

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Emily A. Goodrum for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 22, 2002.

Title: Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: Hermeneutics and Epistemology in Ishmael's Seafaring.

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Abstract Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

David Robinson

This paper defends a reading of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* that elevates Ishmael's status from mere narrator of Ahab's tragedy to that of protagonist of his own story, a novel of epistemological seafaring. As a metaphysical quester, Ishmael provides the novel's only reliable and complex vision of the condition of man and the universe, despite its necessary incompleteness.

Not dismissing the tragedy of Ahab, the study illustrates the limitations of his fixed hermeneutics, the simplicity of his "final" interpretations, and the consequent misuse of his will, which ultimately denies him his humanity. Ahab's tragically limited quest is interpreted as the counterpoint to Ishmael's more fluid and complex quest, becoming one of many backdrops for Ishmael's drama and thus contributing to the novel's main epistemological dialogue.

Ishmael's drama is defined as the soul's comprehension completing itself, a drama of epistemology and hermeneutics. His multiple methodologies are explored through the dramatic stress, which is defined as Ishmael's struggle to maintain an independent sense of spiritual and intellectual equilibrium while various experiences and observations on board

the Pequod throw this equilibrium off balance. Ishmael goes through a series of “resurrections,” regaining lost equilibrium as he comes to a state of balanced acceptance of two key perplexities concerning the human condition and the universe, namely, inescapable polarities and the unattainability of Ultimate Truth.

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Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: Hermeneutics and Epistemology in Ishmael's Seafaring

by  
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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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Emily A. Goodrum, Author

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction.....	1
Ahab's Failed Hermeneutics: The Tragedy of Self-Will and Inhumanity .....	7
Perception, Resurrection and Transfiguration: Ishmael's Dynamic Epistemology and the Transcendence of the Tragic.....	34
Complicating Polarities: Ishmael's Multiplex Vision.....	57
Ishmael's Ever-Shifting Truth: The White Whale as "Spouting Fish," Mythic Monster and Mystic Medium.....	85
Bibliography .....	123

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?

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.

*Ecclesiastes 9:17*



## INTRODUCTION

*Moby-Dick*'s vast critical legacy is indicative of Melville's success in at least one significant aspect. The novel's meaning will not be pinned down. That this should be viewed as a literary "success" speaks for the character of Herman Melville, and his penetrating fascination, if not obsession, with the workings of the mind and the ongoing search for Meaning. His rejection of religious orthodoxy and his skepticism toward philosophy contribute to the novel's ambiguity. In dispelling orthodox beliefs, Melville's new "Gospel of the Century" demands independent crafting, which is inevitably bombarded by Melville's broad intellectual and religious background, creating a panoptical palette of philosophical possibilities. Additionally, rejection of orthodox views of the world and their inherent systems of moral conduct, Melville also, by necessity, annihilates the Universal Truth that any given system adopts. Melville, in a sense, attempts to explain the condition of his race "from Adam down," having rejected the systems presented to him up to the time of writing *Moby-Dick*. If that task were not enough, he further confounds the problem by giving Ishmael the lead role in telling this new story of man. Ishmael - pseudo-scientist, Platonic idealist, poet, facetious ironist, near plagiarist, eternal skeptic, naïve dreamer, jocular seaman - will not tell us the Truth. What he builds up to be a matter of most urgent import, he subverts in ironic humor at the next turn. Other times, he reverses the pattern, coloring a scene with jocular irony and ending in a reverent moment of metaphysical insight. In fact, at one point in the novel he suggests that "this strange mixed affair we call life" and the "whole universe" itself is but a "vast practical joke;" his

gospel's new god merely the "unaccountable old joker" (185). He would seem, thus, the most unreliable of characters to narrate Melville's new gospel. The jury is still out on whether *Moby-Dick* succeeds as a harmonious blending of tragedy, spiritual quest, romance, sea-tale, fact and metaphysics, culminating as Melville's masterpiece, or if the artistic and intellectual experimentation in *Moby-Dick* showed the author "maundering, drivelling, subject to paroxysms, cramps, and total collapse, and penning exceeding many pages of unaccountable 'bosh'" (Parker and Hayford, "Doubloon," 95).

If Ishmael's narrative turns and meandering aren't enough, his role is further complicated by his frequent disappearance. Although the book begins with Ishmael's immediate presence as first-person narrator, he later becomes omniscient narrator and dramatist, working out the scenes from inside other character's heads or behind the curtain. His seeming instability and virtual absence through much of the novel left him sorely neglected in critical studies for many years after the revival of the novel in the 1920s. Although Ishmael's unreliable narration, stream-of-consciousness passages, "word play," and blending of "irreverence" and "seriousness" attracted revival critics and writers of the late-modernist period (Selby 33), post-war readership was especially receptive to "Melville's dark allegory of evil and madness" (35). Recent criticism turns attention once again to Ahab. Post-structural interest in the subversive, in the relationship between language and self, and in the conflict between "selfhood, social relations, and power" (Selby 125), as well as postmodern criticism examining power structures, cultural imprisonment, postcolonial representations of tyranny and democracy, and language and ideology as an apparatus of power, return critical attention to Ahab's drama (Selby 146-48). As a result, the novel's "meaning" is read through the construct of Ahab's feud with the whale. This in itself is perplexing and ambiguous, as many possibilities are drawn

from it. Ambiguous as Ahab's feud with the whale may be to the novel's interpreter, it is not ambiguous to Ahab. Perhaps Ahab's story, if Ishmael never interfered with it, would be fairly straightforward. Ahab's whale is "all evil," his quest for the whale vengeance of that evil. Ahab's pursues to white whale to "strike through the mask" of the unreasoning agent to get at the "reasoning thing" behind the mask. The futility of that quest combines with his monomaniac will to end his tale in tragedy.

In itself, Ahab's is an undeniably gripping story, as both a tragedy and a marvelous sea-tale. But there is more. Suppose Ishmael *doesn't* get lost in Ahab's fury, suppose as he slips from the central "stage" of the drama the reader doesn't lose sight of him, another story unfolds. In fact, the story that unfolds is the story of unfolding itself. Sandwiched in between early criticism of Ahab's mythology and late criticism dealing with power, language and ideological subversion lies a period in which *Ishmael's* novel was read; this study returns to and reexamines the formal and humanist readings of this period in Melville criticism.<sup>1</sup> Ishmael's novel, as Sedgwick describes it, is the Dantean quest for meaning, his dramatic action being the unfolding of comprehension, the action of human "growth," in which "his identity – or soul – is the protagonist" (16). Ishmael slips necessarily from sight because his quest, his "action," is internal. It is happening in the mind or as Sedgwick states it, the soul. We lose his outward presence as his inward action takes him farther from the stage that the planks of the Pequod's deck create. As we lose him, Ahab comes to view; the physical quester's immediacy shadows the metaphysical quester's elusiveness. Nevertheless, it is in Ahab's shadow that the novel's most profound questions are raised. Ahab becomes, in a sense, the most intense material object of Ishmael's

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<sup>1</sup> This period spanned the late-50s to the 80s. See Nick Selby's fifth chapter for the shifts in *Moby-Dick* criticism.

epistemological and hermeneutical seafaring. Ishmael is not subverted by Ahab's tragedy. He is not merely Ahab's storyteller. He is Ahab's interpreter of sorts, and the novel's only speculative, distanced and deeply thinking character. He is the one character who transcends Ahab's tragedy.

What this study concerns itself with is not so much the conclusions of the epistemological seafaring, but the methodologies that it experiments with. Unlike Ahab, Ishmael is capable of living in a world of uncertainty; in fact, the one thing that Ishmael rejects is certainty itself. Flux, speculation and fluidity – as opposed to certainty and rigidity – distinguish Ishmael's search and make him, as Zoellner rightly concludes, the novel's only reliable philosopher. The shadow in which Ishmael finds himself, the dark and demonic shadow cast by his unrelenting captain, does not subvert or in any way abort Ishmael's quest. In fact, it does much to drive his quest, as we see him moving from innocence and naiveté in the novel's opening through his own tragic vision further on.

Ahab's unbending philosophical rigidity plays a significant role in the novel's epistemological dialogue. In the first chapter, I examine Ahab's monomaniac need for completion, for absolute knowledge, and I argue that this overarching need becomes his ultimate tragedy. Ignoring all possible interpretations of his encounter with the white whale except his own grimly black conclusion, Ahab in essence "dies in life." He is no longer a quester in the true spiritual or philosophical sense of the word. He is a "chaser." One can only give him that. Because he defines his search's end before the end comes, the chase is an empty one. Furthermore, to pursue his monomaniac aim, he necessarily denies his humanity and turns his will to a demonic and ultimately tragic end.

From the shadow of this single-visioned quest, Ishmael stands in much more reliable light. It is Ishmael who bravely takes on the novel's most profound questions,

willing to face the possibility – as Ahab cannot – that there may be no answer at the voyage's end. It is this tentative and open epistemological search that I describe in the second chapter of this study. Projecting my argument from William Sedgwick's concept of the mind's unfolding vision and the problem of equilibrium, Howard Vincent's account of the theme of intellectual resurrection and acceptance, and Merlin Bowen's concept of the dual function of perception and action, I will argue that Ishmael's epistemological approach requires, first, that one's individual spiritual and intellectual independence must be maintained in a state of equilibrium and that, second, this equilibrium is impossible without complex acceptance of the dualistic forces in the universe and mankind. From this position of acceptance, Ishmael adopts a stance of "armed neutrality" and "life-affirming stoicism," as Bowen's argument defines the outcome (3).

The final two chapters examine at length the two key perplexities that Ishmael perceives and comes to reconcile, namely, the inherent and inescapable polarities of the universe and the final unavailability of Ultimate Truth, including the possibility that there may exist no Ultimate Truth at all, that perhaps there is nothing behind "the pasteboard mask." In the third chapter, which explores polarities, I devote much discussion to the polarities of fate and free will. I do this not because I think they are ultimately the most significant polar opposites that the book presents, but because I see them intricately woven into the study of epistemology. Ishmael's truer, though indeed complex and incomplete, vision of truth is a direct product of free will in action. Not the "action" that mad, stage-worthy Ahab brings to the fore, but the action of the soul. Ishmael's free will, that is, allows him to throw overboard the orthodoxy, subjectivism, mythologies, rumors and false truths that he encounters, continually reading from these as they appear, taking from them what he will and creating a new, transfigured comprehension. Should he dispel faith in the

existence of free will, however limited, he would not be this type of fluid philosopher. Ahab's mistaken notions of fate and free will were his doom, whereas Ishmael's balanced reconciliation brings him resurrection and salvation on more than one level. Borrowing again from Bowen, Ishmael *chooses* an 'attitude' of "life-affirming stoicism." This choice is an act of will.

In the final chapter, I turn at last to the greatest symbolic object of Ishmael's contemplations, the white whale itself. His interior action, as earlier defined, does not project absolute meaning on the white whale, as does Ahab's exterior action. Thus, all the scenes leading up to his first encounter with Moby Dick – his other encounters with the generic whale, his contemplation of the sea, and his metaphysics on whaling itself – all lead Ishmael to a drastically different view of Moby Dick than he briefly shared with Ahab. The final chapter, then, traces Ishmael's shifting perceptions of the mysterious whale, from his earliest surmises before going to sea to his observations of the final three day's chase.

## AHAB'S FAILED HERMENEUTICS: THE TRAGEDY OF SELF-WILL AND INHUMANITY

To refute that *Moby-Dick* is the tragedy of the “grand, ungodly, god-like” Captain Ahab, despite reading the novel as Ishmael’s spiritual and intellectual quest, is to court folly. Abundant critical research documents both the formal elements of tragedy utilized in *Moby-Dick* and the literary influences upon Melville during the composition process, which led to the remolding of his sea-tale into a metaphysical novel with richer, more complex, and tragic import. It doesn’t require painstaking scrutiny to see where the novel incorporates the traits of dramatic tragedy in the building of Captain Ahab’s character and the drama of his “quenchless feud” with the timeless “intangible malignity,” as symbolized in the white whale, upon whose hump Ahab piled the “sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (160-1). *Moby-Dick*’s multiplicity doesn’t necessitate the denial of Ahab’s tragedy in order to defend a reading of Ishmael’s quest, and the converse is also true. In fact, combined, as the tragedy is, with the myriad other aesthetic devices and contrivances, and especially in the present discussion of the novel’s hermeneutics and epistemology, a reading of just the tragedy would be shortsighted. The tragedy of Ahab is not the final resting place of the novel or Melville’s rendering of the tragic vision, but merely a part of a greater dialectic on the human condition, and more importantly, on human comprehension of that condition.

More significant than Melville’s employment of genre mechanisms, at least in this discussion, is the vision and motivation that led Melville to interject dramatic tragedy into what began as “a romance of adventure, founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries” (Melville, “Letters,” 109). As Leon Howard points out, the book

underwent a conceptual sea change at the time Melville ceased referring to his tale as the story of “the Whale Fisheries” and began to call it his book about “the Whale” (Howard, “Melville and the Tragic,” 68). This shift in Melville’s direction has been the focus of much scholarship, culminating in the now famous “Two Moby-Dicks” theory of composition.<sup>2</sup> Though these studies have not resulted in a definitive textual analysis, dating the precise order, rearrangement and revision in the writing of *Moby-Dick*, it has nevertheless become universally accepted that the conceptual shift gave birth to Captain Ahab the tragic hero (as opposed to the common Nantucket whaling captain believed to be the character of the original draft); and, equally important, as implicit in Howard’s statement, the elevation of the white whale to the mythic creature who becomes the hero’s worthy antagonist.<sup>3</sup>

The tragic emphasis has ignited inquiries beyond the formal outcome itself, examining the influences that changed Melville’s direction, and his own state of mind, during the writing process.<sup>4</sup> It is a commonly held position that Melville’s own tragic vision and growing pessimism had combined with the timely reading of both Hawthorne and Shakespeare, to produce the tragic turn in Melville’s novel. Also significant was the friendship that sprung up between Melville and Hawthorne during the writing of *Moby-*

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<sup>2</sup> The main compositional studies include Leon Howard “Melville and the American Tragic Hero,” *Four Makers of the American Mind* (Durham 1976) and his earlier essay “Melville’s Struggle with the Angel,” *Modern American Qrtly.* (June 1940); George Stewart “The Two Moby-Dicks,” *American Literature.* (January 1954); James Barbour “The Composition of *Moby-Dick*,” *American Literature* (November 1975); Robert Milder “The Composition of *Moby-Dick*: A Review and a Prospect,” *ESQ* (1977).

<sup>3</sup> *Moby Dick* represents the only formidable antagonist to Ahab, though on the human level, Ahab’s other, but ineffectual, antagonist is Starbuck (Sewall 100).

<sup>4</sup> Though research on the literary and philosophical influences upon Melville during the writing of MD are too abundant to list here, the work of Merton Sealts (*Melville’s Reading* [1988] and *Pursuing Melville: 1940-1980* [1982]) is perhaps an indispensable starting point.



*Dick*. Howard Vincent describes the effects of these combined influences as the “revolution” of mind which led to Melville’s genius, a revolution which was twofold in nature: “first as the result of forces long gathering within Melville as he brooded on life and read Shakespeare; and second, as the sudden and magnificent release of those Shakespearean forces when Melville met Nathaniel Hawthorne” (25). Melville’s now famous review of Hawthorne’s *Mosses*, a review which many critics and biographers agree is self-portraiture as much as critical review, underscores Melville’s increasing fascination with the dark side of human life. “[I]t is that blackness in Hawthorne,” Melville writes, “that so fixes and fascinates me” (Melville, “Mosses,” 541). If you combine the extolment of Hawthorne’s “blackness” with the further praises of Shakespeare, also in the same essay, specifically those “deep far-away things in [Shakespeare]; those flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality” (541), you will find Melville, the artist, about to launch into his most notable effort in the “great Art of Telling the Truth,” a truth undeniably branded by Melville’s tragic vision.<sup>5</sup>

Conceding to the tragic, however, does not easily distill the novel’s meaning. There are an equal number of interpretations of the tragedy, it seems, as there are critics who defend a tragic reading. According to Stanley Geist, Ahab’s tragedy, and Melville’s by extension, is the tragedy of isolation. Man elevates himself to a place of greatness “through conquest over one’s own surface-skimming self” (27) and through the attainment

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<sup>5</sup> I feel compelled to note here that while Melville may have been in “the tragic phase of life” - in which he himself acknowledges and contemplates the “dark” - during the writing of MD, and during his friendship with Hawthorne, it seems plausible that his “fascination” with the “blackness” may possibly be more - at this particular time of his life, at any rate - artistic in nature, and does not necessarily portray an accurate *summation* of his personal philosophy. Many letters and journal entries written at this time, as well as passages and chapters in MD, portray an author very much engaged in and enjoying the pleasant, the simple and the human (versus only the broodingly dark and metaphysical). In fact, his relationship with Hawthorne at this time significantly contributes to Melville’s pronounced sense of aesthetic and intellectual pleasure and satisfaction.

of the tragic vision, which Geist defines as “that mournful richness of soul which [comes] only through knowledge of the darkness of life” (42-3). For Geist, this heightened state of consciousness makes one noble, but it is a “fatal magnificence” (57). Though Ahab becomes a “superman,” he does not become inhuman, and thus he is “isolated from men and from the gods” (59). The universe itself “cease[s] to be an organized whole” (61) and the illusion of a brotherhood of man is shattered (63).

According to Richard Sewall, the tragic vision is, first, the calling up of the ultimate question: “what does it mean to be?” (4); secondly, and necessarily following the initial question, is the dialectic which “contemplates the thrust and counterthrust of man against destiny” (6). Ahab, as tragic hero, is impelled to “fight against his destiny, kick against the pricks, and state his case before God or his fellows;” he is a man “at the limits of his sovereignty,” probing the mystery of human suffering to his own tragic end. Ahab reaches the apex of his tragic heroism in the final lowering, where his “topmost greatness lies in [his] topmost grief;” it is this reconciliation within himself – and his determination in action despite its fatality – that makes Ahab a tragically great man (104). The tragic vision, Sewall suggests, is not for those who are “quiet” and would “do nothing,” but for those impelled to action (5).

On the flip side of the coin, however, this action, pushed forward by the focused will, is interpreted by Howard Vincent as Ahab’s tragic flaw: “Captain Ahab hunts the White Whale in revengeful rage, heedless of the prudent words of his mates, blind to the omens... [and] prophesies. Ahab’s tragic flaw, his *hybris*, is his drive to self-assertion” (115). Vincent maintains that the central theme of the book is to be found in Father Mapple’s sermon; Ahab’s undoing is his headstrong disregard of the sermon’s main message, namely, “the law of self-annihilation” (116), annihilation, that is, of the lower

self, of the ego, of self-will. In contrast with this law, Ahab exerts unrepentant, defiant self-reliance, which ultimately brings about the destruction of both he and the Pequod's crew (72); in his mad search for the Absolute, which is fueled by "self-assertion," there is no law but Ahab's, as he "striv[es] to be God himself" (75).

Ahab's monomania, of course, is the center of any discussion on his tragedy. It is, as William Ellery Sedgwick suggests, the "tragedy of mind," which is defined as "the mind's need to see things comprehensively – with a view... to finality" (Sedgwick 8). It is our "deepest nature," Sedgwick writes, to desire an apprehension of "'the absolute condition of things,' regardless of the desolation that this invariably brings" (17-8). Ahab followed this "tragic phase" of mind to its fatal conclusion, as his monomaniac will forced him on in his pursuit for a "comprehensive" view of man's suffering. Leon Howard's analysis of the formal creation of Ahab's tragic character reinforces Sedgwick's theory. The mind's need to know, he implies, is a natural, intellectual faculty, but it is not, in and of itself, a fatally tragic one. Ahab's tragedy is shaped, Howard suggests, by Melville's reading of Coleridge's *Notes and Lectures Upon Shakespeare* and the subsequent employment of the tragic model he found therein: "to conceive any one intellectual or moral faculty in *morbid* excess, and then to place [the character]... thus *mutilated* or *diseased*, under given circumstances" (qtd. in Howard, "Struggle," 202). A further point in Howard's argument that should not be overlooked is his reminder that Melville describes Ahab's monomania – his "over-ruling morbidness" – as "half-wilful" (202, emphasis mine). Ahab's condition, his madness, is perhaps not a tragic condition without the key element of *wilfulness*. One characteristic of romantic tragedy is a critical *choice* that the protagonist makes as directed by his *hamartia*. In Ahab's case, we see the critical choice he wilfully makes, on more than one occasion, which projects him to his doom, that choice

being the denial of any straggling remnants of his humanity, even when he clearly sees that to embrace his humanity again would be to remedy his ill. Although James Young erroneously asserts that Ahab has “lost sight” of his humanity (459), as the following discussion will hopefully make clear, Young’s premise that it is Ahab’s *understanding* that makes him a tragic figure is significant. Even in the grasp of his monomania, Ahab is “capable of reason” and knows that the whale “is best left alone.” “Understanding does not lessen Ahab’s monomania;” Young writes, “it makes it tragic” (459). It should be added to Young’s argument that Ahab is also clearly “capable of reason” in the context of his own humanity and that he has an acute – and tragic - understanding of his conscious and deliberate renunciation of that humanity. One cannot separate his monomania from this choice, because his pursuit of the whale demands his sacrifice of the human lives for which, as captain of the whaling ship, he is responsible.

A synthesis of these theories is illuminating. Having acquired what has been described as the “tragic vision” and, through a circumstance of chance being “mutilated” by the white whale, Ahab’s tragic vision is perverted to such “morbid excess” that he asserts his unrelenting will to its fatal end, despite his understanding that he is courting disaster. What is implicit in this synthesis is the matter of *choice*. Ahab’s tragic conclusion, and that of the Pequod and its crew, has alternately been set forth as the result of possessive madness, divine workings, or, in Ahab’s own words, the “immutably decreed” act of the Fates, with Ahab serving as the “Fates’ lieutenant,” merely acting “under orders” (459). In “Melville’s Pardonable Sin,” Jerome Loving claims that Ahab’s situation is “hopeless,” that given the “final frustration” in understanding that “evil can come out of good,” the “choices in human existence” are “limited” (276). Ahab, according to Loving, had only two choices: to give up the futile quest or lose his dignity (276).

Loving suggests that Ahab is to be “pitied and admired, but not blamed” for his actions since circumstances threw him into this limited and frustrated human state. As already implied, however, the novel sets up a dialectic through which the human condition is explored, particularly in light of that “final frustration” and including the notion of individual choice. Ahab’s choices are not so limited or constricted as he himself – and many critics – believe. What prove, in the final analysis, to be “limited,” are not Ahab’s *choices*, but his simplistic and rigid hermeneutics and epistemology. Lacking a complex and complete understanding of the concepts of necessity and free will, for example, Ahab skews and distorts his response to his maiming. This is not an insignificant misinterpretation, since it drives the action of his tragedy to its fatal conclusion. Viewing only Self and God as the possible “reasoning” agents of his life, his plan for vengeance is elevated to the superhuman sphere; he then necessarily renounces his humanity to carry out his demonic vengeance.

In the gam with the Samuel Enderby, Melville constructs an antithesis to Ahab’s feud with Moby Dick, suggesting that an alternative reaction to the “final frustration” is available. Having a distinctly different option articulated in this chapter, Melville underscores not only Ahab’s madness, but also Ahab’s wilfulness. Captain Boomer, English Captain of the Enderby, has, like Ahab, had a devastating encounter with Moby Dick. When Boomer raises his sperm whale bone arm in response to Ahab’s inquiry regarding Moby Dick’s whereabouts, Ahab “impetuously” lowers his boat to interview the English captain. As they meet, Ahab puts out his ivory leg, “crossing the ivory arm,” in a gesture that superficially suggests their mutual bond or brotherhood. His words of greeting, “cried out in his walrus way,” also suggest Ahab has found in Boomer a common link with humanity: “Aye, aye, hearty! Let us shake bones together! – an arm and a leg!- an

arm that never can shrink, d'ye see; and a leg that never can run" (364). But Ahab's brief encounter with humanity ends there as he quickly breaches his sole interest in the captain and the gam: "Where did'st thou see the White Whale? – how long ago?" (364). The language used in the beginning of this interview reveals the disparate positions each captain takes on the matter of their mutilations and the whale itself. Ahab uses the active verb in reference to the whale's severing of Boomer's arm, "And he took that arm off did he?" (365). The use of the active verb recollects Ahab's soliloquy in "The Quarter Deck," in which he contemplates the "inscrutable malice sinewing" the whale, whether the whale be agent or principal of that malice (144). By accusing the whale of "malice" he assigns it purpose and forethought. Boomer's response to this is similar to Starbuck's first response, though subtler: "Aye, he was the cause of it, at least" (365). Here, Boomer negates the active and thoughtful malice of the whale, as Starbuck did on the quarterdeck: "Vengeance on a dumb brute... that simply smote thee from blindest instinct!" (144). This is echoed in Dr. Bunger's assessment, "'what you take for the White Whale's malice is only his awkwardness'" (368). Starbuck reads blasphemy in Ahab's conclusions; Dr. Bunger merely thinks Ahab's reason misguided. Whatever the case, Ahab's attitude toward his encounter with the white whale is in stark contrast with Boomer's, as the remainder of the scene demonstrates.

