Ironies of Freedom: A Reading of Melville's *Moby Dick*

by

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mojim roditeljima, čije slike nosim kao ikone pred sobom

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I cannot wait for my 23rd birthday in a couple of days. I think I look—if not young or good, then maybe—okay for my age. I'm OK with OK. It is with the utmost earnestness that I want to end with the words of another: "Now, I've had the time of my life/No, I never felt like this before/yes, I swear, it's the truth/And I owe it all to you." Now, if you do not mind, please catch me like Patrick Swayze.

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Abstract

Ironies of Freedom: A Reading of Melville's Moby Dick explores the complex interplay between authority, freedom, and madness in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*. The study focuses on the peculiar absence of mutiny aboard the Pequod, a striking deviation from Melville's other narratives. This peculiarity is examined through the lens of Ahab's dominion and the crew's voluntary compliance with his vengeful quest, despite the evident madness of his mission. Ahab's hunt symbolizes a broader metaphysical and spiritual crusade, driven by a deeply personal yet universally resonant anguish. The crew's unanimous acceptance of Ahab's cause exposes their metaphysical, ideological, psychological, and existential alignment with him. This alignment is not born of coercion or deceit but emerges from a shared orphanhood and a collective yearning for meaning and redemption, reflective of the broader 19th-century socio-cultural context.

The dissertation posits that this shared orphanhood and its associated pathologies are central to understanding the motivations and actions of the Pequod's crew. These men, emblematic of their era's ideological beliefs and existential crises, find a perverse refuge in Ahab's monomaniacal quest, which offers an asylum for their madness by providing a semblance of purpose and unity. The narrative of *Moby Dick* thus serves as a prophetic critique of the times, highlighting the inevitability of such collective delusions and the inherent ironies in the pursuit of freedom. In *Pierre*, Melville further explores these themes, presenting a prequel to *Moby Dick* that delves into the internal catastrophe that precedes and precipitates external madness culminating in the hunt. Pierre's character, like Ahab, embodies the tortured soul grappling with profound

existential discontent, leading to a descent into madness from which the only possible escape is the hunt for Moby Dick.

Ironies of Freedom integrates close textual analysis with historical and philosophical contextualization, drawing connections between Melville's narrative strategies and the broader intellectual currents of his time. It argues that Melville's works not only reflect but also critique the ideological constructs of their era, particularly the romantic ideals of individualism and the myth of the self-made man. Ironies of Freedom identifies and maps out the successive stages that Ahab, Ishmael, and the crew pass through—from the "great American desert" to the vengeful fantasy of the hunt—and the psychological and historico-philosophical causes and conditions of that passage. Further, it demonstrates that *Moby Dick* has a double structure: at one level, it narrates the Pequod's monomaniacal hunt, while at the other, it narrates Ishmael's escape and return. At this first level, *Moby Dick* declares a prophecy for the 19th century, i.e., a series of monomaniacal but well-intended fantasies of vengeance, while at the second, it is a Gospel of the return. Further, it submits that *Moby Dick* can be both this prophecy and this Gospel because it also contains a third element, a treatise explaining why Melville prophesizes the hunt, the entire causal structure from the despair on land to the lunacy of the hunt, and how Ishmael ultimately manages to escape and return.

Focused on identifying and reconstructing the philosophy embedded in *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*, Ironies of Freedom reveals the underlying principles and critiques within Melville's narratives and offers a significant contribution to outlining Melville's philosophical thought. Ultimately, it contends that *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* reveal the paradoxes inherent in the human pursuit of freedom.

Introduction

"She's not pretty, she's not wearing any rouge."
Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*

There is no mutiny on the Pequod. Unlike in many of Melville's other works such as *Ommo*, *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, and "Benito Cereno," in *Moby Dick* there is no mutiny. This absence is unusual for Melville, but it becomes even more peculiar when we consider another absence: on the Pequod, there is not even any objection to or discontent with Ahab's rule. This is in stark contrast to *Billy Budd*, for instance, where, while there is no mutiny, there is an undeniable discontent with Captain Vere's decision to put "goodness beyond virtue" to death when he executes Billy.

When Ahab announces his plan to hunt Moby Dick for revenge, none of his men object, nor do any of them express any discontent. This lack is all the stranger, once we recall that when he announces this mad plan it is news to his men. Ahab claims that Moby Dick took his leg, but it quickly becomes evident to everyone on board that he intends to heal a more spiritual and metaphysical wound. As Ishmael explains, "Upon [that] whale's white hump, he piled the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down" (156).[1] That this is lunacy need not be said, but it must be said because therein is the point of the story that Melville is trying to tell. Blaming a whale for humanity's misery and hunting in turn is madness, but that is very much the point. Moby Dick is the cause, Ahab assures them, and he will hunt as the means of

[1] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or, the Whale*, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 156. All subsequent references will be made directly in the text.

resolving all the pain and suffering humanity has ever endured. In a word, this is the plot of *Moby Dick*.

Ahab's madness is undeniable, as acknowledged by himself, Ishmael, Starbuck, and any reader of the book. And yet, it is also beyond a doubt that all the men on the Pequod accept Ahab's crusade and assume it as their own. If he is mad, then so are they; and if he is guilty, then they are too. There are no exceptions aboard the Pequod. There are no objections. And there is no mutiny. These absences are at the very center of *Moby Dick*.

The careful reader might argue against this apparent lack of objection, but he would be mistaken. To be sure, there does *seem* to be a clear exception: Starbuck, the first mate. He objects, immediately, right there on the quarter-deck, insisting that Moby Dick did not take Ahab's leg and that seeking vengeance against a "dumb brute" is both irrational and "blasphemous" (139). He even goes so far as to call Ahab "mad" (139). All the crew are present, and there is no reason to believe that they have not heard Starbuck. Nonetheless, not one of them is swayed by his reasons, nor does even one of them feel compelled to ask Ahab to address Starbuck's claims or explain his reasons. Instead, they all believe him, they all agree, and they all comprehend, immediately. Clearly, Starbuck's objections, sensible, rational, and correct as they may be, are for naught. There will be no objections from the crew, and there will be no mutiny.[2] Their voluntary consent—and it *is* voluntary—demonstrates that there will be no mutiny, but it is Starbuck's objections that shed light on *why* there will be no opposition aboard the Pequod. And so, yes, an objection is voiced, but the one who voiced it confesses the futility of his protests on the very next page:

My soul is more than matched; she's overmanned; and by a madman! Insufferable sting, that sanity

[2] Starbuck's objection is based on fact and reason, and yet not one of the men standing on the quarter-deck bats an eye, and Ahab dismisses his objection with ease: "Aye, Starbuck; aye, my hearties all around; it was Moby Dick that dismasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now." Melville, *Moby Dick*, 139. If the crew were concerned upon hearing Starbuck's argument, Ahab resolves any doubts with a simple response: 'no, it was Moby Dick.' They believe him and they follow him because they want to believe him and, what's more, because they need to believe him. Fittingly, there is no indication the men even heard, cared, or listened to Starbuck. They pay no mind—never did and never will.

> should ground arms on such a field! But he drilled deep down, and blasted all my reasons out of me! I think I see his impious end; but feel that I must help him to it. Will I, nill I, the ineffable thing has tied me to him; tows me with a cable I have no knife to cut. (144)

Starbuck will protest again. In fact, he will even march right up to Ahab's cabin with a pistol in hand, but he will not pull the trigger.[3] Everything he says about Ahab and his vengeance is true, but all his screams and threats amount to nothing more than sound and fury. There will be no mutiny on the Pequod, not by the first mate, nor by anyone else. The reason, never explicitly written but evident everywhere between the lines, is simple: there will be no mutiny because Ahab has offered these men what they have always wanted, what they truly desired. He has offered them something they cannot and will not refuse.

Instead of just shrugging it off as inconsequential, Starbuck's inability to follow through on his threats merits attention. His impotence to act is neither physical nor legal, but psychological. He could easily overpower his old, one-legged captain, and, as the first mate, he has a legal right (indeed, the duty) to mutiny, the moment Ahab breaks his fiduciary responsibilities.[4] He will do neither, however, because he cannot sever the "ineffable thing" that ties him to Ahab. Starbuck's character takes much criticism in *Moby Dick*, and his flaws are delved into in some detail; but his impotence is never explicitly linked to the fundamental flaw in his character: his orphanhood. It is not just the first mate that suffers from this flaw, however, but all the Pequod's men (and, of course, all the landsmen they represent). They are all orphans, all of them; and they all suffer and display the same pathologies.[5] But Starbuck also stands out, because, unlike Flask and Stubb, he

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[3] See Chapter 109, "Ahab and Starbuck in the Cabin," in Melville, *Moby Dick*, 361-3.

[4] To strengthen this argument, we could assert that if a power struggle were to arise between Starbuck and Ahab, it would be reasonable to assume that the crew would support Starbuck. Not because of any preferences for their personal characteristics, i.e., Starbuck's sensible and calm disposition as opposed to Ahab's strangeness and fanaticism, for instance, but due to the explicitly stated motivations of the men for boarding the Pequod, namely, hunting whales for profit, rather than pursuing one whale, Moby Dick, for metaphysical vengeance. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 138-44.

[5] See Chapter 114, "The Gilder" of Melville, *Moby Dick*, 372-3.

possesses a level of self-awareness. It does not extend to understanding the cause of his impotence (a knowledge only possessed by Ishmael), but it does permit him to recognize his limitations and the conflict between his desires and the world as it is. This partial awareness, combined with his yearning for things that are now impossible, makes his confessions as well as his protests and (failed) actions enlightening. In short, he proves to be exemplary and enlightening precisely because he is slightly out of sync with the conditions and "manufactured" character of his age.[6]

Orphanhood is central to the pursuit of Moby Dick, motivating various aspects of this voyage explored in the book, such as dissatisfaction with life on land, the compulsion to set sail, and the resulting hunt. It is not, however, fully addressed in *Moby Dick*. Instead, its full treatment comes only in Melville's next novel, *Pierre*. *Moby Dick* depicts its characters as "romantic," "absent-minded," "melancholic," and "disgusted" with the world, as well as "sordid," "fickle," "orphaned," and a handful of other not-exactly-flattering characteristics.[7] But orphanhood is the fundamental or foundational feature of their character, and it names something more extreme than simple abandonment: it refers to a stronger form of negation, foreclosure; a negation that installs a complete lack of all knowledge and access to what is missing. Buried in the graves of their "unwed mothers," the secret of their paternity is doubly concealed (373). These "exiled royalties," as Ishmael describes them, are, moreover, driven by "subterranean," unconscious forces blindly repeating the would-be actions of their "sires," deposed, forgotten, and broken, lying hidden at unreachable depths within each of them (157-8). They are driven to repeat these actions, they repeat unbeknownst to

[6] Both Ahab and Ishmael view the character of men of the age as "manufactured" by its conditions and form of life. Referring to Ahab's view, Ishmael writes: "the permanent constitutional condition of the manufactured man, thought Ahab, is sordidness." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 178.

[7] These characterizations are found across *Moby Dick*, but the most comprehensive single characterization of these men is found in Chapter 35, "The Mast-Head": "For nowadays, the whale-fishery furnishes an asylum for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the carking cares of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber." This sentence, I will argue, is the prophecy Melville makes in *Moby Dick*. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 135.

themselves, and they repeat them in distorted form.

While *Moby Dick* explores how the madness common to these men manifests and seeks asylum in the hunt, it is *Pierre* that concerns itself with the internal catastrophe that leads to this madness. In fact, as we will see, *Pierre* should be recognized as the prequel of *Moby Dick*, its protagonist embodying an Ahab-like character without (or prior to finding) a whale.[8] Indeed, Pierre precedes both of *Moby Dick*'s heroes, who should be

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[8] In *Pierre*, we find not only the *casus belli* of Pierre's madness but also the cause of the madness in *Moby Dick*, i.e., the cause the motivates the entire movement from the Woe of the "great American desert" to the "Maddened Madness" that is the hunt for Moby Dick. And so, while *Pierre* follows *Moby Dick* chronologically, it precedes it logically: *Pierre* is the backstory, as it were, of *Moby Dick*. While many readers have maintained that *Pierre* is nonsense, a senseless novel that proved the madness of its author, many of those that have come to appreciate *Pierre* maintain that the novel—all of its qualities notwithstanding—does not explain the cause of its protagonist's madness; others, simply ignore this matter. Andrew Delbanco, for instance, has argued that *Pierre* does not provide the "*casus belli*" of Pierre's madness. See Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 199. This, as the following chapters demonstrate, is false: *Pierre* does provide an account of what causes Pierre's madness, indeed an extended account, as well as the cause of Ahab's madness (and by extension, the madness of all the Pequod's men).

The term "avenging dream" is from *Pierre*, where it is used to describe the ambitions with which Pierre is led into the madness he ultimately dies entrapped in. Moreover, as will be demonstrated, it refers to a strictly homologous phenomenon as the one that takes place in *Moby Dick*. Pierre's avenging dream is the same phenomenon but at an earlier stage of the process that culminates in the hunt. Further, Pierre is explicitly referred to as a "sailor" diving into the "sea," the figurative meaning of which is identical to the meaning of the sea in *Moby Dick*. See Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Cindy Weinstein (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 368. Pierre is cast (or casts himself) into the same sea as the one that the Pequod (and the Fidele, in *The Confidence-Man*) sail, and he too soon finds the truth therein (albeit not the whole of "the Truth," which is expressed by the narrator but of which Pierre remains largely, but not completely ignorant). A few things bear mentioning here, in anticipation of what follows. The symbolism of the sea, sailors, etc., is identical in *Pierre* and *Moby Dick*, as are the underlying historico-philosophical conditions and psychological commitments. As such, when Melville describes Pierre as having "plunged into a sea of trouble" and being lost in "unknown seas," what is being described and narrated is the same as what takes place in *Moby Dick* when the landsmen set out sea; indeed, the description of the men subject to the prophecy (romantic, melancholic, absent-minded, disgusted, etc.) are all perfectly suited to Pierre. See Melville, *Pierre*, 93, 96. Some hundred pages later, as Pierre is crossing "his Rubicon," we are told that any man seduced into thinking he can be a god is a "restless sailor" who "breaks from every enfolding arm, and puts to sea in height of tempest that blows off shore," and that "Pierre was now this vulnerable god; this self-upbraiding sailor; this dreamer of the avenging dream," who is about to take a step from which there is no return and no exit. See Melville, *Pierre*, 182-3. "Sucked into the Maelstrom, man must go round"—that is Pierre's fate. Melville, *Pierre*, 183. Wirth also makes this point, namely that although Pierre is landlocked, the hero is cast out to sea; because the sea, he maintains, is a symbolic representation of an epistemic situation, Pierre, Wirth argues, is confronting a philosophical problem. See Wirth, "Outlandish Lands," in *Melville Among the Philosophers*, ed. Corey McCall and Tom Nurmi (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 65-82. Lewis

seen not as alternatives to one another but as distinct yet successive developments in a single trajectory: Pierre, the orphan who dies consumed by madness without a whale; Ahab, the monomaniacal captain who hunts Moby Dick and dies entangled in whale-lines; and Ishmael, who follows Ahab but manages to escape

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makes a related observation: "Going to sea, both in deed and in symbol, was always Melville's way of fronting what Thoreau called 'the essential facts of life.'" See R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 142. In the chapters that follow, these facts of life show themselves to be, above all, the nature of the subject, meaning its constitution, mind, and soul, and the historico-philosophical conditions that shape (or "manufacture," to use Melville's term) the subject and in which the subject lives. Lewis rightly adds that Melville's heroes plunge into the mind of God and leave all appearances ashore, so to speak. The trouble with this claim—and with making this plunge—as we will see, is that while Melville's characters do plunge into what could be called 'the mind of God,' there is no God in Melville's works, and so what they are plunging into and confronting is, aside from a Godless ontological reality, their own psychology and the "sacred" truth of the father. In sum, the sea is Melville's symbolization of how the ontological truth of the void appears, Pierre is explicitly identified as a sailor, and his ambitions and torments arise from the same conditions and desperation that led the Pequod's crew to sea and made them susceptible to Ahab's lunacy. He sails the same sea and he plunges into it for the same reasons.

Secondly, the term "madness maddened," which I will rely on repeatedly to designate the frame of mind and vision of the world involved in the hunt for Moby Dick, is taken from one of Ahab's self-descriptions. In addition to using it to refer to the state of mind of a character actively pursuing Moby Dick, I will use it to designate the perception and experience of the world by any such individual, in contrast to "madness" and "woe," which refer to life on land and life at sea without Moby Dick, respectively. When referring to the state of mind on an individual, I will use "woe," "madness," and "madness maddened," but while referring to the world in which such individuals exist I will capitalize the terms, i.e., the worlds of Woe, Madness, and Madness Maddened. The term itself is used by Ahab in Chapter 37, "Sunset," to describe his state of mind immediately after the quarter-deck scene when Ahab informs the crew of his intention to hunt Moby Dick. Instructively, in the passage where the term is used, Ahab makes the distinction between madness and madness maddened. Because much of the quote will be useful throughout, I quote it here in full: "Twas not so hard a task. I thought to find one stubborn, at the least; but my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve. Or, if you will, like so many ant-hills of powder, they all stand before me; and I their match. Oh, hard! that to fire others, the match itself must needs be wasting! What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do! They think me mad—Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself! The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were. I laugh and hoot at ye, ye cricket-players, ye pugilists, ye deaf Burkes and blinded Bendigoes! I will not say as schoolboys do to bullies—Take someone of your own size; don't pommel me! No, ye've knocked me down, and I am up again; but ye have run and hidden. Come forth from behind your cotton bags! I have no long gun to reach ye. Come, Ahab's compliments to ye; come and see if ye can swerve me. Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! man has ye there. Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!" See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 143.

and return through the capture of a different whale, the White Whale.[9] Cetology is all that matters here: not only are all three defined by their respective cetology (Pierre lacks a whale, Ahab hunts Moby Dick, and Ishmael captures the White Whale), but the transitions from Pierre to Ahab and from Ahab to Ishmael are also cetological in nature: Ahab escapes the madness that swallows Pierre through Moby Dick, and Ishmael returns from the lunacy of the hunt through the White Whale.

Ishmael's escape and return notwithstanding, a careful reader may also criticize the alleged lack of mutiny. It could be argued that there is mutiny in *Moby Dick* because there is mention (and a rather long description) of a mutiny in the book: about halfway through, Ishmael recounts the story of the Town-Ho, a whaleship where a mutiny takes place and succeeds, resulting in everyone involved returning home peacefully.[10] However, upon closer examination, this mention only serves to highlight the absence of mutiny on the Pequod. As one critic remarked, "But what happens? Steelkilt and some of his fellow-mutineers escape and return home. That's all. Everything goes back to exactly where it was before."1[11] If this interpretation of the Town-Ho's story is accurate (and it is), then what purpose does it serve in *Moby Dick*'s strangely mutiny-less plot? It serves two functions, I would submit: first, comparatively, it emphasizes the lack of mutiny on the Pequod, suggesting a lack of need or desire for any such rebellion, and second, allegorically, it counsels that mutiny would be pointless because even if it occurred and succeeded, it would lead to no meaningful change. The message of this embedded narrative of mutiny, in other words, is that there *will be no mutiny*

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[9] The term "White Whale" will be used throughout to distinguish how Ishmael conceives of the Whale in contrast to how Ahab and the crew (which initially includes Ishmael) conceive of the Whale, which I will refer to as "Moby Dick." As such, I will use three terms: the White Whale, which denotes Ishmael's alternative, Moby Dick, which denotes what Ahab and crew hunt as the cause and means, and Whale, which I will use to denote what is common across the White Whale and Moby Dick. Furthermore, when referring to what Melville calls "principle" I will often use "Whale" or "Whale as principle."

[10] See Chapter 54, "The Town-Ho's Story," of Melville, *Moby Dick*, 199-214.

[11] James reads Moby Dick as a specific political allegory, but this observation holds true more broadly. See C.R.L. James, *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World we Live in* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 1985), 60. Subsequent references are made directly in the text.

because the crew has no desire or reason for mutiny and warns that there *should be no mutiny* for it would bring about no change. But this only begs another question: why prohibit something already declared impossible?

As becomes evident by the end of the book, the hunt is inevitable, in which case, if a mutiny were to occur, the hunt would not be evaded but postponed, momentarily, before resuming anew: the mutineers would return to shore, yes, but because they would return to the same circumstances, their return would be temporary, and those same circumstances would soon prompt another hunt, identical in kind. After all, it is the conditions on land that drove these men to the sea, and it is the same conditions that gave birth to Ahab; and so, if this Ahab is overthrown, another will inevitably rise. When considered in context, therefore, the story of the Town-Ho, like Starbuck's protests, only reinforces that there will be no rebellion against Ahab's vengeance because there cannot be any rebellion; to which it adds a seemingly superfluous warning that there must not be any such rebellion, and, finally, that even a 'successful' mutiny would achieve nothing but a brief respite from the desire for the hunt, without negating the underlying cause that compelled them to assume this "vengeful dream." *Moby Dick* claim, therefore, is even bolder than it may seem at first glance: the men not only lack a reason to rebel but have a reason to consent and assume Ahab's "quenchless feud" as their own. To this Melville adds an even stronger and certainly stranger claim: they must assume this lunacy if they are to have a chance at escaping it. Ishmael does not survive because he stays on land or departs the voyage early; no, he survives because he assumes the hunt, because he follows Ahab but manages to escape the fantasy and return.

If that is the case, the earlier question persists: if the men will not mutiny because they do not desire to, then isn't the advice against mutiny redundant? If they have no inclination, is it not pointless to tell them not to? In *Moby Dick*, the answer is "no"—they do not wish to mutiny *and* they must not refuse the hunt. They will, they desire to, and they must consent to the hunt because to escape it, they must first assume it. Regarding the cause that dissuades mutiny, which is also the cause that motivates the hunt, the following can tentatively be proposed: (i) the reason behind the Pequod's vengeance and the crew's lack of objection extends

beyond the autonomous wills, characters, or agency of the individuals involved, (ii) this same cause—whatever it may be—is the driving force behind their true desires, and (iii) they are as powerless to resolve this cause through mutiny as they are to resist the allure of Ahab's promises. This cause is, in essence, both beyond and within each of them.

On the Pequod, there will be no objections—none that can be acted upon, at least—and there will be no mutiny. That is the moral—the first moral—of *Moby Dick.*

Melville was certainly aware that his act justified mutiny. To this fact, another should be added: his works consistently take the side of the downtrodden, identify and critique the abuses, hypocrisies, and injustices of power, and sometimes even encourage dissent or rebellion by those who have been wronged. In *Moby Dick*, however, the situation is more complex. Firstly, the crew is never encouraged to dissent, nor are they ever blamed for joining Ahab's quest. Secondly, what drove them to "take to the ship" was not tyranny or authoritative or alienating power, but rather the absence and destruction of traditional forms of authority. And thirdly, *Moby Dick* never suggests that the men could or should have acted differently than they did. As mentioned, Melville had compassion for the oppressed, but he did not view them as a revolutionary force to be trusted.[12] Nowhere is this more evident than in *Moby Dick*, where a revolutionary force, so to speak, is very much on trial.

The strangeness of this lack of objection and mutiny gets stranger still when we consider the quarter-deck scene in detail. Firstly, it is important to note that Ahab is essentially a stranger, and a rather unusual one at that, to the majority of the Pequod's crew. In the first thirty or so chapters, there are discussions about Ahab, primarily concerning his idiosyncrasies and peculiarities, but he is absent. Aside from a few reassuring remarks regarding his capabilities as captain, an assurance that the men will like him "well enough" and that

[12] See David Dowling, *Chasing the White Whale: The Moby-Dick Marathon; or, What Melville Means Today* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010). A reading of "Charles's Isle and the Dog-King," see Herman Melville, *The Piazza Tales*, ed. Brian Yothers (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2018).

he has something other men lack, the stories and rumors circulating portray an extraordinary but strange and troubled man. Ahab is depicted as a man of imposing stature but also as a madman beset by demons and pathologies, with which he has wrestled, those who know him will admit, but with which, they will add, he wrestles still. He is, as Ishmael and Quequeeg are told, an "ungodly, god-like man" (78). Ahab himself does not really enter the scene until the thirty-sixth chapter, "The Quarter-Deck." By this point, the Pequod has been at sea for a considerable amount of time, and the men, with few exceptions, have never yet seen their captain in the flesh. If these men possess any knowledge of Ahab, it could only be from the same rumors and accounts Ishmael and Queequeg heard ashore.[13] We are informed that Ahab snuck onto the ship unnoticed, late at night, a mere few hours before the Pequod embarked and has since secluded himself in his cabin, avoiding contact with the crew.

On the fateful evening in question, Ahab emerges from his cabin, ascends to the quarter-deck, and addresses his men for the first time.[14] He proclaims that their purpose will not be chasing whales for oil and money but hunting one whale alone, and hunting him in vengeance. The men could not have anticipated this, and only a handful have spent enough time with Ahab to accept his assertions and proposals on trust. Nonetheless, unanimously and without hesitation they all agree. Whatever economic interests they had and whatever responsibilities they owed their families ashore (to say nothing of their concerns for their personal safety) vanish. Without a second thought, all such considerations are made irrelevant by Ahab's proposal, and

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[13] Most of the allusions to and remarks about Ahab are found in Chapters 16, "The Ship," 19, "The Prophet," and 21, "Going Aboard," of Melville's *Moby Dick*.

[14] The three mates and one of the harpooneers knew Ahab before boarding the Pequod, a few of them, moreover, have also sailed with Ahab before. They are, however, exceptions. This prior knowledge, as becomes clear over the course of the book, is irrelevant to the point in question. Starbuck confesses that he is incapable of acting on his objections and protests, indeed he confesses this impotence a number of times. The other three had no idea that they would be hunting Moby Dick in vengeance, prior to Ahab's declaration of his intentions, and yet all of them follow Ahab without objection. All of them, therefore, are included in Ishmael's repeated assertions that Ahab's vengeance for Moby Dick was assumed by all. See Chapter 108, "Ahab," in Melville's *Moby Dick*. For the quarter-deck scene, see Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck," and Chapter 37, "Sunset," in *Moby Dick*, 136-146.

the men drop them as if they never had any value at all.[15] The early chapters continuously emphasize the perils of whaling and the desperation of the men, all of whom are willing to undertake such risks for financial gain. Moreover, they describe the tragic fate awaiting the families left behind if or when the men fail to return. And yet, all these concerns disappear without a moment's pause. It is as if Melville dedicated time to these matters just to highlight the readiness and willingness of these men to forsake everything to join Ahab's crusade.

Somehow, deep within the maddened pit that is Ahab's mind, he has ascertained that a specific whale is responsible for humanity's collective suffering and deduced that the death of this whale will bring an end to all their pain and failure; indeed, that it would redeem humanity, returning to it its rightful inheritance.[16] Surprisingly, most of the crew, many of whom have never laid eyes on their captain or even heard of Moby Dick before, agree. They seem to perceive and comprehend what Ahab perceives and comprehends. They display no confusion and pose no questions. Instead, they simply nod their heads, inhale, and begin shouting "death to Moby Dick" into the black night all around them (142).[17] From this point onward, this motley

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[15] The fact that an act that should have caused any reasonable assembly of men to mutiny takes place when the overwhelming majority of the crew see Ahab for the first time only further emphasizes the significance of their lack of mutiny or even murmurs of dissent. None of the men knew—nor could any reasonable men have suspected—that they would be hunting a whale in vengeance, and yet, not one of these men objects. Melville, on more than a few occasions in *Moby Dick*, remarks upon the poverty of the class of men that compose the crews of whaleships and that their motives are financial. Moreover, he also notes the consequences for such men and for the families of such men if they return from these multiyear voyages empty-handed—to say nothing of the consequences that befall their families if these men do not return at all. These details are not intended to pull at the heartstrings; rather, they are meant only to direct attention at how strange and thus how significant the lack of dissent is.

[16] Ahab is no Calvinist; neither his actions nor his words suggest that he believes fallenness or original sin to be man's inherent nature. Instead, both suggest that he is a Unitarian, or to be more precise, a Transcendentalist. The discontents of man and men are seen by him as neither necessary nor natural but as the effects of some contingency parading itself as natural and fixed.

[17] From this point onward, this diverse group of men, gathered from the farthest reaches of the globe, becomes "united along one keel." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 107. They see and accept what Ahab sees and tells them; as a result, the Pequod continues its voyage. Ahab confirms this unity a number of times, for instance: "Ye are not other men, but my arms and my legs." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 423.

crew, gathered from the farthest reaches of the globe, becomes "federated along one keel," and the Pequod sails on (107). No one is coerced, and no one is deceived. Ahab is no tyrant, and he is no liar.

Often, these men have been misunderstood. Most commonly, they are misconstrued as being deceived or coerced by their deranged captain. Otherwise, they are simply disregarded and seen as irrelevant to the moral of the story. Melville is not innocent in this regard, considering the words spoken by Ahab as the Pequod is on the very precipice of its final encounter with Moby Dick: "ye are not other men, but my arms and legs, and so obey me" (423). They obey, but their obedience is not due to deception or coercion. No, they obey because they agree, because they understand, because the madness Ahab has presented to them is a madness that each of these men, somewhere deep within themselves, in places they had never dared to venture, was already prepared to assume. They embraced the hunt because they had already, albeit unconsciously, desired it. Familiarity with *Moby Dick* should not diminish the shock and importance of this moment, nor should we ignore the circumstances surrounding its occurrence. Even Ahab expresses disbelief: "Twas not so hard a task," Ahab says, "I thought to find one stubborn, at the least; but my one cogged circle fits into all their various wheels, and they revolve. Or, if you will, like so many ant-hills of powder, they all stand before me; and I their match" (143).[18] Ahab's words can certainly deceive on occasion, but Melville is careful not to mislead the reader in this scene. On the quarter-deck, where the men embrace Ahab's

[18] By Chapter 36, none of this can surprise the careful reader. Melville has been building up to this scene from the very beginning, above all, in Chapter 1, "Loomings," which contains a wealth of important but subtle indications of what is coming. The term "loomings" is, as Lardas points out, a nautical term but also refers to something appearing on the horizon through mist or darkness and that this thing is in some way threatening because "it calls into question one's point of orientation, that is, one's fundamental assumptions of order, clarity, and legibility." See John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xviii. The "Etymology" and "Extracts" with which Melville begins *Moby Dick* already foreshadow that something very strange will take place in the narrative that follows, and Chapter 1 itself is flush with allusions to the sea, whales, whaling, ships, land, and water, and to what it is that men seek and find in these various objects, as are many of the other Chapters leading up to the quarter-deck scene in Chapter 36. All of this is to say that the episode stretching between Chapters 35 and 37, wherein it is explicitly stated that the Pequod wants something other than empirical whales, cannot surprise an attentive reader. In fact, the only surprise is the immediacy and enthusiasm with which the crew assents to the hunt.

vengeance, Melville leaves no room for ambiguity. All of this raises an obvious question—a question that should permeate every chapter and page of the book: why does *this* crew, sailing under *this* captain, pursuing *this* mission, find no reason to mutiny?

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To appreciate *Moby Dick,* we must recognize Ahab as common, not as exceptional. If Ahab were exceptional in his madness, frustrations, desires, or vision, then how could the rest of the crew have so easily agreed and taken part in his vengeance? These men, we are told, are all common and driven to the sea by the shared conditions of their lives. If they are common and Ahab is exceptional, would their agreement and involvement not have to be the result of obedience or gullibility? Would they not have to have been coerced or tricked? Ahab, as mentioned earlier, would have been unknown to the majority of them, and so it is reasonable to assume that if he had expressed something outlandish (such as hunting a whale as a means of humanity's redemption), at least a few would have expressed some hesitation, skepticism, or confusion instead of unanimous and immediate agreement. Since no such apprehension is expressed, we can assume that Ahab's identification of Moby Dick as the cause of humanity's suffering and his intention to hunt him as the means of humanity's redemption made perfect sense to all his men. To their minds—to their understanding of the world—hunting Moby Dick as cause and means is not outlandish, but sensible. And so, regardless of how Ahab sees the world and the suffering he wants to relieve, we can assume that the others share his vision.

Near the end of the book, there is mention of a "riddle," the riddle of what troubles Ahab's leg.[19] Criticism has mostly ignored this riddle, except for a few instances where its meaning is reduced to a simple metaphor. Melville is above simple metaphors and understanding the riddle is crucial to understanding *Moby Dick*. Like Ahab's pegleg, the configuration (or "lower layer") and the resolution (or upper, visible layer) of

[19] See Chapter 108, "Ahab and the Carpenter", in Melville, *Moby Dick*.

this riddle are literally what the hunt for Moby Dick stands on. Setting the details aside, we can posit that whatever understanding Ahab has of this trouble, it is shared by the others. Otherwise, his resolution, i.e., the hunt, could not and would not have made sense to this motley crew of men, and certainly would not have made such immediate and obvious sense to them. "My one cogged circle," as Ahab himself says, "fits into all their various wheels." For the moment, it is enough to refer to a few of Ishmael's declarations on the matter: "there is nothing surprising in this, if they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, sometime or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean as me" and "a demon phantom… sometime or other, swims before all human hearts" (22). Ishmael makes many equivalent assertions, each of which could have been used instead, but this pair expresses the crucial points plainly and clearly enough: there is a shared feeling towards the sea and a common inclination to seek out the Whale.

The displacement of the crew's interests from economic concerns to spiritual ones is so seamless as to cause suspicion that Ahab has not introduced anything exactly new—and certainly not anything unwanted—by pointing their discontents and desires to Moby Dick and then handing them a harpoon. He gives them a "good grip," we later learn, "because [men] like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold, man" (259). In fact, it appears Ahab has only allowed something that must have been latent but unrecognizable in these men to manifest. Their eagerness suggests he has given them only what they already wanted but could not recognize on their own or satisfy on land, while the speed at which they abandon their prior concerns suggests the degree to which they wanted it and the degree to which the world ashore left them wanting of it. Further support comes from another strange absence: not once does Ahab explain himself, convince them, or make anyone understand. The absence of such tactics indicates not an oversight on Melville's part but a subtle signal that there was no need for such tactics. If Ahab does not do these things, it is because he had no need to, and if he had no need to it is because these men already want and see what Ahab wants and sees. Their presuppositions and convictions, in other words, are the same as his. At a lower layer, their troubles and their understanding of the cause and solution are the same as his. His vengeance, therefore,

is not an exceptional but a common "avenging dream."

And what is this common dream that they assume as their own? What is the crusade that they freely undertake? To hunt Moby Dick in the name of all of humanity's pain and suffering and to resolve it by annihilating its cause. And what do we learn about these men?[20] We know that they are ordinary men and that they will pursue this vengeance not due to some personal malice or lunacy, but because of the conditions of life in which they live, the way they have been shaped by them, weakened, and tormented by them. It is ordinary men who undertake this mission, and it is for common reasons that they undertake it. This is the prophecy of *Moby Dick*, as Ishmael declares a few pages earlier: "nowadays, the whale-fishery provides a refuge for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the burdens of life on land, seeking solace in tar and blubber" (135). Ishmael confesses the same as his own motive, namely the deteriorating state of life on land, which, he adds, leaves its citizens with two options for escaping a life of despair, torment, and aimless delinquency: take the pistol or "take to the ship" (18). All men in the "great American desert" will be weakened, disoriented, and frustrated; they will all become absent-minded and melancholic romantics, disillusioned by the burdens of life on earth. And all of them will, at some moment or another, seek a solution; and when they do, they will find refuge in the whale-fishery; and they will be so desperate and disoriented that they will agree to hunt even a "dumb brute" as the cause and the means (19).[21] Read carefully, the prophecy reveals an often-overlooked fact: these are well-intentioned men, fully aligned with the ideology of their time. Less immediately obvious is that through the hunt they are seeking refuge from the very ideas that were supposed to liberate them and they seek this refuge absent-mindedly, by which,

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[20] An answer to "who are these men?" is given several times over the course of *Moby Dick*, including in the explicit formulation of the prophecy, wherein they are described as romantic, melancholic, and absent-minded individuals, disillusioned with the realities and burdens of everyday life on land. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 135. Over the course of the book and over the course of this study, these characterizations are expanded on and explained in great detail.

[21] These and other similar descriptions of the Pequod's men are found across the book. See, for example, Melville, *Moby Dick*, 135, 157-8, 178, and 373.

above all else, Melville means unreflectively: they seek refuge by doubling down on the ideas they led to their despair. They are, Melville says, romantics, and they are orphans, he adds, and it is these qualities that will leave them melancholic and aimless, and susceptible to this lunacy.

In the brief quarter-deck scene, as the crew meet Ahab for the first time in the flesh, it only takes a few words for their existing desires, sacrifices, and responsibilities to be disregarded. Their previous aspirations are discarded without hesitation, as if they hold no real significance. The seamlessness and immediacy of this transition are noteworthy. While economic objectives and motivations are typically rational, these men easily forsake them in favor of more spiritual pursuits, driven by metaphysical reasons.[22] It is worth reiterating that not a single man objects; instead, all of them readily embrace the hunt and each assume Ahab's revenge as their own. No one is coerced or deceived. Each willingly chooses to hunt Moby Dick. In addition to the above characterizations, we are informed of another aspect of these men: "now, federated along one keel, what a set these Isolatoes were! An Anacharsis Clootz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth, accompanying Old Ahab in the Pequod to lay the world's grievances before that bar from which not very many of them ever came back" (107). No words are wasted here: that is exactly who they are, that is exactly what they will do, and that is exactly what will be their fate. The voyage is undoubtedly madness, and the captain is undeniably insane; however, Ahab is also a hero, and his crew are honorable men—ordinary men, devoid of malice, driven by good intentions.[23] They are a diverse group,

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[22] As Michael Rogin notes, even the state of being "slave to the dollar" is abandoned by the crew, and no less by Ahab. Ahab, he adds, abandons everything in the name of hunting Moby Dick: "family, local attachments, and secular and religious restraints." See Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 105-6. Subsequent references are made directly in the text. In response to Starbuck's objection that hunting Moby Dick is blasphemy, Ahab makes the following statement: "Nantucket market! Hoot! But come closer, Starbuck; thou requirest a little lower layer. If money's to be the measurer, man, and the accountants have computed their great counting-house the globe, by girdling it with guineas, one to every three parts of an inch; then, let me tell thee, that my vengeance will fetch a great premium *here*!" See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 139. Ahab's response confirms Rogin's interpretation, but it also provides a few further insights, to which I will return shortly.

[23] Melville's point is not that bad men do bad things or that lunatics end in lunacy (there is no need to say that)

united on a single vessel, destined to champion the rights of all humanity. They are not extraordinary but ordinary men. They harbor not ill will but good intentions. And they are not driven by selfishness but by the will to redeem all mankind. And, as we will see, they are not reactionaries but very much the progeny of the liberating dreams of their century.[24] The Pequod sets sail as a testament to compassion, embodying the dreams and objectives of the new age.

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but that good intentions and good ideas and good men are no safeguard against madness, indeed that well-intentioned men can easily find themselves mindlessly and ruthlessly pursuing a venture like the hunt for Moby Dick. Not because of malice or indifference, but due to certain conditions and circumstances, above all due to configurations of beliefs and convictions that underlie their propositional and intentional words and deeds. Sundquist makes special mention of Melville's observation that there was a fascination with this idea so zealous and unflinching that its adherents ignored or suppressed its flaws. See Eric J. Sundquist, *Home as Found: Authority and Genealogy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 153.

[24] The referent includes Transcendentalism, but also the "myth of the American Adam," and much of the anti-institutional reform movements of the time. In general, I will use the term "Hope" (or "the party of Hope") to designate these beliefs and ideological commitments. The term itself, along with its contrary (the "party of Memory), are Emerson's, who intended to draw a binary between progress and conservatism. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Conservative," *American Transcendentalism Web*, accessed on September, 1, 2021, https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/conservative.html. Lewis convincingly argues that Melville (like Hawthorne) does not belong to either the party of Hope or the party of Memory but to a third position that negates this binary, and which Lewis names the party of Irony. See Lewis, *American Adam*, 1-10, 127-55. For a recent and convincing argument that Melville's opposition to Transcendentalism was based not only on his suspicion that Transcendentalism would not solve the problems American society faced but that he considered the principles of Transcendentalism to be implicated in the very ills they attempted to address, see Jason Frank, "Pathologies of Freedom in Melville's America," in *A Political Companion to Herman Melville* ed. Jason Frankl (Lexington: University Kentucky Press, 2013), 435-458. A case could, however, be made that Hope, when evaluated by its metaphysical presuppositions, which for Melville compose its "lower layer," is reactionary. Shallow readings of *Moby Dick* interpret Ahab as reactionary, but they do so for the wrong reasons, as we will see. In short, he is no tyrant, nor does he have any authoritarian intentions or desires for a return to some ethno-state, as he is commonly misinterpreted. Instead, Ahab is a monstrosity born of progressive, democratic ideology, but the underlying presuppositions of that ideology could, in fact, philosophically speaking, be interpreted as reactionary in so far as they posit a substantial essence, which is inherently moral and rational, into the subject, and maintain the belief in a Divine order that can be accessed without mediation. As I will briefly argue later, the ideology and metaphysical commitments (as well as the intentions) of the Pequod foreshadow what Alain Badiou has proposed as one of the dispositions by which the 20th century has pursued its passion for the real, purification. See Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

The often-cited "lower layer" is, as Rogin points out, the "layer of revenge" (114). Rogin is right, to be sure, but he largely passes over what this lower layer contains and what takes place there. For the moment, it suffices to observe that the act of revenge presupposes the identification of a cause that aligns with the spontaneous and historically situated understanding Melville's characters have of the world and themselves. Moreover, the hunt also provides more than simply a means for exacting their vengeance: it offers clarity to their confusion, purpose to their boredom, dignity to their impotence, a way out of their desperation, etc. An embryonic interpretation can be proposed here: Ahab provides something that addresses a want in these men, could not be satisfied but only ever more frustrated ashore, overrides all other considerations, orients all their subsequent actions, corresponds to whatever initially led them to sea, and, finally, something they are as powerless to resist as they are desperate to have and ready to accept.

Ishmael dedicates much of his time to this curiosity, but it is a brief interaction with Elijah, a peculiar and prophetic figure wandering around Nantucket's ports, that gives the initial insights into the cause and its fulfillment.[25] According to Elijah, the contract signed by each of the crew should include a promise regarding the signer's soul. He suggests that any man signing up for this voyage *must not* possess a soul, before adding that this is not an uncommon phenomenon in this age.2[26] He then assures Ishmael that Ahab possesses enough soul to compensate for any deficiencies in the rest of the crew. Acting as something of a precursor to Ishmael, Elijah already possesses some knowledge about the Pequod's fate and intentions and about the men that will

[25] For the exchanges with Elijah, see Chapter 19, "The Prophet", and Chapter 21, "Going Aboard", in Melville, *Moby Dick*, 86-8, 90-3.

[26] The "must" here is double, as becomes clear over the course of the book: the men must not have souls, if they have signed up for the Pequod, in the sense that soullessness is a motivator, and they must not have souls if they are to be men fit for the Pequod's purpose, in the sense that soullessness is a requisite for assenting to the hunt. Overall, Elijah demonstrates knowledge regarding Ahab's intentions and emphasizes that the lack of a soul is a crucial requirement for undertaking and engaging in the pursuit, along with the eventual gratification that the pursuit will yield. Ishmael's eventual knowledge will surpass or, at the very least, expand upon what Elijah already knows. However, at this moment in the plot, Elijah's knowledge far exceeds Ishmael's. Despite feeling somewhat unsettled by Elijah's various statements and warnings, Ishmael ultimately dismisses the old man and even laughs off the warnings.

seek asylum through its crusade, knowledge that Ishmael does not possess as he prepares to board the Pequod.

Elijah's remarks offer insights into another aspect of the puzzle: if the men arrive soulless, then their soullessness is a consequence of their "manufacture" and form of life in the "great American desert." A series of implications are contained in this seemingly insignificant detail. Firstly, soullessness is an essential aspect of the subjective formation, i.e., manufacture, that arises from these conditions. This deficiency, moreover, cannot be satisfied on land—were it otherwise, there would be no need for them to venture out to sea. Secondly, soullessness serves as a point of connection between what I will call the subjective and the objective causes. It is a central element of the causal structure leading from land to the hunt, and crucial for understanding a series of phenomena, including why their lives on land were little more than aimless despair and why they were so prone to accept the absurdity of hunting a whale in the name of humanity's redemption. The subjective cause, i.e., the actions of the characters, should be understood as a response to the objective cause, i.e., the conditions of life on land, that has generated their discontent.[27] Lastly, this brief passage identifies soullessness as a factor within "the impersonal personified," Melville's term for subjective character as determined or subjectivized by external and impersonal conditions. Soullessness, therefore, is implicated in both the effects and causes of their reactions.

Melville explores soullessness in greater detail in *Pierre*, defining it as an essential feature of orphanhood while conceiving of orphanhood as the defining characteristic of man as constituted by the historico-philosophical conditions of the 19th century and the symbolic structure of the form of life they undergird. Orphanhood leads to what in *Moby Dick* is referred to as "absent-mindedness" and "moral enfeeblement," constitutive features of an inner catastrophe that sets the stage for the lunacy embodied by

[27] Insofar as the subjective act is a reaction to the subject's discontent with its objective conditions and circumstances, and because Melville conceives of the character of his characters as being 'manufactured' (or shaped or determined) by those conditions and circumstances, it is more accurate to view these two causes as interconnected elements within a unified process, rather than separate and autonomous entities.

the Pequod. Elijah's later reassurance that although Ahab will never be "alright," Ishmael and the crew will like him "well enough" further reinforces the idea that Ahab provides something that compensates for or satisfies what these 19th-century men are lacking. Consider Ishmael's later remark: "Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air!" (127).[28] At the subjective and the objective level, soullessness underlies the prophecy.[29]

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[28] It bears mentioning here that "dived for in the deep" and "featured in the unbodied air" designate nothing because, as Ishmael at this point already knows, there is no God at the bottom of the sea nor in the heavens above. And yet, Ishmael still insists on describing what is in Ahab as if it was something Divine, or at the very least, something sublime. Ishmael appears to be contradicting himself, playing loose with rhetoric, or speaking nonsense but this remark only appears as such until the source and nature of Divine order (a fiction, according to Melville) and the soul are understood through Melville's impostor-fiction logic, which explains how fictions (such as the soul and Divinity) are produced through impostors. For the moment, we can take as a presupposition that (i) landsmen, as it were, lack a soul, (ii) the hunt satisfies this want, and (iii) the want of a soul overrides all other considerations, i.e., money is forgotten, responsibilities are deserted, a law is broken without concern, and reason and fact are indifferently cast aside because the hunt turns their boredom into purpose, impotence into dignity, their desperation into a way out, etc. Melville's characterization of life on land, democratic culture, and the character and capacities of landsmen are very similar to Tocqueville's analysis in *Democracy in America*, as we will see in detail in what follows. As Rogin notes, Ahab and crew abandon everything in the name of hunting Moby Dick. See Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 104-9. Soullessness as a condition must be understood in conjunction with the other explicitly identified causes, including and especially the "moral enfeeblement" of the crew, which is, at times, assigned to the ideologies of the officers. More generally, it is conceived of as a consequence of conditions and circumstances of life on land. Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask are often treated as embodiments of alternative responses to the despair and disorientation of life on land, e.g., nihilism, hedonism, etc. But all three, for one reason or another, go along with Ahab on his mission of vengeance. The qualification of Starbuck's virtue as "unaided" bears special mention, as does the fact that Melville's criticism of Transcendentalism aligns with Nathaniel Hawthrone's "Earth's Holocaust" and Melville's stated appreciation of that story and Hawthrone's own position on the reform movements of the time. See Melville, "Hawthorne and his Mosses," in *Moby Dick*, 517-31. The need for virtue to be "aided" is a clear indication that Buell is wrong in saying that "[w]hen Ishmael puts Ahab's 'Sultanism' in question, it's not so much to unmask it as to remystify it." See Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014), 372. Rather, what Ishmael has recognized is that such authority always requires an excessive, and we can say sublime, object, the absence of which makes Starbuck's undeniable virtue "incompetent," while the presence of such an object makes Ahab's power irresistible, and, indeed, valid and legitimate. Both of these factors must be synthesized with Ishmael's remark that it is some "unconscious understanding" that, in some "dim, unsuspecting way," made Moby Dick "seem the gliding great demon of the sea of life." Melville, *Moby Dick*, 152-59.

[29] In this instance, as in so many others, it is only through *Pierre* that *Moby Dick* can be fully understood. In *Pierre*, Melville develops a series of notions and theories that explain soullessness and how it is satisfied through the hunt. It is only by reading *Pierre* that we can fully appreciate the causal progression from life on land to the hunt, i.e., from the world of Woe through the state of Madness on the horizonless sea and to the state of

What I am referring to as the objective cause encompasses the various conditions that produce the feelings of weariness and despair as well as shape individual character, whereas the subjective cause involves actions (or reactions) that are aimed at alleviating the dissatisfaction with these objective circumstances.[30] The objective cause consists of historico-philosophical conditions, the form of life on land, including its symbolic structure and the ideologies that dominate within it, while the subjective cause includes all the subjective actions and thoughts that emerge out of them and of the character these conditions manufacture, including the motive to head out to sea and the disposition to engage in the hunt. The latter represents a dissatisfaction with the form of life on land, the disgust these men feel for the "carking cares of earth," but this discontent also induces a contradiction within themselves, between their manufactured character and a sovereign point of personality that is, according to Melville, irreducible to their conditions and manufacture. Consider Ahab's soliloquy:

> Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own

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Madness Maddened that is the frenzy of the hunt. These three distinct situations, as presented in *Moby Dick*, are clearly demarcated by cetological distinctions and subjective actions.

[30] Throughout, I will refer to these two causes with different terms, as befits the context and focus. The first cause is the "constitutive" or "objective" cause, which refers to the constitutive conditions of the subject, the structure that subjectivizes it, the historico-philosophical conditions, and the symbolic structure thereof. The second cause is the subjective act or symptom that results as a consequence of (or reaction to) the first cause, and which arises from a kernel of subjectivity irreducible to subjectivization, or, in Melville's terms, the point of personality that remains sovereign within the "personification" of the "impersonal" that is the individual character. Moreover, as we will see, this kernel, described as an "empty point," corresponds to the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious. In *Moby Dick*, this latter, subjective cause receives various names and formulations, including "principle," specifically the principle that is left unsatisfied and frustrated by the subject's conditions and which torments the subject when it is without what Melville calls "agent." Broadly speaking, over the course of this dissertation the objective cause is treated first while the subjective cause is treated second.

> thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whencesoe'er I came; wheresoe'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. But war is pain, and hate is woe. Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee; but at thy highest, come as mere supernal power; and though thou launchest navies of full-freighted worlds, there's that in here that still remains indifferent. Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee (382-3).[31]

Mediating between the objective conditions and the subjective act is an impersonal mood. Ahab's "quenchless feud," as Ishmael recognizes, becomes the obsession of the crew not through reasoning but through a "wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling" (152). Underlying their assumption of his vengeance as their own is the

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[31] The key to resolving Ahab's "Is Ahab, Ahab?" can be found in this soliloquy. No, Ahab is not an autonomous self, but the product of some impersonal conditions and forces. But, if the same question is posed to Moby Dick, then the answer becomes more complex and interesting. Is Moby Dick, Moby Dick? No, of course not, because Ahab transforms some empirical whale into Moby Dick by investing it with the "idea of the Whale." If Ahab was reducible to the positive result of his subjectivization, then the status and very possibility of Moby Dick would become a problem: Moby Dick would be either a natural property of some empirical whale, in which case he would not be Ahab's, so to speak, and all the discussions about the idea of the Whale and "investment" would be senseless, nor is he a natural property of the sea, which is denied repeatedly in *Moby Dick*. Neither is satisfactory, therefore. Rather, Moby Dick is the manifestation of the element of Ahab that really *is* Ahab, namely the irreducible point of personality, which is itself described as "empty" and a "darkness," that acts to resolve his (and its) discontent. In short, the part of Ahab that really *is* Ahab is expressed in his discontent with life on land and the "spirit" that made him, by which he means something like the ideology and the historico-philosophical conditions of the age that define life and manufactured him into the character that he is, i.e., mad, tormented, etc. This discontent that really is Ahab is a discontent with the impersonal and the "impersonal personified." Further, as we will see, it is this personality in the midst of the impersonal personified (and the impersonal conditions, more generally) that gives birth to the madness that engulfs Ahab, both in the sense of driving him to the sea and in the sense of driving him into the hunt. In other words, the part of Ahab that really *is* Ahab *is* Moby Dick, or, more precisely, it is the Whale as principle (and then as Moby Dick). The problem is that Ahab misrecognizes this, imagining that the Whale (and Moby Dick) exist independently of him. A similar observation is made by Rogin: after noting that it is Ahab's body and soul that gives birth to this "independent thing within him," he adds that Ahab is tied to Moby Dick and, moreover, that Ahab lives or is alive only because of his bond to Moby Dick. Rogin, *Subversive Genealogies*, 118.

impersonal mood that induces desperation and torment, accompanied by a range of other disagreeable dispositions, sentiments, and qualities. On land, it predisposes the men to view the sea as containing a solution to their troubles and at sea it disposes them to embark on the hunt. For the moment, noting its primary features and effects is sufficient. Consider Ishmael's confessed state of mind ashore:

> Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. (18)

Below his delinquencies lies an objective mood that channels his vexation and frustration into directionless aggression. It is the "drizzly November in Ishmael's soul," predisposing him to engage in purposeless delinquent acts, all of which bear the stamp of anger without a target. Similar to Heidegger's notion of mood, the underlying mood in *Moby Dick* is the characters' attunement to their conditions, which determines their activity at a pre-reflective and pre-propositional level.[32] This mood guides the way they perceive, interpret, and act in the world before any conscious, intentional, or propositional activity, shaping their interpretations, evaluations, and responses to the world. Further, note the not-so-subtle tone of frustration resulting from existing within a situation that is inscrutable and enervating, exhausting and deflating, and which leaves no immanent means of resolution. This frustration is evident in the reiterative structure of the quoted passage,

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[32] See Martin Heidegger, Division I, Part V "Being-in as Such," in *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), and Martin Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana, University of Indiana Press, 1995), 59-77. See also Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods*: *Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790–1840* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1-74.

the constant shiftiness of the opening chapter, and the odd combination of an almost frantic listing of examples with an overly dramatic and almost epic tone. It is as if Ishmael cannot pinpoint the problem and responds by pointing at everything at once and then forcing (or, at least, assuming or hoping for) a melodramatic narrative onto it all. Ishmael, Ahab, and Pierre insist that the inscrutability of their suffering and their consequent impotence to resolve it turns their suffering and frustration into intolerable torment, confronting them with the added indignity of helplessness. With the dilapidated symbolic structure of life on land, Ishmael confesses that the form of life leaves him with only two options: suicide or the sea.

Melville's characters experience a general state of confusion, which cannot be attributed to personal negligence or epistemic mistakes, because the source is the historico-philosophical conditions and their attendant effects on meaning, orientation, and rules. As such, their confusion is a sound reflection of the state of affairs. They are not deceived or ignorant, in other words, instead their confusion is a sign that they see the world around them accurately. “Great pains, small gains,” writes Melville, near the end of *Moby Dick,* “for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself” (332). The world cannot solve itself because it is itself anarchy, an entropic psychosocial world, wherein causality and identity have lost any consistent or consensual status they may have had, leaving men in a situation of extreme interpretive agitation, inundated by an onslaught of unconnected and opaque words and things, and bereft of any key or code that would resolve the anarchy. Sharon Cameron labels this entropic reality Melville's "impersonal," but her interpretation falls short in that it completely reduces the personal to the impersonal, thus obscuring what can be referred to as Melville's theory of the subject.[33] When Melville writes "in landlessness alone resides

[33] As a result of such a complete reduction of the personal to the impersonal, the central conflicts and significant elements of Melville's works cannot be explained. Cameron's reading of *Billy Budd*, for instance, cannot explain how Billy's fist could have ever risen to strike Claggart, and so she loses the entire plot. More importantly, when her conception of the impersonal is applied to other of Melville's works, what becomes unthinkable and impossible includes Pierre's madness and what haunts him, the confusion atop the Fidele (in *The Confidence-Man*), as well as what perplexes the lawyer in "Bartleby," and, above all, just about everything in *Moby Dick*, from the motive that first drives men to the sea to the distortions and projections all of them cast onto the empty horizon to Moby Dick himself, and, of course, to Ishmael's Gospel. It is a strange mistake

the highest truth," he is conveying two meanings: it pertains to the candidness of the sea, revealing itself as a masterless and horizonless globe, a limitless expanse in which "to traditions no rocks furnish tablets," but at the same time it also refers to the truth of the subject, i.e., the principle, its defining characteristic and, according to Melville, its only inherent property (376). At the intersection of these two truths, one subjective and the other objective, one living "full of faith" even in these most candid seas, the other tolerating neither leviathans nor Whaling ships, smashing "even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leave[ing] them there side by side with the split wreck of ships" lies the Whale, as what is missing out there and what is projected out from within (224).[34] Everything in Moby Dick revolves around the Whale. On this point, there is no ambiguity: "unless you know the whale you're a provincial and sentimentalist in Truth" (268).

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We can now return to the prophecy, which should be understood in the biblical sense, but with one unusual condition: there is no God, no Divine order, and no Divine justice.[35] There is faith in such things and

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on her part, especially considering that when Melville himself uses the term (e.g., in one of Ahab's soliloquies, part of which is quoted above), he insists that a sovereign point of "personality" remains within the "impersonal personified." See Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 180-204. As we will see in detail later in this Chapter, any complete reduction of the personal to the impersonal confronts a decisive obstacle: it cannot account for the works' central conflicts, not for Billy's "sublime fist," not for Ahab's Moby Dick, not for Ishmael's alternative whale, and not for Pierre's quagmire of madness.

[34] In full, the passage involving "full of faith" reads: "Look! here, far water-locked; beyond all hum of human weal or woe; in these most candid and impartial seas; where to traditions no rocks furnish tablets; where for long Chinese ages, the billows have still rolled on speechless and unspoken to, as stars that shine upon the Niger's unknown source; here, too, life dies sunwards full of faith; but see! no sooner dead, than death whirls round the corpse, and it heads some other way." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 376. On the matter of the intersection, Ishmael's point is best formulated when he asserts that "only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out." Melville, *Moby Dick*, 348. This remark must be read in conjunction with the identification of the Whale with the Truth, such that the Truth in question is in the subject's act when it finds itself at sea, meaning when the illusions of life on land dissolve and, as we will see, when the historico-philosophical conditions of the 19th century appear objectively. In short, the Truth, as we will see, is the act of inventing some Whale.

[35] For an account of the elements of Biblical prophecy and for how it was understood in 19th-century America, see George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis:

this faith produces effects, but ontologically there is no Divine anything. Nonetheless, Ishmael is called to the role of a prophet, presenting the public with a decision that challenges the notion that the future is definitively determined and impervious to human action. He warns that unless they alter their current mindset, catastrophe will ensue.3[36] Like the prophets of old, Ishmael's truth is one that the public is reluctant to accept. Furthermore, his invocation of a transcendent or transcendent-like agent aims not to absolve responsibility or dictate submission, but to stimulate action. The ironic twist of the prophecy is that it involves following Ahab as inevitable and necessary. Ahab proves to be a false redeemer, but he remains a necessary moment on the path of redemption, nonetheless. The pages that follow aim to elucidate why the Pequod is seen as an asylum, Ahab a hero, Moby Dick the cause, and the hunt the means, by reconstructing the subjective and objective elements of the causal sequence from land to the hunt. The specific structure in question engenders soulless, absent-minded, and sordid individuals, draining them of reason and vitality and impoverishing them before subjecting them to torment and rage through the incomprehensibility of their suffering and the indignity of their powerlessness. Consequently, they become ready and eager to seek a cause and a means in almost anything, even in the hunt for a dumb brute. The manifestation may be a witch-hunt, a fight against discrimination, or something else altogether, but the initial desire is defensive. On top of that, there is a desperate need for a cause—a want so desperate that if it's satisfied, few will pay any concern to how reasonable it is. Drowned by the enthusiasm of a want finally satisfied, all such considerations become irrelevant. The impotence of reason to influence this crew is, for the first of many times, laid bare by Ishmael's remark: "when a man suspects any wrong, it sometimes happens that if he be already involved in the matter, he insensibly strives to cover up his suspicions even from himself" (90). In short, it means little or nothing at all. This imperviousness to reason is all the more damning when we recall another of Ishmael's discoveries

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University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 1-37.

[36] The referent of this mode of thought, down to its underlying metaphysical presuppositions that must be altered if the catastrophe is to be avoided, is the platform of the party of Hope. I will return to this in detail.

about man: “there is no folly of the beasts of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men” (300). The men have their cause, their frustrations have been heard, their wants satisfied—what does it matter if the cause of their torments and the cause of their salvation is some dumb brute they've never seen? It does not, not at all. Like Ahab, they want a "good grip" on something, anything.

In a non-superficial sense, Melville is echoing Tocqueville's prediction: "They feel imprisoned within bounds, which they will apparently never be allowed to pass. Soon as they do—and they will—their minds know not where to fix themselves, and they rush unrestrained beyond the range of common sense."[37] That is the prophecy in *Moby Dick*. But *Moby Dick* contains more than the prophecy alone: it also contains a Gospel. This is no interpretation, on my part: "Though I wrote the Gospels in this century,” Melville writes to Hawthorne, “I should die in the gutter."3[38] He is referring to *Moby Dick*, of course. That Hawthorne, the man to whom Melville dedicated *Moby Dick* and one of the few he thought understood the book, is the addressee of this letter, written mere weeks after Melville’s masterpiece was published, should be assurance enough that he should be taken at his word. *Moby Dick* is Melville’s Gospel.

But this begs the obvious question: How can this prophecy of madness also be the good news? It contains both because it also contains a treatise. A treatise that explains why the prophecy will come true and out of this understanding constructs a means for transcending it. A prophecy of lunacy, a Gospel for redemption, and a treatise all in one book? Yes—and the most succinct evidence is found on the first and last pages. The Epilogue’s epigraph reads: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (427). This sentence is

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[37] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 470. The striking echoes between Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and the works of Melville, especially *Moby Dick*, have been frequently noted by scholars. In a recent collection of essays on the political thought embedded in Melville, *A Political Companion to Moby Dick*, for instance, four of the essays place notable emphasis on the consistencies between Tocqueville and Melville. See *A Political Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. by Jason Frank (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013). In Chapter 2, I provide a more systematic parallel between the two.

[38] Referring to *Moby Dick*, Melville wrote: “Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter.” See “To Nathaniel Hawthorne” arrowhead Early May 1851. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 538-41.

intentionally ambiguous: on one reading, it suggests that he is the only survivor, on another, it implies that he has returned to share something. The well-known first sentence reads: "Call me Ishmael" (18). Is Ishmael asking or demanding? Is this his given name or is he only asking to be called by it? As no commentator has failed to note, the name in question belongs to the one that would establish a new and different nation. This is certainly the case in *Moby Dick*. But if Melville's efforts are to be fully appreciated, we must also recognize that the hundreds of pages between the first and last narrate more than just *what* happened to the Pequod; they also narrate the process by which one of the crew managed to survive and return, which is to say, the logic by which this lone survivor came to assume the name "Ishmael." This second narrative, as we will see, is produced through Ishmael's gradual understanding of *why* what happened happened. The narrative of the escape and return, in other words, is produced out of an understanding of the why stretching across the entire causal structure from Woe to the hunt. Ishmael does not board the Pequod as "Ishmael"—no, he returns with this name, having earned it by virtue of assuming the hunt but also escaping it and returning with a different leviathan in hand. In a word, he becomes the man who can tell this story, who can tell the prophecy of the hunt and the Gospel of the return. He admits that his "shouts had gone up with the rest" on numerous occasions, but also that he managed to escape and return because he understood all that fed into Pequod's vengeful fantasy (196). This understanding, which enables the derivation of a Gospel from the prophecy, I propose to call the treatise of Ishmael.

Before moving on, it bears mention that this Gospel is peculiar, primarily because the good news is only accessible by first embarking on a path of maddened vengeance in pursuit of Moby Dick, and because it involves the capture of something very similar to what the hunt seeks to kill. Ishamel returns because he traverses the fantasy of the hunt but also because he manages to capture an alternative Whale. He does not return through refusing the need for a Whale—if he did, he would return to the same desert, or, in his own words, to the "pitiful port," which would leave him subject to prophecy once more. The Gospel, therefore, requires following the prophecy and it involves a Whale of its own. Melville leaves no room for ambiguity on

this matter—within one of the book's key conceptual chapters, "The Whiteness of the Whale," we encounter the following statement: "What the white whale was to Ahab has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid.... But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught" (159).

These chapters contain the logic and understanding of what he has come back to tell. In other words, they encompass the Prophecy of the hunt and the Gospel of the return. They can be this only if Ishmael can adequately convey what the Whale was (and is) to him, in contrast to what it was to Ahab; otherwise, they are of little to no worth. Without this cetology, the prophecy of the hunt would not be a genuine prophecy; and thus less likely to be believed, in which case, it would also be ever more likely to be mindlessly followed. The Gospel, on the other hand, would be mere rhetoric, describing an unattainable accident that could only be hoped for, not followed. Without the treatise, without the cetology, the Gospel would be lost because Ishmael's return would be a matter not of good deeds, as it were, but of good fortune. In which case, what he has to say would be of little worth, and *Moby Dick* would be just another tale of one madman as recounted by another—by another who was a little luckier, but no less mad.

Similar to the affliction troubling Ahab's leg, *Moby Dick*, therefore, is one thing or it is three: it is either a story about a group of madmen narrated by one of their own, or it is a prophecy of madness and its maddening into vengeance as well as a Gospel for escaping this same madness because it also contains a treatise of political philosophy. In all cases, it is a cetology. And if not, then it is just a story of chasing tar and blubber.

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There are no exceptions to being determined by this causal structure. The prophecy, as we will see, applies to everyone: northerners and southerners, seamen and lakemen, Westerners and non-westerners, freemen and slaves, Christians and pagans, colonizers and colonized, young and old, educated and ignorant, every single one, down to the last. They all die. They all follow Ahab. None object and none dissent, because none want to.

Careful readers might object to this, but they would be mistaken. In Ishmael's description, they may say, of the voyage of this motley crew "accompanying old Ahab in the Pequod to lay the world's grievances before the bar," he says that "*not very many* come back" (107, emphasis added). The same "many" (as opposed to "all"), they may add, appears in the prophecy as well: "Nowadays, the whale-fishery provides a refuge for *many*… seeking asylum in tar and blubber" (135, emphasis added). Both instances appear to contradict the universality of the prophecy, but, in point of fact, they do not. There is neither an inconsistency nor a contradiction here on Melville's part. There is no oversight or a change in rhetoric either. In fact, viewing it as an error or negligence on Melville's part would cause us to miss a crucial element of the book's ironic logic. One could attribute this to carelessness, but Melville is so rarely careless with his words that it's almost impossible to believe he would have been careless with a sentence of this importance. Alternatively, we could attribute inconsistency to Melville, but this too seems inadequate since, as will repeatedly demonstrated, closer reading dispels what appear to be contradictions in *Moby Dick* and exposes, in their place, subtle, often dialectical logics. A third resolution would attribute this "many" to a rhetorical or persuasive strategy on Ishmael's part, but this would pit this one sentence against Ishmael's otherwise consistent practice of making universal claims about the prophecy and related matters. Moreover, it wouldn't solve the problem but only displace it onto another question, namely, why Ishmael changes his strategy in this instance. There are no exceptions: all men of the desert will take to the ship and all will hunt some Moby Dick, and from this venture, none return. Melville, as Murray astutely notes, was constantly occupied with the "spontaneities of the impersonal unconscious and identifying with a procession of archetypal figures" by which he sought to portray " dispositions that are universal."[39] To mention just one of many instances: "all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings toward the ocean with me" and the "demon

[39] See Henry A. Murray, "Introduction," in Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, ed. Henry A. Murray (New York: Hendricks House Inc., 1949), xxxi.

phantom… some time or other, swims before all human hearts" (22). Variations of the claim appear throughout Moby Dick, and it is absolutely crucial to recognize that Melville is making universal claims for all individuals subjectivized by the same historico-philosophical conditions, which are not only common, thus making all the sailors—Ishmael and Ahab included—equivalent and ordinary, but which are responsible for all subjects being predisposed to identifying with Ahab. All of the prophecy, the description of what is sought and intended, and the lack of return apply to all. Except, of course, for the possibility of a return. Ishmael did return in the end, and he returned with reason, so to speak, from this mad, ill-fated venture of laying the "world's grievances before the bar." They apply to "all" *and* to the "many" because "many" designates the "all" minus those, like Ishmael, who went and yet returned. In other words, the only subject(s) not included in the "many" are those who were part of the "all" but returned. Consider again the Epilogue's epigraph: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." We can interpret this as 'I confess that I am the only one who escaped,' or as 'I escaped so that I could tell you.' To tell us what? The story of the Pequod, of course. But that story is also Ishmael's story because he "was one of that crew," his "shouts had gone up with the rest," and, as he confesses, "the stronger I shouted, the more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul" (196, 152). But Ishmael returned while the others did not. And so, if the story of the Pequod includes Ishmael, then it contains two stories: the story of the hunt and the story of the return. Further, if Ishmael was like all the rest, then the return is the only thing that sets him apart. Therefore, the substance of the second story is merely its difference from the first. This double narrative is evident in Ishmael's narration, which constantly shifts from what happened to why it happened (often on the same page). The difference is subtle: it is the contrast between a narrative of a crew following their captain's crusade and dying for it, and a narrative of how or why a crew took on their captain's crusade and perished. They are essentially the same except that the latter involves a self-consciousness of the former, an awareness or understanding of the causes that produces a further difference: an acceptance of the need for a Whale, but of a different Whale. This difference

is best understood as a parallax shift pivoting on the object known as the Whale.3[40] For Ishamel, the Whale changes, as does "the Truth," the result of which is a shift from the prophecy to the Gospel.

Like all the other men, Ishmael first sees the whale as Moby Dick, but then, through a process that culminates in the reconfiguration of the riddle of what troubles Ahab's "leg," his understanding shifts, resulting in a change in the object from Moby Dick to his Whale. This shift is not just a different perspective or a form of critical distance, but an instance where an epistemic shift is reflected in a change in the object itself. His "perspective," derived from an understanding of the causal structure underlying the entire trajectory from Hope to woe to madness to the hunt, leads to a different cetology, a different symbolic structure, and thus a new form of life. Ishmael escapes by traversing the fantasy, and he returns through an alternative cetology, based on which he will establish a new nation. He does not return to the "pitiful shore" nor to the great American desert, but to a world whose men would not be subject to the prophecy of the hunt. When he addresses the public, he instructs them on what will come to pass (the hunt) and how they must approach it (the escape and return). Essentially, he says 'follow me.' The logic behind all of this (and in all of its irony) is found in *Moby Dick*—along with unexpected concepts like negative magnitudes, transcendental illusions, double negations, subtractions, and an anticipation of a series of psychoanalytic notions.

Now, if Ishmael announces the prophecy after returning, why does he not urge his audience to refrain from "taking to the ship"? Despite his countless warnings, he neither tries to dissuade nor suggests that anyone can be dissuaded from going to sea or embarking on the hunt.[41] He believes it would be pointless. But if it is inevitable and nothing can be done to avoid it, then why the warning? Or, for that matter, why his analyses?

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[40] I use parallax in the sense developed by Slavoj Zizek. See Slavoj Zizek, *The Parallax Shift* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

[41] The obvious objection to this claim is the oft-mentioned Tahiti passage, in Chapter 58, "Brit." A close reading of the passage, and the chapter as a whole, however, refutes the objection, as we will see in Chapter 5.

Or even, from Ishmael's perspective, why *Moby Dick*? Here lies another irony: there are no exceptions because one cannot resist or directly refuse to hunt Moby Dick; except that the cause driving men to the hunt can be resolved by first assuming the hunt and then, in the midst of this fantasy, deriving the means for traversing it. Ishmael, in fact, implies this on numerous occasions, stating, for instance, "only on the profound unbounded sea can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out" (348). His methods are peculiar: overidentification, subtraction, and a few other strategies that deserve the status of ideology critique, enabling him to escape the vengeful fantasy by passing through it. The return, relying on forced choice, proves ironic: to make the right choice, Ishmael must first make the wrong one. Moby Dick, therefore, opens up the possibility of the cetology through which Ishmael returns. As no critic has failed to note, "Ishmael" denotes an outcast and the founder of an alternative nation. Melville certainly hoped for the same with *Moby Dick*. Often overlooked or deliberately ignored, is that Ishmael does not begin as an outcast. He does not board the Pequod as somehow different from Ahab or as somehow exceptional in comparison to the absent-minded crew. Instead, he creates the difference and becomes exceptional.4 [42] He starts off as ordinary and

[42] Ishmael has often been misunderstood as being distinct by birth, i.e., from the outset. The assumption of such a preexisting essential difference is then used to explain the possibility of his difference from Ahab. Porter's interpretation is representative, albeit it involves a twist: Porter argues that Ishmael is an outcast by birth but resigns that status in order to speak for all men and women. The textual evidence does not support such an interpretation, as we will see. Instead, we should understand Ishmael as being identical to the rest at the outset of the hero-narrative and as attaining or earning his exceptional or distinct status, and thus the right to call himself "Ishmael" only at the end. Porter's position, therefore, should be reversed: it is at the observer-narrative level that Ishmael is an outcast, in the sense of being different from the rest, and it is from the point of view of this distinction that he narrates the fate of ordinary subjects (himself included) and the logic by which he attained his distinction. He can say "call me Ishmael," in other words, only because at that moment he has become what such a name symbolizes, i.e., an exile or outcast who founds an alternative nation, which is to say, a subject that broke through the fate assured by the common human fantasy, the fate that awaits the spontaneous thought of ordinary men in the 19th century. And he does so by resolving the ineffability of the "ineffable thing" that Starbuck identifies as what ties him (and the others) to Ahab. As such, we can say that he is ordinary at the outset of the story being told, becomes exceptional by virtue of his survival, and then comes back in order to narrate both the story and the manner by which he survived. See Porter, "How to make Double-Talk Speak," in *New Essays on Moby Dick*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 101. It bears repeating that it is crucial to always keep in mind that Melville conceived of *Moby Dick* as the Gospels for the 19th century, and thus, as this study will show, the book was intended to offer a means by which the 19th century could avoid endlessly repeating the hunt for Moby Dick.

unremarkable and earns the right to say, "Call me Ishmael". He becomes "Ishmael". In a sense, all the pages between the first and last narrate the process by which the narrator could begin by asking to be called "Ishmael". There is no contradiction, therefore: the "many" encompasses everyone except those who already went and managed to return, the "many" is the "all" except for those bearing the name "Ishmael". Put another way, there is the "all" of the prophecy and the "many" of the Gospels; to which we should add that the "all" can be the "many" only because there is the treatise of Ishmael. *Moby Dick* is a prophecy, a treatise, and a Gospel, in that order.

