

WATER, FIRE, AND STONE: IMAGES AND MEANING IN MELVILLE

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This thesis is a study of Herman Melville's symbolism. I have chosen to investigate the elemental images of water, fire, and stone in *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre; Or, The Ambiguities* (1852), and *Clarel; A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876). This work is a semiotic study, insofar as the association between image and meaning is personally assigned and therefore to a degree inscrutable. This work is a structuralist investigation insofar as structuralism is interested in images that are repeated in separate works by one author, and how these repeated images and their possible meanings cohere. Also related to my structuralist inquiry is how meaning is conveyed. I argue that Melville uses symbols in different ways: meaning is unfixed, his symbols are complex, they overlap, and he sometimes inverts or subverts the meanings of traditional symbols—and also, that Melville's symbolism is derived, or modeled, consciously or unconsciously, on his skeptical and unfixed spiritual state.

Water, Fire, and Stone: Images and Meaning in Melville

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Brian D. Martin, Author

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: The many meanings of water.....	13
Chapter Two: The ambiguities of stone.....	33
Chapter Three: “That plunged wake”: Overlapping images.....	46
Conclusion: To emerge from the sea.....	61
Works Cited.....	71

It may be easy to prove that the ascent of Apollo in his chariot signifies nothing but the rising of the sun. But what does the sunrise itself signify to us?

—John Ruskin. “Athena Chalinitis,” 1869.

Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven. So in dreams, have I seen majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell. But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels.

—Herman Melville. *Moby-Dick*, “The Tail.”

“What impression have I made upon your fancy?”

—Edgar Allan Poe. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, 1841.



Water, Fire, and Stone: Images and Meaning in Melville

This ordered universe, which is the same for all, was not created by any one of the gods or of mankind, but it was ever and is and shall be ever-living Fire, kindled in measure and quenched in measure.

—Hêracleitus of Ephesus, c. 500 BC

## Introduction

In “The Candles” chapter of Herman Melville’s novel *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab delivers a monologue—a rebellious prayer—to the pale phosphorescent fire that quietly clings to the ship due to an electrical storm. The crew gathers on deck to witness the phenomenon: “While this pallidness was burning aloft, few words were heard from the enchanted crew; who in one thick cluster stood on the forecastle, all their eyes gleaming in that pale phosphorescence” (*MD* 381). This scene sets the stage for Ahab’s speech. He declares to the fire, “I now know that thy right worship is defiance....Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee” (*MD* 382). The two words Ahab uses in his monologue: “defiance” and “fire” are principal to my investigation of Melville’s symbology. My understanding of the symbol begins with readings in F. O. Matthiessen: “symbolism is esemplastic, since it shapes new wholes....*Moby-Dick* is, in its main sweep, an example of the reconciliation of the general with the concrete, of the fusion of idea and image” (249-50). Matthiessen reminds us of Emerson’s idea that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (qtd. 242). However, some of Melville’s symbols resemble something like compound substances: “Melville’s most effective symbols expand thus from indicated analogies into the closely wrought experience of whole chapters” (Matthiessen 290).

I hope to bring to the field of Melville studies an analysis of Melville's symbology, specifically images of water, fire, and stone. In a way, I am performing a semiotic study of these elemental symbols, as the association between representation and meaning is personally assigned, and therefore to a degree inscrutable (why does Melville make the whale's tail suggest an image of Satan to Ishmael?) and unfixed—although not unlimited or without parameters. In another way, I am performing a structuralist investigation, insofar as structuralism is interested in images that are repeated in separate works by one author, and how these repeated images cohere. I am interested in *how* meaning is conveyed by Melville's literary images, as well as in *what* meaning is conveyed. I argue that Melville uses symbols in different ways: meaning is unfixed, his symbols are complex, they overlap, and he sometimes inverts or subverts the meanings of traditional symbols—and also, that Melville's symbolism is derived, or modeled, consciously or unconsciously, on his skeptical and unfixed spiritual state.

Although focusing on religious themes (in English departments) is not as popular now as it was in the 1940s and 50s, I am interested, nonetheless, in Melville's skepticism and defiance of Christianity—which turns out to be skepticism of religious and philosophical affirmations in general. This is the sympathetic viewpoint I will be looking at Melville's sometimes inverted romantic symbology in which he turns “Christian symbols against their received meanings” (Herbert 10, n. 9).

Melville's skepticism of, and anger towards, Christianity has been well established. One important book on this subject is *Melville's Quarrel With God* (1952) by Lawrance Thompson. Thompson discusses Melville's strategy of hiding his

skepticism of and anger<sup>1</sup> towards Christianity—although Thompson believes that Melville is in a much more extreme position than skepticism. Thompson asserts that Melville hates God and sees him as depraved (Thompson 5-6). Thompson has been criticized for taking his argument too far. Herbert says, “My researches indicate that Melville was not nearly so self-possessed in his dealing with religious matters as Thompson implies, and that his struggle included a sincere yearning to achieve a positive faith” (Herbert 74, n. 5). Robert Frost wrote to Thompson: “I must confess you do take away from Melville’s stature a little in making him bother to believe in a God he hates” (qtd. in Ingebretsen 275).

What seems to be missing from the discussion about Melville and God is the possibility—what could very well be the reality of the situation—that Melville was angry at the *idea* of God, the very real popular notion of God that is discussed and evangelized and prayed to. Being angry about an idea that one perceives as harmful is reasonable.

A passage from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s journal, which may be one of the most-cited passages in Melville scholarship, might give us a better idea about Melville’s feelings and views on religion. Hawthorne made this observation in his journal when Melville was visiting him at his relatively new home in England, in 1856:

Melville as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated” . . .but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation . . .He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief. (Hawthorne 433)

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<sup>1</sup> I think it is important to include both terms, since anger does not necessarily accompany skepticism. Skepticism can be dispassionate.

Hawthorne's passage suggests that both sides of the religious question mattered a great deal to Melville. One does not have a crisis about something one does not care about. Herbert's analysis agrees with Hawthorne's observation, and both serve as a correction to Thompson's argument.

In 1852 Melville published *Pierre; Or, the Ambiguities*, which sold even more poorly than his novel of the white whale, and was criticized harshly. After *Pierre*, Melville turned to short fiction, but he was soon exhausted and despondent. His family was worried about his health, so they encouraged him to go on an extended vacation. He left in 1856 to go to Jerusalem, and it was on his way that he stopped in England to visit Hawthorne, who had moved there three years earlier.

Melville's spiritual state is often referred to as the well-known "Crisis of Belief" that swept across Western civilization after the Enlightenment and the work of naturalists like Charles Darwin who practiced the scientific method. William Braswell informs us in the beginning of his book *Melville's Religious Thought* (1943) that Melville was obsessed with religious questions for the latter half of his life (3). Andrew Delbanco describes Melville as someone who "was driven by a burning need to get at the *why* of things" (211). Both scholars characterize Melville significantly more positively than Thompson, who saw *Clarel* as further "illumination of Melville's morbid preoccupation with sombre theological concepts" (335). Melville was compelled by the question of religion and beliefs due to his sense of betrayal by God—although Thompson seems to think Melville has little reason to feel this way when he says Melville "thought that he had somehow been betrayed and forsaken by

God and man” (338). Walter Herbert discusses the financial ruin and death of Melville’s father, Allan Melvill, when Herman was twelve.

Allan’s fall and its consequences posed enigmas that could not be resolved within the system of religious thought that was available to his son. As the paradoxical elements in Herman’s religious education ceased to make sense in a coherent totality, he found himself incapable of seeing moral experience intelligibly in theocentric terms. This disaster provided the impetus and the themes for an endless round of agonized meditations in Melville’s adult life. (45)

Herbert points out that Allan held an optimistic faith but failed tragically, and young Herman Melville witnessed it all (54).

In addition to the influence of his father’s Calvinism, Melville was born during the Second Great Awakening, which was the Protestant effort to build a Christian nation. There was a region of western New York so heavily evangelized that it was known as “the burnt district” (Finney 78). Lyman Beecher (1775-1863) was a prominent Presbyterian clergyman in this wave of evangelism; he is also the father of the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher, and his older sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Biblical archeologist Edward Robinson (1794-1863) describes his upbringing that so influenced his life:

As in the case of most of my countrymen, especially in New England, the scenes of the Bible had made a deep impression upon my mind from the earliest childhood....Indeed, in no country of the world, perhaps, is such a feeling more widely diffused than in New England; in no country are Scriptures better known, or more highly prized. From his earliest years the child is there accustomed not only to read the Bible for himself; but he also reads or listens to it in the morning and evening devotions of the family, in the daily village-school, in the Sunday-school and Bible-class, and in the weekly ministrations of the sanctuary. Hence, as he grows up, the names of Sinai, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Promised Land, become associated with his earliest recollections and holiest feelings. (Obenzinger 42)

It is important to understand the dedication Christians had for their religion, and in return the powerful influence it had over their lives and imaginations.

Perusing various discussions on the genre of Melville's works, one might be tempted to believe that genre is in the eye of the beholder. To use *Pierre* as an example, a reviewer in Melville's day described the novel as "some of the ancient and most repulsive inventions of the George Walker and Anne Radcliffe sort" (Parker 54). Hershel Parker affirms Melville's familiarity with gothic, melodramatic romances, and lists books Melville read by Radcliffe, Walker, Horace Walpole, Matthew Gregory Lewis, and Sir Walter Scott (Parker 54-5). Leon Chai describes *Pierre* as a hybrid Romantic-Victorian Bildungsroman: "the Bildungsroman was about the process by which an individual came to be what he or she was" (Chai 72). "Victorian literature was equally fond of the Bildungsroman. Unlike the Romantics, however, it didn't subscribe to the belief that development invariably turned out well" (Chai 72-3). Many critics mention the satirization of contemporaneous sentimental literature. Discussions of genre slip into how one chooses to read the work, such as "looking at *Pierre* through a psychological lens." One could also approach *Pierre* biographically.

I see *Moby-Dick* as an inverted Romantic novel, although many have seen it as an epic poem. The long poem, *Clarel*, many critics are reluctant to call poetry. Elizabeth Renker describes Melville as a realist poet "In an era in which poetry was often based in idealist, romantic illusions" (482). Renker describes Melville's approach to the literary marketplace in general as "antagonistic"—"a brilliantly embattled engagement

with genre” (482). Whatever was in vogue at the time, Melville had to do something different.

Melville did not really stand a chance of appealing to readers in nineteenth-century America. The first two best-selling authors in the United States were Christians: Harriet Beecher Stowe and Susan Warner. Warner’s book, *The Wide, Wide World*, was published in 1850, a year before *Moby-Dick*, and went through fourteen editions in two years (Tompkins 584). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was published a year after *Moby-Dick* and was a huge bestseller in the United States. Stowe’s book sold 300,000 copies in its first year. Her novel made more money than any other American author at the time. In 1853, sales of Stowe’s novel in Great Britain tripled sales in the U.S. (Hedrick 223, 233). Herman Melville’s novel did not get many dollar votes. From 1849 to 1850 when Melville was writing his novel about the whale, he was about \$2,000 in debt, and he was hoping his new novel would get him out. Unfortunately, he only made about \$556. *Moby-Dick* never even sold its first run of 3,000 copies. When, “in December 1853, the unsold copies burned up in the publishers warehouse, few noticed and fewer cared” (Delbanco 7).

Melville surely had a sense of the popularity of Christianity in his lifetime. When Ishmael visits the Whaleman’s Chapel he comments on Father Mapple’s ship-fashioned pulpit: “What could be more full of meaning?—for the pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part...the pulpit leads the world” (47). In his short story “John Marr,” published in 1888, Melville has John Marr characterize the community he lives among as: “a staid people; staid through habituation to monotonous hardship; ascetics by necessity not less than through moral bias; *nearly all of them* sincerely, however



narrowly, *religious*” (Italics mine. *Tales* 394). Melville was writing against popular discourse and belief, which is a difficult thing to do. Evidence that readers found the irreverence in Melville’s novels offensive can be seen in reviews by Melville’s contemporaries. Sacrilegiousness had been recognized in *Mardi*. A reviewer in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, July 1849, admonished Melville: “Mr. Melville seems to lack the absolute faith that God had a purpose in creating the world. He seems to think that the race is in a vicious circle, from which we cannot escape...We believe in God, and therefore we cannot accept the doctrine that this world can be a failure” (qtd. in Parker 634). In a letter of December 29, 1851, Melville’s mother wrote that he was “‘very angry’ after hearing complaints in Pittsfield that *Moby-Dick* ‘is more than Blasphemous’” (qtd. in Sealts 78). Evert Duyckinck, Melville’s publisher, wrote this in *The Literary World*, November 22, 1851: “This piratical running down of creeds and opinions...is out of place and uncomfortable. We do not like to see what, under my view, must be to the world the most sacred associations of life violated and defaced....Nor is it fair to inveigh against the terrors of priestcraft” (Leyda 437).