Captain Boomer is jocular and cheerful while reporting his encounter with the whale. Indeed, he is often distracted from the telling itself. Ahab's patience is taxed while he listens to the exchange between Bunger and Boomer, whose good-natured "bye-play" and frequent "facetious interruption[s]" completely deny the situation the solemnity that Ahab pays it, and expects from this stranger captain. This jocular distractibility is in stark contrast with Ahab's monomaniac *concentration* on the subject of his Whale. When

Boomer is brought back to the topic of the present conversation, the language again is significantly revealing; Boomer, urging Jack Bunker to complete the story for Captain Ahab, proclaims, “but go on – go on with the *arm* story” (367, emphasis mine). That seemingly simple sentence is loaded with meaning, which reverberates throughout the entire novel; namely, that meaning making is a hermeneutical process which is entirely, at first reading at least, subjective. Boomer’s amputation is “the arm story;” Ahab’s is the story of universal injustice, of the evil inherent in not only the natural universe, but in God himself. Action outside of man interplays with the lives of man, whether the action springs forth from the Fates or the “dumb brute” Nature of the universe. Where free will has its say, at times, is only in the response to this interplay. Here, two captains are victim of a very similar “fate” in their encounters with Moby Dick, but their comprehension of these encounters differs drastically because they each attach to it their own disparate interpretations and subjective meanings. To Captain Boomer, who thought his encounter with Moby Dick was going to “[bear] him down to Hell’s flames,” there is a resurrection, another frequent theme of the book. Boomer thanks “the *good* God” (emphasis mine) for the salvation of his life, while Ahab curses the evil God for the amputation of his leg.<sup>6</sup> Boomer crosses the white whale’s wake two more times, without any thought of lowering for him. “[H]e’s welcome,” Boomer goes on, “to the one arm he has, since I can’t help it, and didn’t know him then; but not to another” (368). Again, Boomer comes out of the fray with one less arm, for which he acknowledges and *accepts*, since he “can’t help it,” but he also comes out with his life. Though Boomer knows there would be “great glory in killing

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<sup>6</sup> This dichotomizing of god is indicative of Ahab’s polarized epistemology. Etsuko Taketani explains this polarization of god as Melville’s Gnostic “rewriting” of history, shows evidence of a 19<sup>th</sup> century revival of Gnosticism (122), and explains the dualities inherent in the Gnostic system of the divine, there being a “true deity presid[ing] over the spiritual world” and another, inferior, deity of Creation – the Demiurge – which presides over the material world, and which was inherently “evil” (124). This Demiurge is the object of Ahab’s vengeance.

[Moby Dick],” he also knows that “he’s best left alone” (368). There is no universal import attached to Boomer’s tale, there is simply *life* to be lived on the other side of the experience; his whole harrowing encounter he reduces to “the *arm* story.” Would that Ahab could reduce his tale the “the leg story,” he, too, might have survived, rather than be driven, “damned in the midst of Paradise” (147), to his tragic end. To Ahab, however, the encounter was the manifestation of Evil, and he “cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale” who “swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them... all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick” (160). The meaning that Ahab attaches to the incident is as bloated as his ego, as manifest in “The Candles” when he “defyingly” worships and challenges the “clear spirit of fire,” proclaiming, “I own thy speechless, placeless power” (417). Young argues that Boomer serves as Ahab’s antithesis because Boomer views the incident with “indifference,” “profiting from the knowledge” the experience provides and drawing the right conclusion that Moby Dick “is best left alone” (458). Though the attitude of “indifference” seems implausible here, Young aptly describes the qualities that save Boomer from Ahab’s doom. Rather than “indifference,” Boomer’s “reasonableness,” “rationality,” and “*humanity*” (Young, 458, emphasis mine) lead him to the necessary attitude of *acceptance*.

In assigning universal profundities to his accident and meaningful malice to Moby Dick, Ahab’s quest for vengeance becomes a quarrel with the gods themselves. Thus turning all of his energy and concentration to this divine quarrel, physically manifest in his hunt for the white whale, Ahab necessarily renounces his humanity; he no longer functions on the human sphere, though he hasn’t necessarily “lost sight of it.” In this there is despairing isolation, as Stanley Geist suggests, and poignant moments in which Ahab is



indeed pitiable and even at times admirable, as Loving observes. Nevertheless, the question of innocence or blame remains a debatable issue for the simple fact that his condition and choices are “half wilful;” Ahab deliberately chooses to continue on his course of destruction. His tragic heroism is thus complicated. Several pivotal chapters and passages in which the reader is most empathetic toward Ahab, in which he arouses the prerequisite response of pity, are followed by passages in which he abjectly and deliberately denies his humanity in order to assert his self will, thus dissolving the pity previously evoked. In taking God to task and abandoning humanity, Ahab’s epistemological tragedy is explained, as Thomas Werge argues, within the Calvinist paradigm. Ahab will not reconcile his desire for metaphysical knowledge with his limited human prospects for attaining such knowledge. “[M]an betrays ‘astonishing madness,’” Werge states, quoting Calvin, “in desiring to ‘comprehend immensity within the limits of [his] reason’” (492). Ahab’s self will and “his refusal to deny himself vengeance” is disobedience to God in the Calvinist sense. Referring to Father Mapple’s sermon, Werge points out that though man is urged to “stand forth as ‘his own inexorable self,’” Ahab misconstrues the meaning of “self” by asserting his bloated self will. The “self” that Mapple defines is “that self not as naked will and self-reliance but as faithful humility and obedience” (Werge 492). Werge further explains the end result of Ahab’s Calvinist tragedy: “For when man seeks to know what is ultimately denied him and demands the revenge and the answer that Ahab desires, there are, says Calvin, two inevitable results” (493). They are the dire results of faulty epistemology: “He attributes to God qualities that stem from his own crazed imagination, and he is certain to be destroyed by that which he seeks. Calvin consistently links pride, madness and ultimate destruction” (493). “‘Rushing onwards to destruction’” from this state of “‘presumptuous imagination’” (Werge 495-6),

Ahab consequently rushes away from humanity, as is seen in his interactions with Pip, Captain Gardiner of the *Rachel*, and Starbuck.

Ahab's relationship with Pip illustrates his deliberate effort to keep his humanity in check. As with Captain Boomer, though less fleeting, Ahab feels a sense of kinship with Pip because of their common maladies, in this case madness. Pip's role after "The Castaway" is significant. Stranded for a time in the "centre of the sea," Pip experiences with horror the "awful lonesomeness" of the "intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity" (347). Left behind, "the sea jeeringly kept [Pip's] finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul" (347). "Carried down alive to wondrous depths... the misermernan, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps" and Pip saw "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" (347). What Pip sees, therefore, is what Ahab fiercely wants to see. In "The Sphynx" Ahab leans over the side of the ship to stare fixedly at the suspended head of a sperm whale. He implores of it: "Speak, thou vast and venerable head... and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world's foundations" (264). Ironically, the noble Ahab searches in vain for Truth in the mighty sperm whale, but Pip, the humble cabin-boy, finds it in "coral insects": "Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs" (347). This contrast of the noble commander and the humble servant, as echoed in the great sperm whale and the minute coral insects, is in keeping with the tragic tradition of a King and his Fool, in which knowledge and wisdom are revealed through unlikely characters. In this scene and others to follow, Melville's theme of self-identity and knowledge are woven. Pip loses his identity in the vast, open sea. He beseeches Queequeg to "[s]eek out one Pip, who's now been missing long" (397). Looking overboard as the

Manxman reels up the log line, Pip mutters: “Pip’s missing. Let’s see now if ye haven’t fished him up here, fisherman” (427). And again, alone in the cabin Pip searches for himself: “[Pip’s] missing. Pip! Pip! Ding, dong, ding! Who’s seen Pip?” (437). Pip gains knowledge of the “eternities” when he loses his selfhood; Ahab’s bloated selfhood, it follows, denies him access to that knowledge. In both cases, the two men are mad, one driven mad by his own maniacal self-willed desire to see, the other mad by his passive, accidental, and selfless seeing. As the Manxman observes, “There go two daft ones now... One daft with strength, the other daft with weakness” (428). “Pip’s madness is a companion piece to Ahab’s derangement,” Howard Vincent notes, for “[n]othing so much resembles a hollow as a swelling” (106).

Despite the antithetical nature of the two characters, there is something in Pip, besides their common malady, which draws Ahab to him. Furthermore, it is his affectionate bond with Pip that leads Ahab perilously close to his humanity again, perilous, that is, to his demonic objective. Very early in the novel, Captain Peleg asserts that “striven, blasted, if [Ahab] be, Ahab has his humanities” (77). This aspect of Ahab is most apparent in his relationship with Pip. After Pip’s encounter with Wisdom’s “hoarded heaps” in the “wondrous depths,” the crew regards Pip as “mad,” because, as Ishmael concludes, “man’s insanity is heaven’s sense” and that “celestial thought,” which Pip experiences first hand, “to reason, is absurd and frantic” (347). There is a subtle complexity in Ahab’s growing affection for Pip. On the one hand, Ahab recognizes a sort of kinship in madness between the two, but he also senses, but cannot articulate, the woeful wisdom that is Pip’s, though he is clearly drawn to it. Ahab concedes that poor little Pip is mad, but elevates his stature regardless. When the Manxman cried out to Pip, “Peace, thou crazy loon,” Ahab mutters, “The greater idiot ever scolds the lesser” (427). Ahab here

proclaims Pip is merely the “lesser” idiot, but in the next breath he commands the Manxman to take his hands “off from that holiness” (427). Though Ahab cannot access or clearly understand Pip’s mad wisdom, he nevertheless senses something extraordinary in the boy. “I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee,” Ahab says to Pip, “Some unknown conduits from the unknown worlds must empty into thee” (433). Paradoxically, Pip’s magnetism for Ahab lies in the inexplicable “wondrous philosophies” from “unknown worlds,” as well as his perception that both he and Pip are victims of the injustice of God, who “did beget” and then “abandon” them (428); yet for all these more ponderous philosophical allurements and metaphysical accusations, Pip’s greatest influence over Ahab is the drawing forth of Ahab’s most human instincts. Ahab becomes, in a sense, the indulging adoptive father to Pip, and Pip the admiring and loyal boy to Ahab:

Here, boy; Ahab’s cabin shall be Pip’s home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings... [you are] full of the sweet things of love and gratitude. Come! I feel prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor’s. (428)

The paternal stirrings of this scene present a dilemma for Ahab, namely, the intrusion of the *heart* upon the mind’s purpose. The binary qualities of the heart and the mind, and the conflict between them, are a recurrent theme in *Moby-Dick*, and in Melville’s philosophical questioning of this period. In a letter to Hawthorne, Melville wrote:

It is a frightful poetical creed that the cultivation of the brain eats out the heart. But it is my *prose* opinion that in most cases, in those men who have fine brains and work them well, the heart extends down to hams... I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart, than Jupiter Olympus with his head. (Melville, “Letters,” 129)

That is a good enough philosophy for Melville, who had a fine brain and was like “most cases” of men; but Ahab was *unlike* “most cases;” he used his untouched intellect, for that

part of him still functioned despite his madness, to diabolical purpose. The cultivation of Ahab's brain did indeed "eat out his heart": "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" (175). Pip weakens Ahab's purpose because he appeals to the heart, but at last Ahab must become "Jupiter Olympus with his head." Despite Ahab's surfacing humanity in his relationship with Pip, when spurred on by the news that a stranger ship had just seen the White Whale, Ahab calculatedly renounces his humanity and casts Pip away from him: "Lad, lad, I tell thee thou must not follow Ahab now. The hour is coming when Ahab would not scare thee from him, yet would not have thee by him" (432). The "hour is coming," as indicated, because Ahab knows the *Pequod* sails in Moby Dick's waters at last. Ahab also knows that to continue to embrace his humanity, through this peculiar brotherhood with Pip, would be to weaken the monomaniac state of his will and his intellect, and such a "cure" would destroy his purpose: "There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health" (436). But Pip is for a time unrelenting in his plea to stay by Ahab's side, and this taxes Ahab's strength of purpose: "If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab's purpose keels up in him. I tell thee no; it cannot be;" until at last Ahab's steel will conquers his heart and he banishes Pip to his cabin with these threatening words: "Weep so, and I will murder thee! have care, for Ahab too is mad... And now I quit thee" (436). And, as if in a "spell" of loyalty, though there were no "lock, nor bolt," Pip remains in the cabin, listening to his captain's ivory steps above him, and prophetically promises his obedience to stay below, "though this stern strikes rock; and they bulge through; and oysters come to join me" (437). In this pivotal scene from "The Cabin," Ahab is guilty of the same crime that he

accuses God of committing, that is begetting and then abandoning Pip. In a sense, Pip is resurrected through Ahab's assumed paternity of him; Pip begins the voyage an orphan, is further abandoned by Stubb, and is then rescued from his ultimate isolation by Ahab. Ahab fully recognizes, and then turns his back on, the curative effects of his humanity and guardianship over Pip: "methinks like-cures-like applies to him too; he grows so sane again" (436). But whatever kinship or affection may have temporarily touched Ahab's heart, he ousts these feelings to keep steadily on his iron-will path.

Ahab is perhaps mentally prepared to divorce himself from Pip, and to make an orphan of him once again, because in the chapter previous he had just rehearsed this heartless stance and made an orphan of yet another boy, the lost son of Captain Gardiner of the "melancholy" Rachel. The dramatic tension in this chapter is heightened because there are now two captains and ships in urgent pursuit. The speed and movement of the ships echo the passions of each captain's purpose. Though the Pequod was "making good speed," the Rachel "shot nigh" to her, "bearing directly down upon [her]" (433). It was a contest of speed and urgency, as well, for each captain to speak his case to other: "But ere [the Rachel's] commander, who, with trumpet to mouth, stood up in his boat; ere he could hopefully hail, Ahab's voice was heard. 'Hast seen the White Whale?'" (433). Again, this contest continues in the lowering of boats: "[Ahab] would then have fain boarded the stranger, when the stranger captain himself, having stopped his vessel's way, was seen descending her side" (433). Upon the Pequod's deck, having informed Ahab that the Rachel just yesterday encountered the white whale, the stranger captain's melancholy story is lost for a time, overpowered by Ahab's obsessive need to know the details of the Rachel's encounter with Moby Dick. Barely cognizant of the stranger captain's initial question about the possible sighting of the missing whale-boat, and "[t]hrottling his joy"

over the news of Moby Dick, Ahab dismissively answers the captain's unexpected question, and then launches into his own exigent interview: "Where was [the whale]? – not killed! – not killed!... How was it?" (433). Only after Ahab greedily hears the details of Moby Dick does Captain Gardiner reveal the Rachel's story, that of the adrift and lost whale-boat which bears the captain's own son. Even the usually indifferent Stubb is moved in the hearing of it: "His son!... oh, it's his son he's lost... We must save that boy" (434). But Gardiner's plea falls on Captain Ahab's deaf ears, until Gardiner is forced to reveal the "cruellest perplexity" of his sad affair: to save one son, who was among the majority, he had orphaned another. Gardiner has not given up hope of a rescue, having boarded the Pequod to charter the ship for four-eight hours so the two ships could run on parallel lines for a sweeping search of the lost boat. (434) Unfortunately for the Rachel's captain and his lost son, the news of Moby Dick's near presence and recent sighting so bloats and fuels Ahab's monomania that he is immovably fixed on his own hunt. Captain Gardiner, a fellow Nantucketer familiar to Ahab, tries in vain to appeal to Ahab's humanity. When he meets with Ahab's cold response, he "alluded to his one yet missing boy; a little lad, but twelve years old," a boy of "tender age" for whom he feels an "earnest" but hearty "Nantucketer's paternal love" (435). The Rachel's captain, meeting no favorable response to his own grievous situation, heightens his appeal by pairing Ahab's fatherhood with the Christian moral of the golden rule: "'Do to me as you would have me do to you in the like case. For *you* too have a boy, Captain Ahab – though but a child, and nestling safely at home now'" (435). This must elicit some momentarily thawing effect on Ahab, which Gardiner reads on Ahab's face, for he calls out the orders to begin the search: "Yes, yes, you relent; I see it – run, run, men, now, and stand by to square in the yards" (435). Whatever betraying sign of hope that Gardiner reads upon the face of

Ahab, however infinitesimally his beseeching strikes a chord on Ahab's heart, it has not the power to shift Ahab in his steely posture: "Ahab stood still like an anvil, receiving every shock but without the least quivering of his own" (435). Only the orders issued by the Rachel's commander, orders which would hijack Ahab's own single-sighted agenda, breaks the rigid posture in which Ahab listens to the Rachel's story: "'Avast,' cried Ahab – 'touch not a rope-yarn'" (435). The next chilling words from Ahab orphan Captain Gardiner's lost son, prepare Ahab for the orphaning of Pip in the next chapter, and cement his purpose:

Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good bye, good bye. God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go. Mr. Starbuck, look at the binnacle watch, and in three minutes from this present instant warn off all strangers: then brace forward again, and let the ship sail as before. (435)

"Hurriedly turning," as if he fears the cooling of his resolve, Ahab, "with averted face," descends into his cabin (435). Interestingly, he takes leave of both Gardiner and Pip, upon renouncing his humanity in each case, with a plea for God's blessings on them. With Gardiner, his refusal of human aid is especially poignant as evidenced in the internal battle between Ahab's heart and his ever-fixed mind; he knows he acts against humanity when he speaks the words, "may I forgive myself, but I must go," and rushes off with "averted face."

The Rachel's news of a recent sighting of Moby Dick fans the flame of Ahab's monomania and the tension of the action is immediately accelerated. The urgent pace relaxes one last time before the Pequod's final lowering. The surface tranquility of the opening paragraphs of "The Symphony" are reminiscent of the meditative "dreaminess" of the "sultry afternoon" on deck in "The Mat-Maker." This time, however, the wedding of sea and sky, "hardly separable in that all-pervading azure," becomes the symbolic union of



the feminine and masculine traits: “on high, glided the snow-white wings of small, unspeckled birds; these were the gentle thoughts of the feminine air; but to and fro in the deeps, far down in the bottomless blue, rushed mighty leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks; and these were the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea” (442). The “gentle air” is compared to the “bold and rolling sea,” but their union “at the girdling line of the horizon” creates an aspect of “soft and tremulous motion” (442). This is more than the union of sky and sea, feminine and masculine; it is the “hardly separable” conditions of good and evil, which the narrator’s new tragic vision encompasses. What marks the greatest difference between this opening scene and similar scenes before it is the narrator’s more complete attention to the contrast *within*, and his knowledge that, though this contrast appears as merely “shades and shadows without,” it is always there at the deeper level. No longer can the “long, lingering swells” of the sea, combined with the “mild, mild wind” and “mild looking sky,” lull the narrator into the “lazy lounging” meditative “dreaminess” of earlier chapters. The narrator has seen deeper into life. This deepening vision is further explored in the next striking contrast of the chapter. Immediately following the sea and sky metaphor, Ishmael describes Ahab’s aspect: “Tied up and twisted; gnarled and knotted with wrinkles; haggardly firm and unyielding; his eyes glowing like coals” (442). This description is then followed by Ishmael’s plea to innocence: “Oh, immortal infancy, and innocence of the azure! Invisible creatures that frolic all round us! Sweet childhood of air and sky! How oblivious were ye of old Ahab’s close-coiled woe!” (442). The significance of these opening passages is manifold. First, after the intensity of the previous chapter, and the news of the recent sighting of the white whale, the reader is momentarily lulled as the dramatic tension diminishes. But all the while, in setting up the calming elements of the sky and the gentle winds, there remains no possibility of overlooking the “murderous”

monsters below this surface calm. The “strong, troubled, murderous” creatures of the sea interfere with the deceleration of tension; the duality becomes especially troublesome when the metaphor is transferred to Ahab’s “tied up and twisted; gnarled and knotted” soul. Just as Ishmael, having lost his innocence in the course of the journey, is unable to look at the sea with the eye of innocence, Ahab’s more darkly pensive moments cannot be separated from even the serene spell that the “enchanted air” casts over him for a time. The “infancy” and “innocence” to whom the narration pleads is perhaps the youthful and innocent narrator who first boarded the *Pequod*, and was, for a time, drawn to Ahab’s magnetism; it may also represent the crew as a whole who blindly followed their captain’s scheme, “oblivious,” until too late, of his “close-coiled woe” and the omens and prophecies of doom. More to the point, in this chapter it is Starbuck, “keeper of the Captain’s conscience” and Ahab’s “spiritual opposite” (Vincent 384), who serves as Ahab’s antithesis. In the conceit, Starbuck is represented by the “innocent” sky, which contrasts with the terrible, murderous depths of the sea, symbolizing Ahab. In fact, Ahab “stood forth in the clearness of the morn; lifting his splintered helmet of a brow to the fair girl’s forehead of heaven” (442), as the groom to the bride, and as Ahab to Starbuck when Ahab gives his innermost self to Starbuck in the chapter’s soliloquy.

Of course, the “wedding” of these polarities can’t take place, as it is with the sea and air, the bride and groom, because Ahab is all sea. “Innocence” and “sweetness” can never again be his. This chapter brings to the fore the novel’s repetitive exploration of the polarities of the human condition by juxtaposing innocence and “murderous thinking,” air and sea, Starbuck and Ahab. Yet this polar representation is complicated; though their philosophical or religious *beliefs* are antithetical, their *attitudes* are identical. They are each intransigent devotees to their faith. What “The Symphony” reveals, as will be

discussed at greater length in a later chapter, is the imperative of not swinging too wildly toward any polar extreme. To be human, effectively so, at any rate, one needs to maintain a state of equilibrium, despite the natural presence of the darker and lighter aspects of the human soul, of God, of the Universe. Though Starbuck represents the “green, landed” qualities of humanity, which is in contrast to the “boiling blood and the smoking brow” aspect of Ahab’s life at sea, philosophically, Starbuck is Ahab inverted twin – so rigidly innocent and dutiful, courageous only in the face “of all mortally practical occasions,” that he was impotent in the shadow of Ahab. Though he contrasts with Ahab in this “landed” quality and in his orthodoxy, he is similar to Ahab in his intellectual and spiritual rigidity. One of the dichotomies of the human condition that was oft examined in the book was that of the *heart* and the *head*. In his soliloquy, after he concludes that his forty years in the whale fisheries were all in vain - years that took him long and far from land, from his young wife and son, from home - Ahab makes one final plea to God: “God! God! God! – crack my heart! – stave my brain!” (444). In this fleeting moment, Ahab desires that his locked heart, which is imprisoning his humanity, be cracked open and set free of his mind’s darker tyranny. “Stave my brain!” he calls out, to kill the vulture that it has created. After this desperate plea to God, Ahab draws Starbuck closer to him to gaze into the “magic glass” of his human eye: “it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God. By the green land; by the bright hearth-stone! this is the magic glass, man” (444). In Starbuck’s *human* eye, he goes on, he sees his wife and child, the “far away home” (444).

Starbuck, recognizing Ahab’s lapse into humanity, beseeches his captain to turn sail and head home at last: ““Oh, my Captain! my Captain! noble soul! grand old heart, after all! Why should any one give chase to that hated fish... no more! it is done! We head

for Nantucket! Come, my Captain, study out the course, and let us away!” (444). As already demonstrated, whenever Ahab gets too close to his humanity, and especially when others respond to its surfacing – as with Pip and the Rachel’s captain – Ahab snaps it shut once again. He will let nothing deflect him from his purpose. To Starbuck’s plea, Ahab answers:

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 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 no so much as dare? (444-45)

Ahab is here contemplating what force is propelling him on in his mad quest:

Is it I, God or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. (445)

The question Ahab asks here is not new or novel in the least; it is the unanswerable, imponderable question of the ages asked by all who “dive deep.” But Ahab settles himself upon an answer, “By heaven, man, we are turned and turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike” (445). What Ahab hopes to achieve in his hunt of the white whale, in addition to vengeance and justice, is the attainment of Truth. In “The Symphony” he lands upon an inconclusive truth, and adopts it as a fast rule for action. How much personal choice comes into play in overthrowing his humanity in this chapter, as compared to those in the previous discussion, is perhaps debatable, but in settling upon a conclusion like this he is making a choice to accept his monomaniac will and to move forward in his action, despite it being “against all natural lovings and longings,” in other words, against all humanity. The paradoxical conclusion, perhaps, is that Ahab’s pursuit of Moby Dick morphed into his defiant fight against God; yet here,

toward the end of his story, he has no more fight in him. Though on the surface his inner fight is just now at the boiling point, in reality, by this point, he has lost already to Fate. He sees he is acting against his “natural” self, he even suspects (for we can never take Ahab’s “Truths” as reality), that it is Fate that moves him thus, yet he does not turn a hand against Fate, as he previously turned a hand against the dark God of fire in “The Candles.” Despite this level of self-knowledge, despite the strength of his defiant will, despite the bloating of his selfhood, in the final movement of the book he reduces himself to an infinitesimal and powerless tool, “like yonder windlass.” His choice to continue the fight, merely acting “under orders,” becomes his choice to *not choose* otherwise. His vision of Fate in “The Symphony” may be, as Paul Brodtkorb suggests, Ahab’s admission “to himself [of] the probable end of the pattern of his action” (93). Rather than being “Fate’s lieutenant,” Ahab, in this late stage of his quest, may merely mistake the probable conclusion of his own patterned *choices* as the “immutable” act, to the effect that, despite some extent of foretelling of the tragic end, his self-willed hunt must proceed. In the greater context of the novel, and Ishmael’s own contemplation of the forces of free will and necessity, of keeping one’s own “equilibrium and independence,” this seems much more likely. Despite the decrees of necessity, Brodtkorb maintains, “life is lived forward in an eternal present without benefit of hindsight... whether in actuality fated or not, the eternal present must be experienced... as at least potentially free” (93). Ahab’s current questioning of his action, and how much his action is decreed, does not excuse him from not shaking himself “potentially free” of his monomania: “for even when we say we cannot do otherwise, we know that we can: that the impulse to do otherwise might at any moment arise, and that if it did, we might just obey it; or we might not” (Brodtkorb 93). That “impulse” arose for Ahab – with Pip, with the Rachel’s captain, and with Starbuck – but

Ahab *chose* not to “obey it.” Perhaps Ahab’s madness indeed originated in the fevers and deliriums which resulted from his amputation, and perhaps the amputation left him with a bitter, vengeful soul, which combined with his “globular brain and ponderous heart” to very ill effect. Conceding to all this, however, does not negate the moments in which Ahab, with clarity of vision, knows his course to be misguided, if not demonic, moments in which his humanity resurfaces, threatening his wilful path. Yet in several of these pivotal points in the novel, Ahab chooses to renounce his humanity to save his arrogant, superhuman quest, until ultimately, he reduces himself to the position of subhuman agent, however faultily. Unable to balance the dualities of fate and free will, Ahab’s vision of both is to the end “mutilated.”