This triptych of prophecy, Gospel, and treatise is captured in the book's double-structure. At the hero-level narrative, it describes the journey of a mythically proportioned hero, but also, as Buell adds, the motives and dispositions common (even if only latently) to all.4[43] The level of narrative reflects the "all" of the prophecy, encompassing Ahab, the crew, Ishmael, and the inevitable fate that awaits all those plagued by torment on land. The observer-level narrative, on the other hand, reflects the exception that transforms the "all" into the "many." The two overlap because the latter is produced out of an analysis and comprehension of the "truth" of the former, which is to say, the overlap of the two narrative levels is the treatise. As such, while the first level encompasses all the characters, the higher level includes only Ishmael. As Buell astutely deduces, there are two Ishmaels, so to speak, the latter of which is produced by understanding the truth of the hero-level, which Ishmael then conceptualizes as “the Truth.” Buell’s formal interpretation opens the space for understanding *Moby Dick* as Melville intended, but he does not inquire into what the truth of either level is, nor into how Ishmael discovers the truth of the hero-level or produces the truth of the observer-level. Buell recognizes that Ishmael leaves as one man and returns as another, but does not investigate what

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In view of this objective and the book’s double-structure, it is possible to say that the Epilogue is at the midpoint of the book because *Moby Dick* should, in a sense, be read twice—first as a hero narrative, wherein Ishmael is not distinct, and then as an observer narrative.

[43] See Lawrence Buell, "Observer-Hero Narrative," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 21, no. 1 (1979): 93-111.

either of these are or how the latter came out of the former.4[44]

Moby Dick, I contend, presents a systematic account of all these aspects, including the comprehension that enables the observer's narrative to emerge from the hero's narrative. It provides an understanding of what I have referred to as the causal structure that underlies the trajectory from life on land to the pursuit of the Whale and the subsequent return. Only through Ishmael's alternative understanding of the Whale can one return to shore in a manner that would not be temporary, i.e., a "cowardly" retreat to the "slavish shore" from which the same forces will "some time or other" drive one back to sea. In conjunction with *Pierre*, *Moby Dick* offers a comprehensive exploration of this process and thus substantiates the thesis that Ishmael escapes and returns through a self-awareness of the shared conditions and instinctive reactions. Hunting Moby Dick is lunacy, but refusing the hunt (or refusing the Whale) is, Melville thinks, impossible. The only way to escape this fate is to assume the hunt and then work through it. As one of the most insightful observations about *Moby Dick* warns: "the only real alternative to the pathologies represented by Ahab— for they are real dangers— is to own and rework, not disavow the suffering, longings, ambitions, and art he personifies."4[45] I would submit that, in effect, much of what is narrated in the hundred-odd chapters of *Moby Dick* is an owning and reworking, the culmination of which is Ishmael's capture of the White Whale. All will seek asylum in the hunt, and all must seek asylum in the hunt, but some may also thereby return. The necessity of the Whale is expressed through a series of notions, most notably "impostor" and "fiction," which come from *Pierre*, and "principle" and "action," which come from *Moby Dick*. There can be no permanent denial of the Whale, which

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[44] In neither "Observer-Hero Narrative" nor his chapter on *Moby Dick* in *The Great American Novel*, where this idea of two Ishmaels and two levels also appear and where Buell goes into some detail about the general meaning of *Moby Dick*, as well as its central themes and message, does he delve into the difference between what the Whale signifies for Ahab and what it ultimately represents for Ishmael himself. It is a particularly striking omission, given Buell's formal reading and general interpretation of the book, and, finally, the emphasis that Ishmael repeatedly places on this distinction.

[45] See Shulman, "Chasing the Whale: Moby Dick as Political Theory," in *A Political Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Jason Frankl (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 71.

is to say, men cannot exist in the great American desert. The only exception to heading out to sea is, we are told, "the pistol and ball". Melville's point is that recognizing this need is essential, and that the alternative leads only to a trap that echoes Lacan's "les non-dupes errant." The sole course of action is to acknowledge this necessity, pursue its misguided fulfillment, and subsequently escape and reconfigure the Truth of the whale.

There is no mystery as to whether Moby Dick serves the crew's need for God—he does. But Moby Dick is not God. What is mysterious is why these romantic and melancholy men cannot help but hunt him for this purpose. The prophecy warns of the inevitability of an unending series of hunts by ordinary, common, perfectly attuned, and well-intentioned men, but men who are also enervated, absent-minded, sordid, distressed, and disoriented, enraged by their pain and tormented by their confusion and powerlessness, and, finally, men who blindly maintain a particular set of metaphysical presuppositions. These men need a "good grip" in this "slippery world"; Ahab recognizes this for he has the same need and hands them a harpoon (259).4[46] The particular object of the hunt is irrelevant: anything can be Moby Dick (and many different things have been and will be); all that matters is the distinction between Moby Dick and Ishmael's Whale.

[46] Later in *Moby Dick*, this is confirmed by Ahab's conversation with the carpenter: "[A] good grip" is what man wants, he says, "something to feel in this slippery world." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 359. *Moby Dick*, as will become evident, fits into a general and widespread phenomenon of trying to coral what had been fragmented. Already in the 18th century, in response to the seemingly impenetrable and complex realities of modern life, new conceptual frameworks began to be developed in order to contain the rapid change, contingency, instability, and complexity of modern life and the social edifice. See Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Foucault makes a similar observation, namely that in response to the fall of the regime of representation and the shift of language from being a method of knowledge to an object of knowledge, the 19th century developed three distinct compensations for this phenomenon: interpretation, formalism, and literature. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 321-9. A further consequence of this impenetrability and complexity, as Thomas Pfau has convincingly demonstrated, is the development of a new conception of human life as a perpetually self-transforming and self-actualizing process that culminates in the notion of Bildung. For a succinct account, see Thomas Pfau, "Romantic Bildung and the Persistence of Teleology," in Brill's *Companion to German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Elizabeth Millan Brusslan and Judith Norman (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 143-72.

"Unless you know the whale," we are told, "you're a provincial and sentimentalist in Truth"; and sentimentalism leads only to this "avenging dream." Naturally, none of this is missed by Ishmael:

> Here, then, was this grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses Job's whale around the world, at the head of a crew, too, chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, castaways, and cannibals—morally enfeebled also, by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right-mindedness in Starbuck, the invulnerable jollity of indifference and recklessness in Stubb, and the pervading mediocrity in Flask. Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him in his monomaniac revenge. How it was that they so abundantly responded to the old man's ire—by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs; the White Whale as much their insufferable foe as his; how all this came to be—what the White Whale was to them, or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim, unsuspected way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life—all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go (158).

Ishmael's remark condenses much of what has been said, and I will return to it at length. For now, I would like to clarify a few points: Firstly, I use the term "White Whale" to refer to the whale that Ishmael captures, *Moby Dick* to refer to the whale that Ahab hunts, and "Whale" to refer to what they have in common. While Melville uses these terms interchangeably, the distinction between them is consistently maintained throughout. Secondly, Ishmael is lying in the quote above by claiming that their "unconscious understandings" is deeper than he can go, because that is precisely where he goes and where he must go, where he must have gone *if* he survived. Thirdly, there are two distinct but related logics in *Moby Dick*. One is the spontaneous causal chain that culminates in the hunt for Moby Dick, and the other is an alternative narrative that culminates in the capture of the White Whale. As a result, there are two of Ishmaels—where appropriate, I will refer to that one that embarked on the voyage as “Ishmael^” and to the one that managed to escape, survive and return

as “Ishmael”; put another way, at the hero-level we have Ishmael^ the character, while at the observer-level we have Ishamel the narrator. Fourthly, *Moby Dick*'s object of analysis can be divided into three inseparable elements: (i) the historico-philosophical conditions of the 19th century that shape the form of life and character of the men, (ii) the causal structure that leads from these conditions to the hunt for Moby Dick, and (iii) cetology. Fifthly, Melville distinguishes between three distinct but related states in *Moby Dick*: Woe, which refers to the world on land; Madness, which refers to the sea without the Whale as an "agent"; and Madness Maddened, which describes the state in which Moby Dick is hunted. Lastly, at the core of *Moby Dick* are a series of notions that, when compiled and organized, form Melville's theory of the subject.

These elements cannot be fully disentangled, and so while the first part of what follows analyzes the objective and structural conditions of the Pequod's desire, the subjectivization of the crew, and the universality of the prophecy, and the latter half focuses on the subject manufactured by these circumstances and its symptoms and actions, there is significant overlap throughout. To read *Moby Dick* as a prophecy grounded in a psychological theory that is attuned to the historico-philosophical conditions of modernity, as well as offering an immanently derived alternative, requires accepting two guiding principles that have already been alluded to. Firstly, there are no external viewpoints, no exceptions, and certainly no essentialized psychological types on the Pequod or among those still stranded on land. Scholars often propose such explanations, but the text refutes them all.4[47] Every single man aboard follows Ahab and assumes the hunt as his own, and eventually, every one of them—except Ishmael—drowns in the sea. Secondly, Ahab enters as

[47] To take just two representative examples: C.R. L. James attempts to redeem (or save) the crew from all responsibility for the carnage and madness by assigning all blame to Ahab, who is, in James' reading, an anticipation of the totalitarian character, especially as it manifests in the 20th century. Geoffrey Sanborn attempts to argue that Queequeg is some form of ideal in *Moby Dick*, but his interpretation, like James', is soundly refuted by the textual evidence and, as importantly, by the philosophical position that Melville lays out in the book. Over the course of the following Chapters, we will see why this is the case. See James, *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways*, and Geoffrey Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of the Postcolonial Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 119-170.

a hero. When these two guiding principles are expanded and synthesized, they reveal a common subjectivization, a common woe, a common madness, and eventually a common maddening of that madness. They also help to explain two of the book's most enigmatic formulations: Ahab's identification as "madness maddened" and his even more confounding confession that "[a]ll my means are sane, my motive and my object mad" (157). Additionally, these two principles account for a curiosity that cannot be missed by the careful reader: the aesthetic form of *Moby Dick*—a reflection, as we will see, of Ishmael's mind, no less than hunting Moby Dick is a reflection of Ahab's—bears the irrefutable stamp of the same insanity that possesses Ahab, with only a minimal difference.4[48] I will address them all in turn, but first, I will provide a brief account of Ahab's ordinariness.

To tie it all together, the prophecy, the soullessness, and the fantasy pursued by the Pequod as it tries to resolve not only humanity's misery but the further torment it suffers from the cause of its endless failures to resolve its misery being inscrutable, and to qualm any unease or skepticism over my claims of what the Pequod is, what it is doing, and what *Moby Dick* is about, here is Ahab. Responding to Starbuck's accusation that hunting Moby Dick is blasphemy against God and useless in the realm of the Nantucket market, Ahab responds as follows:

> Nantucket market! Hoot! But come closer, Starbuck; thou requirest a little lower layer. If money's to be the measurer, man, and the accountants have computed their great counting-house the globe, by girdling it with guineas, one to every three parts of an inch; then, let me tell thee, that my vengeance will fetch a great premium *here*! (139)

The very next line suggests the meaning: "He smites his chest," whispered Stubb, "what's that for? methinks

[48] As we will see at the end, the formal structure of *Moby Dick* can be understood as a reflection of its author's mind, i.e., Ishmeal's mind. Moreover, I will argue that everything in the book must be read from this perspective. Similar insights have been made by both Richard Brodhead and Georg Lukacs. See Richard H. Brodhead, *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).

it rings most vast, but hollow" (139). Is Ahab referring to the soul? Perhaps. But even if he smites his chest at just the right moment, it is not certain that the soul is what he had mind in refuting Starbuck's accusation of the hunt as useless. It is equally possible that "here," while deeming the Nantucket market meaningless, nonetheless refers to the world in which it exists because his vengeance will set it right. There is no third possibility—it is either the soul or the world of men. And nothing on the page guarantees that it is one and not the other. Perhaps, it is best read as another instance of Melville's intentional equivocations: this vengeance will satisfy the soul *and* it will set the world aright.

Chapter 1 examines Ahab and the men that constitute the Pequod's crew, highlighting their shared characteristics and underlying motivations, demonstrating that neither Ahab nor any of his men are exceptional or pathological. Instead, Ahab and his men are shown to be ordinary men, perfectly attuned to the impersonal, historico-philosophical conditions of their time. It subsequently establishes that their common attunement and character are a precondition for the men's assent to hunting Moby Dick in vengeance. In contrast to most interpretations of Moby Dick, this study shows Ahab to be an utterly ordinary man and the hunt for Moby Dick to be a common fantasy, but also that if Ahab is different from his men (and from the men still living ashore), this difference is developmental, not essential. He is ordinary but distinct, in other words, and this distinction is on account of him being a step or two ahead of the other men of his age. The men ashore are in a state of Woe, and men at sea are condemned to a state of Madness; Ahab, on the other hand, is a maddening of this madness. Finally, this chapter demonstrates that from the moment the crew assumes the hunt for Moby Dick as their own, their madness maddens, making them essentially identical to Ahab. Chapter 2 discusses the political and ideological context of Moby Dick, focusing on the historico-philosophical conditions, the dominant ideology, and the discontent and existential crises faced by the characters. It analyzes the socio-political landscape of the 19th century, particularly the impact of democratic ideals and the myth of the self-made man. The chapter supplements Melville's description of life on land

through an extended reading of Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America, examining how this socio-political reality contributes to the characters' motivations and actions, driving them towards Ahab's vengeful mission. The crew's disillusionment with life on land propels them to take to the sea and seek asylum through the hunt. While Chapter 2 focuses on the world of Woe, i.e., life ashore or in the "great American desert," Chapter 3 focuses on the impersonal forces and the form of life at sea, which I refer to as the world of Madness. Through Carl Schmitt's notion of the state of exception and Michel Foucault's description of the modern episteme, this chapter conceptualizes the default reality of the sea. Finally, it explores Melville's theory of the subject, which conceives of the subject as manufactured by its impersonal conditions but also irreducible to them, and demonstrates that this irreducible element of subjectivity, identified by Ahab, Ishmael, and Pierre, is central to the prophecy and Melville's philosophy more generally.

Chapter 4 focuses on Pierre, analyzing the inner catastrophes and psychological turmoil that precede the madness seen in Moby Dick. It investigates the theme of orphanhood and its profound impact on the characters' quest for liberty and identity. The chapter explores Pierre's internal struggles and the existential crises that mirror Ahab's outward madness, and establishes that Pierre is Ahab's precursor or, put another way, he is Ahab minus Moby Dick. Through an extended reading of Pierre, I identify and reconstruct Melville's theory of the subject and his conception of orphanhood, including its causes, dynamics, and consequences. Finally, I submit that the theory of the subject embedded in Moby Dick and Pierre foreshadows the psychoanalytic notions of the unconscious and the Name-of-the-Father. Chapter 5 maps the transition from Woe to Madness to Madness Maddened, and the psychological states of woe, madness, and madness maddened, and explores the symbolic roles of ships, whales, and churches. It examines the progression from existential despair to full-blown madness among the characters, and recapitulates the broader metaphysical implications of this transition, highlighting the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Melville's narrative.

Chapter 6 focuses exclusively on the maddened pit that is Ahab's mind, tracing his mental descent from woe

to madness maddened, and explaining why the hunt for Moby Dick is the only possible resolution to the madness inherent to 19th-century orphanhood. As such, this chapter confirms the proposition that Pierre is Ahab without a Moby Dick, as well as the twin propositions that the hunt for Moby Dick is a common fantasy and that Ishmael's escape from or traversal of the fantasy of the hunt requires that he first assume the hunt for Moby Dick. This necessity of assuming the false path of salvation, i.e., the hunt for Moby Dick, to open up the possibility of the true path of salvation, i.e., Ishmael's White Whale, is one of the primary ironies in Melville's thought. Because Ahab is ordinary, his maddened psyche and the resolution to madness he finds through the hunt are demonstrated to be a microcosm of universal human struggles with meaning, freedom, reason, and sanity in the 19th century. The conclusion synthesizes the key findings, presenting Moby Dick as a prophecy, a Gospel, and a treatise. It discusses how the narrative serves as a prophetic critique of 19th-century societal and ideological constructs, predicting a future of monomaniacal pursuits. The Gospel aspect of the narrative is examined through Ishmael's survival and return, symbolizing hope and potential redemption.

Chapter 1: Ordinary Men

"Oh! many are the Fin-Backs, and many are the Dericks, my friend."
Melville, *Moby Dick*

1.1 Ahab and Other Ordinary Men

Ahab is a peculiar man. As much is evident to everyone, and no one would deny it. Those acquainted with him readily acknowledge his strangeness. Captain Peleg, for instance, introduces Ahab as follows:

> I don't know exactly what's the matter with him; but he keeps close inside the house; a sort of sick, and yet he don't look so. In fact, he ain't sick; but no, he isn't well either.... He's a queer man, Captain Ahab—so some think—but a good one. Oh, thou'lt like him well enough; no fear, no fear. He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab; doesn't speak much; but, when he does speak, then you may well listen. Mark ye, be forewarned; Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales. His lance! aye, the keenest and the surest that, out of all our isle! Oh! he ain't Captain Bildad; no, and he ain't Captain Peleg; he's Ahab, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was a crowned king! (68)

As if that were not enough, he continues:

> And a very vile one. When that wicked king was slain, the dogs, did they not lick his blood? Look ye, lad; never say that on board the Pequod. Never say it anywhere. Captain Ahab did not name himself. 'Twas a foolish, ignorant whim of his crazy, widowed mother, who died when he was only a

> twelvemonth old. And yet the old squaw Tistig, at Gay-head, said that the name would somehow prove prophetic. And, perhaps, other fools like her may tell thee the same. I wish to warn thee. It's a lie. I know Captain Ahab well; I've sailed with him as mate years ago; I know what he is—a good man—not a pious, good man… only there's a good deal more of him. Aye, aye, I know that he was never very jolly; and I know that on the passage home, he was a little out of his mind for a spell; but it was the sharp shooting pains in his bleeding stump that brought that about, as any one might see. I know, too, that ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale, he's been a kind of moody—desperate moody, and savage sometimes; but that will all pass off.… hold ye then there can be any utter, hopeless harm in Ahab? No, no, my lad; stricken, blasted, if he be, Ahab has his humanities! (68)

In addition to such reports, all readers surely notice the many strange and often troubling things Ahab himself says—sometimes to others, other times to himself or no one at all. A careful reader will further note that his words become more confounding as the Pequod gets closer to its final encounter. His early exchanges with Starbuck, for example, are dramatic, sometimes fanatical, and often saturated with ambiguous metaphors, but when compared to much of what he says later in the book, these exchanges are composed and straightforward. Unsurprisingly, most scholars and readers alike conclude that Ahab is crazy. They are not wrong. Ahab himself admits his madness on several occasions. Where most interpretations go awry is in assuming that his madness is exceptional.

An alternative approach to Ahab is to focus on his enormity: the degree of his rage and ruthlessness, the extent of his monomaniacal devotion, the unquestioned authority with which he directs the Pequod and its men, or the scale of his indifference to all but the hunt for Moby Dick. Another alternative is to view Ahab first and foremost as the representation or manifestation of some larger force or notion. There is, of course, no consensus over what he represents, and often enough equally convincing interpretations not only differ

but contradict one another. Consistent across these alternatives is a feature they share with interpretations that foreground Ahab's madness, namely, they view the old captain as exceptional, which is not same as what is meant by Peleg's statement that he is "above the common."[49] Regardless of the particulars, what all such interpretations identify is Ahab's distinctiveness and enormity. Yes, Ahab is mad, and yes, he is not exactly the same as other men, but he is not exceptional in his qualities or his pathologies; rather, he is ordinary, all-too-ordinary, in fact.

By "common" I mean that Ahab is not fundamentally different from the other men on board or from the countless masses left ashore, but also that he is not an autonomous, self-defining agent in full control of himself. When his lack of autonomy is remarked upon, it is typically limited to Ahab once he has already laid blame on and decided to hunt Moby Dick. Thereafter, there is no doubt that he is no longer an "agent" but an "instrument" of something other and larger than himself. In fact, Ahab himself recognizes and admits as much. Ahab certainly begins to lose control as his encounter with Moby Dick nears, but it must also be noted that he maintains enough self-awareness to question his degree of self-determination: "Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (382). As the encounter with Moby Dick approaches, Ahab's words and thoughts become increasingly perplexing, and there is a distinct sense that he is ever more beyond the reach of reason or diversion. Ahab is aware of this too, acknowledging, "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run" (143). Such interpretations, however, typically fail to recognize that this lack of autonomy precedes Ahab's discovery of Moby Dick. Ahab may not be in control once the hunt is underway, but it is also the case that he is not the cause of his madness nor that some personal pathology is

[49] Against the dominant interpretation, Susan McWilliams makes the case that Ahab is in no way exceptional and, moreover, that he is not the primary source of the atmosphere on the Pequod. She takes her cue from Ishmael's remark that the captain "gets his atmosphere at second hand from the sailors on the forecastle," as well as numerous assertions that Ahab is not exceptional, strange, or alien, and argues that what causes the Pequod's allegorical voyage of revenge is not a mad captain but underlying cultural and social conditions. See Susan McWilliams, "Ahab, American," in *A Political Companion to Herman Melville* ed. Jason Frankl (Lexington: University Kentucky Press, 2013) 109-40.

the catalyst of the woe that precedes it. By this I do not mean that he does not make everyday decisions (e.g., what to eat, what to wear, or whom to marry) but only that his essential character and mood are not self-determined. Orphanhood is the most evident example: it defines Ahab (and everyone else), shaping his other notable traits, but Ahab did not choose to be an orphan.[50] All his defining features, as well as his seemingly autonomous actions and reactions, are not products of self-determination, they are not the actions of an individual defining himself against a relatively neutral backdrop of circumstances, but reflections (or personifications) of the form of life on land and the underlying historico-philosophical conditions of his age, with all their attributes and all their flaws. Once again, Ahab is conscious of this, recognizing himself as the "impersonal personified" and explicitly blaming the "spirit" of his age for the combustible and enraged man he has become (382). Ishmael arrives at the same conclusion, providing insights and analyses of Ahab's mindset along the way. For now, it suffices to posit that Ahab's madness is neither his own nor his alone; and, moreover, that this commonness applies just as much to the states that precede the maddening of his madness.

If Ahab's madness was a unique and defining pathology, then the crew's agreement could not have occurred as described. Instead, it would have involved coercion, deception, or, at the very least, confusion

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[50] The account of how orphanhood shapes Ahab's other characteristics (as well as the characteristics of the others) is found in *Pierre*. In *Pierre*, we will see that this mood of madness is triggered by what can be understood as the death of the imaginary father, which results in the delusions of land dissolving, and, subsequently, the orphan's reaction. The "Ambiguities" in the title refers to the dynamic that Pierre gets trapped in as he attempts to salvage the moral law by abandoning his imaginary father, who has been exposed as an impostor because there is no way for his authority to be maintained after Pierre receives the letter from Isabel. Pierre attempts to save his father but finds that both images of his father are lost in the attempt to save either one of them. The result is what I will call Pierre's quagmire, i.e., his attempt to refuse what he cannot unconsciously deny and his want for what he cannot have. This quagmire is the result of the principle, the principle without some alien impostor to restrain its truth. The maddening of madness, on the other hand, involves the principle and the agent. As critics note, life on land is a deception and, moreover, it conceals the ontological and epistemological truth. See Wirth, "Outlandish Lands," 65-82. What also needs to be recognized is that Melville conceived of the entire process as neither elective nor as the result of personal or individual pathologies but, rather, the result of natural reactions to common conditions. Hints as well as explicit assertions of this causality are found at the beginning and throughout the book. For example, early on, Ishmael remarks that all men living in the "great American desert," even the most absent-minded, inevitably turn to the sea *if* they are led by a "metaphysical professor." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 18-25.

among the men and an explanation from Ahab. Conversely, if the agreement happened as described, then the beliefs and convictions that led Ahab to embark on the hunt must also be present in the minds of the crew. The entire process from woe to the maddening is driven by common objective conditions and subjective actions that Melville conceives of as universal and spontaneous reactions to those conditions. Ahab is not disconnected from reality and portraying him otherwise undermines the intended purpose of *Moby Dick*. He is a reflection of his reality, not exceptional, but ordinary. If he sets sail, so will all the other ordinary men. If the sea drives him to madness, it will do the same to them. And if he seeks asylum in the hunt, they too will pursue such a vengeful fantasy. This is the basis on which the prophecy that all men of the 19th century will follow Ahab into this "avenging dream" is made.

Most interpretations of Ahab consider him to be exceptional in some way. Some see him as delusional and disconnected from common sense, making him impossible to understand or identify with. Others view him as an exaggeratedly selfish man, driven solely by the desire for profit and completely indifferent to the lives of others and the collateral damage of his obsessive pursuit. Still others perceive Ahab as a man determined to exert his will over everyone else, with subjugation being the end itself, rather than a means to some greater purpose. To debate the merits of these interpretations would be to miss the point, however, because they all share a common flaw: the belief that Ahab is somehow exceptional or fundamentally different from the ordinary.

Susan McWilliams offers a different perspective, arguing that although Ahab may seem strange "at first glance… we quickly realize that he harks from a place much closer to home."[51] She correctly observes that there is a pervasive and impersonal "atmosphere" aboard the ship, which influences and controls the men, and, furthermore, that this atmosphere, originating from the culture they left ashore, is what allows the crew

[51] McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 110. Subsequent references are made directly in the text.

to accept Ahab's vengeance as their own.[52] Despite allusions to this culture and the similarities she mentions between Melville's and Tocqueville's analyses of democracy in 19th-century America, she abandons a thorough examination and gives little consideration to the shared convictions and beliefs that lead the crew to agree to the hunt or the alignment of these beliefs with the decision to hunt Moby Dick (as cause and means). The flaw in her analysis lies not in these omissions, however, but in McWilliams' excessive reduction of Ahab to a merely ordinary figure.[53] Ahab is an ordinary man and there is a common culture and atmosphere that shape the desires and characteristics of both him and his crew, but Ahab is *not exactly* the same as his men. He is not fundamentally different, as McWilliams is right to point out, but he is distinct; not on account of some essential or inherent feature but purely because he is a step or two ahead of his men—he is, in a word, already what they will come to be. Captain Peleg says as much: "Ahab's above the common" (78). To which he adds more than a hint at why: "common; Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales" (78). And what are these greater foes than whales? They are the Whales, the "the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world" (116).

Comprehending *Moby Dick* necessitates not confusing Ahab's enormity and eccentricity for idiosyncrasy. Instead of personal will, pathological or otherwise, what drives Ahab from woe to the maddening of madness is a perfect attunement to objective conditions and a series of spontaneous and universal subjective reactions to those conditions. Analogously to Adorno's unsettling conclusion that

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[52] McWilliams argues that what permits the Pequod to pursue is mad vengeance unimpeded is not Ahab's power or will but the individualist culture of the time, which she ties to Tocqueville's analysis of the social context of mid-nineteenth century America, in particular its "*isolato* culture." See McWilliams, "Ahab, American," 109-40.

[53] As we will see, McWilliam's account is inadequate for a second reason, namely, none of Melville's characters are completely reducible to being their conditions because while his notion of the subject conceives of it as empty of any substance it does possess one inherent property, the principle. The same limitation applies to Cameron's argument in *Impersonality*, as we will see in Chapter 4.

"authoritarian personalities" are more natural to the 20th-century than "liberal" ones, Melville's Ahab proves to be a more perfect reflection of his age than a "right-minded" man like Starbuck. [54] His madness aligns more closely with the truth of the form of life in the great American desert than does the noble but desperate futility of a man like Starbuck, because his woe has transformed into the madness latent in it, and this madness has already maddened. For the same reason, he is a more authentic representative of the conditions of his era than those who remain on land: he is more representative because he has already embarked on the sea. And he is also a more authentic representative than those aboard because his madness has already maddened, because it has intensified and resolved itself through Moby Dick. In a word, Ahab is representative of the common because he has already encountered and begun to hunt Moby Dick. Put another way, he is more representative because he has already realized the truth latent in his impersonal conditions and within the impersonal personified that he is. He is representative of this age because he is ever so slightly ahead of his time. Because Melville views Ahab's actions and reactions as natural, in the sense of inculcated nature, he announces the Pequod's fantasy of vengeance as a prophecy for all.

For the crew's assent to be as described, there must be an existing and underlying identity between the captain and the crew. This identity can be explained in two ways: either all the Pequod's men have similar personal pathologies, meaning they are all exceptional in the same way, or they are all the same due to common conditions of life and a common manufacture by those conditions. Within this first explanation, there are two option for accounting for the cause of this identity of pathologies across this motley crew of men: either the entire crew is by some coincidence identically exceptional, in which case the object and message of *Moby Dick* change, or some common constitutive mood is posited but restricted to the crew alone. The latter negates the crew's status as representative and contradicts all of *Moby Dick*'s universal claims,

[54] See Theodore Adorno, "Remarks on *The Authoritarian Personality*," in T.W. Adorno, Else Frankel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*, ed. Peter E. Gordon (New York: Verso, 2019), xli-lxxv.

including the prophecy. As such, it effectively collapses into the first option. In either case, *Moby Dick* could not be conceived of as announcing a prophecy about the fate of ordinary men and women but only proclaiming the danger posed by some exceptional lunatics. In which case, it would be hard to see how Melville could conceive of *Moby Dick* as his Gospels, and all the universal claims, from the great American desert to the sea as "alien" to the Whale as a phantom that swims before the heart of all men and women to what Ishmael calls their "unconscious understanding" and the "grim sire" would be annulled, while the crew's seamless assent to Ahab's prophecy would be either incoherent or meaningless. The same fate of incoherence or insignificance would, of course, await Ishmael's transition from assuming the hunt to escaping and returning from it. Finally, *Moby Dick* would lose the status it has been accorded, since it would not be addressing anything *singular* but only something very, very particular. Such an interpretation of this seemingly minor element of the plot would alter the intention of the book, from being addressed to the ordinary public, warning about the possibilities inherent in the ordinary and offering an alternative, to a warning about the dangers of exceptional individuals and their exceptional pathologies. Had this been Melville's intention, *Moby Dick* would be making an all-too-common mistake in analyses of socio-political pathologies: regardless of whether the blame is placed solely on the leader, who managed to seduce the crowd, or if it's distributed more democratically distributed across the leader and the led, the fault is ultimately the same because both conceive of the culprit as inexplicably deranged, as if the lunacy is the expression of some inherent but exclusive madness, as if it came from the land they (and they alone) inhabit or the water that they drink.[55] Melville does make such an error, however, focusing instead on common conditions, culture, and psychology.

Melville avoids this mistake by adopting an approach reminiscent of Sir Walter Scott, in whose novels the outcome of ideological conflicts is not decided by the speeches of princes or the tactics of armies, but

[55] See Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

rather by which ideology successfully permeates everyday life.[56] Instead of fanatical partisans or ideological spokesmen, the winner is determined by the sympathies of the ordinary, ideologically uncommitted population, by which ideology captures their spontaneous and unthinking actions and which principles they come to assume as self-evident. Melville attributes the madness and desire for vengeance to the common, that is, to the prevailing ideology, the form of life installed on land, and his concept of human nature and functional societal structure; more acutely, he attributes these pathologies, frustrations, and deprivations, and the pathological responses to them, to the conflicts between the ideology manifested and what he believes cannot be changed in human nature or removed from civic society. If the men of the Pequod are viewed as intentionally malicious or cognitively exceptional (in the sense of detached or unattuned to the common impersonal conditions), the fault lies with us, because in *Moby Dick* they are neither. Like Tocqueville before him, as we will shortly see, Melville assumes a minimal conception of human nature and then sieves it through the elementary features and primary principles of social practices and dominant ideologies, the result of which is his description (and conception) of the inculcated character of the citizens of mid-19th-century democratic America: sordid, absent-minded, enervated, and tormented orphans, desperate, disoriented, and searching for a cause. Despite their sorry state, Melville predicts, they will continue to hold onto the convictions that brought them to this point as articles of faith, while their visions of the world and themselves will continue to be aligned with the metaphysical convictions of Hope. Contrary to most (mis)readings, their intentions are neither malicious nor selfish. Ishmael, as mentioned earlier, equates Ahab and the crew with Anacharsis Clootz and his delegation, who marched to Paris to demand adherence to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. This characterization is confirmed more than a few times over the course of the book, including Ishmael's description of what Ahab had placed onto the white hump of Moby Dick (156). The

[56] See Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 30-63.

Pequod intends to resolve the accumulated grievances of mankind through the hunt. Its pursuit is ruthless, yes, but its vengeance is ultimately a selfless act on behalf of all humanity, and not some senseless cruelty or selfish sacrifice of others for one's own interest.

The prophecy unambiguously describes this fellowship of men as neither detached from reality nor reactionary, but as perfectly aligned with their historico-philosophical conditions and fully committed to the progressive ideas of the age (e.g., romantic, disgusted), while conceding that the same conditions and ideas have left them disappointed and deformed (e.g., melancholic, absent-minded). In an obscure self-description, Ahab confirms as much: "All my means are sane, my motive and my object mad" (157). Reading this as a merely rhetorical expression of anger or pathology would be a gross mistake, because its meaning is precise and elucidating: "means" refers to the acts through which Ahab responds to his circumstances, i.e., heading out to sea and later finding asylum in the hunt, while "sane" is not an antonym for 'crazy' or 'pathological' but a synonym for 'common' or 'attuned,' in the sense of being a natural reaction by a subject so manufactured to its circumstances and discontents; another clue resides in the syntax, namely, the repetition of "my" before "motive" and "object" suggests that "mad" is not an equivalent adjective in the two instances; in describing the motive as "mad," Ahab is confessing his anger and rage, his torment and even his desperation, but in describing his object as "mad" he is referring to the maddened madness of conceiving a dumb brute as the cause of humanity's misery. At a more conceptual level, it is mad three times over: Moby Dick is (i) involved in something that lacks ontological existence but appears through Moby Dick, i.e., God or Divine order, (ii) exists as a form of something that is expelled from the historico-philosophical conditions represented in *Moby Dick* and yet returns in antagonistic contradiction to them, and (iii) takes the form of a delusional formation, a pathological reaction to a lack the subject cannot accept.[57] Ahab's rage is a natural response to his conditions,

[57] With respect to the first, the madness of this object is on account of the fact that it secures the fiction of a Divine order by being posited as what obstructs that Divine order, or better put, what obstructs man's access to and thus his alignment with that order. Moby Dick, in other words, is an illusion (or delusion) that supports

as is the principle underlying his act, but the agent he posits, and the very idea that there is some such agent, is not only lunacy but is also in conflict with the form of life on land and the ideological commitments of Hope, of which Ahab is the representative. Reading the motive in this fashion aligns with Ishmael's discernment of the motives that led him (and the others) to turn away from life on land and head to sea, while reading the madness of the object in this manner aligns with what that object is, i.e., the Whale. Insofar as Ahab is not essentially distinct from the others, this obscure and seemingly purely rhetorical self-description supports the interpretation of the Pequod's men as well-intentioned, attuned, and representative, not malicious, deranged, or out of touch. They are not reactionaries nor lunatics but committed patrons of the new values of their age.

Setting aside for the moment Ishmael's analyses of the factors that "tied" the men to Ahab and the reasons behind their shared hatred, consider the characteristics that define Ahab as distinct: (i) he has already decided to act on his want of vengeance; (ii) he has already abandoned the state of Woe and resolved the Madness by maddening it; (iii) he is an orphan—and acknowledges himself as such—that has been *raised at sea*; (iv) he has resolved the torment of inscrutability; (v) he has regained the ability to act, instead of being paralyzed and disoriented; (vi) he is no longer a helpless victim and has regained dignity and pride in turn; and finally, (vii) his wound is self-inflicted. [58] All of these distinguishing characteristics stem from Ahab's

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a preexisting belief in a fiction.

[58] A careful reader will note that two of Ahab's defining characteristics are absent from this list: his alleged "ungodliness" and his not being part of "Christendom." While, in some sense, these aspects do apply to Ahab, they are also clear misnomers: Ahab is a deeply religious man, who still holds firm beliefs in God and Christianity, at least a certain denomination of Christianity, namely, Unitarianism and its secular progeny, Transcendentalism. He believes in God and in man, regardless of whether his words may appear to suggest otherwise. Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick is merely a means for upholding his faith in God and man, allowing him to protect these beliefs despite evidence to the contrary, while also seeking vengeance for the suffering and pain that he believes should not exist, all the while relieving both man and God of responsibility. In essence, the hunt for Moby Dick serves as a scapegoat: the misery, pain, and failures of man can be admitted without the assumption of man's inherent goodness or God's existence and justice being put into doubt. Further, because the failure of this crusade to redress the world's grievances induces its repetition, this quixotic adventure is destined to continue indefinitely, or at least to continue until a different cetology is

adoption of the fantasy of hunting Moby Dick. From the moment the crew assume Ahab's resolution as their own, these markers of distinction gradually fade. Hence why after the quarter-deck scene, Ahab can declare that the Pequod, the "material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's *soul*," sails on manned by "one man, not thirty" (107). From this point onwards, they are the same and one; as such, it makes no difference if they are one, two, thirty, or a thousand. Once this is recognized, a famous but misunderstood declaration reveals its true meaning: "Ye are not other men, but my arms and my legs; and so, obey me" (423).

James's influential interpretation is flawed because it portrays Ahab as a man driven by a totalitarian desire and the crew as innocent victims, deceived and coerced by their captain.[59] Nonetheless, he is correct in asserting that Ahab is a representative *because* he is slightly ahead of his time. We should add that he is slightly ahead because he has already manifested or embodied the hidden truth of his era.[60] If Ahab is "democracy's nightmare," as a few critics have suggested, he is its nightmare because he is its contradictions made manifest.[61] Ahab is representative because he is simultaneously common and distinct: common in the

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assumed. Melville's argument is that it will continue to repeat unless something (or someone) intervenes: Ishmael. Ahab and his men share certain similarities with the individuals whom Nietzsche would later warn about. Above all, they exhibit a persistent belief without being conscious of it, and a fanatical devotion that is even more harmful due to its apparent disconnection from the church. See Anderson, "Platonic and Nietzschean Themes of Transformation in *Moby Dick*," for an insightful interpretation of the parallels between Melville and Nietzsche, in particular on the question of nihilism and value.

[59] Three reasons for why such an interpretation is flawed can be identified immediately: first, Ahab is one of them, ordinary and common, in fact, anyone could have been Ahab; second, it is the conditions that shape them and it is their common reactions to these conditions that motivate their actions; and third, Melville rejects any idealization of common or ordinary man as well as any idealization of the secondary characters. For James' position see "the Captain and Crew," in James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*.

[60] James makes a similar argument, namely, that the greatness of Ahab as a literary character is that he is of but also ahead of his time, in the sense that he is a foreshadowing of what will come. James' argument, however, does not look into the account of this development that is, I argue, offered in *Moby Dick*. See "The Captain and Crew," in James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*. What James passes over would include the structure of the historico-philosophical conditions in question, Melville's expressed theory of the subject, and their interaction, which is to say, Melville's account of the how and why Ahab is or has become what he is, and *what* Ahab is.

[61] Matthiessen and Rogin make this point in *American Renaissance* and *Subversive Genealogies*, respectively. As does Bryant, from whom the quote is taken. See John Bryant, "Moby Dick as Revolution," in *The Cambridge*

sense of ordinary and distinct in so far as he is a step or two ahead of what awaits all ordinary men of the age. If recognized as such, his authority and heroic stature among the men and their seamless and ready assumption of the hunt become coherent. Ahab suffered just like they suffer, he felt the same despair and powerlessness they feel, but he also stands among them "god-like" because he has begun to act, to resolve his misery and bring about the world they not only want but which they assume to be their birthright. His troubles are no longer the same as their torment: they are tormented by the cause of their suffering being inscrutable, while his only trouble is the execution of his resolution. It is a false resolution, to be sure, but that is irrelevant because neither he nor they see it that way.[62] They too will madden, identify the cause and means, attain a purpose, acquire a soul, and "sail away from all heavens," etc. Ahab's greatness is in his maddening of madness, and this greatness is also his distinction: he suffered like them, but he suffers no more because he refused the indignity of impotent despair and found a cause and a means. Because he is ordinary, he needs neither to convince nor coerce but only voice what they already dimly and fearfully intuit and are thus ready to believe. All this makes him a hero to his men—he leads them to where they were always destined to be, while standing among them but ever so slightly ahead. In this respect, he is very much an anticipation of many later idols and leaders. Recall Elijah's words to Ishmael: the men must be soulless to sail on the Pequod, before adding that their ghastly condition will be alleviated by Ahab. They acquire what they lacked and wanted *through Ahab*. Hence why there is no need to deceive, impose, or convince, but only to name what they could not say and point at what they could not yet see. He offers them what they already desired and tells them what they deep down already knew: there is a cause of your pain and suffering, it is neither your beliefs about yourself nor your visions of the world, but something else, Moby Dick. Yes, he piled all the rage of humanity since Adam

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Companion to Herman Melville, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1998), 78.

[62] Part of the fault involved is their inability to understand the dynamics of principle and agent and impostor and fiction, as well as in what I will reconstruct as their common configuration of the lower layer of the "riddle" of what troubles Ahab's leg. All three of these matters are treated at length in the following Chapters.

onto that white hump, but that white hump can be the target of their vengeance only because it is supported by underlying convictions that these men already hold. And so, they recognize what he points at and accept his proposition, immediately. They will it themselves, they assent to the hunt spontaneously and zealously.

Because Ahab is distinct but not fundamentally different, he towers over the crew as a hero—all the greater in their eyes because he is a hero in their own measure.[63] His heroic status is founded on his already being what the others are destined to become. His doubled madness is his greatness, which is to say, his greatness arises out of this distinction. In a word, his greatness is that he is hunting Moby Dick. Rhetorically, his pride sets him apart: "Talk to me not of blasphemy, man, I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (140). Superficially, his distinction arises out of some personal power (or lunacy), out of his being "god-like" (78). But logically, his distinction lies in the distortions of his mind: he has already (mis)recognized lack as loss and thereby regained Hope through the identification of Moby Dick as cause and means. This distortion is a condition of possibility for seeking and encountering Moby Dick, which subsequently shapes all his other distinctive characteristics, freeing him from the torment of inscrutable suffering, disorientation within a world consumed by meaninglessness and deception, and rage without a target.[64] Ahab sees and names what has been expelled and made impossible within their shared circumstances, thus freeing them into the action they so

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[63] Milder also places great emphasis on recognizing that Ahab enters as a hero. See Robert Milder, *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72-96. It is because of the crew's assent, Ahab's undeniable heroic status, and their sense that he's one of them, that, as Milder notes, he appears to them as Job and Christ, suffered and redeemer. This dual nature of Ahab has been suggested by several critics, as Milder documents. Many, moreover, have understood Ahab as a false redeemer, but what is less often discussed or inquired into is why Ahab is so appealing, why is it that within the impersonal conditions in which the crew is manufactured and within which they live Ahab appears a savior. Melville, as I demonstrate, gave significant attention to these matters, including a situated psychological theory that explains it. In *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*, as I will show, he provides a conceptual understanding of why this is a false redemption and why it is both inevitable and necessary as a step towards Ishmael's alternative.

[64] As Rogin observes, the hunt is a defense "against chaos, against the panic of rage without a target." Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 115-120. This observation must be read in conjunction with Ishmael's remark about the consequence of the maddening of Ahab's madness, namely that Moby Dick gave a "thousand-fold more potency" to Ahab's mind, that Moby Dick contracted Ahab's madness.

desperately want.

Ahab may be ordinary, but he exceeds the ordinary through a series of actions culminating in the hunt for Moby Dick. His distinction is not essential but developmental. The crew cannot resist his proposition because it aligns with the same fantasy they were destined to enact. Revisiting the absurdity of the quarter-deck scene, note that before Ahab identifies Moby Dick, such an agent was not just unknown but also denied within their land-bound lives. And yet, they recognize him immediately, and everything becomes clear, instantly. On casual reading, we may see Ahab's proposition as lunacy, but Melville's point is that this lunacy resides within everyone, that it is a "common fantasy."[65]

1.2 Ahab's Proposition and the Common Fantasy

At one level, Ahab's proposition is simple: humanity's pain and suffering have a single cause, Moby Dick, which can be eliminated, thus restoring humanity's proper alignment with Divine order. Before accepting this proposition, the cause of humanity's pains and its failures to address them was inscrutable to these men, which only served to torment them further, but with the cause identified, they feel as if they know the source of all their troubles, even if the details remain indefinite. All that remains is the hunt, the execution of their resolution. If the men believe Ahab—and they do—then it is reasonable if all their other concerns, whether financial, personal, or otherwise, lose their urgency. The men may be irrational and absent-minded, but they are not so foolish as to not recognize that if Moby Dick is the ultimate cause of their failures and frustrations, then all their more immediate concerns are mere consequences of his malice. Consequently, all their existing objectives, aimed at resolving their dissatisfactions or achieving long-denied joy, are undermined and suspended. Why? Because despite their cognitive limitations, Melville gives no reason to doubt that they are

[65] Milder and Lawrence Buell before him both make this observation. Milder goes into more detail as to what this fantasy is and why it is common. See *Milder*, *Exiled Royalties*, 78-80. For Buell, see "Observer-Hero Narrative," 93-111.

sensible enough to understand that any solution that fails to address Moby Dick's malevolence will ultimately be in vain. As such, it is not surprising that these impoverished and desperate men discard every thought, plan, and duty they had brought aboard as irrelevant and insignificant. The hunt offers an additional allure: it fulfills their need for purpose and dignity: a sense of purpose denied to them by the meaningless worries of life on land, from which they turn with "disgust," and a dignity that can belong only to those who control their own destiny. To fully grasp the promise of the sea and the appeal of the hunt, consider another of Ishmael's remarks:

> Once more. Say you are in the country; in some high land of lakes. Take almost any path you please, and ten to one it carries you down in a dale, and leaves you there by a pool in the stream. There is magic in it. Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries—stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water, if water there be in all that region. Should you ever be athirst in the great American desert, try this experiment, if your caravan happen to be supplied with a metaphysical professor. Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever (19).

There is "magic in it" if one is left "athirst in the great American desert." The point is precise: if people on land are left athirst within that form of life and seek satisfaction in the sea, then the sea does not offer something completely other, but instead appears to promise to supplement that life by satisfying needs that it cannot meet.6[66] In all of Ishmael's descriptions, people turn to the sea out of necessity. He instructs that accompanying, or even guiding, this turn is not a positive knowledge of some metaphysical substance, but a

[66] Numerous scholars have noted that Melville's characters, in *Moby Dick* especially, are driven to their acts by various repressions, or negations more generally. In Chapter 4, I focus on a particular form of negation, foreclosure, and how it is operative in both *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*. Similarly to the argument being offered here, Murray suggests that there is a repression in Western culture that disposes it to chasing Fascism. Indeed, and again similarly to the argument developed here, he suggests that *Moby Dick* tells such a story. Murray, however, does not develop the point. See Murray, "Introduction," xxxi.

"metaphysical professor," a compass of sorts that guides them to the sea. Beneath their intentional act of turning to the sea is a feeling or suspicion, or as Ishmael describes it in another moment, a curiosity, about the existence of what is sought at sea. Moreover, this intuition with respect to the existence of something they do not know but only suspect cannot be derived from any positive experience of life on land. Instead, as Ishmael will conclude, these men appear to have something akin to an instinctual intuition that what they seek exists in the sea. As becomes clear over the course of the book, Melville's point is even stronger: in addition to this intuition unprompted by experience, these men feel the necessity of what they seek as if to their minds it must exist. This feeling and need are so insistent that their discontent with life on land is unbearable. Ishmael, for instance, confesses choosing between the pistol and the ship. To any sensible person, deciding to leave the security of land and set out to sea, with all the danger and uncertainty that entails, in search of something for which one has no evidence that it even exists, is lunacy. Melville, no doubt, is aware of this. The decision of his characters—including his mad and his lucid heroes—to pursue such a venture on nothing more than a suspicion is not only a measure of the degree of their misery and torment but also of the extent of their faith in the existence of what they seek and of their need for it. They feel, in other words, the existence of something they have no experience of, and it is a feeling they cannot silence indefinitely. On this point, Melville once again echoes Tocqueville: "They feel imprisoned within bounds, which they will apparently never be allowed to pass. Soon as they do—and they will—their minds know not where to fix themselves, and they rush unrestrained beyond the range of common sense."[67] If what is sought cannot be found on land, then it must come from within the subject itself; in which case, as we will explore further, the individual cannot be merely a reflection of impersonal circumstances or shaped solely by his way of life. For Melville, even though Ahab and the others are the "impersonal personified" they also possess some core, irreducible personality, a kernel of sovereign autonomy, an element distinct from their impersonal circumstances—

[67] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 470.

within their manufactured character, in other words, there remains a, so to speak, mind of their own. In essence, this passage reiterates the notion expressed in Ahab's earlier-quoted soliloquy.

Ishmael continues: "there is nothing surprising in this, if they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me" (22).[68] Like "many" in the prophecy really means "all," the qualification "almost" in the above is a misnomer and should not dissuade us from understanding the statement as making a universal claim. Ishmael elaborates further:

> surely all this is not without meaning, and still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life (20).

The image in the fountain is, of course, Narcissus' reflection, meaning that he himself is source of the image after which he plunges. Melville's point is not only that the subject is the origin of what he seeks but also that the subject misrecognizes something of itself as something independent and other. A subjective projection, in other words, is misrecognized as something discovered. If what Narcissus sees in the fountain is what all men see in the sea, then the image projected—this image of the ungraspable phantom of life—appears to correspond to the Whale. When this passage is combined with the previously discussed passages, it follows that the Whale, or something related to the Whale, is experienced as intolerably absent in the great American desert. But what exactly is being projected? And why is it described as both "ungraspable" and the "phantom of life"? A hint is given in the description of Narcissus's failure to grasp it as "tormenting." If it is not yet clear, it will be by virtue of what follows: behind this projection that we, like Narcissus, cast into the sea and

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[68] Variations of this claim appear throughout *Moby Dick*, and it is absolutely crucial to recognize that Melville is making universal claims for all individuals subjectivized by the same historico-philosophical conditions, which are not only common, thus making all the sailors (Ishmael and Ahab, included) equivalent and ordinary, but which are responsible for all subjects being predisposed to identifying with Ahab. For an insightful and detailed interpretation of Melville's focus on universal dispositions see Murray, "Introduction."

misrecognize as something independent and other is the principle, in which case the "image" is what it posits by presupposing it. It is ungraspable for a few reasons, as we will see, but primarily because it is not a substance or object but a place that some substance would occupy; because there is nothing in this place but the place itself, there is nothing to be grasped, and yet because the place of where some substance would be is presupposed we are compelled to grasp something, to keep grasping as it were at nothing. Something about this strange trick of the mind, as it were, Melville conceives of as essential to—or even as the essence of—life. Ishmael confirms this many times, but nowhere as pointedly or as beautifully as in his description of Ahab, as he sorrowfully leans over the hull and looks into the sea: "Slowly crossing the deck from the scuttle, Ahab leaned over the side and watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze, the more and the more that he strove to pierce the profundity" (405). Setting aside the profundity Ahab tries but fails to pierce, one thing is clear: a phantom is a ghostly appearing figure, something that exists in perception only, it is, in other words, a fiction made by the one that sees it. It is not Moby Dick that men project into the sea—he arrives later, as it were. Instead, what is projected into the sea and dived after is a fiction, an ungraspable fiction; Moby Dick is something else, something that allows men who have plunged into the sea in chase of this fiction to image that this ungraspable fiction is, in fact, within their grasp. That Narcissus drowns—and that, by analogy, all men will drown—is the result of the same set of mistakes that assure that from the venture of "accompanying old Ahab in the Pequod to lay the world's grievances before the bar" *none* return. What drives men to sea, in other words, is the principle that presupposes and thus underlies the suspicion of landman that a metaphysical substance they do not see and do not experience on land exists and can be found in the depths of the sea. What he and we project, misrecognize, and plunge after—and then die in the pursuit of—is the fiction of Divine order.

At sea, this same principle appears as distortion: the sea is masterless and horizonless, because there is neither a Divine presence in its depths nor in the heavens above, and yet the men aboard the Pequod

perceive the endless sea and the ever-changing ripples and waves as "the inscrutable tides of God" (136).[69] In essence, it transforms an ontological problem into an epistemic one, or lack into loss: it is not that God does not exist, but rather that humans have lost access to Him. Consequently, all suffering, pain, and failure, as well as the futility of their efforts, are attributed to a loss of access instead of the ontological lack of what they presuppose exists. Ishmael is unequivocal about the status of this principle: "here, far water-locked; beyond all hum of human weal or woe; in these most candid and impartial seas; where to traditions no rocks furnish tablets… here, too, life dies sunwards full of faith" (376). By the "candid and impartial seas," he means the ontological truth. And when he states, "here, too, life dies sunwards full of faith," he is conveying two concepts: firstly, this principle is intrinsic to subjectivity, and secondly, it is constitutive of life itself; it is, as

[69] Melville often refers to the sea with religious terms, including "God" and "Divine." At one point, for instance, he refers to the sea as the "inscrutable tides of God." It is important to observe that Melville is no suggesting that God exists at the bottom of the sea, indeed he repeatedly denies this, rather his point is that the Godless sea will appear to the Pequod's crew as if there was some hidden God below the surface. The same applies to "the weaver god," which Ishmael describes in Chapter 102, "A Bower in the Arsacides." The denial of God's existence is repeatedly and variously asserted, sometimes explicitly, but most often implicitly through consequences. At the bottom of the sea, we are told, there is nothing but the "unwarped primal world" and a "foot on the treadle of the loom." See Chapter 93, "The Castaway." The sea and the weave in the jungle are identical, both being figurative representations of a void tumultuously and meaninglessly moving. In the case of the latter, there is a Whale-head that sits in the midst of the jungle, giving the impression that it orders the meaningless and relentless weave, even if the order is epistemically inaccessible to the human mind and, as Ishmael describes, exhibits no objective, direction, or order. Given that this is how Melville conceives of ontological reality, Chapter 3, "The Spouter-Inn," offers a synecdoche in the form of a painting that Ishmael confronts and muses over, and from which he deduces that the inscrutability of the painting is resolved only at the moment that some leviathan is identified in its midst, after which all the "all the rest plain." In the sea, however, there is no such sovereign or leviathan, instead, all there is is Moby Dick. Melville's various formulations of what is below the surface, in the sense of its ontological status, all align with what Badiou calls "void," i.e., pure or inconsistent multiplicity that precedes even the distinction between one and multiple and which cannot be presented by any situation or "count-as-one." The void, moreover, must be repressed in the name of the stability of any situation. It floats, according to Badiou, in the situation as a "phantom of inconsistency," simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. As I demonstrate, this floating void of a situation corresponds to what Melville figures as the "storm," which neither precedes nor succeeds the calm but is constantly just below the fragile order of the surface. For a full definition see Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Routledge, 2006), 52-9. This reading echoes Matthiessen's in *The American Renaissance*, wherein he observes that once one strikes through the "pasteboard mask of appearance" one finds nothing to sustain him. See F.O. Matthiessen, *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2009), 516.

we will see, the essence of life. Put another way: man will, and man must. At sea, "traditions no rocks furnish tablets," yet sailors do not experience utter meaninglessness, instead they experience themselves as navigating through "barren mazes"—a notion that would be downright nonsensical were it not for the principle and how it forms the reality subjects perceive through the distortion it enacts (196). Much like what Lacan referred to as "hieroglyphics in the desert," this reality suggests that individuals are certain of there being signification despite lacking knowledge of what it is, a method for obtaining such knowledge, or any even objective conditions to validate their faith in the existence of such knowledge. Faced with the complete absence of signification, these men—as if by cognitive instinct—perceive the endless waves as meaningful, as the inscrutable tides of a God they cannot see or understand but one they nonetheless are convinced exists. This principle, according to Melville, renders the human mind incapable of perceiving nothingness as pure nothingness or meaninglessness as pure meaninglessness. It distorts perfect nihilism into an imperfect form, and it does so spontaneously.[70]

Consider now the alluded-to inability to perceive one's own reflection in the water, a reflection that therefore torments and is labeled by Ishmael as "ungraspable" and associated with the concept of the "phantom of life." For now, we can interpret it as follows: Narcissus sees his own reflection in the water, meaning that it is what he has projected into it. He projects it, moreover, through the principle but he also cannot grasp it because it proves to be ungraspable; and it is ungraspable because, as we will see, at this point it is just the principle without an agent. Tormented by this inability and ignorant of the fact that he has misrecognized something projected into the water as something discovered therein, he plunges into the sea and drowns. The men who eventually become the crews of Whaleships turn to the sea because they suspect the existence of something denied by the institutions and laws of the world of Woe, all of which they see as impostors. The

[70] See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 75-80.

sea, however, does not offer any consolation; instead, if seen candidly, it only reinforces the absence by revealing that what they believe is hidden, lost, or otherwise denied to them is, in fact, ontologically lacking. The sea should shatter their faith and undermine the suspicions that motivated their setting out to sea, but no such disenchantment takes place. Melville's characters do not consciously choose to endure the misery and torment of life on land or willingly answer the irresistible call of the sea. Nor do they intentionally distort the ontological reality they encounter there. Rather, life on land simply must be intolerable, leaving them desperate, disoriented, and weakened, driving them to seek solace in the sea, at which point they will spontaneously distort the reality of the sea. At the core of this subjective reaction to objective circumstances lies a dissatisfied and frustrated principle, which underlies their suspicions and distorts their perceptions by assuming the existence of what Melville admits is a fiction, Divine order. The principle that propels this entire sequence produces what Melville calls the image of the phantom of life.

A seemingly offhand remark in *Pierre* is enlightening in this context: "political institutions which in other lands seem above all things intensely artificial, with America seem to possess the divine virtue of natural law" (13). They *seem* artificial (and they are artificial, in a sense), but if they are deposed, they will quickly prove themselves to have something of the virtue of natural law. Gods are fictitious, and human institutions and laws based on them are what in *Pierre* he refers to as "impostors." However, due to man's principle and its instinctive cognitive presuppositions, these impostors and fictions prove to be more than mere contrivances that can be discarded easily and without consequence. In *Pierre*, we will observe how this peculiar dynamic involving the principle (and agent) and the presence of fictions and impostors not only shapes what Melville's characters see and believe but also defines the character they have.

By offering Moby Dick to his crew, Ahab confirms their suspicions, therefore, validates their disgust for the burdens of everyday life, and justifies their irreverence for the false authorities on land, the "pasteboard masks" as he calls them in one of *Moby Dick*'s most quoted passages (140). Above all, the hunt fulfills the "essence of life" that these men had been deprived of. Through this pursuit, they find meaning and purpose,

a solution to their suffering, and a sense of dignity through action. In essence, these despairing and soulless men are offered refuge from their melancholy and a cause to believe in and pursue, all the while leaving their underlying romanticism unquestioned and secured. He assures them that there is a cause of their suffering, points to Moby Dick, and then hands them a harpoon. Is it any surprise, then, that Elijah tells Ishmael^ not to worry for he—and all the others—would like their old captain "well enough"?

All of this makes Ahab's proposition appealing and satisfying, but what makes it intellectually acceptable? One answer can be derived from Pease's explanation for the lack of mutiny. According to Pease, Starbuck's objection on the quarter-deck gives rise to the possibility of dissent.[71] However, this possibility is immediately nullified because Ahab appropriates Starbuck's dissent by identifying with it and elevating it to another, higher level. Starbuck challenges Ahab by asserting that Moby Dick did not take his leg, that Ahab is "mad," and, above all, that seeking vengeance against a "dumb brute" for the suffering of humanity is "blasphemy" against God and the secular Nantucket market. Nevertheless, the argument goes, Ahab's proposition negates the appeal of Starbuck's dissent because the pursuit of Moby Dick is not only the paradigmatic form of dissent against a nihilistic universe, but also a proposition that discredits the very authorities upon which Starbuck's objection relies, by exposing them as impostors who are complicit in humanity's suffering. In essence, Ahab's response is: 'You are right to dissent against your superiors, but behold, the authorities you obey are false, and I am dissenting against them—I will expose and ultimately annihilate them.' From this standpoint, Ahab would argue that Starbuck's dissent merely appeals to more "pasteboard masks," falsehoods and illusions that he, however, will find and shatter in order to uncover the Truth. Pease is correct in highlighting rage and dissent as central themes in *Moby Dick*, but his interpretation suggests that the only thing that makes the hunt appealing and intellectually acceptable is an unrestrained

[71] See Donald E. Pease, *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Contexts* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 235-75.

desire for rebellion. If this were the case, the Pequod's mission would be one of destruction in the name of liberty. However, if the men assented solely out of a desire for rebellion, as Pease suggests, then little of Ishmael's analysis would hold any value. In fact, *Moby Dick* would lack the substance to be considered a treatise, and the story itself would be reduced to a rhetorical allegory devoid of meaning. And so, while there is certainly an element of rebellion in the Pequod's voyage, and destruction ensues, interpreting this desire as the central objective and enabling factor would undermine many of the book's primary elements, including the sea and the Whale, and render the prophecy and the Gospel contained in *Moby Dick* incoherent. Pease's reading, therefore, while persuasive at a superficial level, is fundamentally flawed within the broader context of the book.

Instead of following Pease's focus on rebellion and dissent, we come closer to the mark by adopting an approach similar to Robert Mildner. Mildner interprets Ahab as a hero who embodies "humanity's common fantasy," which he defines as the act of "slaughtering the dragon or father or tyrannical God who has deprived mankind of its rightful claim to earthly paradise."[72] Mildner is correct in identifying the presence of a fantasy, and it is indeed a common one. Furthermore, he accurately perceives it as a fantasy driven by the desire for vengeance against an entity held responsible for humanity's suffering. However, there are additional dimensions to the narrative that Mildner fails to acknowledge. The fantasy in question, while widespread, is also specific: firstly, it is a psychotic fantasy particular to orphans, and secondly, although it can be considered a common fantasy in the sense that it is widely recognized or presumed, it is also specific in that it originates from the romantic ideology of the time. Mildner's interpretation is more accurate than Pease's, but it overlooks the "lower layer" of the hunt and the reason why the pursuit can be seen as a form of madness proper to Melville's age. After all, it is "*nowadays*" that "the whale-fishery offers an asylum…." Like Pease's interpretation, Mildner's understanding is overly general. Consequently, despite correctly identifying what

[72] Mildner, *Exiled Royalties*, 79.

the men aim to achieve through the hunt, it fails to grasp why this objective is so alluring. As a result, it devalues Ishmael's investigations and disregards the symbolism of the sea, as well as the descriptions of life on land and the crew's status as orphans. Ultimately, if pushed to a holistic logical coherence, it also misinterprets the role of the Whale. In doing so, it denies *Moby Dick* any significance beyond being an intriguing but theoretically inconsequential allegory of revenge and madness. At first glance, it is a compelling interpretation, but it ultimately proves inadequate. The "lower layer" of this fantasy, overlooked by Milder, is an underlying configuration that renders the hunt as the resolution of their troubles coherent and intellectually acceptable to the men, thus permitting them to assume Ahab's absurd proposition as readily as they do. And it is indeed an absurd proposition—intentionally so, in fact: these men are pursuing a mindless brute in the name of humanity, and this, as Ishmael asserts, is not an allegory.

At the lower layer of the fantasy of the hunt lies another fantasy, to which I will refer as "fantasy2," which is expressed in a cryptic passage about Ahab's troubled "leg."[73] Ahab himself calls what troubles his leg a "riddle". Once the components of this riddle are recognized, it becomes evident that there are at least two distinct possible resolutions, each of which relies on a distinct underlying configuration of the riddle. While a thorough examination of this riddle will be given later, it suffices for now to note that Ahab's configuration involves three elements (the original leg, the prosthetic leg, and Moby Dick) when there should only be one. As I will demonstrate, Ahab's configuration at the lower layer aligns with the ideology held by the party of

[73] See Chapter 108, "The Deck – Ahab and the Carpenter," in *Moby Dick*, 358-61. This second, underlying fantasy2 contains a set of assumptions that configure what troubles Ahab's leg, as will be demonstrated in detail later. There are two possible solutions to this trouble, to which Ahab himself refers to as a "riddle." Ahab's solution, as we will see, establishes the conditions that make his proposition to hunt Moby Dick as cause and means possible, while Ishmael's configuration of this trouble underlies the construction of the White Whale. Milder, relying on Buell's notion of "observer-hero narrative," refers to Ahab's act of vengeance as "humanity's common fantasy," from which he argues for the necessity of recognizing that Ahab enters the scene as a hero, a crucial fact, in his opinion, for any reading of *Moby Dick*. Milder adds that while Ahab is progressively demonized as the book continues, he begins as a hero and remains so for his men. See Milder, *Exiled Royalties*, 79. Milder does not investigate the relation between *Moby Dick*'s double structure and this fantasy, however. This is an oversight I address in the chapters that follow.

Hope. It is no accident that the aspirations and beliefs of the Pequod's men are repeatedly described in terms that align with 19th-century progressive ideas and the doctrine of Transcendentalism. Metaphorically, what troubles Ahab's leg is what motivates the men, and his resolution is what the Pequod's voyage stands on, but there is more to this riddle than symbolic meaning. A careful reading reveals the logic and philosophy underlying this vengeful fantasy. The hunt, as the resolution to human suffering, is intellectually acceptable because it aligns with the underlying configuration of the riddle. When unpacked, it acknowledges the inadequacy of the synthetic substitute in comparison to the lost original, which represents the discord between the world and mankind as they are and world and mankind as they should be according to Transcendentalism, and it assigns the cause of this difference to the actions of an external malevolence. Humanity's failures and resulting misery are, in turn, attributed to this malevolence rather than to the lack of Divine order above and man's inherent flaws below. This malevolence is then posited into the body of some dumb brute, the result of which is Moby Dick, that white hump on which Ahab and all those like him pile all the rage of mankind since Adam on down and then exact their virtuous vengeance against. It is because these men hold such convictions as their foundational beliefs, as their inculcated vision of the world, or as their metaphysical convictions, that they can accept the idea of a single cause whose annihilation would lead to humanity's redemption from its fallen state. A reader with a psychoanalytic perspective might add that this fantasy2 is, in fact, the ultimate fantasy, presupposing the existence of a complete, consistent, and whole "big Other," after which any flaws and inconsistencies (or its 'non-existence,' in psychoanalytic parlance) are attributed either to the subject (which gains an unconscious, as a result of this displacement) or to an imagined obstacle, as in the case of psychosis.[74] Finally, there is a second possible resolution to Ahab's leg troubles, made possible by an alternative underlying configuration. This resolution belongs to Ishmael. Identifying this lower layer of

[74] See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar III: The Psychoses*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993).

configuration and understanding its role in accepting the hunt, as well as the possibility of an alternative configuration and resolution, elucidates another peculiar aspect of *Moby Dick*: we know that Ishmael wholeheartedly embraced the hunt but that he also eventually escaped or transcended this fantasy, and yet there is no singular moment where Ishmael proves the fallacy of this fantasy to himself, nor a prolonged period in which he questions his belief or weighs the pros and cons; rather, at some imperceptible moment, he simply walks away, as though the hunt no longer held any meaning for him or, put another way, as if the hunt suddenly appeared not only absurd but nonsensical to his mind. While his investigations, to which I will soon turn, are necessary for his escape and return, the culmination occurs when he recognizes this lower layer, reconfigures it, and then simply turns away, disenchanted. At the heart of this reconfiguration, much like in the painting he ponders at the Spouter Inn, is the Whale. "Unless you know the whale," as Ishmael will later instruct, "you're a provincial and sentimentalist in Truth." Eventually, he comes to know the Whale.

A few remarks regarding Moby Dick are necessary here to prevent any confusion. Moby Dick is not the enigmatic phantom of life, nor is he God or the metaphysical substance that the metaphysical professors in the minds of landmen suspect the existence of. Moreover, he does not make the ungraspable graspable, either. What he does, however, is allow people to perceive their failure to grasp it as a problem that could be resolved even if they never manage to do so, a problem that is not the result of their metaphysical assumptions but because of the ungodly cunning of some powerful malice. Consequently, it becomes a problem that they think can be overcome. In truth, however, it is an illusion, undergirded by mistakes and misconceptions. But it is an illusion that enables these individuals to maintain their existing beliefs and commitments, while simultaneously giving them a sense of purpose and the feeling that they are fighting for a just cause. It reinforces and protects their false beliefs about the world and, perhaps most importantly, about themselves. This is not the only lesson that Ishmael learns about the Whale, but it's a crucial part of what he comes to understand.

Once Ishmael fully comprehends the Whale, he learns another surprising lesson: there is no easy

escape from the Whale. He cannot simply deconstruct the illusion that has entrapped Ahab and be set free, nor can he find peace by rejecting the desires associated with the Whale. Instead, he realizes that he needs the Whale, but a different kind of Whale from the one Ahab pursues. He requires an alternative cetology. The further twist in the Gospel of *Moby Dick*, as Ishmael also discovers, is that to achieve this different cetology, he must first follow Ahab, he must go through the logic of forced choice where the correct answer cannot be reached directly but only by first making the wrong choice. The hunt for Moby Dick is a mistake that opens the possibility of finding the correct path. It is not arbitrary that Ishmael never condemns Ahab or views him as simply a madman leading people astray. Instead, Ahab remains a hero in Ishmael's eyes, though no longer a redemptive one, but rather a tragic figure whose actions despite being mistaken prove necessary. Ahab's hunt is not a false path so much as it is an incomplete or insufficient one. It is not wrong to follow Ahab, nor can it be avoided, but following him is not enough.

Before delving into the logics of Ishmael's survival and Ahab's madness, and the subtle distinction between them, I will first examine how *Moby Dick* portrays the historico-philosophical conditions of the 19th century and how they shape and frustrate its characters, ultimately leading to the madness that consumes them.

Chapter 2: Life On Land, A World Of Woe

"Nowadays, the whale-fishery furnishes an asylum for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the cracking cares of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber"
Melville, *Moby Dick*

2.1 The Political in *Moby Dick*

Long underappreciated as a resource for socio-political thought, Melville's works have recently garnered considerable attention from critics inclined towards socio-political analysis.[75] This newfound interest should not come as a surprise, given the dominance of the ethical turn in literary studies (and the humanities more broadly) and its insistence on investigating all cultural products for their potential contributions to moral evaluations of social and political phenomena, both past and present. The pervasiveness and persistence of

[75] Recent publications include: *A Political Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Jason Frankl, *Melville Among the Philosophers*, ed. Corey McCall and Tom Nurmi (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), Eyal Peretz, *Literature, Disaster & the Enigma of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), Geoffrey Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal: Melville and the Making of a Postcolonial Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), Loren Goldner, *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne And the Antemosaic Cosmic Man: Race, Class And the Crisis of Bourgeois Ideology in an American Renaissance Writer* (New York: Queequeg Publications, 2005), *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Michal Jonik, *Herman Melville and the Politics of the Inhuman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Prior to this focus, scholarship on Melville as a political thinker or theorist, or more generally on politics in Melville's work, was largely lacking and far less than the volume of scholarship on Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau and other prominent authors of the time. Exceptions include Rogin's *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville*, which remains the most comprehensive and authoritative account of Melville's politics and Melville as a political thinker. Two other important exceptions are Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Herman Melville: The Pilgrim," in McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 328–371; and John H. Schaar, "The Uses of Literature for the Study of Politics: The Case of Melville's *Benito Cereno,*" in Schaar, *Legitimacy in the Modern State* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction, 1981), 53–88.

this insistence have transformed the turn from a possible method or perspective into an imperative. As one scholar has argued, this imperative is insistent that any scholarship that does not contribute to our understanding in these areas is expected to provide an explanation of why it has not done so .[76] With such an imperative in place, it is hardly astonishing that the Ethical Turn has spawned a deluge of distorted interpretations of literature, unjustified inquisitions and accusations, a reliance on dubious evidence, loose logical reasoning, projections, exaggerations of greatness or culpability, unremarkable scholarship, and invalid and unsound critiques that are valuable only in their demonstration of flawed critique.

The excesses of this turn, notwithstanding, this sharp focus on the ethical presents a different risk for Melville's works compared to those of other writers. Throughout his career, from his early adventure novels to the posthumously published *Billy Budd*, Melville addresses almost every significant socio-political phenomenon of the 19th century from a moral or ethical perspective. With one notable exception, there are no gaps to be investigated.[77] Furthermore, the positions expressed in his works align with our contemporary moral sensibilities, and so, while his contemporaries often harshly criticized him, today we are more likely to critique his critics and celebrate his values and judgments.[78] It is probably true that if Melville's works were examined using the full range of the turn's inquisitorial instruments and incentives, the practitioner would likely uncover some indiscretion, some anachronistic moral imperfections. But that would be a silly exercise, lacking any real objective and providing the inquisitor with nothing more than a shred of narcissistic virtue. More to the point, if read from a contemporary standpoint Melville's works would be, on the whole, found to be morally admirable to any good faith reading. The real risk posed by the Ethical Turn is that it may be

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[76] Kerry Larson, *Imagining Equality in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.

[77] That exception is the status of women in society, a topic that Melville never treats in any substantial way.

[78] See Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, eds., *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

content with superficially engaging with his works, thereby missing out on the true value of Melville's writing, which lies somewhat further in the depths of his narratives.