One of the premises in Lawrence Thompson’s thesis is that Melville felt he had to hide the skepticism and defiance in his works: “I had become more interested in the possibility that Melville had consciously worked out stylistic and structural devices which might serve as deceptive sheeptraps and mousetraps, particularly for readers who might otherwise become vituperative heresy hunters” (11). Thompson also wonders if “Melville’s stylistic ‘wile and guile’ had been even more successful than he had intended them to be?” (10-11). But, since Melville complains of feeling the need

to hide his true beliefs and feelings in his fiction, Thompson has ferreted out what was already given. In a letter of December 14, 1849, Melville writes: “What a madness & anguish it is, that an author can never—under no conceivable circumstances—be at all frank with his readers” (*Corr.* 149). Later, in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850), an accolade to his friend, Melville points out a practice that Shakespeare, Hawthorne, and himself have in common: “Through the mouths of the dark characters...he craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them” (*Tales* 52).

Melville, consciously or instinctively, chose to make his assertions and inversions via images of natural elements because these elements and images were already loaded with religious meaning. For example, a significant proponent of the Christian practice of seeing the benevolent hand of God in nature was English Christian apologist William Paley. He expressed this argument in his work *Natural Theology* (1802), which “was to be one of the most popular works of philosophical theology in the English language” (Brooke 192). Paley’s view led him to declare that “it is a happy world, after all” (qtd. in Brooke 193). We can see how Paley’s assertion would appeal to Americans eager for affirmation of so many of their actions, i.e., the gamble of trying to live in a new promised land, and the fight to establish a sovereign country. For as long as Americans appeared to succeed, they could believe that God approved of their actions, and to see the excellence and benevolence of God in the very landscape of their new country must have been encouraging to them.

In her book *The Empire of the Eye* (1993), Angela Miller studies landscape imagery—in paintings mostly—and its relationship to nineteenth-century American nationalism. Miller informs us: “landscape imagery proliferated in the sentimental and popular giftbook annuals, periodicals, and prints,” and that it “embodied a romantic ideology of spiritually uplifting nature” (79). Society was versed in landscape imagery associations, both visually and in literature; people saw—wanted to see—positive religious meaning in natural phenomena.

Loren Baritz supplements Miller in his discussion of national character:

Rage was perhaps one inevitable reaction to the pietistic optimism of nineteenth century America....America had seemed actually to become the nation of the future, the natural asylum for the party of hope....an increasingly democratic people came, and saw, and conquered. Dreary old phrases about the limitation of human power or, even worse, about original sin were evidently shown to be both false and pernicious by the unprecedented march of the American people. (271)

Both of these scholars agree that America had a growing addiction to religious hopefulness. When Melville was asked his opinion of Scottish poet James Thomson’s poem “The City of Dreadful Night” (1880), he replied in a letter: “As to the pessimism, although neither pessimist nor optimist myself, nevertheless I relish it in the verse, if for nothing else than as a counterpoise to the exorbitant hopefulness, juvenile and shallow, that makes such a bluster in these days” (qtd. in Matthiessen 496).

Melville reacted to “pietistic optimism” not just with rage, but with a range of emotions. Many emotions are at play in the beginning of *Moby-Dick*. The novel begins with Ishmael’s disillusionment and melancholy, yet there is a humorous tone as well. But Ishmael’s scene of despondent departure from Manhattan is a contrast to

Baritz's characterization of a nation of hope and the "march of the American people." Ishmael is nearly out of hope, money, and close to suicide. His plan to ship on a whaler is one of desperation and last resort.

I want to set up a reference point outside of Melville's works and refer to it periodically throughout this thesis. Stone imagery is not as prevalent in *Moby-Dick* as it is in *Pierre* and *Clarel*, but it will be useful by the end of my discussion of *Moby-Dick* all the same. The example, or counterpoint, is a landscape metaphor from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Mountains are only mentioned five times in this novel, and the first instance is in chapter 15. The narrator describes Ophelia St. Clare who is about to visit Orleans with her cousin. During the description of her "mental cultivation," the narrator tells us that Ophelia has an active mind and definite theological ideas, but "underlying all, deeper than anything else...lay the strongest principle of her being—conscientiousness. Nowhere is conscience so dominant and all-absorbing as with New England women. It is the granite formation, which lies deepest, and rises out, even to the tops of the highest mountains" (197). The narrator's description elicits a panoramic view in the reader's imagination: a single granite peak that pokes up above a range of mountains. Stowe uses this granite outcropping to illustrate Ophelia's sense of right and wrong. Her conscience is solid, and although it is at the *core* of her character, Stowe chose to portray it not as something hidden, but as something highly visible, a granite peak rising up for all to see. The narrator goes on to say in the following paragraph: "She would walk straight...up to a loaded cannon's mouth, if she were only quite sure that there the path lay. Her standard of right was...high...all-

embracing.” The popular appeal of joining granite and Ophelia’s “standard of right” is understandable. Stowe’s metaphor recalls Mount Sinai and the ten commandments that were engraved on the stone tablets from the book of *Genesis*.

Stowe’s novel begins and ends with direct references to Christianity. The Union will only be saved, Stowe says in the last paragraph of her book, “by repentance, justice and mercy.” She continues to warn her readers: “not surer is the eternal law by which the millstone sinks in the ocean, than that stronger law, by which injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God!” (552). It is interesting, and maybe a little bit confusing, that these two laws converge in images of stone. Stowe’s “stronger law”—which is God’s law—is associated with granite and stone tablets. For physical law (or as Stowe says, “eternal law”), we are given the image of a millstone that sinks in the ocean. Stowe has judged God’s law stronger than physical law; she expresses this judgment in the last words of her novel. The laws that objects appear to operate by, are, according to Stowe, really operating by the will of God. This would never be a settled matter for Melville. Stowe’s approach allows her readers to emerge with a sense of her position, but Melville’s readers are not allowed this sense of clarity, and emerge from his novels and poetry confused. This kind of comment by a reviewer of *Moby-Dick* was not uncommon: “The title is a strange one, but the work is as strange as the title. All the rules which have been hitherto understood to regulate the composition of works of fiction are despised and set at naught” (Leyda 448).

## Chapter One – The many meanings of water

In the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, the narrator, describes a scene that takes place—on any Sunday, apparently—in lower Manhattan. Crowds of people stand “like silent sentinels...fixed in ocean reveries.” The nose of the island is “washed by waves, and cooled by breezes,” and these words in the second paragraph are the first explicit reference of fluidity—in this case, of water and air; in this scene they just hint at a bit of doubt. Ishmael asks the reader, “What do they here?” “Strange!” he answers, “Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land....They must get as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in” (19). These “silent sentinels,” what are they looking for? They are “striving to get a better seaward peep.” The suggestion here is that land does not provide everything necessary for their contentment and satisfaction. Something is missing, but Melville does not reveal what it is yet. He wants to arouse our curiosity.

In the first paragraph, actually, Ishmael has given us a slight hint when he says, “There is “nothing in particular to interest me on shore.” Ishmael is at the end of his rope. He is angry and melancholy: “growing grim about the mouth.” It is a “damp, drizzly November” (18) in his soul. He is near suicide, but instead of killing himself he decides to go whaling. Whatever is on shore—in Manhattan—is not enough for him to find peace. There were many churches in Manhattan, and these are included by implication in Ishmael’s statement that nothing in particular on shore interests him. Land is lacking, but water has something.

For much of the first chapter Ishmael reasons with readers and tries to provoke us. “Yes, as every one knows,” he says, “meditation and water are wedded for ever”

(19). Here is an important association for us: water and thoughtfulness. The concerned reader might pause at this point and wonder what it might be about water that would inspire meditation and thoughtfulness, if it is anything inherent in the substance of water. Ishmael, in his reasoning with us, asks us to imagine an artist. “He desires to paint you the dreamiest, shadiest, quietest, most enchanting bit of romantic landscape in all the valley...What is the chief element he employs? There stand his trees, each with a hollow trunk, as if a hermit and a crucifix were within; and there sleeps his meadow, and there sleep his cattle” (19) yet all this would be of useless affect, says Ishmael, without a stream in the painting. We should notice that we are asked to imagine something in the painting that is not represented there. There are the meadow, the trees, and the cattle. But Ishmael says the trees each have a hollow trunk, *as if a hermit and a crucifix were within*. This is a humorous and somewhat irreverent situation to ask the reader to picture: hermits crouched in hollow trees holding crucifixes, in such a pastoral setting. By associating water with meditation and a hint of irreverence, Melville is giving his reader a small sample of what more complex symbols will accomplish further on.

Ishmael then goes to Nantucket, to ship out on a whaling vessel. He interviews with Captain Peleg who is part owner of the Pequod, and is asked about his reasons for signing up on a whaling ship. Ishmael replies, “Well, sir, I want to see what whaling is. I want to see the world.” To which Captain Peleg, practical-minded, directs Ishmael: “Well then, just step forward there, and take a peep over the weather-bow, and then back to me and tell me what ye see there” (71). Ishmael takes a look and returns to Captain Peleg.

“Well, what’s the report?”  
 “Not much,” I replied—“nothing but water; considerable horizon  
 though....”

Ishmael makes no associations with the view of the water that he has just taken in. In this scene, it seems that Melville wants to convey to readers not just that representations of landscapes are empty of meaning, or that the landscape itself does not inherently suggest anything, but also to convey that it is we who bring meaning to the things we see.

The scenes in chapter one are Melville’s effort to arouse our curiosity by suggesting there is something missing on land, and that thoughtfulness is associated with water. And here, in Ishmael’s interview, Captain Peleg does not encourage anything other than the pragmatic, unimaginative observation that Ishmael expressed. These passages are artistically executed rhetorical moves that prepare us for the short but important “The Lee Shore” chapter, in which Melville makes explicit associations with land and sea: two important symbols in *Moby-Dick*.

While “The Lee Shore” chapter is a premature memorial to the character named Bulkington, what concerns us immediately are the associations Ishmael makes with land and sea. First, Ishmael says “port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that’s kind to our mortalities.” No doubt these things are what many sailors daydream of while so long at sea. But then Ishmael reminds us that port is a danger to ships in storm: “in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship’s direst jeopardy.” During a storm, if a ship gets too close to the shore it could get smashed



against the rocks. Therefore, what is usually a refuge, in stormy conditions becomes a danger. Ishmael emphasizes this point, saying the ship:

must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would make her shudder through and through. With all her might she crowds all sail off shore; in so doing, fights 'gainst the very winds that fain would blow her homeward; seeks all the lashed sea's landlessness again; for refuge's sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe! (97)

Our perception of port, and land, pivots on the contingency of the storm. Our assessment of land cannot be consistent or absolute. Port is what most sailors desire after being out at sea on a long voyage, but during a storm they have to avoid it at all costs. We should notice the sensitivity of the ship's keel if it should even graze the land during a storm: it would strain the integrity of the entire vessel. Given that danger, the mariners use every bit of sail to keep the ship away from shore.

On the other hand, the storm-tossed sea, Ishmael says, is where "all deep, earnest thinking" is done, and here we should notice that he does not say earnest thinking takes place on a peaceful sea. The subject and the setting indicate a heightened state of energy. Ishmael associates "highest truth" with the sea, and further, truth is described as "shoreless, indefinite as God" (97). If the storm-tossed sea represents life, then vigorous energy is required of us to match the furious energy of life; only in this way will we be able to go our own way and not to passively ride the currents wherever they take us. With "earnest thinking" we can achieve depth; without it we stay on the surface.

Ishmael opens "The Lee Shore" chapter by informing us that Bulkington had just returned from a four year voyage, only to embark immediately on what would be another long voyage on the Pequod, the same ship that Ishmael is on. Ishmael is

impressed: “I looked with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon the man, who in midwinter just landed from a four years’ dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term. The land seemed scorching to his feet” (96). Now that we know that land stands for the comforts of this life, we understand the significance of Bulkington’s preference to feel—not just impatient with the port—but incredibly (and abnormally) resistant to it. He does not want any of the port’s pleasures, distractions or dogmas. For some people, land and all it stands for is irresistible. For others, land is tempting, but they are able to avoid it, maybe because they value integrity and “finding their own way” more. But for Bulkington, as soon as one voyage is over, he ships out again as soon as he can. He wants to always be at sea. Ishmael asks us: “Know ye, now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?” (97). Bulkington has the intellectual energy to match the energy of the storm that is life; he has an aversion to recreational distractions; he does not want to be mentally sedentary or distracted. One touch of the shore will make the sensitive soul shudder through and through. Melville said, “I love all men who *dive*”<sup>2</sup> (*Tales* 32); Bulkington is Melville’s ideal thinker.