If Melville designed the *Pequod* to represent the macrocosm, serving as a “Harvard and a Yale” for the pursuit of knowledge on the human condition, then to limit the meaning of the novel to Ahab’s tragedy, and to further limit an understanding of the human condition to Ahab’s final understanding, is to overlook Melville’s greater point. As demonstrated in this chapter, Ahab’s view of the universe is skewed by his “half-wilful” monomania, not by any externally enforced limitations. This is not to say the human realm is not limited, but the possibilities are much broader than Ahab’s singleness of vision could possibly encompass. The crew, along with the stranger captains of the various gams, provides different perspectives of, and therefore different possible responses to, the human condition. Of course, the crew goes down with the captain in the end, except for Ishmael, and this is, in part, a result of their own self-imposed blinding limitations. The shipmates - Starbuck, Stubb and Flask - are further examples of the problematic nature of limited vision; they are all, like Ahab, “Fast-Fish.” Starbuck, with his exaggerated moral sense of duty and obedience to authority, rooted in his Nantucket Quaker background, and for all

his “hardy sobriety and fortitude,” his “uncommonly conscientious” intelligence and bravery, is incapable of withstanding “those more terrific, because more spiritual terrors” which Ahab presents (103-4). Stubb, the second mate, is also incapable of resisting Ahab’s purpose. He is an equally devoted man as Starbuck, only his religion is that of indifferent jollity. Stubb is blinded by his incessant “[g]ood-humored, easy, and careless” comportment, lacking the intellectual or spiritual rigor needed to comprehend the tragedy that is about to unfold (105). Flask, the third mate, is the most impotent of all the mates. “So utterly lost to all sense of reverence” (106), so intellectually incapable of seeing beyond the surface of things, Flask reads this meaning of the doubloon: “I see nothing here, but a round thing made of gold, and whoever raises a certain whale, this round thing belongs to him.” (361). These characters are all “Fast-Fish,” as mentioned, in the sense that is implied in Melville’s generalizing of the whaling code to intellectual, social and religious ideas: “What all men’s minds and opinions but Loose-fish? What is the principle of religious belief in them but a Loose-Fish? What to the ostentatious smuggling verbalists are the thoughts of thinkers but Loose-Fish?” (334). Every mind is a “Loose-Fish” until some belief - philosophical, social, moral or spiritual - holds it “fast.”

The result of becoming a “Fast-Fish,” in this philosophical sense, is that it necessarily aborts further spiritual or intellectual development. The adopted idea possesses the mind, and growth or regeneration ceases. In Melville’s short “six-inch chapter” on the restless soul of Bulkington, lies one of the most definitive messages of the novel: “all deep, earnest thinking is but that 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). Though the land is “all that’s kind to our mortalities,” in “landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God – so, better is it to perish in that

howling infinite, than to be ingloriously dashed upon the lee" (97). Better it is, Melville is implying, to be a Loose-Fish than a Fast-Fish. Even Bulkington, however, here revered by Ishmael as a "demigod," is a Fast-Fish. He takes to the "storm-tossed ship," the land "scorching to his feet," so completely that "independence" itself becomes the enslaving idea that possesses him. As admirable, and even imperative, as "deep, earnest thinking" and "independence" are to the development of one's mind or soul, if this annihilates all else that makes one human, one perishes nonetheless.

The only character who remains a Loose-Fish from first page to last, of course, is Ishmael. Though he nibbles at the bait on more than one occasion, and is held fast temporarily, he alone maintains the "intrepid effort" to save the "open independence" of his soul. All others died long before the ship went down if "life" is defined as one's unfolding and developing consciousness. It is in this sense that Ishmael not only represents the greatest antithetical character to Ahab, but the one character who transcends the tragedy, and thus survives, in both the figurative and literal sense. It is through Ishmael that the tragic is realized; without Ishmael, Ahab's tragedy is incomplete. Only through Ishmael's retrospective distance do we see Ahab's demonic use of will, his renouncement of humanity, and his universal application of subjective truth. This retrospective comprehension of the tragedy goes beyond the mere telling of Ahab's story. Ishmael could not have accomplished this with such vision had he not had his own apprehension of the tragic. Ishmael, too, almost renounces his humanity, almost falls prey to accepting as universal a passing or subjective feeling; he, too, feels the horrible desolation that is part of the human condition, and he, too, experiences the nameless horrors of the sea. Throughout all of this, however, he is never "ingloriously dashed upon the lee;" he maintains his "open independence" (97); he remains a Loose-Fish. Returning to Sewall's point that the tragic



vision is only for the man of “action,” and not for those who would “become quietest and do nothing” (5), it is arguable that Ishmael was indeed a “man of action,” a man, in fact, of “intrepid effort,” to use his own narrative words. Though Ishmael is the character who “become[s] quietest,” he is not one to “do nothing.” The protagonist of his own story, Ishmael’s action is not remarkable in the dramatic sense, but it makes Ahab’s drama possible, because through Ishmael’s action the tragedy is revealed and transcended. What is the action of a character who fades into the background so quickly, who becomes the “quietest”? It is, as Sedgwick would suggest, the “action of man’s comprehension slowly completing itself” (87). What Sedgwick writes about Melville can justifiably be applied to Ishmael:

Melville [Ishmael] did not stand passive like a pitcher into which his growth as a human being was slowly poured... his growth is consciously, even wilfully assumed. It becomes an action. The unfolding within Melville [Ishmael] takes on the character of a drama in which his identity – or soul – is the protagonist. (16)

This unfolding vision is the action of the story, and without Ishmael’s “matured and complex acceptance of reality” (Vincent 264), gained through the action of his unfolding vision, Ahab’s tragedy would be lost; the Pequod’s tale would be just another sea-tale, dramatically compelling though it may be. If *Moby-Dick* is the story of how to reconcile the apprehension of the terror and desolation inherent in the human condition, in Truth itself, then it is Ishmael who must lead the way on this journey.

PERCEPTION, RESURRECTION AND TRANSFIGURATION:  
ISHMAEL'S DYNAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE TRAGIC

If the *Pequod's* gam with the *Samuel Enderby* juxtaposes the two mutilated captains to illustrate Ahab's denial of humanity and the self-willed elevation of his hunt for the white whale to the metaphysical realm, as was earlier suggested, Ahab's gam takes on further significance when considered in the context of Ishmael's gam with this English ship. In the following chapter, "The Decanter," Ishmael interjects a narrative account of a gam on the *Enderby* "long after old Ahab touched her planks with his ivory heel" (370). Ishmael's experience is far different from Ahab's. The difference lies not in the *Enderby*, however; in both accounts Ishmael recalls the "good-humored" captain and crew. The difference, and the significance of the juxtaposition of these two gams, lies in the reception of the two characters, Ishmael and Ahab, to the *Enderby's* hospitality. Of course, there is no reception at all in Ahab's gam; his time on board the *Enderby* lasts only long enough to complete his interview regarding *Moby Dick*. Ahab boarded no ship unless she had news of the white whale, and even then "he cared not to consort, even for five minutes, with any stranger captain" (204). It has already been noted in the novel how an ordinary pleasure, like a sunset or a pipe, "no longer soothes" or "charm[s]" Ahab; neither can a social gam – human contact – provide such pleasure because Ahab "lack[s] the low enjoying power" (147). A gam is an opportunity for both "friendly and sociable contact" as well as the exchange of "dear domestic" news from home (205), so it is not surprising that Ahab has no use for them. Ishmael, some years later, boards the *Enderby* with social aims. Having boarded the "noble craft" "somewhere off the coast of Patagonia," Ishmael "drank good flip down in the forecabin." He recalls what a "fine gam" it was: "all trumps – every soul on board," full of that "noble, solid, Saxon hospitality" (370). He details the tangible and

human aspects of this gam, summing up: “the Samuel Enderby was a jolly ship; of good fare and plenty; fine flip and strong; crack fellows all, and capital from boot heels to hat-band” (370-71). In keeping with the metaphysical narrative style throughout *Moby-Dick*, in the midst of the physical and very human description of the gam, Melville slips in a brief but significant passage that sustains the thematic pulse of the novel. On the subject of this noble “hospitality,” Ishmael states, as if in warning: “may my parson forget me, and the devil remember me, if I ever lose sight of it” (370). If only from the perspective of retrospective distance and expanded consciousness, Ishmael sees that to turn away from such hospitality is to turn away from humanity, and he further understands the dangers inherent in that move.

Though he embraces this jovial hospitality and is capable of the “low enjoying power,” Ishmael should not be accused of intellectual indifference like that of Stubb or Flask. Ishmael is, from start to end, a thinking, feeling and “diving” man; in fact, he is as acutely curious as Ahab to learn the secrets that lie beneath the surface of life, as all his metaphysical meditations and reveries prove. Compare Ahab’s explanation of his voyage with Ishmael’s and this becomes clear. In “The Quarter-Deck,” Ahab describes his pursuit of Truth, his need to know what lies beyond the “visible objects” which are “as pasteboard masks.” He hunts Moby Dick to get at “the little lower layer,” the unknown but still reasoning thing... behind the reasoning mask.” Ahab’s drive to “strike through the mask” is plagued with a morbid vengeance as he sets his sights not just on the inscrutable mystery of life, but the “inscrutable malice sinewing it” (144), and that marks the key difference of the two questers. Though Ishmael goes to sea with less morbidity than Ahab, and admittedly a great deal more innocence – at least at the start – he is a quester nonetheless,

and a deeply thinking one.<sup>7</sup> The rationale for Ishmael's quest is noticeably similar to Ahab's. The sea is the metaphysical avenue toward Truth because there is "magic" in water and something "strange" in man's urge to be near it; there is a "mystical vibration" in being out of sight of land (13). As Ahab hopes to "strike through the mask" by hunting the white whale, for Ishmael, going to sea "swung open" the "great floodgates of the wonder-world" in which he pursues the "one grand hooded phantom" floating in his "inmost soul" (16). Both Ishmael and Ahab seek "the ungraspable phantom of life" (14). By setting up antithetical characters, though in like pursuit, Melville constructs a dialectic that explores not only the nature of Truth itself, but also man's search of that Truth. A reading that goes beyond Ahab's tragic quest and examines the action of Ishmael's less dramatically compelling but more comprehensive quest arrives at a fuller understanding, or reconciliation at least, of Melville's fundamental metaphysical and epistemological questions.

To examine the "action" of the protagonist Ishmael, it is first necessary to define his "drama." According to Sedgwick, Ishmael's drama is shaped, like Ahab's and Melville's, by the "mind's urge out of its own deepest and universal nature to get at the truth" (9). The ultimate form that this truth takes is of less importance than the active search itself. The "unfolding of inward vision" is an active process, organic and malleable; it is a "vision not so much of life as of what it is to be alive," Sedgwick states, so that

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<sup>7</sup> I should interject here that I do not agree with arguments in which Ishmael is portrayed as a suicidally depressed and morbid character, nor do I read "Loomings" with "brooding meditative seriousness" (McSweeney 31). My reading of "Loomings" perceives Ishmael as a jocular, humorous, and adventurous young man, despite his soul's "drizzly November," which anyhow has evidence of being simply a passing condition, of which he is "regulating" once again by his voyage to sea. It is difficult to take too seriously the suicidal allusions of someone who confesses that his "spleen" manifests itself in a strong urge toward "methodically knocking people's hats off." A post-*Harold and Maude* reading makes it just as difficult to be overly concerned with a young man's "pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral" (12).

“seeing” becomes nearly synonymous with “being” (16-7). Human growth, which is inherent in the unfolding vision, becomes the “action” of the “soul,” and the soul itself becomes the protagonist of the drama (16). Ishmael’s action is Dantesque, Sedgwick maintains; it is the “action of man’s comprehension slowly completing itself” (87-88). It is an action, therefore, organic in quality, in which “each observation that adds to his comprehension gains from the next” and each contributes to the unfolding vision by “undergoing a transfiguration in the completion of the whole” (87-8). Although it’s unwise to deny *Moby-Dick*’s simultaneously multiple and ambiguous classifications, it is interesting to note that when the novel is read in this Dantesque light, Ahab’s drama is complete before he even steps upon the stage. In the previous chapter the philosophical concept of Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish was applied to Ahab and Ishmael, correspondingly. Though dramatically speaking, Ahab’s action is more “stage-worthy” and compelling on the surface, it is, ironically, complete as soon as Ahab fixes meaning to the white whale, which occurs before the Pequod ever sets sail.<sup>8</sup> The organic process of “transfiguration” is aborted; the “action” of “comprehension slowly completing itself” is impossible in Ahab’s drama, because he is a “Fast-Fish,” barbed to the *unbalanced* and morbid philosophical bent toward “inscrutable malice.” Ahab’s monomania is “fast” to the physically “assailable” manifestation of that malice, the white whale itself. In thus intellectually fixing himself, and arresting further development, Ahab, in one sense, becomes the

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<sup>8</sup> In Sedgwick’s view of Ahab’s tragedy, the action is not so easily completed. Ahab’s inner drama, he suggests, is the struggle of his humanity trying to “free itself” from the “clutches of his evil monomania” (113). According to this theory, Ahab is “stretching his whole stature to God on high yet trying to bind himself to horizontal man” (135). As the previous chapter suggests, I disagree that this struggle exists. Ahab is nowhere found *trying* to bind himself to humanity; he is instead trying to keep intact his previous dissociation from “horizontal man.” Even chosen delays in his agenda, lowering for the first whale or mending leaky casks in the main-hold, for example, though they appear to be the surfacing of Ahab’s *human* responsibility and obligation, they are merely acts of “prudential policy” to ward off any “disaffection,” and possible mutiny, on the part of the chief mate and crew.

backdrop – though undeniably the most intense and informative – to Ishmael’s action. Ahab’s limited quest becomes one of many contributing “observations” in the drama of Ishmael’s soul comprehending itself.

If the action of Ishmael’s story is his unfolding vision, the dramatic stress, Sedgwick explains, “lies in the effort to preserve [his] equilibrium” despite the “realization of the foul truth of human nature” and the “terrors of the ultimate truth” (17). “Against such realizations,” Sedgwick asks, “how keep one’s equilibrium?” (17). This becomes the critical question for Ishmael; his survival depends upon finding an answer to it. Howard Vincent lays out a convincing account of Ishmael’s response to this dilemma. According to Vincent, Ishmael’s action, and conversely the action of which Ahab is incapable, is that of “regeneration in spiritual maturation” (75). It is the lesson of religious philosophies throughout the ages, and the subject of Father Mapple’s sermon at the Seamen’s Bethel, namely, the renunciation of personal desire and the acceptance of God’s will (Vincent 74-5). Through this, spiritual maturation is possible and one comes to understand the “deepest meaning of selfhood” (75). The process of maturation is one of intellectual or spiritual “resurrection;” death and rebirth, a repeated theme throughout the novel, is the “dialectic of human growth,” not unlike Sedgwick’s concept of “comprehension completing itself;” it is the “passage from youthful idealism into the *matured* and *complex acceptance* of reality” (Vincent, 265, emphasis mine). Vincent asserts: “Ishmael has attained the inner harmony unrealized by Ahab, because he has come to terms with his environment as his great captain never could do” (205). Ishmael’s ability to “subdue” his “sense of outrage,” to *accept* what life has to offer, makes it possible to keep his even keel, recover his personal equilibrium when it is threatened, and transcend the tragedy of Ahab. Ishmael learns “the

law of acceptance,” the law of resurrection and maturation, and he achieves spiritual rebirth (Vincent 390-91).

The concepts of acceptance and equilibrium are also set forth by Merlin Bowen, who describes Melville's work as the “pitting” of the “single individual against the universe” (3). This encounter becomes the essential “problem” of both “perception and action” played out in Melville’s characters. Bowen’s theory complements both Vincent and Sedgwick’s in terms of the “action” of Ishmael’s tale. In the first stage of the development of self, Bowen explains, there is the necessity for *perception*: an “awareness of one’s separateness from the not-self, of the basic hostility of the universe” (3). From perception, the self moves into the *action* of development. “[W]ith this awareness,” he writes, “will come the problem of the choice – or of the adoption, at any rate – of a life-attitude, a policy or course of action, in the following-out of which each man realizes himself and his destiny” (3). In the last chapter, Ahab’s self-willed *choice* was defined as his renunciation of humanity in order that, applying Bowen’s terms here, a “life-attitude” and “course of action” resolved on demonic and destructive defiance could proceed unscathed. Looking at Bowen’s dualistic definition of “self” brings further insight into Ishmael’s action, and again, the action that was aborted by Ahab. The self is “something that is both given and achieved,” according to Bowen, made up of both an “aboriginal, stable, though elusive center” and of the “realizations in action of the full human and individual potential” (3). Where Ahab fails in this process, perhaps, is in denying the “given” and “stable” center of self, since it is, as Bowen describes, “elusive.” Indeed, what “tasks” and “heaps” Ahab is that “inscrutable thing” (MD 144), and once he defines his “action” and “individual potential,” he turns his energy outward toward that action and the equilibrium of the dual nature of self is thrown off balance. Ishmael’s action of

development is an inward peering toward that “given” and “stable center,” which interacts with and helps define the external personality, the “achieved” self. Ishmael, therefore, maintains equilibrium between the “given” and the “achieved” selves. Additionally, Ishmael’s action is dynamic; though he cannot change – or even perceive in its full light – the stable center, the process of development continues to change and unfold as he “reshaped and qualified his beliefs in the light of continuing experience” (Bowen 3-4). It should be admitted that Bowen was here describing Melville, and not his character Ishmael, and it is well to heed his warning to scholars who insist upon identifying Melville with any of his characters; yet, in the context of this argument, and as the following discussion will hopefully make clear, this “reshaping” of self is precisely the action of Ishmael’s book. Ishmael’s *dynamic* process of defining self is in stark contrast to Ahab’s *static* definition of self, hence the Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish analogy that was earlier applied. Like Vincent, Bowen ascribes the concept of resurrection to the main action in Ishmael’s drama. When perception moves to action, the individual has to consider what “characterizing responses to life,” and to “the dimensions of reality’s dark side,” that he will take (5). For Ishmael, a series of resurrections evolve into his “life-affirming stoicism” and the stance of “armed neutrality” (4-5). Bowen’s “armed neutrality” is synonymous with Vincent’s idea of “matured and complex acceptance of reality.” “Armed neutrality” is necessarily “matured and complex” because it is a decision or response to the perception of darkness and the “problem of moral action;” it is not, therefore, an action of the “simple doers,” like Stubb and Flask, or the “innocents,” like Starbuck, perhaps (126). Bowen’s concept of “armed neutrality,” therefore, incorporates both equilibrium and acceptance. Having *accepted* one’s “separateness,” the hostility of the universe, and the darkness of reality, the person thus “armed” maintains a state of *equilibrium*, giving into



“neither immoderate hope nor despairing anger, neither submission nor defiance” (126); he maintains both his “‘humanities’” and his sovereignty “‘among the powers of heaven, hell and earth’” (127).

The pattern of dramatic action in Ishmael’s quest can be articulated in the fusion of these arguments. A myriad of experiences and observations on board the Pequod threaten Ishmael’s state of personal equilibrium; then, arriving at a matured acceptance of some metaphysical insight, which a physical or meditative experience has wrought, Ishmael is “resurrected,” his equilibrium is recovered, his consciousness “transfigured;” from this process of transformation he chooses the “life-attitude” of “armed neutrality” and “life-affirming stoicism,” which ultimately becomes his salvation.

The maintenance of one’s personal philosophical and spiritual equilibrium has thus far only been connected to the dilemma of one’s realization of the “terrors” and “foulness” of human nature and truth. Just as imperative to Melville thematically, and Ishmael dramatically, is the necessity to maintain one’s equilibrium in the face of *any* philosophy, insight, or observation - positive or negative, light or dark. One of Ishmael’s early opportunities to glean the wisdom of this lesson is in “The Mast-head.” In this chapter, Ishmael experiences what was previously described and anticipated in “Loomings,” that is the wedding of meditation and water. Ishmael’s first duty on watch comes round once the Pequod sails in “the serene weather of the tropics,” a serenity so seductive to the “dreamy meditative man” that he quickly finds himself “lost in the infinite series of the sea, with nothing ruffled but the waves” (136-37). The metaphysical journeyer is lulled into a meditative state by the physical forces around him: the weather is “serene” and “exceedingly pleasant;” the “tranced ship indolently rolls; the drowsy trade winds blow; everything resolves [him] into languor” (136-37). The orientation of the masthead,

elevated “a hundred feet above the silent decks,” lends itself to this meditative trance as it induces “sublime uneventfulness” and disconnection from the “carking cares of earth” (136-7). The ascent to the masthead symbolizes a shift from the physical to the meditative state:

I used to lounge up the rigging very leisurely, resting in the top to have a chat with Queequeg, or anyone else off duty whom I might find there; then ascending a little way further, and throwing a lazy leg over the top-sail yard, take a preliminary view of the watery pastures, and so at last mount to my ultimate destination. (139)

Away from the business on deck, he stops for a “leisurely” chat with Queequeg, then rising still higher, he leaves the human plane to “take a preliminary view” of the sea, which represents his unconscious mind, until he reaches at last the “ultimate destination” of the “opium-like listlessness” of “vacant, unconscious reverie” of the “deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature” (140). The “absent-minded youth” loses his identity in this dreamy trance; his thoughts blend with the “cadence of the waves,” and he himself blends with the unity of the All. Though the meditative state of the “young Platonist” is serene and pleasantly seductive, Ishmael’s description of it is broken off with a physical warning, with symbolic import, of the dangers of thus “sleeping” at the masthead:

But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, 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. Heed it well, ye Pantheists! (140)

This scene has been variously interpreted. According to Vincent, Melville is here satirizing the idealistic New England Transcendentalists as “misguided men blind to the brute facts of existence” (156). Lost in the “enchanted mood” the young Platonist loses his own identity to the “Over-Soul,” and in this “seductive” and “deceptive” state of harmony,

there is no accounting for the “evil and repellent facts of life” (Vincent 151-2); dismissing the “up-rising” fins of the sharkishness of the human mind as those “elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it,” the “short-sighted” and “imperfect” dreamer overlooks the “hugest monsters of the sea” swimming beneath the surface of consciousness (MD 136-8). Contrastingly, D.J. Ferrantello explains this meditative state as one that does not overlook the “hugest monsters” but transcends that *level* of the unconscious mind. “The dreaded creatures of the sea are, metaphorically, the part of consciousness which needs to be released or transcended when reaching meditative states” (44). Instead of a process or philosophy that *excludes* the “dreaded creatures” inherent in the mind and human nature, Ferrantello suggests that the “reverie” achieved at the masthead simply went beyond them: “Deeper than the dreaded creatures of the sea of consciousness, then, is the notion of a universal consciousness or soul” (45). Supporting this idea, Ferrantello recalls Ishmael’s later reflection on the “Insular Tahiti” of his soul: “For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life” (MD 236).<sup>9</sup> The satire of Ishmael’s meditation at the masthead, according to Ferrantello, lies not in the absence of the darker forms within the soul, but in the impossibility of maintaining this altered transcendent state and thus being thrown back into “ordinary consciousness” (46). According to Charles Feidelson, Jr., the masthead scene illustrates Ishmael’s first glimpse of the ultimate paradox of the novel: “the necessity of voyaging and the equal necessity of failure” (676). By “blending the cadence of waves with thoughts,” and attaining “sheer vision,” Ishmael risks falling to the same fate of

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<sup>9</sup> The “notion of a universal consciousness or soul,” as Ferrantello expresses it here, however, though first suggested by Ishmael, is rejected at the masthead, so this definitive conclusion seems dubious. Also, Ishmael’s “insular Tahiti” reverie supports *only* that Ishmael has found within *his own soul* this place of refuge; it does not validate a belief in a “universal consciousness or soul.”

Narcissus. To lose the separateness of individual identity to the sea is to drown, yet without diving, the self cannot be known: “The phantom is ungraspable as long as we stand on the bank; and the ocean is annihilative once we dive into it” (Feidelson 672).