In this respect, the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg is exemplary. Described as radically different in terms of ethnicity, religion, race, appearance, and custom, Queequeg and Ishmael initially confront one another with confusion and apprehension but quickly form a friendship founded on understanding and acceptance. They are intrigued by and appreciative of each other's particularities, rely on each other, and selflessly help one another. For more demanding contemporary critics, Ishmael and Queequeg could be misread to share more than a platonic bond because they also share a bed. There is, however, no textual evidence to suggest any romantic or sexual relationship between the two, nor any indications that their respective sexual orientations are relevant to the story, as an honest reading would confirm. Instead, the sharing of a bed—and the overlapping of appendages Ishmael wakes up to—should be understood as a moment that, in a historically and situationally reasonable way, indicates and foreshadows camaraderie and comfort between the two sailors. Ishmael goes so far as to say that he prefers Queequeg to members of his own faith, nation, and race, and repeatedly praises his character and talents, while Queequeg selflessly shares all he has with Ishmael and vows to protect him. Because Ishmael is a penniless American wanderer and Queequeg is a wandering prince from a faraway Pacific island, their relationship could be seen as subverting other assumed prejudices and exhibiting moral enlightenment beyond mere friendship. Ishmael, being a poor nobody closer to a pauper than a prince, subverts the prejudices of class, while Queequeg, embodying courage and selflessness as a pagan from cannibal lands, undermines the conceits of Christendom and the West. Assuming that such beliefs and values were uncommon at the time, focusing on the identities and friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg allows us to pass flattering moral judgment on their author while looking down on the prevailing ideas of his time. Putting aside the inanity of presentism in literary scholarship and criticism, the discovery of a man like us in an earlier, less enlightened time may offer a moral exemplar whom we could then champion and elevate above his backward contemporaries. Such

interpretations may slightly dampen our cynicism, lifting our spirits a bit, but apart from these fleeting and ephemeral effects, would we gain anything from reading *Moby Dick*? No, from such a reading—or any similar one—we would learn nothing. It would be a terrible waste, I would argue, even if *Moby Dick* was not intended as a Gospel but only a well-written and entertaining story that may or may not contain a moral or two. In fact, I would wager that such a reading could very well leave the reader with less than nothing: having satisfied the urge for cheap representational and sentimental points, such a reader might drop the book, mistakenly believing they have exhausted it, or alternatively, their appreciation of this unlikely friendship across differences may obscure the far more important lesson embodied in Ishmael and Queequeg. In either case, what would be missed is what Melville had to say.

Moby Dick does not revolve around this friendship. While their bond, differences, and friendship across their differences may seem important to the story Melville tells, they ultimately prove to be insignificant in relation to what truly matters. Just like the character traits and ideological convictions of Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask are powerless against Ahab's influence, the virtues that allow for Ishmael and Queequeg's friendship and mutual respect are also irrelevant in terms of following the prophecy and seeking "asylum and sentiment in tar and blubber". If what truly matters is whether one will join the hunt, then their differences and the virtues that enable their friendship become irrelevant, as both of them agree to participate in the hunt and seek revenge. Queequeg's generosity and courage, as well as Ishmael's open-mindedness, prove to be inconsequential in this regard. In fact, the significance of their respective virtues lies in the fact that none of them, including kindness, warmth, openness, good intentions, courage, or selflessness, oppose the pursuit of this vengeful dream, nor can they hinder the madness of hunting a "dumb brute" as a means of salvation. What truly matters is what these very different men have in common, which is primarily their commitment to the hunt. Another indication that the common overrides the differences can be seen in a parallel between the two sailors: Ishmael is lost, disoriented, and confused in the modern world, while Queequeg can no longer decipher his own tattoos, which once depicted the "complete theory of the heavens

and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth," of his people (363). In other words, both are adrift, lost in an ocean without compass, havens or horizons, devoid of any Gods above or leviathans below. What is more significant to the prophecy or the Gospel, Queequeg's selflessness and Ishmael's openness or the fact that both of them have been stripped of any cognitive map of the world, left devoid of all meaning, understanding, and orientation? Neither can any longer interpret the celestial or terrestrial realms, and all they can see are waves crashing into each other, dissolving, and then emerging again on an endless sea without direction, end, or center.

The three mates, who sometimes appear as contrasting responses to the chaos and hopelessness experienced by the men on land, all prove to be ineffective at sea. Flask and Stubb have, in their own ways, given up and embraced nihilistic and hedonistic attitudes, going with the wind, as it were, heading wherever it tends to blow.[79] On the other hand, Starbuck, in a pitiful manner, clings to the norms, rules, and reasoning that once held sway on land, futilely attempting to apply them as moral guides in the vastness of the sea. Unlike the other two, Starbuck tries to resist, but Melville conveys that his "right-minded" virtue is powerless, leaving the men morally weakened and distracted, defined by their desperation and immorality. The reason behind Starbuck's unaided virtue and the potential remedies for it will be discussed in later chapters. For now, it is sufficient to acknowledge that what is relevant and significant is the collective experience, and to acknowledge as secondary the traits and qualities—both moral and otherwise—that have no bearing on the heart of Melville's intended narrative.

A more scholarly approach would interpret Melville as an "immanent critic," assessing the extent to which certain ideas or social structures fulfill their promises.[80] From this perspective, *White-Jacket* portrays

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[79] For Melville, mankind so "officered" is not only helpless but desperate. The fact that the crew rush to the Pequod and assent to Ahab is *Moby Dick*'s normative judgment of the form of life on land, a judgment it announces in the prophecy and then offers a positive political psychology theory of in the analyses of the causal structure that leads these subjects so fervently assume the hunt for Moby Dick.

[80] Reynold's reading in *Beneath the American Renaissance* is a paradigmatic example of such an approach. See

naval power dynamics and practices, condemning them and demonstrating their contradiction with American principles.[81] After which, it uses these dynamics as a means for exploring class society on a broader scale. Similarly, *Typee*, when examined through the same lens, reveals a preoccupation not only with denouncing the violence of missionary practices, but also with understanding the moral hypocrisy of civilized nations in colonized territories. "Benito Cereno" presents another example, focusing on slavery, bringing the issue closer to home. It can be understood as depicting the sheer stupidity of Captain Delano, who fails to see what is blatantly before his eyes: the mutiny on the San Dominik, as well as the certainty that a larger mutiny is imminent, making abolition inevitable. Regardless of the outcome of this particular mutiny, the head of Babo, Melville writes, remains "unabashed" for eternity.[82] There is no explicit condemnation of slavery, nor any romanticization of the mutineers or an idealistic reconciliation. Instead, Melville emphasizes the ignorance of

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David S. Reynold's, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988). This approach could be taken in other directions as well. One could investigate if America has politically and socially lived up to its ideals, for instance, or whether Western civilization, more generally, has lived up to the ideals of Christianity or those of the Enlightenment. Matthiessen, for instance, suggests that in *Moby Dick* "civilization itself is at war with Christianity." See Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 439.

[81] Although not intended or planned by Melville, a copy of *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* was distributed to every member of the United States' Congress, on account of its graphic depictions of the practice of flogging in the U.S. Navy.

[82] The closing paragraph of "Benito Cereno," reads as follows: "Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black [Babo] met his voiceless end. The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites; and across the Plaza looked towards St. Bartholomew's church, in whose vaults slept then, as now, the recovered bones of Aranda: and across the Rimac bridge looked towards the monastery, on Mount Agonia without; where, three months after being dismissed by the court, Benito Cereno, borne on the bier, did, indeed, follow his leader." See Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," in *Melville's Short Tales*, ed. Dan McCall (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 102. Read from such a perspective, "Benito Cereno" reveals itself as eerily close to *Confidence-Man* because the constitutive problem is an epistemological one: Captain Delano cannot discern the situation, the result of which is his dumbfounded confusion abroad the ship, i.e., his inability to recognize that a mutiny has taken place until the desperate Captain Cereno literally jumps off his ship into Delano's boat. After the trial and Babo's execution, the focus is on his stupidity because he does not see that the mutiny was not a contingent event, assignable to some particular and arbitrary circumstances, but a symptom of something larger, namely the inevitability of emancipation.

those who fail to recognize that this institution will inevitably collapse, not because of its moral wrongness or divine punishment, as if God Himself would intervene to redress man's errors and punish the wicked, but due to its inherent contradictions. The head of Babo, while remaining "unabashed," embodies a "hive of subtlety" that can only be subdued by the combined intelligence of esteemed Captains Delano and Cereno, so long, that is, as their intelligence is aided by brutal military force and unjust legal systems. In other words, the unsounded premises of the institution of slavery cannot be defeated in a fair fight. Rather than delivering another diatribe against slavery, pandering to sentimental sympathies, or repeating the existing beliefs of the reading public, Melville uses allegory to explain his certainty that slavery is unsustainable. The institution will crumble because its foundations are not only morally wrong, but also logically inconsistent. *Mardi* takes a more somber tone on the subject of slavery: "Humanity cries out against this vast enormity;—but not one man knows a prudent remedy."[83] As Delbanco suggests, for Melville, "prudence" simply means ending slavery without destroying the union. However, the problem is far more complex than a straightforward choice, as dissolving the union would not eradicate slavery, but rather shift the sin comfortably onto the other side of a new national border.[84] The only acceptable solution would be the abolition of slavery while maintaining the union, but in *Mardi* Melville fails to see a clear strategy for achieving such an outcome. This predicament reflects a broader pattern that recurs throughout Melville's works: cries of anguish resound repeatedly, yet humanity is powerless and God, naturally, remains silent.[85]

Each of Melville's major works can be interpreted as a contemplation of certain institutions or ideologies. However, focusing solely on this aspect alone would overlook the valuable insights that his

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[83] Herman Melville quoted in Andrew Delbanco, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 10.

[84] Delbanco, *The War Before the War*, 10.

[85] Such contradictions recur with increasing frequency and ever-greater theoretical abstraction as Melville matures, culminating in the epistemological and juridical contradictions of *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd*, respectively.

thoughts offer to a series of fields, including social and political theory and psychology.[86] By restricting his contributions to cultural or ethical opinions, we would miss all that Melville's continuous preoccupation with exploring the fundamental conditions, convictions, and ideas have to offer. For one, they shape the very space, narratives, and characters within or through which he stages the various cultural, psychological, social, and political conflicts and questions explored in his works. Without these theoretical elements, Melville's fictional works would lose their coherence and much of their profundity. The case of *Pierre* is exemplary: the only way the novel could be viewed as a "failure" and "nonsense" and its author as "crazy," all of which were common and long-standing opinions, is if the book's theoretical elements are ignored or misunderstood. The same could be said for readings of *Moby Dick* that view Ahab as a profit-driven maniac or as an immoral man intent on subjugating or causing harm to some segment of mankind—he is nothing of the kind, indeed he is quite the opposite. Lest we forget that, even Peleg, a man who could be suspected of much but certainly not of keeping a forgiving prejudice for Ahab's character, admits that the captain is a virtuous and selfless man: "stricken, blasted, if he be," says Peleg, "Ahab has his humanities!" (79). In a word, a book like *Moby Dick* can be understood and appreciated only if acute attention to the theoretical elements that litter its pages, often concealed in subtle symbolisms and turns of phrase and, above all, the speculations and soliloquies of its leading characters. As the best of Melville's interpreters have shown and as more than a few have explicitly expressed, Melville was doing philosophy (in the broadest sense of the term) in literature.[87] To this I would

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[86] The distinction can be succinctly stated: if read as an allegory for fanatical and authoritarian political ideologies or movements, for instance, where the focus is only on what the Pequod desires and does, then *Moby Dick* expresses no political theory but only an abstract warning; if, on the other hand, focus shifts to the historico-philosophical and psychological conditions of the Pequod's romantic venture, which is to say, if it considers why the Pequod's men desire what they desire and do what they do, then we are squarely within political theory.

[87] In the Introduction to *The Corporeal Self*, Sharon Cameron proposes that American writers were doing philosophy in and through literature, most notably Hawthorne and Melville. See Sharon Cameron, *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). Matthiessen never makes such claim explicitly but demonstrates as much in *American Renaissance*. The same thesis is expressed in much of the scholarship on Melville. Rogin's *Subversive Genealogies* is exemplary, as are

only add that not only is Melville doing philosophy through literature but that the philosophy embedded in his works accompanies the narratives, it explains them—from their narrative arcs and conflicts to the most minute characteristics and actions of its characters and, in some cases, even their formal-aesthetic elements. It is as if Melville is trying to tell a story but cannot help himself from supplementing (and, at times, diverting) the narrative with the philosophical concepts and doctrines those narratives presuppose as conditions of possibility. His convictions and opinions on psychological, social, and cultural matters influence the stories he tells, to be sure, but below that Melville supplements those stories with a lower layer that shapes and explains the very space within which his characters think and act, the impersonal conditions within which they do whatever it is that he decides that they will do.[88] What sets Melville apart and makes him particularly intriguing is the inclusion of philosophical, psychological, theological, etc. considerations that both influence and elucidate his narratives. Take *Pierre*, for example. It chronicles the gradual descent of its protagonist into irredeemable madness, but within the novel, there exists a framework of ideas that explain the reasons behind and the nature of his descent, as well as why he could not evade or escape it; ideas, moreover, which reflect the ideology that was rising to dominance at the time; the same ideology and Melville's skepticism over its viability is, I would submit, also reflected in the genre of *Pierre* and in the failure of that genre that the novel expresses. In the case of *Moby Dick*, once the precise meaning of elements such phantoms, deserts, the sea, the Whale, Melville's vision of human nature, etc., are identified—largely from Ahab's and Ishmael's many musings—Ahab's madness loses much of its lunacy; it remains pathological but no longer appears exceptional and thus unrelatable or incomprehensible but instead appears as common, as ordinary and even

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Richard Brodhead's writings on Melville, especially his *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel*.

[88] Melville's political value, as Rogin, Frank, James, Shulman, and others have demonstrated, resides well beyond such elements, and the focus of his mature works is rarely on normative judgments of various socio-political realities. In addition to the already cited texts of these scholars, see also Rogin "Herman Melville: state, civil society and the American 1949, in *Michael Paul Rogin: Derangement and Liberalism*, ed. Alyson Cole and George Shulman (New York: Routledge, 2019), 195-205.

understandable to the point that readers can empathize and identify with the madmen on the Pequod, as Melville intends them to do, instead of casting condemnations and a disapproving conceit at their foolishness. Ahab's madness is the madness lying in the soulless heart of common men, attuned and aligned with the conditions and ideas of their time. It is not lunatics that sail on the Pequod but ordinary men. In a word, therefore, without grasping elements such as those listed above in their precise meanings and implications, the meaning and objective of the book would be missed because readers would not identify with who they are supposed to identify with.8[89] In this and a few other respects, *Moby Dick* belongs to a genre closer to something like *Genealogy of Morality* than to something like *David Copperfield*.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting a distinct aspect of reading *Moby Dick* as an allegory. It comes as no surprise that *Moby Dick* is often interpreted in this manner. The problem with such a reading, however, begins from the existence of multiple interpretations that are not only distinct but are often mutually exclusive and yet equally persuasive. A further problem with such readings is that none of the existing allegorical interpretations, such as viewing the Pequod's journey as a relentless pursuit of profit, or perceiving Ahab as a tyrant imposing his will on his innocent crew, or even understanding *Moby Dick* as a Quixotic dream, has managed to fully address all the loose ends. Evidence for refuting the interpretation of the Pequod's desire as a ruthless drive for profit is the most obvious, given that the captain and crew readily abandon their economic interests in order to pursue a non-economic objective. As Rogin has demonstrated at length, even the state of being "slave to the dollar" is abandoned by Ahab and the crew. And it is not just the value of money that is undermined by the hunt, as Rogin adds, but all other, pre-existing concerns, including "family, local

[89] The same point could be made through the fact that *Moby Dick* provides Melville's rationale for why men will seek asylum in a series of ruthless and devoted attempts to rid the world of what they will perceive as the singular and sole cause of misery, as well as his explanation for why Ishmael could return and deliver his Gospel. My primary objective is to identify these elements and their respective logics, and then reconstruct them in order to interpret the plot and narrative through them.

attachments, and secular and religious restraints" undermined—or at least suspended—by it.[90] Religious convictions are not abandoned, as becomes all too obvious, indeed the religious convictions of the Pequod's men underlie and motivate the hunt; but restraints, including those derived from religion, undoubtedly are. The most obvious evidence is Ahab's reactions to the ships the Pequod encounters (or simply sees) at sea. His sole interest in each case is whether its captain or crew had seen (or know something about) Moby Dick. If he receives a negative response, his interest immediately collapses into complete indifference. None of their troubles or even explicit calls for aid have any effect on him. The final gam is exemplary: the captain of the Rachel pleads with and even begs Ahab to spare two days to help him find his son, who a day prior was lost at sea. He begs him for no more than 48 hours of his time and offers to pay Ahab handsomely, but Ahab refuses. Indeed, as if to show how little captain Gardiner's cause and pleas mean to him, Ahab calmly and shamelessly says to the desperate man before him that this conversation is already costing him too much time. On shallow reading, one might conclude from Ahab's cold and immediate refusal to help another find his son that the old man has finally fully and unambiguously abandoned Christendom. But such a conclusion would be mistaken: immediately after refusing to help, which is undoubtedly a dire transgression for a Christian, Ahab confesses that he hopes he is forgiven for this sin. His formulation of the confession is strange, to be sure, but as will become clear, its meaning is unambiguous: "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" (398). Ahab has not abandoned his religious convictions, as evidenced by the logic of his strangely formulated confession, but also by the simple fact that he continues the pursuit for Moby Dick. He cannot have abandoned his convictions for they are at the foundation of the hunt, but he has undoubtedly abandoned all conventional religious restraints. The significance of Ahab's actions in this last of its encounters with another ship is supported by what one would be hard-pressed to accept as a meaningless contingency: during its crusade, the Pequod

[90] See Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 97-107.

encounters nine distinct whaleships—and ten if the Town-Ho is counted (as it probably should be)—each of which either embodies a sin, represents the transgression of a commandment, or presents Ahab with a decision of whether to obey or transgress his moral duty. Setting the meaning of Ahab's confession and the Pequod's encounters aside for the moment, what can return to the above-mentioned categories of interpretation. Each instance of such an interpretation, to varying degrees, is compelled to disregard significant textual evidence to make its case. Instead of weighting the relative worth of different interpretation, each partial and supported by inconclusive evidence, or debating whether Ahab leans this way or that, it is more prudent to adopt Rogin's thesis that any attempt to assign a specific political ideology to Ahab "politicizes *Moby Dick* at the expense of Melville's political imagination and the actual subject matter" (108). *Moby Dick,* as Rogin points out, "remains, paradoxically, above politics" as a political allegory, and those who view it otherwise align themselves with one political stance or another, while *Moby Dick* defies all of them. This limitation, however, offers valuable insights. For instance, let us consider a prominent example: on the one hand, Ahab has often been read as John Calhoun, a man willing to sacrifice the Union to preserve slavery, on the other, the same mad captain has been read as a "man heroic enough" to sacrifice his life to "slay the monster" of racism and slavery.9[91] Is Ahab Calhoun or an abolitionist? Disregarding the fact that both interpretations overlook or distort many aspects of the book, it is clear that Ahab cannot be both. At one level, this is undoubtedly true. At a deeper level, however, it is false: Ahab could be both Calhoun and Morrison's hero. He is neither at the more superficial level of textual evidence, which does not support either interpretation, but at the conceptual level he could be both or either because at this level it makes no difference; it makes no difference because at the conceptual level that Melville is interested in there is no inherent difference between these two positions. It does not matter whether Ahab blames racism for the

[91] See Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Tanner Humanities Center, accessed on February, 3, 2021, https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/resources/ documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf

world's ills and intends to abolish it or if he blames the attempt to abolish it for some misfortune that has (or will) befall the nation as a result and is thus prepared to sacrifice the union itself in order to preserve it, as long as his target is in the form of Moby Dick. And so, if Ahab is Morrison's hero, then that is a discreditation to her view of how social or political justice is pursued, and by extension, her conception of what justice is or what the cause of injustice must be. Ahab, in short, cannot be your hero. Whether he aligns himself with a cause that is nominally progressive and just in our eyes, or one that is nominally reactionary or immoral, is irrelevant—the only relevant factors are the cetological differences: Moby Dick or the White Whale.

Textual evidence supporting this thesis can be found throughout the book, but the final and conclusive evidence is presented in Chapter 108. By closely examining the obscure exchange between Ahab and the carpenter (referred to by Ahab as a "manmaker"), where Ahab refers to what troubles his leg as a "riddle," we can uncover the metaphysical beliefs that underlie Ahab's view of the world and humanity's fate within it. Ahab, feeling frustrated and unable to resolve his trouble, abruptly ends the conversation and demands a harpoon instead. It is evident that what troubles his leg is none other than the Whale, but the riddle also reveals that there are multiple solutions to this problem, each dependent on a different interpretation of the trouble. One possible solution, or resolution, involves the pursuit of Moby Dick, while the other allows Ishmael's escape from the fantasy of the hunt and his return to shore. It becomes clear that the latter solution relies on a different Whale, Ishmael's White Whale. Ishmael never ceases to emphasize the importance of "knowing the whale," as failing to do so is, in his eyes, a sign of provincial and sentimental thinking.9[92]

[92] Sentimentalism is, for Melville, devoid of any real intellectual engagement. He makes this point repeatedly in *Moby Dick* but also, and in fact far more emphatically in *Pierre*, wherein he repeatedly refers to Pierre as a "toddler," a "cripple," "youthful, a "juvenile," and "not philosophical," on account of his transcendentalism. His attacks on the Apostles, including his parodic depiction of Plinlimmon, their mystical leader, are explicit and extensive, referring to the best version of transcendentalism as "Transcendental Flesh-Brush Philosophy." See Book XVIII, XIX, XX, XXI, and XXII of Melville, *Pierre*, 256-305. He also attacks the sentimentalist literature of the time, a genre infused with sentimentalism and half-baked philosophy. The young, pre-Isabel Pierre wrote literature of this genre and was, in fact, viewed by this community of writers, editors, and publishers as a promising young writer. See Book XVII "Young America in Literature," in Melville, *Pierre*,

However, an Ahab-like resolution leads to an even greater failure because it perpetuates the same flawed interpretation of the riddle and thus ensures the repetition of the hunt. Even if a crew were to succeed in hunting down Moby Dick, the hunt itself would ultimately be revealed as a failure. Moby Dick is said to be immortal on several occasions, but the riddle makes it clear that he is immortal because he cannot be killed. His immortality stems from the fact that if any Whale identified as Moby Dick were to die, the suffering that he is assumed to cause would persist, leading the crew to acknowledge that the carcass on their deck is merely the lifeless body of an ordinary creature and not the body of Moby Dick, who must still be out there somewhere. The resolution, therefore, is destined to fail, even if it initially appears to succeed. Failure, however, does not automatically prompt a reevaluation but—in what at first would appear to be a paradox—motivates the repetition of the same flawed solution. Moby Dick, we are explicitly told, is eternal. This is no overstatement: he is eternal because the hunt for Moby Dick repeats because it fails and because it cannot succeed it repeats without end.

There is no inherent limit to the ruthlessness with which a crew like the Pequod's will hunt dumb brutes cast as Moby Dick, nor to the number they will slaughter, mercilessly, one after another, before each false target pushed overboard like useless masses of tar and blubber. They are indifferent to the pain and lives lost in this carnage; it is all collateral damage, irrelevant and justified by their selfless pursuit of resolving humanity's suffering. The only way to end this endless cycle of massacres is through a reconfiguration of the underlying riddle of the hunt. With such a reconfiguration, one could, like Ishmael, simply turn away from the hunt, abandoning it like a forgotten or misunderstood dream. Without such a reconfiguration, however, Melville thinks that humanity will continue a pattern of ending one (failed) pursuit only to embark on another. If we interpret this allegorically as a representation of social justice, for example, each time the alleged cause of some injustice is identified and annihilated, the state of affairs the hunt intended to redress would remain,

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243-56.

but the Clootz-like delegation would persist undeterred by the failure and disappointment. Indeed, the presuppositions and logic of the hunt ensures that they would grow more assured in the existence of Moby Dick. Why? Because the failure would be viewed as evidence that Moby Dick's size, malice, pervasiveness, and cunning are even greater than previously imagined. If they were unable to kill him, if they were deceived, then the evil must be even more extensive and concealed. It is the underlying commitments with which the problem is configured that, if left unexamined and unchanged, causes the pursuit to persist, repeat, and grow even more urgent. Each such failure will only increase the conviction because the failure itself feeds the fantasy—Moby Dick is not a fiction or fantasy, will be the conclusion, he exists, lurking somewhere even deeper in the depths and even further out on the distant horizon than previously thought. After all, insofar as one remains blind to the lower layer, what other explanation is possible for failure at the level of resolution other than assuming that if we have failed then this malice must be even greater than was believed before.

Far more common than Morrison's interpretation, which views Ahab as benevolent, heroic, and virtuous, is the understanding of Ahab in a negative light. As early as 1952, Ahab was seen as a prototype of the totalitarian man, described as "the most dangerous and destructive social type that has ever appeared in the West."[93] This view has largely persisted throughout the Cold War and into the Ethical Turn. Instead of

[93] James was surely influenced by his time and his personal situation, but this does nothing to devalue his interpretation. For one, he is only one of many who have read Ahab in this fashion, and, secondly, the interpretation is valid and justified, even though it is somewhat mistaken and limited. See James, *Castaways and Renegades*. Less abstract interpretations continue the identification of Ahab with negative or oppressive ideologies and socio-political positions. James Duban reads Ahab as modeled on various spokesmen for expansionism and slavery, such as Lewis Cass and John Calhoun, while Rogin's Marxist reading adds that Ahab is also representative of industrial capitalism. See James Duban, *Melville's Major Fiction: Politics, Theology, and Imagination* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983), and Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*. Such an interpretation faces a number of textual obstacles: (i) authoritarianism, broadly understood as a rejection of pluralism, is more apt characterization of the activities and desires in question; (ii) there is no reason to suppose that Ahab harbors any desires to assume totalitarian or authoritarian power, either for its own sake or in the name of installing some specific regime; (iii) nor to suppose that if the Pequod's mission was successful, that the crew—Ahab included—would not return to life on land, now released and satisfied; (iv) under such a circumstance it would not be Ahab who releases the crew from his grip, but the cause that drove them to the sea, to the hunt, and to become as one through Ahab, that would release them after having been satisfied (the last two objections are impossible, as we will see, but they are significant nonetheless for

being selfless, Ahab is ruthless; instead of seeking liberation, he aims for control; and instead of virtuous goals, his objective is malicious. However, there are two main objections to this negative portrayal: firstly, Ishmael is insistent that Ahab's objective is selfless, virtuous, and liberating; and secondly, any reading that assumes a strict binary between freedom and totalitarian ambition fails when confronted with textual evidence. As noted by Matthiessen all the way back in 1941, Ahab's madness originates from a particular notion of freedom, while, as a few more recent critics have demonstrated, Ishmael compulsively pursues totality.[94] As Royster astutely noted, "Ishmael is never as happy as when he is finding in some dull, arduous, or onerous task an

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interpreting the Pequod and its captain); (v) Ahab, as already mentioned, does not impose or force anything onto any of the crew, nor deceive or misguide them with respect to their interests; (vi) Ahab is not the sovereign but only the leader of a mob seeking one, and he is as crazed and desperate as any of his crew; (vii) the Pequod is not an allegory for some state, totalitarian or otherwise, but a figural embodiment of the deranged will of the people in desperate want for clarity, agency, and purpose. Putting it bluntly: Ahab is not a literary foreshadowing of a Hitler-type figure any more than the Pequod would be the accordant party. They may be, certainly, but such an equation misses Melville's more precise concern and his more general object. Moreover, it misses that what Melville is focused on could apply as much to culture as to politics, and, in fact, as much to what would be categorized as progressive or left concerns as to those belonging to reactionary or right forces. In short, *Moby Dick* is not about a totalitarian leader any more than it is about some such state; rather, it is about the ordinary citizen's readiness to assent and participate—with relief, fervor, and fanaticism—in such a venture, indeed about such a citizen's desperate want and desire for such things, when subjectivized by and forced to live within the set of conditions Melville depicts in *Moby Dick*. It is the great American desert that drives them to sea, and it is the sea that leads them to Moby Dick, and if they are mad—and they are—it is not on account of personal pathology any more than it makes them out of tune with their time. Undoubtedly, *Moby Dick*'s thematic concern is proximate to such interpretations, but it is ever so slightly aside of them: with Ahab at its head, the Pequod embodies the deranged will of the people, a will that, determined by its conditions, disposes them to a mood that could manifest as a want of authoritarianism. There is certainly a way to read *Moby Dick* as an allegory for a political leader who imposes what he may or may not know is a fantasy onto the populace, thereby driving them and the purported malignant agent to catastrophe and death, but such an interpretation must exclude too much textual detail and, more importantly, misses Melville's point. Ahab is not the sovereign, nor does he harbor any such ambitions. He is only an ordinary and ordinarily tormented and crazed subject, standing at the head of an equally enervated mob, so desperate for a sovereign to (i) turn an inscrutable world of suffering and injustice into some form of clarity and (ii) offer them something to do as a path to salvation, that he—and they—literally seek such a thing in the sea, even electing a dumb brute as the omnipresent and intentional agent.

[94] Pease also argues that there are no absolute distinctions between Ahab and Ishmael with respect to freedom and totality. See Pease, *Visionary Compacts*. The interpretations of Milder and Shulman also suggest that some totality or Whale is a prerequisite of Ishmael's survival, but without explicit mentioning or developing the idea. See Milder, *Exiled Royalties*, and George Shulman, "Chasing the Whale: Moby Dick as Political Theory."

allegory of universal truth."[95] The world that Ahab leaves behind is shaped by liberating ideologies of the 19th century, while Ishmael escapes and returns not because he abandons the desire for a leviathan, but because he captures an alternative form of leviathan. If Ishmael were to see through the illusion of the hunt and return to shore after abandoning the desire for a Whale, it would be a "pitiful" return, back to the same shore he initially left, to the same desert and despair that drove him to the hunt in the first place. It would be a temporary return that would inevitably compel him back to the sea.

The above notwithstanding, there is a notable parallel between the hunt and fascism. Similar to Nazism's "Jewish plot" and "final solution," Moby Dick is presented as the hidden and malevolent force causing disorder and despair. Identifying him as the source of such problems provides clarity in an otherwise perplexing situation, while eliminating him promises to restore a harmonious and functional society. Both entities are viewed as foreign intruders that disrupt and hinder peace and order. In essence, they serve as scapegoats, allowing their accusers to deflect blame from themselves and their beliefs by attributing their failures and broken promises to an external agent. As such, the accusers can preserve their conviction, believing that annihilating this agent would redeem the suffering population and lead it to its rightful destiny. It is not us, in other words, nor the things we believe, nor, finally, it is an intractable fact of life, but the deeds of some wickedness that can be removed.

Although it may initially seem absurd, Melville emphasizes that there is no conceptual difference between something abhorrent like the "Jewish Plot" and something virtuous such as the fight against racism or the pursuit of equality. The crucial factor lies in whether the accused and its sins take the form of Moby Dick, below which is the underlying fantasy2 that enables Ahab to seek resolution for what troubles his leg by hunting such a Whale. The point is a homology without ethical equivalency—anything can, and Melville

[95] See Paul Royster, "Melville's Economy of Language," in *Ideology and Classic American* Literature, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 313.

argues, something will be posited in the role occupied by Moby Dick in the minds of all men manufactured like the Pequod's crew. Once the hunt is understood in this context, it loses its pathological and exceptional grandeur but gains an omnipresent universality. It becomes a pervasive and all-too-common pathology: everyone will undertake such a hunt, ranging from the most outrageous and abominable ideas to the most well-intentioned endeavors, encompassing both grand politics and minute activism. Every individual born into the great American desert will bear the same mindlessness and all who subscribe to the same underlying convictions will identify an agent as the cause and envision its elimination as the means to end their suffering. As the cause, it will appear to resolve their torment by the incomprehensibility of what causes their failures, and as a means, it will provide a purpose that is easy to explain, comfortable to accept, and psychologically enjoyable to enact. Moby Dick can be anything and he will always be something, so long as the above conditions are met. Portrayed as immortal, eternal, and impervious to death Moby Dick is portrayed as not only elusive and impossible to catch but, and more importantly, the hunt is conceived as something from which there is no escape because failure only serves the conviction in the cause as more insidious and pervasive. Ishmael conveys this idea through his seemingly casual remark on human madness: "human madness is often characterized by its craftiness and feline nature. Just when you believe it has vanished, it may have but become transfigured into some subtler form" (157).

The parallel with Nazism notwithstanding, if the hunt is categorized as either on the Left or Right, the textual evidence pushes it to the Left. There is no indication of a desire for ethno-nationalism or prejudice for one race over another, a fact further supported by the men being a motley crew gathered for all corners of the globe.[96] Instead, Ahab is associated with Clootz, who, like Ahab, led a diverse group of some three-

[96] The first and most obvious evidence is Ishmael's explicit identification of Ahab with Anacharsis Clootz, indicating not only a strict universalism but an ideology that cannot be categorized as reactionary, conservative, or malicious in intent. Like Clootz, Ahab leads is a group "renegades and castaways" explicitly identified as hailing from every corner and demographic of the world. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 104-7.

dozen men to the National Constituent Assembly to demand adherence to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The crew's decision to head to sea is seen as a response to the desolation and despair brought about by the democratization of culture and society and its departure from traditional constraints. At first glance, this motive might be interpreted as reactionary, but such a reading would require a misunderstanding of the Whale's role. The Whale serves as a scapegoat for the crew's struggles and misfortunes, allowing the ideologies and convictions ingrained in these men to remain intact. Moreover, there is no indication that Ahab or his men have abandoned the ideas realized on land, ideas that were assumed to be liberating but which turned their world into a desert and their lives into despair. Ahab, as some critics have pointed out, is "democracy's worst nightmare." He is that, to be sure, but it is important to note that he poses a threat to democratic culture not as an external menace but as a product of the inherent contradictions within democratic culture, particularly the contradictions between that ideology and what Melville conceived human nature to be. Melville looked beneath the "beautiful dreams of 1848," as Rogin observes, and prophesied their inevitable failure—a failure stemming from a conflict between those ideas, as we will see, and the requisite features of a sound civic society and the very core of human beings. Even in the height of his madness, Ahab recognizes the source of his darkness: "Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee!" (383). The world ashore, though beautiful and enlightened, lacks a solid foundation, and Ahab represents the darkness it engenders—a discontent that seeks vengeance. Melville may have erred in granting Ahab such self-awareness, if his understanding and motives are to be fully consistent, but it is a forgivable mistake and of little consequence to the overall coherence of the story he aimed to tell.

There is no indication that the hunt represents an attempt to reverse the changes that have occurred. Instead, the motive is to retain them while explaining their failure to deliver on their promises. The goal is to ensure that the men and their world can maintain their convictions, which they accomplish by trying to eliminate an unknown malevolence they believe is hindering the realization of their desired outcome. *Moby*

Dick is not simply a story of revenge or malicious intent, but a narrative of progress gone wrong, of an ideology that refuses to question its underlying assumptions, and a crew of men who are not only discontented and disappointed but also too absent-minded and morally enfeebled as a result of subscribing to ideas that promise fictions and which they either do not care to or are unable to reevaluate. What sails on the Pequod is Hope, which is both disappointed by its failures and determined to seek revenge without considering its own implication in its failure. When viewed as such, the asylum sought and found in Whaling takes on a third meaning: it is a refuge, a place of madness, but also a place where the insane can live out their delusions without hindrance.

In *Moby Dick*, Melville presents his vision of human nature, which goes against the prevailing beliefs of the time. His main focus is on exploring and explaining why the 19th century, with its rupture from the past, ideological commitments, and democratic culture leaves its inhabitants impoverished, depleted, and enraged, and why these individuals would fall into the trap of seeking scapegoats onto which to exact vengeance for their misery. Ahab is representative, as are the others once they assume his crusade as their own. Ishmael explains:

> But this intensity of his physical prostration did but so much the more abbreviate it. In an instant's compass, great hearts sometimes condense to one deep pang, the sum total of those shallow pains kindly diffused through feebler men's whole lives. And so, such hearts, though summary in each one suffering; still, if the gods decree it, in their life-time aggregate a whole age of woe, wholly made up of instantaneous intensities; for even in their pointless centres, those noble natures contain the entire circumferences of inferior souls (411-2).

After condensing all the turmoil and contradictions of an age that promised liberty but delivered woe, Melville focuses on how his characters' manufactured desires and pathologies manifest. This interest in the subjective and social consequences of such changes is distinctly Freudian: how are changes in space of representation

connected to nervous disorders?9[97] How do disturbances of symbolic structures affect individuals? Better yet, how do different structures of reality subjectivize subjects?[98] The more overarching moral of the story can also be said to reflect a Freudian theme: the prophesied outcome displays a logic that resembles the return of something repressed.[99]

Moby Dick, when examined closely, is, I would submit, a significant contribution to the field of political psychology. Primarily, it is a positive theory, but it also contains two normative elements. The vengeful dream of the Pequod is the object of the former; at the same time, because this catastrophic desire is the prophesized fate of life on land, this analysis is also a normative judgment of that form of life. It is not, however, a judgment against the declared principles of the American nation, as if the Pequod was the manifestation of America's failure to live up to its stated ideals, but a judgment of that form of life and those principles against Melville's theory of the human subject. The judgment, in a word, is that the form of life in question is not fit for its purpose. Melville would admit that it failed to deliver on its promises, but his central argument is that it could never have succeeded in the first place. The catastrophic desire portrayed serves as

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[97] Sigmund Freud, "Project for a Scientific Psychology" in Sigmund Freud, The Standard Edition of the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 1: Pre-Psycho-Analytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts, trans. James Strachey (New York: Vintage Classics, 2001), 283-346.

[98] Consider, for instance, the way that Ahab dies. First, Fedallah is drowned by Moby Dick's onslaught on the second day of the chase. And then, on the third, Ahab see him still entangled in the whale-lines attached to Moby Dick, before he too, after sinking his final dart into Moby Dick, is dragged to the bottom of the sea by a whale-line. "The line runs foul," Matthiessen writes, "catches him around the neck, and propels him instantly to his grave." See Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 423. Ishmael repeats the point numerous times, as cited earlier, namely that all men live "enveloped in whale lines" but adds that men are not aware of this, nor do they recognize what the Whale is, until they are caught up in the chase and feel the pull of the line. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 229.

[99] More accurately, Moby Dick arises as a consequence of a foreclosure, as is discussed in detail in Chapter 4. I am would also submit that, at a more general level, the ultimate lesson of *Moby Dick* is also Freudian: "If you want to expel religion from our European civilization, you can only do it by means of another system of doctrines; and such a system would from the outset take over all the psychological characteristics of religion—the same sanctity, rigidity and intolerance, the same prohibition of thought—for its own defense." Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. J.A. Underwood and Shaun Whiteside (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 65-6.

a critique of the principles themselves rather than a condemnation of hypocrisy or corruption. Melville never suggests that these principles have been imperfectly established, which would attribute their failure to circumstances such as lack of completion or obstructive forces. On the contrary, he believes that these conditions and principles have been adequately realized (or, at the very least, stages them as fully realized), in which case the madness exhibited by the Pequod is a direct result of their implementation. Ahab is not democracy's nightmare, as some have said, so much as a democratic nightmare born of democracy. Hence why Melville's description of the crusade expresses an attempt to rationalize the failures of this form of life by assigning blame to something external—anything, in fact, except the ideology or its underlying commitments. It an ironic fate: while the Pequod represents what Hegel termed as internal negation, to the men growing discontent on land and progressively turning their eyes to the harbors and Whaleships waiting at the edge of the sea these same failures appear to be the results of external negation.[100] The idea itself failed, Melville wants to say, but its supporters refuse to (or cannot) acknowledge this and are thus forced to blame on something else, anything else, in fact, so long as it leaves its priors intact. The dynamics here are not unlike those of the melancholic seeking revenge for the loss of something he loved and cannot let go, directing his rage towards something innocent. As the melancholic's relentless vengeance arises from a lack of understanding of what he loved in what he lost, so Hope's "avenging dream" is driven by an inability (or unwillingness) to reflect on the implication of its priors and presuppositions in its failure and suffering. Finally, the vengeance of both knows neither a limit nor an end: the melancholic, in an attempt to save himself, will belittle and disparage the innocent relentlessly and without end, until he has reduced it to worthless, infectious, malicious, and irredeemable; while the Pequod assumes a ruthless vengeance from which there is no return against dumb brutes it identifies as malevolent leviathans, a crusade powered at the lower layer by

[100] See "The Doctrine of Essence," in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

an ignorance of itself and a devotion to securing its priors, and—at the upper-most level—an uncontrolled vengeance for its misery, thinly veiled by a veneer of selflessness.[101]

In a broader sense, the dreams of Hope were destined to fail due to the inherent nature of humanity and the absence of Divine order. The despair and misery found where liberty and much else was promised, Melville reasons, will not motivate reconsideration or reflection but, instead, a doubling-down on the same principles that led to their sorry state. The hunt is an extension, a radicalization of the ideology that brought about the world of Woe. In a sense—or at a more rudimentary level of analysis—the transition from the failure that led to Woe to the hunt is not altogether different from the transition between one failed hunt to another, in the interim of which the underlying convictions only strengthen, and the alleged pervasiveness of the malice only grows. The liberating dreams of the 19th century failed on land, but Hope, Melville warns, responds not by looking in the mirror, so to speak, but by setting its sight on the sea. Rogin is right that *Moby Dick* "projects into imaginative space a world constructed from elements of the political discourse and social tension in which Melville was entangled," by which he means the democratizing and liberating ideologies of the 19th century, but we should add more precision to this conclusion: the world of Woe is already the construct of these elements and tensions, while heading out to sea is the absent-minded—or unreflective—response that (mis)identifies its failures not as its own but as the result of the residual effects of the traditions and disposition it overthrew. Instead of pausing to consider whether those deposed and dismantled institutions and norms may not be as "artificial" as they were taken to be and that perhaps what were discredited as "arbitrary lines of conduct" may not be just unnecessary and obstructive but required for the "worldly good" and enabling to man, Hope surges ahead with even greater assurance. Melville reasons that Hope will not consider whether masks and veils, impostors and customs may have been unnoticed constitutive elements,

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[101] See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 14, (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1957), 243-258.

components of a silent infrastructure that enabled life; no, it will explain the problem as the result of as yet unseen masks and veils, illegitimate inventions passing as natural laws that remain, albeit deeper, more cunningly and pervasively hidden and operating in the world around men and in the hearts and minds within them. These men have assumed a romantic ideology, but their rupture with inherited tradition, their refusal of restraints and limits, their fervent demand for unrestrained liberty, and their blindness to their "lower layers" have left them melancholic and absent-minded, as well as disgusted with the burdens of earthly life. They are, in short, very much the democratic men that Tocqueville describes – frustrated, anxious, uncertain, but also cowardly, dumb, and powerless. They are willing to--and they will--parade beliefs and values they no longer believe in, but there is a limit to their nihilistic cynicism. And after that Rubicon is finally crossed, they will break those bounds and seek to satisfy a want that they find intolerable. As a few careful commentators on Melville have noted, Melville not only rejects Transcendentalism as a viable solution, he also incriminates it as implicated in the pathologies it purports to treat. The Pequod is what happens Hope is the treatment for Hope. It is Hope ashore, behind the Pequod, in other words, it is Hope that is on the Pequod, and it is Hope that remains ahead of the Pequod. This is Melville's warning: a series of mindless and merciless revenge fantasies against imagined enemies, in which, like Narcissus, its partisans will drown.

The first normative element is the prophecy, the second normative element is Ishmael's Gospel, which not only presents an alternative to the prophecy of the hunt but also derives this alternative from a comprehensive understanding of the causal structure that leads to the hunt. The treatise through which the Gospel is derived out of the prophecy, therefore, contains three primary parts: the aforementioned positive theory, the normative elements, and a cetology, a study of leviathans. We can now turn to the more concrete context of Moby Dick.

2.2 Ideological Context

In the middle of the 19th century, Protestant America was plagued by "anxiety over the breakdown of

consensual dogmatic structures" and, in particular, the erosion of biblical authority.[102] The prophets of old were now suspected of being mere poets, while the credibility of the former diminished, reduced to imposed and groundless conventions with ever dwindling "purchase on the soul".[103] Belief that God's will governs the world He created, such that a "true understanding of what happens in the world reveals his nature" and that this this divine nature is the essence of justice and has "absolute authority over human affairs," the two primary theological axioms, in other words, that had to that point organized the world and its affairs came into doubt or were refused outright.[104] Consequently, the world was no longer widely perceived as a reflection of God's essence. Melville, it is well known, did not believe in God, but he also did not subscribe to the idea that the absence of God would lead to perceiving the world as a mere illusion, a thin veil of falsehood concealing a liberating emptiness, nor that such emptiness would in fact be liberating. Instead, he anticipated that people would largely confront this existential reality as an epistemological problem and that most would come to exist in a state of psychological nihilism, perceiving the world as a "charnel house," a multitude of appearances, shadows, and layers that either concealed or had lost the key that would restore order to the world.

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[102] Buell, "*Moby Dick* as Sacred Text," 55.

[103] Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*, 65.

[104] See Herbert Jr., "Calvinist Earthquake: *Moby Dick* and Religious Tradition," in *New Essays on 'Moby-Dick; or, the Whale*, 132. Herbert Jr. argues that Ahab is troubled by an accustomed dependence or reliance on and belief in some cause that is consistent and identifiable, to some extent at least. My claim is stronger: not only is there no Divine order but Ahab (and the others) cannot but posit the place of the Divine order. Moreover, when faced with this absence of God, which, according to the theory embedded in Melville's works, results from the delegitimization of the representatives of Divine order, the subject presupposes the place of Divine order and this presupposition in the absence of something that assumes this place, thus giving it some positive substance, leads to torment. To resolve this torment, the subject subsequently identifies an agent; for Ahab and his men, Moby Dick is such an agent. When Ahab hunts Moby Dick in vengeance he is hunting a ghost, a ghost of his own making. *Moby Dick*, Herbert Jr. adds, "sets these axioms at odds," with Ishmael and Ahab struggling to find a way to confirm something of the latter within the world they confront. I would suggest that, after assuming the hunt, what they are struggling with is not immediately the discernment of some form of justice but with explaining the injustice, i.e., the misery, failures, etc., and eliminating the cause. In a sense, *Moby Dick* permits order insofar as it explains what was inscrutable, while the elimination of Moby Dick would be the restoration of what is believed to be the true moral law.

Individuals, he thought, might consciously acknowledge the ontological reality of nothingness while unconsciously denying such nihilism. Even if contrary to their own avowed beliefs and knowledge, 19th century men would, Melville theorized, spontaneously presuppose the existence of something that could fulfill the role previously served by God. This unconscious belief, in fact, serves as the psychological motivator for his characters embarking on their respective adventures. The Pequod's crew, for instance, would have no alternative but to surrender to hedonism, nihilism, or a longing for the pretense of a faith they no longer believe in—resignations, in other words, to the ideologies represented by the three mates. Melville anticipated that, confronted with the absence of God, most would find themselves trapped in the torment of imperfect nihilism, regardless of their professed convictions on the matter, because within human nature existed a cognitive feature that spontaneously reject nothingness and transform an ontological void into an epistemological absence, which he refers to as "the principle."

The resulting experience is a world wherein signification has been lost but significance remains. In other words, things and words still have meanings but their meanings are inscrutable, forever deferred and never consolidated. What torments Melville's characters most is not the pain and misery but the fact that they cannot understand the cause of their agony; a further indignity follows, the indignity of impotence over one's own life and affairs. Established knowledge within this world, like the compasses and maps brought aboard the Pequod, would no longer explain the world because they could no longer represent it. This resulting confusion is further exacerbated by the fact that while all these instruments no longer denote or explain what they once did, none can be sure that they have not partially retained such functions. Knowledge and its instruments fail twice: they fail to represent, but they also fail to completely fail to represent. The result is even more confounding and frustrating than a failure of representation because while nothing represents anymore, it is also the case that subjects cannot know with certainty that something does not represent, at least partially. Nothing has meaning, in other words, but also anything may be meaningful. At the beginning of *Moby Dick*, Melville refers to the state of affairs as the "great American desert," and as the

"slavish shore." The choice of words clearly serves to emphasize the prevailing sense of nihilism that characterizes life on land, a life wherein people conform to societal norms and adhere to empty words but only superficially and only because they have no other choice. In such a world, whatever beliefs men have can no longer be genuine nor can any rules or authorities be experienced as legitimate or be granted legitimacy. Life, consequently, morphs into a nihilistic parade of men puppeting words, sentiments, and rules they feel (and know to be) lies and distortions. At sea, their experience morphs into a field of "barren mazes", a reality as meaningless as the term designating it is senseless. The notion of a maze in a completely empty space seems contradictory—and it would be, were it not for what the subject contributes to the reality it experiences. With traditional meanings and norms abandoned, one might expect to encounter a desolate sense of meaninglessness, where nothing holds significance, but Melville's characters observe the vast expanse of the sea, its surface quivering, its waves endlessly merging and dissolving, leaving behind transient traces that vanish as soon as they take form. Rather than experiencing meaninglessness, they see an endless web of hints and deferrals always leading but leading nowhere. This experience is produced by the combination of the lack of signification and the subjective principle that rejects meaninglessness and instead finds some potential but indiscernible meaning in every wave, as it were, such that a uniform and undifferentiated meaningless space takes on the characteristics of a maze, as if in a horizonless and harborless sea there still remained right and wrong ways to turn.

Melville's contribution to socio-political discourse can be conceived as stemming from his focus on the "symbolic dimension of the political" (150).[105] Like Claude Lefort, he recognizes that the erosion of power is the fundamental cause for the breakdown of understanding, coherence, continuity, and legitimacy within

[105] Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 148-87. See Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

the social structure, the form of life it had held together. This loss, according to Melville, involves the death of God and a wider erosion of the authority of established and previously consensual dogmatic structures, leads to the world his characters inhabit becoming a chaotic and entropic psychosocial world, where causality, identity, and distinction have disappeared in any consistent, consensual, and permanent fashion, a situation of extreme interpretive agitation, where they are inundated by an onslaught of unconnected events, opaque and distorting words, and the lack of any master code or space of order. This loss causes a collapse into anarchy, where traditional norms, laws, and meanings transform in the eyes of individuals into arbitrary conventions that no longer carry obligatory force and spontaneous legitimacy but alienate and appear optional. Individuals no longer feel a connection to them, nor find them to have any use for establishing and supporting the polity. Instead of the promised or expected liberty what ensues is a pervasive woe, characterized by a seemingly endless set of negative features: disorientation and confusion, despair and frustration, disappointment and cynicism, as well as melancholia and enervation, to men that are absent-minded and sordid, arrogant but fragile and anxious, ambitious but incapable, as well as isolated and without purpose, all wrapped up in a general and pervasive nihilism, where some (or some residues) of the old words and norms continue to be practiced but without anyone believing in them in earnest. The Pequod arises out of this context. Melville's primary concern revolves around the subjective and subsequent socio-political consequences of the change in the symbolic locus of power. He explores this concept and the institutions and practices that arise from it through various notions, including impostor, fiction, principle, and agent. These dynamics, as we will discuss, support Hawthorne's observation that Melville "can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief."[106]

Returning to Melville's conception of modernity, he divides its impact into two distinct but sequential

[106] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The English Notebooks*, ed. Randall Stewart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 432–33.

moments: Woe and Madness. Not altogether differently than structuralism will in the 20th century, Melville divides the place from what takes place and views the former as prior to the latter and, moreover, as a subjective projection, as something akin to a spontaneous transcendental function of the mind. By emphasizing the transcendent presupposition of the symbolic locus of power, Melville expects that modernity will not manifest either as peaceful liberal pluralism or as meaningless anarchy. Instead, the result will be a proliferating nihilism and intolerable degrees of discontent, followed by a world of significance without signification and repeated attempts to reject or undermine the consequences of this change. For Melville, the conditions of modernity, consequent to a rupture with the past, align with T.J. Clark's understanding of the negative moment of modernity, a transitional phase, a sort of interregnum:

> Contingency was a fare to be suffered, and partly to be taken advantage of, but only in order to conjure back out of it—out of the false regularities and the indiscriminate free flow—a new pictorial unity. Out of the flux of visual particles would come the body again—naked, in Nature.... Way back to totality. Call it the Body, the Peasant, the People, the Economy, the Unconscious, the Party, the Plan.[107]

Clark's sobering account of modernity's fate echoes Melville's prophecy of what will come from the state of Woe. Modernity, Clark continues,

> means contingency. It points to a social order which has turned from the worship of ancestors and past authorities to the pursuit of a projected future—of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, or infinities of information. Without ancestor-worship, meaning is in short supply—'meaning' here meaning agreed-on and instituted forms of value and understanding implicit orders, stories and images in which a culture crystalizes its sense of the struggle with the realm of necessity

[107] T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 11-2.

> and the reality of pain and death.... The disenchantment of the world is horrible, intolerable. Any mass movement or cult figure that promises a way out of it will be clung to like grim death. Better even fascism than technocracy: there is a social id in most of us that goes on being tempted by that proposition.[108]

Melville is in complete agreement, as any careful reading of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* would show. The difference between their respective accounts is that Melville ground his prophecy in these intolerable conditions and his conception of the orphaned, unalienated subject. an orphaned. Without grounding the prophecy in a haunted, orphaned subject, enervated and discontent, the prediction voiced would be little more than rhetorical; and, in fact, could be misconceived as conservative, when it is better conceived as disciplined by natural law. Such attempts, according to Melville, will not be driven by intellectual motives or reactionary nostalgias but by psychological needs. They will be defensive. As in the already-mentioned remark about the uncanny nature of institutions that appear artificial, Melville's warning is that we cannot and must not abandon what appear to be mere artifices or creations of human fancy—we cannot because monstrous substitutes will return in their place, and we must not for the same reason. In America especially, due to its defining fantasy of masterlessness and variations thereof, this faltering of the symbolic efficacy of the premodern regime will lead to pervasive democratization of culture and society in political modernity. All the while society remains dislodged from but unconsciously unable to accept not being founded in divine will. Consequently, as traditional sources of certainty and power disappear, the characters in Melville's works find themselves in a state that Eric Santner refers to as "creaturely."[109] A state of existence "called into being" in moments when "natural historical fissures or caesuras in the space of meaning" appear (xv). More acutely, what Santner has

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[108] Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 7.

[109] Eric Santner, *Creaturely Life*: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Subsequent references made in the text.

in mind is existence within a "a perpetual state of exception/emergency in which the boundaries of the law become undecidable," the consequence of which is a state of ex-citation, a chronic state of agitation and disorientation that continues to be subjected—or, at the very least, feels or experiences itself as subjected—to a Creator God or sovereign who's decisionist rule is no longer transparent and coherent but appears as inscrutable and dispersed across "a field of relays and points of contact that no longer cohere" (21-2). It is, in short, life "abandoned to a state of exception," that paradoxical domain where the law has been suspended but in which the force of law remains and is ever more tyrannical. Creaturely life, like Melville's orphans, exist in a situation that should be liberating, indeed within which there should be no limits to possibility and action, but which is, in fact, a tormenting and paralyzing existence, enervating and disorienting, and desperately in need of some asylum. Unlike most popular conceptions of this rupture, Melville assigns it to parricide, not Deicide. In the terms introduced in *Pierre*: first the impostors will teeter and fall and then the fictions will disappear, after which, with the "arbitrary lines" that had allowed for the "worldly good" abandoned, the orphan is left empty in emptiness space, a toddler, as Melville mockingly refers to his Hopeful hero, "toddling entirely alone, and not without shrieks" (295). Gods have always been fictional and necessary, but these necessary fictions could only appear to exist if people submitted themselves to their imposters, primarily through fathers. These changes bring about a "crisis of investiture," a cultural and psychological condition where traditional symbols and rituals that confer identity and authority lose their efficacy.[110] As a result, individuals are deprived of the endowments that would be bestowed upon them—and internalized by them—by roles and statuses that are recognized and supported by a community's symbolic order. Such a crisis ensues, Santner argues, when symbolic mandates no longer function adequately, when meaning, norms, and laws are no longer operating properly in the external reality outside the subject or in the psyches of the

[110] Eric Santner, *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

subjects themselves, nor experienced as legitimate. For Melville, the generative cause of this situation is parricide, and no less so than for Santner, this crisis leads to a rather desperate search for new forms of investiture.

Within the socio-political realm, modern democratic regimes uphold the belief that the position of power should remain vacant. Melville, however, argues that this is a fool's endeavor, especially considering that individuals would find such emptiness subjectively unbearable.[111] As is the case with other aspects, this emptiness and its consequences manifest differently in worlds of woe, madness, and the maddening of madness, not to mention the world produced by Ishmael's cetology. Like Lefort, Melville believes that the occupation of the symbolic place of power permits the "flesh of the world" to be bound to the space of representation, or body politic, in a manner that entitles subjects to recognize themselves in words and actions, find the social world intelligible, and experience the structures and institutions of the world as not wanting of legitimacy.[112] The occupation of such a place permitted subjects to experience their form of life as having coherence, consistency, continuation, and vibrancy, while its negation leads to a state of despair and torment, succeeded by madness and a further descent into an even more maddening madness. Like Hobbes' leviathan, Melville's leviathan is supposed to settle the sea. The problem, as Ishmael discovers, is that there is no leviathan in the depths of the sea or in the starry skies above, nor can a valid synthetic one be constructed and effectively imposed. Neither the ontological nature of the sea, nor the epistemic disposition of the in a sense disenchanted mind can permit such a thing. "Like a savage tigress that tossing in the jungle overlays her own cubs, so the sea," Melville writes, "dashes even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leaves them there side by side with the split wrecks of ships. No mercy, no power but its own controls it" (224). Later

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[111] A subjective discomfort with such emptiness is everywhere evident in *Moby Dick*, most notably the discontent, boredom, and aimlessness Ishmael describes as features of life in the "great American desert," but it is in *Pierre* that Melville focuses on and analyzes this emptiness and why the subject finds it intolerable. Chapter 4 covers this in detail.

[112] Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 213-55.

statements about the "great democratic God" being the "center and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!" and the "Spirit of Equality… spreading a royal mantle of humanity over all my kind" are often interpreted as celebratory or, at the very least, hopeful (103-4). Closer examination, however, reveals a more pessimistic meaning: according to Melville, divinity and the responsibilities of its earthly representatives have been fragmented and transferred to individual mortal beings, but that such displaced responsibility will lead to Pierre and Ahab. Moments before this passage, Ishmael ridicules the idea of the "ideal man… so noble and so sparkling," and then sarcastically refers to democratic atheism as the Spirit of Equality (103-4). Acknowledging the burden of this royal mantle, he pleads for assistance from this new god: "Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God!" (104). When read in the context of *Moby Dick* (and *Pierre*), it is unquestionably a confession of powerlessness, a cry for help. In Melville's works, democratization, secularization, and the break from traditional authority affect not only governance but all aspects of life: previously unquestioned beliefs begin by being challenged and then overturned, laws turn into traditions and traditions devolve into optional customs, knowledge becomes opinion, mere bias or distortion, and logic dwindles down to persuasion; appearances become semblance, meanings become inscrutable, change becomes relentless, youth transforms into orphanhood, and above all, epistemology devolves into perspective and truth into opinion.[113] Similar to Tocqueville's predictions a decade or two earlier, Melville expects that in this enlightened age, opinion—often mindless—will increasingly become the "mistress of the world." The earth will stand as a ruin "soaked in lies," requiring the task of the world's reconstruction, but this task, both as *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* make clear, is one for Gods, not mere mortals. And Gods are the creations of fathers, not sons, and certainly not orphans.

In the United States, the contest over the nature of government, the role of tradition, human nature, and individual rights and liberties that took place in the decades surrounding the break of the 19th century

[113] These effects are developed more explicitly in *Confidence-Man* and *Pierre*, than in *Moby Dick*.

focused on the idea of the American Adam. American intellectuals, driven by the belief that a new culture was emerging, pondered over various themes such as "innocence, novelty, experience, sin, time, evil, hope, the present, memory, the past, and tradition."[114] As the nation saw itself as being at the dawn of a new era, distinct from its past, most American intellectuals aligned with the unrestricted and Romantic belief in the potential of man. They revered the American Adam as their hero.

> an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances… standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources…. Adam before the Fall… the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene around him. All this and more were contained in the image of the American as Adam.[115]

With such resources and innocence instilled in the untutored soul of man, all faults and limitations were seen as the residual effects of the sins of tradition. These traditions were seen imposed on people as if they were the laws of God, rather than being creations of human imagination. In this regard, the ideology that dominated America's intellectual elite shared similarities with early Romanticism, best exemplified by early Wordsworth, who not only celebrated the genius of innocence but also attributed the greatest errors of the French Revolution to the lingering effects of the preceding regime.[116]

Under this Manichaean division, all traditions and institutions that assumed authority and dictated what should be done were not only disregarded and overthrown, but also met with hostility corresponding

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[114] Lewis, *The American Adam*, 2.

[115] Ibid., 5

[116] See John Turner, *Wordsworth: Play and Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 21-59.

to the potential they were believed to have suppressed throughout history. The party of Hope, as Emerson christened the side to which he belonged, was defined by a fervent belief in the boundless capacity of man.[117] They believed that man did not require selfish incentives, fear of punishment, or an adherence to public rules and laws in order to achieve morality and peace. Similarly, they believed that man did not need books or teachers to attain unrivaled wisdom, and that man inherently possessed the means by which he could transcend all previous human experiences. This potential existed within every individual as his or her divine inheritance; and this potential, the belief was, could—and would—flourish if only people would overthrow the impostors, free themselves from the shackles of tradition, and, above all, reject the inferiority and self-doubt that bind them to these imposed restrictions. In turn, the failures of the past were deemed irrelevant, conceived of as the result of impostors, while man, who they believed had never truly been given the opportunity to be free, was seen as innocent. In other words, the laws of human nature were not obstacles but rather the very conditions necessary for the aspirations of Hope, both at the individual and collective levels. In short, it was a faith in the perfectibility of innocence, further fueled by resentment towards restraints. Conversely, the party of Memory, according to the partisans of Hope, consisted of sorrowful individuals who lacked faith in themselves and desperately clung to the restraints they believed to be authoritative and necessary. This party, to their mind, was composed of two groups: some were mistaken but earnest in their beliefs, while the others were cynical, heartless, and corrupted individuals who defended tradition solely to preserve the privileges it provided them. According to the partisans of the other side, this party of Memory was, in a word, made up of the ignorant or the wicked, but mistaken all the same.

Melville rejected the ideas advocated by the Hopeful. While his position is not a simple refusal, which would align him with Memory, a brief examination of the disagreement can be instructive. Elery Channing, who Emerson referred to as "our bishop," sets the stage for Transcendentalism as a movement when he

[117] See Emerson, "The Conservative," and Lewis, *The American Adam*, 1-10.

proclaims that man's primary definition is not based on original sin and the need for redemption, but rather on his "likeness to God."[118] In his sermon, "The Likeness to God," Channing unequivocally declares man's inherent dignity: "the likeness to God, of which I propose to speak, belongs to man's higher or spiritual nature. It has its foundation in the original and essential capacities of mind" (54). He then adds an unmistakably Emersonian remark: "As these capacities are unfolded through proper and vigorous effort, they are extended. As they lie dormant, they are obscured" (54). Man carries "within himself," Channing continues, "a proof of the Deity, which can only be understood by experience," that in proportion to the degree in which individuals "approach and resemble the mind of God," they come "into harmony with creation," and carry within themselves the perfections of which the "beauty, magnificence, order, benevolent adaptations, and boundless purposes, are the results and manifestations" (55). As the pinnacle of creation, man is the "birth and shinning forth of the Divine Mind" and therefore inherently possesses within himself "the explanations of what [he sees]" (55). In conclusion, Channing summarizes this faith: "We call God a Mind. He has revealed himself as a spirit. But what do we know of mind, but through the unfolding of this principle in our own breasts?" (57). Accordingly, an understanding of and alignment with the ways of God is assumed to be inherently present in man, rather than something that humankind must strive for with theological authority or traditional knowledge. Therefore, faith remains even as the authority of religious institutions is questioned and their necessity is increasingly doubted because that faith is grounded in an unquestionable belief in God's existence and an equally undeniable conviction in man's inherent mental and spiritual qualities. If man is primarily defined by his likeness to God, then what truly distinguishes the teachings of the church from the intuitions of an individual conscience? Or the traditions of a community from the inner light of an individual soul? The answer is nothing, which renders the former unnecessary. Emerson, the most prominent and influential of

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[118] William Ellery Channing, "Humanity's Likeness to God" (1828), in *Selected Writings of The American Transcendentalists,* 2nd Edition, ed. George Hochfield (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 54-66. Subsequent references made in the text.

the Transcendentalists, their spokesperson then and now, would go on to assert that all his beliefs are united in this: "I have one doctrine, the infinitude of the private man."[119] The young Emerson would take a step further than Channing: for him, this faith in humanity's limitless inherent capabilities is accompanied by a disdain for customs, traditions, institutions, histories, and even society itself, as they impose constraints, distortions, and redundancies.[120] More than merely unnecessary, they are stifling and corrupting. In one of his most notable essays, "Self-Reliance," after exposing the distorting and stifling effects of institutions and the moral codes they enforce and promote, Emerson boldly declares "the only sin is limitation."[121]

> [n]othing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.... No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions.[122]

For Emerson and those like him, the inner light in the subject was born with it, not learned on the pew. For the men that would define this school of thought, the soul's new dignity of natural intuitions could not be explained by Locke's empiricist psychology, which Unitarianism supported, as a result they looked to German philosophy and theology for answers.[123] Although some of the founders had studied German philosophy and

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[119] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 134. See also Lawrence Buell, *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), xxiii.

[120] For a comprehensive account of Emerson philosophy and its development from his early to his late period, see Stephen E Whicher, *Freedom And Fate: An Inner Life Of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

[121] Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 120-37.

[122] Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 126.

[123] See Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 69-

theology firsthand, the school's understanding of this tradition was mainly influenced by Coleridge and Carlyle. The outcome was an interpretation of the tradition from Kant to Schleiermacher that led to an idealist view of the mind, albeit a severely simplified and distorted version of German Idealism. According to the Transcendentalists, the mind was filled with innate principles and intuitions, providing it with *a priori* and intuitive knowledge of the Divine, Infinity, transcendental truth, and everything that follows.[124] In its simplest form, they argued that Christ's true teaching was not "I am divine, thus follow me" but "God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world."[125] Consequently, they assumed that all true knowledge, whether moral or otherwise, could be discovered from within, and that this intuition, if unfettered from and undistorted by imposed tradition, could accurately comprehend the world using only its own faculties and thereby set man on the road to his proper inheritance.

Channing and the Transcendentalists, as well as those who followed them, encouraged their followers to have faith that "should the whole order and purposes of the universe be opened to us, it is certain that nothing would be disclosed that would in any degree shake our persuasion, that the world is inhabited by rational and moral beings who are authorized to expect from their creator the most benevolent and equitable government."[126] Melville, on the other hand, urged his readers to understand that unveiling these secrets would reveal nothingness: no metaphysical order or moral law would be found in the heavens or in the depths of the innocent unalienated soul. He warned that if the veils were lifted, i.e., if the impostors were removed, the illusions they covered would dissolve, leaving behind only emptiness and torment. In *Pierre*, we read the

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97. See also Daniel Walker Howe, *Making of the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 189-255.

[124] Buell, *The American Transcendentalists*, 9.

[125] Emerson, "Transcendentalism," 4.

[126] Channing, "The Moral Argument Against Calvinism," in *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D., Vol. I*, ed. (Boston: Walker, Wise and Company, 1862), 228. Channing quoted in Herbert, "Calvinist Earthquake: Moby Dick and Religious Tradition," 128.

following, "It is the law that a nothing should torment a nothing; for I am a nothing" (273). Pierre is the tormented nothing, while the tormenting nothing is the nothing that would be discovered by such unveiling in the place God was supposed to be. Under such circumstances, man would, Melville thought, confront a terrible fate: the world would collapse into incomprehensible meaninglessness because, as Pierre discovers, even Virtue and Vice are only falsely diverging shadows of the same nothing (237). In this state, man would not find liberty or enlightenment but only torment, paralyzing confusion, and ultimately a descent into madness. Pierre and Ahab are representative of what awaits humanity if impostors and fictions fall. The only glimmer of hope that Melville offers is Ishmael. There is no going back, however, according to Melville: the world cannot (or at least cannot easily) be reenchanted. The hope that Ishmael represents must pass through Pierre and Ahab, it involves an irony where the ambitions of Hope depend on the statutes of Memory that Emersonian Hope had abandoned.

Pierre is a direct attack on Transcendentalism. The protagonist is explicitly identified as a Transcendentalist, and his goals, attitudes, and choices are all openly Hopeful, and Melville devotes a significant space to describing what the realization of this ideology would entail. *Moby Dick*, on the other hand, posits this as its backdrop but largely leaves the details astern, as it were, focusing instead on the ultimate fulfillment of the quintessential American fantasy of masterlessness. However, what unfolds is not in line with Lawrence's defined outcomes: it is not a mindless liberty that stubbornly rejects any new "It," nor a mature discovery and acceptance of some new "It," instead there is a devout dedication to the former that eventually erupts into a fanatical and irrational vengeance.[127] Melville's message appears to be that if there is an American "It"—or, more broadly, an "It" for the 19th century and beyond—it is an endless cycle of rejecting alienating authority, which only leads to a desperate pursuit of something, anything, as an escape from the freedom of being without a master. The Pequod with Ahab at the helm—as becomes evident by the end of the book—is

[127] See D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classical American Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

just another in a long series of Whaleships and their captains, a series that will continue unless an Ishmael (or a nation of Ishmaels) emerges.

"Ahab," as Bryant summarizes, "is the worst nightmare of democracy."[128] Not as something foreign or a long-forgotten other, but as a nightmare born out of the very freedom that promised to liberate men like him. Melville examined the ideas that marked the beginning of the 19th century and predicted their downfall.[129] In *Moby Dick*, however, aside from abstract comments and general references, he is relatively silent about this world and how it would turn its citizens mad. Instead, he takes much of this for granted and gives only hints at how it would distort, limit ability, and frustrate desires. The men are described as sordid and absent-minded, as well as melancholic, disguised, tormented, deprived, soulless, and disoriented, but relatively little explanation is given of how modern democratic culture turns them into such beings and why life on land fails to alleviate their discontent, pacify their anger, or resolve their confusion. *Pierre* supplements *Moby Dick* in this regard, as we will discover. For the moment, to provide a more sociological analysis of their way of life, I turn to a study published a decade prior to *Moby Dick*. This study, whose analysis—as will gradually become more evident—aligns with Melville's own, offers a detailed account of how democratic culture not only shapes its individuals into sordid beings but also how it makes them highly susceptible to mindless fantasies of revenge.[130] This study is Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.[131]

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[128] See John Bryant, "Moby Dick as Revolution," in *The Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1998), 78.

[129] Rogin argues that "Moby Dick projects into imaginative space a world constructed from elements of the political discourse and social tensions in which Melville was entangled," adding that for Melville the ensuing disaster is the full realization of the "dreams of 1848." Further, Rogin argues that Melville expected that men would not rise above 1848 but would instead drown, so to speak, in that sea. Ahab, he adds later, is the attempt to evade this defeat of democracy. See Rogin, *Subversive Genealogies*, 22, 109-11.

[130] For a detailed study of Melville's political opinions see Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance,* and Berthold, "Democracy and its Discontents," 149-164.

[131] Nietzsche's diagnoses of 19th century culture are also very similar to Melville's. I have opted, however, to rely on Tocqueville because *Democracy in America* offers a more detailed sociological and institutional analysis of democratic culture, moreover it offers an analysis that is particular to America. Stylistically different and

The parallels between Melville and Tocqueville extend well beyond the conclusions, but we can start there: "Nations of our time cannot prevent the conditions of men from becoming equal: but it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or to wretchedness," concludes the second volume of *Democracy in America*.[132] This uncertainty is overstated, if not feigned. Seventy-five chapters precede it, and they leave little doubt over Tocqueville's earnest prediction: democracy will end in despotism.[133] With the inculcated "habits of mind" at the center, democracy's fate does depend on its citizens but they, in Tocqueville's eyes, are not all that dependable.[134] Melville agrees: the "permanent, constitutional condition of the manufactured man… is sordidness," and this morally degraded, unethical and dishonest, enfeebled, rundown and repulsive character

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distinct in method and primary focus, the agreement is striking: in Tocqueville's empirical and deductive account, these citizens, without any interiority aside from a preference for ease and interest, are turned and twisted by the interplay of their material conditions, modern ideologies, and most basic considerations, until a sordid, scared, resentful, dumb, and desperate character is produced; in Melville, it is the structure figured in the sea, sky, boats, whale-lines, etc. that molds his characters, all of whom are left stranded between their unreachable depths, silent laws, and dizzying phantoms, into enervated minds, reactionary desires, desperation, and rage. In both cases, an inscrutable world of woe leads them to madness, helplessly; what Melville adds is that their minds subsequently lead to their further maddening, seamlessly.

[132] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 613-4. Subsequent references are made in the text. The striking echoes between Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and the works of Melville, especially *Moby Dick*, have been repeatedly noted by scholars. For instance, a recent collection of essays on the political thought of Herman Melville, *A Political Companion to Moby Dick*, contains four essays that rely on or argue for consistencies between Tocqueville and Melville. See *A Political Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. by Jason Frank (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013).

[133] For a comprehensive study of Tocqueville that provides sound convincing evidence that Tocqueville expected democracy to lead to despotism, as opposed to liberty, see Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2013). See also Wolin, *Tocqueville: Between Two Worlds.*

[134] In large part, this prediction hinges on the supposition that the concrete habits of mind fostered and reinforced by democratic culture enable and strengthen what Tocqueville identifies as the natural "defects of the mind" and "vices of the heart," from which follows his argument that institutions and traditions sere the function of containing and disciplining humankinds natural weaknesses. In the Norton edition of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville's expressions are translated as "the deficiencies of the mind" and "the perversity of the heart." I elected for the alternative translation of these formulations. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 482.

is also unprincipled, fickle, and unable to keep "a climate of its own" (178).[135] Melville sympathizes with the common people and he understands their grievances, but he does not trust them nor the character their form of life has imprinted on them. The crew are not, because they cannot be, the heroes or victims that critics often want them to be.