So far, we have seen “meditation wedded to water,” and the sea as “highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God.” One meaning is not fixed to water. In “The Mast-Head” chapter, Melville associates yet another meaning with water. Ishmael relates the experience of an “absent-minded young philosopher” (a thin disguise for Ishmael

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<sup>2</sup> In a letter from Melville to Evert Duyckinck, March 3, 1849.

himself, who later admits, “Let me make a clean breast of it here, and frankly admit that I kept but sorry guard”). When Ishmael looks at the ocean from high up top of the mast-head on the lookout for whales, he is unlikely to sight any because he is too inward-looking. We already know that the sea invites people to meditate and ponder. Melville pushes this tendency further—to a significant culmination. Ishmael is “lulled into an opium-like listlessness” and he

loses his identity, takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. (136)

The experience Ishmael describes is a merger of ordinary consciousness with a larger consciousness. The larger consciousness transcends individuality; the individual is swallowed up by the whole. A key phrase in this passage is when the sailor’s thoughts blend with the cadence of the waves. Ishmael has merged with the universal soul.

This passage is related to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s passage in *Nature*:

In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egoism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (Emerson 10)

Melville has changed the setting, from the woods to the sea, but Ishmael has an experience similar to (if not the same as) Emerson’s. They both describe a loss of self, and a connection with the universe such that they claim spiritual knowledge and

vision. David Robinson cites Thoreau's statement: "How indispensable to a correct study of nature is a perception of her true meaning— The fact will one day flower out into a truth" (16). All three of these writers were careful observers of nature, and looked to it for truths and meanings about life.<sup>3</sup> A significant detail in Emerson's passage is the safety he feels in the woods, and it is perhaps a point of difference between Melville and the Transcendentalist writers.

At the end of Ishmael's experience of the sea as universal soul (a third meaning of water), he articulates two warnings. The first is an argument for practicality; the second is an expression of fear. "Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditateness; and who offers to ship with the Phædon instead of Bowditch in his head" (135). The Parker and Hayford notes help us understand Ishmael's warning. "Phædon" refers to Socrates' argument in *Phædo* is that "the soul is immortal because the mind is independent of the physical senses" (*MD* 135, n. 6). "Bowditch" refers to Nathaniel Bowditch, the author of *New American Practical Navigator* (1802), "the standard handbook on every ship" (*MD* 135, n. 6). There is a complication if we want to consider Plato's mind-body division and Transcendentalism in relation to Ishmael's warning. Robinson describes Thoreau's discipline in observing nature, reflecting on his observations, and considering "nature...as the primary teacher of men and women" (16), especially after reading *Nature*. So Thoreau, instead of feeling divorced from his senses, depended on them to take in nature. "This meant that nature study was an inherently philosophical activity, an investigation of the order and meaning of reality. The laws that structured

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<sup>3</sup> The Transcendentalists ultimately sought a unified theory of life, a natural harmony (Robinson 16). This was not a goal Melville pursued, and so I forbear a discussion of it here, although it would be an interesting one.

the natural world, Thoreau believed, also structured human consciousness and defined human action. The inner life was therefore inextricably tied to the life of nature” (17). Thoreau’s belief in such a (potentially) strong tie between himself (each person) and nature led him to plunge into natural experiences: “such an act of complete merger required an extinction of consciousness and a life lived wholly in the body and the senses” (19).

The complication in Melville’s argument (expressed by Ishmael) is that Plato’s paradigm is divorced from the body, and Transcendentalism’s philosophy accepts the body’s senses. It is a fine point. Nevertheless, when full separation (in Plato’s case) or full unification (in Thoreau’s case) is reached—a “peak experience”—there is a loss of self and the merger with larger consciousness. Thus the danger Ishmael speaks of: “move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror...And perhaps, at midday,” says Ishmael, “in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever” (136). The loss of self, however temporary or valuable an experience, poses danger. (Melville is not—it is important to notice—asserting that such an experience cannot take place, or that it is not valuable.) Robinson notices also that “for Thoreau there is no recoil from a sensed danger of what Ishmael saw as deathlike merge with the universe. To let go, to find the crucial capacity of self-forgetfulness, to accept a place among the many other beings in the world, is the crucial spiritual step” (22).

We will see as we make our way through this thesis that it is a rare symbol of Melville’s that does not include some aspect of angst or danger. Suffering in the

world made a deep impression on Melville, and he was never able to resolve it. There is another mast-head scene in chapter 86, "The Tail." In the beginning of the chapter, Ishmael describes the sperm whale's tail in great detail. Ishmael's observation parallels Thoreau's observations of the woods. The final observation is "that in the tail the confluent measureless force of the whole whale seems concentrated to a point. Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it" (*MD* 294). Nature's capacity for destruction does not escape Melville, and he wants us to know it is there. When the whale smacks his tail on the surface of the sea, "the thunderous concussion resounds for miles. You would almost think a great gun had been discharged" (295). Yet there is beauty in the form of the tail, and also in "the sublime *breach*...this peaking of the whale's flukes is perhaps the grandest sight to be seen in all animated nature. Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven" (295). The foregoing discussion has been in preparation for the following mast-head scene: "Standing at the mast-head of my ship during a sunrise that crimsoned sky and sea, I once saw a large herd of whales in the east, all heading towards the sun, and for a moment vibrating in concert with peaked flukes. As it seemed to me at the time, such a grand embodiment of adoration of the gods was never beheld, even in Persia, the home of the fire worshippers" (295-96).

The preparation for this mast-head scene is important. The scene is as Matthiessen says, a "prolonged," or complex symbol. We have the sea being viewed from the mast-head, reminiscent of the first mast-head scene, and there is no fear this time. But we are aware of the great destructive power in the whale's tails that Ishmael has just described—yet the whole scene is of peacefulness and beauty. Has Ishmael,

here, made that “crucial spiritual step” to self-forgetfulness? Some scholars have argued that he has. I will argue that he has not. Ishmael recognized the beauty of nature, but he did not allow himself to be absorbed by it this time. The language of losing his identity is not here. Beauty is foregrounded, but annihilation and fire worshippers are in the background.

We can thus begin to see a significant relationship between Melville’s spiritual terrain and Stowe’s. Melville’s association of truth with water, destabilizes truth; it is “shoreless, indefinite.” He associates land with danger, destruction, and distraction. In a significant way, Melville has inverted the traditional “script” on truth and what it is associated with. Stowe’s script is not arbitrary, but is based on the Hebrew tradition of morality engraved in stone; that engraving an ancient literary text in its own right. Melville’s reversal, or reinvesting, of the meaning of water is likely meant to be provocative. The effects on readers of switching the symbol for truth or conscience could be confusion, anger, or simply to pause and think—and I think the last of these responses is what Melville wants: to provoke some kind of doubt, skepticism or deeper thinking about the nature of truth.

I don’t mean to suggest that Melville has created a system of absolutely stable symbols in *Moby-Dick* or any of his other works. If he had, that would make his book much more like the allegorical novel *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Ishmael says “The Lee Shore” chapter represents the stoneless grave of Bulkington—this analogy makes the novel the whole of the surrounding ocean. To phrase the analogy a bit more succinctly: the chapter is to the watery grave as the novel is to the ocean. And so the

ocean as metaphor is getting packed: it is like the novel, it is like our mind. There is a parallel, then, between looking for truth in the panorama of the sea and looking for truth in the symbols and metaphors in the panorama of the novel. Melville wrote in an effort to explore and hopefully encounter truths about life and religious or spiritual beliefs, and when we read his works we are following his efforts. Just as the sea can appear “boundless” at times, so do the explorations and thoughts in Melville’s book go beyond the boundaries of the binding and the pages, flowing into our eyes and into our minds and with us as we walk down the street.

Melville’s approach in *Moby-Dick* of searching for truth on the sea—compared to the certainty and solidity in Stowe’s novel—implies skepticism. Stowe, like the majority of Christians, looks to the Bible for truth—Melville looks to the open sea, which is (metaphorically) where we all find ourselves, vulnerable and casting about for security. To be honest with ourselves, this is where we must stay for our soul to keep its independence.

Although water and fire are different substances with different properties (water is a liquid, fire is a gas that gives off heat and light), they share fluid and wavelike characteristics of movement. The meanings associated with Melville’s fire imagery do not contradict meanings from his water imagery.

Melville gives us two prolonged images of the Pequod as a “fire-ship.” One is in “The Try-Works” chapter (Ch. 96), where a whale is butchered and its blubber rendered to oil. The other is in “The Candles” (mentioned in the introduction), where an electrical storm causes a phosphorescent fire to spread over the ship. In “The Try-



Works,” the flames from the furnaces underneath the iron pots, in the night, appear as a hellish spectacle to Ishmael, who is at the helm of the ship. Melville piles on pagan and nightmarish references to create his spectacle: the smoke from the burning whale fat has a “wild Hindoo odor”—“It smells like the left wing of the day of judgment; it is an argument for the pit” (326). There is the occasional illumination of “every lofty rope in the rigging, as with the famed Greek fire,” and the barbarity of the crew. And then there is the ship itself on the storm-tossed sea:

the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea...the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul. (327)

The “fire-ship” (327) is a representation of Ahab’s rebellious will, unapologetic and determined. This image of the ship is related to Ahab’s first appearance in the novel: “He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness” (108). Ahab is wrapped in fire, his defiant purpose; the ship, his soul, on a quest for the truth behind appearances. That is Ahab is burned without is a literary device to signify that he has been burned within. He feels his “spiritual throes” so intensely he “sleeps with clenched hands” (169). Sometimes, when Ahab sleeps, he has “intolerably vivid dreams,” they play out “in his blazing brain”:

and when, as was sometimes the case, these spiritual throes in him heaved his being up from its base, and a chasm seemed opening in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship; and

with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his state room, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire. (169)

This is one internal Ahab—the violent struggle, the flames, the invitation to madness and abandonment. Ahab, a still *more* internal Ahab, rejects the invitation. Ishmael catches a glimpse of the innermost Ahab when he bursts out of his room and onto the deck was a “tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes,” it was “but a vacated thing...a ray of living light...but without an object to color...a blankness in itself” (170). Ishmael can see the clear essence of Ahab, and the reader can see the blankness of Ahab’s soul is the same as the whiteness of the whale, which Melville means for us to see: “God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates” (170). This is not the first time we will see Ahab’s duality, Ahab as both vulture and Prometheus. This is Ahab’s spiritual struggle.

We will return to Ishmael and the burning try-pots on the ship. As we have just seen, Melville often uses the time before, during, or after sleep as a no man’s land, when reason is suspended, for revelatory experiences. While at the helm, Ishmael gets drowsy and slips into a half sleep. In “The Counterpane” (Ch. 4), Ishmael falls “into a troubled nightmare of a doze” and experiences the “silent form or phantom” that places its hand in his and stays by his side for “what seemed ages” (37). We have already looked at the thinly veiled experience in “The Mast-Head.” This time, with the try-works burning and giving the ship an inflamed aspect, Ishmael “began to yield to that unaccountable drowsiness which ever would come over me at the helm” (327). He jolts awake but is disoriented. He sees no compass or tiller, only “a jet gloom, now

and then made ghastly by flashes of redness” (327). Ishmael had turned around in his doze and nearly capsized the ship. He deduces from his experience this warning:

Look not too long in the face of the fire...Never dream with thy hand on the helm...believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp—all others but liars!” (328)

Ishmael’s voice has lost its colloquial style and has drifted into stentorian, dramatic mode, but this passage is evidence of Ishmael’s rejection of fire, his rejection of defiance. Neither he nor Starbuck can sway Ahab from his purpose—Ahab overpowers and sinks them all. Still, it is a position that Melville allows.

It is with fire that Melville expresses anger: defiance reaches a high point in fire imagery, in “The Candles” chapter. The ship encounters a typhoon which “struck her directly” (379). The sails are torn and the ship is tossed. Darkness comes, “sky and sea roared and split with the thunder, and blazed with the lightning.” Starbuck wants to drop the lightning rods to conduct the electricity to the water, but Ahab commands him not to: “let’s have fair play here, though we be the weaker side.” Starbuck notices balls of lightning on the ship’s masts and calls out “The corpusants! the corpusants!” Ishmael describes the spectacle of the ship bathed in electric flames:

All the yard-arms were tipped with a pallid fire; and touched at each tri-pointed lightning-rod-end with three tapering white flames, each of the three tall masts was silently burning in that sulphurous air, like three gigantic wax tapers before an altar....God’s burning finger has been laid on the ship...His ‘Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin’ has been woven into the shrouds and the cordage. (381)

The ship is a burning sacrifice, a burning bush, a table before an altar, and it is the wall that God wrote on in the book of Daniel.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the “burning” ship is a complex symbol with various potential meanings. The apostle Paul made the distinction between “the Lord’s table” and “the table of devils”<sup>5</sup>—or a pagan table—and Melville writes the flaming Pequod in the direction of a heathen offering to the Christian God, a trope on Cain’s well-meaning but inadequate offering in the book of Genesis: the turn is outcast Ahab’s offering is knowingly inadequate and his intent is offensive.

