; yet with me, as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist. Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright” [169]. The white whale for Ishmael remains a blank, a white absence upon which he will not foist any definite construction. The whale, then, becomes a metonymy of the frontier, the meeting place between the external space of reality and the internal space trying to colonize that reality.

The one construction Ishmael will not mock is Ahab’s. The Puritan captain’s imperative is formed of undebatable stuff, dark emotions borne of his experience in contact with the whale. In his heart he holds the fury of the Puritan who has been wronged and will exact his vengeance. Driven by his own rage, he foists upon the white whale all of the passion in his heart, focused and purified, transforming this one example of whalehood into the embodiment of malign divinity. Rushing headlong toward that divinity, Ahab serves the ends of his ideological framework by seeking to conquer and triumph over it. Losing the specific in the general, he is willing to put all of his tools and weapons into the service of this white beast’s destruction. Blinded by his own desire, he cannot see a white whale as a whale, open to alternate interpretations. It becomes for him a metaphor containing all of the

dark and malicious things, as well as all of the light and creative things, that his mind can imagine and support.

This construction of the whale becomes necessarily the construction which the entire crew must share. As one community, they readily adopt the vision of their charismatic leader. The only person who manages a critical distance is Ishmael, the one who does not entirely buy into such constructions, and also the one survivor of the wreck. The men who followed the leader blindly did so to their collective doom. Ahab's constructions, built upon the back of the white whale, find no support, and collapse under the inflexibility of the captain's vision. He, as the monomaniacal, narrow-minded, and self-assured figure, loses everything because he cannot see. Unlike the more enlightened Captain Kirk, who adheres to the non-interference rule of the Prime Directive, Ahab cannot express tolerance of difference, and he cannot allow his own world view to adapt to new circumstances. Inflexible, he is firm in his resolve, and brooks no doubt in the course he insists upon staying. That course will lead him into the frontier, where he will only find himself and the world he has dragged along with him. Because he cannot learn to accommodate the difference that the white whale represents and because he cannot negotiate a compromise in their shared space, Ahab perishes, taking along with him the wooden world which produced him. The one person who remains flexible and adaptable to the conditions which surround him, the one who critiques blind obeisance to a self-righteous leader, alone survives and endures.

Ishmael's servitude under Ahab, and their different approaches to the frontier, remains the curious fate of America. Led by its own charismatic leaders, America, too, chases its passions toward new frontiers, which in turn define the character of the nation. When frontiers disappear, Americans invent new ones. These new frontiers, acting as simulacra of the seminal western frontier, often lack the psychological relevance, the validity, and the genuine challenge represented by the archetypal frontier of yore. Among the new frontiers, the connection between external reality and internal construction has become a deception. Such false constructions do not need to relate to reality, so long as symbolic constructions are foisted upon them. A challenge remains a challenge, so long as enough people believe in it. Cyberspace, for example, was once an American frontier which drew the individual away from real space and into an internal space of the mind. Now heavily colonized, cyberspace has the landmarks and navigational tools for the explorer, but in its infancy the advent of the internet did present a genuine, blank, uncharted space which could support any human constructions that an imagination could create. With this frontier likewise declared closed, cyberspace has become as cluttered and overdefined a simulacrum as any gated community. America continually renews its need for a new frontier to conquer and a new challenge to overcome. Without such a symbolic space into which Americans project their values and desires, America has no clear sense of destiny. It must, as a nation, take its definition from the frontier, the space in which the moral and cultural meet the material and physical. There, the drama repeats itself yet again.

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