Scholarship on *Democracy in America* tends to focus on the process by which the democratic populace submits to a tutelary power and the nature of the latter. The book's overarching argument is unsurprising and

[135] Melville is difficult to categorize politically: his evaluation of democracy is ambiguous; he had compassion for the masses, but did not trust them; his works generally support the oppressed and critique a variety of dominant ideologies and practices, but, at a more abstract level, his evaluation of the underlying principles and commitments of revolutions and liberations is largely negative, almost always skeptical, and often conservative; he views traditional dogmatic consensual structures as impostors based on nothing but fictions, but he opposes their deposition and warns against naïve forms of negative liberty; he does not belong to the anti-Enlightenment tradition, but he cannot accept the universal faiths of the Enlightenment; his position on with respect to God and the Church is complicated, to say the least, but much of it can be discerned in a remark Hawthorne makes about his friend, "[h]e can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other." Hope, as mentioned earlier, is deemed "immature" and not "philosophical," by Melville, but he also rejects the presence of Memory. In fact, he refuses the validity of this binary and Emerson's seemingly indisputable underlying definitions, namely, that "conservatism" "stands on man's incontestable limitations," while "reform on his indisputable infinitude." See Emerson, "The Conservative". For a detailed account of Melville's position on democracy see Dennis Berthold, "Democracy and its Discontents," in *A Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Wyn Kelley (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 149-164. For an account of Melville's thoughts on and reactions to political changes and movements in Europe see Larry J. Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 97-124. As Milder notes, Melville saw little that deserved conservation, and yet his works indicate more than an apprehensiveness towards the proposals of reform. For Melville's appreciation of Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust," see Melville, "Hawthorne and his Mosses," 242-5. Hawthorne's parabolic allegory for just such an instance: the world—from its news and titles, to its statutes and inventions, to its ideas and its knowledges—are thrown into the flames in the name of man's undoubted innocence, it leaves him liberated, for a moment, before, by the virtue of that "foul cavern" that is the soul, he recreates it all and returns to the same, but worse, much worse, Hawthorne thinks. Melville, in fact, makes special mention of it in "Hawthorne and his Mosses." See Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). See also Buell, *The Great American Novel*, 358-88. In *Moby Dick*, see Chapter 46, "Surmises," and Chapter 26, "Knights and Squires" of Melville, *Moby Dick*. Melville, both through Ahab and Ishmael, repeatedly stresses the differences between man and the Whale. One of these differences is that the latter has a temperament of its own, while the former does not, and that the latter can see absolutes and can hold two distinct images in its mind at one time and without contradiction, while the former cannot, and, instead, blurs everything. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 177-8.

simple: forced to rely on their own cognitive resources, which inevitably prove too meager, democratic subjects are quickly overwhelmed and exhausted by their newfound autonomy, and thus readily and somewhat desperately submit to a state more omnipotent and omnipresent than any monarchy.[136] Absolute but gentle, this state administers to their comfort and ease, provides guidance and security, regulates their lives, and facilitates their pleasures. Given its later relevance, some detail is merited here.

> After having thus successfully taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp, and fashioned them at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a net-work of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided: men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd (602).

The cost of such submission is perpetual childhood, depoliticization, and tormenting frustration: safe, comfortable, and satisfied, subjects so managed are also dependent, obedient, incapable, and indifferent. By managing their lives down to the most minute elements, this authority gradually but incessantly breaks its citizens' spirit and enervates their character. These democrats, progeny of revolution, “gradually [lose] the faculties of thinking, feeling, and acting for themselves, and thus gradually [fall] below the level of humanity” (603).The few exceptional ones, Tocqueville adds, are trapped in stultifying mazes of pesky and inscrutable rules and regulations. Tocqueville is unambiguous:

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[136] For a representative account of this trajectory, see Max Pensky, "Radical Critique and Late Epistemology: Tocqueville, Adorno, and Authoritarianism" in *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory*, ed. Wendy Brown, Peter E. Gordon, and Max Pensky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 85-124.

> Subjection in minor affairs break out every day, and is felt by the whole community indiscriminately. It does not drive men to resistance, but it crosses them at every turn, till they are led to surrender the exercise of their will. Thus their spirit is gradually broken and their character enervated.... gradually [they lose] the faculties of thinking, feeling, and acting for themselves, and thus gradually [fall] below the level of humanity (603-4).

Willpower and ambition, as well as reflection and analysis, are frustrated by the inability to understand the path to success or the cause of failure—the situation is incomprehensible, and the results are frustrating and destabilizing (604). However, every few years, a tremendous responsibility is placed into the hands of this liberated yet weakened multitude, all of whom have not only "[fixed] the standard of their judgment in themselves alone" but also remain confident in their ability to make rational judgments: they are entrusted with electing their leaders.[137] Democratic citizens who, until yesterday, were—and will be again tomorrow—nothing more than the "play-things of their ruler[s]" are assigned the task and the trust to choose their masters (604). According to Tocqueville, this is nothing more than a fool choosing his own unchangeable destiny. The immense power of this state, he concludes, creates another paradox: this multitude of liberated yet weakened democrats reveal themselves to be "more than kings, but less than men" (604).

What has received less critical attention is a short chapter titled "Causes of Fanatical Enthusiasm in Some Americans." Here, Tocqueville remarks that religious insanity is unusually common in democratic America and predicts that it will not be long before even mysticism makes a significant advance in this nation. A strange fate for any modern nation, certainly, but especially bizarre for a nation composed of people who deny anything that transcends their individual comprehension, who are "solely engaged in promoting their own worldly welfare," and who have resigned the exercise of their will (378-382, 470). These religious fanaticisms, Tocqueville plainly states, are compensations: "the soul has wants which must be satisfied; and

[137] See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 444-49.

whatever pains be taken to divert it from itself, it soon grows weary, restless, and disquieted amid the enjoyments of sense" (407). Not only is the soul deprived and frustrated, but the "defects of the mind" and "vices of the heart" cultivated by and in the existing conditions dispose this citizenry to fervent folly the moment the soul finally acts on its wants. "They feel imprisoned," he warns, "within bounds, which they will apparently never be allowed to pass. As soon as they do—and they will—their minds know not where to fix themselves, and they rush unrestrained beyond the range of common sense" (470). The same confluence of factors that dispose a democratic populace to willfully submit to an absolute tutelary power, and which are compounded by such submission—including intellectual arrogance, spiritual and cognitive enervation, isolation and individualism, exhaustion and preoccupation, anxiety, conservatism, frustration, the valuation of interest over principle, and an expansive, stultifying confusion—are intertangled at this juncture to dispose them to spiritual, moral, or ideological demagoguery. When they finally seek some spiritual fulfillment, some clarity, and some agency, they will surely go beyond the reaches of any common sense. Tocqueville's prediction heralds Melville's. *Moby Dick*, I suggest, can be conceived as the fate of this constellation, while *Democracy in America* offers the backstory of the men who find asylum in the grip of a harpoon. I propose a closer look.

2.3 The Character of Democratic Subjects

Democratic America is not a philosophical nation, but it is a nation of spontaneous Cartesians: each places method before result and "shuts himself up in his own breast, and affects from that point to judge the world" (378). On its own, this is a noble stance, even in Tocqueville's eyes. What it misses, however, is the function of things that seem alien, imposing, and on the surface superfluous. No longer protected by reverence and piety, the validity or wisdom of the "old" is exposed to attack by this enthusiastically but amateurly applied "philosophical method," and the fervor and self-assurance proper to such liberty quickly relaxes and then abruptly breaks its ties with the ideals, principles, conclusions, and methods, in short with the knowledge, of

previous generations. Under their self-assured gaze, all social formations become equally subject to "rational evaluation by the individual according to ultimately arbitrary standards," and so "all habits, values, and norms are in principle intelligible only as material for individual judgment and calculation."[138] As each "appeals to the individual exercise of his understanding alone," not only is the ground of synchronic consensus suspended but the ties between generations are relaxed, and then fully broken (378). Soon, the genealogies of ideas and practices, methods and knowledges, and even words themselves are lost, and the age of equality arrives at a stupefying moment: its citizens no longer recognize themselves in any of the standing traditions and institutions, viewing them as only cumbersome impositions. Hollow but pretentious, these relics appear as little more than useless, obstructive, and distorting obstacles. Individualism develops from here: as each assumes his formation to rely on nothing but himself, his interests and concerns focus squarely and solely on himself. The relegation of traditional laws and institutions motions this individualism into elevating interest above all principles. This shift, Tocqueville thinks, aligns perfectly with humanity's natural vice: the preference for ease and speed in the pursuit of satisfaction (389). Made confident by successes in resolving minor difficulties, these Cartesians pay no mind to the implications of these losses and changes, and promptly turn to condemning all "forms," which are deemed "useless and inconvenient veils placed between the individual and the truth" (379). The same confidence leads them to conclude that everything in the world can be explained by their spontaneous and untutored understanding. The true, the existing, and the comprehensible are thus equated and exhausted by one another, with the common untutored understanding establishing the criteria and limits. The world of democratic culture, with its doctrine of the equality of intelligence, slowly but surely, Tocqueville thinks, will be reduced to the limits of the most common mind (384-5).

Not disposed to posit intellectual authority beyond or above the common, democratic culture posits

[138] Max Pensky, "Radical Critique and Late Epistemology," 94.

it in the only places its epistemology and ideology deem valid: the individual or the mass. Equality of intelligence and learning are, he adds, inversely related: the more the former is assumed and installed, the more the latter is despised and devalued. Democracy never explicitly demands submission or forces consent, but individuals, Tocqueville thinks, will soon grow tired of the demands of analysis and judgment. And so the two avenues above will eventually collapse into one: if individuals look to the others, what they find can be true only if they can recognize it, and they will recognize only what they can understand; from the other side, the mass imposes on the individual because within democratic epistemology it cannot be wrong, moreover it is not in the individual's interest to oppose the mass, nor is it to its taste to choose principle. The outcome is clear: eventually, truth is reduced to the lowest common denominator. The 19th century's expanded and celebrated private judgment does not, therefore, abandon "general ideas," Tocqueville thinks; but it does mark them with its unequivocal stamp: general ideas persist by pressing ever further towards the lowest common point of agreement, and the smaller and simpler that point becomes, the more it is judged in the scales of raw numbers, with the largest granted the status of truth. Together with the doctrine of the equality of intelligence, unrestrained democratic culture ultimately reduces truth to the most popular and accessible of opinions. In the enlightened 19th century, Tocqueville argues, opinion becomes "more than ever the mistress of the world" (383).[139]

The origin of a given opinion may be hard to identify, but once installed, Tocqueville thinks it

[139] Tocqueville demonstrates that the logic of this relentless race to simplicity and bareness makes opposition and contestation increasingly less possible. The simpler the point the more irrefutable it becomes, and the more individuals are inclined to agree, and the more they agree the greater they judge its truth. Mutual consensus and conviction become the confirmations of opinions. Tocqueville issues a dire and superficially somewhat surprising conclusion: in the enlightened 19th century, opinion becomes "more than ever the mistress of the world." Tocqueville thereby arrives at a conclusion that resonates with Marx's infamous claim in *The Communist Manifest*, namely, that 'all that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred is profaned.' The solid words of God and aristocracy, in Tocqueville's account, melt into the opinions of the democratic mass, opinions whose only metric is consensus and number and which fluctuate and move with the whims of the crowd.

becomes unshakable. Ironically, their power arises from what ought to be weaknesses, which is only further strengthened by the fact that these opinions are not imposed or decreed from above but offered freely and without interest from others no different than oneself.[140] Neither by coercion nor demand from some incomprehensible authority, the mass democratic opinion, Tocqueville adds, persuades and convinces in the very act of communication.[141] Democratic culture, he deduces, will not be torn apart by intellectual anarchy, which can only ever be transient in a democracy, but it will end in stupefying simplicity and stultifying uniformity (559). Another irony: a nation of everyone thinking for themselves ends in everyone "conduct[ing] their understanding in the same manner, and govern[ing] it by the same rules," and sharing the same tastes, habits, and opinions (558). Democratic opinion, he adds, performs a "mild censorship": it does not exclude or ostracize through law or decree but expels simply by turning its back; and it convinces through the argument of common sense, refuting the exceptional and novel by the majority's lack of comprehension (560). It prohibits nothing, Tocqueville warns, but it can ignore almost everything. All this, he concludes, limits the influence of any individual and resigns the mass opinion to a state of inertia, which may seek new consequences but rarely exerts itself in search of new principles. "When the conditions of men are almost equal, they do not easily allow themselves to be persuaded by each other," but they become proportionally more subject to the opinion of the majority (559). Another paradox: individual thought is formally liberated, but mass opinion is ever narrower, more compelling, and increasingly stultifying. The warning is unambiguous: the doctrine of equality of intelligence produces a mass opinion of unimaginable power precisely by abolishing authority and thus the distinction between subject and commanding authority. Let this

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[140] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 553-62.

[141] The logic of this narrowing and simplification is, at bottom, rather simple: from the perspective of the epistemic principles of the untutored democratic man, if an opinion can be understood, then it must be right, and if the others, equally untutored and reliant on their intuition, also understand it, then that is all the proof that is needed for the opinion to be confirmed as true. In what cannot but appear as a paradox, the very lack of trained learning grants opinions their strength and persuasiveness, and, indeed, permits their rapid dissemination and wide recognition. See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 556-562.

suffice for the enervation, inscrutability, and absent-mindedness, Ishmael identifies, for the obstacles confronted by those inclined to more intellectual and spiritual endeavors, and for the disgust they all come to feel. What remains is an account for their anger and want of vengeance.

This constellation of elements, Tocqueville relates to the more material concerns of democratic citizens. Having risen out of poverty and possessing ambitions unimaginable in another era, this progeny of revolution is, he notes in 1830, shockingly conservative. They attach "enormous value to their possessions," but with only a "scanty fortune" separating them from poverty, they see privation at every turn (555). As such, they are apprehensive over anything that might imperil their estates, and so these "natural enemies of [any] violent commotions" desire only more of the same while dreading any significant alteration (554-6). With anxiety accompanying their fragile successes, these citizens will only further elevate interest over principle in their minds and deeds. Tocqueville never uses the term, but this anxious and conservative multitude, he foresees, will inevitably plunge the nation into a spectacle of nihilism.[142] Under the pressure of excommunication and economic and social ruin, not to mention the lack of intellectual resources beyond mass opinion and the limitations of their epistemic principles, this nation of Cartesians will usher in a campaign of frightening self-censorship and a parade of feigned declarations (562). They will come to doubt their way of life, Tocqueville thinks; indeed, eventually the majority will cease to "believe what they believed before"

[142] As Wendy Brown has pointed out, for Nietzsche, the age of nihilism is not the disappearance of values but their devaluation: "the age of nihilism does not mean the elimination of values but a world in which the 'highest values devalue themselves' as they become unmoored from their foundations. Western Judeo-Christian values, including those that secure liberal democracy, lose their depth as they lose their foundations; accordingly, they do not vanish but become fungible and trivial, easily traded, augmented, instrumentalized, superficialized. These effects further degrade the value of values, inevitably deepening the nihilism of cultures and their subjects…. This is how nihilism goes—not the death of values but their becoming protean, becoming available for branding projects and other purposes that manifestly do not comport with them. Not only values but truth and reason lose their moorings in a nihilistic age." See Wendy Brown, "Neoliberal's Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-first Century 'Democracies'," in *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory*, ed. Wendy Brown, Peter. E. Gordon, and Max Pensky (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018), 26-7.

but they will nonetheless "still affect to believe," thereby "chilling innovators" and prolonging the "empty phantom of public opinion" (561). Doubt will be concealed and discontent repressed as they begin to evermore parrot publicly sanctioned opinion. They must, Tocqueville deduces, for material reasons, and they cannot but do so, for cognitive and ideological ones. Disgruntled and exhausted, they will be willing to change their positions, but as "nothing urges or guides [them] forward, [they will] oscillate to and fro without progressive motion" (559). With minds enervated, principle abandoned, souls unsatisfied, and success meager and fragile, Tocqueville predicts that these democrats will repress everything and then medicate by clutching everything but holding nothing fast (471).

Having rid society of unjust rights and privileges, thus inspiring great hopes and ambitions for a wide share of the population, democracy confronts a problem: all are invited and prompted to dream of riches, fame, and status, but most striving must end in failure. Indeed, the more equality is enacted and assumed, the greater must be the frustration. Optimism is justified, but it is also without much ground. Excitable but brittle, the hopes of these citizens are volatile. Aristocracies, Tocqueville reminds us, provided an unjust but psychologically comforting cause for failure: law, birth, tradition, etc. Democracies, with their formal equality of opportunity, epistemology, and ideology, can offer no such causes. Some rise but most will—and most must—fall. The problem is that the constellation of elements and principles of democracy and equality makes the causes and reasons of individual fates inscrutable. The result, as Pensky points out, is a reality of oppression but without an identifiable oppressor.[143] Failure, frustration, and suffering is the most common outcome, and the few that evade this fate only assure the others that there are some criteria; but these criteria remain inscrutable to, hidden from, or refused by them. The cause of failure must be found and addressed, and while some will turn to themselves and thus despair and depression, many will refuse such a path and turn their anger outward: no longer able to direct their ire and rage upwards, but unable to discern anything

[143] Pensky, "Radical Critique and Late Epistemology," 103-4.

clear or constant across the multitude of cases, their frustrations, Tocqueville thinks, are prone to turn to fantastic explanations and malicious agents. Their frustrations want resolution, and their spiritual deprivations and dignity want redemption. Stupefied, disoriented, and undignified, these democratic citizens are also angered and vengeful, and now hunting for a cause.

At this point, the various factors begin to intertwine and reinforce one another: the combination of the right to and formal opportunity at advancement, along with their material precarity and discontentment and the subsequent perpetual but futile pursuit of more, all situated within an abandonment of traditions and communal commitments, produces a complex phenomenon where (self-)interest replaces principle and all decisions are arbitrated before the altar of ease and speed. These crowded but isolated and insular individuals become a multitude that tries to grasp everything but holds onto nothing. A subjective product of these conditions is a character of mind that, as Wolin argues, extends to and overwhelms their cognitive abilities, such that they cannot even tell the difference between a change of fashion and a change of meaning.[144] Their general ideas become ever simpler, their disregard for principle ever greater, their intellectual resources ever smaller, and, as Tocqueville astutely observes, their language reflects these realities as it descends ever deeper into equivocity, inconsistency, generality, and vagueness—in short, into uselessness. Is it any wonder that when they finally recognize their sorry state and, in some form of desperate courage, seek resolution and redemption, they will "rush unrestrained beyond the range of common sense"? (470) Restlessness and confusion feed into each other, and the vices and flaws of these citizens soon become their only buoys, but buoys that only deepen their torment and suffering, as they strive in vain in a world overwhelmed by anxiety, frustration, conformity, and nihilism. This, in short, is Tocqueville's diagnosis. The culture is a tinderbox waiting for a match.

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[144] Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 88.

This, I propose, is life on what Melville calls "land": A nation of citizens ridden with anxiety over retaining what little they have and restlessly but vainly striving for more, isolated, enervated, and limited to the pursuit of their own well-being within a crowd that mildly but absolutely censors and refuses to move in any direction that might harbor revolution, and against which each is powerless to compete. These democratic citizens will begin to accrue frustrations and doubts but with neither the liberty nor the capacity to articulate or resolve them. With no identifiable and consistent cause to attribute their frustrations to, they will look uneasily to one another and eventually turn to some supreme agent as the cause and to some champion with demands for justice and protection. Language too will let them down, since its capacity for discernment and precision will be compromised by the bustling and restlessness of men and women obsessed with novelty, innovation, pragmatism, and interest, and further weakened by the same epistemology that led their general ideas down to the lowest common denominator where they attained consensus and ease of use at the price of finding little or nothing of worth at all. Angered and frustrated, dissenting but quieted, ambitious and hopeful but uneasy and fragile, arrogant in their abilities but lacking in learning, isolated and dependent but with a distaste and distrust for the knowledge of others, and disoriented by equivocal language, simplified ideas, and an inability to rely on the past "to throw its light upon the future," the mind of man, as Tocqueville surmises, "wanders in obscurity" (611). But this mind is now dragged down with repression and anger, frustration and anxiety, sickness, disappointment, disillusionment, and dissatisfaction with the fruits of its liberty and the actuality of promises broken, leaving it looking for asylum and sentiment. This is where Ahab enters.[145] He pronounces their lives pasteboard masks, and their ambitions surfaces piled upon surfaces. In one gesture, he offers them the cause of the suffering and a cause for their redemption. Moreover, he gives them something

[145] Consider Ahab's and Ishmael's descriptions of the character of landsmen (and of the crew). For instance, their sordidness and unprincipled nature, fickleness, their moral enfeeblement and inability to think for themselves, which Ahab contrasts to the Whale who in "all seasons" retains "a temperature of [its] own." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 177-8, 247.

spiritually satisfying to do, something to assert some agency against, something to find some pride in, something to give their empty lives purpose and dignity. It is a temptation almost without measure. He was one of them, he suffered and was tormented like them. But he refused, and he found the cause. And now he stands before them a hero, all the greater because he is from their own ranks.[146] The crew's ambitions become disgust, their frustrations become anger, their confusions certainty, their repressions fervor, their anxiety vengeance, and even their individualism dissolves into a readiness for self-sacrifice. Ahab lifts the silencing of their distress, voices what they wanted to but could not say, discerns what they felt but could not see, recognizes their anger, and offers them a cause, hands them a harpoon, and with his finger points at the target: "look there," he tells them; they look, and see Moby Dick. And they're too dumb and too desperate to not see that it's just a dumb brute, that a Whale and its death could not possibly be the cause or solution to their problems. It's almost mockery when Ishmael asks: "Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?"(165).

[146] Ahab imagines a cause for his suffering and refuses to submit to it. What he does not recognize, except partially in a few instances, is that he is the one who posits the cause, and indeed invents the cause that would explain his torment and the death that would bring his redemption. Ishmael narrates a figurative representation of this a few chapters later, which is certainly one of the most beautiful passages in the entire book: "Slowly crossing the deck from the scuttle, Ahab leaned over the side and watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze, the more and more that he strove to pierce the profundity." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 405. As most scholars conclude, Ahab is, of course, a false prophet. See Milder, *Exiled Royalties*, and Buell, "Moby Dick as Sacred Book," for two convincing accounts.

Chapter 3: Out To Sea, A World Of Madness

"God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!"
Melville, *Moby Dick*

3.1 The World of *Moby Dick*

Having arrived in New Bedford, Ishmael wanders the streets in search of a meal and a bed for the night. Exhausted and hungry, he stumbles over a box of ashes, dispersing them into the air. As the ash fills his lungs, he ponders whether it could be remnants from ancient Gomorrah. It is not, of course; he is in a small whaling port on the eastern shore, preparing to board a ship, nothing more. Melville, however, doubles down on the symbolism: Ishmael passes by a man sleeping on the street, teeth chattering and bones shivering, his meager scraps of clothing barely cover his limbs, as he sleeps on the street with a curbstone for a pillow (25). Looking upon this pitiful figure, Ishmael realizes that there are no angels attending to this Lazarus, and that only the cold Atlantic wind cradles him in its arms. When he gazes up, he sees nothing but the constellation Orion and the northern lights, both beautiful but neither capable of providing even fleeting warmth for this abandoned man. God is absent, and humanity is left to fend for itself. Yet, the authorities, responsible for governance, pay no heed to this Lazarus or to the absence of God. They are too busy for such concerns, Ishmael scoffs, preoccupied with their festive temperance meetings a few blocks away. Everything is awry, Ishmael concludes, before thinking to himself that if there are any "gods" in this world, they ought to "go down to the fiery pit itself in order to keep out this frost" (176). This passage, short as it is, encapsulates the essence of life in the great American desert and the disgust that men like Ishmael^ bear for it.

Same as the others, Ishmael was compelled to sea by a promise. He had faith that he would find something in the depths of the sea that would redeem his world, bring back a sense of purpose and meaning, and enable him to make sense of the chaos and uncertainty of life on land. He hoped for legitimacy to be restored and for words and actions to once again hold genuine sincerity. He believed that all of this was possible. He was certain that such a world existed in the past and therefore saw no reason why it couldn't exist again. This faith, however, is shattered by the sobering he discovers at sea: there is no God, only an "unwarped primal world" and a "foot on the treadle of the loom" (322). In other words, there is no divine order and certainly no just rule. "Look!," he will say, "here, far water-locked; beyond all hum of human weal or woe; in these most candid and impartial seas… to traditions no rocks furnish tablets" (376). Sobered to this reality, he comes to understand that "whatever swift, rushing thing [he] stood on, was not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern" (327). The Pequod's hope (or Hope) was built on fictions, in other words, and its mission on an illusion. On land, Ishmael imagined that the truth was distorted and twisted, denied or hidden from him, yet he remained certain it existed and could be discovered. At sea, he gradually learns that behind the impostors and their pretenses were nothing but fictions. The world was inscrutable not because he lacked some knowledge or access to truth, but because the truth he believed in was a nonexistent fiction. The problem, in other words, was not epistemic but ontological. In consequence of these realizations, Ishmael accepts that the world was not consumed by suffering and misery because there was something obstructing the cities of men from being reflections of the City of God, but because suffering and misery were a reflection of the absence of moral essence in the hearts of men and a void in the heavens above. And if there is no God or divine soul within, if such metaphysical convictions are false, then there is also no Moby Dick. This is what Ishmael came to understand. His escape and return are addressed later; for the moment focus should be directed to what the men aboard the Pequod observe and believe while at sea. Recall Ishmael's description of these men as the Pequod rounded the tip of Africa, heading into the warmer waters of the Indian Ocean:

> And heaved and heaved, still unrestingly heaved the black sea, as if its vast tides were a conscience; and the great mundane soul were in anguish and remorse for the long sin and suffering it had bred.
>
> Cape of Good Hope, do they call ye? Rather Cape Tormentoto, as called of yore; for long allured by the perfidious silences that before had attended us, we found ourselves launched into this tormented sea, where guilty beings transformed into those fowls and these fish, seemed condemned to swim on everlastingly without any haven in store, or beat that black air without any horizon (193-4).

The turbulent sea is described as "tormented," its tides representing a conscience. The men aboard the Pequod should be transformed from "sinners" into mere "fowls" and "fish" by the reality of the sea. They should, in other words, be expelled from the realm of Christendom for the simple reason that no such realm exists. Such a transformation, however, does not occur. The men remain unchanged, and the Pequod sails on.

Ishmael is not mocking those who still maintain these beliefs by pointing out their fictional nature, instead he is highlighting and elucidating the disparity between their beliefs and the knowledge he eventually attains. Consider the following passage: "condemned to swim on everlastingly without any haven in store, or beat that black air without any horizon." This formulation of the alternatives provides insight. On one hand, the two alternatives are radically different: the first option, where the sea is seen as God's conscience, keeps the men within a moral realm where virtue and sin exist; the second, conversely, places them in a godless and amoral universe, where they are nothing more than fowls or fish. Both exist within the same godless objective reality, symbolized by "that black air". The difference is not objective, therefore, but subjective: one option acknowledges the ontological truth of the sea and gives up the belief in God, while the other clings to its belief by rejecting or distorting the ontological truth of the sea. In addition to this distinction, another significant difference is found in this passage: "without any haven in store" is not the same as "without any horizon." The absence does not carry the same meaning in both alternatives. If the men maintain their belief in God, they will continue swimming endlessly, despite the lack of a visible destination. In contrast, those

who abandon their belief will be left "beating that black air without horizon." In both cases, the journey is endless and ultimately without a destination, but there is a crucial difference: those who have let go of their belief may or may not continue swimming; they may change direction, go backward or forward, or remain in the same place, but in all cases, they are going nowhere because there is nowhere to go; conversely, those who retain their faith may make the same movements, but they will do so with the conviction that there is a direction to be followed, or at the very least, that a haven will, as if by magic, appear at some point. This difference lies not in the absence or presence of God, but rather in the absence or presence of faith in God's existence. It is not a dichotomy between meaning and meaninglessness, therefore, but rather between indecipherable significance and meaninglessness. This nuanced difference points to the core of what is occurring in *Moby Dick*.

The continuation of the passage identifies what motivates these men to "swim on": "But calm, snow-white, and unvarying; still directing its fountain of feathers to the sky; still beckoning us on from before, the solitary jet would at times be descried" (194). It is, of course, Moby Dick. Clearly, it is Ishmael, not Ishmael^, that is speaking. The reason is obvious: Ishmael^ could not have recognized the latter alternative because he would not have been able to see the objective reality and, consequently, could not have conceived of the Pequod's men as mere fish and fowl beating their wings in the black air deluding themselves in believing themselves to be men subject to some Divine moral law. This notwithstanding, Melville is a little sloppy with Ishmael here. The error lies not in Ishmael's assertion that Moby Dick was beckoning the Pequod forth, because by this point in the hero-level of the narrative the men had already assumed Moby Dick and agreed to hunt him as the cause and means. Instead, the error lies in Ishmael's depiction of the men's perception of their reality at that moment. They were not endlessly swimming with no refuge in sight. If there is no haven, then what guided their actions could not have been Moby Dick but the Whale as principle. It was not a blind faith in an unseen God that compelled them to swim onwards, in other words, but rather a certainty in His existence derived from their belief in and pursuit of Moby Dick. Once Moby Dick is assumed as the cause

and means, faith in God is safeguarded. His apparent absence in the world is no longer evidence of His non-existence for these men but the result of Moby Dick's malevolence. Therefore, if they have agreed to hunt Moby Dick as the cause and means, the sea cannot be devoid of havens or horizons because the cause of humanity's suffering has been identified, as has the means to resolve it. Moby Dick allows them to believe in God despite the lack of evidence that he exists. As partisans of Hope, at the lower layer they have presupposed the existence of a God (much like they have presupposed the existence of a Divine soul within themselves) as well as a configuration of the riddle that blames the misery of humanity not on God's inexistence or man's inability to live according to Divine order and justice but on Moby Dick. And so, once Moby Dick is identified these man feel their (and humanity's) misery to no longer be inscrutable but comprehensible and no longer irresolvable but solvable, in which case God's existence is assured in their minds as is the conviction that with the death of Moby Dick they will once again establish harmony between men and Divine order. The sea is settled, horizons are visible, and havens exist, even if they are as yet not quite visible on the horizon, i.e., the cause is understood and the means have been identified, only the carrying out of the resolution remains after which their haven will be reached.

The symbolism of the sea, in connection with the knowledge of the specific Whale, Moby Dick, suggests that from the quarter-deck onwards, the sea is no longer without horizons or refuges. Consequently, the error in this passage lies in Ishmael's misinterpretation of how the men on the Pequod (including himself as Ishmael^) would have perceived or experienced the world at that moment. Strictly speaking, the logic of *Moby Dick* allows for three distinct possibilities. One, "swim[ming] on everlastingly without any haven in store," which is the result of the Whale as principle alone, i.e., without the Whale as agent. The second possibility, "beat[ing] that black air without any horizon," is the result of accepting the objective reality without the distortion caused by the principle. The third possibility, finally, follows from Moby Dick, i.e., from the Whale as principle *and* as agent, in which case the Pequod would be sailing with direction and purpose on a sea with horizons and havens. The second possibility is the only one based on an objectively true

ontology and free from subjective illusions. It acknowledges the lack of God and refuses the idea of Moby Dick as what is obstructing humanity's access to Divinity, and recognizes that both the principle and agent are subjective inventions. But this alternative is also impossible to maintain. For the same reason, we can also say that it involves an incomplete knowledge since it fails to acknowledge the subjective part of what Melville calls "the Truth," i.e., the principle. Regarding the status of this principle, Ishmael leaves no room for ambiguity, as discussed earlier. Because of this principle, it is impossible for man to be permanently reduced to "fowl and fish" or for the heavens and the world to become mere "black air." The world of suffering left behind on the shore may resemble such a state, but it is unbearable and compels men to "take to the ship" the condition of possibility for which is the principle. When considering the subject and its transcendental contribution to what it observes, the only possibilities at sea are, therefore, the first and third. The alternative of swimming on endlessly is to acknowledge that there is nowhere to go because there is no God—although Ishmael ultimately rejects this position, it is a theoretical alternative that only he can recognize. On the other hand, persistently swimming without any refuge implies belief in the existence of some Divine order, and therefore the belief that there is somewhere to go and something to do, even though the specifics may be unknown. This is the scenario I have referred to as the world of Madness, a brief but logically necessary transitional phase between woe and the hunt. Had Ishmael said that the "phantom" (or what I have referred to as the Whale as principle) was the force motivating the men forward, the passage would have explained the differences between the preceding alternatives, i.e., between what Ishmael learns and what the crew believe or between the observer-level and hero-level of the narrative. It is a rare and minor but potentially confusing slip by Melville.

Despite this slip, Ishmael is correct in asserting that the men can swim on only because they are enticed by the Whale. They could never have left the port of Nantucket without it, nor would any of the landsmen ever turned to the sea. Nonetheless, it is essential to make this distinction, and Ishmael must have recognized it for his escape and return to be coherent. The Whale as principle transforms an unlimited,

directionless sea into a realm that holds the promise of what they seek, yet forever postpones its fulfillment. This promise remains empty without an agent that fulfills the presuppositions of the principle. Consequently, with the principle alone the Pequod would drift aimlessly, moving but going nowhere at all. Ahab offers Moby Dick as an agent and the boundless sea, in turn, miraculously becomes a navigable map for the men. The hunt quite literally gives them direction and orientation because Moby Dick, if he exists, must be somewhere and they must sail in that direction. The sea offers hope because the men have attributed significance to its depths, but they find asylum only through the hunt for Moby Dick, swimming just beneath the surface, somewhere in the distance.

Before turning to Moby Dick, the sea without (or prior to) Moby Dick merits attention. Most notably because it expresses why the Pequod's men so readily and seamlessly assented to the hunt.

3.2 Melville's State of Exception

The madness at sea can be conceptualized through Carl Schmitt's state of exception.[147] The essential feature of such a state is well-known: with the legal norm suspended the force of law remains, resulting in an anomic space subject to the pure force-of-~~law~~.[148] As is the result: within such a state there is (i) a fundamental indeterminacy between what is inside and what is outside the law's jurisdiction, (ii) an impossibility of

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[147] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Subsequent references are made in the text. In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville makes an interesting assertion on this point, namely: "it is with fiction as with religion; it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel a tie." My contention here and throughout is that the tie is a homology between the symbolic structure of reality in the middle of the 19th century and the symbolism deployed in Melville's works, most importantly and comprehensively in *Moby Dick*, *Pierre*. See Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), 143. As will be evident, what Schmitt conceptualizes as the state of exception is, in certain respects consistent with Foucault's description of the epistemic crisis in *The Order of Things*, specifically the crisis that inaugurates the modern episteme. I will return to this shortly.

[148] There is a law in effect, in other words, but its subject's do not know what it is, where it ends and where and when it applies. Agamben, Giorgio, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 39. Such a state is, ultimately, equivalent to what Agamben calls "imperfect nihilism," i.e., existence wherein the transcendent sovereign agent is lacking, expelled, deposed, etc., but the place of sovereignty remains. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 75-80.

distinguishing between the observance and transgression of the law, and (iii) the law itself is absolutely unformulatable.[149] In such a situation, significance without signification reigns and there is no *a priori* outside of (or limit to) the jurisdiction of the force-of-~~law~~, leaving subjects condemned to a reality wherein nothing has any discernible, objective, or stable meaning and yet simultaneously everything is potentially meaningful.[150] The only certainty is that everything holds significance, even if the exact meaning is unknown. On land, life may have been perplexing, but at sea, the crew should be even more bewildered. Ishmael observes that traditional tools for navigation, like maps, compasses, and whale migration records, lose their meaning on the masterless sea.[151] Instead, the Pequod's understanding and orientation rely solely on Moby Dick, who functions similarly to a sovereign in a state of exception. The parallels are notable. Moby Dick does not adhere to established norms or customs, but follows his own malevolent will, destroying ships as he sees fit. His movements, furthermore, cannot be predicted by physical laws: he moves with unimaginable speed and possesses the ability to navigate below icecaps and continents, which allows him to be in the North Atlantic one day and to the South Pacific the next. This puts the crew of the Pequod in a predicament:

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[149] See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Particia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 104-6.

[150] The terms "signification" and "significance" should be distinguished, the first denotes an instance when a signifier refers to a signified consistently, while significance is when the signifier indicates only an empty place, where the signified should be. In other words, the former has a clear and unambiguous referent, such that the pair of signifier and signified operate as a sign, while the latter denotes an instance where meaning is suggested but absent, thereby creating a situation where the subject knows/believes that something means but cannot identify the meaning. See Philipe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*, trans. Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

[151] For Ahab, even the "veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings," and he is certain that Moby Dick is the key that reveals them. In the absence of that Whale, he can know that everything is meaningful because he is certain that Moby Dick contains the key, even though he may not conclusively know what anything means. On this account, Ishmael is no different: "some certain significance lurks in all things," he declares, before adding, "else all things are little worth, and the round world itself is but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 331-2.

"Horizons" and "havens" are dependent on Moby Dick, but his will is opaque and his actions are unpredictable by any preexisting norms. So, how does Ahab plan to hunt Moby Dick? According to Ishmael, he relies on his intuition about Moby Dick's whereabouts and future movements. In Schmitt's state of exception, this type of knowledge would be unattainable to any of its subjects, but in the world of *Moby Dick*, this is possible and coherent.

To appreciate the similarities and differences between Schmitt and Melville, we can compare the sovereign to the Whale. In a state of exception, the sovereign suspends the norm and rules with unintelligible fiat. In contrast, in a normal situation, there is an intelligible and transparent norm that governs.[152] Citizens are therefore aware of being under the sovereign's jurisdiction but have no knowledge of the law or its limits. In a normal situation, conversely, the law is transparent, and they know its meaning and boundaries. By dividing the Whale into principle and agent, a homology emerges: with the principle alone, the Pequod's men find themselves in a world where "some certain significance lurks in all things," yet they remain unaware of the meaning behind anything, but with the Whale as agent, everything becomes clear. In other words, the principle alone creates a state-of-exception-like effect, while the addition of the agent results in the return of knowledge and orientation.[153] The difference is subtle but crucial: it is only with the addition of the Whale as agent (e.g., Moby Dick) that humanity's suffering becomes comprehensible, the result of which is the sea gaining horizons and havens, allowing the Pequod to navigate with purpose.

Furthermore, a state of exception is established in response to an "exceptional situation," a significant disruption that hinders or endangers the standard operation of the norm because of a disturbance in the

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[152] According to Schmitt, the norm is produced by the sovereign, as well, but that is not directly relevant here. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*.

[153] Ishmael's investigations exemplify this well: he spends the majority of his time investigating every detail of the crusade, from the design and materials of the ship and boats to the tools they carry, and from every rumor and document available to every inch of the whale itself. For an account of Ishmael's obsessive pursuit of such knowledge, as well as his ultimate inability to attain it, see Royster, "Melville's Economy of Language," 313-36

underlying situation. In *Moby Dick*, this catalyst occurs on land, of course. Recall that it's not the suffering itself but the incomprehensibility of its cause that drives the men to the sea. If the correlate of suffering is the disruption, then the correlate of incomprehensibility is the discord between the norm and the underlying situation to which it is supposed to apply. According to Schmitt, when faced with such a situation, the sovereign suspends the norm and keeps it suspended until order is restored to the underlying situation, allowing the norm to be reinstated.[154] For Schmitt, however, the sovereign represents the essence and source of the law, but only reveals itself as such in a state of exception. Moby Dick presents a fascinating parallel: individuals living on land are compelled to venture into the sea in search of an explanation for the inexplicable and the subsequent promise of a return to normalcy. Similar to the sovereign suspending the norm, these men abandon the norms of land and find themselves in a situation that resembles a state of exception. In Melville's parlance, they enter a world of Madness.

The resolution of this situation in *Moby Dick* differs from the resolution in Schmitt's theory. First, the hunt identifies Moby Dick as the cause of the previously inexplicable suffering. Secondly, it is Moby Dick's death that Ahab and his men believe will restore the true order that he disrupted. Moby Dick, therefore, is not the sovereign figure, even if he serves a similar function with respect to explaining their misery; rather, he is the alleged cause that initiates the exceptional situation and motivates the state of exception. He is what the sovereign must understand in order to act, while his death would be that act, the act that restores order. Further, while Schmitt's sovereign restores the situation to its state prior to the disruption, the death of Moby Dick would be an act that would restore an order that, in a very real sense, never existed, but which the men believe to be the original, uncorrupted state. To fully appreciate the similarities and differences between

[154] In *Political Theology*, Schmitt writes: "for a legal order to make sense" a normal situation must exist." See Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15. Put another way, no norm is applicable to chaos, and the sovereign, Schmitt adds, is he who decides to suspend the norm under such circumstances and he who subsequently "produces and guarantees the situation" such that the norm can be reinstated. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 16.

Melville and Schmitt, *Pierre* must be given close attention. No norm, according to Schmitt, is inherent to the situation itself. The sovereign not only decides when the norm is applicable and when it should be suspended, but also creates the norm itself. The law's essence, therefore, is extra-legal because its creation is not itself founded in law. The law is "outside of itself," in other words, even as it proclaims that nothing is outside of it. Melville's logic of impostor and fiction, developed in *Pierre,* echoes this idea: various institutions, figures, and institutions such as "the church, the monument, [and] the bible" represent Divine Laws and derive their authority from them, but they are "impostors" whose pretense of authority is founded in "fictions," fictions, moreover, that they themselves create. The law decreed, therefore, is not itself grounded or founded in some Divine law but in a decision that is groundless.[155] Schmitt calls this the sovereign decision at the basis of decisionism, while Melville refers to it as the impostor's (or the father's) "trick."

An exceptional situation occurs when the norm cannot be applied. This happens when established meanings break down: words no longer correspond to their intended referents. As a result, inconsistencies and excesses emerge, disrupting the clarity of meaning. However, this does not lead to a state of meaninglessness because the sovereign intervenes. The sovereign absorbs the excesses and inconsistencies and serves as a guarantor of meaning, ensuring that words retain their meaning, even if individuals cannot understand or access it. At the legal level, this does not result in chaos because the sovereign acts as a force-of-law, maintaining a legal order. However, this legal order is completely opaque and unpredictable to those who are subject to it. In both cases, the suspension remains in effect until the sovereign stabilizes the

[155] Melville's reasoning is somewhat intricate regarding this matter because it is the impostors that create the fictions on which they subsequently depend for their authority. I will turn to this shortly. For the moment, it is sufficient to say that Gods, like mortals, as we will see, depend on and must have fathers; not Divine ones, however, but mortal fathers, our fathers. Setting the details of the impostor-fiction dynamic aside until the next chapter, worth noting here is Melville's insistence that the authority of these impostors is and must remain "sacred", *if* they are to function properly. Indeed, although he claims that "life" depends on what "men call God," he adds it first depends on impostors, the archetype of which is the father. All of this is dealt with in detail in Chapter 4.

underlying situation, allowing the norm to be reinstated. As a result, individuals experience a lack of discernible meanings and laws, but they are assured that they exist because someone knows; as such, they can maintain the further faith that they too will know one day. The situation is a little more complicated in *Moby Dick*. Firstly, that day is two days: first, the day when Moby Dick is identified as the cause, and second, the day when he is killed. Moreover, in *Moby Dick* there are two distinct but similar state of exception-like situations, one of which is the period extending from Woe to the moment torment finally drives the men to the sea, while the other is the intermediary period between the moment they have taken to the ship and the moment they assume the hunt.[156]

The primary difference between Melville and Schmitt lies in the following: if there is a sovereign that acts to restore the situation in *Moby Dick*, it is not Moby Dick but the Pequod; in which case, there is not one but two sovereigns in *Moby Dick*, Ahab and Ishmael—or, more accurately, Ahab's vengeful hunt and Ishmael's Gospel. Despite the parallels, Moby Dick corresponds not to the sovereign but to the alleged cause of the exceptional situation. Identifying him decodes the lies and discerns the cause of the misery ashore; killing him is imagined as the means of returning what the men on the Pequod imagine is the true world, i.e., how the world *should be* were it not for the intrusion of some alien malice. Moby Dick does not explain the world as it should be, but instead explains why humanity's life on earth has not been what Hope believes it should be. This is subtle but crucial distinction can be understood as follows: the sovereign reacts to an exceptional situation from the position of the state, suspends the law with the intention of restoring order, and then reapplies the law, while Moby Dick is the embodiment of the cause of the exceptional situation and the reason

[156] The worlds of Woe, Madness, and Madness Maddened can now be mapped in more detail. After reaching a certain threshold of torment, the world of Woe on land initiates an exceptional situation. In response, men take to the ship and set out to sea, entering a state of exception, which is the world of Madness. The identification of Moby Dick as cause restores (or grants) comprehensibility to their circumstances, while his death is believed to be means by which the true norm would be reinstated. Moby Dick cannot be killed, of course, which renders this promised reinstatement impossible, but that is irrelevant in this context.

for the suspension of the law; he is not what tries to save the state, but rather what the state tries to save itself from. Identifying Moby Dick as the cause is parallel to the sovereign's attempt to understand the disturbance, while the hunt parallels the sovereign's attempt to annihilate it, and his death—were it possible—would be the sovereign's restoration of the underlying order, after which the norm could be reapplied. Identifying Moby Dick is the explanation that enables the sovereign to act, while the hunt is the act required for the restoration of the law. Three further differences should be obvious now: one, in *Moby Dick* there is no state that was recently disrupted because such a state is a fiction; two, instead of the state of exception being the response to a recent disruption, it is more accurate to think of all of human history as an extended state of exception, interrupted, as it were, by moments of calm and order; indeed, the vision of history in *Moby Dick* would conceive of the state of exception as the default state and any temporary state of order as exceptional; and three, in Melville it is not the sovereign that produces the effect of the state of exception.[157]

Schmitt argues that every functional order requires a sovereign, and that sovereignty is the limit concept of any such order.[158] Melville largely agrees, as any careful reader of his works will discern.[159] The

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[157] In Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael provides insight into his understanding of this state of exception, as well as what preceded it, what follows from it, and the outlines of *his* resolution. Unsurprisingly, his understanding stems in large part from a recognition of the principle, its distinction from the agent, the dynamics of impostor and fiction, and of course the Whale. The alternative cetology he constructs, i.e., the White Whale he captures, follows from and assumes this knowledge.

[158] Debate persists within these fields over whether political sovereignty is a necessary and inevitable feature of an objective legal order or not, over whether all constitutional requirements and normative principles ultimately depend on political sovereignty or not. Schmitt answers in the affirmative, maintaining that so long as such an order is viable and sound it has a sovereign, somewhere. Liberal theory, on the other hand, denies that political sovereignty is such a necessity. Melville is clearly on the side of Schmitt, albeit there are significant differences between them, above all due to Melville's theory of the subject's constitutive involvement. For both, it bears mention, it is a theoretical *and* a normative question. For an account of debate between decisionism and liberalism, see David Dyzenhaus, "Introduction: Why Carl Schmitt?" in *Law and Politics: Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism* ed. David Dyzenhaus (Durham: duke University Press, 1998), 1-20, and Heiner Beilefeldt, "Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Systematic Reconstruction and Countercriticism," in *Law and Politics: Carl's Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism*, 23-36.

[159] Decisionist logic is everywhere in Melville's works. In fact, many of them can be read as inquiries into

true nature of the political or legal order, moreover, is revealed by the state of exception because the sovereign's role comes to the surface in such a situation. For Melville too the "Truth"—both the ontological truth and the truth of the subject—appear at sea. The truths in question, however, differ. For Schmitt the sovereign is the truth of any order because it decides whether and when to suspect (and reinstall) the norm, meaning that it is in power even when the norm is operational, and because the sovereign is the source of the norm. In all instances, therefore, the norm is dependent on the sovereign. Melville, on the other hand, imagines something very similar to the state of exception but without the existence of a sovereign. There is no leviathan to be found and there is no leviathan that can be constructed, as Ishmael makes clear; moreover, even if the hunt serves a function similar to the sovereign's during a state of exception, it must be kept in mind that the hunt is a delusion and, moreover, an act impossible to complete. If there is no sovereign and if there is something like a state of exception in *Moby Dick*, then source must be elsewhere.

The suspension and establishment of the law by the sovereign are, Schmitt contends, extra-legal or ungrounded because they are not themselves grounded in law but in acts that decide the law, while simultaneously declaring that there is nothing beyond the law. Melville's impostors are similar, given that they represent or are grounded in fictions. In contrast to Schmitt, however, Melville's view of exceptional

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various moments, configurations, and consequences of situations that embody this logic. Consider the worlds depicted in *Moby Dick*, *Pierre*, *Confidence-Man*, *Bartleby*, *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd*: all explore some element of a situation with no orientation, a reality where nothing means anything, not consistently, coherently, objectively, or lastingly, at least, where relations are constantly shifting, distinctions constantly collapsing, and a sprawling uncertainty which neither denies nor affirms extends infinitely in all directions, but a reality wherein subjects are nonetheless certain that there is meaning, somewhere, deep below the inscrutable surface, even if it is epistemically inaccessible to them. Indeed, they are constitutively incapable of not seeing significance amidst the anarchy, a perception contingent on the assumption of signification and thus a sovereign. *Confidence-Man* can be read as depicting life on land, meaning life existing in the shadow of a suspended norm; *Pierre* can be understood as depicting the futility of a self-reliant subject assuming the function of a sovereign itself, meaning of a mortal subject attempting to establish the underlying order and subsequently reinstall some norm; *Moby Dick*, on the other hand, narrates the perils harbored by its objective lack and the lunacy to which men will descend out of the enduring torment; while *Benito Cereno*, I suggest, can be read as narrative of what happens when an idiot is tasked with discerning the sovereign function.

situations and states of exception do not allow for any sovereign-like figure to persist; instead, they leave individuals abandoned in emptied space devoid of any higher authority. This is evident in Ahab's defiant *and accurate* proclamation: "Who's over me? Truth has no confines." The "Truth" that Ishmael discovers at sea is that something like a sovereign will emerge because men need one psychologically, and so in the absence of some sovereign their minds will invent one but misrecognize their invention for something they have discovered. Melville's response, therefore, to Schmitt's contention that a sovereign remains where they have always been would be twofold: one, there is no sovereign but a sovereign will materialize because the position of the sovereign will be posited by the mind in response to its spontaneous presupposition, and because presupposed place of the law if vacant is so intolerable and maddening to man that he will inevitably identify some agent to assume it, even if it is just a "dumb brute."[160] Similarly to how the force-of-~~law~~ reassures subjects that the law is not lacking but is only temporarily suspended, i.e., lost, Melville's characters experience the waves of the sea as a field of barren mazes but it is not some independent sovereign but the subjects themselves that distort ontological lack into an epistemic loss. No less than that sovereign is the truth of the situation for Schmitt, the subject is the Truth for Melville. Indeed, this distortion, through which the subject expresses its need for an alien law above itself, is, Melville thinks, the sole inherent characteristic of

[160] As we will see, Melville's conception aligns more closely with Lacan than Schmitt, primarily because he conceives of the subject as the originator of the place of the law. See Jacques Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 412-41, and Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 230-43. The clearest expression of this principle (or of the truth of the subject) is in *Pierre*: the orphaned Pierre, cast out to sea, states that "it is the law… that a nothing torments another nothing." Further, he recognizes that he is the "a nothing" tormented by "another nothing," and that the latter "nothing" is the lack of God. Further still, he accepts that from this lack of God follows that a lack of all that is derived from God. As is developed in Chapter 4, the sequence is the following: first, the father is discarded, then God is exposed as a fiction, and then everything the legitimacy of which was previously suspect (as a result of the delegitimization of fathers) is denied absolutely (as a result of recognizing Godlessness). How Pierre is reduced to "a nothing" and why his reduction to such a sorry state coincides with the reduction of the Heavens to "a nothing"—both of which are ever so slightly more than nothingness—and how impostors are involved in this catastrophe is the subject of the next chapter.

the human subject. In other words, the subject experiences itself in a state of exception but only because it has created that effect itself. "Even on the most candid seas," as Ishmael comes to learn, "where to traditions no rocks furnish tablets… life dies sunward full of faith."[161]

Perfect nihilism, as mentioned earlier, is distorted into the imperfect kind, and the culprit of this transformation is the spontaneous principle inherent in the subject.[162] Melville argues that decisionism is both descriptive and normative but only because it is first transcendental. The situation is not haunted by the sovereign's force-of-~~law~~, but rather by the posited presupposition of a subject, who brings about the effect of the state of exception yet fails to recognize its origin as within itself. Therefore, even in the absence of a sovereign, when all meaning is gone, significance will remain. The Truth that Melville seeks now becomes clearer: it pertains to the Whale, but it cannot be reduced to the idea that any valid and sound order (political, legal, semantic, etc.) is founded on a sovereign and its decisionist authority; rather, the Truth is that the need

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[161] It merits mention here that all three of Ahab, Ishmael, and Pierre express this Truth, albeit in very different ways. Ahab, Ishmael, and Pierre are orphans, all three are "self-abrading" sailors, and all three venture into the same sea in pursuit of an "avenging dream." It is not their conditions nor their initial reactions that distinguish them but their distinct cetologies. Pierre finds no Whale and descends into irredeemable madness; Ahab finds Moby Dick through which his madness maddens into the hunt; and Ishmael, after escaping Ahab's fantasy of the hunt, finds the White Whale and returns. The three heroes do not follow different paths or depart from different circumstances; instead, they represent distinct moments in a single sequence. What remains consistent among them and throughout the sequence is the need for a Whale and the principle that will spontaneously presuppose the place of a Leviathan, even if each of them interprets it differently. This principle, as mentioned earlier, opposes Transcendentalist calls for freedom because it announces the inherent need for alienation. As we will see in the next Chapter, what torments the subject when it is reduced to its truth, i.e., "a nothing," is not the lack of God; rather, what torments is that the subject cannot but presuppose—or, more accurately, presuppose the positing—of the place where God would be but cannot subsequently produce any fiction that would assume that place or any impostor that would represent the truth that is allegedly in that place. Pierre finds no Whale, and thus finds himself trapped in madness. Ishmael and Ahab, on the other hand, find a Whale. Their Whales are, ultimately, different, to be sure, but what is consistent between them is that they escape quagmire of madness Pierre is mired and dies in through some Whale. Consistent across all three is the need of a Whale and the spontaneous and principled, as it were, presupposition of the place that some Leviathan would assume. Chapter 4 spells out Melville's theory of the subject in detail, for the moment all that is necessary is to recognize that this torment is caused by the principle being unsatisfied and that this principle is, to Melville's mind, the defining feature of the subject.

[162] See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 49-62.

for and place of a sovereign is and always has been grounded in the subject. In Schmitt, the sovereign exists and imposes on his subjects, but in Melville, the dynamic is more complex, primarily because the sovereign does not exist without the subject. In fact, it is the subject that produces the place of the sovereign, that "phantom demon" which Ishmael in another instance also calls the "phantom of life"; and it is the sovereign that depends on the subject. The further twist of his logic is, as we will see, that while the sovereign depends on (and it is produced by) the subject, the subject also depends on (and is produced by) the sovereign. Indeed, it is constitutively dependent on the sovereign *if* it is to be a rational and moral subject capable of action and autonomy. Above all, subjects depend on their fathers, according to Melville, while civil society depends on its fathers, i.e., on the institutions, norms, laws, and meanings passed down as authoritative tradition. Further, for Melville, we can see that any functional decisionist order is dependent on subjects remaining convinced about the legitimacy of the impostor-sovereign, which is to say so long as they have not become disenchanted by the trick. Melville's characters need impostors in every aspect of their lives. Given the logic of the impostor, with its tricks and fictions, this also means that subjects can continue to believe in the validity or legitimacy of fathers and the inheritances of tradition only so long as they fetishize them, that is, so long as they confuse the attributes of their symbolic places for attributes that belong to the particular agents in those places. At the most abstract level, this means nothing more than that men must believe these alleged representatives to be representatives, representatives of something. Melville's position here is, in essence, Hegelian: what creates the fiction (or essence) is the subject's assumption of the representative as a representative (or appearance as appearance).

Given how much of the subject's character and capacity, to say nothing of its actions, beliefs, desires and fantasies, depend on the agent that assumes the place of the law, Melville is not exaggerating his notion when, in *Pierre,* he writes that man depends on it for its very "life." The difference between Ahab and Ishmael is the obvious case in point, as is the tragic fate of Pierre. The father's name is empty, Melville admits, but, as he describes in *Pierre*, such impostors are nonetheless constitutive of subjects, responsible for giving them

a mind's compass, an "inner angel," a soul, the ability to operate in and see a decisionist world as legitimate, and the ability to make decisions itself. All of this, as we will see, Melville conceives of as consequences—as inheritances, if you will—of alienation, of alienation by an impostor he calls the father. The name is empty, as he writes in *Pierre*, but it is nonetheless what breathes life into the lungs of man (13).

We can conceive of the principle involved as a transcendental function, in which case Moby Dick serves as a form of transcendental illusion.[163] This is the Truth of the subject, according to Melville, but this only becomes evident under certain conditions: orphanhood and emptied space. In short, it is the subject, not the sovereign, that produces the effects of a state of exception. To mark this difference, what appears in Moby Dick as a state of exception can be referred to as a ~~state~~-of-exception.

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The same principle and theory appear throughout many of Melville's works. "Confidence-Man," for instance, highlights the challenges faced by individuals condemned to an epistemic ~~state~~-of-exception, where there is no common norm to establish stable meaning, and *Pierre* provides a detailed explanation of this theory and the quagmire it leads Hopeful young orphans into. But it is better to set both aside and briefly examine "Bartleby" instead.

Consider the signification of Bartleby's famous phrase: asked to do something, he responds "I prefer not to"; asked to go somewhere, he responds "I prefer not to"; asked if he wants something, he responds "I prefer not to"; ask for his reasons, he responds "I prefer not to"; asked to leave, he responds "I prefer not

[163] The distinction between agent and principle is crucial to what Melville is getting at in *Moby Dick*, and it is repeatedly mentioned throughout. See Chapters 36, 44, and 133. As I will demonstrate across this Chapter and especially the next, what Melville is describing here is conceptualizable through Kant's transcendental illusion and Lacan notion of the unconscious, especially its presupposition of a "subject supposed to know," as well as the distinction and dynamic between what he calls the "object of desire" and the "object-cause of desire". For definitions of transcendental illusion and the subject supposed to know, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

to"; asked if he wants help, he responds "I prefer not to"; and so, without end. In each such instance, Bartleby does nothing in place of what he prefers not to do. He may continue standing where he is or he may turn and walk back to where he was, at which point he may stare out the window or at a brick wall, or he may, just as well, simply stare out into the ether, but in each case, he does nothing, looks at and sees nothing. There is no thought, no idea, no reason, no motivation, and no desire behind his "I prefer not to"—it signifies nothing. The lawyer, however, is driven mad by the phrase. He tries to interpret it again and again, and the more he tries and fails, the more obsessed he becomes with the mystery, the more unhinged his interpretations and responses become. Critics have often suggested that the lawyer is heartless or that Bartleby is staging some radical rebellion, but neither claim stands up to the textual evidence. And we should add that if Bartleby is taken as some hero, then the rebellion imagined by the critic is no more than a shadow cast against a wall—it will disappear the moment there is nothing to oppose, or it will disappear with the passing of the day. No reasonable criterion for compassion is not reached and surpassed by this employer; moreover, the fact is that Bartleby's response cannot signify anything because, one, he literally does nothing in place of what he prefers not to do, and two, the things he prefers not to do are so eclectic that their refusals cannot delineate any positive cause or position. The lawyer tries every conceivable interpretation, except one: that there is no meaning, that the phrase signifies nothing, and that what is behind this veil of "I prefer not to" is only what he himself presupposed there. And what does he presuppose? He presupposes the place of some meaning, but as there is nothing there, it remains empty thus condemning him to the impossible task of discerning some word from silence. At bottom, Bartleby is just a screen that puts on display the spontaneous principle of the human subject's mind. If the reader recognizes this all too obvious fact, then he will soon recognize that he is meant to identify with the lawyer and that the subject of the story is not Bartleby but the mind's inability to not make this presupposition. Melville, in other words, is toying with his readers, above all with scholars. Their endless and futile attempts to read "Bartleby" stage the same quagmire in which the lawyer finds himself trapped. Bartleby's progressively irrational behavior and the lawyer's increasingly unhinged interpretations

mock the interpreter: there is nothing to this phrase as there is nothing to this story, but, like the lawyer, interpreters refuse to accept as much and insist on turning meaninglessness into a mystery. Their minds, like those of the Pequod's crew, distort lack into loss. It is the same principle that permits sailors at sea to discern barren mazes in what are just waves, going nowhere and relentlessly collapsing and dissolving themselves in one another. All of them see such impossible and senseless things only because they have already distorted the ontological lack of meaning into an epistemic loss, a distortion that makes silence begin to sound like a Voice. A Voice to which the subject responds by going off in search of some Word. As the next chapter demonstrates, the lawyer, like Pierre, has the Whale as principle and now needs some Moby Dick, if he is to evade madness.[164] Ahab does—he resolves his madness by maddening it, that is, by thinking he has found it, found the fiction that does not exist. But we must be precise here: Moby Dick is not some key or secret knowledge that would discern the meaning of Bartleby's phrase, rather, if the lawyer had a Moby Dick, what he would have thereby is something that explains his inability to comprehend, something that supposedly obstructs his comprehension, thus permitting his faith that there is some meaning, i.e., that some piece of knowledge or some knower could assume the place he has presupposed, but in a manner that no longer torments him into madness but, instead, gives him something to do. Maybe it is something tricking him, or maybe there is something he does not yet know, it matters not because whatever it may be, it would release him from the futile task of trying to hear what silence has to say. At bottom, Bartleby is the same story as Moby Dick but without Moby Dick. We can understand this in two ways: one, each of the lawyer's interpretations and subsequent resolutions is a mistaken hunt, a failure that only propels him to try again and again— and so the carcasses pile up; or two, we could read each of his failed attempts as the torment of inscrutability in the world of woe, in which case we can be sure that he will soon enough turn away with

[164] For a review of the various interpretations of "Bartleby" that have been ventured, see Dan McCall, *The Silence of Bartleby* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

disgust, finding himself so immiserated and tormented that he will seek asylum in the whale-fishery. In either case, at the level of the subject and its principle, it is the same story as *Moby Dick*. Ishmael's remark that madness is a 'most cunning thing' applies here because what drives the lawyer mad is qualitatively indistinct from the madness of the men who become Ahab's crew (157).

With this preliminary sketch of the Whale in hand, we can turn our attention to the subject and the sea, and the Whale found at their intersection.

3.3 The Pequod, the Whale and the Modern Episteme

Life on land is inherently nihilistic, characterized by an existence that is overwhelmed and frustrated by layers of deception, superficiality, and illusions. No individual, regardless of their level of depravity and absent-mindedness, can long remain cognitively, psychologically, or spiritually content within such an environment. If one refuses the pistol, as Ishmael confesses to having done, they must head to sea. But what do sordid, melancholic romantics seek at sea? A cause of their suffering and its resolution, yes; but what else? Ishmael explains: "Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow" (47). For now, let's focus on the word choice in the first part of the quote: the ship is referred to as a "world" on its passage out. In *Moby Dick*, "world" is distinguished from "earth" and "globe": the prophecy states that men "disgusted with the carking cares of *earth*" will head out to at sea where "the masterless ocean engulfs the *globe*," while the ship (the Whaleship) is a "world" on "its passage out." "Earth" names life on land, a world consumed and exhausted by shadows and lies, "globe" names the ontological reality revealed at sea, and "world" names the alternative to "earth," an alternative whalemen intend to (re)establish through the hunt. The prophecy, therefore, describes a crusade from the earth through the globe and towards a world.[165] More

[165] Melville does not use these terms consistently. "World," for instance, is the most frequently used term of the three and Melville often uses it to refer to all three of the notions. Nonetheless, the three notions are consistently distinct throughout the book, as a careful reading demonstrates. I will use the three terms in their more strict meanings whenever it is important to note a distinction between the forms of life in the "great American desert," the sea, and the hunt. Further, given the meaning of "world" in distinction from "earth"

acutely, it is a mission to eliminate the malicious force that has robbed humanity of its right to earthly paradise, which involves abandoning the illusions of earth, wherein humanity's suffering is further magnified by the incomprehensibility of its cause and their resulting powerlessness to resolve their discontent. This powerlessness deprives humanity of any sense of purpose and burdens them with indignity and shame. Inevitably, they will embark on a misguided quest to restore the true world, but they will do so while clinging to the assumptions that initially led them into despair. In their minds, Moby Dick emerges as the malevolence that obstructs humanity's access to and alignment with Divine order, which these hopeful men believe is their rightful inheritance; and so, they will strive to annihilate this demon in the name of restoring humanity to its rightful place. In a sense, *Moby Dick* is the story of a revolution attempting to redeem itself by blaming its broken promises on an imagined foe; because it is blind to its own mistaken priors it views each failed attempt at this redemption as further proof of the malice that it blames, thus condemning itself to an interminable task, interminable because it is impossible to solve and impossible to stop. It is, in a word, the story of a witch-hunt that cannot succeed and cannot end. From the perspective of Melville's anthropological and philosophical beliefs, this venture, which to its partisans appears as a virtuous crusade, reveals itself to be somewhat less than moral: a mindless and ruthless campaign attempting to absolve itself by avenging innocents and protecting its own fictions. To make matters worse, all its efforts, like the carnage, are in vain.

What Melville means by establishing a "world" is misunderstood if conceived as a colonial or Eurocentric objective of "civilizing the wilderness" or the "savages." Melville is not a Western or Christian missionary, and in *Moby Dick* he takes care to avoid being misunderstood as such. The Whaleship "maps the globe," "clears the way for the missionary and the merchant," and "interpret[s] between them and the savages," while its oil "greases" the bottoms of such ships and the heads of monarchs at coronations (98). The aim is not

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and "globe," the aim of the hunt can be understood and described as an ill-fated and misguided, but well-intended and desperate attempt to *reestablish* the world.

to spread a specific knowledge, custom, language, or set of ideas, but to get its "hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world," i.e., on fundamental structure of society and culture, the essential grounds upon which all knowledge, action, and aspirations are built (116). One of Ishmael's more obscure assertions reinforces this point: "Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his one superficial western one" (224).[166] If the western world is discovered, then the referent is not what Europe imposed on the Americas, but rather the indigenous society that existed prior to its arrival; and if the indigenous world is superficial, then the contrast is not between an indigenous world fetishized as authentic and a western world experiences as artificial and alienating, instead the relevant distinction is between all such societies and something compared to which all their visible differences are "superficial." What this more substantial world is should be obvious from the metaphor—Columbus "sailed over" it. What matters is in the sea, below its surface, what matters—all that matters—is cetology.

While Melville may have romanticized the indigenous in his earlier works, in *Moby Dick* there is no such fetishization.[167] He is no Rousseauian, romanticizing the noble savage or the untutored yeoman, but he is also not a dogmatic reverent of Western modernity, the idea of America, or of any other particular culture.

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[166] The full quote bears citation here, because it clarifies and validates the argument to which I am about to turn: "But though, to landsmen in general, the native inhabitants of the seas have ever regarded with emotions unspeakably unsocial and repelling; though we know the sea to be an everlasting terra incognita, so that Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his one superficial western one; though, by vast odds, the most terrific of all mortal disasters have immemorially and indiscriminately befallen tens and hundreds of thousands of those who have gone upon the waters; though but a moment's consideration will teach that, however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make; nevertheless, by the continual repetition of these very impressions, man has lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it." See Melville, *Moby Dick,* 224.

[167] As critics have frequently noted, Melville's earlier novels tended to elevate (or even fetishize) indigenous societies in contrast to the more developed Western societies. That may well be the case in *Typee* and *Omoo*, for instance, but by the time of *Moby Dick* Melville had abandoned such naïve judgements and positions. For an example of this type of reading, See Sanborn, "The Aftersight: *Moby -Dick* and the Spectacle of Savagery," in *The Sign of the Cannibal*.

Such beliefs are dismissed in *Moby Dick*, above all by the fact that modernity in America manifests as the great American desert that drives men to sea and disposes them to the hunt. *Pierre*'s thematic focus is distinct from but aligned with *Moby Dick*: it is those that have liberated themselves by throwing off the restraints of tradition and alienation that find themselves collapsing into madness from which there is no "logical" exculpation. In both books, the general counsel to the 19th century is to "quit… the quarry" and "study architecture" (256). We should ask: what is missed or ignored if focus is cast exclusively on the superficial? Two things: the sea and the Whale, which is to say the true nature of reality, revealed once the illusions of land are abandoned, and what would settle the sea, i.e., the Whale. Or, from a different perspective, what is sailed over is the problem that needs to be solved as well as the fundamental elements or the infrastructure of the solution. Because the Whale is ex-timate, what is also sailed over is the nature of the subject, i.e., what the human subject is, what it does, and what it needs, etc. More comprehensively, what is sailed over by an exclusive focus on the superficial and the visible differences between various superficially different worlds is "the Truth" and cetology, which is to say, man, god and nature, and cetology. Because man's soul is "appallingly" empty, the heavens void of any Divine order, the sea boundless, masterless, and indifferent to man, and the Whale nothing but an idea and a "dumb brute," what is sailed over is all that matters, and what is sailed over is what appears at sea: the faith inherent to man, the alien nature of the sea, and the asylum sought through the Whale. The subject, or the truth of the subject, bears special mention because it is what creates the cetology, elects one as opposed to another, operates within a given cetology by its conscious beliefs and maintains that cetology through its unconscious commitments at the "lower layer," and because it is what will, while inhabiting and being manufactured by the form of life constituted by that cetology be content or discontent, rational or mad, capable or impotent, virtuous or sordid, sensible or fickle, grateful or resentful, etc. At the center of what Melville has to say in *Moby Dick* is his vision of man, which also serves as a warning against the naïve and mistaken romantic beliefs of his era. On the other hand, if someone poses Kant's three questions to him, i.e., What can I know? What must I do? And what can I hope for?, the answers to all three would

undoubtedly hinge on the Whale. Once Melville's symbolism is recognized, his many remarks about whalemen and whale oil—that they are higher than kings, that they map the globe, that it greases heads at coronations, etc.—no longer appear outlandish or rhetorical. What is sailed over by youthful preoccupations with superficial ideologies is the lower, underlying layer where the foundational commitments that shape the superficial level are decided and configured. And so, we can say, if it is Hope that sails the Pequod, then and while its supporters have thrown themselves into the depths the very thing they are seeking, it would not be inaccurate to say that they (and others like them) have never truly looked into the sea. Columbus, Emerson, Ahab, they're all of a kind.

Two deductions can be drawn from this passage. Firstly, the neglect of cetology has resulted in the decrepit state of the great American desert, an unbearable and unsuitable form of life for humans. This neglect involves rejecting the "idea" of the Whale and failing to understand what Melville refers to as "the Truth." Secondly, the configuration at the lower layer determines whether the form of life that appears on the surface can be called a "world" or if it should be referred to as an "earth." Melville explicitly discusses this point and provides several passages to support it. In Chapter 105, "The Fossil Whale," he describes the Whale as "ante-chronical" and "antemosaic", as the foundation, in other words, on which even time and order depend. Cetology, by extension, encompasses the metaphysical and ontological commitments that shape logic, representation, ethics, and all other aspects of the cities of man. The Whale is prior to all "superficial formations" and determines even whether history is experienced as circular or linear, progressive or an attempted return to the past, etc. There are various cetologies, Melville admits, but in all cases the Whale logically precedes all else in human history: "all the Fossil Whales hitherto discovered," he writes, "belong to the Tertiary period," meaning some millions of years prior to the earliest of holy books and other human stories. To emphasize the distinction between the cetology and the rest, he adds that the Tertiary period is "the last preceding the superficial formations" (349).

The objective of the Whalemen is clear: abandoning life in the great desert, they plunge into the sea

to restore humanity to what they believe is its rightful place. That is not, of course, what the Pequod accomplishes, regardless of what its men think or feel, because ultimately its men, bound by and blind to their mistaken beliefs about themselves and the world, sail the sea to protect their mistaken beliefs and avenge themselves on a phantom for a rage and misery for which those very beliefs are responsible. At the hero-level, however, all that matters is that the Pequod's men believe that Moby Dick is the source of all human suffering from the time of Adam onwards and that his death would be humanity's salvation.

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The Whale is pre-Adamite, as Ishamel learns. When this assertion is combined with the proposition that Moby Dick is the cause of all human suffering and humanity's failures to resolve that suffering, the suggestion is clear: *this* cetology has defined every step taken in the forsaken attempt to return to the imagined point of origin, including the expulsion of leviathans as impostors. It is nowhere said explicitly but it is not hard to surmise that, according to Melville, Moby Dick is the Whale that has defined all human history. In which case, while the Pequod is in concert with the assumed philosophy of history, what Ishmael accomplishes through his investigation of the sea, Whale, and the hunt is a reinterpretation of that history.

Ishmael attempts to investigate what is typically "sailed over," meaning all that is assumed and presupposed, commonly ignored and taken as given, and all that allows for what is seen, felt, and thought at the superficial level. The sea, however, proves to be a "terra incognita," rendering compasses and maps, in short any preexisting instruments and knowledge futile for understanding or settling the sea; leaving the men in a situation not altogether different than the one they abandoned on land, where all governing bodies and practiced norms were deemed illegitimate. "A moment's consideration," Ishamel says,

> will teach, that however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make; nevertheless, by the continual repetition of these very impressions, man has lost that sense of the full awfulness of the

sea which aboriginally belongs to it (224).