This is the chapter of Ahab’s soliloquy to the fire that I mentioned in the introduction. “I know thy right worship is defiance,” prays Ahab, “O thou clear spirit, of thy fire madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee” (382). Finding a common substance with God, and making himself equal with God, is one of Ahab’s many blasphemies in this novel. Ahab’s common substance is different from the young philosopher’s transcendent experience up on the mast-head. Ahab is defiant and angry, his “oneness” is in the spirit of a challenge to authority. “I own thy speechless, placeless power; said I not so?...Thou canst blind; but I can then grope. Thou canst consume; but I can then be ashes” (383). Ahab will not acknowledge defeat or give up his aggression. Starbuck is alarmed and grabs Ahab, “God, God is against thee, old man; forbear! ‘tis an ill voyage! ill begun, ill continued; let me square the yards, while we may, old man, and make a fair wind of it homewards, to go on a better voyage than this.” The crew moves to do as Starbuck has suggested, but Ahab grabs his harpoon, the one he baptized in the blood of his three pagan harpooners as he

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<sup>4</sup> In King Belshazzar’s banquet hall. Daniel 5:25-28.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:21 (KJ)

spoke (in Latin), “I do not baptize thee in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil” (Olson 53)—and “the silent harpoon burned there like a serpent’s tongue....Ahab waved it like a torch among them,” threatening them if they altered the ship’s course.

So far Melville has used images of land, sea, and fire. In the next passage we will look at, Melville introduces air into his narrative. These four elements compose the classical Greek elements of earth, water, air, and fire. Merton Sealts’s research confirms that Melville not only read the Greek philosophers, but that he had “praise of Greek philosophy, art, and poetry” (105). Sealts cites a reviewer of Melville’s lecture, “Statues in Rome” (1857), who “recognized” Melville’s “affection for heathenism,” as well as two visitors to Melville’s home at Arrowhead who recorded that Melville discoursed on Aristotle and Plato, claimed that “all our philosophy and all our art and poetry were either derived or imitated from the ancient Greeks” (the two visitors Sealts quotes from Jay Leyda’s *Log*; 105).

“The Symphony” chapter draws significantly on the ancient Greek tradition. Melville introduces a musical metaphor (a symphony often consists of four movements) for the final four chapters of the novel. The word “symphony” means to harmonize together; it seems that Melville is leading us to believe that he wants to bring a measure of harmony to the conclusion of *Moby-Dick*. Melville seems to present an extended flirtation with a harmonious ending. The first movement of a symphony is the sonata, with two instruments. The two “instruments” in “The

Symphony” chapter are the sky and the sea. Melville mythopoeically<sup>6</sup> genders the classical elements of air and water and portrays them as lovers and gods:

The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman’s look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells, as Samson’s chest in his sleep.... Aloft, like a royal czar and king, the sun seemed giving this gentle air to this bold and rolling sea; even as bride and groom. And at the girdling line of the horizon, a soft and tremulous motion—most seen here at the equator—denoted the fond, throbbing trust, the loving alarms, with which the poor bride gave her bosom away. (404)

This scene of harmony is part of Melville’s flirtation with a greater harmony the reader may predict is forthcoming. We will have to wait, however. Ahab enters the scene next; it is he who is leaning on the rail of the ship, seemingly imagining the erotic panorama and considering it. Ahab is the first fracture in this peaceful spectacle of sea and sky: “Tied up and twisted; gnarled and knotted with wrinkles; haggardly firm and unyielding; his eyes glowing like coals, that glow in the ashes of ruin; untottering Ahab stood forth in the clearness of the morn; lifting his splintered helmet of a brow to the fair girl’s forehead of heaven” (404-5). But Ahab, with his hero’s “splintered helmet of a brow”<sup>7</sup> signifying his divided mind, is a man caught between the natural pagan deities, and the deity he contemplates several paragraphs later, which is a further fracture:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper natural heart, I durst not

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<sup>6</sup> I use the word “mythopoeic” to characterize this passage because Melville personifies the air and the sea as gods, and in doing this employs a poetic style. The effect is an allusion to classical Greek thought and mythology.

<sup>7</sup> Also alluding to Homer: “Hektor of the shining helm was leader of the Trojans” (97). Ahab’s “splintered helm” also signifies his status as an anti-hero in comparison to Hektor.

so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? (406)

It is the nameless, unearthly deity—which Ahab perceives to be God—that is unnatural, that is not part of the pagan, earthly harmony that opened this chapter. God is disconnected from the earth. There is a parallel in Ahab’s reasoning of the unnatural Christian God compelling him in his admittedly unnatural quest—“against all natural lovings and longings,” Ahab says, “I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time.” Ahab’s heart would not be the first that God hardened for his own purposes in the world. When Moses was trying to free the Hebrews from Egypt, it was God who hardened the pharaoh’s heart,<sup>8</sup> and it was “an evil spirit from God” that possessed King Saul.<sup>9</sup>

The division within Ahab is taking its toll. The sky, the air, and the water, all act on Ahab as he “leaned over the side, and watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze, the more and the more that he strove to pierce the profundity” (405). The action of Ahab’s shadow merging, sinking with the sea, hints to the language in “The Mast-Head” when the young philosopher loses his identity and there is a “blending cadence of waves with thoughts” (136); “the spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space.” As the sentence ends with Ahab striving to “pierce the profundity,” the reader might think another transcendent experience is forthcoming; this time for Ahab, finally, to see behind “appearance.” Ahab’s pagan imaginings of the natural elements overwhelm him and he is moved: “That glad, happy air, that winsome sky, did at last stroke and caress him; the step-mother world, so long cruel—forbidding—now threw affectionate arms round his

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 9:12

<sup>9</sup> 1 Samuel 16:14-16

stubborn neck.” For once, for a moment, Ahab feels the goodness of the world and life: “From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop.” But this is all of Ahab that will enter the ocean: his shadow and a single tear. He either cannot or will not be absorbed into the sea and lose his identity to realize the soul that pervades man and nature. Maybe too much of the angry and defiant Ahab is still in him, too much of the Ahab that blasphemously spat into the silver calabash before the altar in Santa (87). The Christian altar drives Ahab crazy, he desecrates it, but before the altar of nature—of the sea and sky, he is moved to weep. The desecrating act is willful and deliberate, his tear into the ocean was unwilling.

The early intimations to harmony are realized not in peace but in destruction. Ahab *is* the child of fire and he is drowned in the end. Melville’s reconciliation is strangely reminiscent of Hêracleitus: “This...universe...was ever and is and shall be ever-living Fire, kindled in measure and quenched in measure....The changes of fire: first, sea; and of sea, half is earth and half fiery water-spout” (Freeman 27). Ahab vowed his defiance and breathed his fire back to the sea; cast his harpoon and was quenched.

In “The Symphony” chapter, Melville demonstrates a spectacle of the ocean and the sky, that did not include God. It may have been a shock for some readers to see the ocean and sky in such erotic pagan imagery, and this is probably what Melville intended. The images that Melville used in his works conveyed arguments on their own. People had been “trained” to associate landscapes and images with certain ideas, and Melville gave some of those landscapes and objects new associations, such as land



as inadequate and even an enticing danger, and water as the uncertain region to be explored for truth, and where independence is more important than certainty. Ahab chose the “better” death in the “howling infinite”; his soul kept “the open independence of her sea” (97), alone, but not trained; not a slave.

## Chapter Two – The ambiguities of stone

*Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852) is an angry book. Melville had intended it to be “a rural bowl of milk”<sup>10</sup> (*Tales* 45), something that the public would enjoy and would be financially successful. Melville wrote to his publisher Richard Bentley and assured him his next book would be, “very much more calculated for popularity than anything you have yet published of mine” (Delbanco 179). But his disappointment over the poor reception of *Moby-Dick* got the better of him. With his novel about Ahab and the white whale, Melville wanted “to give the world a book, which the world should hail with surprise and delight” (*Pierre* 283). But people did not like *Moby-Dick* and Melville did not understand why.

Andrew Delbanco also relies on “the reception of *Moby-Dick* and to the faltering of his literary career” (180) to explain Melville’s anger in *Pierre*. But Delbanco does mention an investigation into Melville’s marriage and family life by W. Somerset Maugham, who, “some fifty years ago...put forward a different explanation. Melville’s anger, Maugham said, arose from his ‘disappointment with the married state’” (180). But Delbanco ultimately finds this research unclear and inconclusive. His final comment on the issue: “Perhaps the only thing we can say with confidence about Melville’s married life is that when he took up sex as a literary theme in *Pierre*, he was experiencing sexual deprivation” (181). Delbanco does not mention Elizabeth Renker’s article in which she lays out a strong argument that Melville physically abused his wife, Elizabeth Shaw Melville. It is a painful article for an admirer of Melville to read. The abuse is not completely certain, but it is certain that Melville inspired an abundance of dislike towards himself from his family. As an explanation

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<sup>10</sup> From Melville’s letter of January 8, 1852, to Sophia Hawthorne.

of Melville's bitterness in *Pierre*, Renker's research ranks alongside the work that explores Melville's disappointment about his literary career.

Melville's sarcasm can be noticed even before *Pierre* begins. Unlike the sincere dedication to Nathaniel Hawthorne in *Moby-Dick*, Melville inscribes *Pierre* to "the majestic mountain, Greylock....his Imperial Purple Majesty." The narrator of the dedication describes his devotion to the mountain, "I here devoutly kneel, and render up gratitude, whether, thereto, The Most Excellent Purple Majesty of Greylock benignantly incline his hoary crown or no" (*Pierre* 2). It seems the mountain is doing double-duty as God and the United States. Melville feigns fealty whether recognition is given to him or not.

Pierre is a nineteen year-old young man who has everything going for him. Beautiful Lucy Tartan is in love with him, and he stands to be the sole heir of the Glendinning estate. His mother is the overseer since his father is deceased. Melville makes sure that religion is positioned prominently in his plot:

It had been a maxim with the father of Pierre, that all gentlemanhood was vain; all claims to it preposterous and absurd, unless the primeval gentleness and golden humanities of religion had been so thoroughly wrought into the complete texture of the character, that he who pronounced himself gentleman, could also rightfully assume the meek, but kingly style of Christian. At the age of sixteen, Pierre partook with his mother of the Holy Sacraments. (*Pierre* 6-7)

The piety of Pierre, his mother, and Lucy is unimpeachable. Pierre's future seems hopeful and his happiness virtually guaranteed. Melville complicates the plot by introducing an illegitimate sister, Isabel, for Pierre. When Pierre learns of her and that she lives in poverty, he feels the injustice in his conscience: he has been living in wealth and comfort while his sister has been suffering. One problem is that

knowledge of his father's infidelity will likely kill his mother. Pierre knows intuitively that his mother will never accept his illegitimate sibling. Pierre's realization of the downfall of his father marks the beginning of his loss of faith in God.

Pierre contrives a false marriage to bring Isabel into society. Disaster follows. His mother disowns him, so for the first time in his life he has to find a way to earn money. Lucy falls ill because of his apparent betrayal. Pierre takes Isabel to Manhattan, where they find rooms at a church. In an act of selflessness and support, Lucy joins the increasingly ostracized trio. Soon, Pierre is jailed for shooting his cousin in the thoroughfare, and when Isabel and Lucy visit him in the Tombs, Lucy dies from shock of learning that Isabel is Pierre's sister. Pierre reacts to this by taking poison, and Isabel then does likewise.

The primary image in *Pierre* is stone. In fact, "pierre" means "stone" in French. We might render Melville's title: *Stone; Or, the Ambiguities*. We could also translate it: *The Ambiguities of Stone*. Milton Stern sees *Pierre* as "a beautifully worked pattern of stone imagery" (151). Michael Berthold points out the overall structure: "There are three main locales in the book: the family manor where Pierre grows up, the Church of the Apostles, where Pierre lives in New York, and The Tombs, where he ends his days; each of these sites is a prison, each more constricting and literal than the last" (228). The family manor is the only building that is not certainly *all* of stone, but there are enough passing comments—such as Pierre's "ancestral kitchen hearthstone" (12), and, "the stone steps of the porch" (31)—to give the impression of a stone manor. With so much stone imagery in this novel, the reader has to wonder if

Melville means for his paradigm of land and sea and what they stand for to hold in this book. It seems to me that Melville does mean for his paradigm to hold, but that he has to struggle to make that happen.