It is not necessary to defend any given interpretation of this chapter. As Vincent correctly asserts, an approach which denies the “symbolic richness and multiplicity” in *Moby-Dick* is “not worth long study” (375). Symbolic ambiguity in *Moby-Dick* is more than a narrative technique; it is a thematically significant element of the novel. No more is the reader to “see” the Truth of *Moby-Dick* than are Ishmael and Ahab to see the secrets that lie in the undivable depths of the sea. In light of this, perhaps more valuable than deciding which interpretation is “correct,” is an approach which exposes what all have in common with the thematic threads of the novel. What each of these interpretations illustrates is that the “absent-minded young philosopher” at the masthead is at perilous risk of losing his own state of personal equilibrium. In Vincent’s account, the loss of equilibrium is Ishmael’s idealistic ignorance and denial of the darker side of reality. In Ferrantello’s account, the disequilibrium lies in the frustration of an altered state that cannot possibly be sustained by the human mind. Feidelson’s theory exposes the dangers inherent in striving for what is beyond the reach of human knowledge; the search that Narcissus pursues is well intended perhaps, but when swollen into a state of exigency the equilibrium between what is desired and what is achievable is thrown off balance. Whatever metaphysical interpretation is applied to the scene, all threaten Ishmael’s equilibrium precisely because this trancelike “sleep” moves him away from his *humanity*. Both physically and symbolically, this poses a vital threat to Ishmael. Notice the final stage of his meditation is described as a lifeless sleep: “There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the

sea, from the inscrutable tides of God” (140). The power of the individual to keep “an open independence of her sea” is lost; Ishmael is dead. There is “no life” in his own independent soul as he becomes one in the All, or leaves the realm of human consciousness, or drowns in a futile and fatal search for self. In each case, he loses himself temporarily, and in so doing almost loses his humanity. He is now only an object moved through external forces: God, the sea, the ship - all combine to “rock” the lifeless being at the masthead.<sup>10</sup> Ishmael’s lapse at the masthead defies the “standing orders” of all whale ships: ““Keep your weather eye open, and sing out every time”” (139). Keeping in mind that the whale ship is Ishmael’s “Harvard and Yale,” and that the voyage is always metaphysically symbolic, this lapse is indeed critical, for it spells spiritual and intellectual death; it spells the danger of being “ingloriously dashed upon the lee” (97). It is not whale ship’s “standing orders” that are of import here, but the soul’s.

As the novel repeatedly points out, incompleteness is the flaw of fast and fixed philosophical theories. If Ishmael’s dream at the masthead is the shortsighted meditation of a naïve journeyer on optimistic and Romantic notions of unity and peace, “The Try-Works” is the dark complement, which completes the episode. It is well to keep in mind, before proceeding into a discussion of “The Try-Works” dream, that Ishmael’s masthead trance precedes Ahab’s wild persuasions in “The Quarter-Deck,” his diabolical baptism in “The Forge,” his worshipful defiance in “The Candles,” and, obviously, the ultimate destruction of the *Pequod*. Yet, at the same time, the *narration* of Ishmael’s meditation at the masthead comes *after* all of these scenes and episodes. Ishmael’s story is complicated

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<sup>10</sup> Compare these external forces working and “rocking” the “lifeless” Ishmael with Ahab’s query in “The Symphony.” Ahab asks how his heart can beat or his brain think “unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that *living*, and not I” (445, emphasis mine). Ahab is not *living*, according to his own theory; he is merely acted upon – and through. Ishmael, too, was “rocked” “lifeless” by forces outside him, but came back to *his own* “living.”

by his dual role of immediate protagonist and retrospective narrator. In depicting scene, as John Wenke points out, “Ishmael juxtaposes his past ignorance with what he now knows;” he is at once “tyro actor and process narrator” (702). This raises the question of just how much of the “action” of Ishmael’s unfolding vision takes place on board the Pequod, and how much takes place in the creative process of recording experience. Does Ishmael wake up from his meditative dream immediately realizing the final horrific warning about dropping into “Descartian vortices” to “no more rise forever”? Or is this revelation a result of the reflective and retrospective creative process? It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this narrative quandary, but at the same time it should not be overlooked. Because Ishmael’s action is an interior action, which accounts for, or at least excuses, his frequent disappearance as active *character* in the novel, for the purpose of this study the question of immediacy or chronology of Ishmael’s various revelations and “resurrections” becomes a moot point. It is obvious from the two key “dreams” – at the masthead and the helm (to be presently discussed) – that Ishmael’s perceptions, and subsequent comprehension, are, in fact, undergoing transformation during his physical and actual voyage on the Pequod. It does not pose a significant problem in the context of this paper should the bulk of his “maturation” and comprehension unfold via the process of reporting the story. In fact, if, as has been asserted, his story is the transfiguration of consciousness, then the “telling” becomes a reliable and reasonable *modus operandi* for “comprehension slowly completing itself.” It is his reflective intellect, after all, that sets him apart from the other characters of the book; it is his changing perception and growing vision that keeps Ishmael, again, a Loose-Fish. The process of narration combines experience and reflection, thus becoming a useful and justifiable hermeneutical tool in Ishmael’s

epistemological journey, a journey that does not end when the still cruising Rachel picks him up two days after the Pequod's sinking.

With that aside in mind, an examination of Ishmael's dream at the helm does show evidence of his already changing consciousness. Much has transpired on the Pequod by this point, in terms of Ahab's demonic mission, to trigger a darker meditation. The midnight scene before Ishmael while stationed at the helm, during the trying-out of the blubber, is diametrically opposed to the sunny serenity of the mild Pacific midday in "The Mast-Head." The smoke from the try-works puts out an "unspeakable, wild, Hindoo odor... such as may lurk in the vicinity of funereal pyres;" "the wild ocean darkness was intense" and is "licked up by the fierce flames" which "forked forth from the sooty flues;" "the smoke rolled away in sullen heaps," "the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived" (353). The horrific physical aspect of the ship is echoed by the diabolical aspect of the crew, and is projected into symbolic significance by the onlooking narrator:

Their tawny features, now all begrimed with smoke and sweat, their matted beards, and the contrasting barbaric brilliancy of their teeth, all these were strangely revealed in the capricious emblazonings of the works. As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like flames from the furnace; as to and fro, in their front, the harpooners wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers... then 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. (353-54)

Still the metaphysical philosopher, although wiser and more experienced than when he climbed the masthead, Ishmael remains vulnerable to meditative trances which threaten his equilibrium. While "wrapped in darkness" and looking out from the distanced and isolated position at the helm, Ishmael "better saw the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of

*others*” (354, emphasis mine). Held in this captive and removed state of observation, Ishmael’s equilibrium lurches off center and his unconscious mind, as soon as he “yield[s] to that unaccountable drowsiness,” leans into the devilish and fiery darkness: “the continual sight of the fiend shapes before me, capering half in smoke and half in fire, these at last begat kindred visions in my soul” (354). Physical effects again work to lull Ishmael into the “dream” state, but this time his dream is of nightmarish “jet gloom.”

Another significant difference in this “dream” is that he is meditating not on the sea, in other words his “inmost soul,” but on the fiendishness of *the other*. While at the masthead, Ishmael’s vision is one of unity, and, therefore, lost individuality, at the helm, Ishmael temporarily perceives his separateness from “the other,” and therefore loses his common identity. Both are perilous imbalances and faulty perceptions of selfhood. As Vincent explicates, in the “Mast-Head” Melville satirizes the Transcendentalist who “errs in too great an insistence on unity and too little heeds multeity” (334). Yet, paradoxically, Vincent also connects the try-works dream with Melville’s satire of the same transcendental idealism: “it also errs in too great an insistence on self-reliance. Too great an emphasis on self, [Melville] says implicatively, may lead to self-destruction” (334). Surely this is the fate of Ahab, and almost becomes the fate of Ishmael as he lets himself be taken over in the dream state at the helm, and nearly too late “turned himself about... faced back, just in time to prevent the vessel from flying up into the wind, and very probably capsizing her” (MD 354). Once again, though at opposite ends of the pole, an “unnatural hallucination” is paired with a “fatal contingency of being brought by the lee” (354).

Embedded in this “unnatural hallucination” at the helm lies another vision that threatens Ishmael’s equilibrium. Not only is the issue of selfhood and identity questioned, but the philosophical and theoretical viewpoints of optimism and pessimism, light and



dark, good and evil. Though Ishmael stands at an “objective distance” from the hellish work taking place on deck, and initially feels himself separate and immune from the savage and ghastly condition of human life, as soon as he yields to the dream state he experiences a “kindred vision in [his] soul” (354). He has, in other words, a deep and dangerously convincing sense of the darkness of his own human soul – what he watches is not separate from him, but also a part of him. And, just as he awakens from the philosophically imbalanced reverie at the masthead and warns the young Pantheists to heed his lesson, Ishmael at the helm likewise admonishes his reader to “Look not too long into the face of the fire, O Man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; *accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly*” (354, emphasis mine). In both cases, Ishmael’s admonishment echoes a sentiment Melville states in a letter to Hawthorne: “what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion” (Melville, “Letters,” 131). Dreamer though he is, Ishmael doesn’t play “mischief with the truth,” as Ahab’s monomania most certainly does, because Ishmael accepts the complexities of truth and the human condition, as Ahab cannot. Ishmael, therefore, transcends the imbalanced visions of his meditations and is spiritually and intellectually resurrected.

Though Ishmael is resurrected from the imbalanced vision of “the blackness of darkness,” his more experienced mind, at this point in the ill-fated voyage, makes regaining his equilibrium much more difficult than it was at the mast-head. This signals, as was earlier suggested, the ongoing transformation of Ishmael’s vision and comprehension of *complexity*. It was much easier, earlier in the voyage, to pull himself out of the position of imbalanced optimism than he now finds it to regain his equilibrium after a psychic slip

into darkness. His attempt to do so shows him oscillating in divergent beliefs. In the final paragraphs of "The Try-Works," his narrative teeters like the sides of a balance-scale, shifting up and down until it slowly comes to rest on a decisive weight of the objects on either side of the scale. As Bowen's analysis of the chapter demonstrates, in an "effort to right the course" of his philosophical interpretation of the "hallucination" at the helm, he swings too far over, and must correct and then recorrect his changing vision of truth. "Believe not the artificial light," Ishmael first admonishes, "Tomorrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in a far other, at least gentler, relief" (354). Even in this first warning, Ishmael is found qualifying his faith. If the "relief" of the crew is not a "far other" one than the hellish view he now holds at midnight, it will be "at least gentler." This is not much reassurance. But he goes on to firmly restate his conviction as regards "the light," despite his qualified view of man: "the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp – all others but liars!" (354). However, in emphatically reasserting this optimism, Bowen points out, Ishmael steers the helm "too far over in an effort to right the course, and it must go back" (250). "Nevertheless," Ishmael again qualifies, "the sun hides not Virginia's Dismal Swamp, nor Rome's accursed Campagna, nor wide Sahara, nor all the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon. The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two-thirds of this earth" (MD 354-55). In accounting for the earth's *millions* of miles of desert and *two-thirds* ocean, Ishmael is not only subjectively qualifying his former statement about the "true light," but he is symbolically quantifying it as well; the numbers lend a sense of measurable and reliable accuracy of his final assessment: darkness outweighs light on the balance-scale of human existence. This is a pivotal moment in Ishmael's journey; it is the moment when Ishmael not only comes to

real terms with the “uprising fins” that “people the soul,” but also accepts that darkness is the greater part of human life. It is, therefore, the first definitive expression of Ishmael’s tragic vision:

that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true – not true, or undeveloped. With books it is the same. The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon’s, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. “All is vanity.” ALL. (355)

But the scales are still wavering, and, as Bowen states, Ishmael, “in correction of this correction” (250), circles back to his initial warning:

But even Solomon, he says, “that man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain” (*i.e.* even while living) “in the congregation of the dead.” Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest in invert thee, deaden thee; as for a time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is woe that is madness. (355)

This last remonstrance returns Ishmael to his previous philosophical position - though admittedly qualified and counterbalanced by woe - of faith in the “true” and “natural” light, and it also brings the novel back to the theme of resurrection. Ishmael was again “dead” for a time, he looked into the fire and came out of the seeing with the tragic vision, but he regained his balance and, therefore, his independent sovereignty and equilibrium. He did not look so long into the fire that he lost all sight of the “light,” and was thus spared the “woe that is madness.” Ishmael perceives, and accepts, the human limitations of comprehension; he therefore explores the unknown with prudence.

Critics differ in their interpretations of Ishmael’s closing words regarding the “Catskill eagle.” Some critics, including McSweeney, Vincent and Sedgwick, deem the passage as an encouragement to dive *and* soar with the Catskill eagle, yet with prudence: don’t look “too long,” else you see the “woe that is madness.” Vincent asserts that the souls capable of this flight are few; in fact his discussion only includes two - Shakespeare

and Melville (336). McSweeney adds both Ishmael and Ahab to the group of mountain eagles, arguing that this is their “essential similarity and the grandeur that their tragic recognitions give them” (105); he further juxtaposes this grandeur with the characters who soar above the plain - Queequeg, Starbuck, Flask, Stubb – those who either “cannot or will not explore the blackness within them” (105). Other critics, Bowen and Sewall among them, suggest that this passage serves as a warning to the reader to keep himself with the common “birds upon the plain,” thus avoiding “the blackest gorges” of the human soul into which the “Catskill eagle” dives. Yet, Bowen’s final analysis of the chapter seems contradictory to his interpretation of prudence. He sums up Ishmael’s warning in this way: “‘Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! – But look’” (251). This is contradictory simply because one cannot “look” if one does not “dive,” and it is only the Catskill eagle that can plunge into the “gorges” of the soul. To stay above the “plain” “for refuge’s sake,” to borrow again from “The Lee Shore,” is to “cast” oneself on the “treacherous” and “slavish” plane of spiritual sleep, or death in life. If *Moby-Dick* has any definitive meaning, with the possible exception of life’s want of definitive meaning, it is the call to *dive*. In his famous review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Melville lauds the intellectual necessity – and the individuals possessing the intellectual capacity - to “dive”:

there is no man, in whom humor and love, like mountain peaks, soar to such rapt height, as to receive the irradiations of the upper skies; - there is no man in whom humor and love are developed in that high form called genius; no such man can exist without also possessing, as the indispensable complement of these, a great, deep intellect, which drops down into the universe like a plummet. (Melville, “Hawthorne,” 539)

There are many more instances, within Melville’s letters and throughout *Moby-Dick*, of this conviction: “I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes

a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more; & if he don't attain the bottom, why, all the lead in Galena can't fashion the plumet [sic] that will" ("Letters," 79); "This going mad of a friend or acquaintance comes straight home to every man who feels his soul in him, - which but few men do. For in all of us lodges the same fuel to light the same fire. And he who has never felt, momentarily, what madness is has but a mouthful of brains" ("Letters," 83); "[C]an we thus hope to light upon some chance clue to conduct us to the hidden cause we seek? *Let us try.* But in a matter like this, subtlety appeals to subtlety, and without imagination no man can follow another into these halls (MD, 167, emphasis mine); "But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God - so, 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). So replete is Melville's writing, and Ishmael's if *Moby-Dick* is read as his book, with a sense of conviction toward the estimable nature of the mind to search, that these words, which launch the cetological center of the book, come less as a warning than as an invitation to worthy readers: "Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harborless immensities" (116). Based on such evidence, the Catskill eagle passage seems, too, an invitation to "[t]he freedom of spirit, alike to plunge and to soar" (Sedgwick 125).

Ishmael's "final" statement of faith in this scene is a remarkably balanced one; it is, as Vincent defines it, a "matured and complex acceptance." There is no other character on board the *Pequod* that demonstrates a faith so balanced, so complex. Nor is there any character that keeps his personal equilibrium, as Ishmael here proves capable, though with great pains and obvious uncertainty. Ishmael demonstrates the quality that Melville wrote about in his review of *Mosses*: "in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without

throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance” (Melville, “Mosses,” 541). The complexity of Ishmael’s interpretation of this “dream” of devilish fires and fiends before him deserves even further examination. As has already been stated here and commonly accepted, this scene is Ishmael’s reconciliation of darkness and light, his acceptance that woe outweighs joy in man’s experience. This is, if we apply Bowen’s theory, the first necessary stage of Ishmael’s changing development, that is, his *perception*. The oscillation that follows this perception is the active process of Ishmael’s comprehension completing itself, as Sedgwick’s theory defines the process, which explains the necessary and understandable tacking of his thoughts. He has had a dark and disturbing vision, particularly in light of the optimistic idealism of his earlier psyche. Such a perception would surely rattle the cage of one’s comprehension. To complete the experience of unfolding vision, Ishmael has to move himself from mere perception, again borrowing from Bowen, to the *action* of “reshap[ing] and qualify[ing] his beliefs in the light of [this] experience” (3-4). He must now choose – or “adopt” – an altered “life-attitude” or “policy” based upon his new tragic vision. He ends his grim assessment of the human condition by quoting *Ecclesiastes*: “All is vanity.” He adds a curious editorial note to this, a fully emphatic statement, via capitalization of each letter: “ALL.” Today’s common usage of the term “vanity” would render this statement of Ishmael’s truly and wholly nihilistic. As applied in *Ecclesiastes*, however, “vanity” is “breath”: *transient, passing, and fleeting*. Undeniably, *Ecclesiastes* deals with the possibility of man’s insignificance, and it is, as Ishmael describes it, “the fine hammered steel of woe,” but it also repeatedly reminds the reader that “life with its limitations is worth living” (May 805). If “ALL” is vanity – in other words, all things are *passing* and *fleeting* – then this dark vision of Ishmael’s at the helm is transient, just as his optimistic vision is at the masthead.

Joined, the two outlooks form a more complete and complex comprehension; but taken singularly, and wholly – in other words, interpreted as the “ALL” – they lead man, as Ishmael’s final warning implies, “out of the way of understanding” and, therefore, into the “congregation of the dead” (355). Since “understanding” is a dynamic, organic and *living* process, one is “dead” when one steps “out of the way of [it]” by adopting as final and conclusive a fleeting – a *vain* – vision. “What plays the mischief with the truth,” it is worth repeating here, “is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion” (Melville, “Letters,” 131).

This chapter began with a discussion comparing Ahab and Ishmael’s disparate responses to the “jovial” hospitality of the Samuel Enderby, concluding that it was Ishmael’s allegiance to humanity – and conversely Ahab’s defiance of it – that defined the difference. The chapter now ends on what seems a far other, far loftier discussion of Ishmael’s metaphysical experiences and insights and the resulting tragic vision. What has the “low enjoying power” to do with the “wisdom that is woe,” that together they should comprise a chapter? What the two have in common is the evidence of Ishmael’s balance of character, and Ahab’s want of it, in all things, small and great, human and metaphysical. It was argued that both personalities have at their core a necessity to *know*, a need to *search*. Both, then, are metaphysical seekers, grasping for the “little lower layer,” the truth that lies under the surface, the meaning of self that lies in the “inmost soul.” Both characters are caught in the quandary which all men who “dive” sooner or later find themselves: they are *physical* beings striving for *metaphysical* truth. The quandary is, as Feidelson stated, “the necessity of voyaging and the equal necessity of failure” (676); it is a quandary which may lead man to devastation and destruction, as it does for Narcissus or Ahab, but may alternately lead to an acceptance of the dualistic nature of the search itself. Thus far the

maintenance of personal equilibrium has been ascribed to Ishmael's complex acceptance of the human condition and the nature of the universe, and a couple of examples have been set forth where he is found struggling with – but achieving - both the acceptance and equilibrium necessary for a meaningful, active and organic pursuit. As the examples set forth show, Ishmael, for one, balances his human and his metaphysical selves. Not so maddened by the exigency of his search, he maintains his humanity, as the Enderby gam shows. Yet, not so indifferent is he to the *inscrutable, mystifying phantom* that he shuns all inquiry, as do the characters that only fly above the plain. He relishes in both his humanity and his meditations, and he achieves a “mature and complex acceptance” of the dual nature of the universe and of man, as his balanced search itself demonstrates. Ishmael accepts, where Ahab cannot, that polarities exist; woe coexists with joy, the mind's metaphysics coexist with the “low enjoying power” of humanity and society; horror coexists with beauty. If acceptance is the means of maintaining one's equilibrium in the search for the Ultimate, then what is necessary to accept is that the world is comprised of inseparable polarities and that, in the end, the Ultimate Truth cannot be known.



## COMPLICATING POLARITIES: ISHMAEL'S MULTIPLEX VISION

In the previous chapter, it was suggested that Ishmael's response to the tragic vision plays itself out in a process of philosophical tacking. Looking "too long into the fire," Ishmael is "dead" for a time - dead, that is, to the possibility of philosophical *light*. And, as already explained, his response to the imbalanced vision of darkness, like a knee-jerk overreaction, draws him too far back into the light. From this position, he then counter-balances both light and dark, qualifying each, until he rests, his equilibrium restored, upon a new complex acceptance of these polar extremes. Having perceived the darkness that is "woe," Ishmael underscores a more significant perception: the perception of the *dualism* inherent in Nature and Being. However, as Thorp suggests, and as is played out in the novel, "the perception of the dualism in the universe brings woe, but man is not *fated* to allow that woe to pass into madness" (lxxv, emphasis mine). Ishmael's tacking offers an alternative to that "fate," which is Ahab's. As also noted in the previous chapter, the philosophical resting place of Ishmael's restored equilibrium isn't quantitatively *equal*. Perceiving both the light and the dark, Ishmael "strikes the uneven balance" which a complex understanding perhaps necessitates. While most pronounced in the two meditations previously discussed, the novel is replete with this action. In fact, philosophical tacking is part and parcel in the *action* of Ishmael's drama, of his "comprehension slowly completing itself." Ishmael cannot arrive at a "matured and complex" acceptance and understanding without the process of perceiving *and* reconciling the polarities inherent in the human condition and the universe. The simplicity of the other crew members, including Ahab, as will be argued, lies in their inability to contemplate polarities, or more precisely, as the following argument will establish, to "strike the uneven

balance” between them, thus reconciling and *integrating* polar opposites into a complex and more complete vision of Life and Truth.

Ishmael’s voyage on board the Pequod provides ample opportunity to explore these necessary polarities and to reshape consciousness in response to them. Asserting that the sea is Ishmael’s “field of vision” (30), Feidelson recalls a significant and early passage that foreshadows the action of tacking in Ishmael’s drama. The “endless processions of the whale,” he reminds the reader, come “two and two” (MD 16); each perception is incomplete in itself, as “each shape implies an opposite” (Feidelson 30). It is understood from Ishmael’s own testimony that the perception of duality is nothing profoundly new to him. He tells the reader in “Loomings” that he is “quick to perceive a horror;” though not “ignoring what is good,” Ishmael is able to “still be social... to be on friendly terms with” the “horror” (16). Despite the increasingly tragic vision Ishmael attains during his voyage, he boarded with a certain predisposition for dual vision, and the capacity to *accept* the complexity inherent in seeing and integrating polarities. As Bowen states, “No part of human experience is foreign or inadmissible” to Ishmael; his “transformation” is played out “by the repeated statement and restatement, in so many symbolic acts, of the theme of reconciliation” (240-41). Bowen provides an illustrative example of Ishmael’s early acceptance of polarities, his first encounter with Queequeg and the subsequent bonding of the two characters at the Spouter Inn: “[W]hat is worth remembering is that Ishmael was not wholly mistaken in his first [frightening] impression... The dried heads are real enough, and the tomahawk peace pipe is quite capable of splitting a skull as uniting two hearts. Ishmael has already in some sense accepted the bright and dark *in one*” (242, emphasis mine). The key point in Bowen’s statement, more important than the “bright” or the “dark,” especially as it applies to the current argument of philosophical tacking and the

balancing of polarities, is Bowen's assertion that Ishmael is able to perceive opposite poles "in one." This should not be misconstrued as the Romantic "One" that Ishmael contemplates at the masthead, a concept of unity that is found wanting in its philosophical simplicity. Instead, Ishmael's balancing of opposites suggests philosophical *complexity* within "one" – i.e. single - being, object, or event.

The metaphysical technique employed in *Moby-Dick* finds Ishmael tacking between polarities as he contemplates the symbolic meaning and significance of his observations on board the Pequod. Physical objects - most notably the sea and the white whale, the characters and crew, and whaling processes themselves all become Ishmael's "textbooks" for his metaphysical education on the polarities of existence. The sea's ability, for example, to lull the narrator into states of "dreamy quietude" is always counterpoised with the monstrous depths beneath the "soft waves," as in "The Gilder": "when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember, that this velvety paw but conceals a remorseless fang" (405). This contrast is also established in "Brit":

Consider the subtleness of the sea: how its most dreaded creatures glide under the water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest hints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliancy and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. (235)

In one of his more crudely poetic moments, as he considers the murderous scene before him in "The Shark Massacre," Ishmael concludes: "the whole round sea was one huge cheese, and those sharks the maggots in it" (256). The awful truth, of course, because the sea is not *just* the sea and its creatures not *just* "fish," is the broader conclusion that Ishmael is drawing, that the human race itself, and each individual, hides the "tiger," the "shark," and the "maggot" beneath its "beauty and brilliancy," beneath its variously

“dainty embellished” appearances. Ishmael perceives the “linked analogies” between “Nature” and the “soul of man” that Ahab contemplates in “The Sphynx” (264), as is suggested by his penultimate thoughts in “Brit”: “Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?” (236). A careful read of Ahab and Ishmael’s search for the inscrutable mystery of life show them parting ways in their acceptance – or lack of it – of the condition of inescapable duality. Ishmael is “quick to perceive [the] horror” of these “linked analogies,” and he can be “on friendly terms” with them. What further separates Ishmael from Ahab, and from the rest of the crew, is his percipient polar vision. “Not forgetting what is good,” Ishmael’s final contemplation in “Brit,” like the final resting place of his tacking in “The Try-Works,” brings the reader back to a position of qualified optimism, which coexists with the “horror” of the sharkish condition of human life: “For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!” (236). This final admonishment echoes those of both the masthead and the helm scenes, the “isle” thus becomes symbolic of the “soul of man” in the “open independence” of her sea, the philosophical and spiritual resting place of that “independence” in “equilibrium.”