More than a fault with man's instruments—whatever they may be—the task itself proves impossible. Consider Ishmael's later remark: "the sea dashes even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leaves them there side by side with the split wrecks of ships" (224). There is no inherent order or natural Leviathan in the sea, leaving it masterless and the men lost; nor does the sea tolerate any human creation, i.e., any ship that claims to be such a Leviathan. The sea should sober man, crushing his hopes and revealing that what he believed to be an epistemic problem is actually an ontological one, but it won't. The Pequod's men suspected that there was something hidden behind the shadows and distortions on land and hoped to find it by heading to sea, i.e., by going behind the veil of impostors. However, it turns out that this hidden thing was never lost, concealed, obstructed, or distorted because it does not exist.[168] This is one half of "the Truth" Melville intends to expose, a half that should leave men without hope. But their faith, Melville insists, will remain, because "Look! here, far water-locked; beyond all hum of human weal or woe; in these most candid and impartial seas… here, too, life dies sunwards full of faith" (376). What keeps their faith in fictions (and their hope for finding and realigning themselves with those fictions) alive is not fundamentally different from the "metaphysical professor" in their heads head, which first turned their eyes to the sea, what keeps their faith alive is the principle that distorts lack into loss by presupposing the place of some Divine order. As a result,

[168] What was left ashore were deemed impostors because they viewed as distorting or concealing, but what the sea should reveal is that there is nothing that would not be an impostor, not because everyone lies, distorts, or conceals but because there is nothing to lie about, distort, or conceal except the fact that there is only nothingness. All that is hidden by impostors, therefore, is that there is no Divine order. I will turn to this shortly, For the moment, it is enough to say that the sea, if viewed objectively, i.e., without subjective distortion, would be recognized as what Pip sees in the depths, i.e., "the unwarped primal world" of "strange shapes" and a "multitudinous, God-omnipresent," with a "foot upon the treadle of the loom," and what Ishamel encounters in the jungle, i.e., that relentless, infinite, directionless weave woven for no end and with no reason. This "unwarped primal world" and senseless weave is all there is in the place where men suppose some Divine order to be. See Chapters 93, "The Castaway," and 102, "A Bower in the Arsacides," in *Moby Dick*. More accurately, as we will see, impostors hide three things: one, that there is no Divine order, two, that such fictions are products of the impostor's "trick," and three, that trick itself.

the men aboard do not perceive the sea's waves objectively, i.e., as Godless; instead, they see them "as if its vast tides were a conscience," the conscience of a hidden God (193). What they fail to see is that their view of the waves is of their own invention, an unrecognized faith that transforms a masterless, limitless, and havenless sea into barren mazes in which they are only temporarily lost. When Ishmael says that the sea is "alien" to man, he means nothing other than this: the mind cannot accurately grasp the sea without distorting it *and* that the mind cannot exist within the sea without distorting it (225). At sea, in other words, the mind distorts the truth of the sea because it must *and* because it cannot do otherwise. This compulsive or spontaneous—but also necessary—distortion expresses the other half of "the Truth": the principle and its presupposition (the first being the undistorted sea, i.e., the masterless globe). Calling the essence of life is no exaggeration, as *Pierre* makes all too clear. The hunt, we will see, is a disfigured manifestation of the principle, a return of the negated in the form of the "phantom," the phantom, Ishamel will add, of "life." What appears at sea is, in a word, the Truth, the truth of the globe and the truth of man.

This principle turns meaningless anarchy into significance without signification, leading to the belief in the possibility of recovering what is felt to be missing. It is what underlies the apparition that every melancholic, romantic landsman suspects in the sea and the spontaneous compulsion to join the hunt for a Whale as an agent. It allows for hope through a spontaneous act of faith, but in the absence of a Whale as an agent, it induces the madness of life at sea, establishing a ~~state-~~of-exception. It is from *this* madness that the hunt offers asylum. As an agent, the Whale is the target because its death, they believe, will deliver what is hoped for, while in truth all this agent does is secure their faith by explaining away their lack of empirical evidence for this faith. Here, Melville's criticism of Hope is ruthless: judging by their *actions*, these men are primarily motivated by the desire to safeguard the validity of their preconceived notions. This subjective act, as we will see in greater detail, is misunderstood by the men, amplifies the insanity, arises as a deformed return of what was repressed, and ultimately asserts something that confirms what was already assumed. The comprehensive logic involving the principle and agent, along with their corresponding terms, impostor and

fiction, will be elaborated later.[169] For the time being, it is enough to recognize the problem presented by the sea, the subject's immediate response, and the importance of the Whale in all that takes place.

This is equally true at the observer-level as at the hero-level of *Moby Dick*, in other words, meaning it is just as true for Ishmael as it is for the Pequod. For now, the difference can be expressed as follows: in addition to needing, identifying (or finding), and pursuing the Whale, Ishmael also comes to *know* the Whale. Few things are repeated in *Moby Dick* with as much emphasis as this. Before delving into the investigations and reflections that transform Ishmael^ into Ishmael, it is important to keep in mind that he does not embark on the voyage as exceptional in any way. Contrary to many interpretations of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael must be taken at his word when he confesses his voluntary assumption of the hunt: "A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's unquenchable feud seemed like my own. With eager ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had sworn violence and revenge" (152). He does not return because he was different, nor because he maintained some "critical distance" from Ahab's delusion, not at all. In fact, the very opposite is true: Ishmael^ not only fully identifies with the fantasy of the hunt, he overidentifies with it; and this overidentification is the first step leading to his detachment from it.[170] With that said, we can now delve into Ishmael's investigations.

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Almost immediately, Ishmael confronts a problem: he lacks the tools necessary for the investigation at hand. The Whale cannot be represented, penetrated, or truly understood, Ishamel surmises, before adding

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[169] The terms "impostor" and "fiction" are taken from *Pierre*, but the notions and their dynamic are involved in *Moby* Dick. In fact, I submit that *Moby Dick* is not comprehensible without these notions, even though they are absent from the book. The next chapter accounts for this logic in detail, including the distinction between what the impostor is and how it appears to the subject.

[170] For Lacan's most detailed account of traversing the fantasy and the structure of fantasy, see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan XIV: The Logic of Fantasy*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (London: Karnac, 2002). For over-identification with a fantasy see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) and Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999).

a prohibition, namely that it "must" not be "painted" (218). Adding a prohibition to a task already declared impossible seems superfluous, but, as we will see, this prohibition proves to be more than rhetorical. Putting that aside, consider the sequence of Chapters from 54 to 59, for instance, which explore the various futile attempts by men to represent the Whale. More significant than the particular failures of these endeavors is the refusal (or perhaps the inability) to abandon the pursuit of representing the Whale. *Moby Dick* explains why Ishmael cannot and must not give up on this task, despite its impossibility and Ishmael awareness of its impossibility. For now, however, acknowledging this impossible demand and the outlines of Ishmael's attempts to answer it is sufficient: each attempt proves inadequate in Ishmael's eyes, and yet he persists, moving on to the next; moreover, after abandoning all these established methods as inadequate, Ishmael continues his investigation and quest to know the Whale *on his own*. The problem, in short, is similar to the challenge posed by melancholy historicism: on the one hand, the Whale cannot be fully understood, on the other, it must be understood; furthermore, it cannot and must not be represented, and yet if it is not, then one forever remains an "infidel"—and a "wretched infidel," as Melville adds in *Pierre*.

The problem at hand is representation, and language is the primary culprit. Words no longer accurately represent their referents and lack direct and objective access to them. Similar to European writers of the mid-19th century, American authors realized that words were no longer transparent tools of knowledge but dense objects containing their own diachronic histories, in consequence of which they could no longer deliver on their promise of objective meaning, representation, and legibility.[171] This discreditation of language extends the epistemic crisis to the various forms of knowledge, all of which rely on representation. Let's consider Ishmael: Despite his extensive research, including consulting numerous documents and reports, he is ultimately left to investigate the Whale on his own and rely on his own wits alone. Established studies, museums, fossils, and even fresh carcasses, Ishmael concludes, hold no more legitimacy than myths,

[171] Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, xviii-xxxii.

tales, or his own musings. Equating empirical and scientific studies with artistic works and myths is not intended to undermine the former or elevate the latter. Rather, the point is that all approaches lack validity and yet all of them are potentially valid. Some knowledge or report may be valid, while another—even if commonly assumed to be of equal stature and credibility—is not, or both may be or both may not be, or one is partially valid while the other is null, etc.; regardless of which is, how and why it is, and to what degree it is valid or not valid, in all cases Ishmael lacks any *a priori* means of determining which are or could be valid and which are not or cannot be. All the studies, information, and investigations he has gathered and made are radically ambiguous, at best partial, always suspect, and never more than fragmentary and distorted accounts of the true nature of the Whale.

Ishmael is in a distinctly modern dilemma: everything fails to represent, and yet everything also potentially represents.[172] Representation fails, therefore, but it also fails to fail completely. Nothing is inherently meaningless, in other words, but nothing provides any clear-cut meaning either. Ishmael, in turn, cannot categorically distinguish between valid and invalid facts, methods, or sources, nor can he differentiate between sound and unsound conclusions. Plagued by this epistemic crisis, he is forced to collect, filter, and interconnect his musings, suspicions, and learning on his own, and weave this web of tentative data, possible correlations, and speculative associations into his allegories in the hope of eventually uncovering some

[172] Franco Moretti defines the problem of modernity in precisely these terms. See Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 1987), 1-13. To this, we should add the Lacanian qualification: if no signifier represents the subject, then no signifier does not (a priori) represent the subject. See Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire." in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006). Ishmael is in a properly modern dilemma: everything fails to represent and yet everything is potentially meaningful, which is to say that while representation fails, it also fails to fail to represent. Nothing is inherently meaningless, but nothing provides unambiguous meaning; and Ishmael cannot make any categorical distinctions between valid and invalid facts, methods, sources, nor can he distinguish between sound and unsound conclusions. For this reason, but also because of Ishmael's alternative Whale, Cesare Cesarino is right to say that *Moby Dick* is a laboratory for the problem of modernity. See Cesare Cesarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

ultimate truth. Each of his inferences relies on others, whether those already made or those yet to come, as none of them can stand alone. All meaning is perpetually deferred from one trace to another, all the while being dependent on a missing but promised key: the Whale. Ahab exhibits a parallel disposition: he is not trying to know the Whale, like Ishmael, but preoccupied with hunting it, nonetheless by discarding all maps and compasses, deeming them useless, and confident that he "can mend all," he proceeds to hunt Moby Dick based on nothing other than his intuition of where Moy Dick must be (391).[173] Setting aside the obvious and not so obvious differences between Ishmael's attempt to know and Ahab's hunt, we can observe what is common between them: one, their discreditation of existing knowledge and methods, two, their certainty that there is something to be found and known or found and killed, and three, their reliance on their own speculations or intuition in response to the discreditation of established knowledge and methods.

This crisis of representation was pervasive during Melville's time, and he was undoubtedly aware of the epistemic and moral challenges posed by modernity.[174] Indeed, as Cesarino has argued, *Moby Dick* can be seen as a "laboratory for the crisis that goes by the name of modernity."[175] To truly understand and grasp the

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[173] Ahab trusts only an intuitive, personal knowledge of where Moby Dick is and will be, a knowledge derived from his assumed knowledge of Moby Dick's will—Moby Dick's movements, as Ishmael instructs, are not determined by the migratory patterns of his species or the fish on which he feeds, but by his own malicious will to wreak havoc on men and their ships. This knowledge on which Ahab relies, as will be discussed and made relevant later, is explicitly denied by Ishmael. Indeed, he will go so far as to assert that the knowledge of the currents, routes, speeds, and even abilities of the Whale are unknown, and, in fact, unknowable to any man. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 154.

[174] Many scholars have documented what Melville had read and conceded that Melville was at least as if not more than any other American author of the era informed about contemporary developments in philosophy, theology, and other relevant fields. Close reading, I would submit, shows that we do not need to peruse his letters, nor make deductions from anecdotes, because *Moby Dick* is proof enough. For an account of the prevalence of the suspicion or even conviction about this crisis of representation in mid-19th century America, see Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum* America.

[175] Cesare Cesarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 1. Cesarino is right to say that *Moby Dick* is such a laboratory, that it experiments with representations of modernity, an age when the framework of representation collapsed, and that it articulates "conceptual-affective and conceptual-perspective constellations that resisted modernity," moreover, he is right that it foreshadows what, by the early 20th century, is recognized as a real state of exception. See Cesarino, *Modernity at Sea*, 1-5. To this I would add that Melville foresaw the outcome of this constellation:

epistemic crisis that Melville explores in *Moby Dick*, it is helpful to interpret Ishmael's investigations through the lens of Foucault's formulation of the modern episteme.

Below the fundamental codes of culture that establish the empirical orders within which individuals operate, separate from scientific theories or philosophical interpretations that explain the existence of order and the principles governing it, there exists the "episteme."[176] According to Foucault, the episteme, by containing the "mode of being of things" and their "unspoken order," i.e., the implicit assumptions, rules, and commitments about being, determines the possible range of thought and knowledge. It is a compound of historical presuppositions, functioning as a historical a priori, but within a given age it appears as if it is "given in things as their inner law," as the ontological truth that has always been there, silently waiting in the depths of things for its moment of discovery.[177] Deviations between the episteme and the empirical order trigger an epistemic crisis that results in the culture's primary codes losing their transparency and legitimacy, and ultimately their power—the same fate, naturally, awaits scientific and philosophical interpretations (323). Such an outcome is logical, of course, since constituted knowledges cannot maintain their credibility if perceived to be distortions, concealments, misrepresentations, or obstructions of the underlying being of things, which stands as the measure against which all knowledge and codes are judged. Foucault's formulation of this crisis mirrors the discontent Melville's characters experience on land, as well as what they posit into

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the subjectively-produced compensation for what this episteme and its discursive forms denied, Moby Dick, as a return of the repressed, a monstrosity produced in compensation for this state.

[176] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 260. Subsequent references are made directly in the text.

[177] Foucault writes: "Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glace, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression." Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxi. In short, the mode of being and the order that initially organizes it appear as natural, inherent, and immanent. Foucault does not use the term, but for the purpose of clarity we can say that this lower layer appears in the position of truth, while codes, theories, and interpretations appear in that of use, manipulation, and knowledge.

the sea, the "terra incognita" Melville describes, and the inaccessible order that they assume would set things aright. Within such a crisis,

> [t]he space of order, which served as a *common place* for representation and for things, for empirical visibility and for the essential rules, which united the regularities of nature and the resemblances of imagination in the grid of identities and differences, which displayed the empirical sequence of representations in a simultaneous table, and made it possible to scan step by step, in accordance with a logical sequence, the totality of nature's elements thus rendered contemporaneous with one another – this space of order is from now on shattered (260).

There continue to be things with structures and relations, and, Foucault adds, there's even a space that would articulate them. In its absence, however, all things appear in a purely temporal succession, isolated and atomized, leaving consciousness no other option than to rely on its own singular effort to know this incoherent multitude. In this respect, Ahab is not altogether different from Ishamel: recall that he does rely on maps or historical records to find Moby Dick but chases his Whale based on *his own* intuitive knowledge of where he must be. With the space of order shattered, representation loses "the power to provide a foundation… for the links that can join [the] various elements together," and, Foucault adds, the condition for such links now appears to "reside outside representation, beyond its immediate visibility, in a sort of behind-the-scenes world" (259). The mode and order of being are inaccessible, and prior knowledges, methods, and instruments are delegitimized. But from this inaccessible lower layer comes what Ranciere calls "mute speech," manifesting in a quivering surface, alluding to itself through fragments and outlines.[178]

> It is from the starting-point of the architecture they conceal, of the cohesion that maintains its sovereign and secret sway over each one of their parts, it is from the depths of the force that brought

[178] See Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 29-40.

them into being and that remains in them, as though motionless yet still quivering, that things—in fragments, outlines, pieces, shards—offer themselves, though very partially, to representation. And from their inaccessible store, representation can draw out, piece by piece, only tenuous elements whose unity, whose point of connection, always remains hidden in that beyond (260).

Compare Foucault's description to Ishmael's confusion while deciphering the oil painting in the third chapter, as he enters the Spouter-Inn:

> [a] large oil painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal crosslights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose. Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched. But by dint of much and earnest contemplation, and oft repeated ponderings, and especially by throwing open the little window towards the back of the entry, you at last come to the conclusion that such an idea, however wild, might not be altogether unwarranted.
>
> But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant. Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through.—It's the Black Sea in a midnight gale.—It's the unnatural combat of the four primal elements.—It's a blasted heath.—It's a Hyperborean winter scene.—It's the breaking-up of the icebound stream of Time. But last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture's midst. That once found out, and all

> the rest were plain. But stop; does it not bear a faint resemblance to a gigantic fish? even the great leviathan himself? (26).

The scene is a synecdoche for the modern condition, epistemically speaking, and, as we will see, for the story told. The resolution is the Whale, of course; but the Whale proves to be equivocal. As does the sea: to the description of the sea as a "horizonless," "howling infinite," Melville adds that it is a "panting and snorting… mad battle steed that has *lost its rider*," as a result of which "the masterless ocean overruns the globe" (224). The cause of this pandemonium is not unequivocal, either: Ahab remains convinced that there is an existing but obstructed order, and thus that its absence is a loss that can be resolved and resolved by breaking through "the masks"; Ishmael, conversely, comes to understand that there is no such order, ontologically speaking, and that what triggered this crisis was the loss of a fiction. The sea was settled, in other words, so long as men had faith in the fiction, a faith that could be maintained only on condition that its representatives, "the Church, the monument, the Bible," for instance, are regarded as legitimate. The rider mentioned in the passage is, therefore, not the fiction but the representation. For the moment, we can focus only on the hero-level and the relentless investigations of the Whale that follow from Ishmael's full identification with Ahab's fantasy. To elucidate this, I turn back to Foucault.

During the Classical age, words existed by virtue of their representative value and their power of analysis, supplication, composition, and arrangement (305). They had syntax and grammar because each meant or represented something. In the modern episteme, however, words have meaning only insofar as they have grammar and syntax. On their own, each is meaningless, signifying nothing (325). The "essential architecture" of words changed, Foucault concludes, because their ability to represent and link up with other words has been lost. Each word is now traversed by history, so they are no longer instruments of knowledge but themselves objects of knowledge. No longer elements of a synchronous representation of the world,

words are now atomized things with their own density and diachronic development (322).[179] The grammar and syntax that would link words together and the less apparent syntax and grammar that would hold words and things together, Foucault argues, are now missing. The fallout of this shattering of representations is the state of language, meaning, and knowledge that has often been identified as a defining feature of modernity: "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else," wrote Benjamin, and "the same object can just as easily signify a virtue as a vice, and therefore more or less anything."[180] To this situation where nothing means anything and wherein nothing is *a priori* meaningless, Foucault's analysis adds a further feature: a word having any meaning is contingent upon not only local grammar and syntax but also on a strict obedience to the laws that regulate language and its placement within an entire linguistic totality. The same can be observed in Ishmael's endless allegories, all of which attempt to derive some universal meaning from every nut and bolt of the voyage and every pound of whale flesh he examines, but which always remain incomplete because the impenetrable Whale always disappoints his attempt to find a definitive meaning in it.

Thrown into a historico-diachronic dimension and tasked with uncovering some narrative in history, consciousness in modernity confronts a relentless onslaught of events, a reality where no event is inherently meaningless and all meaning is derived only from events but wherein, in the absence of a master code, each event presents itself as almost irredeemably ambiguous and isolated from others.[181] Both Ahab and Ishmael find themselves in this epistemic reality, but there is a subtle yet crucial difference: while Ahab acknowledges that "trifles carry meanings," Ishmael firmly believes that "some certain *significance* lurks in *all* things, *else* all

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[179] This life and density of words, as Modern documents in his investigation of what haunted mid-19th-century America, was recognized in the young nation, as was their subsequent failure to deliver on the promise of meaning, representation, and legibility. The young nation, and Melville in particular, he observes, was not blind to words failing their function and morphing into opaque objects. Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, xviii-xxxii.

[180] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 2003), 174-5.

[181] Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 3-13.

things are little worth, and the round world itself is but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way" (331-2, emphasis added). The difference can be conceptualized through the logic of the signifier. The signifier is what represents the subject (or signified) to another signifier, but which of these signifiers is the master signifier and which is the other signifier? Does the master signifier grant meaning to the rest, or does it receive meaning from the others? Translated into *Moby Dick:* does the Whale grant meaning to all else centrifugally or does everything else deliver meaning to the Whale centripetally, while the Whale in-itself is devoid of meaning? Their Whales differ, yes, but even their approaches mark out a significant difference. Recall the episode where Ahab is standing before the skull of a Whale: "speak, mighty head," he says to it, "and tell the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head… has moved amid this world's foundations" (249).[182] For Ahab, the secret to all meaning is literally in the malicious mind of Moby Dick. The statement is rhetorical insofar as the skull to which he is speaking is a proxy for Moby Dick, but what he says should be understood literally. As mentioned earlier, the truth, according to Ahab, is *in* Moby Dick, it is in his will. Ishmael begins with the same convictions, indeed it is his belief that this malice is in Moby Dick that motivates his relentless investigations, his obsessive and earnest dissections and musings over everything from the skin

[182] At first glance, there appears to be a slip here on Melville's part, because Ahab's soliloquy seems to suggest that his investment of the idea of the Whale is not exclusive to Moby Dick, but this appearance is deceptive. The whale to which Ahab is speaking is clearly a prop for his musing about Moby Dick, after all, he does not much care to catch this particular whale nor any other. He remains distinct from Ishmael, better yet, he remains distinct from the process by which Ishmael^ becomes Ishmael. This becomes immediately evident when we consider that unlike Ishmael, he shows no interest in any other whales or in any scholarship or other investigations into whales or whaling. The whale in question here is, in other words, clearly a proxy for Moby Dick. Further, this moment could be read as suggesting that Ahab is aware of the difference between principle and agent, but if it was such a moment, then it would be an exceptional moment of clarity for the old man. A reading of the passage that would be consistent with the dynamics and convictions of his mind in the aggregate, would read it as follows: the statement is a true expression of Ahab's conviction but it is also rhetorical because he is knowingly addressing this carcass as a proxy for Moby Dick, in whom, he believes, is the key that unlocks all meaning. If Ahab was in fact referring to all Whales, then his complete disregard for all other whales, including all sperm whales, would be incoherent.

to the bones, from the will of the tail to the location of the brain, from the positions of its eyes to its lack of ears, etc. In every instance, however, the Whale proves impenetrable: Ishmael cannot read the "hieroglyphics" on its skin, nor even conclude whether the skin is the outer transparent coat or the many feet of blubber below it, nor can he locate its will, nor even determine if the brain is in the head or the spine, etc. Each inquiry fails and the sought-for will, which would provide the key, evades him. Eventually, he resolves that there is no such will in the mind of Moby Dick (or any other brute mistakenly taken as that Whale), but this conclusion, it is essential to note, proves to be a consequence of his initial acceptance of and over-identification with the fantasy of Moby Dick, not of some preexisting difference or initial skepticism or lack of belief.

For Ahab, Moby Dick contains the key to meaning and grants meaning to everything else centrifugally; hence why only Moby Dick matters, while all other whales, like all other concerns, are just "tar and blubber," and why once he has Moby Dick in his sights, everything is already meaningful. Ishmael's case is more complex: even after finding no malicious agent in the Whale, he maintains that Whaling allows one to get his hands on the "foundations, ribs, the very pelvis of the world" and that the Whale is necessary for establishing meaning (or turning significance into signification), in fact, that the key to the possibility of meaning (and a few other things besides) is in the Whale. He, however, maintains all of this through an altogether different cetology. A subtle hint is found in a remark that is otherwise bizarre to the point of senselessness: "No, his great genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it" (274). For Ahab, Moby Dick grants meaning to everything, meaning not only that Moby Dick is the master signifier but also that he represents the signified for all other signifiers. From Ishmael's perspective, on the other hand, such a view makes Moby Dick a fetish. Ishmael, conversely, sees it is the other way around. Indeed, the procedure of his investigations and speculations foreshadows this difference: at first, he begins with established knowledge concerning the Whale, but finding it unsatisfactory soon turns to Whales themselves, which he investigates piece by piece, from their flesh and bones to the placements and functions of their features. In his

parallel investigations of Whaling, the procedure is the same: he begins with what he is told about Moby Dick and the stories and tales of the great Whale, but he eventually turns to every piece and part of Whaling that he can get his hands on, from maps and records to masts and ropes, and even to the uses of the oil and the constructions of the boats in which Whales are pursued and the procedures by which they are hunted. All of this he strings and links together, working his way back up to the Whale and Whaling in their totality, but in each case he finds no substance that would be the key he expected to find. His process goes from an uninterrogated assumption of what he is told to an investigation of that claim in its totality; each such investigation, however, proves unsatisfying, and they prove unsatisfying because of his complete and devoted assumption of the idea of and hunt for Moby Dick, which he assumes literally—we can imagine Ishmael saying to himself 'Moby Dick is what I believe it to be, so I must be able to make sense of the various claims that I have been told (e.g., he is eternal, he is omnipresent, he is the cause and his death the means, etc.); in response to the failure of these more abstract investigations to satisfy his rather obsessive need to know and see, Ishmael does not abandon his conviction but, instead, begins to investigate from the bottom up, analyzing each component part of the great Whale and Whaling, inquiring into it and drawing tentative or speculative conclusions that he manically but carefully weaves together in an attempt to arrive at a proof of what he believes about the Whale and Whaling. It is his very devotion and earnest belief in the fantasy that leads him to traverse it, and it is by way of what he learns that he escapes and returns.[183]

Like the being of what is beyond representation in the modern episteme and would tie the space of

[183] The Conclusion addresses the full logic by which Ishmael must first hunt Moby Dick as a precondition for the *possibility* of evading the fate of being forever condemned to hunting Moby Dicks, but the kernel of this logic is already evident here. The irony is that Ishmael traverses Ahab's fantasy by first identifying with it. He openly confesses as much, as noted above. The cause and means are in Moby Dick, he is told, and he, more than any other man on board, believes it. As a result, he reads every book, analyses every story, takes apart and muses over every part of every Whale, and every element of Whaling, down to the Pequod's last nut and bolt. He takes everything seriously, too seriously, in fact, as he searches for the metaphysical agency said to reside therein. More than identifying with the fantasy, he over-identifies with it, and this over-identification proves itself to be a necessary and first step of the logic of his return.

representation back together, the Whale lies beneath the inscrutable surface of the sea. This parallel must not obscure a difference between Ahab and Foucault: Moby Dick resolves the otherwise inscrutable pain and suffering of humanity, he explains, in other words, the absence of earthly paradise because he is the malicious agent that has dispossessed humanity from attaining its rightful inheritance, but Moby Dick is not what ties the space of representation back together; indeed, that space, Ahab thinks, has not been shattered so much as obstructed by Moby Dick. The difference here is analogous to the earlier-described difference between Melville and Schmitt. His Hopeful beliefs and convictions notwithstanding, at a deeper level Ahab is not modern because he refuses the problem posed by modernity, conceives of the epistemic challenge as nothing but a veil, a lie from which humanity suffers. It is a mask, he thinks, but it is also a mask through which he can break by killing the agent that imposed it. I leave it to the reader to deduce what this implies for Melville's judgment on Hope (and its variants). Ishmael, on the other hand, is fully modern. In contrast to Ahab's Moby Dick, who obstructs what would allow for the world to reestablish itself as Ahab believes it should be, Ishmael's White Whale aims to construct a world out of the fragmented globe. From this difference follows another: to Ahab's vengeance there is no end and there cannot be, while through Ishmael's Gospel there is a return from, which is to say, a resolution to, that avenging dream. The hunt cannot end because its underlying presuppositions are mistaken, and the carcasses of innocents that pile up are just collateral for maintaining its underlying ideologies and its fantasies. It is not without sad irony that Ahab, not Ishmael, foreshadows much of the ideological madness of the 20th century, a century defined, Alain Badiou has proposed, by a passion for the real that has far more often taken the mistaken and vicious road of purification.[184] But that, like the above, are subjects belonging to the next chapter. Ishmael's investigations appear to have the same Sisyphean character, but they are wholly different. To elucidate this, I turn back to *The Order of Things*.

Within the modern episteme, things, Foucault writes, are made to "quiver" by the "force" that

[184] See Badiou, *The Century*, 48-67.

brought them into being, offer themselves as inaccessible "fragments, outlines, pieces, and shards" on the surface, thus forcing consciousness into the arduous and seemingly futile task of dragging these "tenuous elements" out piece by painstaking piece, all the while the "point of connection… remains hidden in that beyond" (260). This is a perfect description of Ishmael's activity, if there ever was one. For Ishmael, there is some secret significance in all things, but as he takes each element, its meaning is tenuous, dependent on its relation to others, and inevitably tied to or dependent on the one thing that is always beyond his grasp. Dozens of times he confesses the futility of his task, but each time he persists. In fact, the relation of failure and persistence is inversely proportional: the more the Whale seems beyond his grasp and the sea's unbounded, the more pressing becomes the necessity of the Whale and the more certain he is of the Whale's significance. In one of many such instances, he says the following:

> The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it. At times there are gestures in it, which, though they would well grace the hand of man, remain wholly inexplicable. In an extensive herd, so remarkable, occasionally, are these mystic gestures, that I have heard hunters who have declared them akin to Free-Mason signs and symbols; that the whale, indeed, by these methods intelligently conversed with the world. Nor are there wanting other motions of the whale in his general body, full of strangeness, and unaccountable to his most experienced assailant. 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 (296).

In the bizarre cetology chapter, Ishmael tries to set out "some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera," calls it a "classification of the constituents of a chaos" and "a field strewn with thorns," and then

confesses man's "unfitness to pursue [this] research in the unfathomable waters," through the "impenetrable veil covering our knowledge of the cetacea" (115). Later, he adds that "the secrets of the currents of the seas have never yet been divulged, even to the most erudite research; [and] so the hidden ways of the Sperm Whale when beneath the surface remain, in great part, unaccountable to his pursuers" (154). Later still, musing over the head of the Whale, he declares that "the front of the Sperm Whale's head is a dead, blind wall, without a single organ or tender prominence," adding that it is only twenty feet deep that any cranial development is found, but immediately adds that this is just a tank of sperm without sensation (267). Failing to grasp what is in the interior, he turns back to the exterior but finds only an undifferentiated surface "pleated with riddles" (274). A moment later, he reconsiders: there are markings on the skin, hieroglyphics. He looks at them, but he cannot read them. He pivots again, declaring that this is no loss for that marked transparent film is not the real skin. The real skin is the blubber, he surmises, but it is dozens of feet deep. He arrives again, therefore, in the depths of the Whale. Later still, turning to the skeleton he finds himself unable to identify the point from which the Whale thinks: eventually, Ishamel settles on the spine at the source, but soon thereafter notices that the Whale's vertebrae begins with unimaginable size but ends in something no bigger than a child's toy (276). He contemplates what the reduction of something so grand to a mere plaything and what the subtleness by which something sublime shrinks to a pebble that fits into a man's hand mean. Ishmael does not express his conclusion, but whatever it was it undermined whatever hopes he had in the bones of the Whale. The skeleton, he shrugs, cannot be the truth of the Whale. It is a disappointing but fitting conclusion; later, Ishmael will say, without hesitation or qualification, that the Whale cannot be properly known except in the act of hunting it: "Only in the heart of quickest perils; only when within the eddyings of his angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out" (348). This sentence, like not a few others, contains far more than its length suggests. Postponing its full significance until its right moment, we can return to Ishmael's investigations. He is spinning in circles, and like a good hysteric he takes everything in earnest before dissolving each belief and starting on another. His tools, he confesses,

are "semi-sciences" and this "anomalous" creature cannot be studied (273). Water or vapor, man, he concedes, cannot even know what the Whale spouts. Nor can he know whether his brain is in his head or his spine. We can know nothing of the Whale, Ishmael concludes, except that with its tail it "dumbly… enact[s] fate" (274). In a final moment, Ishmael remarks that the Whale does not speak but insists that this is to the Whale's credit, in fact, that this silence is his genius (274).[185] Aside from their bewildering content, even the very rhythm of Ishmael's investigations also reflects the tormenting conjunction of certainty and inscrutability—so much so that at times it is torment just to follow their twists and turns.[186] The Whale cannot be known, nor represented, and yet man must decide what is in the Whale's head or "forever remain an infidel" (267).

We know Ahab's answer, or at least part of it. Ishmael's answer will be different. And after he comes to this different answer, Ahab's status in his eyes will change, from a "god-like" hero to a tragic and false redeemer. He will not, however, resign the Whale, nor the conviction that the Whale must be known if one is to be more than a sentimentalist and thereby have a fate other than the hunt. Inscrutable, unknowable, unidentifiable, the "pelvis of the world" must be known, he must be known but "he has no face" (286). It is a

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[185] This conclusion is also too equivocal, applying to the Whale Ahab chases and the Whale Ishmael captures. This identification of silence as genius, as we will see, returns in *Pierre*, wherein God is defined as the "Voice of Silence" and, more crucially, this Silence is what causes Pierre's madness to become intolerable. And like the narrator of *Pierre*, who asks how it is that man can hear silence as the Voice of Silence, so Ishmael arrives at the conclusion that what he seeks—and expects to find—in the Whale is not in the Whale, but in the transcendental structure of the subject's mind. This cannot surprise too much, considering that Ishmael, from early on and consistently throughout, insists that what he is primarily interested in is how Ahab's vengeance became his own; and, moreover, given that his survival involves an earnest and complete identification with Ahab's proposition, to the degree he does little else other than obsessively investigate the Whale (and all things involved with Whaling) and, with equally relentless determination, analyze that "wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling" that made Ahab's "quenchless feud" his own and that ""ineffable thing" that tied all the men to Ahab with a rope they had "no knife to cut." In a word: he is obsessed with the Whale and himself, that is, with the object and the subject involved in this fantasy of revenge.

[186] Ishmael's desperate and relentless investigation is best conceived of as "imbecilic"—I will return to this in the Conclusion. For a definition of the imbecile or imbecilic, see Slavoj Zizek, *Less than Nothing*: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism New York: Verso, 2012), 1-19.

text that cannot be read but must nonetheless be read—and it must be read, he adds, from an "antediluvian" point of view (349). And when read properly, a different Whale will be found.

In addition to the parallels mentioned above, in *Moby Dick* we also find correlates of Foucault's three compensations for the demotion of language. Indeed, versions of formalization, interpretation, and literature are involved in the logic of Ishmael's escape and return. In addition to these parallels, there are two further, essential differences between Foucault and Melville: one, while the subject in Melville is an "impersonal personified" it is not reducible, as Foucault would have it, to a positive effect of discourse, i.e., there is an irreducible part of subjectivity; and two, in Melville there is something that transcends the immanent apparatus of knowledge and power, and this something is not only real but also necessary.[187] The first of these has many names, as we have seen, while the latter is, of course, the Whale. The common but mistaken assumptions about these two elements are involved in Ahab's configuration of the underlying fantasy2 that leads to the hunt, while the true understanding of the subject and the Whale are involved in an alternative configuration at the "lower layer," a configuration that allows for Ishmael's escape and return, that allows, in other words, him to return *as* Ishmael, the founder of a form of life no longer subject to the prophecy, no longer tempted by the fantasy that holds Ahab and crew in its grip. It is, in other words, the configuration of the Gospel. The logic by which Ishmael breaks out of this vengeful dream, a dream, we read in the late chapters, not exclusive to Ahab but which has been repeating since the fall, is the treatise embedded in *Moby Dick*. In many ways, Cesarino is right that *Moby Dick* is a laboratory for the crisis of modernity, but it may be more accurate to say that at a more fundamental level, this fantasy of revenge, as Melville conceives it, is not entirely new but rather a fantasy that reappears whenever a romantic movement calls for the dissolution of the fictions imposed on life, fictions that, Melville thinks, often prove to have something of the virtue of

[187] For the function and nature of this real irreducible to the immanent apparatus of knowledge and power, see Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire*: Lacan Against the Historicists (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 1-14. I will return to this necessity in the Conclusion.

natural law.

Setting that aside, I turn to the impersonal conditions and the point of personality that remains sovereign within the impersonal.

3.4 The Impersonal and the Personal

Atop such an episteme and beneath the gaze of an intelligence lacking the necessary tools, the surface quivers, with its waves seamlessly sliding into one another, leaving behind only traces that vanish as soon as they appear to be discerned. Epistemically, the world appears as a sea of deferrals and hints leading nowhere. This pandemonium forms the background of the plot of *Moby Dick*. Sharon Cameron refers to this epistemic reality as Melville's impersonal: an inscrutable web of proliferating negations and negations of negations that never amount to anything positive.[188] By "positive," she means conclusive and stable, something impervious to deconstruction and which possesses autonomy and self-identity. Moral judgments are subject to this incessant negation, as are the meanings of propositions and the identities of things. A cursory reading of many of Melville's works (e.g., *The Confidence Man*, *Pierre*, or *Mardi*) would support this thesis, but Cameron goes further: the attributes we spontaneously assume to belong to a particular character, including will, decision, opinion, perception, action, morality, and character, are all merely effects of the disordered impersonal that lies beyond them.[189] The forces of the impersonal, she argues, render all individual acts and wills ineffective, suspended, and eclipsed. What appear to be personal characteristics are revealed to be not only fleeting and weak, but also foreign effects of impersonal forces, entirely dependent on the whims of the impersonal. The characters (and readers), however, she adds, mistake these effects for features of autonomous subjects. There

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[188] Cameron, *Impersonality*, 14. Subsequent references are made directly in the text. Cameron's concern is *Billy Budd,* but her depiction of the impersonal network applies equally well—in fact much better—to *Moby Dick*, *Pierre*, and *Confidence-Man*. For her discussion of the notion and its applicability to Melville's works, see the Preface, Introduction, and Chapter 7, "'Lines of Stones': The Unpersonified Impersonal in Melville's *Billy Budd,*" 180-204.

[189] See Cameron, *Impersonality*, vii-xviii.

is no courage in one character or will or intention in another, because all such qualities are illusory as subjective characteristics, instead they ripples and remnants of the movements and recoils of an impersonal that is beyond human control. In short, Cameron argues, autonomy and self-determination in Melville's works are nullified to such an extent that the "personal becomes impersonal."[190] Melville's characters, according to her interpretation, are transitory effects of a disordered discursive structure.

"Nothing," Cameron insists, "closes character off from what might lie outside of it" and the personal simply is the impersonal (181-2). Ahab serves as evidence: he admits that his mind is porous and his skull is cracked, that it is not him who "lifts this arm," that the sea "nursed him," that the impersonal made him mad, and, finally, that his will is set on "iron rails" he cannot alter. Cameron's notion captures much of what takes place in Melville's narratives, but it also misunderstands them—the characters in particular. Not, however, because it denies the existence of any pre-existing or essential substance of subjectivity. In this respect, Cameron's notion is appropriate. One example from *Pierre*: "Pierre went forth all redolent; but alas! his body only the embalming cerements of his buried dead within" (100). Stunning is not only the phrase but also its placement: it closes the section of *Pierre* where it becomes obvious what decision Pierre will make, it concludes, in other words, the passage where Pierre makes the decision that determines the entire plot, and yet, at that very moment Melville drains all substance and autonomous self-determination from his hero and places it instead into the echoes of his dead and foreclosed father. According to Arsic, understanding the impersonal requires letting go of one's personality.[191] To comprehend Ahab's vengeance, one must look to the sea, therefore, and to understand the misery and torment that drove the men to the ship, one must look to the great American desert. All the characters are blind to this determination and mistakenly believe themselves to be the agents of their actions and emotions. Melville's characters are shaped by their historico-

[190] Branka Arsic, "Introduction," *American Impersonal: Essays with Sharon Cameron*, ed. Branka Arsic (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 11.

[191] Arsic, "Introduction," 11.

philosophical conditions, by the epistemic reality these conditions induce and the symbolic structure of their form of life, and there is ample textual evidence to support the claim that their moods reflect these circumstances and that they are blind to this fact. While Cameron is correct in these regards, she is mistaken in asserting that they *remain* blind and *devoid* of all agency. Consider Ishmael: in the opening chapter, he admits that an underlying mood led him to sea and deceived him into believing it was a choice made freely and with discerning judgment; on the other hand, however, he eventually recognizes this and manages to escape and return.[192] He manages to deviate, therefore, from the path dictated by impersonal forces, the same path that leads everyone else to their inevitable end. If Ishmael differs from the others, then what allows this alternative must be accounted for; and if *Moby Dick* fails to do so, then the Gospel would be a fairy tale and treatise useless. Putting aside other issues with Cameron's thesis, we can ask a simple question: If there was only the impersonal, how did Ishmael (and only Ishmael) escape and return? Was it mere chance? If it was mere chance, then what is the purpose of Ishmael's Gospel upon his return? Would it not be more logical to preach crossing one's fingers instead, if his survival comes down to luck?

Cameron's notion can be condensed into three primary characteristics: the impersonal (i) manifests through bodies, thereby showing the limits of their autonomy, (ii) appears as mood and mental state, which subtend other behavior, and (iii) is often experienced as a law outside of the self, which shapes the self even when perceived as aporetic.[193] All of these characteristics apply to Ahab: Ahab is not Ahab, he only "feels, feels, feels," his orientation at sea, and all of his emotions, perceptions, desires, and actions are motivated by external factors, finally he is no agent but a lieutenant of the fates, acting under orders (406, 418, 419). The

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[192] See Chapter 1, "Loomings," in Melville, *Moby Dick*. My objective in this engagement with Cameron and more broadly in this study is to draw attention to the fact that there is an irreducible personal in Melville's works, that it is produced by but also irreducible to the impersonal, and that it too can be known by looking at the impersonal—hence Ishmael's "nowadays" and his claim that "the Truth" "resides in" the sea, which, he adds, can be fully seen only in the midst of the hunt.

[193] Arsic, "Introduction," 8-11.

trouble with Cameron's reading is that it goes too far in denying anything personal. The first problem is obvious: there must be some independent personality for the impersonal to be experienced as aporetic. Beyond this internal incoherence, Cameron's concept also renders the entire plot, prophecy, and Gospel incoherent. At first glance, her neglect of Ahab's explicit identification of himself as the "impersonal personified" is strange, but on closer consideration this oversight reveals itself as necessary for her argument because in that soliloquy Ahab identifies himself more acutely as an irreducible point within the "impersonal personified" (383).[194] Ahab recognizes himself as a personified impersonal but also insists on the existence of an irreducible, sovereign point of personality within the personification. The objection to Cameron is not based solely on Ahab's words but also on his actions, indeed this empty point of personality is a necessary

[194] In support of my argument, as well as in support of what is discussed shortly hereafter, Ahab's soliloquy merits being quoted at length: "'Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e'en for hate thou canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whence soe'er I came; wheresoe'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. But war is pain, and hate is woe. Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee; but at thy highest, come as mere supernal power; and though thou launchest navies of full-freighted worlds, there's that in here that still remains indifferent. Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee.'" Ahab continues: "'I own thy speechless, placeless power; said I not so? Nor was it wrung from me; nor do I now drop these links. Thou canst blind; but I can then grope. Thou canst consume; but I can then be ashes. Take the homage of these poor eyes, and shutter-hands. I would not take it. The lightning flashes through my skull; mine eye-balls ache and ache; my whole beaten brain seems as beheaded, and rolling on some stunning ground. Oh, oh! Yet blindfold, yet will I talk to thee. Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee! The javelins cease; open eyes; see, or not? There burn the flames! Oh, thou magnanimous! N ow I do glory in my genealogy. But thou art but my fiery father; my sweet mother, I know not. Oh, cruel! what hast thou done with her? There lies my puzzle; but thine is greater. Thou knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten; certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun. I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself, oh, thou omnipotent. There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical. Through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it. Oh, thou foundling fire, thou hermit immemorial, thou too hast thy incommunicable riddle, thy unparticipated grief. Here again with haughty agony, I read my sire. Leap! leap up, and lick the sky! I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would fain be welded with thee; defyingly I worship thee!'" See *Moby Dick*, 382-3.

condition for explaining the entire trajectory of the plot. Cameron may respond that Ahab's notion of a sovereign point of personality is an illusion (similarly to how she could argue that Ishmael's confession of autonomy is illusory), but she would be mistaken. Melville's world is chaotic and lacks inherent meaning, and the impersonal is an active force that shapes and motivates individuals, Ahab and Ishmael both acknowledge the influence of mood and repeatedly state that individuals are shaped by their circumstances—Ahab even refers to the men on land as "manufactured" men; however, both also acknowledge that the men at sea cannot be solely defined by their manufactured character, which is the same as to say by their impersonal circumstances alone. There is something more to them, an excess that manifests as discontent with land, as distortion at sea, and as an illusion in the hunt. Ishmael, for example, recognizes this same excess of manufacture in the despair experienced in the American desert and in the metaphysical professor that drives them to the sea, while Ahab explains that this point is what fuels his revenge and drives his search for satisfaction through the hunt: "Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee" (382). By overlooking this small, empty point and reducing everything to the impersonal, Cameron's concept fails to explain Ahab's madness, the crew's loyalty to Ahab, and the significance of the Whale. Without acknowledging this point, the entire logic of *Moby Dick* is lost. Even in the case Cameron considers most closely, *Billy Budd*, her concept misses what resists or objects to the impersonal and its sprawling meaninglessness, and, in turn, losses the central act and thereby the whole plot: Billy's fist, the act Cameron tries to explain through her understanding of the impersonal is a conclusion, an inexorable refusal of infinite dispersal without meaning. Melville's narratives are staged atop a veritable sea of semantic ambiguity, collapsing identities, blurring distinctions, endlessly deferred meanings, and opposites indifferently turning into one another, but the drama is only possible if something refuses, if something resists a reality that would be less than epistemic anarchy, because there would not even be anything stable enough to pass the normative judgment of calling meaninglessness anarchy.

Confidence Man is exemplary in this regard, and a brief look is instructive: the plot—if the book can

be said to have a plot—goes nowhere, only relentlessly narrating contingently tied events so exhausted by conditional terms, conspicuous personages and motives, masks and trickery, deception and unrecognizable pronouns, that any semantic or logical clarity is on the very precipice of impossibility; a man walks onto a boat, characters bounce around in conniving conversation, more board and some disembark, conversations continue, the novel ends, and ends at a point whose justification is no greater than if Melville had simply run out of paper. It can almost be reduced to a sequence of randomly strung together interactions between various characters trying to trick one another, establish sincerity and give confidence, before taking advantage or finding themselves fooled. Often, it is not even clear who is who, or who has what intention. Composed of randomly sequenced instances of trickery, deception, reversals, shape-shifting, conversion, transgression, debate, confusion, paradoxes, inversions, faith and self-interest, this novel takes place on a riverboat named "The Fidele." One chapter, properly titled "THE MAN WITH THE WEED MAKES IT AN EVEN QUESTION WHETHER HE BE A GREAT SAGE OR A GREAT SIMPLETON," has this man meditating on kindness, and Melville is clearly at pains to display the impossibility of certainty, even for comprehension of the confusion: in less than a page almost two dozen overlapping conditional formulations—all that is clear, in effect, is that something has been said.[195] So adamant is his insistence on the matter that the reader must

[195] To quote just a segment of the chapter, as an example: "Meditation over kindness received seemed to have softened him something, too, it may be, beyond what might, perhaps, have been looked for from one whose unwonted self-respect in the hour of need, and in the act of being aided, might have appeared to some not wholly unlike pride out of place; and pride, in any place, is seldom very feeling. But the truth, perhaps, is that those who are least touched with that vice, besides being not unsusceptible to goodness, are sometimes the ones whom a ruling sense of propriety makes appear cold, if not thankless, under a favor. For, at such a time, to be full of warm, earnest words, and heart-felt protestations, is to create a scene; and well-bred people dislike few things more than that; which would seem to look as if the world did not relish earnestness; but, not so; because the world, being earnest itself, likes an earnest scene, and an earnest man, very well, but only in their place — the stage. See what sad work they make of it, who, ignorant of this, flame out in Irish enthusiasm and with Irish sincerity, to a benefactor, who, if a man of sense and respectability, as well as kindliness, can but be more or less annoyed by it; and, if of a nervously fastidious nature, as some are, may be led to think almost as much less favorably of the beneficiary paining him by his gratitude, as if he had been guilty of its contrary, instead only of an indiscretion. But, beneficiaries who know better, though they may feel as much, if not more, neither inflict such pain, nor are inclined to run any risk of doing so. And these, being wise, are the majority. By which one sees how inconsiderate those persons are, who, from the absence

concede that there is only one certainty amidst this cacophony of words and intentions: the reader, no less than the characters, be they innocents or deceivers, will assume something, indeed cannot but assume something, but it will be through confusion and deferment, on faith, always tentative, and probably wrong. *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* make clear that such disorder—better yet, such disgrace—cannot be assigned to the epistemic limits of subjects. They are not confused. Rather, the disgrace belongs to the structure of the situation itself. The confusion is in the situation, to see it clearly is to be confused. These passengers do not see it objectively, however, and so they fall time and again for trickery. It is reality itself that is distorted, confused, inconclusive, inconsistent, and it is the characters that produce semblances of order and meaning, thereby permitting trust, but their fragile and desperate semblances dissolve, quickly and inevitably. Melville did not fail to recognize this, though much critical theory still does: "[g]reat pains, small gains," says crazy Ahab, in what appears a throwaway remark, "for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself" (332).[196] A reflection of the epistemic consequences of its historico-philosophical conditions, *Confidence Man*'s forty-five chapters and 250 pages squeeze into one passage: "What are you? What am I? Nobody knows who anybody is" (165). Which character says this? It makes no difference, none. *Confidence Man* is paradigmatic, but the same phenomenon is depicted across his mature works. No statement in such a reality either negates or affirms, but, at the same time, none of them fail to do either conclusively. Only allusions and suggestions, distortions and suspicions are offered to the tormented mind evermore condemned to an endless and insidious

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of its officious manifestations in the world, complain that there is not much gratitude extant; when the truth is, that there is as much of it as there is of modesty; but, both being for the most part votarists of the shade, for the most part keep out of sight." Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade,* ed. Hershel Parker and Mark Neimeyer (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 32-33. Subsequent references are made directly in the text.

[196] Melville, *Moby Dick*, 332. For Melville, what merits the name ideology is not something that distorts one's view of reality, it is not a lie told, so to speak; rather, it is that reality itself, reality is itself ideologically structured, albeit this structure follows from the historico-philosophical conditions and the contribution made by the subject. For a succinct articulation of this distinction, and its basis on Marxism and psychoanalysis, see Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), 1-55.

uncertainty of significance. Nothing signifies a given signified, but, by the same measure, no signifier does not signify any given signified. Nothing means anything, in other words, but nothing is a priori inherently meaningless—something may be meaningless, indeed much if not everything is, but nothing can be assumed as such and the spontaneous reasoning of the characters never permits them to do so. Words fail twice, therefore: they fail to represent but they also fail to fail to represent. So insufferable is such inscrutability that the mind will inevitably, desperately, and understandably rush beyond all common sense for some asylum. And so, the trust of the Fidele's passengers is posited; and so, Billy's fist rises; and so, the phantom in the sea beckons landmen to "take to the ship".

Two consequences can be drawn from the above. Firstly, the slippery and ever-shifting nature of meaning does not result in a world of detached, isolated, and marooned terms. Instead, Melville's characters navigate a constantly evolving and morphing web of relations, a network of underdetermined elements and deferred meanings relentlessly seeking consolidation. Ishmael's investigations and speculations are a case in point. The significance of this cannot be overstated: the pandemonium these characters encounter does not manifest as a meaningless world, but rather as a field of perplexing mazes; they perceive hints and promises of meaning everywhere and in everything, but all these hints and promises revolve around something that appears lost, or at the very least, impenetrable. They do not experience meaninglessness, but a world where every small detail holds significance and everything is interconnected, even if no one understands how. Were this not the case, no one aboard the Fidele would ever be deceived, the Pequod would be incapable of choosing a direction to sail, and Billy's fist would never rise, leaving him stuttering forever and without end. Something obstructs this impersonal and it serves as the condition that allows the action and drama to unfold. It is the relentless pursuit of closure that transforms *Confidence Man* into a novel that could *almost* be reduced to a random sequence of events. Secondly, this network of perpetually deferred meaning is not a passive backdrop against which characters act and think independently, but an epistemic reality that drives and motivates the characters. The problem with Cameron's idea is that it only acknowledges the latter aspect, while denying

the former. Ishmael's state of mind before embarking on his sea voyage is sufficient evidence that Melville was not oblivious to this:

> Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship (18).

The "drizzly November in [his] soul" inclines him towards engaging in purposeless delinquent acts, all of which reflect an aimless anger and shape his interpretations, evaluations, and reactions to the world. It is all involuntary, his actions, deeds, thoughts, and perceptions are merely expressions of impersonal circumstances and his attunement to them. Note the choices: either take the pistol or take to the ship. If these are the only options, his discontent is not only unbearable but also untreatable within the form of life on land. The part of Ishmael that feels this discontent and seeks its resolution, like the empty point of darkness in Ahab, is excluded from and impossible within the conditions on land. A few pages later, this is further substantiated:

> Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage… though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment. Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale

himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity (22).

Ishmael recognizes the function and silence of the impersonal but also expresses an irreducible element of subjectivity. First through the appearance of the "idea" of the Whale and then in his confessed "curiosity." If the subject was just a reflection of the discourse, or if personality was just the impersonal personified, if Ishmael had no mind of its own, so to speak, there could be no "idea of the great whale" and no curiosity; to which we could add, no enervation by the great American desert, no desperation, frustration, want, or sense of something lacking, nor could there be any basis objective or subjective basis for the "demon phantom" that allegedly swims "before all human hearts." And in the absence of *that* idea, there could be no Moby Dick. The reason is clear: if the form of life on land denies and prohibits the Whale and if the subject is nothing but a positive effect of its conditions, then what would the source of (or the need for) this idea be? The sea cannot be the source either, given that it neither bears nor tolerates leviathans. In a word, if Melville's characters are reduced in the manner Cameron's notion demands, the entire plot would be lost—to say nothing of the prophecy, Gospel, and treatise. No woe, no madness, and no hunt, and Moby Dick *would be* just a dumb brute hunted for no reason whatsoever. He is, after all, as Ishmael learns, nothing but oil and blubber until he is "invested" with the "idea" of the Whale, after which he transforms into the eternal and omnipresent malice that the Pequod hunts.

Moby Dick cannot be the product of the impersonal because he fixes meanings and establishes horizons, explains suffering and gives orientation, and the impersonal is defined by the absence of both. The origin of the idea of the Whale can only be the subject, therefore, but if that is the origin, then the subject cannot be nothing but the impersonal personified. The idea of what Whale can only come from something other than the historico- philosophical conditions, from something irreducible to the symbolic structure that subjectivizes individuals into the debased, melancholic, and absent-minded romantics they are, and from something that is beyond the epistemic reality they face. Ishmael's discovery is that it comes from a facet of

subjectivity that not only defies its impersonal conditions, but which experiences itself dissatisfied, discontented, and enervated within them; conditions that drive this irreducible element of subjectivity, along with the manufactures character that clothes it, to madness due to what it experiences as intolerably lacking from them. More than a manifestation of discontent, therefore, the Whale is the manifestation of an essential and inherent feature of the subject being denied by the world as it is. Put otherwise, Melville's point is that the liberating, democratic ideology of the 19th century, embodied in the great American desert, is out of joint with the nature of man. It may please the avowed beliefs of the age, but it conflicts with a lower layer that is not amenable to change. As such, this inner sovereign point also pits man himself against his manufactured character. When Ahab and his men set out to sea, they leave more than the carking cares of earth behind in disgust, they also abandon in disgust—even if unbeknownst to themselves—the men they were. Was *Moby Dick* without this point of personality, without the principle, there would be no prophecy because there would be no woe, because there would be no madness and no distortion of the sea, no source of Moby Dick, but also nothing to fear politically and nothing to blame subjectively. Without this small empty and discontented principle, *Moby Dick* would be just an agonizingly long, confusing, and ultimately useless series of musings by one madman about another.

Note another revealing detail: a "strong moral principle" is required to prevent Ishmael from "stepping into the street" and engaging in directionless delinquency. Could Starbuck be of help? No. Melville is adamant that his right-mindedness, level-headedness, and reasonableness cannot provide Ishmael with what he needs, not aboard the Pequod and not ashore. No less than the hedonism and nihilism of Stubb and Flask, Starbuck's convictions and principles leaves men "morally enfeebled." Ishamel must lack the means for this self-control because he admits to committing such acts involuntarily and because the only deterrents available on land are suicide or exodus, implying that the moral principle needed is nowhere to be found on land. As becomes even clearer in *Pierre*, what Ishmael needs is not only absent but *constitutively* lacking from the form

of life on land.[197] Moreover, this form of life offers no prototype or model, no idea—in the colloquial sense of the term—of what this principle demands, and yet it is within this form of life that Ishmael experiences an existential need for it. Like Ahab, the conditions that shaped him left him lacking, weakened, and dissatisfied. And what he senses the absence of and an irresistible longing for, despite never having encountered or experienced it, is an alien and authoritative moral principle. Here then is Melville's retort to Emerson and the other Transcendentalists: not only does man lack a Divine soul within and not only is the demand to depose all alienating authorities a fool's errand that will leave man absent-minded, morally-enfeebled, and paralyzed, as opposed to setting him on the path to truth, virtue, and autonomous self-expression, but the sole inherent feature of man is the need for alienation, an alienation that is constitutive of a rational and moral subject capable of action. "leave the quarry," as Melville will instruct his youthful hero, Pierre, and "study architecture." To appreciate just how far off the mark Emerson's Hope is, in Melville's eyes, consider a fuller expression of this warning:

> Youth must wholly quit, then, the quarry, for awhile; and not only go forth, and get tools to use in the quarry, but must go and thoroughly study architecture. Now the quarry discoverer is long before the stone-cutter; and the stone cutter is long before the architect; and the architect is long before the temple; for the temple is the crown of the world (256)

Ahab's retort to Starbuck's accusation of "blasphemy," when read from this perspective, reveals itself

[197] A moral principle could prevent such activity and reorient him, but such a moral principle is nowhere to be found in the great American desert. As Chapter 4 makes clear, the reason Ishamel lacks such a moral principle is two-fold: on the one hand, as an orphan he has been deprived of any interiority, including what Melville in *Pierre* calls the subject's "inner angel,"; on the other hand, as will also be made clear in Chapter 4, the great American desert lacks any authoritative moral codes, authoritative in the sense that they would be imitated (or followed) even when they are distanced from the subject. Put another way, the reason for the lack of moral principle that would discipline and reorient Ishamel's delinquency is lacking because he is an orphan and because the great American desert is the realization of the American fantasy of masterlessness.

an ironic self-diagnosis of his pathology: "Who's over me? Truth has no confines" (140).[198] It is true, there is no one above him, no impostors imposing on him. And indeed, the truth is not confined. The "truth" in question is double: it is the truth of the subject, i.e., the principle, but it is also ontological truth of Godlessness; because the principle presupposes the place of where the fiction of God would be, in the absence of impostors securing that fiction, the subject is left tormented by the certainty that in this silence it hears a Voice, but a Voice it cannot turn into a Word. As I wrote once before already, if *Moby Dick* is read closely, the reader will recognize that it's almost mockery when Ishmael asks: "Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?"

In the desert, this truth appears as an uncanny discontent and curiosity, later on the "most candid seas," it appears as the distortion of lack into loss, and then, in the final moment, it appears in the shape of a whale. In the first moment, we can say it manifests discontent and promise, in the second, as madness and faith, and in the third as a delusion and an asylum. Ahab is correct, therefore, but he does not recognize that he is the cause of his troubles, of the wound he so courageously tries but will forever tragically fail to heal. Initially, while listing Ahab's distinguishing traits, one was noted but left unaddressed: his wound is self-inflicted. There are a few ways this can be read and be true. One is that what haunts him is his own presupposition and that what drives him to his death is his own delusional projection; put another way, Ahab is the origin of both "~~God~~ hunt us" and the alternative "we hunt Moby Dick." That what he has projected, i.e., the "idea" of the Whale, has fallen on a "white hump" is a matter of personal of historical contingency—it could have been a black hump, a brown hump, a green hump, or the hump of a blue whale, and it would have been something different, not a hump at all. Another sound way to read this self-inflicted wound is to see it as referring to Hope, that is, to see the Hope led to Woe and Hope led to Madness and Hope led to the hunt from which none of the Hopeful return. A third would be to read it as indicting man as the source of his own misery and failures to redress it because he is born of crooked timber, as the saying goes, and not some

[198] I will return to this response in detail in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6.

imagined malice hiding in the depths as the obstacle preventing men from being what they wishfully image they could be. A fourth, to which I will shortly turn, would be to read this self-inflicted wound, which, of course, cannot be healed so long as the inflicted remains as and what he is at the "lower layer," as equivalent to a warning announced in *Pierre*: "to comprehend, is himself to condemn himself," which is, Melville adds, "always highly inconvenient and uncomfortable to a man" (209).

An absence from the conditions that shaped life on land and the "impersonal personified" produces a lack that is instinctually experienced as psychologically intolerable. It may be no more than a "point," but it maintains its "royal rights." It is empty, without substance or predication, a darkness but a darkness that rises and stands in antagonistic contradiction to the conditions and the character that exclude it, before reflexively leaping back in vengeance. If there is a discovery of the psychoanalytic unconscious in literature, it is, I submit, in *Moby Dick*. A close reading of Ahab's soliloquy and of *Pierre* in their entirety suffices as evidence. Any interpretation that completely reduces the personal to the impersonal in Melville confronts a decisive obstacle: it cannot account for the works' central conflicts, not for Billy's "sublime fist," not for Ahab's Moby Dick, not for Ishmael's alternative whale, not for Pierre's quagmire of madness, etc. Consider *Moby Dick*: if such a reduction was valid, then Moby Dick would have to be either an objective property of the sea or a property of some empirical whale, neither of which is permitted by the text (or the treatise embedded in it). In fact, it is this very lack that makes madness the latent truth of woe and the masterless sea the latent truth of life on land, both of which are only waiting for the opportunity to manifest. Cameron's interpretation cannot account for Moby Dick because it refuses this empty but irreducible element of the subject, which Melville refers to as the principle. Aside from losing Billy's fist and Ahab's Whale, such a reduction conflicts with the general subjective perception of reality in the narratives: not one of Melville's characters accepts nothingness or pure meaninglessness, not one of them *can not* see significance even on the candid seas, and at no moment does Melville describe this as a choice or personal pathology. A rebuttal that the want of a whale, i.e., the "demon phantom that… swims before all human hearts," and the hunt for Moby Dick are forms of

individual pathology, be it cognitive or psychological, fails for reasons internal to the notion itself: if the personal is fully reducible to the impersonal, and if the impersonal is as Cameron describes, then where would these personal delusions, fetishes, confusions, fantasies or whatever else come from? In fact, if Cameron's notion is enacted in its full implications, then not only would Billy's fist be lost as possible and not only would the primary features of the impersonal dissolve but the entirety of *Billy Budd* would disappear and all that would be left would be the cutting-room floor of the proverbial room with its one-thousand monkeys on one-thousand typewriters. Something distorts and resists the impersonal from manifesting as pure meaninglessness. If something did not, then there would be just a void and nothing to hear it—there would be, in other words, nothing to turn "silence" into the "Voice of Silence." We do not, however, need to poke at the inconsistencies of the notion if what is in question is what Melville thought. Instead, we can simply recall an already-cited definition: "It is the law," as Pierre recognizes, "[t]hat a nothing should torment a nothing," before adding the sobering truth, "I am a nothing" (273). Setting aside the question of the conditions that lead to this situation and the full exposition of the dynamics involved, a few simple observations bear mention. One, Pierre is not reduced to nothing but to "a nothing"—Melville will describe how his youthful and hopeful hero is turned to ruin but he will insist that Pierre is not simply a ruin but a ruin haunted by the foreclosed presence of the "saint" whose fall brought the young romantic hero to this state. Two, the heavens above are also not reduced to nothing but to another "a nothing"—God may not exist, but the place of the Divine remains. And three, what is the cause of the torment? How can there be any form of frustrating relation if there is pure nothingness on both sides? How can there be torment if there is nothing to be tormented and nothing that does the tormenting? Is this formulation just a rhetorical flourish on Melville's part? No; and the narratives of both *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* prove as much because they are only coherent if such a notion of the subject is operative with them. A few pages later, Melville adds an elucidating remark: "Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the

spiralness of the stair, and the blackness of the shaft" (287). If, as Melville writes, "appallingly empty is the soul of man," then there is no bottom, no inherent substance to be found in the depths of man. The unalienated subject is empty, but this emptiness is concealed by its incessant pursuit of some foundational substance. As German Idealism theorized that behind the veil there is only what the subject itself had posited there by presupposing it, so for Melville there is nothing in the soul of man but what is posited there. In *Pierre*, the possibilities are identified: the alienated subject has what it internalized, a soul, its "inner angel," its "moral compass," etc., while the orphan has nothing, nothing but the shadows cast by its own search for something, a search the precondition of which is the principle and its presupposition of the place where something would be. What holds for the soulless heart of man, holds also for the Godless heavens: there is nothing there, nothing but a looking for something made possible by the spontaneous presupposition of a place, which is to say, of the idea, as it were, that there is something to find. The first "a nothing" in the formulation above names the fact that Virtue and Vice are "falsely diverging shadows of the same nothing" and the second "a nothing" is the soulless orphan, stripped of everything but its one inherent feature, its principle. What makes the subject just a little more than nothing is also what makes the heavens just a little more than nothing, too. First the presupposition posits the place, after which, if that place is left vacant, a shadow cast by that empty place in nothingness torments the nothing that posited it. Melville's subject, in the conditions of the 19th century, is what manifests the effect of a ~~state~~-of-exception. It is a creaturely thing that shows its true colors, as it were, when it's 'liberated' into orphanhood and empty space. In itself, it is nothing but an empty point without inherent substance, but when all impostors and fictions disappear, there in the midst of the world reduced to a meaningless sea, the principle remains.

Scholars and critics who point out that Melville's subjects are driven by forces so undeniable and powers so constitutive that they are beyond their control are correct, but they err whenever they reduce the subject to compound of positive reflections of its impersonal conditions—these conditions may well exhaust the characters, so to speak, but they do not exhaust the subject. Such reductions miss what Melville conceived

of as the subjective element of "the Truth," the empty point and the Whale, and thereby cannot coherently comprehend why it is that asylum is sought in the hunt—they cannot comprehend either part of "God hunt us, unless we hunt Moby Dick." Nor can they comprehend why men born in the great American desert would ever turn their eyes to the sea.

Is Ahab, Ahab? It depends where and when we ask the question. On land? No; because on land both this empty sovereign point and the Whale are excluded and denied. At sea? Yes, there he is Ahab. He is Ahab when he takes to the sea, which is also to say, when the antagonistic contradiction between his world and manufactured character and this denied, empty point of sovereignty manifests. It manifests as madness, but this madness is also "sane" for it is the expression of what Ahab cannot deny. For Ahab this venture is completed through Moby Dick, meaning through the maddening of that madness.[199] If the same question was posed to Moby Dick, 'is Moby Dick, Moby Dick?' The answer would also be a yes and no, albeit for different reasons. The Whale is ex-timate: he is part of the subject but also outside of him, originating if (or from) Ahab but appearing as and embodied in something that is other than and outside of him, a dumb brute to which he gives chase.[200]

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[199] Undoubtedly, it appears paradoxical to claim that Ahab's irreducibility to his conditions manifests in the agent that sets his "fate on iron rails." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 376. Put another way, it appears paradoxical to claim that what is truly Ahab is the projection of an alien object that completely dominates and determines him henceforth, but that is part of Melville's irony—the non-pathological correlate of which is that the subject is not stultified by alienation but dependent on and enlivened by it. Indeed, although Moby Dick is a pathological fantasy, Moby Dick has what Kant called negative magnitude, through which it keeps the space of desire and thus the necessary for freedom. A second ironic twist is that the subject must first make the wrong or false choice as a condition of making the right one. Salvation from fervently hunting some Moby Dick, in other words, must first pass through an identification with that fantasy. The details of this are dealt with in Chapter 4 and need not detain us here. As we will see, the same object and dynamic manifests differently in Ishmael, such that it offers not a fate of vengeance and insanity but an alternate fate of liberty, a freedom produced through a logic as ironic as Ahab's hunt is insane. It is ironic for two reasons: one, for Ishmael to escape the fate embodied by the Pequod he must first identify with the fantasy that leads to it, only to later traverse it, and two, he does not evade hunting Moby Dick by refusing to capture some Whale but by capturing another Whale instead, the White Whale.

[200] "Ex-timate" is one of the neologisms frequently used by Lacan to designate facets of various psychoanalytic concepts that he thought had topological structures. The term itself is used to describe

something that is simultaneously within and outside of the subject and, moreover, something that, on the one hand, belongs to or comes from the subject, but, on the other hand, exists outside and to an extent independently of the subject.

Chapter 4: An Inner Catastrophe, The Case Of Pierre

"a nothing tormented by another nothing"
Melville, *Pierre*

4.1 Orphans and Liberty

"Nowadays, the whale-fishery furnishes an asylum for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the cracking cares of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber" (135). That is the prophecy, but the "many" is a misnomer because all individuals born in the vast American desert share a common yearning for the sea. Those who have not yet experienced this longing will eventually succumb to it, and when they do, they will take to the sea, and at sea, they will find asylum in the hunt. Their vengeance may be directed towards a different target, but whatever they set their sights on will be a Moby Dick, their Moby Dick. They will be an Anacharsis Clootz-like delegation, accompanying Old Ahab in order to present the world's grievances before a bar from which "not very many return" (107). Here too, the "many" is a misnomer. In the prophecy, "many" means "all," and in this case, "not very many" means "none". They accompany Ahab on a crusade from which none return.

The immediate reference is the Pequod's men, none of whom ever come back because all of them die once their harpoons finally pierce Moby Dick. They do not return because Moby Dick shatters the boats and them and the Pequod to the bottom of the sea. They do not return because instead of killing Moby Dick, they are killed by him. But there is a deeper meaning: all who board some Whaleship in pursuit of some Moby Dick will not return, not because they are killed by the Whale they intend to kill, but because even if they

succeed in killing it, their quest for Moby Dick will be a failure; they will have failed because they will have failed to kill Moby Dick; and as long as the hunt fails, the hunt will persist. If the hunt persists, they will not return. They will have failed even if they seem to have succeeded because Moby Dick cannot be killed. Ishmael^ had heard rumors of Moby Dick's immortality, but later he discovers the true reason behind why he cannot die. For the others, each failed hunt will only reinforce their belief that Moby Dick must still exist somewhere out there. Whatever carcass they haul out of the sea will not be Moby Dick, but just another, meaningless mass of tar and blubber. Instead of suggesting to them that Moby Dick does not exist, all such carcasses will only reinforce their belief in his malice. They have *not* been hunting something that does not exist, they will assure themselves, instead they have been fooled and deceived by his cunning into chasing some decoy. Angered and ever more convinced about what they must do, they will push whatever remains of this beast overboard and, with even greater vengeance and purpose, scan the horizon once again. Their misery will not be washed away by that kill or by any of the many others that may follow, and so they will continue to believe that Moby Dick is out there, somewhere, still. Instead of waking them to the truth, their failure will only serve as further evidence of his cunning and malevolence. Failure will only strengthen their conviction and fervor. Every apparent success will prove a failure in disguise; a failure that ensures the continuation of their crusade. There will be no end to their pursuit because there can be no end unless it concludes with their own death at the hands of a leviathan. They may kill one, two, or a thousand, but neither the first, nor the second, nor any of the other whales they slaughter by mistake will bring the massacre to an end. It will continue as long as they live because it can only end through their death or his—and he cannot be killed. And so, all will head out to sea, and all will readily assume the hunt, and none will ever return. None, except those that return as Ishmaels.

The apparent paradox is resolved when interpreted through the two layers of the hunt, the upper layer of resolution and the lower layer of configuration. The assumption that the resolution to humanity's suffering lies in the hunt presupposes Ahab's configuration at the lower layer, but this configuration can lead

only to failure at the level of resolution because it sets up an impossible task of capturing a ghost, of finding and killing something that does not exist except by way of the mistaken presuppositions at the lower layer. The second trick, as it were, of this lower layer is that failure at the upper layer ensures the continuation of the avenging dream. The hunt cannot be abandoned but only repeated in response to failure. The hunt is destined to fail because Moby Dick as the cause does not exist, i.e., because there is no malicious entity responsible for humanity's suffering. This does not mean that there is no misery or no causes of humanity's misery, but rather that there is no obstructing force preventing the alignment between the cities of men and the order of God. There is no such obstruction because the substances it supposedly obstructs do not themselves exist: there is no Divine order above and there is no Divine soul within. Melville disagrees with Transcendentalism at the level of first principles: there is no moral soul and no Divine order, instead there is only nothing and another nothing. Whatever misery plagues man since the time of Adam, it is not Moby Dick. No hunt and no massacre, not one and not a thousand such ventures can kill Moby Dick because there is no Moby Dick. Instead, all that will come from the hunt is failure and the mindless and futile repetition of such carnage.

Moby Dick cannot be killed because any whale killed cannot be Moby Dick. If the killed-whale was Moby Dick, humanity's suffering and torment would end. Because it does not, then the killed-whale is not Moby Dick. The problem lies in the minds of those who think like Ahab, who will insist that the real Moby Dick must exist somewhere. If he is not the carcass on the deck before them, then he must be somewhere. They believe in Moby Dick, and then believe in Moby Dick because he is the manifestation of the presupposition with which they have configured their understanding of what troubles mankind. Ahab's failed pursuit happens because at the lower layer of the mystery surrounding his leg the old man and his crew have configured the problem in a way that assumes there must be a Moby Dick. They have presupposed his existence, in other words, before they even knew about Ahab's foe, before they ever saw him, and certainly before they set out to hunt him. Ultimately, this is why the men could (and did) so readily agree and assume

his rage as their own. Somewhere deep within them, deeper than they may have ever wondered, they were already predisposed and primed to embark on the hunt. All that was missing was someone to point a finger and say, 'That thing over there, hidden just beneath what you can see, is the cause of your misery. Now, kill it!' Rogin's observation that the men arrive with "an anger without a target" should be slightly reformulated: the men arrive with an anger *seeking* a target—a target they are already convinced exists. The same can be said if we view the men not as angry, but as seeking a cause; they embrace Ahab's mission because they already believe there is some cause to be found. If properly understood, the hunt is a perfect instance of ideology, defined as an instance when the way a problem is perceived is itself part of the problem. The hunt is not a solution and cannot be a solution because what underlies the resolution is a configuration that produces a false problem and then a resolution that fails to resolve it. Simply put, the hunt fails as a resolution because the problem has been misunderstood and misconfigured at the lower layer. Humanity's misery is not due to a malice that obstructs the alignment of moral souls with the mind of God. Whatever the cause of humanity's failures may be, their frustration and pain is not the fault of something other than humanity itself. The crusade fails because it is driven by Hope's mistaken ideology and its refusal to reflect on itself. Therein is Melville's message: Hope will lead to catastrophe, an endless cycle of moral but vengeful crusades that will result in nothing but pointless carnage, a senseless and desperate destruction until little or nothing of what once was remains. Along the way, the world will be reduced to ruins until "the masterless ocean overruns the globe" (224). If one reads Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust" with care, one will immediately see that it is the same story, told from a slightly different perspective: Hawthorne's liberators burn all of humanity's inventions and creations in an attempt to rid the world of imperfections and sins; Moby Dick is each and every one of the things they throw into the flames, but more than that, he is the belief that there is some virtuous state to be arrived at and he is what they are chasing as their anger and rage move from one object to another, from the lies of newspapers to the medicine cabinets of doctors, and from the works of great authors to systems of law, all of which are blamed in turn as the cause of man's inability to be what he has imagined men to be capable

of.