A passage that is integral to my thesis is about the Memnon Stone in Book VII (iv-vi). It compares nicely, again, to Stowe's conscience as "the granite formation." After Pierre receives the message from Isabel that she is his sister, he is shocked, and begins to realize the unfortunate consequences of this new reality. They arrange to meet in secrecy, and Isabel tells Pierre what she knows of her past (Book VI: "Isabel, and the First Part of the Story of Isabel"). Pierre emerges from their meeting just as shocked and bewildered as after he read Isabel's letter: "Not immediately...could Pierre fully, or by any approximation, realize the scene which he had just departed...he now vaguely felt, that all the world, and every misconceivedly common and prosaic thing in it, was steeped a million fathoms in a mysteriousness wholly hopeless of solution" (128). The ocean is a metaphor of cosmic angst: the world being leached of hope, adrift in the universe. To deal with his feelings, "Pierre plunged deep into the woods, and paused not for several miles" (131), and he visits what he has named both "the Memnon Stone," but also "the Terror Stone." It is "huge as a barn," "wholly isolated horizontally," and "yet sweepingly overarched by beech-trees and chestnuts."

It was shaped something like a lengthened egg, but flattened more; and, at the ends, pointed more; and yet not pointed, but irregularly wedge-shaped. Somewhere near the middle of its under side, there was a lateral ridge; and an obscure point of this ridge rested on a second lengthwise-sharpened rock, slightly protruding from the ground. Beside that one obscure and minute point of contact, the whole enormous and most ponderous mass touched not another object in the wide terraqueous world. It was a breathless thing to see. One broad haunched

end hovered within an inch of the soil, all along to the point of teetering contact; but yet touched not the soil. Many feet from that—beneath one part of the opposite end, which was all seamed and half-riven—the vacancy was considerably larger, so as to make it not only possible, but convenient to admit a crawling man; yet no mortal being had ever been known to have the intrepid heart to crawl there. (132)

The whole description of this object is full of contingencies. A characteristic is described, only to be followed by a “but,” or “yet,” to detail some exception to the characteristic: the stone is “*something like an egg*” (italics mine), it is “pointed,” “yet not pointed.” The stone is compared to “Captain Kidd’s sunken hull in the gorge of the river Hudson’s Highlands,—its crown being full eight fathoms under high-foliage mark” (132). The Memnon Stone itself is not submerged in earth as its metaphorical “sunken hull” is; it rests mysteriously on another submerged rock, but the metaphor suggests that something about the Memnon Stone is hidden. The narrator supposes that, “if any of the simple people should have chanced to have beheld it, they, in their hoodwinked unappreciativeness, would not have accounted it any very marvelous sight, and therefore, would never have thought it worth their while to publish it abroad” (132). One way to understand this statement is that we do not all see things in the same way. We are given to know that Pierre has made many trips to the Memnon Stone and considers it a profound object. Whatever meanings Pierre sees in the stone are hidden from “the simple people.”

The narrator tells us how Pierre came to name the stone when he was a boy and recalls the story of Egyptian Memnon, “who, with enthusiastic rashness flinging himself on another’s account into a rightful quarrel, fought hand to hand with his overmatch, and met his boyish and most dolorous death beneath the walls of Troy. His wailing subjects built a monument in Egypt to commemorate his untimely fate”

(135). The stone foreshadows Pierre's quarrel with God and society on Isabel's account, and he too is overmatched.

There is a crawl space where “no mortal being had ever been known to have the intrepid heart to crawl,” and at this time of crisis in his life, Pierre is compelled to enter that crawl space. The stone is so improbably and precariously balanced that, “It seemed as if the dropping of one seed from the beak of the smallest flying bird would topple the immense mass over,” yet, Pierre, “slid himself straight into the horrible interspace” (134). Here Pierre prays to the “Mute Massiveness” that if “miserics,” or the burdens of Life are going to cause him to dishonor himself; or, “if invisible devils do titter at us when we most nobly strive; if Life be a cheating dream,” that the “Terror Stone” would fall on him. I think it is a short step to guess that “Mute Massiveness” could be seen as an idiom for God. The stone does not fall, and Pierre “went his moody way” (135). Why wasn't Pierre happy? Was not the stone's immobility an answer to his prayer? A simple and straightforward reasoning of this outcome means that Pierre would not dishonor himself, no matter how heavy the burden of life—and this meant that there are no invisible devils, nor is life a cheating dream. But there is ambiguity in the act of prayer. Pierre is not encouraged because he suspects or fears that God may simply be choosing to not communicate with him, or perhaps that God is unable to communicate with him. There is also the possibility that if the stone had fallen, it might not be a sign from God, but a coincidental accident. These may well be the suspicions that account for Pierre's moodiness as he walks away from the silent stone. Perhaps these suspicions are like the bird's seeds the narrator mentions, that could seemingly tip the precariously balanced stone, because a few chapters later the

narrator opens Book XIV with a relevant meditation on silence: “Silence is at once the most harmless and the most awful thing in all nature...Silence is the only Voice of our God” (204).

As far as stones represent the masculine, paternal, and the sublime, there is a connection between the stone, God, and Pierre’s father. We can see that what was for Pierre the shocking news that his father produced an illegitimate child—“my sacred father!” (65), Pierre exclaimed—contributed to the unraveling of Pierre’s belief in God. Later in the story, when Pierre has taken Isabel to the Black Swan Inn, the beginning of their flight to Manhattan, Pierre returns home to gather what things he can. He opens a chest and finds the chair-portrait of his father, “with its noiseless, ever-nameless, and ambiguous smile” (196). He burns the portrait. The qualities he saw in his father’s face correspond to the qualities in the Memnon Stone, and God.

We realize that the stone has multiple layers of meaning. As the narrator says, a passerby might glance at the stone and not pause. From another point of view, when Pierre looks at the stone, he sees an Egyptian youth who died for honor; Pierre does not want his honor damaged. When he was a boy and first saw the Memnon Stone, Pierre wanted it for his headstone when he was in the grave. The headstone is a foreshadowing of his death in the Tombs.

This is the substance and background of Melville’s “remarkable stone” in *Pierre*, and now we know that it is something, again, contrary to Stowe’s “granite formation” of conscience. The meaning of Stowe’s outcropping is stable and clear, whereas the Memnon Stone has various meanings, none of which *has* to exist, for they exist through the eyes (or in the thoughts) of Pierre. Stowe’s metaphor is supported by



tradition and people readily understand it. Contrarily, the narrator thinks that for “the simple people” the Memnon Stone “could be no Memnon Stone,” but, is “nothing but a huge stumbling-block.” And this is Melville’s novel, *Pierre*: a stumbling-block to people. Melville’s concept of stone is a refutation of Stowe’s concept, and the Christian concept of stone—“Faith’s rock...the Church, the monument, the Bible” (205). Melville’s concept reveals the false certainty of stone.

In Book XXV (iv), Pierre recounts a dream vision. Another “sunken hull,” a spectacle of a trapped stone god. When Pierre and Isabel are living at the Church of the Apostles in Manhattan, Pierre dreams of the giant Enceladus, of Greek mythology. Pierre is trying to make progress on his “great, deep book,” but he has been working on it for so long that his eyes resist even looking at paper. He slips into a “state of semi-unconscious, or rather a trance,” and “a remarkable dream or vision came to him” (342). The objects around his room, the narrator tells us, “were replaced by a baseless yet most imposing spectacle of natural scenery...It was the phantasmagoria of the Mount of Titans, a singular height standing quite detached in a wide solitude not far from the grand range of dark blue hills encircling his ancestral manor.” (I remind us here of the exact language of Stowe’s metaphor of conscience as: “the granite formation, which lies deepest, and rises out, even to the tops of the highest mountains.”) In his dream, or vision, Pierre becomes a “tourist” (343), but soon the narrator adopts the second-person point of view, so that Pierre, a tourist, and ourselves blur together, moving through Pierre’s dream. Finally, after some wandering and discourse on the surroundings:

You paused, fixed by a form defiant, a form of awfulness. You saw Enceladus the Titan, the most potent of all the giants, writhing from out the imprisoning earth;—turbaned with upborne moss he writhed, still, though armless, resisting with his whole striving trunk, the Pelion and the Ossa hurled back at him...toward that majestic mount eternally in vain assailed by him, and which, when it had stormed him off, had heaved his undoffable incubus upon him, and deridingly left him there to bay out his ineffectual howl. (345)

Melville depicts Enceladus as a truly tragic figure. Both the Memnon Stone and Enceladus lack the sarcastic, mocking tone that is so prevalent throughout the novel—which is not to say that these scenes lack melodrama. Melville has complicated his metaphor of the Terror Stone with Enceladus—“a form of awfulness” (345). In Enceladus we have nature’s sculpture of a god. However, Enceladus is a paradox; the narrator uses many contradictory terms in describing the giant. Not only a “form of awfulness,” a “wondrous shape,” “a demoniac freak of nature” (345). He is “the most potent of all the giants” and he is striving to assail “that majestic mount”: a god trying to overthrow God. Although he is the “most potent,” he is horribly armless, which the narrator later says it is “more truthful” of “Nature” to have “performed an amputation, and left the *impotent* Titan [italics mine] without one serviceable ball-and-socket above the thigh” (346). The narrator declares Enceladus has an “unabasable face,” but then we notice “his ineffectual howl,” and “the defilements of the birds, which for untold ages had cast their foulness on his vanquished crest” (345). Further, a group of “collegian pedestrians” with spades and picks dig around the form and “exposed his mutilated shoulders...uncovering his shame” (345).

Enceladus is not a metaphor for God, but for Pierre as apotheosis, akin to Bulkington’s rise above the human (“O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod!”), and as Ahab. They are all Melville’s highest examples of resisters, those who are

defiant to God. By the end of the dream the narrator admits that Pierre is “Not unworthy to be compared with that leaden Titan” (345), “this American Enceladus” (346). Pierre, too, is half-sunk, struggling, and defiant. Pierre cries out, “Enceladus!...in his sleep,” and he sees “his own duplicate face and features...gleamed upon him” (346). According to the myth of Enceladus, the giant is wounded and is buried under Etna, and its eruptions are his struggles. “Those Etna flames,” the narrator tells us, “the malicious breath of the borne-down giant” (346). Evidence of Pierre’s association with fire—and thus with Enceladus—is plentiful. This passage from Book I marks Pierre’s first association with fire: “with a graceful glow on his limbs, and soft, imaginative flames in his heart, did this Pierre glide toward maturity, thoughtless of that period of remorseless insight, when all these delicate warmths should seem frigid to him, and he should madly demand more ardent fires” (6). This passage foreshadows Pierre’s Ahab-like rage.

There is a prototype of Enceladus in *Moby-Dick*. In “The Tail,” Ishmael describes the sperm whale’s tail reaching upwards: “[o]ut of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven” (295). What this image suggests to Ishmael is perhaps not what anyone would guess: “So in dreams, have I seen majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell. But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels” (295). While on the mast-head, Ishmael must have been in the mood of Isaiah for he sees in the gesture “a grand embodiment of adoration.” In another mood he could have seen the same scene as tormented. Readers may well ask themselves

what the image of Satan with an upraised arm suggests to them? What expression on Satan's face do they see? Anger and defiance? Pleading? Ishmael's admission of interpretation based on his mood gives readers permission to let their imaginations play with the symbols that Melville presents.

Melville has troped his prototypical Satan into the stone-animated Enceladus. This is a compelling liminal figure because it parallels Hawthorne's description of Melville's spirituality of uncertainty ("He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief"). Melville's symbolism is derived, or modeled, consciously or unconsciously, on his skeptical and unfixed spiritual state.

The narrator sketches a deft psychological background of the Pierre-Ahab type:

That hour of the life of a man when first the help of humanity fails him, and he learns that in his obscurity and indigence humanity holds him a dog and no man: that hour is a hard one, but not the hardest. There is still another hour which follows, when he learns that in his infinite comparative minuteness and abjectness, the gods do likewise despise him, and own him not of their clan. Divinity and humanity then are equally willing that he should starve in the street for all that either will do for him. Now cruel father and mother have both let go his hand, and the little soul-toddler, now you shall hear his shriek and his wail, and often his fall. (296)

Lucy is able to recognize and intuit that Isabel (who is still unknown to them both here) has had some effect on Pierre. "Tell me once more the story of that face, Pierre;—that mysterious haunting face, which thou once told'st me" (37). But Pierre only regrets he told her about the face. Then Lucy sees fire in Pierre's eyes but she does not know its significance: "Pierre...with eyes of steady, flaming mournfulness, that face this instant fastens me" (37). Isabel is the catalyst in Pierre's life. Thompson—while acknowledging the girls "are endowed with multiple symbolism" (256)—says that Isabel "represents the hard cold facts of life; the dark and evil facts of

life” (250). In the time between Pierre’s seeing Isabel, but before finding out who she is, her face would haunt him.