The examples of polar extremes contemplated in the novel are numerous, only a few of which can be examined at length here. Ranging from abstract philosophical and religious ideas to more “horizontal” quandaries of individual human existence within “multiple” society, Ishmael’s narrative touches on the conflict between many forces: light and dark, good and evil, solitude and society, land and sea, appearance and reality, birth

and death, humanity and inhumanity, reason and intuition, savage and Christian, pacifism and rebellion, heart and mind, submission and defiance, mind and matter, freedom and imprisonment, democracy and tyranny, beauty and terror, fate and free will, desolation and communion, skepticism and belief, man and Nature, reason and passion. This is likely an incomplete list, despite its length. That such list can be drawn, however, is cogent evidence that the mere presence of polarities themselves, whatever the particular nature of each, has symbolic import. Surely Melville did not intend, in one novel, to make an exhaustive survey of the multitudinous religious, moral, intellectual or social issues that *Moby-Dick* brings to the fore. What is more important than a complete list or a thorough examination of each pair of opposites is an understanding of the broader function of such juxtapositions in Ishmael's metaphysical seafaring. To focus at too great length on any particular set, in the context of this study, would thus impair the reader's vision just as looking too long into the "face of the fire" impairs Ishmael's "for a time," and Ahab's for good and all. That is not to say that *Moby-Dick* should *not* be examined under such a fine lens, extracting from the whole a particular set of conflicting concepts. Much is to be gained by such microscopic treatment of the text - a fuller understanding of the novel, and Melville by extension, as well as Melville's America and the universal problems that he and his contemporaries grappled with. The novel does, for example, as Elizabeth Schultz demonstrates, juxtapose the masculine "watery world of woe" with the feminine "woe of women and children at home" (29). Her study convincingly explores the novel's representation of typified gender-based responses to "woe:" the "masculine response to pain," as characterized by "anger, hatred, hysteria, violence, and self-loathing," and the feminine response, which includes the qualities of "sympathy and care" (31). Equally important are the studies, like John Bernstein's and Wynn Goering's, on the problematic

duel between pacifism and rebellion, with particular focus on Christian orthodoxy and "blasphemous" defiance, as played out in the antagonism between Starbuck and Ahab. Linda Cahir's comprehensive study explores the polarities "[i]nherent in the American experience" and "central in American letters," namely, the "contradictory states of isolation and community, individualism and conformity," topics which breed their own contradictions, that of "dilemma and desire" (xiii). The list of such studies on the thematic threads played out in the novel's presentation of polarities is endless. Without taking away from the validity of these studies or their contribution to Melville scholarship, it is still impossible to make general claims as regards the "meaning" of *Moby-Dick*, as no doubt all the critics cited would attest. The novel is too complex to be whittled down to a treatise on the problem of gender representation, or the conflict between religious pacifism and rebellion, or the condition of individual man in society. The book is all of these. And, in a sense, it is none of these if the metaphysics of the novel supersedes the thematic threads upon which it meditates. *Moby-Dick*, it is universally accepted, will not be pinned down. Therefore, in the context of this argument at least, what the presence of polarities suggests, and what significance can be drawn from them, is in itself that quality of not being "pinned down." Rather than providing definitive "answers" to universal problems or problems particular to Melville's day, the separate sets of polarities, and Ishmael's tacking between them, represent an organic process of Knowing. Perception, as has earlier been stated, requires action; Ishmael's action in the face of universal duality is at first tacking, then reconciling and ultimately unifying polar extremes into his dynamic state of understanding. The polarities transcend, therefore, their separate significance when viewed in the greater context of Ishmael's action; they become a vehicle of Ishmael's hermeneutical and epistemological methodology.

It is in terms of hermeneutics and epistemology that the most significant pair of polar extremes is to be found in the novel. It was earlier asserted that Ahab's tragedy and Ishmael's voyage set up a dialectic on the method of *Knowing*. It was also asserted that knowing is an organic and dynamic process. The different responses to the comprehension of duality offer significant insight into the failed methodology of Ahab's search, as opposed to Ishmael's more balanced and vital search. Philosophical processes themselves, therefore, accentuate the conflict inherent in the mind's natural need to *search* and its futile need to *know*. As the novel repeatedly points out, Ishmael can reconcile these conflicting aspects of mind, where Ahab cannot. The dualities are aptly summed up in the metaphor repeated frequently in this study, that of Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish. Both characters, faced with the "woe" of existent polarities, respond in opposite ways. Ahab, incapable of reconciling and integrating these polarities, becomes "fast" to one side, as is dramatically represented in his feud against evil or injustice. He demands an absolute answer, which polarities by nature negate; his solution is to only look in one direction, the direction of "fire." Despite the incompleteness that his monomania settles upon, Ahab still requires an answer. Thus, his search remains static, where Ishmael's is dynamic. As Reddick defines the problem, Ahab's need for "rigid certainty" contrasts with Ishmael's "truer vision that is confused and ever-shifting." The novel's "epistemological question is located," Reddick explains, "[i]n the context of Ahab's monomania and Ishmael's multiplicity" (88).

Feidelson contrasts the epistemological methodology in a similar way, suggesting that it's Ishmael's method of interactive *fluidity* that sets him apart from Ahab. The achievement of *Moby-Dick*, according to Feidelson, is the extent to which it reveals "Melville's preoccupation with intellectual method" and the ultimate "methodological paradox" inherent in the process of the mind's interaction with "the material world to

generate symbolic meaning” (184). According to Feidelson the paradox of the “symbolistic method” is that “‘significance’ rises from and returns to the dual reality of subject and object, which it would deny” (184). The novel, and Ishmael’s quest, requires “frank acceptance” of this paradox. It requires a “provisional” acceptance of “ambiguity and indefiniteness,” which Ishmael demonstrates, as opposed to Ahab’s “refusal to remain in suspense” (33). The act of knowing, then, for Feidelson, is a dynamic process in which “symbols take on meaning in the course of perception” (32); the “‘endless processions’” of symbolic images become the “fluid reality” of Ishmael’s method, which is a “product of imaginative perception,” his pursuit an “evolution of an image” (30-1). More important for Ishmael, then, is the *process* of knowing, and not its product. Ishmael is capable of living in “a world of flux” and he is a voyager, as Ahab can never be, because of this active and – more importantly – *interactive* process, in which “the moment of imagination is a state of becoming, and the visionary forms simultaneously are apprehended and realize themselves” (29-30). Where Ishmael is speculative, Ahab is rigid; where Ishmael accepts provisional truth, Ahab demands totality of meaning. Symbolism as a methodology demands that the “reading of the symbol is continuous;” “emphasis is placed not so much on the particular meaning evolved as on the evolution of meaning” (179). Not satisfied with provisional “evolution of meaning” and intellectually incapable of “continuous” reading, Ahab’s methodology is bound to failure; assigning the whale definitive symbolic meaning, that of “all evil,” aborts intellectual “evolution” and denies the possibility of integrating and unifying polarities.

Robert Zoellner also deals with the problem of rigidity and fluidity in his comprehensive study of *Moby-Dick*. In fact, Zoellner quite persuasively argues that the only “true philosopher” of the novel is Ishmael, and not Ahab. To be a philosopher,



Zoellner suggests, one must keep a speculative mind. Ahab, contrary to that qualification, is “philosophically unsubtle.” His “ontological divinations are as rough-and-ready as the peg-leg with which he stumps about on the *Pequod*,” the “rigidities of his monomania, the committed intensity of his hatred for Moby Dick, make him dogmatically affirmative rather than speculatively tentative” (6). Although conceding that Ahab may be “philosophically significant,” Zoellner rightly concludes, “he cannot be philosophically informative” (6). “It is Ishmael,” he establishes, “obsessed by hypos, hounded by unbidden infidelities, skeptical of all things (and most especially of philosophy!) who is the book’s true philosopher, the steadily on-going voice that supplies the meditative, introspective counterpoint to Ahab’s dogmatism” (6). Zoellner’s argument also encompasses the issue of interactive process as epistemological method, situating the dualistic conflict within the Locke and Kant metaphor of Chapters 74 and 75 of *Moby-Dick*. Qualifying this placement, Zoellner suggests that Kant and Locke serve as “counter-words for the broad philosophical polarities represented by ‘empiricism’ versus ‘idealism,’ or that which is ‘imaginative’ contrasted to that which is ‘real’” (9). This philosophical structure suggests another set of polarities, that of perceived and perceiver. It is here, Zoellner maintains, that Ishmael and Ahab differ, “they do not agree on the relationship between perceiver and perceived” (11). “Ahab and the world he perceives remain dichotomized” (11), Zoellner explains, whereas “Ishmael sees the mind as a lamp, contributing actively to the creation of the final percept” (27). Zoellner cites a passage from “Ahab and the Carpenter” to illustrate Ahab’s “unidirectional epistemology” (5). “I’ll order a complete man,” Ahab tells the carpenter, “[with] about a quarter of an acre of fine brains; and let me see – shall I order eyes to see outwards? No, but put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards” (MD 390). What this passage shows, Zoellner

states, is that “[p]erception is for Ahab *input* only” (5);<sup>11</sup> it is “Ahab’s failure to take into account the possibility that *he* makes a contribution to the act of perception that sustains his tragic dissociation from the object-world of phenomena” (11).<sup>12</sup> Ishmael’s epistemology, on the other hand, is bi-directional not dichotomized; just as we saw him tacking between the light and dark, and striking the uneven balance, his epistemological method tacks between perceiver and perceived, forming “‘one seamless whole’ in the organic relationship between inner imaginative construct and outer empirical datum” (27). There is a dynamic interplay inherent in his methodology that reflects the action suggested earlier, that of tacking between, reconciling and then unifying polar extremes. Both Feidelson’s “symbolistic” and Zoellner’s “bi-directional” methodologies impose an inescapable dilemma in the search for Truth. A “reality” formed from this type of interactive and organic process of knowing has inherent in it an unavoidable element of subjectivity. However, as the previous discussion of the Samuel Enderby gam establishes, subjective reality only becomes problematic, and in Ahab’s case tragic, when it is adopted as definitive and universal, in other words, to borrow again from Reddick, when the “confused and ever-shifting” truth becomes “rigid.”

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that Ahab’s description of the “complete man,” designed after a “desirable pattern,” includes only this “sky-light on top” to “illuminate inwards” (MD 390). Ahab is elsewhere in the novel, notably in “the Sphynx,” demanding external answers to be *delivered to him*, in a sense. Such uni-directional knowing is intellectual passivity. If we recall Sewall’s argument that the “tragic vision” is not for those who “would become quietest and do nothing,” but for the “man of action,” then Ahab is again, not that man of action. He is the passive receiver of perception, and does not, in the intellectual sense “kick against the pricks,” as Sewall suggests is required of the tragic hero. Ishmael, on the other hand, meets Sewall’s qualifications. Perhaps not dramatically, but intellectually Ishmael does “fight against his destiny, kick against the pricks, and state his case before God or his fellows” (Sewall 5).

<sup>12</sup> This dissociation, and ignorance of *his* contribution to meaning making, thwarts the capacity for reassessing and objectifying the *subjective* meaning applied in the symbolistic method - hence, Ahab’s undeviating monomaniac hatred toward the white whale.

This “rigidity,” in the present discussion, can be defined as uni-polar or uni-directional seeing, and it describes Ahab’s vision in response to the white whale and Ishmael’s temporarily limited vision at both the helm and the masthead. Able to keep his equilibrium, however, Ishmael’s bipolar vision is restored. This need for bi-directionality is described by D.J. Ferrantello as the Romantic quest to “unite the two realms: mind and nature or spirit and matter” (72); it is the quest to “reconcile epistemological viewpoints” between “Locke’s empiricism and Kant’s transcendental method,” both of which only represent “partial truths” (72-3). Ferrantello points out that the failure to reconcile epistemological viewpoints, as is the case in Ahab’s dichotomized methodology, is symbolized in the whale’s eyes. “In the literal sense,” Ferrantello points out, “the whale’s vision is dichotomous; thus, the eyes of the whale are on two different sides of the head, without interconnection” (73). This “literal” disconnection symbolizes the “intellectual dilemma of opposing philosophies,” and, “effectually divided” as the eyes are, there can be no “unity” in what they perceive: “all life contains these opposites” that “disconnected vision” cannot unify, causing “alienation” (73). This alienating opposition, she suggests, is the result of Western philosophy’s *dualism*. An alternative, which she believes *Moby-Dick* offers, or at least explores, is a more process-oriented method of unifying form and content (73), which she describes as the capacity of Oriental thought for “cross-fertilization” (76). This suggests the same interaction between the internal and external, perceived and perceiver, or symbol and interpreter, as in Feidelson and Zoellner’s accounts of *Moby-Dick*’s methodology. “[E]xternal forms and symbol are but revelations of an internal content (form equals content),” according to Ferrantello (73). The “cross-fertilizing capacity” blends “intuitive modes of Oriental metaphysics with reasoned empirical thinking,” elevating “intuition” from mere “feeling” to a viable “source of intellectual

knowledge and the unity of polarities” (76). This “continuous interplay” between physical and spiritual – or metaphysical – realms marks the “linked analogies” that Ahab contemplated, but only Ishmael unified.

If, as Ishmael writes and Feidelson argues, all the “processions of whale” come naturally “two by two,” because polar opposites are an inescapable quality of Nature and life, much can be learned about Ishmael’s epistemological methodology by examining his reaction to these binaries. The methods discussed above suggest that knowledge is, to some extent, a form of reconciliation. There are, as Robert Greenberg states, “multiple theories of knowledge and types of erudition;” some of which are “reconcilable” (2). What Ishmael’s methodology shows us, in the myriad of forms of knowing he presents - his cetological categorizing, his metaphysical meditations, his encyclopedic learning, his analysis of factual datum, his symbolistic interpretations, his philosophical pondering – is that the *process* of knowing should be no more fixed than the “knowledge” attained. Ishmael’s fluid and manifold epistemology distinguishes his quest and makes him, as Zoellner suggests, the “speculatively tentative” “true philosopher.” Contemplating the nature of truth, of polarities, of human existence from various approaches, Ishmael combines the forms of knowing that have been defined here. As a symbolist, Ishmael doesn’t deny the reality of “imaginative perception,” as Feidelson put it, but he knows that any given perception needs to remain “fluid,” requiring “continuous reading.” As an empiricist, Ishmael devotes much of his narrative to factual datum, but at the same time he repeatedly undercuts the validity of scientific knowing, in and of itself. Ishmael finds himself, then, teetering on the tenuous threads between subjective interpretation and objective analysis; in accepting this fluid, provisional and *active* role, Ishmael becomes the “true lamp,” balancing, as Ferrantello states, “intuitive modes” of metaphysics with

“reasoned empirical thinking.” His struggle for equilibrium throughout the novel demonstrates this balancing act. What is significant in Ishmael’s manifold epistemology, as it relates to the reconciliation of polarities, is his movement from dual vision to polar vision – as in scenes like the masthead and the helm, in which he first looks too far toward one extreme, then reconciles both in the “uneven balance; from this polar vision, however, it can be suggested that Ishmael finally moves to *multiplex vision*. This can be defined as Ishmael’s ability to see and reconcile not only existent and inescapable polarities, but also his capacity to see a myriad of other forces at work that interfere with the simple dynamics of polar opposites. More sophisticated than Ahab’s “either-or” thinking, Ishmael’s mental processes move beyond the singular “either-or” paradigm of knowing, beyond even the “opposites in balance” paradigm, to an ultimately more complex comprehension that accounts for factors which complicate binaries themselves. This process can be observed in Ishmael’s unfolding comprehension of the binaries of free will and necessity.

In “The Mat-Maker,” “The First Lowering,” and “The Hyena,”<sup>13</sup> Ishmael’s *active* persona, his “tyro” character, dramatically tacks between the notions of necessity and free will. The “action” of mere *meditation* at the masthead is here played out experientially. In “The Mat-Maker,” the “pacific” calm lulls Ishmael into a meditative state, just as at the masthead; the warning from the masthead, the risk of plummeting into “Descartian vortices,” is then dramatically rendered in “The First Lowering.” The further “action” is Ishmael’s response to these two chapters, and to the dangers of life at sea, which is the reconciliation that takes place in “The Hyena.” Ishmael’s descriptive passages of the sea in “The Mat-Maker,” in keeping with his bipolar narrative, maintain the notion that the

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<sup>13</sup> Howard Vincent’s work was especially useful in this discussion. It was Vincent that suggests the structural method of Melville, linking chapter pairs or clusters. The artistic pattern blends whaling information (exposition) and episode (dramatic narrative); these two elements are then often followed by a philosophical interpretation of the material, as will be evident here. (299)

surface calm and beauty of the sea are always linked with the binary opposite of “terror.” Ishmael’s wordplay in “The Mat-Maker” reminds the reader of this inescapable fact. It is a “sultry afternoon” in which the “seamen were lazily lounging about the decks;” Ishmael and Queequeg were “mildly employed weaving” while “each silent sailor seemed resolved into his own invisible self” (185). Not letting the reader, like the “lazy lounging” sailors, be “subdued” by the “revery” of such an afternoon, Ishmael warns that the scene was “somehow preluding” something that “lurked in the air” during that “incantation” of a “cloudy, sultry” day. Nevertheless, the spell lasts long enough for the meditative narrator, busy attending Queequeg in the weaving of a sword-mat, to apply his metaphysics to the process of weaving in the contemplation of the binaries of free will and necessity. Symbolically regarding the interplay between the warp, the shuttle, and Queequeg’s sword, which “shapes and fashions both warp and woof” with its “easy, indifferent” “blow” (185) – Ishmael declares them much like necessity, free will, and chance, respectively. The polar extremes of free will and necessity are complicated in Ishmael’s meditation by the inclusion of *chance*. It is most commonly argued that the opposing concepts, the polar extremes, are defined by necessity and free will.<sup>14</sup> The force of necessity, which is described within the weaving metaphor in Ishmael’s meditation, is “the *fixed* threads... subject to but *one single, ever returning, unchanging* vibration;” this is contrasted with the force of chance, the “*impulsive, indifferent... concluding* blow” (185, emphasis mine). What seems at odds here, especially as it applies to the epistemological act of interpreting

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<sup>14</sup> As a result of the Calvinistic dilemma Melville applies to Ahab’s struggle, as was discussed in Chapter 1, there are *only* these two forces - one either *accepts* that an event or condition is part of an “inscrutable” act of predestination or one is a heretic, in the Calvinist sense, by asserting one’s free will in an effort to “know the riddle of the universe and to make God justify the presence and ways of Leviathan to man” (Werge 503). Ahab’s case against the white whale that “caused” the amputation is thus necessarily turned against Providence. Because life, or Ahab’s understanding of it, is dichotomized in this manner, he lacks the more complex vision of Ishmael, with which he might otherwise reconcile his “accident.”

events in human lives and Ahab's definition of his own mad hunt (getting at the *reasoning* thing behind the *unreasoning* mask), is not so much fate and free will – individual control versus God's control – but *meaning* and *lack of meaning*. If some event has been foreordained it therefore has "significance." If something is merely a stroke of good or bad luck, in other words *chance*, it lacks significance. As has been suggested, Ishmael's movement from binary vision to multiplex vision gives him the insight to see that, at the end of one pole, there is often a branching off into another set of conflicting opposites. If the labels are shifted a bit, the conflict between free will and necessity becomes *what man has control over* and *what man does not have control over*. At the end of one of these opposites, another pair is then apparent. The polar opposites, in the realm of events that man has no control over, are necessity and chance, in other words, *fixed* and invariable acts of predestination or *random* and unpredictable acts, *reasoning* and *unreasoning* forces. Having first, in his sword-mat meditation, observed that necessity and free will do mingle, Ishmael then adds this third variable of chance: "here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads [of necessity]... Meantime, Queequeg's impulsive, indifferent sword [chance]... produc[es] a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric" (185). What Ishmael recognizes, which Ahab simply cannot, is that in the interplay between free will and necessity is this third component of chance; "indifferent" chance, as opposed to the "right lines" of necessity, can have the "last featuring blow at events" (185). What "tasks" and "heaps" Ahab is the suggestion that his maiming might be the "indifferent" "blow" of chance; he needs for it to have greater significance than that.

Ishmael, on the other hand, strikes another uneven balance in the forces at work in human life. In this meditation he finally concludes that "chance, free will, and necessity"

are “no wise incompatible – all interweavingly working together” (185). It directly follows, in “The First Lowering,” that Ishmael will have a brutal opportunity to further contemplate these concepts and put his meditative conclusions to the experiential test. Up to this point, Ishmael has a lingering romantic notion about the sea, its relation to meditation and its curing effects on his “hypos.” The “sultry” afternoon, however, is interrupted by “a sound so strange, long drawn, and musically wild and unearthly” (185); it is the call from the masthead: “There she blows! there! there! there! she blows! she blows!” (186). This is the signal of the storm that interrupts the calm. Ishmael states that the call so startled him from his “mild employment” of weaving that “the ball of free will dropped from [his] hand” (186). Falling from the dreamy trance into the “Descartian vortices” of his first chase, Ishmael is propelled into “the most riotously perverse and cross-running seas,” a “tyro” observer of the “strange” and the “wondrous” hunt (191). “It was a sight full of quick wonder and awe” (193), its quickness of pace and “awe” of action in stark contrast with the lazy pace of the previous chapter. In the heat of the chase, Ishmael’s meditative narrative gives way to the present dramatic action of the story, action which subverts the dreamy romantic notions of the sea as seen by an earlier, more innocent Ishmael. This is the “real” whale fishery: “the life and death peril” (194); “the brief suspended agony” (193); the cacophony of the sea’s “surging, hollow roar,” the “cries of the headmen and harpooners, and the shuddering gasps of the oarsmen” (193); the “knife-like edge of the sharper waves” and the “sudden profound dip into the watery glens and hollows” (193). In this quick and perilous pursuit, it seems, on the surface, that Ishmael’s account is correct, that the “ball of free will was dropped.” Yet as intense as the outward manifestations are in this scene, of the “troubled water and air,” the “charmed, churned circle of the hunted sperm whale” (192-93), for all of this, Ishmael’s descriptions of the



headsman and harpooners demonstrates a measure of self-possession more implicative of free will in action. They all display a “dexterous, off-handed daring” (187) and a “wondrous habitude of unconscious skill” (191), and each headsman commands his crew in his own characteristic manner. “Stubb’s exordium to his crew is given... in a tone so strangely compounded of fun and fury, and the fury seemed so calculated merely as a spice to the fun” (188). Flask “mounted upon gigantic Daggoo... sustaining himself with a cool, indifferent, easy, unthought of, barbaric majesty” (191). Starbuck “nimble springing up... with intensely eager eyes... was seen coolly and adroitly balancing himself to the jerking tossings of his chip of a craft” (190). Meanwhile Ahab, with his “outlandish strangers” for his crew, “with one arm, like a fencer’s thrown half backward into the air... was steadily managing his steering oar as in a thousand boat lowerings ere the White Whale had torn him” (190). The various comportments of the different mates and the captain illustrate that there was only one to whom the terrible chase seemed to be the symbolic dropping “of the ball of free will,” that one being the “tyro” oarsman, Ishmael. To the others, the first lowering on this particular voyage was just another lowering of countless numbers before it. And if the upcoming squall, which tossed Starbuck’s boat and crew “helter-skelter into the white curdling cream” of the stormy sea, abandoning them through the “forlorn” night in the “midst of despair” (194-95), if this predicament seems like the playing out of a predestinated act or the bad luck of chance, two important details subvert even that possibility. First, it is noted that the other boats were spared the “hopelessly” desolate night of “forlornness” on the storm-tossed sea precisely because, “[e]re the squall came close to, the other boats had cut loose from their fish and returned to the ship in good time” (195). Starbuck, on the other hand, despite the “increasing darkness of the dun cloud-shadows” or the “suffusing wide veil of mist” (193), had decided “there is time to kill a

fish yet before the squall comes” (194). Starbuck, the man of prudence, makes an imprudent *choice*, while the other leadsmen – even wild Ahab – see the squall coming and cut short the hunt for the ship’s refuge. Also very significant is Ishmael’s reaction to the fast-paced, remarkable hunt. The description is full of “wonder” and “awe,” “peril” and “agony,” but not once in his narrative account does Ishmael refer to any “horror” of the chase. Indeed, he finds it exhilarating and exciting. He is the adventurer who is part of the “wondrous sight” he beholds and he finds it all “thrilling”:

Not the raw recruit, marching from the bosom of his wife into the fever heat of his first battle; not the dead man’s ghost encountering the first unknown phantom in the other world; - neither of these can feel stranger and stronger emotions than that man does, who for the first time finds himself pulling into the charmed, churned circle of the hunted sperm whale. (193)

It is not insignificant that Ishmael maintains his composure, pulling oar into this “charmed, churned circle,” where later Pip, also in the position of the “green” oarsman, sees terror and opts to jump boat. The choices played out in “The First Lowering” – Ishmael’s to stay steady in the face of “wonder” and “awe,” and the different choices of the headsmen to stay in the hunt or cut loose and head for the Pequod – as well as the very ordinariness of the chase to all but the naïve narrator, undercut Ishmael’s suggestion of free will being “dropped” or abandoned for a time.