None return—*except* Ishmael, who he returns by traversing the fantasy of the hunt. How does he traverse it? When does he escape it? He has escaped its hold the moment the hunt no longer makes sense, that is, the moment the resolution no longer aligns with his (new) underlying configuration. The hunt, we saw, made sense to the men on the quarter-deck because the idea of Moby Dick and the idea of some such malice aligned with their underlying presuppositions. Ishmael escapes and returns because, at some moment, Ahab's "mad" but "sane" proposition no longer makes sense. He returns because he *re*configures the "riddle" of what troubles Ahab's leg. Nothing at the level of resolution explains why the hunt must fail—not Moby Dick's speed, not his size, not his ferocity, and not the crew's skill or determination. The cause of failure resides at the lower layer; and so long as this underlying configuration remains intact, the experience of humanity's misery and suffering will be interpreted as the consequence of some malicious, alien agent. So long as the two Transcendentalist metaphysical convictions remain, something—*anything*—will be taken as Moby Dick at the level of resolution and hunted in turn. If this something is killed, it will prove to not have been Moby Dick, but this will not matter because the belief in Moby Dick as the only conceivable cause and thus the hunt as the only resolution are preordained by their misconceptions. Hope will forever be disappointed, and it will grow evermore frustrated and enraged in turn, so long as it fails to reflect on itself, on its priors, on its—according to Melville—Misconceptions of God and man. its underlying premises remain. The prophecy states that all will go and that none will return, while the Gospel states that all will go and that none will return except those who return as Ishmael. Because the Gospel is produced out of going through the prophecy, Shulman's insight that the pathology represented by Ahab should not be waved off but owned and reworked should be slightly reformulated: the only way to not dismiss and resolve the danger Ahab represents is to accept it and work through it—the only way out, in other words, is through.[201] The why and the how is

[201] Shulman, "Chasing the Whale: Moby Dick as Political Theory," 71.

spelled out by Ishmael in what I am calling the treatise embedded in *Moby Dick*.

Ishmael does not lie often, but he is lying when he says that the "unconscious understandings" that made the Pequod's men assume Ahab's vengeance as their own is "deeper than [he] can go." We know that he is lying because he must be lying, and he must be lying because understanding the unconscious motivations and dynamics is part of the means by which Ishmael escapes and returns. If he was not lying, he could not have returned; or, at the very least, he would have returned by accident. In which case, his return would have been as significant as the return of the mutineers of the Town-Ho, which is to say, not significant at all. He would have returned but returned in a manner such that he would have had nothing—and certainly no Gospel—to tell. The prophecy refers to the "all," the Gospel promises that it is not "all" but only the "many," and the treatise explains how the "all" can become just the "many."

If the only way is through, then any landsmen who refuse the call of the sea and any sailors who reject the harpoon are not saved thereby. Instead, their resistance only delays the inevitable. To make matters worse, as it were, such a delay, as we have seen, threatens to only further enervate and immiserate them, disposing them to greater absent-mindedness, melancholia, desperation, and sordidness. In resisting the call, therefore, incredulous men such as these would fall further into the category of the "les non-dupes errand." In a sense, *Pierre* tells the story of one such man.

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To this point, the focus has been primarily on the objective conditions of the Pequod's desire, including the dilapidated symbolic structure of the historico-philosophical conditions that have shaped them and their form of life. In what follows, I attend primarily to the subjective factors involved. Instead of the ~~state~~-of-exception and the sea, I examine the "crisis of investiture" and the "torment" that prime the crew to assume Ahab's fantasy as their own. Instead of the impersonal they confront, I explore the mood and subjective reactions it induces. Instead of focusing on what manufactures these men, I analyze how these personifications of the impersonal react in turn. We have seen what makes them melancholic, absent-minded, and disgusted,

as well as desperate, disoriented, and enervated; now we turn to those debilitations and exhaustions themselves and how they lead to assuming the hunt, how and why they assume what Milder rightly refers to as a "common fantasy." Elijah sums up the matter: if they have signed up, they must not have souls, he says, before adding, "[Ahab's] got enough… to make up for all deficiencies of that sort in other chaps" (87-8). When Ishmael asks whether Ahab is 'all right,' Elijah responds that he will never be all right but that "thou'lt like him well enough; no fear, no fear" (78). It's the soullessness that makes the Pequod their asylum and Ahab their captain, and this soullessness is a feature of their manufacture. The fantasy of the hunt is offered as compensation. They cannot resist because Ahab offers them something they lack, but something that they also cannot do without.

Moby Dick alludes to the "secret" that leads to the hunt: it lies in the "grim sire," now broken and forgotten, hidden and inaccessible in the depths of the sailors themselves (157). We are also told that there is a "family likeness" between this sire and the "subterranean miner" working in all the crew (158). But it is *Pierre* that focuses most intently on this sire and its orphaned progeny, on its "exiled royalties," as Ishmael refers to them, who have been left unmoored and cast into the sea (157). Some critics that have looked into the matter, have suggested that *Pierre* does not provide the "*casus belli*" of its hero's madness; but such a conclusion comes from a shallow reading.[202] Not only does *Pierre* present the generative cause of its hero's downfall, it also presents the *casus belli* of the madness raging on the Pequod.

Consider Ahab's response to Starbuck's accusation that hunting Moby Dick in vengeance is "blasphemy": "Who's over me?" Ahab replies, "Truth has no confines."(140).[203] Within its immediate

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[202] Delblanco, *Melville: His World and Work*, 199.

[203] As with many of the assertions Melville's heroes make, this one too, when fully unraveled, contains the entire essence of the book to which it belongs. In this case, it is not only about the refusal of alien authority, nor the identification of some truth, but also about this lack of confinement for said truth, which aligns with the particular form of liberty offered by the deposition of authority and leads to what happens in *Moby Dick*. Melville makes this point repeatedly in both *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*. In the former: "Yet now, federated along one keel, what a set these Isolatoes were! An Anacharsis Clootz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and

context, the remark has only rhetorical value and no precise meaning. *Pierre*, however, demonstrates that the lack of something above the subject and the lack of confinement of this truth are at the root of Ahab's troubles. A preliminary delineation of Melville's position can be sketched by comparing Emerson's declaration about Shakespeare with a curious remark made by Melville a third of the way through *Pierre*. Emerson, intent on inciting the American nation into cultural autonomy, asked: "Where is the master who could have taught Shakespeare?"[204] The answer is nowhere, of course, because, according to Emerson, there can be no such master. Melville disagreed and in *Pierre* gave his response: "for being but a mortal man Shakespeare had his fathers too" (140). There can be no doubt as to Melville's esteem for the playwright, nor the conflict condensed in these characterizations of Shakespeare's greatness: Shakespeare became Shakespeare, Emerson thinks, because he refused the traditions and institutions of masters and let his genius speak unbridled; Melville, on the other hand, insists that Shakespeare became Shakespeare because his genius was subject to such alienating masters. The subjection advocated for is not a form of imitation, which Melville condemns; instead, what he is urging his audience to recognize is that alienation is necessary.[205] Freedom and autonomy, but also effective expression and access to truth, are not antagonistically but symbiotically related to

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all the ends of the earth, accompanying Old Ahab in the Pequod to lay the world's grievances before that bar from which not very many of them ever came back." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 107. And then again: "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." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 135. In the latter: "Ay, Pierre, now indeed art thou hurt with a wound, never to be completely healed but in heaven; for thee, the before undistrusted moral beauty of the world is forever fled." See Melville, *Pierre*, 71. And then again: "Here the helplessness of all further light, and the eternal impossibility of logically exonerating his dead father, in his own mind, from the liability to this, and many other of the blackest self-insinuated suppositions." See Melville, *Pierre*, 153.

[204] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. by Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 134.

[205] Melville explicitly condemns imitation in a letter to Duyckinck: "we want no American Goldsmiths; nay we want no American Miltons.... Let us loudly condemn all imitation." See Herman Melville, *Correspondence, Volume Fourteen, Scholarly Edition, Melville*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 118.

restraints. Shakespeare was no dogmatic adherent of traditions, but he was subjected to traditions, and, moreover, he must have acknowledged their authority, but he was no imitator. Another of Melville's remarks about Shakespeare ought to be read in conjunction with this insistence on subjugation: "in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth—even though it be covertly, and by snatches."[206] Shakespeare, by Melville's estimation, was one of the few who told the "truth" from within this "world of lies"; a truth that is, moreover, visible only by "cunning glimpses." As if this was not confusing enough, Melville adds a further twist to his evaluation of Shakespeare: "In Shakespeare's tomb lies infinitely more than Shakespeare ever wrote. And if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing" (550). There is some excessive rhetoric here, and it is not innocent because it confuses Melville's position almost to the point of obscuring it: there is not more in the tomb than in the works, and what Shakespeare wrote is not of less value than what he refrained from writing. Even phrasing the point in terms of what he "wrote" is confusing; instead, we should understand what Shakespeare refrained from saying, better yet, what he refrained from positing, as a supplement that allows the words he did write to capture the truth. Simply put, what Shakespeare wrote is necessary for glimpsing the truth, but what is inscribed by the words only proves sufficient for capturing the truth when they are supplemented by what he refused to posit. No phrase of Shakespeare's captures what Melville is getting at better than the first line of Jacques' monologue in *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage."[207] To this, we should add what is implied: all the world's a stage and there is nothing behind it. If read together, these

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[206] Shakespeare, in Melville's estimation, was anything but a man blindly devoted to Memory: "[I]n this world of lies," he writes, "Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare." And the truth Shakespeare speaks, Melville adds, is "the sane madness of vital truth." See "Hawthorne and his Mosses," in Melville, *Moby* Dick, 551. Subsequent references made in the text.

[207] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, edited by Michael Hattaway (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2009).

remarks offer a tentative definition of truth: truth exists only within this world, which is a world of lies (or impostors, as Melville will refer to them), moreover, it is not immediately accessible and access to it hinges on alienation or subjection to a father, but a subjection that does not amount to imitation. Leaving the full exposition of Melville's conception of truth and how it relates to the subject to later, for the moment it is enough to posit the outlines. Close reading of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* reveals that Melville's obscure formulation of the reason for his esteem of Shakespeare amount to this: yes, the works are great, but Shakespeare is greatest because he refrained from renouncing and denouncing the stage in the name of some supposed truth behind it; in Melville's terms, Shakespeare knew that behind the impostors were only fictions, fictions men need and fictions they would forever lose if they renounced the representations they believed to be mere impostors.

Another of Melville's remarks about Shakespeare, this one from a personal letter sent to Evert Duyckinck, should be added here: "if another Messiah ever comes 'twill be in Shakespeare's person."[208] Aside from confirming his esteem for Shakespeare, it also hints at the function and status he thought belonged to such poets. Without getting ahead of ourselves, it suffices to say that given Melville's denial of any ontological existence to God, it should not be taken literally, but as we will see, it is not merely rhetorical either. Shakespeare is no God, of course, but as a father he creates them.

Further deductions can be drawn from the initial remark. First, the obvious: if Shakespeare has father*s*, then "father" must denote something other than the biological function or the individual who fulfilled it. Second, mortals require fathers. As Melville writes to Duyckinck, in another letter, "We are all sons, grandsons, or nephews, or great-nephews of those who go before us. No one is his own sire."[209] The "sires" (or "fathers") of Pierre and the men aboard the Pequod are nowhere to be found—they are orphans, all of

[208] Melville, *Correspondence*, 119.

[209] Melville, *Correspondence*, 345.

them. If the father is a constitutive function of subjectivization, if it is what puts "life into man," as argued in *Pierre*, then one can expect that Melville's characters will face some difficulties. With this preliminary framework in mind, Ishmael's otherwise obscure remark gains significance: "Where is the foundling's father hidden? Our souls are like those of orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must go there to learn it" (373). If the secret of their paternity is concealed in mothers who were unwed and have since passed away, then their fathers are doubly hidden: not only absent and unknown, but they are also foreclosed and unknowable. Additionally, if the secret of their paternity, which is the secret of why they are the orphans they are, lies within the graves of unwed mothers, then these mothers must be somehow influenced or shaped by the foreclosure of fatherhood. Something (or perhaps many things) about these mothers hint symptom-like at what is lacking. Finally, these mothers without fathers are the structures that shape or manufacture these orphans. There is, therefore, something problematic in the impersonal conditions that make the characters of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* as they are, and these orphans find themselves and the world around them in disarray and tasked with 'setting it right'.

Both *Pierre* and *Moby Dick* stage the American fantasy of the death of the father, or, as it has otherwise been called, the fantasy of masterlessness.[210] The realization of this fantasy leads to troubles for Melville's characters. Take Ahab, for example: the sea is referred to as his "stepmother," and the sea is masterless and horizonless due to the absence of a leviathan to settle and order it. In Pierre's case, his father is dead, his mother is a widow, and he leaves her the moment he loses the last image he had of his father. In *Pierre,* the lack of Divinity and Pierre's recognition of Divinity as a fiction follows from his orphanhood. After the foreclosure of his father, life on land becomes Woe, and he collapses into madness. In *Moby Dick,* the same madness intensifies into the hunt. The second deduction above is, therefore, incomplete: yes, mortals may

[210] See Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994) and Lawrence, *Studies in Classical American Literature*.

need fathers, but so do Gods. Gods are also dependent on fathers; and not their own Divine fathers (if such a thing could exist) but on mortal fathers, on our fathers. This revelation should not surprise any attentive reader. Melville repeatedly emphasizes that Gods have no ontological existence and that what is believed to exist in the heavens can only be "fictions." If they are fictions supported by fathers, then the fathers who claim to represent Divine laws are "impostors." Not because they distort what they claim to represent, but because they claim to be representatives, when in reality they represent nothing and no one. Their authority is grounded in fictions, therefore, but they are, Melville insists, authoritative and necessary, nonetheless.

If Gods are fictions and their representatives are impostors, Melville obviously cannot belong to the party of Memory, which reveres such inherited authorities and devoutly believes in Divine fictions. On the other hand, because the troubles his characters suffer follow from the lack of fathers, he cannot belong to the party of Hope either, since it views the abolition of such alienating restraints as liberation. Instead, Melville, as Lewis rightly claims, belongs to the party of Irony. It's an odd fellowship that, in a sense, seeks to attain the ambitions of Hope *through* the means of Memory.[211] *Pierre* makes clear that Melville's irony involves a further twist: fathers acquire their status by representing Divine fictions, but those fictions and all their laws and truths exist only through the fathers that allege to be their representatives. Gods depend on fathers, in Melville, on fathers that produce the very fictions that subsequently ground their authority. If Divine order is a fiction, then fathers are necessarily impostors. In which case, God and all the institutions and authorities grounded in Him are dependent on lies, on representations and representatives that are impostors regardless of what they decree or demand. Melville's ironic position follows: impostors are necessary precisely because they represent fictions—fictions that they, in a very real sense, create and which disappear without them. Men need these impostors, Melville wants to say, *because* all things Divine do not exist. Yes, therefore, Melville pursues Hope through Memory, but the full irony of his position is that he defends Memory in the

[211] See Lewis, *The American Adam*, 1-10, 127-55.

name of Hope while admitting that the authority of all the rules, customs, and institutions belonging to Memory are pretense; and he defends them as necessary because it is all pretense. In a word, impostors are necessary because they are impostors. In *Pierre*, this logic is spelled out through the tragic fate of its youthful hero.[212] To Emerson's reproach, therefore, that "We are sent to feudal school to learn democracy," Melville responds with Pierre: 'Here is your democratic education!'—a toddler, "toddling entirely alone, and not without shrieks"—an understatement, as we will see.[213] In contrast to Emerson, who urged self-reliance on individuals and urged self-reliant individuals to build their own worlds, Melville warns the youth of the century: "Youth must wholly quit then, the quarry, for awhile; and not only go forth, and get tools to use in the quarry, but must go and thoroughly study architecture" (256). To prove the point, Pierre takes Emerson's path, but in this "path of truth," he finds nothing and his world collapses. In essence, the novel is a response to Emerson: 'Here is your youthful, hopeful hero!' Melville replies, a "soul-toddler," "forced now to stand and toddle alone"—'Watch him toddle!'[214]

If life depends on God, but God can only exist through impostors, then the triad of Father-King-God is not grounded in either a king or God. We can set kings aside and focus on the dependence of Gods on fathers. Being an impostor means to deceive in the act of representation, but there are two possible deceptions: the impostor can misrepresent something, or it can claim to be representing something when there is nothing to be represented. If there is something to be represented, then discrediting the impostor leaves the falsely represented intact and challenges the mind to comprehend it without distortion. The mind could respond to such disappointment with cynicism or what Sloterdijk refers to as enlightened unhappy

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[212] Melville begins *Pierre* by accepting the premises of Hope, and then, just as the plot is about to begin, he makes a promise that doubles as a warning: "Believe me, you will pronounce Pierre a thoroughgoing Democrat in time; perhaps a little too Radical altogether to your fancy." See Melville, *Pierre*, 18.

[213] Emerson, "The Young American."

[214] See Book XXII: The Flower-Curtain Lifted from before a Tropical Author, with Some Remarks on the Transcendental Flesh-Brush Philosophy," in Melville, *Pierre*, 293-9.

consciousness, thereby subjecting itself to error in its attempt to not be fooled again.[215] But even in such a case, the underlying substance would remain. On the other hand, if there is nothing to be represented, then discrediting impostors results in the loss of what was purportedly represented as well.

"Fathers," which in its broadest understanding encompasses all that Emerson designates as Memory, are not the origin of laws, moral or otherwise, but only their representations. By assuming this apparently secondary function of representation, however, they create the fiction of an absolute or Divine truth. Their authority is baseless, therefore, and they appear to possess authority by presenting themselves as mere messengers. The authority of their decrees, therefore, is established by concealing the fact that there is nothing to conceal, so to speak, by hiding the fact that there is nothing. Melville's disagreement with Transcendentalism stems from here: impostors are necessary precisely because they *hide* nothing. 'Yes, they are impostors,' Melville wants to say, 'but they are necessary precisely because Divine things are fictions and because life must and will engage in such fictions.' As we will observe, the subjective distortions evident in *Moby Dick*—for instance, the ~~state~~-of-exception or the transformation of anarchy into a mood of paranoia—are further developed in *Pierre*. People have a need for Gods, but Gods do not exist; and so, humanity needs fathers. If, as Melville writes, life depends on Gods, then man and men depend on fathers—this, in fact, is the essence of the story Melville tells in *Pierre*. Men need fathers because only they can fabricate the fictions that life needs. The alternative to relying on such alienating impostors, as discussed earlier and further demonstrated in what follows, is not liberty but a set of negative effects that culminate into the lunacy of the hunt. It is Hope that drove them to the sea, and it is Hope that propels the Pequod forward, and it is Hope that will move them from failure to repetition. More concretely, Melville describes the father as what puts "life into man," gives him its "mind's compass," and is his "inner angel" (136); in other words, it is what

[215] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, translated by Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

guards against absent-mindedness and soullessness. Through the process of alienation by fathers, individuals gain the ability to recognize and interact with societal laws, institutions, structures, values, and meanings, all of which, according to Melville, involve decisionist logic. As much is explicitly stated in Pierre's discussion with the Reverend, but the entire novel also serves as a demonstration of the same.

The novel contains various references to the father figure, often hidden in figurative language and casual remarks. For the purpose of clarity, I will list the central aspects of the father figure here:: the breath in our lungs is hereditary," but the father's name, which "fills man's lungs and puts life into man," is "empty" (14); the father is the pillar of the soul's "one-pillared temple," and his deposition brings the subject to ruin and madness and the "moral beauty of the world" to being forever lost (273); the "dead" father cannot be "logically" exonerated; to which Melville adds that when deposed, it persists as a "fallen saint" haunting the ruined subject by remaining broken and buried beneath the ruins its fall caused; to forsake fathers, Melville adds, is to cross a "sacred limit" (87); and, finally, there is a "trick" involved in this entire dynamic. Earlier, I proposed that Melville uncovers the Freudian unconscious in *Moby Dick*; *Pierre* provides further evidence for this claim and warrants another similar claim: Melville also anticipates another psychoanalytic concept, the Name-of-the-Father.

If *Moby Dick* focuses on the aftermath of an inner catastrophe, *Pierre* delves into the catastrophe itself: a catastrophe that arises from the realization of the romantic and liberating concept of Hope. A parable from *Critique of Pure Reason* encapsulates Melville's stance effectively: "The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space."[216] Kant wants to convey that our actions have constitutive conditions of possibility, which we often mistake for unnecessary or obstructive rules and restrictions when we believe that freedom is best served by "empty space." This empty or vacated space is the core of the American fantasy of masterlessness, the socio-cultural

[216] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 129.

manifestation of which Melville imagines as the great American desert, a state of Woe that fosters and motivates the prophecy of the hunt. As Sundquist rightly observes, Melville witnessed a fascination with this idea so fervent and unwavering that its adherents disregarded or suppressed its flaws.[217] But Melville judgment of such men and the ideas they advocated for is more damning: the very ideals championed by Transcendentalists, such as liberty and self-reliance, not only possess flaws and prove ineffective in addressing America's discontents, but they are already deeply complicit in the very pathologies they were meant to confront.[218] In *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*, this ideology is indicted as directly causing Pierre's descent into madness and the Pequod's lunacy. Since *Pierre* narrates the causes and mechanics of the internal catastrophe that is a prerequisite for boarding the Pequod, it serves as the backstory of *Moby Dick*. Like *Moby Dick*, *Pierre* should be understood as Melville's argument against (and cautionary tale about) Transcendentalism and Hope, more generally. The difference between the two books lies in the fact that in the novel, Melville focused on an earlier moment and presents his case more acutely through psychology. It is an immanent critique, a proof by negation: all the aspirations, assertions, reasoning, and premises of Hope are initially accepted, pushed to their logical conclusions within the historico-philosophical conditions, after which the youthful hero refutes the myth of the American Adam step by step and piece by painstaking piece. Right from the start, Pierre embodies the cliché of Hope's romantic ideal—Melville endows him with all the traits and ideas that should make him appear as its greatest exponent.[219] With these premises in place, Melville makes a pledge that also

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[217] See Sundquist, *Home as Found*, 153.

[218] See Frank, "Pathologies of Freedom," 442. Matthiessen makes a similar interpretation, see "The Revenger's Tragedy," in Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 430-507. See also Brodhead "Introduction" in Richard Brodhead, ed., *New Essays on Moby-Dick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[219] Pierre is depicted as the son of a noble man and a refined woman. He is the grandson of not one but two heroic revolutionary generals, and stands to inherit substantial and valuable lands. More to the point, Pierre is described as a promising writer, having displayed exceptional writing abilities of a sentimental and optimistic nature. In essence, he is a fine, idealistic, and promising young man who rejects fiction, distortion, and lies. Instead, Pierre sets out on a quest to discover the Truth himself. For an analysis of Pierre as a romantic hero, see Murray's "Introduction," xciv-v. Later in *Pierre*, as the young hero prepares to embark on his Hopeful adventure, Melville insists that "I am more frank with Pierre than the best of men are with

serves as a warning: "believe me, you will pronounce Pierre a thoroughgoing Democrat in time; perhaps a little too Radical altogether to your fancy" (18). Emerson encouraged all individuals to embrace self-reliance and urged all self-reliant individuals to "build [their] own world."[220] Pierre embraces self-reliance and strives to construct his own world; in fact, he goes so far as to attempt to "gospelize" the world anew, but he discovers nothing, descends into madness, and the world around him crumbles. He is, in a word, Melville's response to Emerson's assertion that "we are sent to feudal school to learn democracy": 'Here is your democratic education!'[221]

Two remarks further elucidate Melville's position. One, "political institutions which in other lands seem intensely artificial, in America seem to possess the divine virtue of natural law" (13). They "seem" artificial *and* they seem to possess Divine virtue, but they are neither and only "seem" and "seem to possess" such status. Their true nature, moreover, becomes evident in 19th-century America. Why 19th-century America? Because of the open frontier, because of the woods to the west that needed to be tamed and mapped, because, as discussed earlier, America was the land of the new Adam, committed to a democratic culture, and driven by ideals of masterlessness and negative liberty, all on top of the more general decline of decline of religious faith and history's authority. At the political level, rejecting any simple distinction between natural and artificial aligns Melville with Burke in the great debate.[222] The second remark is Ishmael's proclamation

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themselves." This statement serves as a declaration that Pierre embodies an inherent critique of Transcendentalism. See Melville, *Pierre*, 114.

[220] See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" Project Gutenberg, accessed on September 1, 2021, https://www.gutenberg.org /files/29433/29433-h/29433-h.htm

[221] See Emerson, "The Young American."

[222] Melville's position can be understood as a fusion of German Idealism and Burkean conservatism. See David Bromwich, "Burke and the Argument from Human Nature," in *Reclaiming Burke's Reflections: Understanding the Concept of an Organic Society*, ed. Peter J. Stanlis (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 29-58. See also Edmund Burke, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, edited by Ian Harris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 168-9, and Yuval Levin, *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2021), 54-5.

of "God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death" (142). Because there is no God except for the "God" of imperfect nihilism, the remark can be rewritten as "~~God~~ hunt us unless we hunt Moby Dick." The meaning is now clear: the hunt is a way to resolve the torment of imperfect nihilism, the torment of the ~~state~~-of-exception, the torment of the principle without an agent, it is a means by which to keep *madness* at bay. "In landlessness alone," we read in *Moby Dick*, "resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God," but this truth, when unrestricted, becomes unbearable (97). In the Hopeful 19th-century, with impostors deposed and fictions dissolved, Melville believes that humanity will need to explain the absence of heaven on earth and the instinctive explanation, he predicts, will involve positing a malevolent entity obstructing access to the Divinity believed to be above and within. Men will, in other words, turn a blind eye to themselves and their fictional beliefs, and attribute their suffering and the suffering of all men to an external force and then seek redemption through the death of this perceived enemy (97). In a sense, Melville's views align with those of the Transcendentalists: man does believe in something greater and something internal, but Melville adds that man is also mistaken because there is nothing above and nothing within. These are transcendental illusions, perpetuated or supported by impostors (or the effects that impostors have on subjects); in fact, we can say that impostors support such illusions in two ways: one, they create such fictions through the trick of representation, and two, they secure those fictions by being blamed as distortions whenever those fictions fail to deliver on their promises. Melville's warning is simple: if the impostors are eliminated in the pursuit of an essence they allegedly distort, these purported essences will vanish along with the forsaken impostors, leaving behind only despair, torment, and then the hunt. In a way, Melville would concede that Emerson is correct to say that men believe in such things and correct in his anticipation that men would venture on moral crusades and find purpose through them, but he would add that the beliefs underlying these actions are mistaken. Emerson is right about what men believe and what they will do on the basis of such beliefs—the problem, as Melville sees it, is that these beliefs and actions will happen atop of mistakes already but unknowingly made, mistakes that will lead to vengeance and lunacy.

"~~God~~ hunt us unless we hunt Moby Dick." Hunting Moby Dick is a delusional formation, as we will see, but the default position also involves a subjective distortion of lack into loss. In both positions, the subject contributes something to what it (mis)perceives as objective reality: in the default position, it adds the "principle," in the alternative, it posits an agent that guards the unconstrained fiction the principle presupposes.[223] The first is spontaneous and unconscious, while the movement to the second is motivated by the torment of existence under a ~~state~~-of-exception or significance without signification. The same logic repeats in *Pierre*: "Silence is the only Voice of our God," but only because "man get[s] a Voice out of Silence" (203, 208). Pierre remains ignorant of this qualification, however; while Melville identified the principle underlying this phenomenon as the very essence of human "life." First a Voice is heard, then arises the hope (and the need) for some Word. At the lower layer is a need which, if unsatisfied by alienation, will be enacted unconsciously, "by unconscious understanding" that blindly repeats what the orphan-subject's forgotten, broken sire would have done and decreed (158). The principle is transcendental, and it will have its illusions. The remark about institutions now takes on the added character of a well-known warning: if such seemingly artificial institutions are repressed, they will inevitably return, and they will return "ou pire," as Lacan would say—they will return as hunts for Moby Dicks. By warning against the instructions of Hope, Melville aligns with Burke, but his reasons align with Freud's. In a sense, his primary question, I would submit, may well be a foreshadowing of Freud's 'what is a father?'

After briefly introducing Pierre as the embodiment of Hope, Melville delves into a contemplation of heredity, paternity, names, institutions, and generations, within which he presents the analogy of the subject being like a pair of lungs, relying on the father's name for breath and existence. Following this, he provides a disclaimer:

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[223] Ahab himself acknowledges this distinction on several occasions, all of which signify his limited awareness and consciousness of his own insanity. As an example, he declares, "be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 140.

> And to the observant reader the sequel will not fail to show, how important is this circumstance, considered with reference to the singularly developed character and most singular life-career of our hero. Nor will any man dream that the last chapter was merely intended for a foolish bravado, and not with a solid purpose in view (16-7).

If what follows is a sequel, then what came before was the concept and what remains is the proof.[224] As observed by critics, *Pierre* presents the absence or death of the father, but to fully understand *Pierre* it is necessary to read this death within a framework that establishes *what* died. Melville provides a definition in the first few pages, declares everything that follows as a sequel, and then removes the father, leaving his protagonist in the conditions desired by Hope.[225] By denying subjectivization by the father, Melville deprives Pierre of alienation and consequently deprives him of internalization. Emptied and liberated in this manner, as Pierre marches forth he loses everything else as well: reason, morality, sanity, and even the ability to act. He is reduced to "nothing," to a "ruin," he will be left "absent-minded," without his "mind's compass" and "inner angel," cast into the sea, a toddler that cannot complete a single task because he does not know "the trick." He will be reduced to a ruin, but within this ruin Melville identifies a minimal and essential form of

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[224] This disclaimer comes after an extended discussion of heredity, paternity, law, institutions, and related matters, with which Melville opens *Pierre*. After this discussion, he writes the following—I quote in full: "In general terms we have been thus decided in asserting the great genealogical and real-estate dignity of some families in America, because in so doing we poetically establish the richly aristocratic condition of Master Pierre Glendinning, for whom we have before claimed some special family distinction. And to the observant reader the sequel will not fail to show how important this circumstance is, considered with reference to the singularly developed character and most singular life-career of our hero. Nor will any man dream that the last chapter was merely intended for a foolish bravado, and not with a solid purpose in view." See Melville, *Pierre*, 16-7. By reading *Pierre* from this perspective, which includes the previously mentioned discussion followed by a definition of Pierre as a symbol of Hope, the later remark, "I am more frank with Pierre than the best of men are with themselves" should be understood as a declaration that Pierre is an imminent critique of Transcendentalism. See Melville, *Pierre*, 114.

[225] For a philosophical defense of alienation, see Rahel Jaeggi's *Alienation*, translated by Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith, edited by Frederick Neuhouser (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). Also see Zizek, *Less Than Nothing*, 235-57.

subjectivity that manifests as discontent, torment, struggle, and ultimately madness—the same minimal element of subjectivity that Ahab recognizes as the empty sovereign point of madness within himself.[226] And like Ahab, this little bit of personality is what moves Pierre to do all that he does in turn. When constructed, Melville's theory of the subject reveals itself to be the complete opposite of Hope, Self-Reliance, and Transcendentalism preach: there is no inherent Divine substance in man and man cannot do away with impostors because he lives only through them.

In this chapter, I focus on the inner catastrophe resulting from the conditions in question, and the spontaneous or common reactions to this catastrophe. Since *Moby Dick* largely leaves life on land astern, I turn to *Pierre* for an account of the constitution that shapes the crew, that motley of orphans, lost, enervated and mad. Ultimately, it is orphanhood that renders them soulless, absent-minded, and disgusted, but also melancholic, disoriented, and desperate.

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[226] The earlier-discussed parallel between Schmitt and Melville reappears here. Schmitt identified the state of exception as the paradigmatic form of legal or political order because the truth of the order appears within it, exposing the sovereign as the limit concept. Similarly, Melville identifies the paradigmatic form of the subject by stripping it of all its support and substance, including all that it internalizes through alienation. Pierre is reduced to ruin, to "nothing," but within this "nothing," Melville identifies the pure form of the subject: "It is the law.... That a nothing should be tormented by another nothing," and I, Pierre adds, am "nothing". See Melville, *Pierre,* 273. The same minimal subjective substance is described in another, later passage: "Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair, and the blackness of the shaft." See Melville, *Pierre*, 287. The principle is the subject's sole inherent quality, i.e., it is what the subject possesses in the absence of any subjectivization by or other influence from impersonal conditions. This principle presupposes the place of Divine order, but as this is a fiction, it then seeks out some agent to act as the representative of what the presupposition posits. As mentioned earlier, for Melville, as well as for Pierre, "Silence is the only Voice of our God," which is to say, there is no God, except for what it experiences as His Voice; and this experience of His Voice is produced by the subject through the principle's presupposition of the place of where God would be. Hence why Melville insists—and this is what Pierre does not recognize, i.e., know—that it is the subject that "get[s] a Voice out of Silence," or to be more precise: it is the subject that produces the Voice of Silence out of silence. Finally, as we have seen, this principle, when the subject in question is an orphan, i.e., an unalienated subject, calls out the need for alienation through its discontent consequent to the absence of alienation, and it is, further, what motivates the return of this missing alienation but in irrational form, i.e., through the hunt for Moby Dick.

4.2 The Case of Pierre

An "almost infinite… amount of utter trash," said *The Boston Post*, nothing but "sound, furry, and perfect incomprehensibility," claimed a Richmond weekly "a dead failure," "abominable," "monstrously unnatural," added other publications.[227] The reception of *Moby Dick* was disappointing but the reaction to *Pierre* was even more damning.[228] "HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY," wrote one New York weekly, but its opinion stood for dozens of others.[229] Since then, *Pierre* has reevaluated. And while some continue to judge the novel a failure, many have come to appreciate it, some of whom have gone so far as to suggest that it may be Melville's most ambitious if not most important work. It would be strange, to say the least, to conceive of anything but *Moby Dick* as Melville's greatest achievement, but perhaps it is the case.[230] Setting aside where *Pierre* should be ranked on the list of Melville's achievements, its centrality is beyond dispute. The reason is simple: acutely and singularly focused on the hero's interiority, it aligns perfectly with Melville's ongoing fixation on the mind and soul. More than any other of his works, *Pierre* focuses on the inner workings of the psyche, investigating the inner catastrophe that leads to the madness of the Pequod. It explains it, in fact, and thus serves as a necessary supplement to *Moby Dick*.

Pierre's plot is deceptively simple: the only and devoted son of a wealthy widow, Pierre is engaged to

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[227] See "Aftermath" in Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker, *Reading Melville's* Pierre*; or, The Ambiguities* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 175-85.

[228] Referring to *Moby Dick*, Melville wrote: "Though I wrote the in this century, I should die in the gutter." See "To Nathaniel Hawthorne" arrowhead Early May 1851. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 538-41.

[229] Higgins and Parker, "Aftermath," 177.

[230] Lewis, for example, considers *Pierre* and Pierre to be "fumbled" versions of *Billy Budd* and Billy, and so devotes little attention to them. His interpretation of Melville's works, however, including repeated stress on Melville being influenced by the betrayal of the father, the subject's subsequent orphanhood, and the overarching idea that Melville's works are best understood as a sequence of Adam's dispatched into the world, suggest that *Pierre*, regardless of its success, should be given a central place in Melville's oeuvre. See Lewis, *American Adam*, 127-55. *Redburn* also places the subject's relation to the paternal figure at its center it is *Pierre* that offers the most sustained investigation into this dynamic, specifically the consequences of such a function being absent.

an angelic girl (Lucy); before they can wed, however, he receives a letter from a mysterious woman (Isabel), claiming to be his half-sister, the first child of his deceased father; Pierre believes her and assumes the Memnonic duty of caring for her; in doing so, he forsakes his father as his moral ideal, breaks his engagement, pretends Isabel is his wife, and departs from the estate, while hiding the truth from everyone; eventually, his mother disowns him and he collapses into madness, while desperately attempting to write a book to re-Gospelize the world; he fails in this endeavor, and then he dies. Acutely focused on the tumultuous interiority of its hero, as he seeks the pure Divine moral law without mediation by the father, or impostors, more generally (e.g., the church, the monument) and all that impostors make possible, Melville finds no interiority, no "deepest angel," no "mind's compass," and *Pierre* devolves into a story of "a nothing torment[ed by] a nothing" (71, 168, 273).

Many critics have pointed out that *Pierre* stags the American fantasy of the death of the father. While this observation is commonly made, the effects of this circumstance on Pierre has been relatively unexplored. Murray's observation that Pierre lives "a sheltered existence wholly within the sphere of his mother's sovereignty," provides a good starting point for exploring his mind.[231] Further insights into Pierre's character

[231] Murray adds that the beginning of *Pierre* represents an "overcompensatory Eden, a poetical feudal paradise in which woman is zealously elevated to the highest place in the order of nature." See Murray, "Introduction," xxxvi. Sundquist builds on Murray's interpretation, viewing the family structure as representative of America as a "paradise of woman, where she fulfills the very station for which she was designed by nature," which, he adds, is an actualization of the American dream of emancipation from traditional patriarchy or the death of the father. See Sundquist, *Home as Found*, 150. Delbanco also observes the mother's overbearing parenting style, drawing connections to Freud's theory that such maternal influence can lead to homosexual tendencies in boys. I do not think there is evidence for such an interpretation but acknowledge the overlap between Delbanco's interpretation and my own. Delbanco relies on a Freudian framework, which associates psychosis with homosexuality. In contrast, I draw on Lacan's revised conceptualization, which dismisses any connection between psychosis and homosexuality and attributes psychosis to the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father. Delbanco also notes that the life of young Pierre prior to receiving the letter is "drenched" by his mother's love and "consecrated to the spotless memory of his father," but he adds that Pierre has a premonition that this may all be a lie, and that he has such a feeling *prior to* receiving Isabel's letter. See Debanco, *Melville*, 181-6. Of this, there is, I believe, no textual evidence. Pierre does have a notable moment of doubt about Isabel's claim to be his half-sister, but this doubt manifests only at the very end of the novel, which is to say, at the peak of his madness. Moreover, this doubt comes after Pierre has already refused the category of "brother," which, as I develop, should be understood as an indication of the semantic consequences of his psychosis and

can be gleaned from several observations: his mother's repeated insistence on his "docility," her later admission that her "noble" and "reverential" son lacks the autonomy and courage to make his own choices, and his aunt's comment that Pierre cannot tolerate ambiguity (25). Given the descriptions of Pierre's actions and thoughts leading up to these reflections on his character, mention of his docility or inability is unnecessary. As a result, Melville's explicit and repeated mentions of these traits suggests their centrality to the plot, as if Melville is worried that they may be ignored or underappreciated.[232] Another noteworthy trait to consider is Pierre's deliberate attempts to imitate his father, a disposition his mother reinforces whenever he faces a decision or needs to contemplate a mistake. It is also worth noting that while Pierre adheres to societal norms

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not a direct or focused doubt over Isabel's claim; in other words, it is not that he begins to doubt her so much as by that moment of his madness all words have lost their meaning, including the word "brother." In short, while it is not uncommon for critics to note the overbearing nature of the mother, the relative absence of the father, and that the image or memory of Pierre's father is identified as a "spotless" ideal, what has received inadequate attention is how these elements interact, how this symbolic structure resembles the symbolic structure represented in other of Melville's works, and how this structure shapes the psyche of young Pierre.

Sundquist suggests that the mother is not only a "grotesque" figure but that she is in full possession of the phallus of authority. It follows that the mother is uncastrated. Sundquist adds, however, that *Pierre* begins with the fact of "vacated authority," referring to the father, meaning that the mother's possession of the phallus and of authority is the result of the father's absence. Sundquist, however, takes this constellation in a different direction than I do. See Chapter 4 "'At home in his words': Parody and Parricide in Melville's *Pierre*" in Sundquist, *Home as Found*, 143-86. As we will see, and as follows from both Schmitt's notion of the state of exception and Lacan's notion of the psychotic, the "vacated authority" requires some further refinement, namely, it is not that authority has been vacated, rather the place and force of authority remain while the positive law that mediates between the subject and the force of law is absent. Some critics have read Pierre as the American Oedipus, but this cannot be, as we will see. For such readings see Sundquist, *Home as Found*, and Geoffrey Hartman, "The Voice and the Shuttle: Language from the Point of View of Literature," *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 346-49.

[232] In a single paragraph, Pierre's mother describes her son's character and their relationship. "docile" is used seven times, in addition to a few instances of "docility" and "docilities". See Melville, *Pierre*, 25. This excessive repetition cannot be responsibly ignored by any interpretation of Pierre's character or psyche. Antecedent depictions of Pierre make any mention of his docility, lack of autonomy, and intolerance of ambiguity unnecessary. Yet, Melville repeatedly and explicitly mentions these characteristics, suggesting that they are crucial elements of what follows. Another trait should be added to the above: Pierre not only reveres his father (and to a lesser extent his grandfathers) but consciously and intentionally imitates him—indeed, his mother repeatedly instructs him to do so whenever Pierre is confronted by the need for a decision or when some mistake demands.

and values, his actions seem to originate from external sources rather than from within himself. Pierre appears to lack a substantial inner self; in fact, he appears from the very beginning of the novel to be internally empty, as if he has no thoughts and feelings that are his own. Consider that while Pierre speaks a lot, far more than all the other characters combined, and while he is constantly the center of the book's attention, there is a distinct feeling that one has no grasp on Pierre's character or inner life. All his words, like all his decisions and deeds, while spoken with confidence and certainty are nonetheless evasive, performative, and even inauthentic. On the surface, he appears a respectable and assured young man, but there is a sense of something being awry. When the external codes around him finally crumble, Pierre's emptiness surfaces and he collapses into madness.[233]

The relationship between Pierre and his mother is more than peculiar; it is characterized by an intense love and care that surpasses all ordinary boundaries. Their connection relies on unspoken glances and understandings, intimate displays of affection, and profound gazes into each other's eyes. His mother's presence is so overwhelming that it raises doubts about Lucy, Pierre's fiancée, being able to assume the role of a lover and wife. They communicate almost telepathically, always guided by the desires of the mother. However, these desires are often arbitrary, controlling, and unreasonable, infused with a hint of eroticism and manipulation. Pierre, however, never challenges or questions them; he simply strives to comprehend and fulfill them. There is little that comes between them, and it seems that they need nothing but each other. The

[233] Some critics have observed that the structure of his family reflects the American fantasy of the death of the father. However, there is more to Pierre's story than is typically acknowledged. Above all, as I have already argued, Melville from the very beginning of the novel reveals his perspective on the human subject: it is empty, devoid of any inherent substance. When alienation is removed, therefore, there is nothing substantial left within the subject. Melville's intention in emptying out Pierre is not to be unfair in his criticism of Hope; rather, he is preparing to test the ideology and its concepts under *its* ideal conditions. To be fair to the idea that one must not internalize alien directives and traditional values, mistaking them as natural, Melville removes all of these elements from Pierre and leaves them as external conventions to be followed or disregarded; moreover, he then allows his hero the opportunity to enact his own values and laws from within himself alone.

only exception arises when Pierre discusses the moral law and challenges his mother and Reverend Falsgrave's conclusion. He does so respectfully and justifiably, but his mother reacts with shock, anger, and an exaggerated threat. Her displeasure reportedly persists for days.[234] It is no accident that the discussion

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[234] An excerpt of the exchange bears quoting here:

> "I will not think now of the man," said Pierre, slowly, and looking away from both his auditors—"let us speak of Delly and her infant—she has, or had one, I have loosely heard;—their case is miserable indeed."
>
> "The mother deserves it," said the lady, inflexibly—"and the child—Reverend sir, what are the words of the Bible?"
>
> "'The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children to the third generation,'" said Mr. Falsgrave, with some slight reluctance in his tones. "But Madam, that does not mean, that the community is in any way to take the infamy of the children into their own voluntary hands, as the conscious delegated stewards of God's inscrutable dispensations. Because it is declared that the infamous consequences of sin shall be hereditary, it does not follow that our personal and active loathing of sin, should descend from the sinful sinner to his sinless child."
>
> "I understand you, sir," said Mrs. Glendinning, coloring slightly, "you think me too censorious. But if we entirely forget the parentage of the child, and every way receive the child as we would any other, feel for it in all respects the same, and attach no sign of ignominy to it—how then is the Bible dispensation to be fulfilled? Do we not then put ourselves in the way of its fulfillment , and is that wholly free from impiety?"
>
> Here it was the clergyman's turn to color a little, and there was a just perceptible tremor of the under lip.
>
> "Pardon me," continued the lady, courteously, "but if there is any one blemish in the character of the Reverend Mr. Falsgrave, it is that the benevolence of his heart, too much warps in him the holy rigor of our Church's doctrines. For my part, as I loathe the man, I loathe the woman, and never desire to behold the child."
>
> A pause ensued, during which it was fortunate for Pierre, that by the social sorcery of such occasions as the present, the eyes of all three were intent upon the cloth; all three for the moment, giving loose to their own distressful meditations upon the subject in debate, and Mr. Falsgrave vexedly thinking that the scene was becoming a little embarrassing.
>
> Pierre was the first who spoke; as before, he steadfastly kept his eyes away from both his auditors; but though he did not designate his mother, something in the tone of his voice showed that what he said was addressed more particularly to her. "Since we seem to have been strangely drawn into the ethical aspect of this melancholy matter," said he, "suppose we go further in it; and let me ask, how it should be between the legitimate and the illegitimate child—children of one father—when they shall have passed their childhood?"
>
> Here the clergyman quickly raising his eyes, looked as surprised and searchingly at Pierre, as his politeness would permit.

concerns the status of parents and the honor they are owed by their children. Pierre's mother and the

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> "Upon my word"—said Mrs. Glendinning, hardly less surprised, and making no attempt at disguising it—"this is an odd question you put; you have been more attentive to the subject than I had fancied. But what do you mean, Pierre? I did not entirely understand you."
>
> "Should the legitimate child shun the illegitimate, when one father is father to both?" rejoined Pierre, bending his head still further over his plate.
>
> The clergyman looked a little down again, and was silent; but still turned his head slightly sideways toward his hostess, as if awaiting some reply to Pierre from her.
>
> "Ask the world, Pierre"—said Mrs. Glendinning warmly—"and ask your own heart."
>
> "My own heart? I will, Madam"—said Pierre, now looking up steadfastly; "but what do *you* think, Mr. Falsgrave?" letting his glance drop again—"should the one shun the other; should the one refuse his highest sympathy and perfect love for the other, especially if that other be deserted by all the rest of the world? What think you would have been our blessed Savior's thoughts on such a matter? And what was that he so mildly said to the adulteress?"
>
> A swift color passed over the clergyman's countenance, suffusing even his expanded brow; he slightly moved in his chair, and looked uncertainly from Pierre to his mother. He seemed as a shrewd, benevolent-minded man, placed between opposite opinions—merely opinions—who, with a full, and doubly differing persuasion in himself, still refrains from uttering it, because of an irresistible dislike to manifesting an absolute dissent from the honest convictions of any person, whom he both socially and morally esteems.
>
> "Well, what do you reply to my son?"—said Mrs. Glendinning at last.
>
> "Madam and sir"—said the clergyman, now regaining his entire self possession. "It is one of the social disadvantages which we of the pulpit labor under, that we are supposed to know more of the moral obligations of humanity than other people. And it is a still more serious disadvantage to the world, that our unconsidered, conversational opinions on the most complex problems of ethics, are too apt to be considered authoritative, as indirectly proceeding from the church itself. Now, nothing can be more erroneous than such notions; and nothing so embarrasses me, and deprives me of that entire serenity, which is indispensable to the delivery of a careful opinion on moral subjects, than when sudden questions of this sort are put to me in company. Pardon this long preamble, for I have little more to say. It is not every question, however direct, Mr. Glendinning, which can be conscientiously answered with a yes or no. Millions of circumstances modify all moral questions; so that though conscience may possibly dictate freely in any known special case; yet, by one universal maxim, to embrace all moral contingencies,—this is not only impossible, but the attempt, to me, seems foolish."
>
> At this instant, the surplice-like napkin dropped from the clergyman's bosom, showing a minute but exquisitely cut cameo brooch, representing the allegorical union of the serpent and dove. It had been the gift of an appreciative friend, and was sometimes worn on secular occasions like the present.
>
> "I agree with you, sir"—said Pierre, bowing. "I fully agree with you. And now, madam, let us talk of something else."

See Book V "Misgivings and Preparations," in Melville, *Pierre*, 100-9.

Reverend conclude that a local girl's parents are not deserving of honor, in response to which Pierre asks whether "honor thy father" is not an absolute moral law, to be maintained in all cases (108). They reply in the negative, and while Pierre concedes the argument, he is undoubtedly left troubled by the idea that a law like "honor thy father" is contingent upon the father's character. The relationship of Pierre and his mother exemplifies the absence of the father, as a few critics have noted, but we can provide a more precise description: more than absent, the father has been foreclosed, as evidenced by the absence of castration in both the child and the mother. Sundquist accurately characterizes the mother as a "grotesque" figure with complete authority, while identifying *Pierre* as commencing with the notion of vacated authority.[235] Sundquist, however, neglects to consider this vacated authority with adequate precision and attention to detail.[236] The

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[235] See Sundquist, *Home as Found*, 154.

[236] What Sundquist fails to distinguish is the symbolic father from the imaginary father, the former of which has been foreclosed, while the latter remains for Pierre, at least at the beginning of the novel. In psychoanalytic theory, the imaginary father is the initial compensation for the absence of the symbolic father. In Pierre's case, it is clear that the imaginary father exists at the start of the novel and is only abandoned after Pierre (a) receives Isabel's letter and (b) the image (or images, since he has two portraits of his father) fails to produce a satisfactory decision for Pierre to follow. Moreover, this imaginary father, as Melville is at pains to emphasize, is an "inordinarily idealized memory" for Pierre, who quite literally imitates this ideal (and, in fact, is repeatedly instructed to do by his mother). This characterization or quality of this image aligns perfectly with the notion of the imaginary father, as Lacan conceptualizes it, namely am agent of privation and an "impossible ideal" for the subject to follow. Consider just one piece of textual evidence: in Book IV, "Retrospective," Pierre recalls the aforementioned discussion he had with his aunt, after which she gave him a portrait of his father as a young man; after receiving Isabel's letter, Pierre recalls this moment, which introduced what will be the problem that will lead to Pierre abandoning his father as a moral ideal; at the end of this Book, which is after the letter but before Pierre's decision, Melville quotes the following: ""Ah! how dost thou change,

Agnello! See! thou art not double now, Nor only one!" See Melville, *Pierre*, 91. Pierre is clearly the addressee. Setting aside for the moment why Pierre is (or will be) "Not only one!" because of what will follow, note that Pierre is being told that he is no longer "two." The meaning of this, as will become clear, is the following that Pierre has just now lost a father. Pierre is an orphan, meaning that he was already without a father prior to the recollection of this episode. So how could this moment foreshadow that he is about to lose his father? The only way to make sense of this passage—and, as we will see, also of all that follows in terms of Pierre's decisions, actions, madness, and character—within the context of the novel as a whole is to recognize that there are two father: the symbolic, which was always already lost, and the imaginary, the loss of whom is foreshadowed by the recollection of this memory. How Pierre acts and experiences meaning are dependent on which father is lost and or present, as we will see. Suffice to say, the ultimate consequence of failing to

authority is vacated because Pierre's father has been foreclosed, as a result of which Melville's hero bears a series of characteristics, all of which are a stunning foreshadowing of what psychoanalysis would conceptualize as psychotic.

In psychoanalytic theory, the foreclosure of the father leads to the emergence and installment of an imaginary substitute in its place. This imaginary (as opposed to symbolic) father possesses specific characteristics: he is a flawless moral ideal and an agent of privation, who is imitated but ultimately proves as ineffective as it was believed to be omnipotent.[237] Melville draws similar conclusions from this absence as Lacan would a century later: Pierre has internalized nothing and lacks any symbolic point of identification; instead, he merely mimics a "perfect" image (or portrait) of his father), but beneath this imitation lies a latent psychosis; as in psychoanalysis, a triggering event leads to the collapse of the imaginary father, which thrusts Pierre into a world he perceives as semantically anarchic and consumed with lies and deceptions and thereafter into a psychotic episode from which there is no rational extraction. Close examination reveals a succession of other symptoms consistent with psychosis, most notably in Pierre's relationship with language: he neither employs metaphors nor comprehends them, taking everything at face value; he exhibits an intolerance for ambiguity and insists upon absolute certainty; it seems that he exists not within language but is controlled by language, treating words as tangible objects; and, lastly, he demonstrates a distinct inability to find humor in a situation or to tell a joke. According to psychoanalysis, the Name-of-the-Father is the fundamental signifier that allows for normal signification. In other words, it permits stable signification and introduces negativity, imparts an identity onto the subject through a point of symbolic identification, grants it entry into the symbolic realm and the ability to recognize its meanings and values as valid, castrates the mother and child,

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make this distinction is that Sundquist simplifies the loss of meaning and subsequent actions of Pierre and thereby misconstrues what takes place. I will return to this shortly.

[237] See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book IV, The Object Relation, 1956-57*, trans. A. R. Price, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Polity, 2021), 191-240.

thereby establishing separation or distance between them, and ultimately provides the subject with the potential to desire through the initial metaphorical act of substituting the Name-of-the-Father for the mother's desire.[238] Moreover, through its act of constitutive alienation it installs this metaphoric function into the subject's psyche, enabling it to assume the sovereign role of making decisions and determining the law itself. On a semantic level, it ensures stability by halting the otherwise endless deferment of significance. Foreclosure of the father produces a latently psychotic subject, who can pass as normal, so to speak, so long as it has external codes to mimic, but who's latent psychosis will be triggered the moment it is compelled to assume a function for which it lacks a prototype in its psyche, i.e., any function that requires the sovereign act of decision. Put another way, the trigger of a psychotic episode is a mandate that the latent psychotic assume the role of a father, i.e., the role of the one that decides the law without its decision being grounded in law. Sons can become fathers and autonomous not by ridding themselves of alienation but by passing through it.

In *Pierre,* we witness an almost identical phenomenon. Prior to the trigger, Pierre operates through imitation and reasoning akin to that of a fool, actions that veil and imply the underlying psychosis; he pleases others and imitates alien norms that have not been internalized. All is well, until a letter arrives:

> This amazing letter deprived Pierre… of all lucid and definite thought or feeling… as if some assassin had stabbed him and fled; and Pierre was now holding the dagger in the wound, to stanch the outgushing of the blood. Ay, Pierre, now indeed art thou hurt with a wound, never to be completely healed but in heaven; for thee, the before undistrusted moral beauty of the world is forever fled; for thee, thy sacred father is no more a saint…. for the first time, Pierre, Truth rolls a black billow through thy soul! (71).

[238] For Lacan's notion of psychosis, along with a comprehensive account of its symptoms and consequences, see Lacan, *Seminar III: The Psychoses*. See also Jacques Lacan, *On the Names-of-the-Father*, trans. by Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

The world has collapsed for Pierre, although he does not yet comprehend the extent of it. Delusions and hallucinations are not far off. The moment, in fact, bears a close resemblance to one of Ishmael's central observations: "No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe" (224). This passage will be unraveled slowly; for now, noting a few elements is sufficient: it is a wound that cannot be healed except in heaven, which is to say it is impossible to heal, since (i) there is no God and thus no Heaven and (ii) Pierre, as we will see, is no longer capable of regaining a functioning fiction of Divine order; the moral beauty of the world is lost; the father and his saintly status have been lost; and some "Truth" has surfaced.[239] Melville elaborates on the consequences of this revelation: "Not only was the long-cherished image of his father now transfigured before him from a green foliaged tree into a blasted trunk," but also "every other image in his mind attested the universality of that electral light which had darted into his soul" (94). Melville's decisionism is evident here: *all* of Pierre's memories and beliefs are undermined, altered and reorganized in the aftermath of his father's status as a moral ideal being jeopardized, not just those directly related to his father and Isabel; simultaneously, new memories and those long-forgotten suddenly "spring up as if by magic," the most significant of which is a recollection of his father on his deathbed, ridden with fever, his hands grasping at a ghost, while quietly

[239] Lewis makes an astute observation about Pierre's pre-existing condition, namely, that Pierre is not only "blown to pieces" by the events that befall him but that he was always already incapable of forestalling his "fall" because "his constitution forbids it." See Lewis, *American Adam*, 149. Unfortunately, Lewis does not develop this insight nor give much consideration to why Pierre's constitution makes him unfit for dealing with the events and consequences in question, nor, finally, does inquire into what this constitution is, in any significant depth. Three points deserve emphasis: first, the proposed cure is impossible; second, a "Truth," which will be implicated in all that follows, has surfaced; and third, Pierre himself will be directly impacted by this event. In the meantime, everything he had believed to be certain has fallen into uncertainty. Later, as we will see, a series of contradictions will arise, and Pierre, we know, will not be able to elude or tolerate them. As noted by the narrator, "[n]ot only was the long-cherished image of his father now transfigured before him from a green foliaged tree into a blasted trunk, every other image in his mind attested the universality of that electoral light which had darted into his soul." See Melville, *Pierre*, 94.

uttering "daughter! my daughter!" (77).[240] While describing the resulting cascade of doubt, which spread to everything Pierre believed and knew, even the most insignificant and trivial of matters, Melville is careful to implicate Pierre's psyche: it was his demand (to not say "his need") for absolute certainty that drove the implications of this event far beyond matters directly (or even tangentially) related to his father, infiltrating even the most distant details of his life and facets of his understanding (94). For Pierre, "the whole world is the matter… Heaven *and* earth is the matter," as he would confess in, a desperate moment, not long after (166). Sundquist is correct when he says that the "the phallus of signification is missing" for Pierre and that the father's fall triggers this collapse into epistemic anarchy, but his interpretation is nonetheless inaccurate.[241] He is not wrong, but he is also not completely right: symbolic meaning is absent for Pierre, but symbolic meaning also was already absent for Pierre prior to the letter. Sundquist neglects to distinguish between the symbolic and imaginary, as a result of which his interpretation cannot account for the varying ways that meaning (or the absence of meaning) is experienced by Pierre over the course of the plot. Moreover, while Sundquist recognizes that Pierre's immediate and later reactions are pathological and even psychotic, this

[240] There are some grounds for thinking that this memory is false, but all evidence that could be usher for such a conclusion is too ambiguous to make the conclusion anything other than a weak induction, at best, or conjecture, at worst. See Melville, *Pierre*, 75-8.

[241] I will return to this, but for now the moments can be identified as the following: (i) immediately after the letter, it is in doubt, (ii) after he loses his father as an ideal, it appears lost, (iii) after Pierre confronts the void, it is lacking, but he then (iv) *immediately* distorts that recognition into loss. As we will see, it is only in the evanescent moment of lack that the situation devolves into pure meaninglessness and worthlessness, which would leave Pierre paralyzed. Murray insists that such meaninglessness and paralysis is Pierre's final state, but this as we will see, is not accurate enough. See Murray, "Introduction." Pierre is active throughout, although his activity is in vain because he is constitutively incapable of the type of act that would make his activity productive, in which case we could say that he is active but paralyzed. His final state cannot be categorized as a confrontation of pure meaninglessness, rather, it should be recognized as a state where nothing has any stable meaning and yet everything is for that very reason potentially significant—a better term, therefore, is significance without signification. Pure meaninglessness appears only for an evanescent moment, which is, moreover, the moment that his task shifts from finding to founding the law, but this same moment is what triggers Pierre's latent psychosis which immediately distorts lack back into loss and shifts his attempt to found the law, i.e., decide on the law, to a pathological search for some ground that would allow the laws return without a decision on his part.

initial oversight makes his diagnosis incapable of explaining how and why Pierre reacts as he does. This epistemic chaos—and Pierre's subsequent psychotic episode—is the result of Pierre's father's demise, but the father whose demise triggered this chaos is the imaginary father, i.e., the portrait that Pierre adored and imitated, while the symbolic father laid the groundwork, so to speak. The latter was already missing for Pierre, the fallout of which is the madness latent but waiting in the empty depths of this orphan. Furthermore, this confusion on Sundquist's part leads him to misinterpret Pierre as already aware of the collapse of his world and the imminent arrival of delusions and hallucinations. Pierre does not possess such foresight at this moment. Instead, while he is disturbed by the disorder, he remains convinced that it is temporary and can be rectified. Recall his declaration:

> 'Myself am left, at least,' he slowly and half-chokingly murmured. 'With myself I front thee! Unhand me all fears, and unlock me all spells! Henceforth I will know nothing but Truth; glad Truth, or sad Truth; I will know what is, and do what my deepest angel dictates. [...] From all idols, I tear all veils; henceforth I will see the hidden things; and live right out in my own hidden life!—Now I feel that nothing but Truth can move me so' (72).

Noting Pierre's conviction that meaning could be restored in essential, because it is a necessary condition of everything that follows, including his decision to leave and his ambition to write his book. Pierre repeatedly declares that a resolution exists and that he intends to find it; moreover, throughout he remains confident in his ability to find it. The "phallus of signification" may be "missing," yes, but the consequences Melville describes demand a more precise interpretation of *how* it is missing. At this point in the plot, for instance, both in terms of Pierre's perception of the world around him and his conscious beliefs, meaning is incomprehensible or obstructed, rather than lost in a more radical sense or lacking. At the center of this absence of meaning as well as Pierre's intention and failure to reestablish it is the father. His involvement in the absence of meaning has been noted by more than a few interpretations, but it is equally important to note

what is far less often recognized: the father, the deposed father, is involved in Pierre's attempt and failure to reestablish it. Melville hints at this involvement numerous times, including his repeated characterization of Pierre's duty and fate as memnonic, thereby underscoring the fact that all of Pierre's actions, including his search for meaning and his decision to head to the city, revolve around fatherhood.

When Pierre turns to his father for guidance about what to do in response to Isabel's letter, he encounters a problem: there are two portraits, and they no longer convey the same mandate. While contemplating them, Pierre recalls the moment his aunt presented him with the second portrait. She explained that this portrait (P1) depicts his father as a young man, when he was captivated by a young French émigré.[242] At the time, this infatuation held little significance, and in Pierre's mind this earlier portrait (P1) of his father as a youth, given to him by his aunt, aligned perfectly with the more recent one (P2) of his father as an older man, which hangs in his mother's home. However, Isabel's letter disrupts this continuity: the smile in P1 now signifies not a fleeting enchantment, but rather a love for a woman with whom he had a child. Individually, each portrait symbolizes a virtuous man deserving of admiration. Yet, when considered together, they become irreconcilable because they entail conflicting obligations: P1 represents love for Isabel's mother and thus necessitates that he acknowledge Isabel as his father's child, while P2 represents love for his mother and requires that he protect her. Based on a series of assertions made by his mother, Pierre is aware that she would not accept Isabel, that she would be devastated by this allegation, both personally and in case

[242] The conversation between Pierre and his aunt that is later recalled is crucial for three reasons: (i) Pierre is told that his mother was never fond of the smiling image of his father in this older portrait; (ii) during the conversation, his aunt reproaches him for his inability to tolerate ambiguity; and (iii) during the episode, Pierre, his aunt, and the narrator all engage in speculation about reading character from facial expressions. Their speculative discussion actually confirms Pierre's previously observed psychotic trait, i.e., Pierre's takes words to be the things themselves or, more broadly, he mistakes representation for the actual object. As we will see, the concept of representation itself never enters Pierre's consciousness until he identifies his father as an impostor, but this does not introduce the act or necessity of representation; rather, it leads him to view anything claiming to be the truth as an object that conceals the real truth behind it. See Book IV "retrospective," in Melville, *Pierre*, 79-91.

the allegation became public, which would ruin her husband's and her reputation. Consequently, he cannot fulfill both his obligation to his mother and to his sister, nor can he simultaneously satisfy his memnonic duty and protect the image of his father. When he gazes at his father now, he is confronted not with an unambiguous directive but with an impossible command.

The reasoning behind Pierre's strange decision is not narrated, but it can be reconstructed. To be coherent, the logic must be rational for Pierre. His decision is sensible only through the principles of reasoning permissible to a psychotic mind.[243] His psychosis imposes three conditions: one, because he lacks autonomy, all thoughts and actions pass through his father; two, because he treats words as things, he cannot distinguish between them and thus sutures the image(s) and what they signify; and three, because he is intolerant of ambiguity, any acceptable ideal and mandate must be unequivocal.[244] As is obvious to any reader, Pierre's decision is not pragmatic. If it had been, one of numerous more practical decisions would have been made. His expressed sentimental concerns and the emotional turmoil involved should not obscure the fact that his decision is driven exclusively by epistemic concerns, which are, for him, existential. He needs absolute clarity and unambiguous laws. Close reading proves that if he cares about the persons and consequences involved, he does so only insofar as they affect his epistemic problem. Consider, for instance, how little attention is paid to Isabel in comparison to his musings on certainty and truth, even in the immediate aftermath of receiving the letter and subsequently speaking with Isabel, to say nothing of what follows, during which Isabel progressively drops out of the novel as anything more than an element in Pierre's logical problem. The same

[243] Sundquist argues for an alternative motivation behind Pierre's decision, namely an anxiety over continuing the Glendinning line, and argues that Pierre's decision as an unconscious act, a way of ensuring that the male line does not continue. See Sundquist, *Home as Found*, 145.

[244] There are three limitations that impose conditions on Pierre's decision and action. Firstly, a limitation that excludes any resolution that bypasses the father, which Melville expresses repeatedly by referring to Pierre's duty as memnonic. Secondly, a psychotic trait prevalent throughout the novel, which negates any solution that separates the father from his image. Finally, as noted by Pierre's aunt, Pierre's inability to accept ambiguity or resolve conflicting demands based on context, pragmatism, moral lenience, or relativism.

applies to Lucy, of course. Consider the following remark by the narrator:

> True, in his extraordinary scheme, Lucy was so intimately interwoven, that it seemed impossible for him at all to cast his future without some way having that heart's love in view. But ignorant of its quantity as yet, or fearful of ascertaining it; like an algebraist, for the real Lucy he, in his scheming thoughts, had substituted but a sign—some empty x—and in the ultimate solution of the problem, that empty x still figured; not the real Lucy (183).

In Pierre's scheme, Lucy, referred to as his "heart's love," is deeply intertwined, yet she is reduced to a mere "x" instead of being seen as the real Lucy. The same applies to all the characters involved in Pierre's life, Isabel and his mother included. None of them are individuals in whom Pierre invests as individuals; instead, they are all treated as pieces or elements in the problem he is trying to solve. Finally, in version of the problem posed in Plato's *Euthyphro*, i.e., are the virtuous loved by the Gods because they are virtuous or are the virtuous because they are loved by the Gods, for Pierre, the morally right decision is the right decision not because it is moral but because it is epistemically correct, i.e., the morally right decision is moral because it is epistemically right, not because it is morally correct.

Initially, the problem itself amounts to this: for P1 to be true, P2 must be false, and vice versa. Pierre, however, has no way to determine which of the portraits is true. On the one hand, throughout his life Pierre's mother has insisted that the later portrait (P2) was a true representation of his father. On the other hand, while looking at the earlier portrait (P1) Pierre imagines it saying the following: "Look again, I am thy father as he more truly was. In mature life, the world overlays and varnishes us… in youth we are Pierre, but in age we seem. Look again. I am thy your real father" (89). Isabel, of course, supports the earlier portrait and although she does not deny the truthfulness of the later one, her claim of being his sister gives the earlier portrait moral authority (for Pierre). Pierre's aunt argues that both portraits depict his father, but this is a position that Pierre, given his intolerance of ambiguity, cannot accept. He cannot, in short, decide between

the portraits, nor can he accept both. The only solution, therefore, is to accept one *and* deny the other. This solution too, however, fails because saving one by refusing the other proves impossible.[245] If he chooses to save P2, he must deny P1 as a symbol of true and honest love for Isabel's mother, in which case, the fact of Isabel makes P1 the portrait of a seducer. The problem appears solved: P1 is discredited and P2 is saved. Had this been Pierre's logic, he would have refused Isabel's claim and thus assumed the duty owed to his mother. But he makes no such decision; instead, he abandons both portraits. The reason is deceptively simple: if P1 is the portrait of a seducer, then P2 cannot be the portrait of a virtuous man since its claim to virtue would itself be a lie. The identification of P1 as a seducer discredits P2 as a virtuous man because it reveals the latter to be an impostor pretending to be virtuous, i.e., a loving, honorable man, while, in fact, being guilty of vice, i.e., a seducer who abandoned a child and concealed as much from another woman. We may be able to avoid such a conclusion, but Pierre cannot. If the portrait or representation is the thing represented, i.e., if words are things, then both P1 and P2 *are* his father; and so, the two are the same but also in contradiction with one another, which also means, with themselves. Because Pierre cannot tolerate ambiguity, this problem must be resolved, but any resolution results in the loss of both. If he sacrifices one, he also loses the other. As should be obvious, it makes no difference which he sacrifices and which he attempts to save—the result is the same. The father is saved only if both portraits are maintained in their contradiction, in which case a pragmatic solution would follow, but this is not within Pierre's range of possibility. The lack of any speculation on Pierre's part about the alternative possibilities or evaluation of their respective costs and benefits further shows that it's not a pragmatic choice. He expresses no indecision. All the hesitation, torment, and delay

[245] Throughout his life, Pierre's mother has insisted that the later portrait was the true representation of his father. However, the earlier portrait challenges Pierre to reconsider, as he imagines it saying to him: "Look again, I am thy father as he more truly was. In mature life, the world overlays and varnishes us… in youth we are Pierre, but in age we seem. Look again. I am your real father." Isabel, of course, supports the earlier portrait and although she doesn't deny the truthfulness of the later one, her claim of being his sister gives the earlier portrait moral authority (for Pierre) Finally, Pierre's aunt argues that both portraits depict his father. Melville, *Pierre*, 89.

between the moment of Pierre's decision and the moment he carries out his decision are devoted to contemplating the consequences and fate that follow from the letter and decision. Hence, his decision and its rationality for him: Pierre tosses P1 into the flames and leaves P2 in his family home, pretends to have already married Isabel, and leaves for the city, while telling the truth to no one. Previously assumed perfect and omnipotent, the imaginary father proves fickle and powerless when presented with a dilemma demanding a real ethical decision. The only father he ever had has been delegitimized and forsaken. At this moment, the phallus of signification is lost, as Sundquist argues, but it is not yet lacking.

Foreclosure, as becomes clear, has left Pierre empty, internally, and the discreditation of his imaginary father has stripped him of the external codes and protocols he used to imitate. Previously, he lacked an internal "moral compass" and "inner angel," but now he also lacks any external laws to follow. As a result, Pierre is now in the conditions desired by the party of Hope: he no longer carries inherited norms within himself *and* the world outside has been freed from the artifices of history, the traditions the imposed upon men until they were internalized by them. He and the world around him have been emptied, and so all he possesses is whatever is inherent to him as a subject. In Pierre's case, according to Melville, all he has is the principle and psychotic reason. Another striking parallel is found here: the psychotic, as Lacan frequently noted, is remarkably rational and reliant on a form of reason that is classically logical and perfectly cold; what we know of Pierre reflects the principles of classical logic, i.e., law of identity, law of non-contradiction, and law of the excluded middle.[246] Pierre's thinking and decisions reflect these laws, as we will see; and all of his subsequent actions prove to be dictated by the logical parameters of his psyche. Empty of any internalization and standing in a world emptied of external laws, Pierre, equipped with the principle and the logical reasoning

[246] By "classically logical" I mean that Pierre's logic adheres to the three laws of classical logic: the law of non-contradiction, the law of excluded middle, and the principle of identity. For insights into the rationality of the psychotic, refer to Lacan, *Book III, The Psychoses*, and Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," *Ecrits*, 445-88.

of a psychotic mind, sets out to find the truth.

> Henceforth I will know nothing but Truth, glad Truth or sad Truth; I will know what is, and do what my deepest angel dictates… Thou art a palterer and a cheat; thou hast lured me on through gay gardens to a gulf. Oh! falsely guided in the days of my Joy… I strike through thy helm, and will see thy face, be it Gorgon!—Let me go, ye fond affections; all piety leave me;—I will be impious, for piety hath juggled me, and taught me to revere, where I should spurn. From all idols, I tear all veils; henceforth I will see the hidden things; and live right out in my own hidden life!—Now I feel that nothing but Truth can move me so (71-2).

This declaration could be mistaken for one of Ahab's; and fittingly so, since his position is identical to the position that Ahab must have held before encountering Moby Dick: impostors have been exposed and abandoned, but faith in a true moral law remains intact. Like Ahab and others, Pierre is heading out to sea. Melville presents the choice before Pierre as "Lucy or God." It is a strange but enlightening way to formulate the choice before Pierre—strange because his dedication to his engagement with Lucy should, one imagines, align with the dictates of his religious faith. For Pierre, however, "Lucy" represents continued obedience not to God but to the moral law dictated by the father, while “God” represents the truth he intends to access and discover in the absence of any mediating representations, all of which he has at this point abandoned and discredited. The parallels with Ahab are significant: one, Pierre’s exclamation, "Lo, I strike through thy helm, and will see thy face, be it Gorgon!" mirrors Ahab’s often quoted declaration, "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?" (72, 140); and two, as is the case with Ahab, there is something “above” Pierre and this something, as in Ahab’s case, is a truth of nothingness misperceived as something Divine, and, moreover, for him too this

something, because he has abandoned all impostors, has no "confines" (140). Further, Pierre's position, as should be clear, is analogous to the underlying assumptions that drove the Pequod's crew to abandon woe and pursue the promise of the sea; and like them, he too will be led to "madness" by it.[247] His perspective has shifted, and now he suspects that what he sees are veils and impostors concealing the truth. Moreover, his psychotic mind, which cannot think the logic of the signifier, nor accept representation, resorts to conceiving the loss of meaning not as a rupture between the signifier and the signified but as the result of false or deceptive representations concealing or obstructing an underlying and substantial essence. The belief in the essence in question is the effect of the principle, which, as the narrator makes clear repeatedly, is a truth (in the form of a subjective act) to which Pierre remains blind. The combination of this flaw and ignorance makes Pierre a "fool" of the truth in question, as we will see, and it also leads him down the same path of purification that the Pequod's men pursued. Acceptance or understanding of representation was always impossible for the psychotic, who sutures the word to the thing, but now Pierre perceives all appearances as veils, that is, as other objects obstructing his access to the objects he desires to see and know. Put another way: previously he treated words as things, suturing them together because he could understand representations; now, however, he suspects all that he can see to be concealing lies; this appears to suggest that he acknowledges representation, albeit as misrepresentation, i.e., that he conceives of the problem as the result of inappropriate representations standing in front of the things themselves; but that is not the case, instead, Pierre sees these "lies" as other object standing in front of and obstructing his access to the true objects.