Sometimes the old, original mystic tyranny would steal upon him; the long, dark locks of mournful hair would fall upon his soul, and trail their wonderful melancholy along with them; the two full, steady, overbrimming eyes of loveliness and anguish would converge their magic rays, till he felt them kindling he could not tell what mysterious fires in the heart at which they aimed. (53-54)

Pierre already had the fire of intellectual energy and resistance to injustice in his heart. If Isabel had not come into his life would this fire have remained soft, at low energy; or is Pierre’s destiny as “a raver” inevitable? That is likely unknowable, and part of ambiguity of Pierre—and the novel.

For much of the novel Pierre is half in the world of faith and religion (the earth, which Lucy represents), but gaining independent thought. Being deep in the earth is not good, it is like hiding or being trapped, like Enceladus. The symbolic meaning of land and shore from “The Lee Shore” chapter still holds true. Like Ahab swearing to strike the sun, Pierre vows to strike (but not yet the heavens): “I will be a raver, and none shall stay me! I will lift my hand in fury, for am I not struck?...Thou Black Knight, that with visor down, thus confrontest me, and mockest at me; Lo! I strike through thy helm, and will see thy face...all piety leave me;—I will be impious, for piety hath juggled me...henceforth I will see the hidden things” (65-66). Pierre, Ahab, and Enceladus are of fire.

What we learn of Pierre’s life and experiences help to explain the mystery of Ahab’s anger and obsession. *Pierre* is a prequel to *Moby-Dick*. Milton Stern asks this key question: “What had Ahab seen in life to make him spit on the altar before his predisposition had been activated by and objectified in the white whale?...It is not

until *Pierre* that the answer is dramatized” (150). Stern argues that if Pierre had lived, he would become an Ahab: inconsolably angry and looking for something to punish for the abandonments, or breach of contracts, mentioned earlier: divine, societal, and parental. So when Ahab, in “The Candles” chapter, shouts his blasphemous prayer: “Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee” (*MD* 382). This is effectively the oath of Pierre and Enceladus as well.

### Chapter Three – “That plunged wake”: Overlapping Images

*Pierre* was aggressively criticized and sold less than two thousand copies (Delbanco 206). After writing several short stories and *The Confidence-Man* (1857, written before he left for the Middle East), Melville became even more depressed. From 1851 to 1856 he was beset with “money worries, an overall sense of failure, and chronic bad health” (Kenny 37). “At the age of thirty-seven, Melville’s career as a commercial writer had virtually come to an end. His mind, after years of philosophical and psychological deep-diving, tottered at what he calls in *Clarel* ‘the perilous outpost of the sane’ (3.19.98)” (Obenzinger 64). Melville was encouraged to take the trip to the Holy Land, funded by his father-in-law Judge Lemuel Shaw. He left October 11, 1856, and he arrived in Jerusalem, January 6, 1857. Although he only actually spent three weeks in Ottoman ruled Palestine, Walter Bezanson said the effect on Melville was “massive” (*Clarel* 523-24).

There are twenty-four years between the publications of *Pierre* (1852) and *Clarel* (1876). Although *Billy Budd* is Melville’s last known work (unpublished in his lifetime), *Clarel* offers important insights into Melville’s development during a time when most scholars thought Melville dormant and uncreative. There were exceptions to this view, such as Walter Bezanson and Vincent Kenny, but within the past ten years there seems to be a renewed interest in *Clarel*—the longest poem in American literature, at eighteen thousand lines—and an acknowledgement that Melville was not dormant, but as creative and passionate as ever. But perhaps quieter. The poem is notoriously difficult and so it has been largely ignored.

In 1867 Mark Twain went on the “Grand Tour,” which included Palestine, and two years later published *The Innocents Abroad* to great success, selling “100,000 even before the second anniversary of its publication” (Obenzinger 164). In 1866 Melville published *Battle-Pieces*, his first collection of poetry, to no success, and also began his twenty-year long career as New York Customs House inspector. Over the next eight to nine years Melville would spend what time he could in the evenings to write his long poem.

William Sedgwick proposes that “[o]n his Eastern travels Melville was reaching out for counterpoise to the inner world of consciousness which had opened underneath him in *Pierre*. He was reaching for the ‘sensational presentiment’ of something the opposite to what he experienced in *Pierre*” (201). I think, in other words, that Melville had become exhausted with disappointment and anger, and he knew he needed to adopt a new view towards life. Even Melville’s choice of a form so opposite from what he had used before confirmed his new perspective (Sedgwick 202).

Lawrance Thompson sees no change in Melville’s view at all. Thompson gives a scant three pages or so of analysis to *Clarel*, and is increasingly unfriendly towards Melville: “As poetry, *Clarel* is of little value; but as an illumination of Melville’s morbid preoccupation with sombre theological concepts, it is painfully convincing” (335). I am struck by the difference a sympathetic reader makes in analysis. Thompson interprets Melville’s poem as “anti-Christian” as ever: “it is sufficient to notice that Melville is willing to permit one character, suggestively and ironically named Celio (heaven-rooted), to unburden himself in a hostile attack on the character



of Jesus Christ” (336). Sedgwick, years before Thompson, had an opposite view: “Given his [Melville’s] temperament, it was the normal expression of his life-long emotional attachment to the person of Jesus Christ. This susceptibility, this emotional tenderness, spoke in the lovely gravity of his description of Serenia in *Mardi*. It reappeared in *Clarel* in different guises, according to different contexts, but with the same earnestness” (198). I will look at Thompson’s example from “The Arch” (1.13) first; although, for the purpose of my thesis, my focus will not be on Celio, but the stone structure that causes him to pause and provokes his thoughts.

Clarel is a young American theology student in a crisis of faith. He has come to Jerusalem hoping to find inspiration to believe again. He falls in love with a young Jewish woman, Ruth, but when her father is killed she goes into mourning. The young couple are not allowed to see each other due to Jewish tradition, so Clarel goes on a tour of Jordan, the Dead Sea, Mar Saba, and Bethlehem. When Clarel returns to Jerusalem he finds out that Ruth has died of grief. In the final scene of the poem, Clarel walks slowly on the crowded thoroughfare and disappears into the town.

Celio is a young man from Italy living among Franciscan monks in Jerusalem. Born a hunchback, he is bitter about his condition and the limitations it places on possible careers: “Since love, arms, courts, abjure—why then / Remaineth to me what? the pen?” (1.12.86-87). Obviously, he cannot pursue manual labor or a military career. Celio has recently been disappointed by a romantic interest named Beatrice. He sums up his feelings about his situation: “This world clean fails me: still I yearn” (1.12.95).

Walking rapidly through the city one evening, he passes Clarel. Their eyes meet, but they do not speak. In fact, they never speak to one another in the poem, and there is only one other instance where their eyes meet. After Celio passes Clarel:

...in the Via Crucis lone  
 An object there arrested him.  
     With gallery which years deface,  
 Its bulk athwart the alley grim,  
 The arch named Ecce Homo threw;  
 The same, if child-like faith be true,  
 From which the Lamb of God was shown  
 By Pilate to the wolfish crew.  
 And Celio—in frame how prone  
 To kindle at that scene recalled—  
 Perturbed he stood, and heart enthralled. (1.13.20-30)

Melville does not give us much description of the arch. We know it is no thin arch; it has “bulk,” and it is in a grim alley. He is less interested in the object and more interested in the feelings it provokes. The street is significant, “Via Crucis”: the way of the cross. This is the street where (“if child-like faith be true”) Jesus was shown to the crowd. Pontius Pilate shouted, “Behold the man!”, and the Jews shouted back, “Crucify him!” (John 19:5-6). Jesus carried the cross on this way to Golgotha where he was crucified.

Celio “seemed to scan / ...the pale / Still face, the purple robe, and thorn; / And inly cried—*Behold the Man!*” (1.13.33-36). The arch evokes Jesus for Celio, and he addresses his complaint to him. In this fourth stanza, just nine lines after Celio inwardly cries “Behold the man,” he invokes the old promise of the rainbow, and for the next four stanzas Celio’s argument goes back and forth, between what has been promised and what *is*.

Yon Man it is this burden lays:  
 Even he who in the pastoral hours,

Abroad in fields, and cheered by flowers,  
 Announced a heaven's unclouded days;  
 And, ah, with such persuasive lips—  
 Those lips now sealed while doom delays—  
 Won men to look for solace there;  
 But, crying out in death's eclipse,  
 When rainbow none his eyes might see,  
 Enlarged the margin for despair—  
*My God, my God, forsakest me?* (1.13.37-47)

Jesus introduced the promise of heaven, and it is no surprise that people “look for solace there.” But at the moment of death they do not see an indication of heaven—“When rainbow none his eyes might see”—then people panic and wonder if they have been forsaken. The italicized line was spoken by Jesus while he was hanging on the cross, but in Melville's poem it is spoken by Celio—and humanity, by implication. There is a promise, but people see no evidence of it.

In the next stanza, feeling forsaken and rejected, Celio is vehement,

Upbraider! we upbraid again;  
*Thee* we upbraid...  
 ...  
 Ere yet thy day no pledge was given  
 Of homes reserved for us in heaven—  
 Paternal homes reserved for us;  
 Heart hoped it not, but lived content—  
 Content with life's own discontent (1.13.48-55)

Celio is claiming here that before the solid things that were promised: homes in heaven, people were fine, they “lived content.” But by introducing this promise, “ah, see, in rack how pale / Who did the world with throes convulse” (1.13.60-61)—God has introduced anxiety.

In the seventh stanza, Celio's discourse is ambiguous enough to include both God and Jesus in his questioning of their existence, and the implied promise of Jesus' return.

Nature and thee in vain we search:  
 Well urged the Jews within the porch—  
 “How long wilt make us still to doubt?”  
 How long?—‘Tis eighteen cycles now—  
 Enigma and evasion grow;  
 And shall we never find thee out? (1.13.72-77)

Actually, when the Jews asked Jesus, “How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly” (John 10:23-24), they were asking if he was the son of God. But Celio’s question supersedes theirs. Since Jesus’ time, “eighteen cycles”—eighteen centuries—have gone by, and humanity has been looking for an indication of truth to Jesus’ claims (of divinity, his return) in “Nature” and in Jesus himself—presumably through prayer and study of the scriptures. The result has been that “Enigma and evasion grow.” For those who lack faith and require hard evidence, Jesus’ claims increase in mystery and improbability, and the evasions of those who try to explain the silence (priests, believers, etc.) become more extravagant. Celio asserts:

...Nearing thee  
 All footing fails us; history  
 Shows there a gulf where bridge is none! (1.13.80-82)

What is interesting about this assertion is the way Melville makes it. Where stonework is needed—a sure path, a bridge—there is none. While believers claim *there is enough* stonework to support *faith*, but Melville structures Celio’s argument so that he claims *there is no stonework at all*.

Thompson is surely right to identify Celio’s complaint as an angry accusation against God. But Thompson says that this canto “is sufficient” to judge the entire poem (150 cantos) by, and this is where he is wrong. “Over and over again,” Thompson writes, “as we have seen, Melville worked up literary narratives to dramatize his resentment at this forsaking...Celio crystallizes it, once more, in

*Clarel*” (338)—and then Thompson moves on to *Timoleon* (1891) and *Billy Budd*, as if he has settled the matter. True, Melville is full of anger and even hate, as Thompson points out. But he has ignored what Sedgwick calls Melville’s “emotional attachment to the person of Jesus Christ,” which should balance our view of Melville.

However, Sedgwick’s claim is largely unsupported. He provides no examples in his book, only saying that Melville’s attachment to Jesus “reappeared in *Clarel* in different guises, according to different contexts, but with the same earnestness” (198-99). There are, however, many fleeting examples. Early in the poem when the narrator reveals Clarel’s purpose in Jerusalem to us, Clarel sadly wonders:

Christ lived a Jew: and in Judæa  
May linger any breath of Him? (1.7.33-34)

Clarel hopes he might find something of Jesus or his teaching to rekindle his faith.

In the scene of Nehemiah’s death Melville gives us a sympathetic figure of Jesus. Nehemiah is an elder American evangelist in Jerusalem who hands out tracts to passersby. Nehemiah seems to be a nod towards Hawthorne’s ethereal characters, such as “the old apple dealer” (one of my favorites, in the story of the same title).

Nehemiah makes his appearance in *Clarel*:

Scarce aged like time’s wrinkled sons,  
But touched by chastenings of Eld,  
...  
In wasted strength he seemed upheld  
Invisibly by faith serene—  
Paul’s evidence of things not seen. (1.7.63-68).  
...  
But how he lived, and what his fare,  
Ravens and angels, few beside,  
Dreamed or divined. His garments spare  
True marvel seemed, nor unallied  
To clothes worn by that wandering band  
Which ranged and ranged the desert sand

With Moses...