What further undermines the meditative conclusions of “The Mat-Maker” is the flippant and jocular tone of “The Hyena,” in which he describes his reaction to the first lowering. “There are certain queer times and occasions,” Ishmael begins, “when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke... and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody’s expense but his own” (195). Amid the humor, there are hints of fatalism at the bottom of this chapter: “small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril

of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seems to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker" (195). That "unseen and unaccountable old joker" would be none other than god, or some force outside of free will, who is pulling the strings. Ishmael, as always, complicates his "conclusion," this time under the shroud of humor and flippancy. Vincent claims that in "The Hyena" Ishmael, "having considered idly of Necessity and Chance in the weaving scene, now, after strenuous experiences, follows up his reflections with a philosophical conclusion: that he will accept the consequences of his whaling life no matter what Fate or Chance should bring" (203). This is indeed so; however, Ishmael is not completely surrendering to these outside forces. Keeping in mind that the tone is jocular, one must at least consider whether his *conclusions* aren't the greater joke than the experience he claims the joke to be. Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. reminds us that Ishmael's references to "personal fate are either too easy, an obvious lip service to an ancient idea, or they are serious but subverted" (88). According to Brodtkorb, Ishmael "mocks" and "explains away" the prophecies which would otherwise serve as evidence of predestination; he asserts that the two omens most "accurate in detail," those of Elijah and Fedallah, which would "argue in favor of classic fatality" are in fact only instances of Ishmael employing "conventional license as storyteller" (92). Prophecy is reduced to either an artistic device or the "function of hindsight" in *Moby-Dick*: prophecy ensures "more than a 'crazy Ahab' status for his hero" or events merely "seem fated because the end is known" (Brodtkorb 92-3). What the "The Hyena" provides is not a definitive conclusion in regards to the binary concepts of necessity and free will, but merely Ishmael's acceptance of the "perils of whaling," complete with "squalls and capsizings" (196), or worse. It marks the shift from the romantic young Platonist's view of the sea, to the now experienced oarsman's perception of "life and death peril." His newly

adopted “easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy” (196) shows Ishmael again being “on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place he lodges” (16). In this, Ishmael is paradoxically asserting his free will in the face of necessity and chance. “I might as well go below,” Ishmael concludes, “and make a rough draft of my *will*” (196, emphasis mine). Notice that it is a “rough draft;” Ishmael is ever the provisional “writer” of his “wills and testaments” (197). He draws up a “rough draft” because he knows, to borrow again from Feidelson, that his symbolic reading of the perils of a chase, that of the “vast practical joke... [of] an unseen and unaccountable joker,” is but “provisional” meaning. Ishmael is the “continuous” reader of symbols, and his first lowering is but one of a lifetime of events from which his “evolutions of meaning” will be drawn. Having performed the “ceremony” of writing his provisional “will,” Ishmael claims, “a stone was rolled away from my heart. Besides, all the days that I should now live would be as good as the days that Lazarus lived after his resurrection; a supplementary clean gain of so many months or weeks as the case might be” (197). This is symbolic, of course, of the “resurrection” of the intellectual sort that was discussed earlier – the “rebirth” as consciousness and comprehension expand in the light of experience. This attitude of resurrection is reminiscent of Captain Boomer’s attitude of acceptance and *life*, an attitude impossible for Ahab. For Ahab, the “stone” of cruel necessity cannot be “rolled away from [his] heart.” More important than a firm and resolute conclusion on free will and necessity is Ishmael’s flippancy in “The Hyena” toward the forces beyond his individual control. This serves to underscore Ahab’s rigid fatalism and the ill use of his will in response to that over which he has no control. Notice also the final resting place of Ishmael’s “will”: “I survived myself; my death and burial *were locked up in my chest*” (197, emphasis mine). Having his will restored thus, in other words, once again regaining his own, independent equilibrium, Ishmael can look with easy

humor at what Ahab grimly molds into his monomaniac purpose: “here goes a cool, collected dive at death and destruction, and the devil fetch the hindmost” (197).

Ishmael’s interrogation of other crew members and mates in “The Hyena,” and the conclusions he draws from their responses, further complicates his understanding of the notion of free will and necessity, providing another example of his multiplex vision. He asks of Queequeg, “does this sort of thing [being lost overnight in the squall] often happen?” Questioning Starbuck’s prudence, he beseeches Stubb to comment on whether “going plump on a flying whale with your sail set in a foggy squall is the height of a whaleman’s discretion.” And of Flask he inquires “whether it is an unalterable law in the whale fishery... for an oarsman to break his own back pulling himself back-foremost into death’s jaws” (196). What these questions and the unemotional and calm affirmative responses of the experienced crew members underscore is Ishmael’s “greenness” in the perils of whaling, further undermining his earlier contemplations on free will and necessity. But what makes this brief exchange even more significant are the many subtle references of Ishmael’s epistemological *openness* and fluidity. Ishmael knows that a first-glance subjective interpretation of an event needs further “reading” to gain a “truer” knowledge. As if to test his own interpretation – that a “vast practical joke” is being played on him and free will is being yanked from his grasp – he turns to others for verification and then revises his earlier comprehension.<sup>15</sup> Having consulted “three impartial witnesses,” he comes away with a “deliberate statement of the case” (196), a

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<sup>15</sup> Consider here the input from so many others that Ahab received and denied. Captain Boomer’s attitude of acceptance of the perils of whaling; Starbuck’s suggestion that the original assault was but the result of “blindest instinct” of a “dumb brute;” and Bunker’s assertion that what Ahab called “malice” was just the whale’s “awkwardness.” These examples, as well as the many omens and prophecies, go unheeded. Ahab’s static, rigid epistemology denies the complexity of disparate viewpoints.

statement that draws a much more complex accounting of events in human lives than is possible within the more simplistic binary of free will and God's will. Chance is not the only force that may have a "featuring blow" at events. There also exists the complication of Nature and the peculiar qualities of whaling itself, "considering... that squalls and capsizings in the water and consequent bivouacks on the deep, were matters of common occurrence in this kind of life" (196). Next, there is the action and free will of *others* that interferes:

considering that at the superlatively critical instant of going on to the whale I must resign my life into the hands of him who steered the boat... considering that the particular disaster to our own particular boat was chiefly to be imputed to Starbuck's driving on to this whale almost in the teeth of a squall, and considering that Starbuck, notwithstanding, was famous for his great heedfulness in the fishery; considering that I belonged to this uncommonly prudent Starbuck's boat; and finally considering in what devil's chase I was implicated, touching the White Whale: taking all things together, I say, I thought I might as well go below and make a rough draft of my will. (196)

In addition to this being one of Ishmael's greatest seriocomic moments,<sup>16</sup> it reveals much about his epistemology. It would be hard to regard as accidental that in this one paragraph, which shows Ishmael's mind in action, drawing up a conclusion and a "deliberate statement" of that conclusion, he uses the word "considering" six times, that he refers to the accounts of others, the three "impartial witnesses," and that he draws his conclusion "*taking all things together.*" There is his multiplex vision at work. In addition to this, the paragraph's repeated and wonderfully ironic references to Starbuck's "famous" heedfulness and prudence betray a very subtle suggestion that he hasn't entirely abandoned his idea that life is a "vast practical joke."

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<sup>16</sup> One can imagine a drenched, exhausted and utterly perplexed Woody Allen being dragged to the safety of the deck and concluding this scene.

Another procedure of whaling becomes for Ishmael a source of metaphysical meaning making on this same quandary of individual free will as complicated by one's sociality. In "The Monkey-Rope," Ishmael describes the arrangement, unique to the Pequod and, not surprisingly, invented by Stubb, in which an oarsman and harpooner are tied together, by rope "fast at both ends," in this particular case, to Queequeg and Ishmael. It is the harpooner's duty to "descend upon the [whale's] back" for the process of "cutting in." All the while, the whale "revolves like a treadmill" and the "maw" of the "rabid [sharks] swarmed round it like bees in a beehive" (271-73). It was Ishmael's task, up on deck but "wedded" to Queequeg via the monkey-rope, to "jerk poor Queequeg from between the whale and the ship – where he would occasionally fall" (271). Both "usage and honor demanded" that should peril come to Queequeg, "instead of cutting the cord" between them, Ishmael would be "dragg[ed] down in [Queequeg's] wake" (271). This process holds for Ishmael a symbolic, metaphysical insight into the complex polar condition of society and individual, fate and free-will:

So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death. (271)

Ishmael's contemplation here of "innocence" and "unmerited disaster" echoes Ahab's frustrated vision of injustice, with the exception that Ishmael if found coming to terms with the condition: "I say, I saw that situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals" (271). This acceptance again prefigures that of Captain Boomer of the Samuel Enderby. And again, underscoring Ahab's madness of intent by contrast,

Ishmael opens his meditations on the monkey-rope by describing it as a “humorously perilous business” (270). When he further describes the process of cutting-in, it is clear that Queequeg is the one who is at the greatest risk of another’s “mistake or misfortune.” Not only is he “tied” to the “joint stock company of two” and dependent upon Ishmael’s watchfulness, he is also dependent upon a “plurality of other mortals,” Tashtego and Daggoo. These harpooners are assigned the task of “slaughtering as many sharks as they could reach,” to keep Queequeg safe from the “insatiate maw.” While “they meant Queequeg’s best happiness... those indiscreet spades of theirs would come nearer amputating a leg than a tail” (272). Once again, Ishmael’s humor and mock-serious style sums up his metaphysical summations with the same sort of “genial, desperado” philosophizing:

Well, well, my dear comrade and twin-brother, thought I, as I drew in and then slacked off the rope to every swell of the sea – what matters it, after all? Are you not the precious image of each and all of us men in this whaling world? That unsounded ocean you gasp in, is Life; those sharks, your foes; those spades, your friends; and what between sharks and spades you are in a sad pickle and peril, poor lad. (272)

Through and through, Ishmael resists the seriousness, the madness of his captain; his philosophizing, as compared to Ahab’s stern and rigid aspect, is wonderfully contrasted in even the smallest juxtaposition, as in his summation of life as a “pickle” and “peril.”

If connection to human society is “humorously perilous” in “The Monkey-Rope,” Ishmael contemplates another aspect of this inescapable union in “A Squeeze of the Hand.” While squeezing case, which has “cooled and crystallized to such a degree” that it “concreted into lumps,” Ishmael finds himself “unwittingly squeezing [his] co-laborers’ hands... mistaking their hands for the gentle globules” (348). The “affectionate, friendly, loving feeling” of being “wedded” in the society of man during this process brings Ishmael



to a feeling of being “divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever” (348). Of course, this contrasts with and is a reminder of Ahab’s “ill-will” and “petulance;” Ishmael never lets us forget the other side of any given meditation: “I declare to you, that for the time I lived as in a musky meadow; I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it” (348). Forgotten for a moment, though it may be, their evil agenda is never absent. The warmth of the spermaceti, its “soft, gentle globules” and its “sweet and unctuous” quality, combine with the “blue tranquil sky,” the ship with “indolent sail,” “gliding so serenely along,” to once again move the narrator into a trance. The feelings of goodwill that the experience evokes leads to a “sort of insanity.” The “insanity,” of course, is the state of his consciousness, in which he projects a temporary feeling into an urgent need for a “universally” permanent state of brotherhood: “Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” (349). This is an unbalanced and impossible version or vision of humanity, which he is quick to realize. “*Would that I could keep squeezing sperm forever*” (349, emphasis mine), he cries, but he can’t. Coming out of the “insanity” of his imbalanced vision of the “sperm of kindness,” he settles again for something more balanced, more within the grasp of human reach. Instead of Universal Kindness or Absolute Love, conditions which he knows are impossible ideals, he settles for “attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country” (349). These pleasant qualities of society and humanity are significant in the present discussion because they mark Ishmael’s balancing of his humanity and his more metaphysical, more philosophical needs and urges. Why are these polarities an epistemological issue? One need only look at Ahab’s bloated

pursuit to see the relevance of keeping one's metaphysics within human bounds. Driven to realms beyond human possibility, Ahab is blindsided by his belief in his Promethean stature, and his "truth" becomes equally warped. Additionally, as has already been discussed, Ahab's bloated metaphysics necessitates his denial of humanity. These are not polarities that trip up the more capable, the more reasonable philosopher. Never lingering too long into any exaggerated meditation, Ishmael's thoughts while squeezing case take him back to the less felicitous aspects of sperm, and, knowing that a balance must always be struck, he marks that movement: "Now, while discoursing of sperm, it behooves to speak of other things akin to it, in the business of preparing the sperm for the try-works" (349). The reverie complete, Ishmael again counterbalances his lopsided visions; by discoursing on the preparation of "sperm for the try-works," Ishmael is also setting the stage for his tacking between this sense of connection and brotherhood to his darker contemplation of the "other" in "The Try-Works," as was previously discussed.

Ishmael's tacking, throughout the novel, despite the particular polarities and incongruities that he is grappling with from scene to scene, demonstrates his philosophical inclination and, more importantly, his epistemological agility. "[S]ome certain significance lurks in all things," Ishmael states in apparent affirmation; but this affirmation drops quickly to speculation when he offers the other grim possibility: "else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher" (358). In the epistemological process, "significance" is either "lurking in all things" or there is no significance at all; these are the two polarities that the novel repeatedly juxtaposes. It is the philosopher with an eye for "striking the uneven balance" that can de-dichotomize such extremes and contemplate the complexities within them – and adjacent to them, as seen in his complex understanding of fate and free will. The "significance" that "lurks in all things," Ishmael

comes to realize, isn't necessarily that which is assigned to it by the preordained purpose of necessity, though Ishmael never entirely shuts the door on that possibility. Instead of viewing "significance" from *only* this extreme view of teleology, which has as its necessary flip side *meaninglessness*, Ishmael perceives that to look from one end of the pole to the other, and then decide between the two is not enough for complex and true understanding. Contingencies, overlapping polarities, temporary moods, subjectivity, human limitations, motivations, predisposition, human interference, Nature's interference – all these factors complicate, and in a sense falsify and invalidate, the making of meaning, the arrival at "Truth." And yet they are inescapable factors. Ishmael understands this complexity – the multiplicity within duality – as the other characters do not, hence, their "final" interpretations of the doubloon. Ishmael's absence in the process of "reading" the doubloon as symbol is significant. All other characters, blind to the various limitations of their own vision, "read" the doubloon with finality of meaning. Only crazy Pip comes to the doubloon with anything resembling the truth: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look... And I, you, and he; and we, ye, and they, are all bats" (362). Being the one character that reads symbols "continuously," Ishmael cannot take his place at the quarter-deck among the interpreters of the doubloon. Ishmael's truths are always tentative; he is, as Brodtkorb describes him, the "insistent questioner" (94), tacking between polarities and reconciling binary opposites, and recovering from moments when both internal and external contingencies and conditions disrupt his equilibrium. Despite his recognition that the human mind and contingencies outside of the human mind falsify and invalidate the making of meaning, Ishmael persists in his quest, settling for the "truer vision that is confused and ever-shifting" in place of the Truth. What Ishmael's

epistemological tacking, his speculative and fluid search, ultimately leads to is the acceptance of the inscrutability of Ultimate Truth.

ISHMAEL'S EVER-SHIFTING TRUTH: THE WHITE WHALE AS "SPOUTING  
FISH," MYTHIC MONSTER AND MYSTIC MEDIUM

Having examined the opposing epistemological approaches of the two possible protagonists of *Moby-Dick*, the focus of this study needs to turn attention at last to the object of knowing, the whale itself. Little more is to be said of Ahab's meaning of Leviathan than has already been stated, since his simplistic interpretation never falters throughout the novel. Nevertheless, a restatement here provides a launching point for a fuller discussion of Ishmael's interpretation of the whale. Zoellner supplies an apt summary. According to Ahab "Moby Dick is illimitably strong. Moby Dick is pervasively malicious. Moby Dick is inscrutably intelligent. Moby Dick is physically vulnerable, perceptually violable. Moby Dick, finally, has bitten off [Ahab's] leg" (147). There, according to Zoellner, is all Ahab has to say regarding the object of his pursuit. Zoellner's summation of Ahab's vision of the whale suggests an unequivocal sense of the whale being *all* strong, *all* malicious, *all* intelligent, *all* vulnerable and *all* violable. There is no lingering question, no scrutinizing of possible subjective limitations or misinterpretations. The novel's more reliable protagonist, however, has made it clear that "ALL" is vanity, and, as Zoellner's study points out, examples of Leviathan negate each of these descriptions, or, if not negate, they at least show the whale's counter-aspects, denying the completion of Ahab's vision.<sup>17</sup> If the whale is the symbol for Truth or the reality of Being, determining the novel's "final" statement on Truth necessitates an examination of the more reliable quester's vision. What will be found if we follow Ishmael's quest of the whale, of course, is duality.

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<sup>17</sup> See especially chapters 8 and 9 in Zoellner's *Salt-Sea Mastodon*.

The whale's dualistic nature falls under Frank Novak's beauty-terror paradigm. "The pervasive, the most consistently developed binary contrast in the novel," according to Novak, lies within the beauty-terror opposition. "[T]he more beautiful the scene or image," he suggests, "the more ominous and malevolent is the terror associated with it" (333). This has already been illustrated in the previous discussion of the sea's surface and subsurface polar characteristics. Novak breaks down the paradigm into four recognizable patterns in the novel, two of which are significant in the context of this discussion. The third pattern he articulates supports the theme of subjective hermeneutics. Novak notes that "a phenomenon of nature can assume either a beautiful or terrifying appearance depending upon one's perspective" (336). Ishmael offers this insight in "The Tail": "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" (MD 317). This subjectivity is an inescapable aspect, according to Dryden, of the metaphysical narrative style, in which the "narrator is well aware that the fictional world is the product of [his] own special vision" (11); the "world is as it is seen" (7). Novak further explains, "in descriptive passages, the inevitable juxtaposition of terror and beauty in the natural world has its metaphysical counterpart. In other words, terror accompanies beauty in abstract, metaphysical realms as well as in the physical world" (336). This is consistent with the infinite "linked analogies" and the metaphysics of the novel. More interestingly, Novak points out that in the material world the surface appearance of beauty hides the underlying terror, yet in the metaphysical realm, the opposite is true: "In the metaphysical universe, however, the general pattern is reversed: 'beauty, the 'insular Tahiti,' lies at the heart of or concealed beneath terror;" and again, "'while ponderous planets of unwaning

woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy” (336-37). The white whale is the “primary symbol” of the beauty-terror dichotomy, and it reflects both patterns presented here of Novak’s paradigm: the whale “embodies the principle that, in nature, beauty is closely accompanied by terror,” and, furthermore, “the salient attribute of the whale depends on one’s perspective” (338). This final statement reinforces the central argument of this paper, namely, that true knowing is an organic process, the “knowledge” of which is the provisional product of a mind in action – just *who’s* mind or *who’s* “perspective” it is alters the *known*.

Sealts, like Zoellner, implies that Ahab’s understanding of the whale is an oversimplification. Ishmael’s on the other hand, requires closer scrutiny because it “is not fixed and set;” “his conceptions continually shift as he moves from rumors and superstitions about the whale through actual experience as a whaler to his first glimpse of Moby Dick himself” (313). Ishmael’s *knowing* of the whale, according to Sealts’ theory, is consistent with the action of his drama as presented in an earlier chapter: “The same effort to weigh and balance and a recurrence of the idea of subjective projection are both apparent when we examine Ishmael’s glimpses of whales in the later chapters of his narrative” (314). Ishmael’s “weighing and measuring” culminates not in a definitive conclusion but a reconciliation of conflicting dualities and the acceptance of the fact that duality itself denies the possibility of absolute Truth. “The majesty of the White Whale as he finally appears to us is first of all the majesty of physical nature itself, with all the ambiguous mingling of beauty and terror;” “[t]aken subjectively, metaphysically, or even on the purely physical level, the White Whale remains ambiguous for [Ishmael] to the final chapter” (Sealts 315). Whether the qualities of beauty or terror are “inherent” in the whale

or “laid on from without,” Sealts argues, “is an epistemological issue that Ishmael never finally decided” (315).

Since Ishmael’s process of knowing has been defended as fluid, ever-shifting, and organic, it is necessary to chart his changing perceptions of the white whale from start to end, and draw conclusions from there. It has already been recalled that Ishmael goes to sea to cure his “hypos,” but chooses to go on a whaling voyage because of the “overwhelming idea of the great whale himself;” “such a portentous and mysterious monster,” he tells us in “Loomings,” “roused all [his] curiosity” (16). One interesting note alongside this fact is that Ishmael was as much compelled to go on a whaling voyage not only to encounter the “mysterious monster,” but also to be “in the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk” (16). The whale itself, not even the “one grand hooded phantom” that Ishmael pursues, has a significant and inseparable connection to the “forbidden seas” in which he swims. If the whale represents Ultimate Truth and the sea is Life itself, or as Feidelson has suggested, Ishmael’s “field of vision,” then in the first chapter Ishmael already establishes himself as having multiple vision which covers a broad and diverse “field,” not limiting his search to one absolute aim, as Ahab does with Moby Dick. Indeed, the whale, as will be recalled, comes “two and two” and swims in a sea that is as mysterious as the “phantom” lurking in it. Thus defining his field of vision from the very start as that “magical” and “mystic” medium of the sea, and emphasizing also that “the *ungraspable* phantom” of life is “*the key to it all*” (14, emphasis mine), Ishmael establishes himself from the outset as a speculative philosopher (despite his ironical reference to himself as a “mere sailor”) and predicts the ambiguity of the novel’s conclusion. Ishmael’s multiplicity and fluidity allow the intermingling of all phenomena found within the field of vision to contribute to his shifting perceptions of Truth. These perceptions must be taken into account to arrive at a



fuller understanding of Ishmael's final thoughts on Truth, as represented in the white whale. What needs to be examined is the active process of comprehension that moves Ishmael from his early apprehension of the whale as a horrible, mysterious, and monstrous phantom to, what will be suggested here, the mystical mirror of Ishmael's vision.

Ishmael's first attempt at scientific *knowing* of the whale, his "Cetology" chapter, immediately sets up the necessity for failure: "Already we are launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harborless immensities" (116). Ishmael claims that "some systemized exhibition of the whale" is "almost indispensable to a thorough appreciative understanding of the more special leviathanic revelations and allusions of all sorts which are to follow" (116), yet he knows a complete system is impossible. On the surface, the cetology chapters help shape the mythic character of *Moby Dick* by building up the feasible and comprehensible physical might of the whale. Later chapters, such as "The Battering Ram," help to make plausible the whale's capacity of sheer force to stave the Pequod, for example. That is the whale of Ahab's story, his mythical, monstrous antagonist. However, the cetology of Ishmael's narrative goes much deeper, and at the very first he assures us that even knowing the concrete and physical whale is impossible. He compares the task of systematizing the whale as "the classification of the constituents of chaos, nothing less" (116-17). "Were it in [his] power," which it is clearly not, to find a "method of dividing" the cetacea, it would not be his "intention" (117). This is noteworthy in light of the previous discussion of polarities, specifically Ishmael's reconciling and Ahab's dichotomizing of them; Ishmael's process does not "divide" and separate, but reconciles and unifies. "Divisions" are, for Ishmael, the building blocks of a rich and complex unified understanding, not separate compartmentalized elements of absolute definition. In quoting the "experts" of the field, "those lights of zoology and anatomy,"

Ishmael emphatically points out the “[u]nfitness to pursue” the whale in the “unfathomable waters,” resulting in an “[i]npenetrable veil” and “incomplete indications” as concerns the whale (117). Ishmael is, of course, most concerned with the great sperm whale. If science cannot know him, he also makes it clear that the poets cannot either: “As yet, however, the sperm whale, scientific or poetic, lives not complete in any literature... his is an unwritten life” (118). This discussion, an obvious commentary on the limitations of science, provides an early hint of the limitations of romantic knowing as well; these same sentiments will be later echoed in the chapters on the whales’ heads, in which Ishmael facetiously deals with the tension between empirical and romantic epistemologies, as represented in the narrative jabs at Locke and Kant. Although many critics, as earlier implied, regard the cetological chapters as the narrative means to make the final destruction of the Pequod credible, Ishmael’s denial throughout the entire first chapter of the “cetological center,” as Vincent calls it, of the possibility of knowing the whale prepares the way for *his* whale - wonderfully mystical, not appallingly mythical; dualistic and ambiguous, not absolute. Frequent passages in “Cetology” are apologetic and defensive in light of this ambiguity and incompleteness: “I promise nothing complete” (118); “My object here is simply to project a draught of a systematization of cetology. I am the architect, not the builder” (118); “What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan!” (118); “[I]t is vain to attempt a clear classification of the Leviathan” (122). “Finally: It was stated at the outset, that this system would not be here, and at once, perfected. You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word. But I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished” (127). He repeats again at the very end of the chapter the notion of the “draught,” which is later echoed in his writing a “draft” of his will in “The Hyena.” “God keep me,” he writes, “from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a

draught – nay, but the draught of a draught” (128). This whole chapter, then, more than providing cetological data for a later understanding of the white whale, provides further necessary background knowledge on Ishmael’s epistemology, without which, the reader cannot correctly perceive Ishmael’s meaning of the whale, or the ultimate meaning of the book. The most telling of all these similar passages is this one: “I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty” (118).

One more critical passage remains to be extracted from “Cetology.” “To be short, then,” Ishmael concludes at one point in the chapter, “a whale is *a spouting fish with a horizontal tail*. There you have him. However contracted, that definition is the result of expanded meditation” (119, emphasis mine). Ishmael’s simplistic conclusion here is packed with significance. First, because Ishmael earlier refers to the many books he’s read on the subject of whales, and even more, because he states that this conclusion is “the result of expanded meditation,” it is not inconceivable to regard this as a statement from the *knowing* narrator, versus the tyro actor. If the comment, which undermines the mythology of the whale, is read as the conclusion of “expanded meditation” on the part of the reflective narrator, it serves as a signpost for the reader to approach the rest of the story with an eye of skepticism. Moby Dick is not, he is hinting, the whale that Ahab thinks he is. In fact, the whale’s mythic stature will be further undermined in the chapter “Moby Dick,” as will be discussed below. To reduce the mighty, monstrous, mythic whale to a mere “*fish*” is telling enough, but in light of Ahab’s dilemma with “horizontal” man, the point is even more emphatic when Ishmael draws attention to the whale’s “*horizontal tail*.” Despite his own metaphysics and later reflections upon the whale as mystic “mirror,” Ishmael won’t let the reader stray too far from the limitations of simple, “horizontal,”

physical life. "There you have him," Ishmael states in a tone of ironic completion. In one fell swoop, Ishmael demythologizes the whale.