Pierre also understands the stakes: "Everything is the matter, the whole world is the matter… Heaven and earth is the matter, sir!" (166). Because Pierre's spontaneous logic is decisionist, his reaction is not an exaggeration. He is mistaken, however, to believe (at this moment) that the "moral beauty of the

[247] The difference is that Ahab has identified Moby Dick as what lies behind the mask, whereas Pierre, still in the early stages of his madness, has not yet discovered that there is only emptiness and therefore continues to believe in some morally grounded metaphysical or Divine law.

world" is salvageable, just as he is mistaken to think that there is a "deepest angel" within him to which he can turn. It is not, it has already been irretrievably lost—and the latter, because he is an orphan, is something he never possessed. Ignorant of these realities, Pierre moves forward, but the narrator issues a warning: "Pierre! Thou art foolish; rebuild… for thy shrine still stands; it stands, Pierre, firmly stands… impostors are not unknown in this curious world" (75). Reassured by Transcendentalism's promise of a Divine order above and a moral soul within, the youthful, unalienated Pierre pays no attention and ventures into an empty space.[248] He follows the "trail of truth," but he has-unknowingly-*already* gone "too far."

> But the example of many minds forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those treacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them; and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike. (168)

Pierre eventually acquires *some* of the knowledge presented here. He confronts the emptiness in place of the Divine and acknowledges the consequence: "Look: a nothing is the substance, it casts one shadow one way, and another the other way; and these two shadows cast from one nothing; these, seems to me, are Virtue and Vice" (273). He also realizes that others remain deceived by impostors: "Demigods trample on trash, and Virtue and Vice are trash" (272). However, he never acknowledges that he himself also clings to shadows, even after discovering that there is only nothingness and falsely diverging shadows. He is cognizant of the objective truth but at the "lower layer" he does not believe it. What he does not believe is his "unconscious understanding," the transcendental structure of his reason and its illusions.[249] The reader, on the other hand,

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[248] In *Pierre*, Melville refers to Pierre's reason as "youthful" and "immature" repeatedly. To this barely concealed criticism of Transcendentalism, he also adds that it is "not philosophical." For a few such instances see Melville, *Pierre*, 18, 166, 243-4, 257, 281-3.

[249] For a succinct articulation of this difference between knowing and believing, See Zizek, *Parallax View*, 3-14. In this Introduction, Zizek formulates this difference first in terms of the difference between the "subject

is enlightened on the matter: "When the substance is gone, men cling to the shadows" (266). Pierre clings to shadows as much as those who are still deluded by impostors, but the shadows are distinct: they cling to shadows misrecognized as representatives of Divine law, while Pierre, who knows that they are impostors of nothing, continues to act in a manner that contradicts his avowed knowledge that Divine order is a fiction and that there is only nothingness, nothingness and the compass that points indifferently in all directions at once; as such, while he does not cling to falsely diverging shadows as if they were true moral laws and meanings, he clings to the shadows cast by his presupposition of the place where the Divine ought to be. They cling to what he knows are lies, in other words, while he clings to shadows of his own unconscious projections. His clinging, as should be obvious, is homologous to the Pequod's men experiencing themselves as stranded in "barren mazes"; and his nihilism, therefore, is not of the perfect but of the imperfect kind. And so, while he knows the ontological truth he cannot act as if he believes it because he neither knows nor recognizes the subjective truth of the principle. In *Moby Dick's* terms, Pierre clings to the bare principle without an agent; we can say that he clings to the "essence" or "phantom" of "life" but has no means of giving this phantom some substance because he has no means of confining the something above him—he has no means because he categorically refuses impostors, the consequence of which is the loss of the fiction that would otherwise be in the place presupposed by the principle. In *Pierre's* terms, while he recognizes that "Silence is the only Voice of our God," he fails to recognize that it is his mind and his mind alone that posits the presupposition that distorts silence into a Voice of Silence.[250] Put another way: because Pierre, unlike Ahab, cannot make the

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of the enunciation" and "the subject of the enunciated," after which he develops how this difference plays out in ideology.

[250] Melville's point is not that man invents God directly, but rather that the mind spontaneously and unconsciously presupposes the place where God would be, thereby establishing the conditions for seeking what is ontologically lacking. Hence, the choice noted at the outset: "Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!" See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 142. The result of this presupposition is identical to what Agamben calls "imperfect nihilism," which, Melville ventures, torments the subject and which, as we will see, can only be resolved through Moby Dick.

move to "hunt Moby Dick," he remains stuck in the prior stage, "~~God~~ hunt us."

He also fails to realize that by reaching the Pole, he has already lost the mind's "directing compass" (168).[251] The allegory is precise and consistent: if this "compass" is lost in this pursuit, then it and the void cannot coexist. It follows that its function is to prevent the pursuit from going "too far." And if "going too far" leads to the void, or the recognition that God is a fiction because there is only nothingness, then the "compass" is another term for the impostor that protects the fiction by concealing the nothingness, thereby creating the impression that there is something to be represented. It hides that there is nothing to hide, so to speak, but by doing so, it conceals everything that needs to be hidden to guarantee its own legitimacy; and, Melville believes, the subject's sanity. The "compass," in other words, is nothing but the father—internalized by normal subjects and imitated by orphans. Melville is aware that something of a hoax is involved: later in the novel, he refers to what Pierre needs to but cannot do as a "trick." Through Milthorpe, he adds: "the whole world's a trick. Know the trick of it, all's right; don't know, all's wrong. Ha! ha!" (317). Not surprisingly, Pierre fails to understand the joke. But more to the point, this description of the trick, while a satirical comment on Transcendentalism, is also a serious proposition, the logic of which is very much the logic of sovereignty and of the signifier. This trick, we can add, is a Parrhasian trick.[252] The combination of

[251] The trail of truth leads to a Pole, but this Pole is barren except for a needle that "indifferently respects all points on the horizon alike." As such, there can be no Pole at all, nor can there be any other. The fact that it is so described and that Pierre reacts in the manner he does indicates, like the "barren mazes" in "Moby Dick," that a subjective distortion is already operating: if the conditions required for faith in meaning are objectively lacking but faith in the restoration of meaning persists, then the cause of that faith can come only from the subject, who, in one way or another, is projecting or presupposing the conditions of possibility for such confidence. If there is just a void, then the description of it as a Pole with a needle indiscriminately pointing in all directions alike is a subjective distortion of lack into loss, indeed the description of what Pierre sees as such a pole indicates that the subjective distortion is already operating. Pierre, as we will see, learns much over the course of the novel, but he does not learn that.

[252] As Pierre's case makes clear, there is the impostor's trick outside, and there is the subject's homologous trick inside. The latter would be the ability to decide on the law in the absence of some law in which the decision could be grounded. It is, in a word, the act of the sovereign or the father. Pierre lacks this ability, as is all too evident, and he lacks this ability, I propose, because he was not alienated by a symbolic father—or,

what Pierre knows and what he does not know explains his tragic fate. Because the narrator articulates what Pierre is unaware of, Murray's suggestion that Melville and Pierre are equally enlightened is incorrect. In fact, it is the knowledge of these unknowns, or the self-consciousness of this "unconscious understanding," that enables Ishmael to escape from the hunt and return through the capture the White Whale; returning, in other words, to land in a way that nullifies the original cause that compels men to the sea and thereafter into the hunt by reinstalling what the great American desert had deprived them of. What Murray overlooks in his comparison of Pierre and Melville is, therefore, nothing less than the core of Melville's message in both books.

"Fathers" are impostors *necessarily*, but they are also necessary *because they are impostors*. Without them, there can be no fictions, nor can the truth above them—the nothing misperceived as a lost Divine order, or the silence misheard as the Voice of Silence—be confined. The compass being irretrievably "lost" along this "path of truth" confirms the previously mentioned idea of the "eternal impossibility of logically exonerating his dead father" (142). The world has been disenchanted, Melville thinks, but not because faith in God has been lost—it has not and, Melville would add, it cannot be. Rather, it has been disenchanted because reverence for the father has been abandoned. When Melville refers to the limit that has been crossed as "sacred" he means it in the full sense of the term: a limit that must not be touched, that must not be questioned or interrogated and certainly transgressed or breached if it and what lies on the other side of it are to remain functional and operative. It is a fragile limit, precisely because it relies on a trick and on faith. The "sacred limit" has been crossed, Melville thinks, but it is not and it never was God that was "sacred," instead what was sacred was the father, the impostor, "the church, the monument, the bible," the representative of the fiction that creates and guards the fiction, that confines the nothingness and the presupposition such that the subject can believe in a Divine order it cannot see, touch, or know, but which it must believe in, orient

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in the terms Melville uses in *Pierre*, he was never "tricked." Matthiessen's thesis that inner and outer facts coincide in Melville's works, I suggest, finds its most significant instance here. I will return to this shortly.

itself through, and trick itself into believing it knows if it is to not be forever a "wretched infidel."[253] For Melville, the trouble plaguing the 19th century is not due to the alleged loss of belief in God, but due to the "breakdown of consensual dogmatic structures," the rupture with inherited traditions, fathers, in other words, after which this orphaned age was bound for the sea. It would not lose faith in Divine order, instead it would be condemned to "~~God~~ hunt us," and to evade that it would "hunt Moby Dick."

If Pierre serves as Ahab's background story, we know what an irrational—or illogical—exoneration would look like for Pierre: a hunt for Moby Dick. There is no "logical" exoneration for Pierre, because, according to Melville, the problem is in his mind.

> Here the helplessness of all further light, and the eternal impossibility of logically exonerating his dead father, in his own mind, from the liability to this, and many other of the blackest self-insinuated suppositions; all this came over Pierre with a power so infernal and intense, that it could only have proceeded from the unretarded malice of the Evil One himself." (142)

This passage confirms the dependency of Gods on fathers, that Melville is not being rhetorical in referring to the father as "sacred," and that the " sacred limit" in question pertains to the father, not God. Blasphemy, therefore, is not directly a violation of Divine law but of the law the qualification of which by the Reverend and his mother left Pierre so uneasy. It is a transgression against the father, it is the removal or denial of the father. This passage also identifies the location of the problem Pierre confronts: it is in the orphan's "own mind." "[F]urther light" is ineffective because the problem's irresolvability lies "in his own mind." The impossibility of "logically" vindicating the deposed imposter "in his own mind" holds two interconnected meanings: firstly, the problem resides *in his mind*, and secondly, it cannot be resolved solely *within his own mind alone*. As in psychoanalytic theory, the problem's presence "in his own mind" emerges from the father's

[253] The term "wretched infidel" is from *Moby Dick*, but as will be demonstrated, it applies perfectly to Pierre. Fittingly, Ishmael uses it to describe a subject facing the Whiteness of the Whale but lacking an agent, i.e., Moby Dick. For its use in *Moby Dick*, see Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," in *Moby Dick*, 165.

foreclosure, resulting in a subject that is not only without interiority and dependent on mimicking external protocols but which cannot itself perform the impostor's trick. Furthermore, here the orphan's latent madness is triggered into a psychotic episode when it is forced to assume the position of deciding on the law. Because the orphan (or latent psychotic) lacks the prototype of this trick "in his own mind," the outcome is a psychotic episode where semantic chaos is resolved only through the projection of a delusional metaphor. He cannot solve it rationally because the father cannot be logically exonerated, i.e., reinstated as legitimate; and even if he did solve it irrationally, the solution would not be in his own mind alone. The only way out, the only asylum, as it were, for the orphan is through an external agent. Moby Dick is the way out and Moby Dick is ex-time, i.e., he is inside or of the subject and he is outside or other to the subject: Moby Dick is the idea of the Whale, which originates in the subject, in its principle and its lower layer, but Moby Dick is also the agent, the body, the dumb brute invested with this idea. He is Ahab, in other words, and he is not Ahab, and Ahab—like the others—will misperceive him as something other, something discovered and not something of his own making. In one respect, Ahab is not mistaken—the dumb brute is not of his making; but in another, he is, because what makes some dumb brute Moby Dick is what Ahab invested into it. Insofar as the problem resides *in his mind*, the problem is orphanhood, and insofar as it cannot be resolved solely *within his own mind alone*, the solution is Moby Dick, a delusional formation.[254]

Something is amiss within the orphan, according to Melville: it cannot handle ambiguity, has no interiority, in the sense of internalized beliefs and convictions, it cannot accept any impostors, and, finally, it cannot absolve itself since it is unable to compensate for what is missing in its own mind or in the world outside. It cannot produce the impostors that create the fictions it needs, which is to say, it cannot produce impostors that would constrain the truth, and it cannot itself act as or submit to impostors because it was never subjected to or subjectivized by them. Empty and finding itself in emptied space, Melville's orphan will

[254] More properly, Moby Dick is a paranoid delusional formation. I will return to this in detail in Chapter 6.

fall into a madness from which there is no rational exit.

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With this rudimentary formulation of Melville's theory of the subject in hand, we can bring our attention back to the initial comments on Shakespeare: Melville's crucial point is that alienation is constitutive and enabling. Constraints, in a broader sense, are empowering, and Hope leads only to the fate suffered by Pierre or the fate suffered by the Pequod's men. "Human life," Melville insists, "doth truly come from that which all men are agreed to call by the name of God," a fiction that grants legitimacy to fathers (145). In a dialectical twist, however, it relies on fathers because they produce and secure the fictions that life depends on, and which themselves subsequently authorize the impostors that created and protect them. In addition to God or Divine order, which the subject unconsciously presupposes, being dependent on fathers, everything else that organizes the world and the subject within a world also depends on fathers as well, including all the "arbitrary lines" that allow for the "worldly good," i.e., the laws, customs, and meanings that extend from impostors, the subject's ability to view the rules, laws, and meanings founded in tricks, and the subject's own ability to perform such tricks. Recall Pierre's exchanges with the Reverend. In dire straits, immediately after losing his father as an absolute ideal, Pierre runs to the Reverend's home in the middle of the night. To the Reverend's question 'what is the matter,' he responds without hesitation: "[e]very thing is the matter, the whole world is the matter…. Heaven and earth is the matter, sir!" This is no exaggeration *for Pierre.* The logic of his spontaneous reasoning is revealed through an earlier discussion with the Reverend. To his question of whether even "the most deceitful and hypocritical of fathers should be honored by the son, as the purest," the latter responds that such absolute laws are conditional on the father's virtue (108). The response left Pierre dissatisfied at the time, and now it leaves him assured that the old Reverend can be of no help. Pierre's reasoning is not narrated but it can be reconstructed: if "honor thy father" is relative, then qualifiers like "virtue" and "sin" must be defined independently, but they cannot be because they are only "falsely diverging shadows of the same nothing" *if* the absolute law is "nothing"; plainly, then, they cannot validate or redeem

"honor thy father" because they are constitutively dependent on some absolute law or first principle, such as "honor thy father."[255] If an absolute moral law is lacking, then all virtue and vice are lost. Regardless of how carefully they are defined and qualified, they can, Melville thinks, be no more than falsely diverging shadows of the same nothing, in which case the heart of a moral system is a barren pole with a needle indifferently pointing in all directions alike. Expanding beyond the realm of morality, this decisionist logic, as evident in *Moby Dick*, leaves the subject either immersed in a world of falsehoods and deceptions or adrift in a purposeless sea of meaninglessness. The father hid the lack through the pretense of being the representative of the fiction posited behind it. It is, Melville writes in Pierre, the lone pillar of the one-pillared temple that is the soul, from which comes the moral life, the reasoned mind, and ability to act.

Later, as we will see, the decisionist logic of the impostor is referred to by Melville as a "little nut," within which "lie germ-like the possible solution of some puzzling problems" (204). For Melville, it is the authorities that 19th-century attempts to break with the past saw as illegitimate impostors, as inventions of human fancy imposed upon men as if they were natural or Divine law, that are sacred. These institutions, e.g., "the Church, the monument, the Bible," and not God are what must be revered as such. If they are, there is nothing to fear for God or His order. The representations, Melville wants to say, must be respected because they create and secure the fictions men need, and it is they—and not the non-existing fictions—that produce the arbitrary lines on which human lives and societies depend. The psychological and cognitive requisites for such a disposition are, Melville describes in *Pierre*, installed by the empty name of the father, i.e., the "compass," the "inner angel," the sole "pillar," the "sacred limit" (87). In a sense, the pressing problem is the absence (or even the lack) of God, but the generative cause of the problem the 19th century, orphaned

[255] This conversation, it must be noted, occurs before Pierre's imaginary father is exposed and abandoned, before Pierre even receives the letter, and certainly before he discovers the needle indifferently pointing in all directions alike. All of which suggests that the spontaneous logic of Pierre's reasoning is decisionist, while also suggesting the degree of his dependence of his father.

from his inheritance, will face is the foreclosure of fathers, a foreclosure that the age saw not as a problem but as the very condition of its pursuit of liberty, truth, and justice. Hope, as I proposed earlier, is not viewed by Melville as merely impotent with respect to solving the ills that plague America but as implicated in those ills themselves. If *Moby Dick* does not make this condemnation obvious enough, a careful reading of the novel so many of his contemporaries viewed as evidence of Melville's insanity puts it beyond any doubt.

The century, Melville thinks, orphaned itself into catastrophe when it assumed the romantic dream of Hope. Because it has assumed the mistaken metaphysical premises of Hope dogmatically, as articles of faith, because it assumed them at the "lower layer," and because it remains blind to and refuses to reflect on them, it will repeat the same mistakes that lead to the misery and failure it will attempt to address. Melville's worry is that this ideology will remain blind to its implication in its failures and thus invent agents to blame, and, moreover, that this same blindness will ensure that its failures will encourage the repletion of the carnage its vengeance will exact on innocents. It is the Hopeful path of purification. Put another way, there will be Pierre and then there will be the hunts from which none will return.

Orphans, therefore, are not hindered by their inability to find (or fabricate) Gods, but rather by their inability to create their own fathers. This is the ultimate irony of the orphan's pursuit of truth, of the unmediated, pure truth for which fathers were sacrificed. What Ishmael writes about Ahab, applies equally to Pierre: "great hearts sometimes condense to one deep pang, the sum total of those shallow pains kindly diffused through feebler men's whole lives. And so, such hearts… in their life-time aggregate a whole age of woe… for even in their pointless centers, those noble natures contain the entire circumferences of inferior souls" (411-2). Pierre is where the madness of the 19th century begins, Ahab is where it leads.

The dependence of God, kings, and their subsidiaries on fatherhood can now be clarified. Melville anticipates the paternal metaphor. The Name-of-the-Father inaugurates the subject's entry into the symbolic order by substituting a legible signifier for an unreadable one, the mother's desire, and granting it a point of identification, through which it internalizes values and laws. Further, it grants the subject entry into an order

where signification functions properly *and* gives it the ability to enact this metaphorical operation itself; put another way, the father subjects the child to "the trick," the result of which is not only an internalization of various values, meanings, and laws, i.e., "the arbitrary lines of conduct, by which the common world, however base and dastardly, surrounds thee for thy worldly good," but also an internalization of the trick itself. The orphan's problem, therefore, lies in its own mind: it cannot accept the trick and it cannot perform the trick, meaning it cannot accept the world's arbitrary lines as legitimate and it cannot produce any such lines on its own. Orphanhood, therefore, leaves Pierre in an impossible quagmire, from which there is no logical escape: he needs the trick, but can neither perform it nor accept any lines of conduct produced by the tricks of others as legitimate. As a result, while his friend Millthorpe (a kind, but ultimately simple man) publishes a new essay each day and gives another lecture each night, Pierre is forever stuck on the first page of what his successful friend jokingly calls his "Inferno."[256] Millthorpe, a practicing Transcendentalist, is another dig at the ideology of Hope, not only because of his simplicity and lack of knowledge but also because his ability to express affirmative and conclusive ideas in his papers and talks—or for that matter his ability to finish a sentence without embroiling himself in a quagmire of contradictions and impossibilities—stems solely from his failure to fully embrace the beliefs he advocates. If he were to fully understand and practice the principles he preaches, he would be like Pierre, relentlessly moving and struggling, but only spinning his head and going nowhere. The fact that this idiot is celebrated by the other "apostles," as Melville mockingly labels them, is the more immediately obvious but ultimately the less injurious criticism: Melville viewed some

[256] Millthorpe is described as a kind but simple man, lacking notable intelligence or education. However, he knows the trick, writing a new essay each night and delivering a new lecture each morning. The celebration of Millthorpe's achievements by the other Apostles is a thinly veiled mockery of Transcendentalism. Undoubtedly, Millthorpe and his shocking exclamation parody Transcendentalism. On the other hand, Millthorpe is correct in asserting that Pierre is eternally stuck on the first line because he does not know the trick. Pierre's countless pages should be understood as futile and exposing his inability to address the problem, rather than contradicting this notion. Pierre's situation is a perplexing combination of ceaseless activity and complete paralysis.

transcendentalists (or "Juvenile Americans," as he calls the literary wing of Hope) as idiots, but more than that he also viewed the doctrine itself was idiotic, regardless of how articulately it was expressed. More than Millthorpe or any of the other artists, philosophers, writers, and social activists that live in the building Pierre occupies, an abandoned Church, which first housed barristers, solicitors, and litigators, and later commercial enterprises, before being left to the apostles, Pierre is the ideal transcendentalist. It is his devotion to and practice of the mistaken beliefs of Hope that leads to him being the man he is by novel's end, a tragic fool. Pierre is not literally stuck on the first page; he's written hundreds of them in pursuit of his "Gospels," but all his countless pages are gibberish and each is forever starting anew. His frantic and relentless activity, in other words, conceals an underlying paralysis consequent to his inability to perform a single and very specific trick.[257]

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[257] The logic and illusion of the trick merit repeating. Firstly, the impostor produces the fiction and then relies on that fiction to guarantee its own legitimacy. Secondly, the impostor only claims to represent something that already exists autonomously. The trick, therefore, hides its own logic and deceives by presenting itself as just the representative and not the actual thing or final authority, but by this gesture it attains its authority. Because Pierre was never tricked, he cannot accept the logic of decisionism and its underlying logic of impostor and fiction, and because he was not tricked, he has not internalized either the substance of a given trick, i.e., values, meanings, norms, etc., or the form of the trick, leaving him incapable of making decisions and producing meanings. As a result, he is empty and, if his psychosis is triggered, destined to find himself in an emptied world, deprived of meanings and rules. Finally, all of this leaves him subject to another form of deception, as suggested by his form of "clinging." There are two distinct deceptions at play: Pierre is tricked by the unconscious or spontaneous act of the principle, while others, i.e., those who believe in God and His various representatives, are tricked by the agent that is sutured to (or in front of) the place the principle always already presupposed. What is unclear in *Pierre* is whether the Name-of-the-Father is what allows the misrecognition of the impostor to occur, or whether it instills the logic of the trick into the subject's mind for use, regardless of its awareness or lack of awareness of its truth, so to speak. In other words, does the father conceal the trick or pass on to the child an acceptance and capacity to use it? There is too much conflicting textual data on this matter in *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* to draw a conclusion, and it is possible, furthermore, that this ambiguity is deliberate, in which case, Melville's position would be that it doesn't make a difference. Additionally, the impostor deceives by hiding the fact that there is nothing to hide, and its trick is to present itself as not the thing itself but its representation. But this deception serves a purpose: if the subject always transforms silence into a Voice through the principle, then it is the impostor (the prototype of which is the father) that converts the Voice into a Word. If this is what the impostor does, and if this is what the subject spontaneously presupposes, then we can understand Melville's otherwise obscure statement that "to comprehend, is himself to condemn himself." See Melville, *Pierre,* 208-9. We will see that this idea, like many others, has multiple variations.

Melville confirms this as the cause of Pierre's troubles through a comparison with a priest: because the priest has "the imperishable monument of his Holy Catholic Church; the imperishable record of his Holy Bible; the imperishable intuition of the innate truth of Christianity," the question he confronts is whether some thought is "true or not true"; while Pierre, because he has no such impostors, must decide whether his "acts" are "right or wrong" (204). "In this little nut," we read, "lie germ-like the possible solution of some puzzling problems (204). The shift in terms intentional and indicative, and Melville leaves no room for ambiguity: "Pierre—where could he find the Church, the monument, the Bible, which unequivocally said to him—'Go on; thou art in the Right; I endorse thee all over; go on'" (204). Pierre lacks the necessary conditions for any productive activity, meaning activity other than the frantic and directionless activity that only serves to conceal his complete paralysis. The conditions for such activity are "the Church, the monument, the Bible," but it is equally important to note that they are all the same: they are "fathers," representatives of what grounds their authority. As such, one can elect any or all of them, order them one way or another (e.g., the Church interprets the scripture or an interpretation of scripture establishes a Church), it does not matter because they are all impostors based on fictions, creating and securing those fictions through their acts of representation, and then drawing and decreeing norms and values as they see fit. Once we grasp Melville's intention, it is of no significance whether one is religious or secular by name, a beadle or a writer, as it were, for the crucial distinction is between individuals who have impostors that they perceive as legitimate (and to which they are subject and by which they are alienated and subjectivized), and those who lack such authoritative alienation. The common factor that makes them all equal is the trick.

Without a father, Pierre is forced to search within himself for the reasons that would sanction his actions. A task completely different from the one assigned to the priest, who only needs to judge whether something is true or false by comparing it to a set of principles he knows and firmly believes in (as absolute). That isolation notwithstanding, Pierre is not completely alone: "Judge, then how all-desolating and withering the blast, that for Pierre, in one night, stripped his holiest shrine of all overlaid bloom and buried the mild

statue of the saint beneath the prostrated ruins of the soul's temple itself" (74-5). Stripped of his holiest shrine, the sole pillar of his soul's temple undermined, Pierre falls into ruin, but beneath this ruin lies a mild figure of the fallen saint. This description perfectly matches the forgotten and broken "sire" in the depths of the Pequod's men. Like them, Pierre is driven by an inaccessible sovereign to the point that he (or, his actions) is little more than its distorted echo. He is, Melville writes, "only the embalming cerements of his buried dead within" (100). The orphaned subject has no internalized substance and with the loss of the father he deemed an impostor, he also loses the external codes and conventions he had been following. He is empty, therefore, and condemned to emptied space; but he is more than nothing only because he is haunted by the residual presence of the expelled paternal function.[258] The residual presence is of the father, yes, but more precisely it is a residual need for a father. The unalienated subject is reduced to a ruin that is more than nothing only because the need for alienation remains. According to Melville, this need cannot be lost because it is the only property that is inherent to the subject. What may seem like the haunting of the expelled father is, therefore,

[258] As mentioned earlier and as will be further developed later, *Moby Dick* makes the same claim, albeit with a different figure: the broken sire lying beneath the conscious thought of the subject who, despite having no direct connection to it or even conscious recognition of it, nonetheless bears a "family resemblance" and acts as a blind mole in turn. Ishmael refers to this unconscious agent as the "subterranean miner," identifies it in all men and, moreover, assigns responsibility for the subject's heading to sea and assuming the hunt to this unconscious agent repeating in distorted form the acts of the forgotten sire. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 157. As the one pillar of his soul's temple, the father's fall brings Pierre's soul to ruin. Below this ruin, Melville believes, the fallen saint lays buried and intact. The father is gone, but not completely. The parallels between this persistence and the "grim sire" in *Moby Dick* are obvious, as is the parallel between Pierre's subsequent activity and the "subterranean miner" whose activity echoes the abandoned and inaccessible sire. In *Pierre*, Melville situates the fallen father below the ruin of the son. The orphan is more than nothing, therefore, but only because what has been forsaken persists as a specter of sorts. If we return to the initial metaphor for paternity, we can see that when fatherless, the subject does not disappear; rather, it is left gasping for breath in vain. Melville confirms that the orphan is haunted by the uncanny persistence of the very thing the lack of which made it an orphan on a number of occasions in *Pierre* and *Moby Dick*, but the two most explicit instances are the passage in *Pierre* where Pierre is identified as a ruin, and the passage in *Moby Dick* where Ishmael describes the "sire" in Ahab's depths. See Melville, *Pierre*, 74-5, and Melville, *Moby Dick*, 157. In *Moby Dick*, Melville is explicit that in this relationship between the orphan (or "exiled royalties") and the sire is a secret: "A family likeness! aye, he did beget ye, ye young exiled royalties; and from your grim sire only will the old State-secret come." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 157. The same claim, as we will see, is made in *Pierre*.

the unsatisfied need for a father, projected and misrecognized as something external. It is the principle, it is the little, empty point of personality, no different than Ahab identifies in (and as) himself. What *Pierre* makes clear is that this empty point of personality (sovereign from the impersonal) demands a sovereign for itself and in the absence of one will try to invent one. Pierre, like all men at sea, is the source of the state-of-exception that subsequently torments him and drives him to seek asylum.

Not just a ruin, Pierre is a ruin haunted by a continuing residual presence of the thing whose expulsion brought him and his world to ruin. By abandoning what it perceives as "arbitrary lines of conduct," i.e., the illegitimate conventions of tradition imposed by impostors, man, Melville argues, becomes an orphan reduced to nothing and wandering nowhere. It is no accident that he calls Pierre "self-upbraiding sailor"—that is what Pierre is and that is where he is going. He is nothing except a ruin haunted by an ex-timate specter of fatherhood. At no point does Pierre consciously recognize this, but he does dream it:

> On all sides, the physical world of solid objects now slidingly displaced itself from around him, and he floated into an ether of visions; and, starting to his feet with clenched hands and outstaring eyes at the transfixed face in the air, he ejaculated that wonderful verse from Dante, descriptive of the two mutually absorbing shapes in the Inferno:
>
> 'Ah! how dost thou change,
>
> Agnello! See! thou art not double now,
>
> Nor only one!' (91).

This passage offers key insights into Melville's theory of the subject. Firstly, it is necessary to reject the most common interpretation, namely, that the "face" belongs to Isabel. It does not. Instead, it belongs to the father, as indicated by the verse in the dream. Pierre can be understood as having possessed a dual nature: his latent psychosis rendered him entirely reliant on an external ideal, resulting in all his thoughts and actions being shaped by two distinct entities, his imaginary father, who commanded, and himself, who imitated. Due to

this dependency and his lack of inherent (or internalized) substance, one might expect that the expulsion of the imaginary father would reduce Pierre to nothingness; and that would be the case if Pierre was nothing more than a reflection of his circumstances. Melville, however, does not reduce Pierre to nothing, instead he describes him as something more, as "*a* nothing," a nothing that is more than one thing and less than two. For now, it suffices to observe that this one+ is the ruined Pierre and the haunting presence of the father. They cannot be separate entities because this specter of fatherhood is not separate from Pierre but intimately connected with him: it is produced by the principle and yet it appears as outside and independent of Pierre, as a place that must be assumed by something other. It is the principle, or what turns silence into an inscrutable Voice of Silence and what must be turned into some Word. If this presence were a distinct entity from Pierre, its return, i.e., its remaining buried beneath the ruins after expulsion, would not be coherent nor conceivable as a spontaneous and natural reaction. If Pierre is haunted by the return of this saint, then the father is a part of the subject, even if it appears external. Like the Whale, it is ex-time, and like Moby Dick is Ahab, so Pierre is more than one thing.

Secondly, the placement of this insight into a dream in the aftermath of the fragmenting and scattering of Pierre's world implies several things: (i) it suggests the necessity of the function or action demanded by this haunting presence, (ii) it confirms the role of the father and consequently the consequences of its absence, and (iii) it indicates that this return in the form of haunting is not accidental or elective but rather essential and unavoidable. Derrida's concept of the *Arkhe* is relevant in this context. Serving as the foundation of the law, the law originates from it, but only after a command is issued from the same place.[259] Hence, not only is there a sovereign decision behind every law, but this foundation itself is divided into the place of the law and the agent that occupies that place. To use Melville's language, there is the place presupposed by the

[259] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

principle and the agent who occupies it. When the place is empty but presupposed, the effect is the force-of-law, which, in Melville terms, morphs silence into a Voice, but when some agent assumes this place, the law taken on positive form, or, in Melville's term, the Voice morphs into a Word. When Ishmael formulates the choice before him as 'God hunt us, unless we hunt Moby Dick,' he is saying the same; and when he insists that all individuals choose the latter, because the former "appalls" men, he is conveying the same idea as Freud and Derrida: the haunting power of the deceased father (or the empty place of the law) exceeds the authority he possessed when alive. Put another way: the force-of-law is more tyrannical than any positive law. Melville refers to this heightened power as "torment," and his significant insight on this matter is double: one, it is man himself, when emptied and in empty space, that produces this effect, and two, people are inclined to seek refuge from this torment, even accepting the decrees of a madman like Ahab in order to escape it. The earlier-cited assertions that "the Truth resides in the sea" and that it is only at sea that the "fully invested" Whale can be properly known can now be comprehended in full. Like the truth of the legal order appears only in the state of exception, so the truth of the subject appears only at sea. Many passages from *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* could be cited here as evidence, but one should suffice: "political institutions which in other lands seem above all things intensely artificial, with America seem to possess the divine virtue of natural law" (13). They are not natural, for they are impostors created by the minds of men, but they are not artificial either, if such a designation implies that they could be done away with; instead, they possess the virtue of natural law, and so they return whenever they are, under the influence of some childish ideology, abandoned, abolished, and deemed unnecessary.

Further, like Derrida's deduction that the *Arkhe* orients the present through the promise of a future that is only made feasible by the assurance of a past, Melville identifies the orphan as a subject incapable of taking productive action due to the absence of the father's name, which, I repeat, he insists is empty. The expulsion of the father is the negation of tradition's legitimacy, but Melville's argument surpasses Lukacs' observation that tradition becomes convention, losing its hold on the soul, because, according to Melville,

the loss of tradition results in the loss of the soul itself. Hence Elijah's statement that they must not possess souls and why Pierre lacks his “inner angel.” Sundquist rightly notes that "with the disappearance of the 'grim sire' from the pyramid of genealogy, the 'entablatures of ages' have become merely 'superinduced superficies' [for Pierre]," adding that "[t]he burden of the past remains, certainly, but it has been deflated and turned into redundant impedimenta that restrict the search and yield not an embedded authority but only its cosmic absence" (155-6). But he fails to acknowledge that in *Pierre* and *Moby Dick* there is (i) an underlying subjective principle that always underpins the agents who authorize traditions, (ii) that in the absence of such agents, the principle resurfaces as an agent-less principle, resulting in (iii) the misperception that what they represented is merely lost, distorting their ontological lack into the subject's experience of them as epistemically lost, which leaves subjects tormented in empty, meaningless space that they cannot see as ontologically meaningless but which they also cannot establish a rational epistemic solution to. Only when this principle is devoid of its agent can Pierre's and the Pequod's actions be understood as "sane," despite also being characterized as "mad." So fundamental and instinctual is this principle that Melville defines the very essence of life with it. Even on the "most candid" seas, where waves have no destination and leave no permanent traces, "life dies sunward full of faith"; it dies (and lives) in this fashion because it cannot but see significance even in the complete absence of any objective evidence, by distorting pure nothingness into something that is just a little more, i.e., into the promise of significance. This image embodies two truths: the ontological Truth of nothingness and the subjective truth that distorts it, i.e., the principle. Finally, the fact that Pierre is haunted in a dream aligns with the description of Pierre as consciously unaware that he is, in a sense, haunting himself, while also highlighting the significance of the principle and his ignorance of it. Pierre remains haunted but oblivious to the source and nature of what haunts him.

The formulation of the subject as "a nothing tormented by another nothing," which is identified as "the law," can now be understood. Pierre's orphanhood and the discreditation of his imaginary father should have resulted in his reduction to nothing. The recognition of the void should have led the subject to perceive

only nothingness where some Divine order was expected. However, Pierre is instead characterized as "a nothing" tormented by "another nothing." What distinguishes him from nothingness is the persistence of the expelled father as a haunting specter, and what makes the nothingness above into something slightly more, namely, another nothing, is the same principle. The subject's torment is the outcome of its existence under a missing God (or God as the Voice of Silence), specifically, its existence under a law that it is subject to but cannot perceive, interpret, or comprehend. There is nothingness on both sides until the subject generates distortions. As developed earlier, the nothingness above is distorted into imperfect nihilism. As for the distortion of the nothingness within, I will let Melville speak for himself: "Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair, and the blackness of the shaft" (287). Nothing, nothing, and a constitutive need for impostors—that is Melville's counter to the metaphysical platform of Hope.[260]

The moment Pierre recognizes the void in the place he expected the Divine law, the problem morphs from epistemic to ontological, and his task transforms in turn, from finding to founding the law. This transition is immediate: after telling Isabel that Virtue and Vice are falsely diverging shadows of the same nothing, as he immediately declares, "I will write such things—I will gospelize the world anew and show them deeper secrets than the Apocalypse!—I will write it, I will write it!" (272). What follows is a psychotic episode. Pierre has been called to the court to assume the paternal or sovereign function of deciding the law. As is the case in Lacanian doctrine, the confrontation of this mandate by a subject for whom the Name-of-

[260] When Ishmael suggests that "the Truth" he seeks "resides in" the sea, he simply means that this essence of life emerges when the subject confronts a world that has lost its enchantment, whose false pretenses have been dismantled, and which is reduced to nothing and emptiness. The theory of the subject that is only alluded to in *Moby Dick* is more fully developed, as I have been arguing throughout, in *Pierre.* What is made clear is that the ~~state~~-of-exception arises because of the subject, the orphaned, haunted, soulless subject, condemned into empty space.

the-Father has been foreclosed triggers its latent psychosis by the imposition of a function for which the subject has no prototype. Pierre does not know the trick because he has never been tricked, so to speak, and so he cannot perform it. What Freud discovered in Judge Schreber, Melville figures in Pierre. The former's patient, as we know, was triggered when called to assume a sovereign position in the higher court of appeal; as we also know, he soon met God in his hospital room and submitted himself to Him. The latter's patient, so to speak, receives the same guest, not in a hospital room and not because he was called to be a judge, but in his study, at the peak of his madness, hunched over an endless number of pages of gibberish and meaningless scribbles Pierre intended to become the new Gospels. Schreber was tasked with making legal decisions, Pierre's task was somewhat greater: having discovered that "Virtue and Vice are trash," having seen that the world lies "soaked in lies," and that all great books are impostors, his task is to "Gospelize the world anew" (272). It is only at this moment, with the full consequences of the father's death made manifest, that Pierre becomes Hamlet in the 19th century. Perhaps this was true for Hamlet, but it is certainly true for Pierre: this task was fated for him, he was destined for it by forces greater than him and manufactured for it by conditions outside of him. These forces, as we have seen, are the symbolic structure and conditions of the 19th century that in conjunction with Melville's theory of the subject produce "the ambiguities" in the subtitle, the impersonal forces Melville appears to offer as an alternative agent to the named hero. The moment he assumes this sovereign task, his latent psychosis erupts. For some pages and weeks—it is impossible to tell how many—the youthful hero is trapped in a whirlwind of attempted linkages of signifiers aiming at the establishment of consistent signification, a relentless, ceaseless but tentative and transitory cascade that can settle only when the signifier and signified relationship is stabilized through a delusional metaphor.

Incapable of the trick, Pierre falls into irredeemable madness—"logically" irredeemable madness. Like the men that head out to sea in *Moby Dick* and are "lost in the infinite series of the sea," so Pierre is "sucked within the Maelstrom," wherein "man must go round" (134, 182). The "world" before him now appears "to lie saturated and soaking in lies," a clear radicalization of his earlier evaluation of the world as distorted by

things he could not trust (207).[261] He responds rationally enough by no longer reading any books, even the great ones, for their authors, from Plato and Spinoza to Goethe, all belong to the "guild of self-impostors" (207-8).[262] Pierre sequesters himself in his study, which he now leaves only to pace the city streets at night—without rest and without purpose. His writing begins to seep into the rest of his activities, all of which become indistinguishable from it. Full delusions and hallucinations arrive quickly thereafter, and Pierre begins to lose the ability to discern between them and reality, between inside and outside, and between wakefulness and sleep. The writing devolves ever further into pure gibberish, now reflecting nothing more than the anarchy of a psychotic episode. Pierre is said to have "plunged into a sea of trouble" and become lost in "unknown seas," and Melville is careful to assure the reader that it is the same sea that the Pequod sails, that he dives into it with the same determination as the soulless men of the great America desert, that he bears the same absent-mindedness, that he seeks the same asylum therein, and that his previous knowledge will also be exposed as useless therein.[263] Cast into the same sea as the one that the Pequod sails, Pierre quickly discovers

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[261] The calm of life on land is, as developed earlier, in a sense an illusion. The calm is produced by impostors concealing the void. Hope, as developed, sees impostors as distorting what they supposedly represent. Wirth, interestingly, sees this as the fundamental ambiguity in *Pierre* and as the cause of the disorientation and displacement that Pierre suffers. He interprets the sea as a symbol of this displacement from life on land, which he sees as an illusion concealing the underlying lack of order. See Wirth, "Outlandish Lands," 65.

[262] This discreditation of philosophers, including Plato, Spinoza, Goethe, etc., all of whom Pierre thinks "belong to this guild of self-impostors," has a clear parallel in *Moby Dick*, namely Ahab's discarding of maps, compasses, etc., and, even more so, Ishmael's discreditation of existing knowledge about the Whale. Another parallel is Queequeg's no longer being capable of reading his own tattoos, which had inscribed the entire history and metaphysics of his people. As is the case with Pierre, so it is with Queequeg: it is only once he is at sea, that he can no longer decipher the cosmology tattooed on his body; before that, it was just doubt and suspicion.

[263] Pierre's fate is to be "Sucked into the Maelstrom, man must go round"—that is Pierre's fate. See Melville, *Pierre*, 183. Wirth also highlights this point, noting that although Pierre is landlocked, the hero is metaphorically cast out to sea, facing a situation that poses a philosophical challenge. See Wirth, "Outlandish Lands," 65-82. According to Lewis, Melville always used going to sea, both literally and symbolically, as a way to confront the essential facts of life, very much in the sense that Thoreau meant 'the essential facts of life.' See Lewis, *American Adam*, 142. These essential facts primarily revolve around the nature of the self, including its constitution, mind, and soul, as well as the historical and philosophical circumstances that shape and surround it. Lewis adds that Melville's heroes delve into the mind of God, leaving behind all superficial appearances. This is, in a sense, true, but it must be remembered that there is no actual existing God in

the truth there. The symbolism is repeated, with the same historico-philosophical and psychological commitments: "plunged into a sea of trouble" the young hero becomes lost in "unknown seas" (93, 96). Some hundred pages later, as Pierre crosses "his Rubicon," we learn that a man who believes he can be a god is a "restless sailor" who "breaks from every enfolding arm, and puts to sea in height of tempest that blows off shore," and that "Pierre was now this vulnerable god; this self-upbraiding sailor; this dreamer of the avenging dream," who is about to take a step from which there is no return and no exit (182-3). The difference is that Pierre finds no Moby Dick, which leaves him stranded in "barren mazes," which is to say that for all his manic movement he sails nowhere at all. By the end, Pierre loses the ability to distinguish between inside and out, between reality and hallucinations; and he no longer sleeps, instead he only "lies still from his throbbings" (304). "He cannot sleep," we are told, for "he has waked the infinite wakefulness in him"; and when awake, he hallucinates (304). Ambiguity and uncertainty are "all pervasive now," spreading quickly and ruthlessly, consuming all his thoughts, until he gives up on even editing his rambling and his relentless writing becomes no more than gibberish on endless pages. Projections arrive quickly thereafter. Facing Plinlimmon—the mystic who leads the Apostles—he imagines this quiet man to be reading his mind and that he knows his secret: "Vain! vain! vain! said the face to him. Fool! fool! fool! said the face to him. Quit! quit! quit! said the face to him. But when he mentally interrogated the face as to why it thrice said Vain! Fool! Quit! to him; here there was no response. For that face did not respond to anything" (292). In another such instance, he feels the piercing eyes of this face leering at him, condemning him from across the way, from behind a brick wall, from a place where—far as an onlooker could tell—there may not be anyone at all. Pierre's "sincere soul" pushes the consequences to their extreme: he loses even Isabel and then himself. To some she was his wife

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Melville, and so what is delved into is the subject's psychology. Consequently, these heroes are only confronted with the sacred truth of the paternal function. Ultimately, the sea serves as Melville's symbol for the manifestation of the ontological truth of the void and Pierre is explicitly identified as a sailor. Moreover, his ambition arises from the same desperation that led the Pequod's crew to sea and made them susceptible to Ahab's lunacy. He sails the same sea, in other words, and he sails for the same reasons.

and he her husband, to others she was his sister and he her brother—one was a lie and the other a truth. But, as the consequences of foreclosure pervade all objective consensual structures and the meanings they guarantee, he comes to deny even the truth of their relation: to her call, "[l]et us sit down again, my brother," he responds with only "I am Pierre," as if now only proper nouns, by virtue of their very emptiness, isolation, and vacuous equivocity, are the only words that can have any meaning (273).[264] He can no longer be a brother any more than he was a husband—he is not one or the other, nor both, but neither, because both have lost all semantic value. Even the certainty that led to his psychotic episode is inverted and discredited—she is not his sister, Pierre begins to think.[265] The "skewer of the world," as Ishmael discerned for the Pequod's men, has indeed "fallen out" for Pierre (391). Melville leaves no room for ambiguity: "Such, oh thou son of man! are the perils and the miseries thou callest down on thee, when, even in a virtuous cause, thou steppest aside from those arbitrary lines of conduct, by which the common world, however base and dastardly, surrounds thee for thy worldly good" (178).

At the peak of his madness, as he sits alone in his room, writing in vain on "his plank," the long-awaited visitor arrives: "Now, that vague, fearful feeling stole into him, that, rail as all atheists will, there is a mysterious, inscrutable divineness in the world—a God—a Being positively present everywhere;—nay, He is now in this room; the air did part when I here sat down" (314). Some domestic matters interrupt.

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[264] The response is significant and intentional. Note that Melville employs the same strategy for emphasis here as he did with Pierre's docility. In the three pages of dialogue leading up to this exchange, Isabel refers to Pierre as "my brother" eleven times, which is more than in any other episode. Secondly, Isabel's claim that Pierre is her brother sets the entire plot in motion. Thirdly, this exchange takes place immediately after Pierre reveals the truth about what Virtue and Vice really are. And fourthly, Pierre reduces his identity to a proper noun alone, as if only proper nouns, with their simultaneous vacuity and tautology, are the only words that have any remaining meaning. If Pierre rejects the designation of "brother," then all words, values, and things have lost their meaning. On the other hand, while they may have lost their signification, they have not relinquished the promise of meaning. If they had, there would be no cause for objection or the affirmation of the proper name. All meanings have been lost with the downfall of the imaginary father, but Pierre is still tormented by an endlessly deferred promise of meaning.

[265] See "Book XXVI, A Walk: A Foreign Portrait: A Sail: And the End," in Melville, *Pierre*, 344-50.

Pierre is pulled away, and he dies a day or two after. Too soon, in any case, for his desperate attempt to reconstruct a world of meaning to be satisfied through this strange friend—who, he well knows, is a fiction. In his state of madness, however, that is as relevant as the fact that Moby Dick did not take Ahab's leg and that some "dumb brute" cannot be the cause of humanity's suffering nor can its death be humanity's salvation—which is to say, it is not relevant at all. We cannot say with certainty what would have happened to Pierre had he not been interrupted and soon after compelled to murder, before being killed in turn. Perhaps, like Ahab, from this visit he would have found himself a Whale. What Melville does tell us is what psychoanalysis discovered in the case of Judge Schreber: what is expelled from the symbolic inevitably returns in the real; with the Name-of-the-Father gone, something other will inevitably walk right into the room.

Murray correctly observes that Pierre's emergency eventually produces a "virtual paralysis with no capacity for decision," but because he fails to analyze the cause of Pierre's incapacity, he mistakenly concludes that this situation corresponds to everything being "equally meaningless and worthless" (xv). The moment of complete meaninglessness is evanescent, lasting just long enough to trigger Pierre's psychosis. The situation in which he finds himself at the end is more, let us say, ambiguous: sure, words, gestures, etc. no longer signify what they signified, but that does not imply that all significance has been lost; Lacan's logic of the signifier should be remembered here: if no signifier represents the subject, then it is also the case that no signifier does not represent the subject. Consequently, Pierre confronts a situation where meaning is completely indiscernible, perpetually shifting, constantly deferred, and always inverted but not thereby without significance. Indeed, if the world Pierre experiences was entirely meaningless, there would be neither reason nor the conditions of possibility for either his scribbles or his torment, i.e., his attempt to re-Gospelize the world or his madness. What Pierre confronts is the same impersonal identified in *Moby Dick*. Moreover, to the very end Pierre is compulsively trying to act and, in a sense, is acting; his problem is that he lacks the capacity for the type of act that would permit him to arrest this perpetual and sprawling web of significance without signification. The sequence of distinct ways in which the "phallus of signification" is "missing" can

now be clarified: immediately after the letter, this phallus is (i) in doubt; after he loses his imaginary father as an ideal, it (ii) appears lost, and it is only after Pierre confronts the void that it is (iii) lacking, but he immediately distorts that lack such that it again appears only (iv) lost.[266] It is only in this ephemeral and almost invisible but logically discernable moment that lack truly appears as such, the result of which would be pure meaninglessness and worthlessness and paralysis for Pierre. But this moment is evanescent, lasting just long enough to trigger his psychosis. He cannot assume this mandate because of a problem "in his mind," and it is because of this same problem that, as Melville recognized, he cannot resolve it in his mind alone.[267]

Pierre's "book" is often viewed as an allegorical biography of Melville's own struggles as a writer, including his disappointment with *Moby Dick's* reception.[268] Any such interpretation forces an equation

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[266] Murray also acknowledges that the key to meaning has been lost, but, like Sundquist, he fails to distinguish between the two realities and subsequent challenges that Pierre faces. Everything appears meaningless and worthless, and Pierre is paralyzed only in the second moment, after he acknowledges the void and thus shifts his task from finding to founding the law. However, it must be noted that Pierre is not completely paralyzed at that moment; in fact, he immediately begins to act, although his actions resemble a psychotic break, hence why the moment of lack, while logically necessary, is chronologically evanescent. That error aside, Murray's interpretation of *Pierre* is notable for its depth and coherence. See Murray, "Introduction."

[267] As should be clear, what Pierre needs—and what could save Pierre from his quagmire—is a delusional formation, exactly like Ahab's Moby Dick. I will turn to this shortly, in Chapter 6. While the narrator says that what Pierre needs is "the Church, the monument, the Bible" that would tell him "you are right" and "go on," it is more accurate to say that such representatives are what he would have needed in order to not become an orphan. Such representatives, as should be clear, cannot help Pierre because Pierre refuses—indeed, he cannot accept or even think—representation. His mind, as we have seen, cannot tolerate or think representation. A church, in other words, cannot save Pierre, just as it could not save Ahab. Instead, the only thing, as Chapter 6 will demonstrate, that could save him from his madness is a Moby Dick—Moby Dick is the only thing that can provide him asylum. The fact that he can only be saved by Moby Dick is part of the reason why Ishmael's Gospel involves a prior assumption of the prophecy. I will discuss this in detail in the Conclusion.

[268] Many Melville scholars have noted the parallels between Melville at the time of writing *Pierre* and Pierre's struggles as an author. In both cases, the author is trying to support his family through writing, and the reception of the work is negative. For example, see Hershel Parker's "Introduction" to *Pierre, or The Ambiguities: The Kraken Edition* (New York: Harper, 1995). We can observe other similarities: Melville, with *Omoo*, *Typee*, and to a lesser extent *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, was a promising and well-received writer, and Pierre, similarly, was viewed as a promising young writer on account of his early works, works that belong to the genre Melville criticizes in *Pierre* as sentimentalist. See Book XVII, "Young America in Literature," in Melville, *Pierre*, 243-56. It must be noted that the writings in question are those written by Pierre *prior to* Isabel's letter and thus distinct from the "mature" works he tires but fails to write. Further, once both attempt

between Melville and Pierre and between their respective Gospels. Needless to say, there is no evidence that Melville either re-evaluated *Moby Dick* from being his Gospels to something like Pierre's gibberish, nor that he conceived of himself as a "fool," a "cripple," a "toddler," "immature" or "not philosophical"—all of which are descriptions of Pierre.[269] Murray's otherwise impressive interpretation suffers a major mistake on this

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a more "mature" work (*Mardi* and then *Moby*, in Melville's case) they are criticized, condemned, etc. However, the interpretation of *Pierre* as an allegorical biography fails because Pierre's book is deemed a mature work that the author assumed immaturely, while this cannot be the evaluation Melville would give to himself for *Moby Dick*. These mature works are of the same genre: Melville conceives of *Moby Dick* as a Gospel and the book Pierre is writing is his attempt to re-Gospelize the world in response to encountering the barren pole with the indifferent needle pointing in all directions. There are certainly similarities between Melville and Pierre, but these are only superficial or strategic at best, akin to props or the residual memories that seep into a dream. We can only identify Pierre and his author if we reduce them to superficial elements. But at that point, there would be nothing worth reading. Instead, Pierre's book should be understood as the object through which he tries but fails to achieve what Ahab does through Moby Dick and what Melville (and Ishmael) accomplish through his distinct cetology. Pierre dies too early for us to know for certain what would have resulted from his encounter with that strange guest, but we can confidently deduce that he is at the stage just before Ahab, and thus two steps away from Ishmael. I will return to this in Chapter 6 and the Conclusion. Sundquist's reading aligns closely with mine, as he argues Pierre's desire to "found a home" is integral to the novel, emphasizing that the founding of a home is the essence of *Pierre*. See Sundquist, *Home as Found*, 146-54.

Pierre, therefore, can only be understood as an allegory for Melville if significant textual evidence is ignored. We could equate them by focusing on the lack of recognition and significant criticism both received for their lack "mature" works, as well as their respective lack of financial success, poverty, and struggle, and, finally, the fact that both lost their father at an early age. However, if Pierre is Melville, what does that mean for "the book" and *Moby Dick?* Pierre's book is described as scribbling, useless, and senseless—does that mean Melville viewed his own work, especially *Moby Dick,* in the same way? Pierre intends his book to be like the Gospels, and Melville declared *Moby Dick* to be the new Gospels, yes, but if Pierre is Melville, then we would have to conclude that Melville considered *Moby Dick* to be pure gibberish or, at best, a failure. Further, we would also have to concede that Melville viewed himself as a "cripple" and a "toddler," as "immature" and "unphilosophical"—all of which are descriptions of Pierre. Would he describe his own philosophy as immature, unphilosophical, and foolish? The narrator repeatedly describes Pierre's work in such terms. Instead of seeing Pierre as Melville, we should view them as alternatives. Pierre is, as will be clear, an honest transcendentalist, by which I mean that Melville portrays Pierre as a transcendentalist who fully assumes the principles and beliefs of transcendentalism and follows them to their final conclusions and implications.

[269] This re-evaluation would be radical. As mentioned earlier, Melville believed *Moby Dick* to be his Gospels for the 19th century, and he stated that he would die unappreciated and poor. The lack of recognition and commercial success did not justify such a re-evaluation. On the other hand, Pierre's book is depicted as pure and irredeemable gibberish, without any ambiguity. Both *Moby Dick* and Pierre's book are intended to be Gospels, but while Melville considers one a success, the other is consistently portrayed as senseless and deranged. Finally, we are repeatedly told—explicitly and implicitly—that Pierre's project is impossible. Can the same be said about Melville's Gospels, that is, about what I am calling the Gospel of Ishmael? In a sense,

point: he maintains that Melville's insight does not stretch much further than Pierre's because the latter is as "enlightened" as the former.[270] Any such equation, moreover, makes nonsense of the narrator's various warnings, insights, speculations, definitions, diagnoses, and criticisms, and misses the most crucial points of Melville's theory of the subject. The identification of Pierre as "fool of this Truth" and "the fool of Virtue, the fool of Fate" is a case in point: these diagnoses are meaningful and possible only if the narrator (unambiguously the voice of Melville) discerns something that is operating within Pierre's mind but of which he is ignorant; moreover, his ignorance is somehow implicated in his fate, while what he is ignorant of is somehow related to Truth and Virtue (354).

Instead, the book ought to be understood from the perspective of the Whale Pierre sorely lacks. It is his attempted but failed vehicle of redemption, but also what drives him into madness: "this book makes me mad," Pierre confesses (306). The subjective root of his failure is the inner catastrophe of orphanhood, and what the book reveals is that this subjective problem is reflected in what is missing from the solution when he attempts it alone. Compare Pierre's evaluation of the paintings he confronts at the novel's end to the painting Ishmael decodes in the Spouter-Inn.

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the ultimate objective of this study is to answer this question—is Ishmael's return possible? Is it possible without the assumption of a pre-existing difference? And it is rational, i.e., is it derived out of the same ideas and notions that explain the causal structure underlying the prophecy? My answer is yes: at the very least, Melville's Gospel is valid, meaning that if his various notions are accepted, then the means of Ishmael's escape and return are possible. All of this is discussed in depth in Chapter 6 and the Conclusion.

[270] If that were the case, however, not only could the narrator not consider Pierre unphilosophical, but Pierre himself would acknowledge the impossibility of his task and the inherent contradiction in his actions. Pierre understands that virtue and vice are mere illusions, yet he cannot resist attempting to restore moral order. He fails to realize that one cannot create their own law, just as a son cannot be his own father, so to speak. In short, Pierre desires what he cannot have and refuses what his mind cannot deny. Without the distinction between Pierre and Melville, *Pierre* would lack the ultimate ambiguity. Pierre is unphilosophical in his youth, yes, but even at the very end of the novel he still fails to grasp the philosophical dilemma at hand: the law must come from an external source because a self-imposed law cannot be created by the individual who hopes to be subject to it. The tragedy, if there is one, lies in the fact that even if Pierre were to fully comprehend Melville's perspective, he would be unable to restore what has been lost because, Melville thinks, the "sacred truth" cannot be achieved through profane means. Hence why Melville can write the following about his hero: "in this case, to comprehend is himself to condemn himself." See Melville, *Pierre*, 208-9.

> It seemed plain that the whole must be a collection of those wretched imported daubs, which with the incredible effrontery peculiar to some of the foreign picture-dealers in America, were christened by the loftiest names known to Art. But as the most mutilated torsoes of the perfections of antiquity are not unworthy the student's attention, neither are the most bungling modern incompletenesses: for both are torsoes; one of perished perfections in the past; the other, by anticipation, of yet unfulfilled perfections in the future. Still, as Pierre walked along by the thickly hung walls, and seemed to detect the infatuated vanity which must have prompted many of these utterly unknown artists in the attempted execution by feeble hand of vigorous themes; he could not repress the most melancholy foreboding concerning himself. All the walls of the world seemed thickly hung with the empty and impotent scope of pictures, grandly outlined, but miserably filled. The smaller and humbler pictures, representing little familiar things, were by far the best executed; but these, though touching him not unpleasingly, in one restricted sense, awoke no dormant majesties in his soul, and therefore, upon the whole, were contemptibly inadequate and unsatisfactory. (345-6)

Like the painting in the Spouter-Inn, these paintings and Pierre's evaluation are a synecdoche of the book he writes. Moreover, both are reflections of their respective psyches and logics, and, of course, of the books they write. Pierre confesses as much explicitly: upon seeing these failures "he could not repress the most melancholy foreboding concerning himself" (346). He too, in other words, attempted a "grandly outlined" "vigorous theme" of recreating some "perfection of antiquity" but, with his "feeble hands," produced only the most "bungling modern incompleteness." With Ishmael, the identification is implicit: he does not see himself in it, but it is he who decodes the painting by identifying the Leviathan at its center. The paintings have equivalent artists and ambitions: both are the work of "some ambitious young artist" intent on capturing or "delineat[ing]" some grand theme, but one succeeds where the other fails. The difference is unambiguous:

the Whale, explicitly identified as the "great theme" of *Moby Dick* by Ishmael.[271] Ishmael's name for this accomplishment is indicative: "chaos bewitched." Setting aside how he accomplishes this feat, we can ask: Is there a better name for what the Whale permits or for what Pierre fails to do?

Little detail is given about this book, but enough to reveal that it reflects the problems and principles in Pierre's mind, the limitations imposed by what he knows, the conditions he finds himself in, and his want of a Whale. It is intended as a "comprehensive [and] compact" new Gospels, both of which are impossible under the given historico-philosophical conditions (281). It tries to Gospelize the void, to establish the "eternally unsystemizable elements" which, Pierre insists, are not graspable by any existing "categories" and only distort the truth (128). The work eventually morphs into a plagiarism of Pierre's own life, leading to an absurd situation of him attempting to derive objectively true Gospels from within himself. He is attempting, in other words, to be the source of the very law to which he would be subject—an act for which he is constitutively unfit. This work soon becomes dependent on a precursor, which Pierre declares the "true" work. It is fair to assume that a third book would soon be necessary and then a fourth; indeed that each subsequent page of each book serves that same grounding function for and assumes the same more "true" status with respect to whichever page preceded it. The project, with Pierre's mind alone at its helm, is evidently unsolvable and endless. Slowly, it develops in the direction of attempting to resolve the tormenting excitations of his flesh, which the project itself incited and continues to incite. More broadly, it is continually devolving evermore into sprawling and incoherent gibberish, which Pierre eventually stops even trying to edit or hoping to complete. Finally, the sheer fact that he is trying to write it not only makes the book(s) impossible twice over but also indicates the presence of something within him that overrides what his psychotic mind should immediately recognize as impossible because inadmissible. The book, moreover, stays true to the aim of understanding and Gospelizing the nothingness, but at the same time this very act of

[271] See Chapter 104, "The Fossil Whale," in *Moby Dick*.

Gospelizing it stays true to the principle. The book—or the writing of the book—is, in other words, in contradiction with itself but at the same time consistent with both Pierre's conscious knowledge and his unconscious beliefs; the former provides its content, so to speak, while the latter is its condition of possibility. Ishmael, recall, deems any orphan confronting the veil of Whiteness but without a Whale a "wretched infidel" (165). A "wretched infidel," is there any better name for Pierre than that?

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Finally, "the ambiguities" in the subtitle have nothing to do with the moral value of Pierre's actions being ambiguous, i.e., good and bad. Reynolds demonstrates that moral values are deformed and distorted into equivocal, paradoxical, and even indiscernible ones or simply negated outright in *Pierre*.[272] But so many of Melville's works do the same—as Reynolds himself demonstrates—that it begs the question of why "ambiguities" deserves the status of a subtitle in this case and in those of others.[273] Moreover, no subversive intention can be attributed to either the hero or the author: from start-to-finish, *Pierre* is preoccupied with identifying stable and true moral values while the narrator consistently warns against abandoning impostors and the arbitrary codes of conduct they offer. Melville, in short, is opposing such subversions; not, however, due to some dogmatic reverence but precisely because all such things lack Divine legitimacy. He is defending impostors and fictions because they are impostors and fictions, not pointing out that they are such. At bottom, therefore, Reynolds comprehends the situation Pierre finds himself in, but he completely misunderstands Melville's point. At the center of this misunderstanding is that he misses Melville's irony and the theory of the

[272] See Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 135-65, 275-308.

[273] *The Confidence-Man* is a prime example. Indeed, that novel is more preoccupied with subverting values than *Pierre*. The subversion and subsequent ambiguity of moral values are as central to *Bartleby* and *Billy Budd* as they are to *Pierre*, yet neither of these works contain terms equivalent to "ambiguities" in their titles. In view of this, it is fair to ask: what would be the justification for "ambiguities" being in the subtitle of *Pierre* and not of any of the other works? More importantly, the ambiguities Reynolds mentions, while they certainly happen in *Pierre*, are not the ambiguities that define Pierre or *Pierre*. To borrow a term from *Moby Dick*, the ambiguities Melville has in mind are at a "lower layer."

subject that supports it. Bercovitch, conversely, absolves the hero and author of any such intention. *Pierre*, he suggests, "unveil[s] ambiguity after ambiguity, until it ends in a solipsistic void."[274] "Solipsistic void" is pretty close to a perfect name for Pierre's final state of mind, but in the absence of a comprehensive and convincing causal structure of this road of doubt and despair and Pierre's constitutive incapacity to arrest it, it is more a moniker than a logical diagnosis. Because there is no ambiguity at the outset and because Pierre is so intolerant of any, both the cause of and the hero's irredeemable entanglement in these ambiguities must be accounted for. In a similar vein, Wirth interprets "the ambiguities" as naming Pierre's disorientation after he confronts the void and adds that Pierre begins life in the proverbial "calm before the storm." It is a strange conclusion on Wirth's part, not least because Melville explicitly says otherwise—I will quote at length:

> Again: as the profound calm which only apparently precedes and prophesies of the storm, is perhaps more awful than the storm itself; for, indeed, the calm is but the wrapper and envelope of the storm; and contains it in itself, as the seemingly harmless rifle holds the fatal powder, and the ball, and the explosion; so the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentines about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play—this is a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair. But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side (229).

I suspect that Wirth, like Delbanco, overlooks or fails to recognize that Melville *does* explain the cause of Pierre's madness, the latent madness later triggered by the letter or, more accurately, by the imaginary father's inability to usher an unambiguous directive to his son. If the latent madness is not recognized, then,

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[274] See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 28.

if Wirth's interpretation is to fit the plot development, he must posit a calm must before the storm, the calm torn to shreds by this storm that befalls Pierre from outside, from out of nowhere, in fact. Melville provides a definition of "the calm" and of "the storm" in *Moby Dick*, and they are perfectly suited for *Pierre*. If something heralds the storm Pierre faces, it is the absence of the father—or, put another way, it is the fact that "rider" has been irretrievably lost, leaving the steed, "panting and snorting," just below the fragile calm of an orphan imitating conventions he neither understands nor holds within himself. At the risk of mixing metaphors too much, the storm in *Pierre* is the composite effect of the inner catastrophe of orphanhood, in which case it is, in a sense, *in* Pierre, and the letter or, better put, in the fragility of attenuated, weakened impostors followed not due to conviction but mere convention. Another subject could have handled the letter, but not Pierre, and other fathers could have handled it, but the covering impostors that remained. Even if *Pierre* begins in the proverbial "calm before the storm" this approach would still be mistaken, because even in such a scenario the crucial question would still concern what was already immanent in the situation, i.e., in Pierre, such that the storm manifested as it did.[275] For Wirth, Isabel's letter acts as the catalyst for Pierre's discovery of the void and thereby for the disorienting consequences that follow; but this causal structure is too shallow, ultimately senseless, and misses Melville's true contribution with *Pierre*. As any reader can attest, Pierre's decision is not the only possible one—though it may well be the stupidest, practically speaking. It follows that the letter cannot be conceived as the cause but only as the trigger of something in Pierre. Wirth is putting the cart before the horse, so to speak. The question to ask is: what is it about Pierre such that this letter causes these consequences? There is something wrong within Pierre. And if Pierre is representative—which he is—then

[275] See the previous Chapter for a similar problem discussed by Cameron regarding the concept of the "impersonal" in Melville. To summarize, the subject is responsible for these scattered and disjointed meanings appearing like a tangled and ever-changing web of significance that could potentially be connected if the right key is discovered. Moving on to the second point, Wirth overlooks the fact that the cause of this ambiguity, which I have identified, lies within Pierre himself. Furthermore, based on the evidence from the text, the root of this dispersion can be found within the symbolic structure itself, as supported by Melville's statement, "Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse" (Melville, *Pierre*, 19). I will delve into this topic in more depth later.

Melville's point is that there is something wrong in the form of subjectivization produced by the great American desert. It "manufactures" orphans, and something within the orphan is malfunctioning. Something in Pierre causes this otherwise manageable situation to be resolved in the way Pierre elects to, up to and including his cold reasoning. If "the ambiguities" name something about Pierre's "disorientation"—and they do—and if what preceded this was the "calm before the storm," then the "storm" was always already there. It is this latent problem or malfunction that must be understood if Pierre and *Pierre* are to be comprehended. Finally, this same latent cause must be related to Pierre's inability to resolve the disorientation and the "ambiguity after ambiguity" that leads to his "solipsistic void." If Reynolds misunderstands Melville by missing the irony, Wirth misunderstands it by missing Pierre. Finally, given Pierre's emptiness and character, as initially described, any interpretation of "the ambiguities" must account for why Pierre's duty and fate are repeatedly described as Memnonic.

Instead, "the ambiguities" are located at a lower layer. First, because his father proves to be an impostor, Pierre is forced to abandon him in order to directly access the Divine moral law. After making the sacrifice, however, he arrives at the conclusion that this Divine is a fiction, but along this “path of truth” he loses the conditions of possibility for attaining any such fiction. Put another way: through the sacrifice he loses what would make what he made the sacrifice for possible, i.e., to save God he sacrificed the father, but by sacrificing the father he also lost the possibility of God. In his attempt to save the moral law, therefore, he loses it, and yet, from Pierre’s orphaned perspective, he could not have acted otherwise. To save God, he had to give up the father, but in giving up the father he gave up the only thing that makes God possible. This is the ultimate ambiguity in *Pierre*—or, we could say, *in* Pierre. Second, Pierre knows that there is only the void but does not believe it; or, put another way, he knows there is no God but does not believe it. As a result, he is left in a quagmire: he wants what he cannot have, and he denies what he cannot but assume. Third, while the father is lacking, something of the father returns. In Pierre's case, this return appears in multiple ways: (i) with the foreclosure of the symbolic father, an imaginary one appears in its place, (ii) this

father is subsequently abandoned, but a specter returns to haunt the orphan, more precisely, what was foreclosed from the symbolic dimension eventually returns in the real; and (iv) the limits of the subject reveal themselves as ambiguous, as do a series of other matters, i.e., what or who is the operative agent, what is natural and what is artificial, and what belongs to the subject and what belongs to some outside or alien agent. Within these ambiguities is Melville's theory of the subject as it appears within the historico-philosophical conditions of the 19th century.

Chapter 5: Ships, Whales, And Churches: From Woe to Madness to Its Maddening

Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out,
and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.
Melville, *Moby Dick*

5.1 Ships and Whales, Worlds and Churches

Orphaned and adrift in empty space, "Pierre [is] now this vulnerable god; this self-upbraiding sailor; this dreamer of the avenging dream" (183). The dream he dreams is the same dream Ahab dreams. With respect to understanding the prophecy, the two heroes are complimentary: the lack of a Moby Dick is Pierre's limitation, while orphanhood drives Ahab's frenzied quest for revenge. *Moby Dick* suggests that "the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul," but it is *Pierre* that explores this dependency (170). The crew's eager adoption of Ahab's vengeance follows from their moral weakness and absent-mindedness, but the underlying cause is the soullessness that results from orphanhood. The "soul," Melville thinks, is what an individual inherits from subjection to fathers, i.e., the internalized ideals and values, an acceptance of the trick as legitimate, and the capacity to perform this trick itself are all gained through alienation. In the absence of a soul, one left an orphan, empty and impotent. But these pathologies only surface when the external conventions protocols it had imitated fall away. Moral enfeeblement and absentmindedness manifest after institutions, laws, and values, perceived as illegitimate, are rejected, therefore, but the generative cause is the inner catastrophe of orphanhood. The transformation of the world into the great American desert is the external consequence of parricide, that is, it is the outward consequence of delegitimizing fathers and abandoning inherited institutions and norms experienced as alien conventions that only obstruct and stultify

thought, expression, truth, and action. Melville's point is that in the wake of parricide, they no longer hold influence over the soul. At bottom, it is orphanhood that leads to "all men, in their degree, some time or other, cherish[ing] very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me" and to the "demon phantom… swim[ing] before all human hearts" (18, 196). The time between orphanhood and setting out to sea is a matter of degree; it will happen, Ishmael insists, "some time or other," it will happen the moment the discontent crosses some threshold, becoming intolerable. After that line is crossed, all men will face a choice between the gun and the ship. According to *Moby Dick,* everything between boarding the Pequod and hunting Moby Dick is a spontaneous series of reactions driven by "unconscious understandings" (158). The crew's response to old Ahab's anger, their seamless and zealous embrace of his vengeance, and the perception of Moby Dick as "the great gliding demon of the seas of life" are all elements of this unconscious understanding. This same understanding is described in *Pierre* as the reasoning of the orphan's mind and its reactions to finding itself in empty space. More than *Moby Dick*, *Pierre* explains how landsmen acquire the unflattering traits they bear. They are not immoral but sordid, not indifferent but fickle, not stupid but absentminded, and it clarifies the source of these traits, explaining why fickleness, sordidness, absentmindedness, and moral feebleness are inherent to their manufactured character. It is not by accident but by design that the place and origin of the soul is consistent across both works: Pierre is haunted by a supernatural feeling "appealing to things ultramontane to his soul," while what is grand in Ahab, that is, what makes him a redeemer in the eyes of his men "must needs be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air" (60, 127).[276]

Pierre elucidates the characteristics and dynamics Ishmael observes and enquires into, including why orphans need some allegedly external agent to find the asylum they so desperately seek, which is to say, why

[276] Note that "featured in" is not equivalent to "is in" and "unbodied" has a precise meaning and reference in *Moby Dick*. That "the skies" and "the deep" are synonyms is obvious enough. The formulation of what makes Ahab great as "featured in the unbodied air" is significant, and I will return to it in the Conclusion.

they cannot solve that problem on their own. Moreover, it explains why even if some men held true beliefs about the world and themselves, they would nonetheless be made "fools" of a certain truth. Like Pierre, such enlightened men may discover and accept the baren pole and its meaningless needle, and they may know the sea to be no "conscience," troubled or otherwise, but in the absence of recognizing the other, subjective part of "the Truth," they will against their avowed knowledge nonetheless be subject to the vengeful fantasy, because, like Pierre, they will continue to hear silence as if it was a Voice of Silence. And this will torment them to no end, and condemn them to a quagmire from which they cannot logically escape because of a problem in their own mind. We can well imagine that the men following Ahab were "sunken-eyed young Platonist(s)," who found relief much like Pierre *almost* did. We could imagine this, but we do not have to: "sunken-eyed young Platonist" is not said by Pierre, nor by the narrator that describes all that Pierre cannot see of himself, but by Ishmael, who offers it as a description of the men following Ahab to lay the world's grievances before the bar from which none can return. What is made clear, once the Pequod is recognized for what it is, i.e., the party of Hope disappointed by its initial efforts to install truth, freedom, and justice through negative liberty and a rupture with inherited tradition, and seeking to avenge its failures by radicalizing its objectives while holding firm on its mistaken, underlying assumptions, is why there are no sunken-eyes amongst the men on board; and, of course, what it is that they are doing at sea: hunting imaginary foes in the name of protecting their mistaken beliefs, i.e., that men are good by nature, that they are moral and rational by birth, and that there is some Divine order out there that can be replicated by innocent men, unfettered from the contrivances of history. Hunting Moby Dick, in a word, allows them to believe in humanity as good and in God as existing, against all evidence, because it allows them to blame humanity's failures and God's absence on something other, something that does not belong, something that can (and must) be removed. Melville calls them "Platonists" not because they are philosophers, which they, like Pierre, are not, and not because they are not religious, because they most certainly are, but because they may very well see themselves as having done away with such silly stories while still believing them at the lower layer.