(1.9.53-59)

He appears weak and thin, held up by some invisible strength, and on the threshold between life and death. As Ahab is associated with fire to signify his defiant character, Nehemiah's ethereality signifies his spiritual character.

On their first meeting, Clarel is wary of the old man. Especially when Nehemiah offers him a Bible as a guide. Clarel declines, saying he is familiar with that guide. Undeterred, Nehemiah invites Clarel to join him on his ramble through the city, and Clarel accepts.

Despite the old man's shattered ray,  
Won by his mystic saintly way,  
Revering too his primal faith,

...

The student gave assent...

(1.9.41-43, 47)

Nehemiah's "ray," his inner light, his spiritual perception, is not whole or coherent. Nevertheless, Clarel perceives a transcendence to him, in his "mystic saintly way"—which is an interesting internal juxtaposition because of his "primal faith," which suggests depth and rootedness. Nehemiah represents the bridge that Celio (1.13) does not see; he is both rooted and transcendent.

Nehemiah dies by sleepwalking into the Dead Sea (2.38-2.39). There are two images associated with his death. The character, Vine, is walking on the shore in the morning and sees something he cannot identify:

...how *that* object name?  
Slant on the shore, ground-curls of mist  
Enfold it, as in amethyst  
Subdued, small flames in dead of night  
Lick the dumb back-log ashy white.  
What is it?—paler than the pale  
Pervading vapors, which so veil,  
That some peak-tops are islanded

Baseless above the dull, dull bed  
 Of waters, which not e'en transmit  
 One ripple 'gainst the cheek of It. (2.39.14-24)

In dying, Nehemiah is practically lost as Melville abstracts him in pronoun confusion of “that” and “It.” Nehemiah is so wrapped in the early morning mist that obscures his body that Vine mistakes him in the distance for a log burned ash-white. Nehemiah is transformed and consumed. There is the suggestion that, by the pale vapors and mist that surround his body, Nehemiah *is* an islanded peak-top. His substance appears “baseless,” without support. The object that is Nehemiah seems to float. What has happened to him? The vapors are a veil, evoking the veil that so frustrates Melville, that humanity cannot look behind.

After the travelers bury Nehemiah, there is a sign, an event that consists of two objects: an avalanche followed by a rainbow. The descriptions of both objects contain allusions to the white whale. The “plunged wake” of the rockslide evokes “the moving valley” of Moby Dick’s “steady wake” (*MD* 408)—the “sideways churning the water in his vengeful wake” (*MD* 411). It is almost as if the rockslide is Death coming for Nehemiah.

They closed. And came a rush, a roar—  
 Aloof, but growing more and more,  
 Nearer and nearer. They invoke  
 The long Judaic range, the hight  
 Of nearer mountains hid from sight  
 By the blind mist. Nor spark nor smoke  
 Of that plunged wake their eyes might see;  
 But, hoarse in hubbub, horribly,  
 With all its retinue around—  
 Flints, dust, and showers of splintered stone,  
 An avalanche of rock down tore  
 (2.39.131-41)

The mist that hides the mountains in this stanza does triple duty as a signifier, connecting the mist that “enfolds” Nehemiah’s body when he is found dead on the beach, the rainbow that will appear moments later “in thin mist above the sea,” but perhaps most importantly, it evokes the scene of Ahab’s death: “Ahab was fairly within the smoky mountain mist, which, thrown off from the whale’s spout, curled round his great, Monadnock hump” (*MD* 424). The allusions in this stanza seem as confused as the “hubbub” of the avalanche, but we see they form a chain that leads to the white whale. Moby Dick brings these chained metaphors full circle when he is likened to a mountain. (Nehemiah can be directly connected to the white whale, in that, when Vine finds his body on the beach, from far away, he at first mistakes Nehemiah’s body for an “ashy white” log.) The difficulty here is that we have a series of natural signs, but Melville has not given us their abstract meanings—as he did, for example, when he has Ishmael say that meditation is wedded to water, or that the sea is indefinite as God. It seems it is the reader’s task to have absorbed their associations earlier, and therefore should be able to intuit the significance of the allusions.

After the echoes of the rockslide subside:  
 They turn; and, in that silence sealed,  
 What works there from behind the veil?  
 A counter object is revealed—  
 A thing of heaven, and yet how frail:  
 Up in thin mist above the sea  
 Humid is formed, and noiselessly,  
 The fog-bow: segment of an oval  
 ...  
 ...It showed half spent—  
 Hovered and trembled, paled away, and—went.  
 (2.39.148-54, 160-61)

The rainbow suggests God’s promise to Noah to never destroy humanity (“all flesh,” actually) with water: “I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a



covenant between me and the earth” (Genesis 9:13). The rainbow, an arch, suggests the arch named Ecce Homo, after Jesus, the mediator between God and humanity.

The white whale is also made an arch, as Melville writes: “his whole marbled body formed a high arch, like Virginia’s Natural Bridge” (*MD* 409).

There are two questions that need to be answered then. What could Melville mean by his chain of symbols and allusions through the avalanche and the rainbow? Also, what is the cause of this compound event: God, nature, or blind coincidence?

The avalanche ultimately points to Moby Dick and his whiteness, whiteness being appalling, something that panics the soul (*MD* 160), the death that is coming for Nehemiah. In the avalanche are the stones of desolation and annihilation. But the rainbow is promise and bridge to the divine. These two contrary signs for the death of Nehemiah pose a question asked by Melville about the nature of death: annihilation or bridge?

The characters in the poem may wonder as much as readers at the cause of the avalanche and the rainbow. Is the singular event a signal from God? Or just blind coincidence? It is inscrutable, and this is just as Melville would have it: “Melville would not agree with either the potential for our accurate interpretation of authentic divine revelation or for the intelligibility of God’s intentions” (Urban 87). We can no more know the origin of this event than we can know answer to the question it poses.

We have looked at two passages now, from two different characters from Melville’s mind. I hope is not anachronistic to refer to Sigmund Freud’s idea that all the characters in one’s dream embody aspects of the dreamer. Freud articulated, or

popularized this notion, but I think it was true and perhaps even realized before his time. My point is, all the characters in *Clarel* are expressions of Melville. At times, Melville feels Celio's anger, judgment, and disbelief. At other times he is attracted by the teachings of Jesus. In *Pierre* the narrator claims that the Sermon on the Mount is "that greatest real miracle of all religions" (207).

Whether Melville is totally hostile to Jesus or ambivalent, or attracted to the person of Jesus, is a *secondary* point. What is important, is that Celio saw the stone arch, which led him to a monologue of doubt and defiance. And also, that Melville implied the inadequacy of stone when he had Celio make his argument against Jesus and God.

One of the primary characters in *Clarel* is the landscape. Melville was fascinated and overwhelmed by the stones; he wrote in his journal: "Stony mountains & stony plains; stony torrents & stony roads; stony walls & stony fields, stony houses & stony tombs; stony eyes & stony hearts....Is the desolation of the land the result of the fatal embrace of the Deity?" (qtd. in Bezanson's essay, *Clarel* 517). The Holy Land was a shock for many American travelers who came from the green "New Jerusalem" of America, with its majestic mountains, to a dry, grey, and rocky country. Reverend James Wylie describes the melancholy terrain in 1841:

So complete is the desolation of Palestine at this day that when the traveller enters it he is almost over-powered. Here nothing is to be seen but barren mountains, from whose rocky sides the sun's rays are flung back with intolerable fierceness....His heart sinks as he surveys the desolation which surrounds him; and he needs to rouse himself by the remembrance, that the land in which he journeys was in ancient times the theatre of wonders. (qtd. in Bezanson, *Clarel* 517)

Wylie's passage ensures that Melville was not just being obstinate in his description of the landscape. He embarked on his journey in hopes of gaining encouragement; he ended up just becoming more discouraged.

There is an exemplary evocation of the stony terrain in the canto titled, "The Halt." The troop of pilgrims have left Jerusalem and have just started their journey into the wilderness. The narrator begins the canto by recounting the various ways that stones are used in the Old and New Testaments:

In divers ways which vary it  
 Stones mention find in hallowed Writ:  
 Stones rolled from well-mouths, altar stones,  
 Idols of stone, memorial ones,  
 Sling-stones, stone tables...  
 ...  
 By stones died Naboth; stoned to death  
 Was Stephen meek; and Scripture saith,  
 Against even Christ they took up stones.  
     Moreover, as a thing profuse,  
 Suggestive still in every use,  
 On stones, still stones, the gospels dwell  
 In lesson meet or happier parable. (2.10.1-5, 20-26)

This little catalogue expands the material side of the Christian symbolic formula. No longer are we dealing with just stone tablets, rocky mount Sinai, the stone arch on Via Crucis—Melville overwhelms us with all the stones in the Bible. The narrator seems to fall short in making a conclusive statement about an overall effect: "suggestive," the narrator admits of their use, and points out that "the gospels dwell" on them. Stony Biblical imagery became embedded in readers' minds—just as the Biblical archeologist Edward Robinson attests: "the scenes of the Bible had made a deep impression upon my mind from the earliest childhood." Most Americans, he is sure, grow up with "the names of Sinai, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Promised Land" which

“become associated with...earliest recollections and holiest feelings”<sup>11</sup> (Obenzinger 42). Perhaps it is sub-conscious, but the teachings of Christianity become associated with stone, and so seem as certain and tangible as stone itself, mistaking an abstraction for a material certainty.

Melville imagined Jerusalem for most of his life, perhaps vibrant and sacred, only to find it a barren, desolate land.

Attesting here the Holy Writ—  
 In brook, in glen, by tomb and town  
 In natural way avouching it—  
 Behold the stones! And never one  
 A lichen greens; and, turn them o'er—  
 No worm—no life; but; all the more,  
 Good witnesses.

The narrator is appalled by the vapid landscape. There is a bit of dry humor in the comment that the stones make “good witnesses.” The comment might allude simultaneously to the epic violence and intrigues that take place in Bible stories, as well as to Pierre’s Memnon Stone which was also silent.

But in the following canto, “Of Deserts,” the narration hints at Melville in the background, and presents the reader with a different yet familiar characterization of the wilderness.

Sands immense  
 Impart the oceanic sense:  
 The flying grit like scud is made:  
 Pillars of sand which whirl about  
 Or arc along in colonnade,  
 True kin be to the water-spout.  
 Yonder on the horizon, red  
 With storm, see there the caravan  
 Straggling long-drawn, dispirited;  
 Mark how it labors like a fleet  
 Dismasted, which the cross-winds fan

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<sup>11</sup> A longer excerpt of Robinson’s description is on p. 4, in my introduction.

In crippled disaster of retreat  
From battle.— (2.11.37-48)

With this stanza Melville is letting his readers know that there is for certain a connection to *Moby-Dick*. We are not to forget the associations he made with land and sea in “The Lee Shore” chapter. This stanza is also important as a characterization of life. The caravan is “straggling,” “dispirited,” “dismasted,” and “crippled.” The caravan is in retreat from battle; Melville’s metaphor for life.

### **Conclusion: To emerge from the sea**

Hawthorne's observation that Melville "can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief," characterizes Melville's spiritual restlessness. This description also characterizes many of his partially submerged images and overlapping symbols. Melville passed on his restless spiritual energy to his characters and images, and vicariously worked out his thoughts and emotions through them. Ishmael, Ahab, Pierre, and Clarel come from society, but are apart from mainstream society. They are exceptional, on the fringe. They have a sense of purpose, mission, or quest, that involves trying to understand their place in an unconcerned universe. They feel a sense of abandonment, if not betrayal.

Melville reliably links fire with defiance. We see fire in Ahab's anger. Ahab is wrapped without and within by fire. Pierre and Enceladus are also endowed with internal fire. The complication with fire is in how it is viewed by certain characters. Ahab and Pierre relish their anger and defiance, but Ishmael abandons it and warns others away from it. Melville uses water to stand for life's abstractions: meditation (*MD* 19). It is "highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God," it is the "howling infinite" (*MD* 97). Waves are blended with thoughts; the sea with the soul of the world and everything in it (*MD* 136). Stones (and mountains) generally represent pain, disappointment, desolation, and I argue, often a counter-symbol to some of Christianity's meanings and associations with stone.