By the time Ahab breaches his single-sighted purpose for the Pequod's voyage in "The Quarter-Deck," Ishmael's incomplete understanding of the whale, which he has yet to set eyes on, it should be remembered, is characterized by awe, mystery, and "undeliverable, nameless perils" (16). It should come as no surprise then, that the naïve Ishmael of this early scene, already proven susceptible to "trances" in "The Mast-head," should fall into the "trance" of Ahab's magnetic appeal to his demonic purpose. The scene depicts "wild approval," "hearty animation," "intense interest and surprise," "enchantment" and "fiery emotion" (141-46). Ahab has succeeded in aligning his crew's will with his own, with the exception of Starbuck. Ishmael admits in a later chapter his place among the "fiery" crowd:

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge. (155)

Given the subjectivity of meaning, it can be asserted that what one hunts for one finds, and, from the outset in "Loomings," Ishmael went to sea to encounter the whale as "monster," thus making him an easy target for "sympathetical feeling" and "greedy" desire for information regarding this "murderous monster" of Ahab's feud. Ishmael's confession, quoted above, is the first paragraph of the chapter "Moby Dick," in which he expounds this "murderous" aspect of the fabled white whale. One single word in his confession sets up the tentative tone for the entire chapter's information. "Ahab's quenchless feud *seemed* mine," Ishmael states. Given his affinity for regaining equilibrium, he makes it clear that

the descriptions of Moby Dick that follow in this chapter do not belong to his understanding; his “sympathetical feeling” is already waning as he recovers from yet another imbalance of external influence. He contemplates the stories surrounding this monster with an unquestionable tone of doubt and suspicion, as seen in numerous qualifying statements: “*to some minds...* the [malign] whale in question must have been no other than Moby Dick” (155); “Nor did *wild rumors* of all sorts fail to *exaggerate*, and still the more horrify the true histories of these deadly encounters” (156); “the whaleman is wrapped by influences all tending to make his *fancy* pregnant with many a mighty birth” of “*fabulous rumors*” and “*superstitiousness*” (156). The preliminary pages of the chapter, in which he recounts the wild legends of the sperm whale, uses the terms “rumors” and “superstition” no less than six times each. Among the repeated use of these two qualifying terms, the narration is replete with other dubious descriptors: *wild suggestions, remarkable documents, contradictory speculations, wonderful stories, fabulous narrations, supernatural surmisings* – these are the legends of Moby Dick. Rather than using the legends to build a creature of mythic proportion for the fulfillment of Ahab’s tragedy, these pages immediately precede Ishmael’s account of what the white whale means to Ahab, and in prefacing Ahab’s take on the whale with these wild legends and fabulous rumors, Ishmael gives the reader permission to dismiss at once his captain’s “wild vindictiveness” and “frantic morbidness” with which he identifies the white whale. “[A]ll evil, *to crazy Ahab*, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick” (160, emphasis mine). What needs to be distilled from this chapter is not Ahab’s meaning itself, but Ishmael’s skepticism and disbelief, and his percipient eye for subjective meaning. *All evil* was Moby Dick, *to crazy Ahab*, but not necessarily to Ishmael. By the end of the chapter, Ishmael qualifies his first confession: “I gave myself up to the abandonment of the

time and the place; but while yet all arush to encounter the whale, could see naught in that brute but the deadliest ill” (163). Already, it can be assumed, distanced from the “wild” passions of the quarter-deck scene and from the fantastic rumors, Ishmael predicts “deadliest ill” in the voyage, but gives himself up to “time and place.” This acceptance of what he cannot control is not unlike Captain Boomer’s in “An Arm and a Leg.”

Intellectual reflection as a philosophical asset has already been attributed to Ishmael. In “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael further distances himself, through the act of reflection, from Ahab’s “quenchless feud.” “What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted,” Ishmael states, “what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid” (163). The reader has just been given permission, in the previous chapter, to dismiss “crazy” Ahab’s interpretation of the whale. Curiously, as Zoellner points out, in the opening statements of a chapter that will explore Ishmael’s own hermeneutical quandary concerning the white whale, the reader again is forewarned to read the discussion provisionally. “Perhaps the most overlooked qualification in *Moby-Dick*,” Zoellner asserts, “is the one which occurs twice in the first half-dozen lines of Chapter 42” (150). This significant qualification are the simple words *at times*: “what, *at times*, [the white whale] was to me, as yet remains unsaid;” “there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which *at times* by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest” (163, emphasis mine). That “nameless horror,” of course, is the whale’s whiteness. Since the chapter on whiteness has been thoroughly handled in countless studies, and because this paper is more concerned with the process of interpretation rather than the product, only a couple of key ideas need to be extracted from the chapter. The first has already been set forth - through the opening qualification, it is clear that the following discussion is provisional. Second, whiteness, with its multiplicity of symbolic meanings, cannot be

defined absolutely; it falls into the beauty-terror paradigm. Most importantly, Ishmael intimates that it perhaps represents universal meaninglessness: by “its indefiniteness it *shadows forth* the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the *thought* of annihilation” (169, emphasis mine). Whiteness is paradoxically the “visible absence of color” and “the concrete of all colors,” and possibly the “dumb blankness, full of meaning” (169). At least, *at times*, whiteness *seems* thus. Remembering that the symbolic method demands continuous reading, to stop here and claim understanding of Ishmael’s comprehension of the whale would be short-sighted. These paired chapters, “Moby Dick” and “The Whiteness of the Whale,” do not define absolute interpretations of the whale, nor do they make a final statement on the validity of either. Their importance in the novel is in setting up a dialectic on Truth. Rejecting the All-Benevolent character of god, or something like god, one quester *assigns* intelligent malice to the powers that be. The other quester, the skeptic, in recognizing that “bad can come out of good,” also rejects *All* Benevolence, but rather than falling back into the dark possibility of *All* Malice, he *questions* (he does not *assign* definitely) the *possibility* of “brute energies of existence, blind, fatal, overpowering... [a] blank senselessness” (Mumford 125). Extended to the surface drama of the novel, the dialectic that is established here contemplates the meaning – or meaninglessness – of Ahab’s maiming encounter with Moby Dick. Was it intelligent malice (fate or God) or blind, brute energies (chance)?<sup>18</sup>

Further meditations on the whale’s status are found in “The Affidavit.” Here, Ishmael’s superficial tone is different from “Moby Dick,” in which the “histories” of the whale were presented as “rumors” and “wild legends.” Now, however, Ishmael’s

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to suggest that this limited dialectic defines the novel’s entire point. I agree with the universal viewpoint that *Moby-Dick* cannot be thus defined. Ahab’s amputation and the dialectic exploring causation is undeniably at the forefront of the novel, but my reading makes this a vehicle for the novel’s greater dialogue on hermeneutics and epistemology.

“histories” are written, as the title of the chapter suggests, as factual accounts. Ishmael is now trying to justify the “catastrophe” of the Pequod with “reasonableness” and “truth” (177), rather than through legend and myth. On the surface, the language throughout is in stark contrast with that in “Moby Dick,” suggesting reliability as opposed to doubt. The facts have inherent in them “*natural verity*” and are “*reliably known*” to Ishmael, there being “three instances which [he] *personally know[s] the truth of,*” and he has “heard of many other instances from persons whose *veracity* in the matter there is no good ground to impeach” (175-76, emphasis mine). “Rumor” and “suspicion” are replaced with repeated reference to “historical” instances. In this chapter, Ishmael draws some seemingly definitive conclusions which would suggest his belief in the malice of the sperm whale, not just Moby Dick himself:<sup>19</sup> “The Sperm Whale is in some cases sufficiently powerful, knowing, and judiciously malicious, as with direct aforethought to stave in, utterly destroy, and sink a large ship; and what is more, the Sperm Whale *has* done it” (178); “I am not superstitious, but... I tell you, the sperm whale will stand no nonsense” (179); “I might proceed with several more examples, one way or another known to me, of the great power and malice at times of the sperm whale” (181). However, “fact” has often little to do with Truth in Ishmael’s narrative, and underlying the pretense of “history” his narrative gives way, as always, to speculation and, in this case, mockery. Early in the chapter, though he states he has facts of “natural verity,” he immediately rejects “methodical” presentation of the facts. Furthermore, he is “content to *produce the desired impression*” (175), in other words to *create* or *invent a desired impression* rather than an objective understanding.

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<sup>19</sup> This generalizing on Ishmael’s part further reinforces the demythologizing of the individual whale, Moby Dick.



Later in the chapter, he interjects this paragraph that finally, in its irony, undercuts the false surface of “verity”:

I do not know where I can find a better place than just here, to make mention of one or two other things, which *to me seem* important, as in printed form establishing in all respects the reasonableness of the whole story of the White Whale, more especially the catastrophe. *For this is one of those disheartening instances where truth requires full as much bolstering as error.* So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable *wonders* of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts, historical *or otherwise*, of the whale fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a *monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory.* (177, emphasis mine)

In a later paragraph, in which he tries, on the surface, to substantiate the whale’s “enormousness,” he again undermines his own argument:

People ashore have indeed some indefinite idea that a whale is an enormous creature of enormous power; but I have ever found that *when narrating to them some specific example* of this two-fold enormousness, they have *significantly complimented me upon my facetiousness*; when, I declare upon my soul, *I had no more idea of being facetious* than Moses, when he wrote the history of the plagues of Egypt. (178, emphasis mine)

*Moby-Dick* is replete with images and episodes and symbols that drive home the point that the *surface* should not be mistaken for the underlying truth of the matter, and it is the same with Ishmael’s narrative technique itself. Even his one grand conclusion, quoted earlier, as to the “knowing” and “judiciously malicious” character of the sperm whale, Ishmael disconnects himself from: “But *fortunately* the special point I here seek can be established upon testimony *entirely independent of my own*” (178, emphasis mine). While this superficially appears to be testimony to his objectivity, he is, in fact, dissociating himself from the “facts” he is “producing.” It is no wonder that his listeners “*significantly* compliment him upon [his] facetiousness.”

Other chapters continue in this vein: rumor, wild legends, misrepresentations, incomplete scientific facts and facetious truths. These will be bypassed here, but with one

observation brought to the fore. In light of the mixed truths and mystery with which Ishmael shrouds his whale, it is not insignificant that more than half of Ishmael's lengthy narrative, more than half the pages of his entire novel about the whale, is spent on such misinformation and "surmises." By Chapter 61, in which Stubb kills the first whale of the voyage, Ishmael has yet to set eyes on a whale. After this chapter, with the exception of prophecies and stories about the white whale gathered from the gams, Ishmael now tells us from his own experience and observation what the monstrous whale really seems, to him. Not just the white whale, but the whale in general, for these initial impressions help shape his perception of the white whale once he finally sees him. The shift from hearsay to first-hand accounting is quite remarkable. It marks the shift from the white whale as mythical beast to the mystical, reflective object of Ishmael's contemplation of Self. Before moving on to Ishmael's actual, first-hand observations of the whale, it would be well to recall Novak's point that in metaphysics, as opposed to nature, the beauty-terror dichotomy reverses; in other words, in the metaphysical realm terror is the exterior surface and beauty the interior "insular Tahiti." Considering that Ishmael devoted half of his narrative to painting an exterior impression of the fabled, mythological and horrible whale – an object of terror and malice – Ishmael's own experience and meditations on the whale, if the pattern is fulfilled, will uncover beauty. To take Novak's argument further, if this pattern of hidden beauty under surface terror is reserved only for the metaphysical realm, then after deconstructing the *mythical* whale by making of him the natural, physical, indeed *humanized* creature, as the following discussion will demonstrate, his own perceptions then reconstruct the whale again to a supernatural position, but this time it is in the realm of mystical beauty.

In “Stubb Kills a Whale,” Ishmael is again dreamily on watch at the foremast-head, only this time a sperm whale is sighted. The actual fact is far different from everything he projected earlier:

a gigantic Sperm Whale lay rolling in the water like a capsized hull of a frigate, his broad glossy back, of an Ethiopian hue, glistening in the sun's rays like a mirror. But lazily undulating in the trough of the sea, and ever and anon tranquilly spouting his vapory jet, the whale looked like a portly burgher smoking his pipe of a warm afternoon. (242)

The only aspect of the whale, from the former legends, that is accounted for here is his enormous bulk; he is “gigantic” like a “hull of a frigate.” As for its monstrousness, there is none to be detected in the unfronted whale. The current description of the whale is one of “majesty” and “tranquility.” His present comportment, in fact, directly reflects that of the crew before the sighting, when they could “hardly resist the spell of sleep induced by such a vacant sea.” The whale reflects the crew “like a mirror.” In the course of this chapter, the mirror images will be inverted as the whale is humanized (“like a portly burgher smoking his pipe”) and the human is made to seem the monster. Ishmael's eyewitness account also inverts prior accounts of the malicious whale pursuing a whale craft with aforethought and purpose. Now, the “poor whale” “majestically turning, swam away... with such a steady tranquility” until he became “alive to his jeopardy,” at which time a “mighty change had come over [him]” (242-43). The *poor* whale, Ishmael states, an obvious first sign of “sympathetical feeling” but this time associated with the whale, is now being maliciously pursued, with murderous aforethought, by man, the savage hunter. The legend of the whale's malice has thus been “reflected” back upon man. The harpooners “like grim death and grinning devils” “howled” out “war-whoops” and “wild screams,” one “smacking his lips,” another “straining” in his seat “like a pacing tiger in his cage” (243). Lest the animality be too hastily credited to the “savage” harpooners, Ishmael is careful to

point out that Stubb does the smoking, the key symbol of the “mirror” reflection, as Ishmael likens it to the whale’s spouting. It is Stubb who counts upon the “honor” of the “assault” (242). It is Stubb who goads his boat crew on to the kill. It is Stubb who “darted dart after dart into the flying fish” (244). It is Stubb, along with the rest of his boat crew, who “glowed” red “when the slanting sun played upon this crimson pond [of blood] on the sea, send[ing] back its reflection into every face” (244). It is Stubb’s pipe that is “smoked out” at the same time the “last agonizing respirations” of the dying whale “shot into the frightened air” (245). Finally, it is Stubb who “stood thoughtfully eyeing the vast corpse he had made” (245).

Though the discussion may appear to have digressed far from the original topic of Ishmael’s perception and interpretation of the white whale, this is a critical chapter in Ishmael’s “developing comprehension” of the whale and regarding the whole business of hermeneutics. Keeping in mind that earlier chapters, especially “Knights and Squires,” elevate whalemens in order that Ahab’s grand tragedy could unfold, Ishmael once again subverts the possibility that this is a feasible reading. He takes his “glorious” Knight and makes of him a blood thirsty savage. It is man, in Ishmael’s first encounter with a whale, that is the monstrous predator, not the whale himself.<sup>20</sup> Considering the sight of the restful and majestic whale, in his unmolested state, it must have surely been a consciousness expanding experience to witness the brutality, not of the whale, but of his crewmates. Furthermore, Ishmael’s final words of the chapter emphatically force the point of inversion by twisting round the “creation” image, as Stubb “stood thoughtfully eyeing the vast corpse *he had made*.” Man’s “creation” is destruction.

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<sup>20</sup> As Zoellner notes, this is the second actual lowering, but in the first lowering Ishmael was rowing “back-foremost” towards the whale when the squall came up and blinded the crew. He never did actually see the whale.

The mirror inversion complicates Ishmael's perception. The "glory" of the hunt is now questionable, the "nobility" of the whaleman is transferred, at least provisionally, to the "majestic" whale.<sup>21</sup> Issues of innocence and malice are confused. Former surface appearance, then, surrounding the mighty whale is obviously a deceit. Shortly after Stubb's killing, Ishmael makes this point in what superficially reads like another cetology chapter. In "The Blanket," Ishmael's comprehension of the whale continues to morph as he further humanizes it. As is Ishmael's wont, he throws a "ridiculous" suggestion - full of import - into his narrative, but then denies its significance. In contemplating the whale's skin, Ishmael states: "from the unmarred dead body of the whale, you may scrape off with your hand an infinitely thin, transparent substance... almost as flexible and soft as satin," and though it "invests the entire body of the whale," he argues, "it were ridiculous to say, that the proper skin of the tremendous whale is thinner and more tender than the skin of a new-born child. But no more of this" (259-60). Too late for "no more of this," the power of suggestion, as Ishmael is cunningly aware, makes his point despite his retraction. That this observation should follow so closely Stubb's "darting dart after dart" through the whale's skin is no coincidence. Ishmael continues to humanize the whale by comparing his blubber to a "real blanket or counterpane," "an Indian poncho;" and he further emphasizes that "like man, the whale has lungs and warm blood" (261). Contemplating the insular capacity of the whale's blubber, and, of course, applying his metaphysics to it, Ishmael takes the conceit one step further and intimates that the whale is a nobler creature than man:

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<sup>21</sup> The honor which Ishmael establishes in the two chapters entitled "Knights and Squires," chapters which precede his first observation of an actual killing, is subverted in a later chapter, "The Honor and Glory of Whaling," in which Ishmael is again at his facetious best.

It does seem to me, that herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individual vitality, and the rare virtue of thick walls, and the rare virtue of interior spaciousness. Oh man! admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it. Be cool at the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole. Like the great dome of St. Peter's, and like the great whale, retain, O man! in all seasons a temperature of thine own. (261)

In beseeching his readers here he again repeats the novel's most recurring message, "to keep the open independence" of one's own sea, remain always a Loose-Fish.

The "interior" beauty of Ishmael's discovered whale is explored in numerous rich and varied chapters, all of which lead the way to his first sighting of Moby Dick. Though the three chapters "The Fountain," "The Tail," and "The Grand Armada" are by no means a comprehensive study of Ishmael's unfolding vision of the whale, taken together they provide an account of Ishmael's growing mysticism, or at least his experimentation with mysticism. In this series of chapters, Ishmael reverses the pattern used in the previous discussion on the polarities of fate and free will, in which he first meditates on these concepts, is dropped into perilous action, to resurface with a facetious summary. In this series, he begins with facetious and biting irony in "The Fountain" and ends in a metaphysical meditation in "The Grand Armada," but all three chapters are interconnected with the same thematic thread.

In "The Fountain," Ishmael's language is from the very start suggestive of mystical meanings and realities, but is done so ironically. The chapter is a critique of philosophy and another facetious jab at the philosopher himself, with his "windpipe" spoutings throughout the ages:

That for six thousand years – and no one knows how many millions of ages before – the great whales should have been spouting all over the sea, and sprinkling and mistifying the gardens of the deep, as with so many sprinklings and mistifying pots... [that] it should still remain a problem,

whether these spoutings are, after all, really water, or nothing but vapor – this is surely a noteworthy thing. (310)

This is reminiscent of the whale's head chapters, in which he pitted Locke against Kant and, figuratively speaking, threw them both overboard. In posing the question as to the substance of the spouting, whether it is "really water, or nothing but vapor," Ishmael is having great fun at the expense of the philosophical debate between the idealism and the materialism. It is not superfluous or accidental that he writes "that for some centuries back... down to this blessed minute" it should remain a mystery. "Some centuries back," Plato discoursed on Idealism, and "to this blessed minute" the Romantics are still pondering the issue. Though the chapter title suggests a *spring* or original *source*, which the mystic tries to apprehend through the awakening of consciousness, the chapter instead ridicules the philosophers whose "gas-pipes" have ever been "spouting" theories throughout the ages. The conceit is wonderfully crafted, yet just below the surface of the irony lies the novel's continuous reminder to keep oneself "disengaged" from and independent of these eternal philosophical "spoutings." Humanizing the whale yet again, Ishmael points out that the whale has "regular lungs, like a human being's" and "can only live by inhaling the disengaged air in the open atmosphere" (310). Ishmael has shifted his former position of the whale as fish, elevating him from this lowly class of creatures for his ironic purpose: "a herring or a cod might live a century, and never once raise its head above the surface" (310), a herring or a cod, or perhaps a Stubb or a Flask. Underneath the chapter's satiric surface, religious mysticism, man's unfolding consciousness, and the soul's movement from physical to spiritual awareness is reflected in the chapter's discussion of the whale rising to the "upper world." The whale can only live, Ishmael writes, by "inhaling the *disengaged air* in the *open atmosphere*" (emphasis mine). This is

not only reminiscent of the Lee Shore's message, but it also alludes to the mystic's disengagement from the physical realm to the "open atmosphere" of the "upper world." Recalling that to Ishmael life is equated with the growth of the soul, the imperative search, the conceit of breathing is further connected with spiritual life with typical Ishmaelian facetiousness:

If I say, that in any creature breathing is only a function *indispensable to vitality*, inasmuch as it withdraws from the air a certain element, which being subsequently brought into contact with the blood imparts to the blood its *vivifying principle*, I do not think I shall err; though I may possibly use some *superfluous scientific* words. (310-11, emphasis mine)

The inconsistencies and ironies in this passage alone confound Ishmael's point. One has to assume that the "vitality" that he alludes to here is *more* than mere physical life; he insists "breathing is *only* a function indispensable to vitality" (emphasis mine), suggesting that no more should be "read" into the conceit, yet he then states that the "scientific" nature of his discussion is "superfluous." The whale's rising to the "upper world" at regular intervals to replenish his "surplus stock of vitality" is not unlike the mystic's patterned discipline of meditation. Noting that the whale only "breathes about one seventh or a Sunday of his time" (311), Ishmael takes an ironic stab at the church.

The most important detail on the spoutings, which launches the chapter's greatest sarcastic critique of philosophy, is the fact that the whale does not breathe through his mouth:

he cannot in any degree breathe through his mouth, for, in his ordinary attitude, the Sperm Whale's mouth is buried at least eight feet beneath the surface; and what is still more, his windpipe has no connexion with his mouth. No, he breathes through his spiracle alone; and this is on the top of his head. (310)

Having already suggested that the whale's rising to the "upper" atmosphere has a metaphysical suggestion inherent in it, and that breathing represents, in a sense, the



spiritual replenishment of “vitality” and the “vivifying principle,” the fact that this process has “no connexion” with his “mouth” is telling. In all three chapters in this series, Ishmael will speak to the quality of muteness, and he here facetiously breaches this topic, which will take a more serious turn later. “In man,” Ishmael writes, “breathing is incessantly going on,” and since there is “connexion” in man between the mouth and the windpipe, man’s incessant breathing is basically equated with a lot of philosophical “hot air.” Profundity and muteness go hand and hand, and it is the “ostentatious smuggling verbalists” that Ishmael here criticizes with his humor: “what has the whale to say? Seldom have I known any profound being that had anything to say in this world, unless forced to stammer out something by way of getting a living” (312). The whale, Ishmael makes clear, “has no voice; unless you insult him by saying, that when he so strangely rumbles, he talks through his nose” (312). These comments are more biting when one considers Emerson’s “getting a living” via the lecture circuit and a closing comment on Emerson in one of Melville’s letters to Duyckinck: “enough of this Plato who talks thro’ his nose” (“Letters” 79).

The mystery of the spout’s substance, whether water or only vapor, represents the confounding issue of Truth itself, the mystic’s ultimate aim, and the chapter’s recondite theme, all obscured in the satiric portrayal of the Idealist philosopher:

But why pester one with all this reasoning on the subject? Speak out! You have seen him spout; then declare what the spout is; can you not tell water from air? My dear sir, in this world it is not so easy to settle these plain things. I have ever found your plain things the knottiest of all. And as for this whale spout, you might almost stand in it, and yet be undecided as to what it is precisely. (312-13)

As in all other aspects of the whale thus far explored through many different approaches, the “fountain” is finally unknowable. Not only unknowable, but also dangerous for those

who would pursue it too closely. “You cannot go with your pitcher to this fountain and fill it, and bring it away,” and it “will not do for him to be peering into it, and putting his face in it,” lest the “acridness” of the substance burn the skin. This is the quester’s paradox, repeated throughout the novel, but here set up in a wonderful ironic conceit; he sets up the need to know, and then warns of the dangers in knowing. Though he cannot know, he can at least hypothesize: “the spout is nothing but mist... to this conclusion I am impelled, by considerations touching the great inherent dignity and sublimity of the Sperm Whale; I account him no shallow being... He is both ponderous and profound” (313). Carrying out the rest of his pattern, Ishmael undermines his own “hypothesis” by ending the paragraph with ridiculous jocularity:

I am convinced that from the heads of all the ponderous profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, Dante, and so on, there always goes up a certain semi-visible steam, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts. While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me; and ere long saw reflected there, a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head. The invariable moisture of my hair, while plunged in deep thought, after six cups of hot tea in my thin shingled attic, of an August noon; this seems an additional argument for the above supposition. (313-14)

Of course, the whale doesn’t breathe, like man, even these “ponderous profound beings,” through his mouth; true profundity is mute, a point that will be further reinforced in his next two chapters.

Ishmael further “mistifies” the subject by tacking back from this humorously derogatory description of man’s supposed “profundity” to the “noble” whale: “how nobly it raises our conceit of the mighty, misty monster, to behold him solemnly sailing through a calm tropical sea” (314). Now, all ridicule aside, Ishmael again contemplates the real, living, noble whale, and he affords it what seems to be authentic metaphysical reverence:

his vast, mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapor – as you will sometimes see it – glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts. For, d’ye see, rainbows do not visit the clear air; they only irradiate vapor. And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye. (314)

This last thought explains the confounding juxtaposition of a serious contemplation of mystical substance with the “windpipe” “spoutings” of “profound” men. Ishmael’s narrative tacking, between reverence and ridicule, reflect his thoughts tacking between mystic knowledge and human knowledge. Also, he esteems “intuitions” here, another reference to eastern philosophies, if we recall Ferrantello’s idea of the “cross-fertilization” methodology. Note also, as in “Stubb Kills a Whale,” the whale as mirror is again employed. The whale’s fountain, he says, is sometimes “glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts.” Likewise, “through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot.” In this chapter, the whale is established, despite Ishmael’s early facetious “spoutings,” as the mystic symbol for the Self.