With *Pierre*, Melville perhaps reached the height of his bitterness and moves inside the boundaries of nihilism. When Pierre imagines his cousin, Glen, as suitor to Lucy, "an infinite quenchless rage and malice possessed him" (289). The narrator

describes the last stage of Pierre's transformation; his final movement as a person of faith, half submerged in earth, dependent, needing support, to an independent thinker, a quester, reaching for the heavens: "All these and a host of other distressful and resentful fancies now ran through the breast of Pierre. All his Faith-born, enthusiastic, high-wrought, stoic, and philosophic defenses, were now beaten down by this sudden storm of nature in his soul" (289). With the "sudden storm" in Pierre's soul, Melville alludes to his symbol of the storm-tossed sea, the only place where the soul can keep her independence. The narrator takes Pierre's disillusionment further. Not only are these beliefs "beaten down" in Pierre for a time, but absolutely: "For there is no faith, and no stoicism, and no philosophy, that a mortal man can possibly evoke, which will stand the final test of a real impassioned onset of Life and Passion upon him" (289). It is this absolute rejection of faith and philosophy that nudges Melville into the region of nihilism. But only in its primary sense: a rejection of philosophical and religious beliefs; not so far as nihilism's secondary meaning: "The belief or theory that the world has no real existence; the rejection of all notions of reality" (*OED*). Melville has his narrator conclude the above passage: "For Faith and philosophy are air, but events are brass" (289). Melville will not go so far as to assert that the world is not real.

Although there is strong skepticism—this time of two philosophies—in *Moby-Dick*, I consider *Pierre* to be the height of Melville's bitter stage because of the difference in tone. Ishmael imaginatively hangs Kant on one side of the Pequod and Locke on the other, only to conclude by advising, "Oh, ye foolish! throw all these

thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right” (261). The tone in *Moby-Dick* is recognizably humorous, while the tone in *Pierre* is strident.

Jack Boies’s article (1961) supports my placement of Melville inside the region of nihilism. “His entire literary life,” Boies says of Melville, “was devoted to a graphic demonstration that no philosophy, religion or pattern of thought is adequate for man in the face of the inscrutable universe into which he has been cast” (316). Melville “had become a nihilist” (319). Boies argues that the destruction and suicide Melville subjected his characters to was his own vicarious suicide, performed over and over so that he did not have to commit suicide in real life. Boies draws attention to a late poem of Melville’s, “Pisa’s Leaning Tower.” In the latter half of the poem Melville personifies the tower:

It thinks to plunge—but hesitates;  
Shrinks back—yet fain would slide;  
Withholds itself—itsself would urge;  
Hovering, shivering on the verge,  
                                A would-be suicide!      (qtd. in Boies 313)

Boies goes on to connect the “suicidal” tower to Melville’s cast of self-destructive characters (313). It seems to me that it is the posture of the tower (not the attitude of hesitation), the leaning forward, that is a point of contact with Enceladus’s posture. The giant “turned his vast trunk into a battering-ram, and hurled his own arched-out ribs again and yet again against the invulnerable steep” (346); a frozen yet aggressive intention.

In Jason Corner’s dissertation abstract (2006), he assumes “Melville’s philosophy of tragic nihilism” and argues that Melville believed “in the absolute falsity of all moral beliefs.” However, I would argue that assertion goes too far. Melville’s fiction



is fueled by his sense of injustice; he is morally outraged. These are the statements we see repeated in his works, that protagonist has been struck an unfair blow, and in spite of the odds against him, he will strike back. Melville was not a moral relativist.

Melville complicated the symbols he worked with—the elemental symbols of water, fire, and stone being only a few of them. In some instances Melville replaced traditional meanings with new meanings. In other cases, such as in “The Lee Shore,” he created a new system of associations, a new system of meanings connected with two of the most fundamental elements: land and sea. Melville’s process of disassociating and investing meaning demonstrates that the physical phenomena of the world, in its parts or the whole, holds no inherent, absolute meaning, and that the meanings people attribute to images and objects are arbitrary. In other words, for Melville, nature does not imply anything. I agree with Elizabeth Renker’s conclusion in her essay, “Melville’s Poetic Singe”: “Melville refuses to invest nature with morally uplifting and sentimental attributes, which was a conventional poetic gesture in his era...Whoever indulges in that light-hearted and comforting interpretation of what nature means is indulging in an illusion” (31).

I do not mean to suggest that because people attribute meaning to objects, natural or manufactured, that they are meaningless. We cannot read nature, we can only use it to make analogies. Or, as Matthiessen puts it, “only by discovering such metaphors can the writer suggest the actual complexity of experience; and consequently, the more of them he is able to perceive, the more comprehensive is his grasp of human life” (284).

Melville's bitterness, and his "fire," are two different things. Part of my purpose in this essay was to find out if Melville was able to sustain his fire (his defiance, his sense of injustice) to the end of his life. Walter Bezanson asserts that "Melville did not soften up in his later years...but remained unsimple and hard to the end" (*Clarel* 506). There is evidence of this in *Clarel*. When Clarel returns to Jerusalem and finds Ruth has died, it is as if a sheet of night falls in front of his eyes: "All swims, and I but blackness see" (4.30.87). The "blackness" that Melville once claimed to see in Hawthorne,<sup>12</sup> he sees through Clarel. And then the familiar Melvillean oaths burst from Clarel: "take my curse!— / O blind, blind, barren universe! / Now I am like a bough torn down, / And I must wither" (4.30.92-95). Like Ahab and Pierre before him, Clarel is struck, and curses.

William Potter observes that *Clarel* "does not strike the reader as possessing the self-confidence and exuberant energy that characterized so much of Melville's earlier works," but is instead "a work of extraordinary high seriousness, deliberately and meticulously crafted" (xii). Part of this is true. But when a writer labors for ten years or more on a work of art known to be "eminently adapted for unpopularity" (as Melville wrote to Billson, *Corr.* 483), do we say that such a writer lacks self-confidence? But more to my point is that when Clarel is struck, he responds with defiance that is recognizably Melvillean. There is a flare up of rebellious energy that echoes Melville's more exuberant days. In *Clarel*, Melville keeps his fire—his anger from his sense of injustice—but loses his bitterness. At some level, a deeper level,

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<sup>12</sup> From "Hawthorne and His Mosses": "this back conceit pervades him...it is that blackness in Hawthorne, of which I have spoken, that so fixes and fascinates me" (*Tales* 52).

perhaps sub-conscious, it is possible that Melville moves toward an acceptance of the world. I think we can see it in *Clarel*.

Clarel sees Ruth buried and the travelers slowly go their way, and Clarel is left alone. A few days pass until Easter. Clarel seems purposeless: “But though the freshet quite be gone— / Sluggish, life’s wonted stream flows on” (4.33.75-76). Clarel steps out and aimlessly wanders the city, absorbed in his thoughts. He is following a crowd along Via Crucis and speaks his last words:

...he murmurs in low tone:  
 “They wire the world—far under sea  
 They talk; but never comes to me  
 A message from beneath the stone.” (4.34.50-53)

Clarel then “Vanishes in the obscurer town” (4.34.56). The poem ends much quieter than most of Melville’s other works. There is not a scene of Shakespearean tragedy or destruction, and more importantly, there is no suicide. Clarel, disheartened, despondent, wanders and disappears in the city. Clarel’s final articulation echoes Celio’s, early in the poem, “This world clean fails me: still I yearn.”<sup>13</sup> But does Clarel still yearn? Does he intend to return to America? How long will his money last? The impression is that Clarel does not care; these concerns are not on his mind. What does seem to be on Clarel’s mind are Boies’s thoughts on the nihilist: “To keep good faith with himself, if he is to live in this world, the existentialist learns to live without hope. This means to live without reliance on any system of religious, moral, or ethical principles, without faith in any ordered doctrine or philosophy” (316). This seems to be what Clarel is struggling with. He returns from his trip with the other travelers to find the woman he fell in love with has died. The hope that Clarel expressed in the

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<sup>13</sup> Or even more, Emily Dickinson’s lines, “This is my letter to the World, / That never wrote to Me —” (poem 441).

beginning of the poem, that he, like the apostles on the road to Emmaus, might encounter someone, “Some stranger of a lore replete, / Who, marking how my looks betray... Would question me, expound and prove, / And make my heart to burn with love” (1.7.47-48, 50-51). This hope is in danger of dying. Clarel, in his moment of blackness, feels betrayed: “then perish faith— / ‘Tis perjured!”—and then the plunge forward—“Take me, take me, Death! / Where Ruth is gone, me thither whirl, / Where’er it be!” (4.30.104-7).

But we know that Clarel chooses to live, at least for the ending of the poem. Can he live without hope?—and the further question, can he live without hope *without bitterness*? Can Clarel accept his position and philosophy of independence (it is a philosophy in spite of rejecting all philosophy). Ultimately, we do not know. What we do know is that Melville, the author, did not have Clarel kill himself as Ahab did in his suicidal relentless pursuit of the white whale, or as Pierre did in the Tombs by taking poison. Melville let Clarel live, thus there is the opportunity for Clarel to move towards an acceptance of his view of life. An indication that Clarel might find a measure of peace is in the final canto, “Epilogue.”

The juxtaposition of Clarel’s downcast disappearance into the town, with the narrator’s coda confirms Bezanson’s assessment of Melville as unsimple to the end. William Potter warns the reader against perceiving the conclusion as “strangely incongruous” (145). Potter brings in Melville’s readings of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) to assist understanding Melville’s final move. Melville read Schopenhauer “at least as early as” 1871 (Potter 143). Melville found a philosopher

who saw life largely as he did: a world full of suffering with a God that “is fundamentally beyond intellectual comprehension” (144), and that the best response was “withdrawal from the world, a denial of self and selfish desires...something similar to what Melville also proposes at the conclusion of *Clarel*” (145). Potter sees Clarel’s disappearance as just that: “the proto-Schopenhauerian withdrawal of a finely tempered heart” (145). The primary image of the last stanza is the heart—Clarel’s heart. The narrator’s words are less an admonition are more an exhortation: less authoritative warning or reminding of duties, and more earnest advice.

Then keep thy heart, though yet but ill-resigned—  
 Clarel, thy heart, the issues there but mind;  
 That like the crocus budding through the snow—  
 That like the swimmer rising from the deep—  
 That like a burning secret which doth go  
 Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep;  
 Emerge thou mayst from the last whelming sea,  
 And prove that death but routs life into victory. (4.35.27-34)

Clarel is on the verge of losing heart, of giving up. Not full-certain, but on the verge. The sense from “Pisa’s Leaning Tower” returns: “It thinks to plunge—but hesitates.” The narrator characterizes the world with odds against life: “like the crocus budding through the snow”: a small but hardy flower that struggles through a frozen white layer. The “swimmer rising from the deep” seems less a human and more likely one of Melville’s leviathans; an allusion to independence and earnestness. The last issue of the heart that Clarel is advised to mind is “like a burning secret which doth go / Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep.” This is extremely ambiguous, but if we take “burning” to be an allusion to Melville’s defiant fire, we see that this could mean the struggle that is taking place in Clarel’s heart, that Clarel wants to both release and hoard and keep. This is the struggle that has taken place within Melville

for most of his life; his inability to believe because of his strong sense of betrayal and injustice.

How Clarel will overcome his sense of oppression and defeat, is implicit in the images Melville has chose to use. The flower that struggles through the snow, the swimmer that rises from the deep, the secret that goes even when it wants to be kept: this is Melville trusting the instinct in life, and in all forms of life. It took a long time for Melville to become a convincing advocate of this viewpoint. When he wrote about the soul-merging experience on the mast-head in *Moby-Dick*, he warned against it; he did not trust it. Ahab brushes up against the transcending experience—another leaning figure—but he pulls away from it. Enceladus seems furthest from the possibility of trusting life, of giving oneself over to it. Enceladus is stone and fire, Melville's new symbol of defiance and rage.

The last two lines of the epilogue are curious: "Emerge thou mayest from the last whelming sea, / And prove that death but routs life into victory." I say curious because "The Lee Shore" chapter establishes the sea, the stormy sea, as the location and condition for independence, earnestness, and truth. To remain at sea is to stay true to these qualities. To emerge from the overwhelming sea is to suggest some—at least partial—separation from it. This is a turn, if even a partial turn, from Melville's own "system." In "The Lee Shore" it was better even to die at sea—"better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land!" (*MD* 97). It seems that in encouraging Clarel to *emerge*, the narrator is advising Clarel to, not reject

independence, earnestness, or truth, but that, in addition to these qualities, he can trust his own nature to recover from the blows life has struck him.

The verb, “to emerge,” requires a buoyant quality; it means: “to rise from” (*OED*). The posture of this action is different from the posture of leaning. Enceladus leans, but it is in defiance and anger. This emergence is not to be a “heaven-assaulter” (*Pierre* 345). The tone in both passages assist the interpretation. To emerge would “prove that death but routs life into victory.” The tone of this line is hopeful, but the meaning is unclear. Ruth just died, and it is also Easter. Is the narrator referring to one or both of these deaths? “ON THE THIRD DAY CHRIST AROSE” (4.33.1), the narrator tells us. Or are these meant to be metaphors of something dying in Clarel so that he can emerge? Melville allows his narrator to give this advice to Clarel, and this may be a way of giving himself permission to let go of anger and his sense of betrayal. Perhaps he made peace with this silent world.

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