The reverence, with which Ishmael concludes “The Fountain,” after all its stabbing irony, is continued in “The Tail.” This chapter, one of the most beautifully rendered prose pieces of the novel, explores the beauty-terror paradigm. In his contemplation of the whale’s tail, as elsewhere, Ishmael reconciles beauty and power and comes to comprehend the sublime. “Other poets,” Ishmael begins his chapter, “have warbled the praises of the soft eye of the antelope, and the lovely plumage of the bird that never alights; less celestial, I celebrate the tail” (314). Specifically, he celebrates the tail’s beauty and power. “In no

living thing are the lines of beauty more exquisitely defined than in the crescentic borders of [the tail's] flukes" (314). Beauty is not the end of it, of course, and the discussion on the tail's power is remarkable, as it encompasses so many of the novel's rich themes. The "vast local power in the tendinous tail," the "whole bulk of the leviathan," with the "muscular fibres and filaments" that run "down into the flukes" "insensibly blend" to create the tail's "might." "Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it" (315). Here is where the power and beauty blend: "Nor does this – its amazing strength, at all tend to cripple the graceful flexion of its motions; where infantileness of ease undulates through a Titanism of power. On the contrary, those motions derive their most appalling beauty from it" (315). "Real strength," according to Ishmael, is never disconnected from beauty, "it never impairs beauty or harmony, but it often bestows it; and in everything imposingly beautiful, strength has much to do with the magic" (315). This is, of course, a sad commentary on Ahab's strength, which, according to this definition and despite his self-assertion, is not *real* strength. Ahab's demeanor lacks both the beauty and the harmony that real strength provides. That being the case, "real" strength requires definition. Ishmael provides some insight. Real strength is "destitute" of "all brawniness," hints "nothing of any power, but the mere negative, feminine one of submission and endurance" (315). This is the essence of Father Mapple's sermon, and the antithesis to Ahab's strength. This is also the inner strength of the mystic. "Submission" and "endurance" describe Ishmael's acceptance of a mission he had no control over, giving himself up to "the time and the place." Also contrary to Ahab's superficial, *rigid* strength, is the "subtle elasticity" of real strength, whether "wielded in sport, or in earnest, or in anger, whatever mood it be in, its flexions are invariably marked by exceeding grace" (315). Despite the tail's awesome power, there is a "delicacy in it," when "in maidenly

gentleness the whale with a certain soft slowness moves his immense flukes from side to side upon the surface of the sea;" yet, "if he feel but a sailor's whisker, woe to that sailor, whiskers and all" (316). Further building the whale's nobility and *celestial* wonder he describes the peaking of the flukes. This 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... As it seemed to me at the time, such a grand embodiment of adoration of the gods was never beheld" (317). Whether "the devils occur to you" or "archangels," no more profound "adoration" has thus been, not even that of the "fire-worshippers" (317). This is, of course, further discredits Ahab and his false worship in "The Candles." It signifies more than this, however; it again signals Ishmael's provisional "reading" of symbols. Depending on one's "mood," the "devil" or the "archangels" may occur to you. Also, he qualifies his current interpretation of "adoration of the gods" as he does in earlier chapters: "*it seemed to me at the time*" like the "embodiment of adoration." Despite the current humanizing of the whale, despite his interpretations of nobility and grandness, the ever-present qualification reminds us to read his words provisionally, as he reads the symbol of the whale.

Ishmael's final paragraph of the chapter returns the narrative to the indeterminacy of the whale's symbolism and his reverence for him nonetheless. "The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it" (317); yet, we know from the previous chapter that muteness and profundity go together, so his inability to express what he "sees" in the whale only substantiates the discussion. The mystery surrounding the whale is inescapable:

Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none?

Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face. (318)

This passage must itself be dissected. Two comments combine to contribute to what at the surface seems like a conclusive statement of nihilism: "I know him not and never will" and "hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face." If the whale is the mystic mirror in Ishmael's search for Truth, to say "he has no face" is but to say he has no surface appearance with which he shows himself to the world. God or the ultimate Self, however one interprets final Meaning, cannot be embodied in such a manner. This understanding distinguishes Ishmael's acceptance, as opposed to Ahab's defiance, of the unavailability of Ultimate Knowledge or of God. No white whale can serve as the assailable "mask" to penetrate Truth. Throughout the novel, one resurfacing difference between Ahab and Ishmael's epistemologies is the *direction* their searches take them. Ahab demands an outward "face," a "mask" to strike through. Ishmael here is saying that no such "face" exists. Whatever is at the heart of Truth, Ishmael perceives here that it is an inward, mute, and faceless essence, hence, the mirror reflection of the whale in earlier chapters. What Ishmael perceives is the ultimate paradox of his quest: that the whale, the object of his search is, after all, just a fish – he is not the "face" of God or Truth; *but* as a symbolist, the whale comes to represent for Ishmael the inner, mystical, mystifying, noble Self. The whale is no more God or the divine than he is Evil or injustice, although to the symbolist, he may represent either – or *both*. Beauty and terror.

In "The Grand Armada," the reflective narrative of the two former chapters is pulled into the fast and horrible dramatic action of the chase once again. This is a critical chapter in Ishmael's continually expanding meditation and comprehension of the whale, and the narrative accomplishes much thematically. The chapter opens as the Pequod sails

through the “narrow straits of Sudra” and is consequently pursued by the local pirates. Getting through to open water, the Pequod espies whales ahead and thus they become the pursued pursuer, echoing the mirror reflection of man as predator in the chapter “Stubb Kills a Whale,” but with a cannibalistic twist here as man pursues man. Another significant accomplishment of the chapter is Ishmael’s rendering of the whale as material object again, humanizing him and heightening his sympathy for him. The whale sighting in this chapter is “a spectacle of singular magnificence,” as they are swimming in an “extensive herd” (320). Their human qualities are brought to the fore in this chapter: they swam together “as if numerous nations of them had sworn solemn league and covenant for mutual assistance” (320); the “host of vapory spouts” “showed like the thousand cheerful chimneys of some dense metropolis” (320); as “marching armies” they swam on “in one solid, but still crescentic centre” (320). The boats are lowered and the herd chased. “Queequeg’s harpoon was flung” and his boat is dragged into the heart of the herd, whereupon, “as the swift monster drags you deeper and deeper into the frantic shoal, you bid adieu to circumspect life and only exist in a delirious throb” (323). From the “singular magnificence” of the sight of the as yet unmolested whale, the scene changes back into horror as the prey “seemed going mad with consternation” and “betrayed their distraction of panic” (322). There is singular significance in this dualistic portrayal of the whale in the beauty-terror paradigm. Unlike the sea, which hides her terrors beneath the surface calm, the whale in its natural state is both beautiful and *powerful*, but that power only turns to terror – at least in this narrative – when man’s influence is upon the whale. Man then creates the outer surface of terror, while the inner reality of the whale is composed of beauty, calm, and serenity. Again, man’s “creation” is destruction. In what superficially seems another simple, expository statement of one more aspect of the whaling industry,

Ishmael's description of the use of the "drugs" draws forth extraordinary sympathy for the whale, as well as heightens the image he has already set forth of the predatory nature of man: "But sperm whales are not every day encountered; while you may, then, you must kill all you can. And if you cannot kill them all at once, you must wing them, so that they can be afterwards killed at your leisure" (323-24). The war metaphor of this chapter – "Armada," the herd "saluting" the Pequod, "the marching armies" – combines to extend the *reflective* image of murderous man. As soldiers off at war, the male whales in "battle" create a protective wall in the sea; into a chaotic, perilous shoal of whales Ishmael's boat is dragged. At the center, at the heart of this frantic shoal, they glided, "as if from some mountain torrent we had slid into a serene lake" (324). The mystical quality of the scene is remarkable:

Here the storms in the roaring glens between the outermost whales, were heard but not felt. In this central expanse the sea presented that smooth satin-like surface, called a sleek, produced by the subtle moisture thrown off by the whale in his more quiet moods. Yes, we were now in that enchanted calm which they say lurks at the heart of every commotion. (324)

In this center, of course, are the "woman and children" of the soldiers of the shoal. The humanization of the whale and demythologizing of it are especially clear:

being so young, unsophisticated, and every way innocent and inexperienced... these smaller whales – now and then visiting our becalmed boat from the margin of the lake – evinced a wondrous fearlessness and confidence, or else a still, becharmed panic which it was impossible not to marvel at. (325)

Compare that to the myth of Moby Dick. Even in a "panic" these young ones are "becharmed" and "still." This is an echo of the former chapter's discussion of holding out inner strength in any attitude. Further domesticating the scene, Ishmael compared the calves to "household dogs" and, as they "came snuffling round" "Queequeg patted their



foreheads; *Starbuck scratched their backs with his lance; but fearful of the consequences, for the time refrained from darting it*" (325, emphasis mine). Ishmael's "calms" are never forgetful.

The humanizing element continues, complete with the "umbilical cord of Madame Leviathan" and the "Leviathan armours of the deep" (326), but before moving on from this chapter, Ishmael's metaphysical "linked analogies" should not be missed:

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternation and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concerns; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy. (326)

It is not a coincidence that in this mystical, metaphysical conclusion Ishmael should use the term repeated so often in Father Mapple's sermon. The whales "serenely revelled in dalliance and *delight*." In the sermon, Father Mapple states: "Delight is to him, whom all the waves of the billows of the seas of the boisterous mob can never shake from this sure Keel of the Ages" (51). And again, "Delight is to him – a far, far upward, and inward delight – who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self" (51). Ishmael heeds Father Mapple's sermon time and again; therefore, "deep inland" he still maintains himself "in eternal mildness of joy." Notice, as well, that Ishmael repeats the quality of "*mute calm*," again reminding the reader that wordlessness and profundity are wedded, the thematic thread that runs through the three chapters in this series. In "The Fountain," Ishmael silences Reason in his facetious attack on philosophy. Truth does not have a voice, not in the lyceum or the pulpit; no sermonizing philosopher can guide one to Ultimate Truth. In "The Tail," Ishmael in effect silences himself, admitting that he cannot find the words to express his growing

comprehension; language, a human construct, is inadequate for the job of rendering Truth. Finally, in his final meditation of "The Grand-Armada," Ishmael discovers the "mute calm" and "eternal mildness of joy" which is, in effect, a refuge in the center of his being.

Ishmael has to at last come to terms with the "one grand hooded phantom" of all his meditations and pondering. By now Ishmael has demythologized Ahab's whale, has labeled the sperm whale a mere fish, has humanized him, has attached to him mystical, god-like reverence, and has then, in turn, reduced him again to the status of mere fish, though with definite symbolic and reflective potency. These are Ishmael's "ever-shifting and confusing truths" surrounding the great sperm whale. As a speculative quester, who doesn't "play mischief with the truth," his metaphysical and symbolistic readings of the whale don't distract him, at least not for long, from the whale's material reality. When Moby Dick is at last sighted, the narration is similar to earlier sightings of the generic whale; relative to what the reader might naturally expect, this is an unremarkable sighting. The first sighting of the great and mysterious Moby Dick deviates very little from Ishmael's first glimpse of the sperm whale in general:

As they neared him, the ocean grew still more smooth; seemed drawing a carpet over its waves; seemed a noon-meadow, so serenely it spread. At length the breathless hunter came so nigh his seemingly unsuspecting prey, that his entire dazzling hump was distinctly visible, sliding along the sea as if an isolated thing, and continually set in a revolving ring of finest, fleecy, greenish foam. He saw the vast, involved wrinkles of the slightly projecting head beyond. Before it, far out on the Turkish-rugged waters, went the glistening white shadow from his broad, milky forehead, a musical rippling playfully accompanying the shade; and behind, the blue waters interchangeably flowed over into the moving valley of his steady wake... A gentle joyousness – a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale. (447)

Several key points can be extracted from this first view of the "monstrous" white whale.

First, as opposed to all the cetological chapters and whale encounters before it, here, the

whale's "*entire* dazzling hump was *distinctly visible*" (emphasis mine). The whale before him is the real, physical and *visible* object, not enshrouded with the mystery of either Ahab's mythology or Ishmael's mystic meditations. Also, Ishmael is here encountering what he earlier claimed is the most haunting of Moby Dick's features – his whiteness. Neither the "dazzling" and "glistening" whiteness nor the "white shadow" from his "broad milky forehead" appalls the narrator, but the whole scene emits a "gentle joyousness."

If his whiteness does not appall Ishmael, then perhaps the malicious battle will, as Ahab's whale will come back to his conscience, as it did for a time in "The Quarter-Deck." But this, too, no longer stirs the same "fiery" emotion in the less naïve narrator. As Zoellner suggests, the ensuing encounters of the three-day chase are not "a confrontation or a battle, but an unwelcome *interruption* of some secretly compelling urgent Leviathanic business that [Moby Dick] already had in hand" (256). The "secretly compelling" business is no more than the whale's instinctual migratory travels. "And thus, through the serene tranquilities of the tropical sea, among waves whose hand-clappings were suspended by exceeding rapture, *Moby Dick moved on*" (448, emphasis mine); after each encounter with the Pequod's boats, Moby Dick returned to his regular course. But Ishmael did not bring the reader this far to dryly restate that Moby Dick is merely a spouting fish with a horizontal tail. The tension tacks back and forth between Ahab's whale: "withholding from sight the full terrors of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wretched hideousness of his jaw" (448), and Ishmael's whale: "not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam" (447). Both of these notions, of course, have already been invalidated, and the suggestiveness in the final scenes is only that – suggestion, not definition. For example, in the first day's chase, "*as if* perceiving this stratagem, Moby Dick, with that malicious intelligence *ascribed to him*, sidelingly

transplanted himself, as it were, in an instant, shooting his pleated head lengthwise beneath the boat” (448, emphasis mine). The histories and the mythologies that *ascribed to him* that malice have already been disqualified. The language is again qualifying and tentative when Moby Dick comes back for a second strike on the boats: “Moby Dick swam swiftly round the wrecked crew; sideways churning the water in his vengeful wake, *as if* lashing himself up to still another and more deadly assault. The sight of the splintered boats *seemed to* madden him” (450, emphasis mine).

Just as in the first day’s sighting, where Ishmael describes the “distinctly visible” “entire dazzling hump” of the physical whale, his description of the second day’s sighting begins with a similarly enchanting sight – the power and beauty of the physical whale are recalled: “Moby Dick bodily burst into view! For not by any calm indolent spoutings; not by the peaceable mystic gush of that mystic fountain head of his, did the White Whale now reveal his vicinity; but by the far more wondrous phenomenon of breaching” (455). Even in a simple description of a sighting, Ishmael sustains the tension between two possible whales. Ishmael’s whale is, of course, the “wondrous” whale “[r]ising with his utmost velocity from the furthest depths... boom[ing] his entire bulk into the pure element of air, and piling up a mountain of dazzling foam” (455). In this same breach, Ahab’s whale is also observed, but Ishmael will not let this whale become a possibility for the reader: “*In those moments*, the torn, enraged waves he shakes off, *seem* his mane; *in some cases*, this breaching is his act of defiance” (455, emphasis mine). Ishmael’s breaching whale is wondrous, not in the mystical sense here, though the language may hint at that, but in the very natural fact. As was earlier established in the novel, the breach is the whale’s most beautiful movement; it is the fusion of grace and power. But he further complicates this suggested physical simplicity in the next paragraph:

As in his immeasurable bravadoes the White Whale tossed himself salmon-like to Heaven. So suddenly seen in the blue plain of the sea, and relieved against the still bluer margin of the sky, the spray that he raised, for the moment, intolerably glittered and glared like a glacier; and stood there gradually fading and fading away from its first sparkling intensity, to the dim mistiness of an advancing shower in a vale. (455)

The language is reminiscent of “The Fountain” and Ishmael’s earlier mystical reflections of the whale. The reflective scene is broken, however, by the lowering of the boats, and the narrative rushes back to an account of Ahab’s whale. “As if to strike a quick terror into them, by this time being the first assailant himself, Moby Dick turned, and was now coming for the three crews” (456). This is again qualified: “*as if* to strike to strike quick terror.” Further on, Moby Dick “*seemed only intent* on annihilating each separate plank of which those boats were made” (456, emphasis mine). The second day’s chase ends after Moby Dick “made a sudden rush” among the “tangles” of “line, loose harpoons and lances,” finally staving each of the three boats. The fury of the scene is suggestive of Ahab’s whale, but Ishmael’s narrative of the retreating whale leaves the reader again deciphering the facts through his ambiguous qualifications and hints of sympathy: “But soon, *as if satisfied* that his work for that time was done, he pushed his pleated forehead through the ocean, and *trailing after him the intertangled lines*, continued his leeward way at a traveller’s methodical pace” (457, emphasis mine).

The mystical allusions of Ishmael’s earlier whale are also present in the narrative of the third day’s chase. The language recalls the shrouded mystifying aspect, but added to this, and more relevant, is his sympathy for the tormented whale. The movement is no longer graceful, like the earlier “mighty mildness of repose in swiftness” which “invested the gliding whale” before the first strike (447). Now, the water around him “slowly swelled” then “quickly upheaved;” the soundless travel is now “low rumblings” of a

“subterraneous hum;” until at last Moby Dick is seen in anything but his past noble aspect, as “bedraggled with trailing ropes, and harpoons, and lances, [his] vast form shot lengthwise, but obliquely from the sea” (464). The mighty whale of Ishmael’s previous vision is fading: “Shrouded in a thin drooping veil of mist, it hovered for a moment in the rainbowed air; and then fell swamping back into the deep” (464). Ahab’s whale, on the other hand, is about to make his most important appearance. “Maddened by yesterday’s fresh irons that corroded in him, Moby Dick *seemed* combinedly possessed by all the angels that fell from heaven... as head on he came churning his tail among the boats and once more flailed them apart” (464, emphasis mine). Only Ahab’s boat remains intact. Though Ahab still madly pursues the white whale, after staving the boats a third time, Moby Dick has already returned “steadily swimming forward” “in his leeward voyage,” “intent only upon pursuing his own straight path in the sea” (465). But the unrelenting captain crosses Moby Dick’s “straight path” once more, this time to the Pequod’s peril. Ahab “darted his fierce iron, and his far fiercer curse into the hated whale” (466), who in turn “spasmodically rolled his nigh flank against the bow, and, without staving a hole in it, so suddenly canted the boat over” (466). Regaining his boat, Ahab pushes on for the whale. Hearing the rushing water of the boat’s wake in pursuit of him, Moby Dick turns again, but, in doing so, he spies the Pequod itself, and “*seemingly* seeing in it the source of all his persecutions, *bethinkingly* – *it may be* – a larger and nobler foe; of a sudden, he bore down upon its advancing prow” (466-67, emphasis mine). And so, “from side to side strangely vibrating his predestinating head... the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship’s starboard bow” (468). Ahab’s “death-glorious ship” goes down without him, until he again assaults the white whale, and, getting caught round the neck by the “foul” line, Moby Dick carries him, too, down to the depths.

Ishmael's interpretation of the three days' chase is complex. First, as has been stated, Ishmael meets the great "phantom" of his dread and dreams with relative indifference, or at least, his narrative infuses a reflective remove on the scene. The whale's physical reality is always present. As Ishmael's shifting perceptions of the whale evolve, from "Loomings" to his first sighting of Moby Dick, his vision is one of recovered balance, equilibrium, and stability. He no longer believes in monsters, not monsters outside of man, at any rate. The duality of beauty and terror apply to humans as to everything else in Nature. The whale's repeated "leeward" turnings, as has already been stated, reinforce Moby Dick's physicality after each encounter. The force of "necessity," as Zoellner calls it, this instinctive force, moves him along his path. Another aspect of instinctive or inherent nature, Moby Dick attacks not with purpose or malice but out of his own terror-stricken reaction to being hunted. The whale's "predestinating head," which "smote the ship's starboard side," is again, the "predestination" of instinctual patterns of response to threat. It is, as Bunger and Starbuck have stated earlier, the "awkwardness" of a "dumb brute." Both his leeward progressions and his "collisions" with the Pequod and its crew are signs of instinct, not intelligence. "In short," Zoellner explains, "Leviathan is impelled by inexorable primal impulse, and moves as he moves because he must" (258). There is the white whale's "predestination." "Retribution, swift vengeance, [and] eternal malice" are only in the whale's "*aspect*" (468, emphasis mine). Ishmael thus qualifies the final fatal blow. These qualities are not in the whale's nature, but merely in his "aspect," in other words, in his *appearance* when "impelled by inexorable primal impulse" to force his gigantic bulk against harm.

If Ishmael's final chapters set out to prove the physicality, and nothing else, of the white whale, and if Ishmael rejects Moby Dick's "purposeful malice" long before the

fateful encounter, why does his narrative shift so between the mystical and the mythical whale during the chase? A simplistic reading of the novel, especially the last chapters, is a sort of showdown between Good and Evil, but even this is complicated by subjective interpretation. Is it the showdown between the Good White Whale and the Evil Captain Ahab, or, conversely, the Evil Whale versus the Noble Ahab, crusader for universal justice? Neither of these makes any sense in light of the whale's material reduction by the end of the book. He's a hunted animal. As Ishmael's quest makes clear, in his many "visions" and the consequent rebalancing of reason and equilibrium, the whale is a whale, even though he may have served a metaphysical or symbolic purpose *for a time*. Just as in the Try-Works scene the crew is the crew – and not the devils of Ishmael's temporary vision. Man cannot do battle with a symbol. He needs the real, blood-flowing, animated beast to dart. The "battle" of the sub-narrative is not between man and beast, good and evil, but between Ahab's whale and Ishmael's whale, both of which, it is necessary to recall, were at one time part of Ishmael's consciousness, his interpretation. Ishmael's two-whale representation of these last chapters, as seen in his narrative oscillations described above, do not represent Ahab's "real" living battle taking place in the dramatic narrative. These oscillations, it can be suggested, are the mind's internal battle. As the whale, in Ishmael's mystic moments, reflects back Ishmael's own thinking, his own mind's workings, it becomes the symbol of Ishmael's own soul. The oscillations between Ahab's whale and Ishmael's whale are the oscillations within Ishmael's *Being*, between his own beauty and terror, and the beauty and terror of his perceptions of mankind and the universe. Despite what happens on the surface of the novel, which Ishmael's ambiguous, subjective and often facetious narrative confounds throughout, it is but a reflection of what is going on *inside*, recalling that the entire "action" of Ishmael's tale is interior action. There are no



victors in this battle, there are merely reconciled polarities of Self; beauty and terror will always coexist. Both whale's show up for battle in these final chase scenes, because both are always inherently there. Ishmael survives the battle, perhaps, because he has unified them at last. Both whale and captain "disappeared" in the "depths." Ahab has to go down with the whale, where Ishmael is resurrected, because he is, from first to last, "fast" to that white whale, he cannot escape that which has its barbs in him, the whale "owned" Ahab. On the other hand, Ishmael's journey's end brings him to the ultimate resurrection. The battle is done, the tacking is through; Ishmael's persistent quest for equilibrium is achieved in this unity of the dualities of beauty and terror. In the Eastern traditions, it is suggested that once the state of Unitive Peace is attained, the "enlightened" one becomes, in a sense, "immune" to the clamors of the "carking cares" of the physical world. Though this paper does not defend a conclusive moment of "enlightenment" on Ishmael's part or suggest that Ishmael attains a state of unitive peace, in which he realizes a *universal* "soul," his acceptance and reconciliation of opposing qualities leads him at least to an individual state of "peace" or "joy," which protect him, in a sense, from the "clamors" and "terrors" of the world around him. Consider Ishmael's final resurrection, as he floated on the sea while all around him "[t]he unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks" (470). Consider Ishmael's affirmation of the "deep inland" "eternal mildness of joy" despite the "tornadoed Atlantic" surrounding him. Consider Father Mapple's sermon: "Delight is to him whose strong arms yet support him, when the ship of this base treacherous world has gone down beneath him" (51). Then consider a reading of *Moby-Dick* that proposes *All* and Absolute nihilism. And recall: "All is vanity." ALL.

Despite Ishmael's long pursuit after Truth, his countless vain attempts to *know* the whale, the outer symbol of his internal mining, and despite the ambiguity and tragedy of the voyage's end, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Ishmael transcends the tragedy, not only in the literal sense of floating on the coffin-life buoy, but in the spiritual sense. Ishmael reconciles the unattainability of Truth and the existence of polarities, in his own Being and in the Universe. Ishmael's metaphysical epistemology is inherently symbolic; meaning lies within him, not within the object of contemplation. Ishmael's whale is the *reflective mirror*, and from this reflection he perceives the horrors of man, but through it he also finds his own "insular Tahiti." Ahab refuses to accept the reflective nature of the whale's symbolic meaning, or he would have seen himself in the whale's wrinkled brow; he would have perceived his own malice and acts of injustice, which he projected on the white whale. Ishmael's metaphysics uses the whale not as the external "face" of some penetrable Truth, but as the symbol for his internal search. Inscrutable Truth has no face. Ishmael understands this as Ahab cannot, and this is why he transcends the tragedy, as Ahab cannot. Ishmael is a continuous reader on an *inward* quest, borrowing from Nature the lessons of Self, and returning to Nature her unspoiled material.

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