Similarly to Nietzsche's warning that the poison the Church had dealt can be all the more insidious when removed from the church, so to speak, so Melville warns that these Platonists are all the more duped and committed to their metaphysical beliefs and thus potentially all the vicious and zealous because they do not see themselves as following the imposed dictates of some church or scripture but following their inner, secular, self-reliant hearts. All of this, Melville thinks, follows from orphanhood, that naïve rupture with inherited tradition, with the representatives of what he admits are fictions, all of this follows from the mistaken assumptions that there is a good soul in innocent man and some Divine order out there, while all flaws and failures are the deeds or residues of their restraints and stories, the impostors and arbitrary lines that the past has invented. *Pierre* confirms the initial thesis that the subjective cause of the Pequod's desire emerges from and reacts to the objective conditions. This progression includes the inner catastrophe of orphanhood, followed by dysfunction and discontent, torment, and finally, an attempt to regain something through what is, as we will see, a pathological and delusional compensatory formation. These psychic states and actions correspond to what I referred to as the initial historico-philosophical conditions and the worlds of Woe, Madness, Madness Maddened, respectively.

The theory of the subject embedded in *Pierre* also validates Ahab's madness (and its maddening) as sane, in the sense of attuned and natural, but also as mad, in the sense of discontented and enraged. At the center of the entire process from woe to the hunt is the principle, irreducible to and maddened within the impersonal conditions and circumstances. We can now comprehend another of Ishmael's peculiar declarations: "man's insanity is heaven's sense" (322). "Heaven's sense" signifies objective ontological truth, i.e., the *lack* of God, while "man's insanity" denotes the cognitive and psychological agitation as it passes and morphs from woe to the hunt. This peculiar remark is, therefore, just another way of saying what has already been said: "~~God~~ hunt us, unless we hunt Moby Dick." What *Pierre* adds is that it is not Deicide or a loss of faith but parricide and faith that leads to the mindless crusade in all its righteousness and all its viciousness. It

identifies parricide not Deicide as the first cause of the prophecy, after which the dialectical dynamic of impostor and fiction malfunctions, leaving the subject in a state of torment by its principle, condemned to a quagmire of wanting what it cannot have and refusing what its mind cannot deny. The journey from orphanhood progresses to the discreditation and abandonment of impostors, viewed as the complete means of liberation by Hope, followed by a brief disillusionment, and then, as we will see, a historical mood or psychological climate of paranoia that occurs within a ~~state~~-of-exception created by the subject's distortion of lack into loss, a further torment, the only escape from which is the hunt, a delusion that allows the preexisting, i.e., lower, fantasy and assumptions to remain intact.

The difference between "~~God~~ hunt us" and "we hunt Moby Dick" lies not in the presence or absence of the principle but in the presence or absence of some agent that "confines" what the other presupposes. Hence Pierre's desperate need for a Whale to avoid being forever trapped in barren mazes. The mood operating in this moment, we will see, is a pre-propositional, pre-representational, pre-perceptual, and pre-conscious "primordial attunement" to the historico-philosophical conditions, it is a "mood of thought" that subtends and predetermines all intentional and propositional activity. Melville's version of this Heideggerian notion involves a conception of what motivates the subject to experience the absence of meaning and order not as ontologically lacking, but as the result of epistemic obstruction or loss, a distortion that turns landsmen's eyes to sea, motivates their suspicions and at sea assures their faith, and then drives them to seek asylum through finding some hidden key. The actions of the crew, mates, Ahab, Ishmael, and Pierre, along with those they represent, should be interpreted as intentional and propositional activities shaped and determined by this shared underlying mood constituted by the sea and the principle. All of which is to say: all of their actions, thoughts, and perceptions should be interpreted through what Melville calls "the Truth." Any differences between the various characters must be understood within the framework of the common conditions and subjective properties that unite them all, such that any differences are the result of their being

in a different stage or world within the sequence from Woe to Madness to Madness Maddened to Ishmael's return, which is the same as to say as the result of the distinct cetologies of each situation. “All men live enveloped in whale-lines,” even those that live in a form of life that denies or prohibits the Whale.

The conditions of this avenging dream are the conditions desired by the proponents of Hope. Melville is not disputing or rejecting the objectives of Hope, rather his point is that this ideology leads to the hunt. Or, more precisely stated, the hunt is Hope doubling down on the very assumptions and convictions that led to Woe. While Emerson, Channing, and others expected to find liberty, reason, and creative self-reliance, Melville's ironic stance anticipates only despair, paralysis, madness, and a desperate need for delusions. He refutes the notion that Hope is revolutionary or opposed to the current state of the world by demonstrating that it is aligned with historico-philosophical conditions and the prevailing beliefs of the time. It is this alignment, along with his theory of the human subject and his analysis of orphanhood, that allows Melville to issue his warning in the form of a prophecy that applies to all men of the age. The prophecy can be rephrased to capture this: nowadays, many Hopeful, enfeebled, and enervated young men, disheartened, dissatisfied with inherited institutions, values, and laws, and disillusioned by the hardships of the great American desert their "youthful" ideology created, will seek a cause for their misery and find it in vengeance exacted on some innocent dumb brute of "tar and blubber."

When Melville refers to "the Truth," he is addressing two aspects: first, the ontological reality of nothingness that exists both above and within, and second, the principle, at the juncture of which is the dynamic of impostors and fictions. Ishmael never denies that the men on the Pequod will not reach this Truth, rather he only stresses that one must "know" the Whale in order to avoid being "provincial and sentimentalist in Truth" (268). All men will eventually come face to face with this Truth and all will find themselves entangled in Whale-lines, the problem is that these sentimentalists will arrive at it the wrong way and be forever lost in turn—*forever* lost because their failures at sea will only further convince them of their fantasies.

What remains to be discussed is the maddened pit that is Ahab's mind and the means and nature of Ishmael's escape and return. Before either can be addressed, however, the subjective experience of the intervening stages and the transitions between them merit attention. We can begin with the frequently cited passage from Chapter 58, "Brit":

> But not only is the sea such a foe to man who is an alien to it, but it is also a fiend to its own offspring.... the sea dashes even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leaves them there side by side with the split wrecks of ships. No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe.
>
> Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure.... Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.
>
> 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? 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! (224-5).

Interpreted through the framework constructed thus far, the passage contains four notable elements, three of which may appear as contradictory. Firstly, the conflict inherent in the passage's definition of the sea: on the one hand, the sea's masterlessness is attributed to the loss of what ordered it, on the other hand, it is said to permit no order, regardless of whether it is produced by something imposed upon or discovered within the sea. The only way to avoid inconsistency without abandoning either claim is to interpret the characterizations through the impostor-fiction trick: the sea is experienced as ordered as long as it was "chaos bewitched" by

some impostor, in the absence of which it is just chaos; moreover, with impostors abandoned, something, be it on the side of the subject or on the side of the sea, resists the return of such order. Understood as such, the warning at the end is not senseless nor merely valid, but sound. Such a reading, furthermore, aligns with Ishmael's assertion that the sea is "alien" to man and with the earlier-mentioned observation that at sea all established methods and knowledge lose their prior validity and usefulness.

Secondly, the warning to "not push off this isle" appears to contradict the characterization of life on land as the cause of discontent, either as the great American desert that which compels all landsmen to set out to sea, or as the "pitiful port" to which those who ventured out to sea return to "ingloriously" (97). *Pierre* dissolves this apparent contradiction. If "Tahiti" names a form of life one should not depart from and if there is a corresponding structure "in the soul of man," the referent is a form of life guaranteed by fathers, who grant subjects a set of internalized values and ideals and the knowledge of the trick, from which follow the capacity to recognize institutions, orders, and meanings founded on the trick as not inherently illegitimate, *and* the ability to enact this trick themselves when confronted by a decision. It grants a coherent form of life, in other words, and a soul, a stable world for the subject, and a subject that can operate within it. It allows them to not be absent-minded, soulless, or morally enfeebled, sordid creatures. The opposed form of life has two variations. If one remains on land, it is the desert, a form of life resulting from foreclosure and inhabited by empty, soulless subjects fully reliant on imitating external customs and protocols they have neither internalized nor understand; a world of imaginary fathers, where nothing possesses legitimacy and subjective activity is little more than a nihilistic parade of values and meanings no one believes in. If subjects abandon land for the sea but return "ingloriously," then the form of life is the "pitiful port." It is the same as the desert, with one difference: the impostors remain discredited but now the men's hopes have been dashed, leaving them no alternative other than relying on and obeying customs they do not believe in. One is a life of frustration and misery, the other is more akin to indifference and despair. Both are variations of the state of

Woe, but the injury is greater in the latter because therein humanity drudges through its misery under the shadow of lack instead of loss, which is to say, without hope because without faith. Seen in this light, the port and the desert are revealed for what they were: forms of life that correspond to the choice Ishmael faced. And if the ship is abandoned, then some mindless delinquency and the gun are all that remains.

The third is obvious, but not simple: the calm is a fragile deception. Below the surface lies the "unwarped primal world" Pip encounters in the depths, the meaningless and relentless weave Ishmael confronts in the jungle, which shows no mercy to man and permits no power to control it. At bottom, the calm is, therefore, a subjective construct established through inherited and consensual impostors perceived as legitimate. As *Pierre* demonstrates, such a calm cannot be but temporary if the fathers in question are merely imaginary ideals with no purchase on the soul, meaning, if they are not symbolic ideals that have been internalized. In a world composed of such fathers, the beliefs and actions of its citizens can have no more authenticity than the convictions and words of a man like Starbuck, which we know are just sound and fury. Three chapters later, Melville refers to what is concealed below the deceptive calm of the surface, as the "universal cannibalism of the sea" (225). More than a beautiful metaphor for the horror just beyond the Pequod's hull and just below the calm surface of the sea, the "universal cannibalism of the sea" is another name for the impersonal, for the all-consuming moral relativism and inexorable sliding of significance into which man can collapse by the gentlest of nudges, if his fingers, as Ishmael's, slip for but a moment from the masts to which they cling. To this latent reality, he gives the name "the storm" (229). In contrast to an interpretation like Wirth's, which posits Pierre's life before Isabel, or the lives of landmen before the Pequod, as a calm before the storm, Ishmael insists that the storm neither precedes nor succeeds but is always already latent in the calm (225). The psychological counterpart of which is, as discussed earlier, the madness latent in woe. And the "sunken-eyed young platonist(s)," which is just another name for the Hopeful immiserated

and frustrated in Woe, Ishmael adds, need only a nudge or a "pin" to collapse into the masterless sea.[277] In *Moby Dick,* this part of the orphan's metaphysical adventure is encapsulated in a deceptively offhand sentence: "Beneath the unclouded and mild azure sky, upon the fair face of the pleasant sea, wafted by the joyous breezes, that great mass of death floats on and on, till lost in infinite perspectives." (247). Condensed herein are three distinct moments: (i) the "calm," (ii) the transition into "infinite perspectives," which leads to the "universal cannibalism" of the sea, and (iii) the "great mass of death," the moment when the fiction itself is lost. The ironic overlay of the serene sky, pleasant sea, and joyous breezes with the image of death floating away, along with the condemnation of relativism, not only serves as a warning against the latter and the Hopeful ideology that fosters it but also caution about the ease, speed, and seamlessness of the passage from the first moment to the last.

Finally, what is the specific meaning of "God" being referenced here? Throughout *Moby Dick* and *Pierre,* "God" is used to represent a variety of ideas: at times, it refers to the "ocean" (or the sea), which figures the ontological truth of Godlessness; other times, it refers to a hidden Divine order the presupposition of which turns the meaningless waves into a an expression of the Divine "conscience,"; less frequently, it is used to describe the agent that could potentially bring order to the sea. The first is no God at all, if "God" has any meaning. The second is a subjective distortion of lack into loss. The third is what would turn the Voice of Silence into some Word, but there is no such agent because there is no Divine order. Whales can be fetishes or they can be something more rational (e.g., Ishmael's White Whale), and they are involved in

[277] Ishmael's declaration that all orphans inevitably turn to the sea once led by a "metaphysical professor" proves precise because, as seen through Pierre, Foucault, and others, the discreditation of impostors *as impostors* is logically preconditioned by a presupposed metaphysical truth (or true being) and always followed by an attempt to grasp it directly. What these landsmen do not recognize is that the truth they seek is not distorted by impostors but produced by subjective presupposition of its place and secured by the impostor's trick. So long as they maintain such assumptions about impostors and fictions, they can return as either unknowingly deluded anew or empty handed, because the truth they thought distorted is, Melville thinks, a fiction created. In short, breaking from the bonds of Woe leads almost immediately to the masterless sea.

fictions, but none of them are a God, true, false, or otherwise.[278] While a Whale may not be God, it can produce or secure such a fiction. Moby Dick is such a Whale, but he is also a transcendental illusion. The choice of "~~God~~ hunt us, unless we hunt Moby Dick" appears at the intersection of these three meanings, yes, but the meaning of "God" in the Tahiti passage does not fall into any of these categories. Rather, it represents the God lost due to the delegitimization and deposition of fathers. It is the God constructed by the priest's perception of its representatives as legitimate, a construct of the dialectical temporal logic of representatives gaining their legitimacy through the fictions they produce while concealing the trick involved. *Pierre* allows us to understand what Melville leaves unsaid in his warning: God will "keep thee," if thee keeps "the Church, the monument, the Holy Bible." In other words, if the subject maintains faith in the representatives, the fiction will be secured and then further legitimize those representatives, granting the subject its Tahiti. If Starbuck's threats are ineffective, it is because his faith is insincere; and it is insincere not because he does not believe in God but because he must not truly believe in the church. His virtue is "unaided," according to Ishmael, and now it is clear why: it is unaided because he has lost (or abandoned) what anchors the priest's faith, his "faith's rock," namely, his conviction in "the Church, the monument, the Bible," his conviction, in other words, in fathers, impostors. The warning, therefore, comes too late for the Pequod's men, naturally, but also for all those landsmen who find themselves already on the verge of taking to the sea. Which is to say, for the men to whom Ishmael addresses his Gospel. As such, the warning is *Moby Dick*'s version of the warning given to Pierre:

> Pierre! thou art foolish; rebuild—no, not that, for thy shrine still stands; it stands, Pierre, firmly stands; smellest thou not its yet undeparted, embowering bloom? Such a note as thine can be easily enough written, Pierre; impostors are not unknown in this curious world; or the brisk novelist,

[278] See Chapter 102, "A Bower in the Arsacides," in Melville, *Moby Dick*, 344-7. I will return to this shortly and again in the Conclusion.

> Pierre, will write thee fifty such notes, and so steal gushing tears from his reader's eyes; even as *thy* note so strangely made thine own manly eyes so arid; so glazed, and so arid, Pierre—foolish Pierre! (75).

This is a strange warning, strange because who its addresses are is ambiguous. It cannot be orphans, for two reasons: one, orphans face an impossibility of logically exonerating the dead father, and two, orphans, if they still live on land, so to speak, exists within the desert and not some Tahiti. If this was a warning addressed to orphans, it would be superfluous and anachronistic, or, more simply put, too late. Melville appears to be beating a dead horse here, much like his narrator in *Pierre* is when, in the immediate aftermath of Pierre's parricide, he says the following: "Ay, Pierre, now indeed art thou hurt with a wound, never to be completely healed but in heaven" (71). If addressed to the orphans atop the Pequod or those still ashore, it is useless *because it arrives too late*, reminding them of what they've lost and cannot "logically" regain. Such mockery would be inconsistent with the lack of normative judgment passed by Ishmael on all the men who have (as well as those who will) set out to sea and assumed the hunt. Indeed, more than inconsistent, it would be outright antagonistic with his consistent refusal to blame or reprimand them. If we try to resolve this problem by proposing that it is not, of course, addressed to them but to the reader, then—assuming the double-structure of the prophecy and Gospel, which applies to readers—Melville would be mocking the reader, which would also be in contradiction with the prophecy and the Gospel. Melville never blames, reprimands or mocks, and he *must not* blame, reprimand, or mock anyone for heading out to see and assuming the hunt, not least because the book argues that they will and that they must take both of these steps. The only interpretation that saves the passage from being useless or a mockery inconsistent with the overall objective, message, and structure of the book, is to read this passage as not a warning addressed to anyone, but instead as an instance of Ishmael working out the treatise by which he escapes. He is not speaking to anyone or of anyone, but only to himself. It is not a warning, in other words, but an expression of one moment of the

understanding that Ishmael is painstakingly arriving at; it is a moment when he has grasped something, something he elects to express rhetorically in what *sounds* like a warning. Close reading of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* will find countless such instances—in this respect, Melville's narrators are not all that different from readers who, when really intent on understanding what they are reading, tend to fill the margins of pages with remarks that sounds as if they are speaking to the book or themselves.

*

"Yes," Ismael confirms, "the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow" (47). A world is a ship, and it needs a pulpit like a ship needs a prow. The ship is a Whaleship, of course; and worlds, as we know, are cetologies. Aside from these obvious, there is another important detail in this sentence: the ship needs a "pulpit," and a pulpit is not a metonymy for God but for a representative who speaks in the name of such a fiction. Before moving further, we should note that not all ships are the same. Four categories can be identified and distinguished based on what they seek and the mindset that captains them.[279] The first involves "empirical" whalemen and the whales they hunt. It makes no difference if they chase sperm whales, right whales, or some other fish because whales are merely blubber and voyages are solely for money. The second category is Pierre's, a Whaleship without a Whale and thus a Whaleship lost in barren mazes—it is a Whaleship with the Whale as a principle but not as an agent. The third category includes the Pequod, captained by Ahab and hunting Moby Dick. The fourth category is Ishmael's, which seeks to capture the White Whale. The last category, as we will see, is reflected in the formal-aesthetic construct known as *Moby Dick; or, the Whale*, with its investigations and formulations within a doubly-structured narrative. The prophecy asserts that the first category will collapse into the second, i.e., woe leads to madness, and then be driven into the third, i.e., madness maddens. As a result, these four categories are ultimately reducible to two: Ahab's and Ishamel's. This reduction of four to two is a rephrasing

[279] I will return to this relationship between captain and Whale in the Conclusion.

of the prophecy: humanity is destined for the Pequod, unless it can find a way to break free from this common fantasy and return like Ishmael. The choice of worlds and ships therefore, is captured in the choice between Moby Dick and *Moby Dick*, the prophecy or the Gospel. If the latter path is taken, it would establish a new and different nation, much like Ishmael of old once did.

The difference between the two is clarified by the remainder of Ishmael's statement. If Moby Dick is hunted, then "not a voyage complete" can only mean that no voyage returns. Moby Dick cannot be killed, and so the voyage cannot end until the whalers die, regardless of how many 'false' Moby Dicks they manage to kill—in which case, no voyage returns. If they return without killing or dying, then their return will be like the mutiny of the Town-Ho—it will be meaningless and, moreover, temporary because the form of life on land always forces its men back to the sea for another hunt. In Ishmael's case, "not a voyage complete" must have a different meaning because he does return—and not to the pitiful port. Ahab's voyage is not complete because he fails to accomplish the world he intends to (re-)establish through killing Moby Dick because he fails to kill Moby Dick. Ishmael, on the other hand, captures and returns with the Whale he sought, meaning that the world he constructs through the White Whale is not missing any of its constitutive components. If the statement above allows for no exception, then it must apply to Ishamel; in which case, it must be equivocal enough to accommodate an alternative meaning. It's being "not complete," in other words, denotes something different. According to the Gospel, this difference allows him to break out of the cycle of Woe-Madness-Madness Maddened, and back again. For the moment, it is sufficient to say that the difference between Ahab and Ishmael involves the impostor-fiction dynamic: Ahab aims for a reunification with Divine order, which requires the removal of Moby Dick, while Ishmael has no illusions about such fictions and aims only to capture a Whale instead; one, in other words, believes in the fiction and tries to abolish what is in the place of the impostor while the other recognizes the fiction as a fiction and wants the impostor as an impostor. Symbolically formulated: Ahab wants God, not the pulpit, while for Ishmael, the pulpit is all that really matters.

In the opening chapter, "Loomings," Ishmael, after hinting at the prophecy, declares, "it's too late to make any improvements now. The universe is finished; the capstone is on, and the chips were carted off a million years ago" (25). Based on the perspective established so far, this statement is equivocal. On first reading, it suggests that the hunt for Moby Dick has been *definitively* determined as humanity's fate, implying that there is no escape from an approaching era of madness. However, understanding it this way would render much of the book nonsensical, including Melville's assessment of what he accomplished with *Moby Dick*. In short, if everything has already been decided, then nothing can be done, in which case there can be no Gospel and there is no coherent treatise and *Moby Dick* is nothing more than a tale.

Some notable political thinkers have proposed credible arguments that catastrophe is not avoided but guaranteed by maintaining that the future remains open, and that it can be avoided only if all indeterminacy of the future is denied and the catastrophe is projected as absolutely inevitable, after which, the logic goes, humanity could pursue not its evasion but its infinite delay.[280] Melville's position, however, is a more classical form of prophecy. The catastrophe of an endless series of hunts is inevitable but only from the standpoint of the common and spontaneous dispositions underlying and motivating intentional and propositional activity. This underlying layer, however, can be modified such that the common fantasy is traversed and the fated catastrophe avoided. This is, I maintain, what Ishmael accomplishes and attempts to transmit through his retelling of the voyage. Recall once again the Epilogue's epigraph: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (427). The ambiguity permits two readings, but the trick is to read them together: I am the only one who escaped, *and* the mode of my escape is what I came to tell. Appearances notwithstanding, *Moby Dick* is an astoundingly consistent book in terms of its logic and reasoning, as well as in its imagery and metaphors. This assertion is no exception. If his return is possible (and possible on a rational basis), then there must be an

[280] See, for instance, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Economy and the Future: A Crisis of Faith* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

alternate meaning to "[t]he universe is finished." To be consistent with his return, his distinct Whale, what he recognizes in the weaver god, and a series of other considerations, the "universe is finished" cannot mean 'nothing can be done'. Instead, it must mean something along the lines of 'nothing more will be added,' in which case the material needed for what Ishmael accomplishes is already here. Alternatively, it could mean 'there is no outside to this world,' in which case what is being rejected is some higher or other world and a teleological solution reliant on some independently existing ideal. For our purpose here, these two alternatives are equivalent: both accept Godlessness and both, moreover, situate the solution or truth in this world as it is. If there is to be salvation or redemption for humanity, in other words, it will be in here or it will be nowhere; and the truth (or the true world) will be here or it will be nowhere. Once again, we find a consistency between Melville's writing and his earlier-discussed remark about Shakespeare, in this case, his ability to discern the truth within "this world of lies."

From this framework, "the capstone is on" is not just another iteration of 'nothing can be done' but a declaration that the fight for what the capstone, so to speak, will be will now take place. The fight, in other words, will take place within what Ishmael has to say. And what he has to say is not one but two stories. If conceived as such, the double-structure of *Moby Dick* and the proposition that the observer-level is different from the hero-level not because it presupposes (or assumes) or adds something extra but because it involves a self-consciousness and subsequent reconfiguration of what takes place at the hero-level, is coherent. Nothing needs to be added, the universe is finished, and now comes to struggle for what this world will be. All the possibilities embodied in the various ships and churches, worlds and Whales are, once again, reduced to two alternatives: either humanity is destined for an endless series of vengeful fantasies, or it will break out of this cycle. Either an endless series of hunts for Moby Dick or the world Ishmael establishes, the outlines and logic of which are embedded in *Moby Dick*. Moby Dick or *Moby Dick,* in other words.

Together with the prophecy, the above interpretation of "every world's a ship" supports Ishmael's claim that "all men live enveloped in whale-lines" (229). No world is unaffected by the Whale's existence

and status, not even Woe, which denies the existence of leviathans in the same breath by which it denies fathers. The remainder of this often-quoted passage deserves attention:

> the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentines about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play- this is a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair. But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, everpresent perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whale-boat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side (229).

The focus is on the Whale-lines, which are always present but often unnoticed or unacknowledged except in certain circumstances. When read together with a remark from *Pierre,* namely, "such, oh thou son of man! are the perils and the miseries thou callest down on thee," writes Melville, "when, even in a virtuous cause, thou steppest aside from those arbitrary lines of conduct, by which the common world, however base and dastardly, surrounds thee for thy worldly good," the symbolism is immediately apparent (178). Whale-lines represent "arbitrary lines of conduct," a battery of values, meanings, laws, institutions, etc., extending from and imposed by the representatives of fictions. If "stepping away" from them forfeits the "worldly good" and causes the perils Pierre suffers, then certain configurations of Whale-lines contain the always latent "storm," while others fail to do so. Whale-lines are Melville's metaphor for the values, norms, laws, institutions, customs, traditions, and everything else that constitutes the form of life of a given symbolic structure. Because the status and nature of a particular Whale define the given structure, any potential symbolic structure is a cetology. Combined with Melville's decisionism, this symbolism makes obvious the meaning of Whale-lines as well as the choice of the metaphor. More to the point, *Moby Dick* presents four such configurations: Woe, Madness, Madness Maddened, and the world that would follow from Ishmael's Gospel. Every situation is a cetology, but while some result in despair and misery, others result in torment and disorientation, some in

frenzied vengeance, and, finally, some in salvation. When viewed as such, we can see that Melville's interest in the subjective and social consequences of cetologies foreshadows Freud's investigations of how changes in symbolic structure and the space of representation relate to nervous and social disorders; and, like Freud, he places a theory of the human subject, which includes a belief in the necessity of alienation and a need for religion, at the center of his investigations. The first three configurations collapse into one, reducing the problem to the choice to the prophecy, which describes the descent of woe into the hunt, or the Gospel, which describes the escape and return. Because the first three configurations collapse into one, the same binary can alternatively be expressed as a choice between the promises of Hope or the Gospel of Ishmael. According to the ideology of Hope, the delegitimization and deposition of fathers was supposed to bring liberty, truth, and justice. Contrary to these promises, however, Melville warns that it would not deliver such things but instead leave individuals enervated and helpless, disoriented, disappointed, distrustful, and disposed to mindless actions and a fervent desire for vengeance. To better understand the central dilemma and possible choices, we can view the alternative of Moby Dick or the White Whale from the perspective of woe rather than the hunt. The stakes and the subject involved are well captured in Kant's parable of the dove is useful: "The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space."[281] Melville believes that actions have necessary conditions, and, like Kant, thinks that men often mistake rules and restrictions as unnecessary or obstructive, believing freedom is achieved in empty space. The same applies at the intersubjective and social level, leading to the belief that institutions and laws are unnecessary or harmful to the public good or social cohesion. In either case, this tendency, so prevalent in the 19th century, leads, Melville believes, not to freer flight but to a sudden and spectacular fall. The socio-cultural realization of the American fantasy of masterlessness, a dove taking flight in emptied space, would not, Melville warns, manifest the promises of Hope but only the great

[281] Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 129.

American desert, which, he believes, will inevitably lead all men to the hunt. Despite his disagreement, Melville admits that this is an understandable mistake because he recognizes many of these constitutive rules and restraints to be internalizations that men are inclined to misperceive as natural or inherent to the soul of man. When internalized, they appear natural, but they are, he thinks, an inculcated nature and the soul, he is adamant, carries no such inheritance in the absence of alienation. As he writes in *Pierre,* "appallingly empty is the soul of man." While understandable, it is nonetheless a mistake, a grave and dangerous mistake to which he thought his age was particularly vulnerable, given its unreflective and "youthful" vision and convictions. And youth, as he writes in *Pierre,* is "no philosopher" (64).

Melville was certainly not alone. This inclination to discredit and discard all inherited and established "forms," which are assumed to serve no purpose other than protecting privilege and hindering access to or the manifestation of truth, was also discerned by Tocqueville, who concluded that it was actively cultivated and promoted in 19th-century American democratic culture, ultimately becoming its defining characteristic and the inculcated and reflexive nature of its citizens. This disposition, moreover, not only reinforces individualism but also rests on a religious-like conviction in the innate and untaught abilities of the individual. Kant's dove, we can say, represents Emersonian Hope, but it also captures the disposition of Melville's orphans and Tocqueville's democrats, while its folly and inevitable fall is what Melville fears and attempts to warn against and avoid through *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*.

"All are born with halters around their necks," further clarifies these Whale-lines. The most common signification of "halters" is the headgear and rope used to restrain and guide a horse's movement. In this context, the meaning is clear: these restraints are not imposed on individuals who already have the ability to act intentionally, rather they are constitutive of such activity. A cetology, therefore, is not imposed on an existing and inherently capable, rational, and moral subject; rather it constitutes and subjectivizes them as agents capable of such intentional activity. Melville's notion of the subject, much like structuralisms, is always the subject of a structure, while his notions of the structures of the external world are, like those of German

idealists, undergirded by transcendental subjects. The representatives of a cetology are, as he puts it, what puts "life into man." In fact, if the soul is abominably empty, then any interiority and capability for action belonging to a given subject are acquired through alienation and internalization. The metaphor of the halters, therefore, is fitting since horses equipped with halters are directed by something alien or foreign, which, moreover, does not obstruct but enables a rational and active life. The contrast between Pierre and the priest exemplifies this perfectly. More generally, the passage also confirms *Pierre*'s central claim against Hope: alienation is constitutive, and restraints are enabling, while their absence is enervating and paralyzing. The second meaning of "halter" as a rope used for hanging, implied by its placement around the neck, supplements the above: if halters are integral to life in the subject, then different configurations produce different forms of life and subjectivization, up to and including their negation or annulment. The difference between Woe and the Gospel would be an obvious case in point. Further, the same idea is expressed through the Parsee's promise to Ahab: "[h]emp only can kill thee," as it eventually does. As well as by Ishmael's seemingly offhand remark that it is the Whale-line, not the Whale itself, that most often kills sailors (229). Lastly, due to the tendency to overlook, forget, or imagine away the fact that all subjective activity has conditions of possibility, which are constitutive and enabling, a third feature of "halters" also applies: the headgear of a coach horse has the unique quality of covering its eyes and thereby enhancing intentional action. This facet of the metaphor can be taken in two ways: on the one hand, it could be taken to imply blind obedience; on the other, it could be taken to imply that it is only in certain moments, namely moments when these lines move, that their presence (and function) is recognized. If the passage is read as normative, the first can be rejected on account of Melville's refusal of imitation as an ideal norm. Any objection that Melville prizes imitation, even if only to stave off disaster, can be dismissed given that he refuses imitation as an ideal even if what is imitated was a Milton or a Shakespeare. If read as a positive claim, the first reading is possible but incoherent within the larger context of the passage. The latter meaning, on the other hand, may seem secondary until we recall another of Ishmael's remarks: it is "only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize

the silent, subtle, everpresent perils of life" (229). His point is not blind obedience, rather it is a recognition of the inclination of men to forget and believe, like the dove, that their flight would be even easier and freer if it was in empty space. Taken together, the passage offers a precise description: the Whale-line (i) "silently serpentines about the oarsmen," enveloping and forming and thus enabling a given way of life, but (ii) individuals only recognize this when disturbances or dysfunctions in the lines cause disorder or discontent, and (iii) what they "stepest aside from" initially appears as just "arbitrary" prove to be what enabled their lives and the worldly good, and (iv) the necessity and function of Whale-lines quickly return, and return with a vengeance, so to speak. Unsurprisingly, given the coherence and consistency of Melville's thought, the meaning of Whale-lines, halters, etc., align perfectly with the aforementioned claim regarding the seeming artificiality of institutions and their habit of proving themselves to have the virtue of natural law. Two points merit attention here. One, Melville agrees with Kant's parable both positively and normatively; even as he situates the prophecy in a historical moment, i.e., it is "nowadays…," indicating his belief that something specific to the 19th century further induces and encourages this tendency to forget the constitutive role of restraints and alienation and adopt the folly of liberating oneself from all forms of external impositions. And two, within the historico-philosophical and ideological conditions of that era, he warns that when it comes to the logic, dynamics, and dialectical relationships of impostors, fictions, and subjects, "to comprehend, is himself to condemn himself" (208-9). According to Melville, Kant's parable is on point, and the ideal scenario, it would seem, would be if this tendency never arose. But we would be mistaken if we ascribed that as an ideal to Melville. The reason is simple: if this tendency never arose, there would only ever be inertia and imitation, which may be comfortable but ultimately leads nowhere. Embracing such a normative stance would render Shakespeare impermissible (if not impossible) and we have every reason to believe that Melville held Shakespeare to be of greater value to the world than tranquility. "[T]o comprehend, is to himself condemn himself" has multiple meanings, depending on the subject and object involved, but two of them are certainly these: (i) a warning against abandoning or disenchanting fatherhood, not only because there is no

"logical" way back, but also because there will inevitably be an "illogical return," and (ii) a second-order meaning of the same, namely that if one grasps the role of the subject and its principle in the status of impostors, fictions, and their various returns, then one realizes that whatever condemns humanity is ultimately caused by humanity itself. The first meaning bears more relevance here since it leads to Melville's defense of impostors—they are all we have if we desire more than nothingness and torment. In the former, it is a warning against crossing the "sacred limit" on account of the inexorable consequences, in the latter, conversely, it applies to the truth that will surface within the consequences of the first warning not being followed. As such, aside from its conceptual value, we could say that the first is addressed to a moment before Hope led to Woe, while the second is addressed to Hope as it embarks on its crusade with the intention of provoking the reflection that would obstruct the inevitable failure of the hunt from causing its repetition.

At the risk of jumping ahead too far, this logic helps explain why Pierre cannot recover from the ruin he has become, at least not logically or on his own, as well as why Ishmael could describe Ahab's wound as self-inflicted. Their ignorance of this is central to their respective fates: Ahab hunts a delusion he created as if it is something other to and independent of him, while Pierre gets trapped in a quagmire; one becomes a lunatic, in other words, the other a fool.

5.2 The Worlds of Woe, Madness, and Madness Maddened

Now, we can explore these configurations and transitions, focusing on the subjectivity involved.[282] Starbuck

[282] In support of exploring the realms of Woe, Madness, and Madness Maddened in more detail, it is helpful to categorize some of the more prominent characteristics and features of each. In the realm of Woe, there is a general discontent and despair, the great American desert or the pitiful port, imaginary fathers, who are obeyed and imitated but not respected or internalized, along with soullessness, and a general rage without a target. In the realm of Madness, we encounter storms, the sea, madness itself, the abandonment of imaginary fathers, and the emptiness of space. Torment, haunting, and the Whale as principle, initially lacking but eventually lost, also belong to Madness. Lastly, in the realm of Madness Maddened, we find the hunt, the settling of the sea, the recovery of a cause, orientation, and dignity, Moby Dick, delusions, and the culmination of the prophecy. Throughout these realms, the Whale and its lines shape the form of life and influence the subjects within them. The effects of the Whale on flesh are only noticed during moments of change or disturbance. In Woe, these effects manifest indirectly as confusion, doubt, a sense of something

is exemplary of subjectivity manufactured in Woe. To Ahab's

> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? (140).

Starbuck responds with "God keep me!—God keep us all!" (140). We know which "God" is being called upon because we know who is calling for Him. Starbuck's plea is no less a pretense than his previous protest, both of which confirm the futility of his objections and intentions. Later, with the Pequod on the verge of confronting Moby Dick, Starbuck once again demonstrates the limitations of his orphanhood. After unsuccessfully pleading with Ahab, Starbuck pledges to carry out the duty he knows is his: he must protect the men, the ship, and the mission. And he knows that Ahab has left him with only one option. He grabs a gun and heads to Ahab's quarters. As he stands before the door, however, he hesitates, and then recoils and sets the weapon down. Starbuck is fully aware of the law and knows that it supports and justifies his actions, and yet he does not act. His reasons are peculiar but enlightening: "I stand alone here on the open sea, with two oceans and a whole continent between me and the law" (387). With the law rendered irrelevant, he contemplates whether he has the moral right to commit murder. He appeals to God, hoping for a sign that says, "Go on; thou are in the Right; I endorse thee all over; go on," but he is met with silence. He knows the law and the duty it imposes on him, but its physical distance obstructs him. In the second moment, he declares that he has the moral duty to murder, but the lack of an explicit and externally derived decree that guarantees such an act prevents him from carrying it out. Why is Starbuck incapable of acting in accordance with the law he knows or morality he professes? The law in question applies at sea, of course, regardless of the ship's

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missing, or even nihilistic indifference. In Madness, the effects are a direct experience of lack, which immediately distorts into loss. This loss haunts and torments the subject through a state-of-exception. In Madness Maddened, what was lost and desired is invented and found.

location, as does his moral duty to act in order to save his men. Moreover, this duty to his men follows from his alleged religious convictions. Why then, does he not act? Why is the physical distance of the law a problem? And if he earnestly believes in the moral code he professes, why is the lack of an endorsement an obstacle? The answer to both should be obvious: like Pierre, Starbuck is an orphan, and orphans lack interiority, they have not internalized the law, nor the trick by which they could act in its absence. Starbuck's convictions, on the basis of which he deems Ahab's crusade as blasphemy against both the secular market and God, are of the same absolute but fragile nature as the esteem by which Pierre had looked upon the image of his "perfect" father. Moreover, like Pierre, Starbuck does not truly believe in them because he does not carry them within himself; instead, he only follows them when they are physically presented before him and he can only act in response to their instruction. In their absence, he has no foundation upon which to act. If this were not the case, neither the distance nor the silence would undermine his beliefs or impede his intentions. His professed faith, while, in a sense, earnest is also false or null, and his sense of right and wrong is feeble because he is fundamentally hollow and nihilistic.

Starbuck's profound misunderstanding of his captain can only be comprehended in light of this subjective depravity: Ahab is, he thinks, a democrat to all above and a tyrant to all below (144). But Ahab, we know, has no need for tyranny "below," and although he claims that "truth has no confines," this conviction quickly yields to Moby Dick. More accurately, the lack of confines leads to Moby Dick, in the sense that Moby Dick provides an asylum from the unconfined truth, i.e., the presupposition of the place, but is also negated as unconfined through Moby Dick. Indeed, we can say that Moby Dick allows for Ahab's belief in the truth to persist (and not torment him as a Voice of Silence) by obstructing Ahab's access to it, i.e., by obstructing him from pursuing the truth in a fashion that would, like it did Pierre, leave him with nothing but a barren pole and meaningless, indifferent needle. Starbuck is right if his description refers to what Ahab thinks he believes, but he is mistaken if his description applies to how Ahab actually believes: as an embodiment of Hope, Ahab thinks that the truth above can be democratically engaged, so to speak, and

accessed directly, but that proves impossible and such a path leads to Pierre; but Ahab is not Pierre, and he is not Pierre because he has posited an obstruction which, he thinks, prevents his access, but in reality allows him to maintain the fantasy of a unconfined truth that could be accessed without mediation and in a democratic, so to speak, fashion. Starbuck would be correct if that was what was taking place, but it is not; put another way, he would be right if there was as yet no Moby Dick, but Moby Dick is already involved. At one level of analysis, it is because of Moby Dick that he cannot be a 'democrat to all above' but only an "instrument," a "Fates' Lieutenant… act[ing] under orders… rehearsed… a billion years before this ocean rolled" (418). At a deeper level of analysis, Ahab cannot be a democrat to all above because he believes in something higher (*through* Moby Dick), he believes in a fictional order safeguarded by Moby Dick. And he is an instrument not only because Moby Dick organizes his world and orients his actions, which he has no capacity to resist, but also because the fictions he believes in and the Whale he hunts are determined by something over which he has neither control nor consciousness, his assumptions and configuration at the lower layer. Finally, and for reasons discussed in detail already, we cannot conceive of Ahab as a tyrant to all below if the referent of "all below" are the men aboard the Pequod. He misunderstands Ahab because Ahab (and the crew) believe in something he cannot perceive. Aside from noting that Starbuck does not believe in Moby Dick as cause and means, it is also important to recognize that his misunderstanding of Ahab is consistent with his impotence. The same nihilism disguised as faith that makes him incapable of acting in accord with his convictions explains why he repeatedly misconstrues his captain as an atheist or blasphemer (139). The truth about Starbuck is that he has no faith in Divine order or in the soul of man. When he lost his faith in the representatives he lost his faith in the fiction, and without this faith in the fiction above and the fiction within, the idea of Moby Dick makes no sense. To him, the Pequod is not hunting the cause of misery but only a dumb brute. His professed beliefs, like Pierre's shallow convictions, are a façade. He is, as a result, miscast on the sea. Perhaps he was never supposed to leave the shore, at least not yet; or, more likely, he is one of the disgraced who returned "ingloriously" to the "pitiful port," now deprived of the Hope that

motivates men to set out to sea and hunt Moby Dick. Instead of a sincere believer, he is better characterized as an honorable and morally upright man whose virtues are nullified anytime a real decision must be made, anytime courage is called for by his nihilism at a lower layer.

Ishmael is well aware of who Starbuck is. Recall his strange description of the first mate in Chapter 26, "Knights and Squires". After commending Starbuck's many honorable deeds and deeming his courage "extreme," not least because he continues to sail while the "torn limbs" of his father and brother lie somewhere at the bottom of the sea, he adds a qualification:

> And brave as he might be, it was that sort of bravery, chiefly visible in some intrepid men, which, while generally abiding firm in the conflict with seas, or winds, or whales, or any of the ordinary irrational horrors of the world, yet cannot withstand those more terrific, because more spiritual terrors, which sometimes menace you from the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man (103).

Starbuck is no coward, not in the midst of a chase, nor in the eye of a storm. But he is a level-headed man, not inclined to hunt something he does not believe in. He is at sea to hunt whales for oil and money, not to give chase to what, for him, is just some phantom of Ahab's imagination:

> Starbuck was no crusader after perils; in him courage was not a sentiment; but a thing simply useful to him, and always at hand upon all mortally practical occasions. Besides, he thought, perhaps, that in this business of whaling, courage was one of the great staple outfits of the ship, like her beef and her bread, and not to be foolishly wasted. Wherefore he had no fancy for lowering for whales after sun-down; nor for persisting in fighting a fish that too much persisted in fighting him. For, thought Starbuck, I am here in this critical ocean to kill whales for my living, and not to be killed by them for theirs; and that hundreds of men had been so killed Starbuck well knew (103).

His final plea to Ahab provides additional insight into Woe's subjectivity: "Loveliness unfathomable,

as ever a lover saw in his young bride's eyes!—Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look deep down and do believe" (373). If these words referred to Ahab their meaning would be completely different; in fact, "faith" and "fancy" ousting "fact" and "memory" would not be an incoherent description. In the case of Starbuck, however, this election of fancy over fact confesses the vacuity of his professed convictions and the complete disconnect between his pretensions and his *true* beliefs. His faith is forced, and deep down, he does not believe in God. Otherwise, he would have acted a dozen times already. Still defined and limited by the conditions and manufacture of Woe, he believes in nothing yet denies this reality and considers himself a man of faith and conviction. *Pierre* reveals not only his lack of a soul but also his similarity to Pierre, if Pierre had chosen to evade Isabel's letter instead of facing it head-on and thereby casting himself out to sea. *Moby Dick,* on the other hand, demonstrates that he lacks the spiritual courage needed for the sea and the cognitive distortion needed to be troubled by the sea and driven to seek asylum in the hunt, he lacks these characteristics because at the lower layer, where in all the other men Ahab's "one cogged circle fits into all their various," Starbuck maintains different assumptions and a different configuration of the puzzle of what troubles Ahab's leg, i.e., humanity since Adam on down. The lack of spiritual courage, in other words, is not a personal trait but a feature of his not possessing the metaphysical assumptions of Hope that the others possess. Recall now Ishmael's judgment of the crew as "morally enfeebled… by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or rightmindedness" (158). "Unaided virtue" what else could this be than a description of obedience of customs and protocols that have no grasp on the soul? And how could they, when the orphan has no soul to grasp? If Starbuck has a "God," it is the secular market, where the Whale and thus everything else is of "little worth… except to be sold by the cartload… to fill up some morass in the Milky Way" (331-2). This is his "God," his "faith," and his "convictions." On the surface, Starbuck stands as an ideal, rightminded, devout, and principled, in contrast to the rest of the men, but when *Moby Dick* and its characters are considered at their lower level, that is, at the level that, ironically, Ahab insists Starbuck must evaluate the hunt at, an unexpected fact emerges: among

all the men aboard the Pequod, it is Starbuck that most lacks conviction and has the least faith in Divinity; and, moreover, it is Starbuck who, despite all his reasons, apprehensions, and level-headedness, is the one the is most truly lost.

The carpenter, whose talent and usefulness to the voyage are beyond dispute, expresses another element of Woe, revealing himself a landsman miscast at sea. Ahab describes him as a "mindless" and "unprincipled" "manufactured" modern man, but also provides his reasons: "Then tell me; art thou not an arrant, all-grasping, intermeddling, monopolizing, heathenish old scamp, to be one day making legs, and the next day coffins to slap them in, and yet again life-buoys out of the same coffins? Thou art as unprincipled as the gods, and as much a jack-of-all-trades" (395). By transforming different concrete objects into a common abstract substance (e.g., turning coffin wood into lifebuoy wood), the carpenter is actively involved in one of the defining characteristics of the world of Woe, the negation of identity and difference; and thus contributing to the entropic psychosocial reality of the impersonal circumstances of Woe, wherein causality and identity have lost any consistent or consensual status, leaving its inhabitants in a state of extreme interpretive agitation because nothing is what it appears to be. The objectives behind his acts express the same unprincipledness: with an indifference intolerable to Ahab, he transitions from making prosthetic legs that enable life, to coffins that signify its end, to lifebuoys that attempt to preserve it. The symbolism of the carpenter, as later demonstrated, magnifies the impact of this transition: as the embodiment of Woe, his actions blur the line between a world that nurtures humanity and one that destroys it, between fostering growth and desperately trying (but failing) to keep it afloat. The carpenter as an embodiment of Woe is another jab at Hope, seen by Melville as an ideology that promises much, and may well be well-intended, but which delivers only handicaps, pathologies, and despair.

By this point in the voyage, Ahab's thoughts are often barely coherent; his retort to the carpenter, however, is accurate and sound: "Aye, and that's because the lid there's a sounding-board; and what in all things makes the sounding-board is this—there's naught beneath" (395). The fact that the carpenter is unfazed

by this further suggests that he is a subject of Woe, not Madness. If he were a Whaleman, attuned to the reality of the sea, this level of semantic disorder would be unbearable; moreover, he would not accept that there is "naught beneath" because the faith that there is something beneath, for instance, the troubled conscience of God below the restless waves, is a necessary condition for heading out to sea. He is a man of woe, still relatively comfortable with a reality where nothing means what it is supposed to mean, if it means anything at all; and wherein, to use Tocqueville's terms, ease and interest override principle. Ahab confirms this, expressing his bewilderment at how the carpenter hasn't gone "mad" yet. Recall that in the mid-19th century, there was widespread anxiety not caused by atheism, but by the breakdown of consensual dogmatic structures, including the loss of biblical authority. Inherited institutions, values, meanings, and norms remained in place but were without legitimacy, no longer representatives of truth; they were seen as distortions or obstructions of it. Melville's term for such a state of affairs is Woe, and he believed that it would inevitably leave its citizenry disgusted, frustrated, and enraged. Were this all, however, the conditions for setting out to sea would not be met. What permits the movement to the sea is that these manufactured orphans remain romantic and turn melancholic. Their romanticism motivates their commitment to innocence, to the untutored Adam, whom they believe to possess a moral soul and a rational mind not in virtue of education or subjectivization but in virtue of birth alone. The same romanticism motivates their belief in some Divine order, not accessed through (and certainly not created by) its alleged representatives but accessible only on conditions of their removal. Setting out to sea, however, does not resolve their discontents but leads to madness, because what they imagine is in the sea and who they imagine themselves to be at sea are both exposed as fictions. Their orphanhood, Melville expects, leaves them not only incapable of establishing a world at sea themselves or returning to a form of life ashore they could recognize as legitimate, leaving them dependent on an irrational asylum from madness. Melville did not need to read Freud to know that melancholia is defined by more than profound sadness. In his time, the notion already involved existential grief on account of loss unidentifiable to the melancholic, as well as displacement of blame

and guilt, paralysis, and the sufferer's inability to resolve the sadness due to his constitution and ignorance of the cause. The men are melancholic because they are ignorant of the cause of their misery and because they displace the blame on an agent that secures their ignorance and protects their fantasies, while offering some innocent thing against which they can avenge themselves.

The 19th century's revolutionary rejection of tradition as alienating and artificial, together with the Enlightenment's faith in demystifying reason and the century's turn to historicism, exposed inherited beliefs and convictions to skepticism while promising liberty, unmediated truth, and even a more just union. What Melville calls madness (or the world of Madness) is nothing but a misguided attempt to resolve the misery that ensues when people live in a world governed by institutions, values, meanings, and laws no longer experienced as legitimate representations of the truth; misguided because it follows from doubling down on the same principles that led to the misery. The skepticism solidifies into conviction, distortions turn into obstructions, and restraints are no longer just inconveniences but deemed unnecessary in principle. Hope, in Melville's view, was neither revolutionary nor a solution but a misguided attempt to resolve the world's misery by following through and more fully assuming the principles that led to the great American desert, as if the pathologies and discontents it embodied were the result not of its inventors but remnants and residues of what had been discredited and displaced by the century's pursuit of liberty. In other words, the cause of the failure to find freedom, happiness, and unity was that man had not yet fully unfettered himself from the impostors of history.

When Melville's symbolism is interpreted coherently, it becomes clear that the conditions that drive men to sea are the presuppositions that led to Woe. At sea, the truth about the failed liberation becomes apparent through the falsehoods of its underlying assumptions: there is no Divine order and no inherent moral soul, there was no just truth behind impostors and man would be neither set free nor come into greater reason by abandoning alienation. The principle described in *Moby Dick* makes clear that Melville believes that it is in human nature to assume these things, but also that the objects of these spontaneous beliefs are fictions, fictions

which, if not constrained by impostor representatives, will be lost and then return as torments. They will torment subjects because their place will be presupposed, all the while no agent will be permitted to assume those places. What will torment is the principle without a proper agent, and this torment will have no logical solution and thus seek asylum in phantoms on which the torment can be avenged, all the while the presuppositions and ideological convictions that lead to woe and madness remain intact.

For Melville, Hope was not revolutionary, innocent, or a solution to mankind's problems. Instead, it was merely a continuation and repetition of an ideology that promised freedom, truth, and justice but delivered despair. Deeply intertwined with the very problems it sought to address, Hope offered no real solution. In Melville's eyes, Emerson and other advocates were naive and foolish, unaware of the true nature of the world, ignorant of the root causes of psychological and social discontents, and deluded about what is at the heart of man. The prophecy does not address the consequences of people losing faith in a divine power; indeed, such a belief is a prerequisite for the prophecy. Rather, it focuses on the suspicion that they have not internalized and do not experience the values, laws, and institutions of the world as legitimate. In response to such a world, they will feel disgust but retain their romantic faith in the naive and uncorrupted. Ashore, Melville sees a world very much aligned with Tocqueville's description of democratic America, a world where orphans reject established principles, knowledge, and institutions, and instead pursue the worldly good through untutored self-interest. A world in which they will ultimately find themselves disoriented, deprived, and despaired. They will become anxious, disgraced, resentful, isolated, and powerless in a world of broken promises and indiscernible cause-and-effect relationships. They will mindlessly parrot values they don't truly believe in because they lack any genuine convictions. As Tocqueville warns, at some point, their souls will grow weary, restless, and disquieted, and feeling themselves still imprisoned by the vestiges of traditions, they will long to be set even more free. Melville adds that they will pursue this freedom on the basis of false presuppositions about God and themselves, and that ultimately they will find some innocent to blame for their misery and for the failure of their convictions to deliver on their promises. If the American desert is

what the break with traditions brought, setting out to sea is the madness of misidentifying the cause of the failure and seeking to remedy it by hunting down phantoms of a now maddened imagination.

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Instead of rehashing what has already been said about Madness, let us focus on the elements that have remained undeveloped. The first of which is the transition from Woe to Madness.

> There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gentle rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. 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 Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at midday, 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! (136).

The subject in question lacks all internalized aspects, rendering it devoid of life. With the absence of the father figure, all subjective activity can only stem from external sources. As a result, any propositional and intentional activity merely gives the illusion of life. This state can aptly be described as "sleep," as all activity is mere imitation, rendering the subject as mindless as the carpenter and as faithless as Starbuck. Ishmael's warning follows from this dependence, asserting that even a slight movement causes the subject to lose its grasp on the standards it adheres to, leaving it without the necessary resources for activity. We can observe this in the characters of Pierre and Starbuck. Without alienation and internalization, the effectiveness of external customs and protocols is as fragile as Pierre's imaginary father proves to be or as useless as Starbuck's faith in God or commitment to the law. Even a slight deviation can lead to the collapse of both the subject's activity and the subject itself. The impending fate aligns with the theory presented in *Pierre*: it hovers over *Cartesian* vortices because the fall would leave the subject with only its own independent mind for establishing certainty and rebuilding knowledge; and it hovers over Cartesian *vortices* because the orphan, empty, irreverent, and incapable of performing the necessary trick, will be swallowed in a circular current from

which it will not be able to escape.2 The identity that resurfaces is one of emptiness, and it returns in horror because this principle alone leads to torment. Initially, it "appeals with such power to the soul," hence why it drives men to the sea, but as long as it remains without an agent it will "appall," hence why it torments them into seeking asylum through the identification of some agent. The phrase "no more to rise for ever" echoes the eternal impossibility of logically exonerating the dead father, leaving the orphan condemned to a madness that can only be escaped through an illogical path. The loss and logically irredeemable collapse perfectly align with the theory outlined in *Pierre,* as does the implication that the unsatisfied need for alienation will eventually find a substitute. The warning is directed at "Pantheists," subtly indicating Melville's target: Hope and its assumptions, as well as the mind's spontaneous ability to hear a hidden Voice from inaccessible depths when faced with emptiness.

Pierre is exemplary. By abandoning his imaginary father as an impostor, he breaks from "every enfolding arm" and casts himself "to sea in height of tempest that blows offshore" (182). Almost immediately, however, he begins the futile attempt of finding a way out of this "Maelstrom" in which "man must go round" himself (183). In turn, he becomes a "vulnerable god; [a] self-upbraiding sailor; [a] dreamer of the avenging dream" (183). The transition from the Maelstrom to being "dreamer" is his unconscious principle, but because he dies before identifying an agent to confine his presupposition he dies in madness. Pip, on the other hand, is exceptional. We should not ignore or take lightly the fact that only Pip's madness poses a threat to Ahab's fantasy but inquire into it, not least because it too proves to be a confirmation of the prophecy (395-6).

By this point, it should be obvious that Pip confronts the ontological reality in the depths not because he was literally dragged to sea's floor but because he was abandoned at sea by the Pequod, which is to say, he confronts this reality because he is (or he is no longer) part of the Pequod's Whaling mission. Far less obvious is the cause of his qualitatively distinct reaction to the sea. Recall that after confronting unformed primal forces in the depths of the sea, his perceptions and statements become fragmented and senseless. Pips

perceptions and statements are not confused, they are faithless—lacking any sense or belief that order can be reconstructed. In addition to only Pip posing a threat to Ahab's fantasy, Pip is also the only member of the crew that is seen by the others having lost his mind—no small matter, given the lunacy in which all the others are engaged. To their eyes he is mad, in the sense of deviating from the norm. They are not wrong: all that he sees, says, and does deviates from how they see and act at sea. Consider the most notable expression of his madness: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look," which he repeats a handful of times (335). Those around him are understandably dumbfounded: it's the middle of the night, the ship's in the middle of the sea, and there is Pip pacing around the mast, repeating his babble, which appears to be addressed at nothing and no one. While this behavior baffles those around him, it gains significance when understood in context. Pip utters his string of words immediately after many of the crew, as well as the three mates and Ahab, approach and then stand before the doubloon, each interpreting or seeing something in it (331-5). Melville's word choice is revealing: they all *see* something in it, but to Pip each and every of them is only *looking*. The difference between him and them aligns with the difference in the common usage of the verbs: “seeing” is distinct from “looking” because it is an act of perception accompanied by an act of comprehension, while the latter implies no such comprehension, in the sense of asking ‘do you see’ or ‘don’t you see’ versus ‘I am looking there’ or ‘I looked but saw nothing’; or, at an even more elementary level, “seeing” implies the existence of something that can be seen, while “looking” has no such implication. Objectively speaking, there is nothing to be seen; from which we should conclude that the others, and not Pip, are mad. Once the world becomes the masterless, horizonless sea, there is nothing to be seen in the waves so long as the subject does not contribute something. Seeing, therefore, cannot be a passive perception but instead involves an act of subjective constitution. There is "naught beneath" the anarchic surface of the sea, and yet to the crew these same waves appear as a “conscience” (395). More than a transcendental act where the conditions of perception are also the conditions of the perceived object's existence, for Melville this act also involves a prior presupposition. The otherwise meaningless datum can be interpreted as meaningful or having significance

only if the subject has already, albeit unconsciously, presupposed the place of some essence behind the appearance, which must and can thereafter be interrogated and interpreted. To the crew, the meaningless datum on the surface appears as an appearance only because they presuppose the essence behind it. In other words, meaninglessness can be perceived as significance, a concealment of a hidden mystery, due to the presupposition made by the subject. That presupposition is, of course, the act of the principle.

Melville's larger point is that the Whale is not merely a subjectively constituted agent but a parallax object. Ishmael and Ahab do not see different aspects or sides of the Whale, rather they see a different Whale. The shift in Ishmael's subjective position, i.e., the difference between his and Ahab's respective configurations at the lower layer, does not reveal a different partial perspective of the same Whale, rather this shift in position produces an ontological change in the object, that is, in the Whale.[283] Leaving this parallax shift aside for now, let us focus on Pip.

If Pip's perceptions and statements remain fragmented and senseless without faith in a key or knowledge that would reveal order, but is currently inaccessible, then Pip's distinction is a lack of the principle that causes all the others to distort lack into loss spontaneously. As a result, his underlying mood is only attuned to the objective ontological reality of nothingness or the void, and not, like the others, the ontological reality in conjunction with the subject's principle. In other words, Pip is determined only by the objective truth "residing in" the sea, and not by the objective and subjective truth together. From the perspective of the other sailors, his perceptions and statements deviate from what their mood disposes them to perceive, understand, propose, and act as they do. Pip deviates not because he has lost his mind—he would not be exceptional, if this was the difference, since all the Pequod's men have lost their minds—but because his

[283] This dialectical relationship between subject and object not only affects the object but also changes the subject. Consequently, there are differences not only between Ishmael's and Ahab's Whales but also between Ishmael and Ahab themselves due to their different Whales. See Zizek, *Parallax View*. I will return to this in the Conclusion.

underlying mood of thought is differently attuned. His mood is without the principle, as a result of which there is nothing to see. Therefore, when Ahab and all the others look at the doubloon and *see* different things, Pip believes that they are only *looking* for there is nothing to see. Only one other character could make a similar assertion: Ishmael, of course, but only after he traverses Ahab's fantasy. From this similarity between them, we should not, however, conclude that Pip possesses some form of saving knowledge or introspection. There are three reasons for this: first, Pip is too limited and opaque of a character for anything not explicitly asserted about him to be attributed to him, and what is attributed to him is inadequate to suppose a comprehensive understanding of Melville's philosophical and psychological position; second, there is no way to derive all the crucial elements of Melville's theory of the subject solely from this difference between "seeing" and "looking," even if supplemented by an interpretation of Pip's string of conjugations as indicating an insight into how the mutual exclusivity of the various things the others see implies that there must be "naught beneath"; and third, while both Pip and Ishmael assert that there is "naught beneath" and both confront the same ontological reality (Pip in the depths and Ishmael in the jungle) and conclude that there is no hidden God, Ishmael would never reduce seeing to looking or be confused by the fact that the others see something.

For now, we can say that while Pip lacks the principle and thus perceives all seeing as looking, Ishmael becomes self-conscious of the principle and recognizes that there will always be (and there must always be) some seeing, even if without the subject's contribution there would be nothing to see. If Pip represents the absence of this principle, which is to say that he is deprived of the essential feature of human life, his lack of the principle could be interpreted as a subtle criticism of the institution of slavery. Melville asserts in *Pierre* that the principle is the essence of God: "Silence is the only Voice of our God." And, moreover, that the principle is not only the essence of life but means by which silence sounds like a Voice of Silences. If part of Pip's symbolism in *Moby Dick* pertains to slaves or the condition of slavery, then his lack of principle can be seen as a condemnation of the institution, so sinful that it undermines humanity's faith in God (and the

inherent goodness of mankind) and deprives men of what is most distinct about humanity. Even the most candid seas cannot negate or quiet the principle, but it is possible that Melville is making a rhetorical point along the lines of the institution of slavery being repulsive and dehumanizing enough to negate even the spontaneous faith in any kind of order and the soul of man. Pip losing his mind and thus seeing the sea for what it is would, under such a reading, be Melville's statement that this institution is capable of driving men to lose all faith in God and man. There is some textual evidence supporting this interpretation, for instance: after declaring that the world is consumed with suffering and indifference, Ahab adds that in such a world, "I feel prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor's" (392). Ishmael's observation of an interaction between Pip and Ahab further reinforces this interpretation: "Ah, now, had poor Pip but felt so kind a thing as this, perhaps he had ne'er been lost! This seems to me, sir, as a man-rope; something that weak souls may hold by" (392). In other words, the kindness and, more than that, the humanity with which a single man treats Pip could have been enough to save his faith. Integrating this interpretation within the book's overarching argument, however, would deny its conceptual center, which is the principle as inherent, necessary, constitutive, and spontaneous.

The presence of the principle in others makes them susceptible to Ahab's delusion. Because the individual minds and thoughts of the sailors are relatively obscure, because unaddressed, it is unclear whether their conscious beliefs lean towards theistic or atheistic views. This uncertainty, however, is irrelevant because their madness does not pose a threat to Ahab's own deranged fantasy; it poses no such threat because this principle inclines them towards a shared mood and all the dynamics that ensue. Indeed, if anything, the uncertainty over the conscious beliefs of the crew could be understood as an intentional ambiguity by which Melville expresses his belief that there is no difference between partisans of Hope who view themselves as believers and those who conceive of themselves as atheists. There would be no difference, according to Melville, between a religious man committed to the metaphysical belief in a Divine order and an inherent moral soul and a secular man committed to some abstract order of Nature and a Rousseauian belief in

innocence or the noble savage, because both maintain equivalent metaphysical beliefs. The case of Pierre serves as evidence for this point: he considers himself an atheist and yet he still experiences some Voice that emerges from the void. While he consciously acknowledges and insists on the existence of nothingness, his unconscious comprehension believes in the fiction of God, an unconscious belief embodied in and expressed by his spontaneous presupposition of the place of God. Pierre knows there is nothingness, yet he does not truly believe it. He is consciously an atheist, but unconsciously he remains a believer. Consequently, like the crew to whose religious commitments the reader is not privy, he is invariably destined for the avenging dream.

Ishmael, while describing the weaver he encounters in the jungles of the South Pacific, who is treated as a deity by the locals, expresses the subject's spontaneous response to meaninglessness: "Unseen weaver!—pause!—one word!—whither flows the fabric? What palace may it deck? Wherefore all these ceaseless toilings? Speak, weaver!—stay thy hand!—but one single word with thee!" (345).At this moment, he is speaking on behalf of the common fantasy, channeling its presuppositions and desires: the belief in order, unity, direction, and purpose. These are things Ishmael has learned do not exist, but he has also learned that the mind cannot be without making such assumptions, nor can man and men live without them. In *Pierre*, as much is confirmed: "human life doth truly come from that, which all men are agreed to call by the name of *God*" (145). While there is a brief, identifiable moment during which God is *lacking* in *Pierre*, there is no such identifiable moment for the Pequod's crew, for whom the principle's presupposition, and thus the underlying fantasy2, is always at play. This explains the unique nature of Ishmael's depiction: the weave's complete lack of meaning is depicted through its refusal to conform to the very desires and wants implicit in the pleas and formulations the subject addresses to it.[284] In *Pierre*, the moment of madness is discernable and described in

[284] *See Chapter 102, "A Bower in the Arsacides*." Note that Ishmael concludes by admitting that what the subject desires is in vain: "[n]ay—the shuttle flies—the figures float from forth the loom." See *Moby Dick*, 332. What is asked of this weave is all that Ishmael knows does not exist, i.e., teleology, order, etc. At bottom, the Whale allows for the void to be confined. Conversely, with the principle's presupposition alone it appears as

some detail. In the plot of *Moby Dick*, on the other hand, the crew passes through madness silently. The men Ahab gathers as his crew, assuring them that Moby Dick is the cause of their suffering and his death will bring about their salvation, are men of Woe, and their acceptance of this fantasy propels them into the realm of Maddened Madness. If there is an extended experience of this logically necessary moment, it would be between the time when their dissatisfaction with the great American desert turns their soulless hearts towards the sea and the moment when Ahab steps onto the quarter-deck and directs them towards Moby Dick. The sea, with the Whale as a principle without an agent, represents the world of Madness, by definition, but within *Moby Dick,* Ishmael identifies this form of existence only after he has traversed Ahab's fantasy.[285] It is perhaps impossible to pinpoint the exact moment or tipping point at which Ishmael traverses it and thereby separates from the hero level of the narrative, but the defining moments of his exploration of this fantasy are clearly discernible, as we will soon see. The entire observer level is, as it should be, created by Ishmael, meaning that it is produced out of his having journeyed through the world of Maddened Madness.

From this position, he explains the choice offered in Madness: "But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed" (196). Since Moby Dick, hunted and harpooned, is what overwhelms (or would overwhelm), the quote contains the entire sequence from Madness to its Maddening, and thus merits detailed scrutiny, The state of Madness is equated with the torment of chasing the demon *as a phantom*, or what Melville later refers

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a Voice of a God unseen, but if it appears through this head, and if this head is viewed as a legitimate representative, then some Word can be issued from this alleged God.

[285] It bears repeating here that the chronological evanescence of the intermediary moment is not, in fact, as strange as it seems. In fact, an argument could be made that even Pierre never experiences it in its purity because the entire episode of his madness it constituted by a series of fleeting and collapsing agents posited in response to the place presupposed by the principle, which Pierre refutes one by one, until he confronts a delusional formation that sticks. Whether experienced or not, even if as the most evanescent of moment, it is logically necessary as a moment of passage leading to the distortion.

to as "bodiless," not as an agent. Moreover, it contains not one but two distinct manifestations of the Whale. "They" does not refer to some multitude of Moby Dicks, instead it refers to two different Whales: first, the Whale as a "demon phantom," or principle, which leaves subjects in "barren mazes," and then the Whale as an agent, which "leaves us whelmed." As mentioned above, in Madness, the Whale as a phantom or principle "appeals with such power to the soul" but is also what is "most appalling to mankind." If "they" refers to both, then the phrasing of "they either lead us" implies that the transition from principle to agent is as spontaneous and inevitable, or natural, so to speak, as the appearance of the principle itself. It is the Whale, in other words, that pulls or drives the crew from the torment of significance without signification into the asylum of the hunt. Hence why the prophecy is that all men will head out to sea in search of the phantom that swims before all human hearts and that all men will therein hunt some brute, whichever brute has been invested with the idea of the Whale. Madness as a subjective disposition is conceptually distinguishable from its maddening, but, according to *Moby Dick*, the subject has no choice but to move from madness to maddening. The movement, like their assumption of the hunt on the quarter-deck indicates, is seamless. Madness as a subjective disposition and the world of Madness are logically necessary, transitory moments that may well be temporally evanescent. Note also the limitations imposed by the above formulation: "they either lead us *on in* barren mazes *or midway leave us* whelmed." There is no option to retreat from Madness back to Woe. Some may be able to tear themselves away at just that moment and return to land, but if they do, they will not return unchanged. They may return to the land but not to the illusions and frustrated hopes of the desert; instead, they would be returning “ingloriously” to the “pitiful port.” Put another way, they may physically return from Madness to Woe, but they could not return without bringing back something of what was exposed at sea. Hence, the previously developed distinction between the desert and the port, as well as the earlier deduction that returning to the pitiful port can only be temporary, since life on land will always turn men to the sea. The option to return is, therefore, effectively negated, which leaves the choice presented as no choice at all. Ishmael’s Gospel, moreover, does not offer an option of immediately passing to the Whale

through which he returns, which supports the initial proposition that Ahab's fantasy cannot be denied or evaded but must be assumed, worked through, and traversed. The only choice, according to this Gospel, is the forced choice of having to first make the wrong choice of hunting Moby Dick, which opens up the possibility of the correct choice, i.e., capturing the White Whale.

One must pass from Madness into Madness Maddened, and Ishamel indicates this twice in the passage. First, the demon phantom leads "us *on in* barren mazes," meaning that these barren mazes are spuriously infinite, i.e., without end, and that the resources of madness alone cannot construct a resolution or escape from them. The passage out of Madness, therefore, cannot be accomplished by the principle alone—Pierre, of course, is a case in point. Second, note that while Maddening allows passage out of Madness, it leaves subjects "midway," indicating that Maddening or hunting Moby Dick is not (or not necessarily) the final destination, but, at least potentially, only the midpoint that must be traversed in pursuit of the final destination. Taken together, the elements of the passage confirm not only the universality of the prophecy and the proposition that the entire passage from orphanhood to the hunt is spontaneous but also that assuming and passing through it in its entirety is the condition for the possibility of breaking out of the repletion of the hunt, which has, as Ishmael later instructs, been repeating since Adam (350). When he instructs that the Whale is antechronical," "antemosaic," "pre-adamite," and "antediluvian, he is, therefore, expressing three related claims: one, a given cetology precedes order, time, and Adam, which is also to say that it determines that order, its accompanying notion of history, and humanity's vision; two, insofar as it is logically anterior, it must be situated at the lower layer; and three, that the cetology in question, the cetology that has been repeating since Adam, because it is constitutive of Adam, is the cetology of Moby Dick. The only way to avoid this fate is to head out to sea and assume the hunt, but then to somehow traverse this fantasy and capture the White Whale instead. Otherwise put, the final moment involves establishing a different cetology, which involves reconfiguring the lower layer. The hunt takes place at the upper layer of the puzzle, but Moby Dick arises from the lower layer, from a particular configuration at the lower layer.

As Woe carries Madness latent within, needing only a subtle slip of the hand to collapse the subject into the sea, so Madness carries its own Maddening. If we consider disgust, faith, and pride as the operators of the first passage, we can identify haunting, torment, and asylum as the operators of the second. In one of his most insightful moments of clarity, Ahab captures much of the latter, and hints at a little more: "Would now the wind but had a body; but all the things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless, but only bodiless as objects, not as agents. There's a most special, a most cunning, oh, a most malicious difference!" (420). Clearly, the principle exacerbates as a bodiless entity, but we must not misconceive the process of taking on a body. The bodiless thing is neither an object nor an agent, but it can take on a body and if it does it will be as an agent, not as an object. It is no exaggeration to say that this moment of clarity by Ahab indicates something crucial: the principle has no body on its own, as already established, but if it cannot take on a body as an object, this implies that some positive substance cannot be posited in the presupposed place, but it can take on a body as an agent. Melville is establishing a difference here between an object and an agent, a difference that is reflected in Ahab's and Ishmael's respective Whales. Moreover, this passage confirms and clarifies a proposition made at the outset: when Ishmael instructs that the Whale cannot *and must not* be painted, he is not being rhetorical—the prohibition of something that is declared impossible is *not* superfluous.

Unraveling this logic must be postponed until the underlying concerns troubling Ahab's leg, i.e., until the fantasy2 at the lower layer of Ahab's hunt, from which Moby Dick arises as the cause of humanity's suffering (and its failures to address that suffering in ways other than the hunt), are more comprehensively understood. In a word, Moby Dick is hunted, has been hunted, and will be hunted because the cetology since Adam has established that as humanity's fate.

> Wherefore, for all these things, we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents broke water; he once swam over the site of the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and the Kremlin. In Noah's flood he despised Noah's Ark; and if

> ever the world is to be again flooded, like the Netherlands, to kill off its rats, then the eternal whale will still survive, and rearing upon the topmost crest of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed defiance to the skies (354).

With respect to the Whale, two significant remarks are made in this passage: one, the species is immortal, while the individuals are perishable, and two, the Whale returns under specific conditions and with a defined purpose. Clearly, the species refers to the idea of the Whale, while the whale in its individuality refers to whatever dumb brute has been invested with the idea and thereby made into a Moby Dick. Again, Melville's word choice is instructive: he is immortal in his species, regardless of how perishable he is in his individuality. The same Whale is being referred to, first in his species aspect, then in his individual aspect. All Whales are identical in terms of the former, despite the fact that they are distinct in terms of the latter. In other words, every time the Whale reappears, he will—or, at the very least, he may—be different in his individuality, i.e., he could be sexism, racism, multiculturalism, some particular group or some particular tradition. He could be anything, but at the same he will always be the same, he will always be the cause construed as the alien and thus removable malice obstructing man from aligning with what he images is—should and could—be the case were it not for this malicious agent. There is no better term for the hunt than scapegoat, a scapegoat that permits men to look away from themselves and their beliefs while contemplating their misery. And that, in short, is when the Whale returns and what he does upon his return: the idea returns whenever the form of life devolves into artifice and nihilism, into a forced obedience of conventions that have lost their legitimacy and grasp on the soul, he returns when the world devolves into an earth, into disgrace as the result of some romantic rupture with its inherited traditions, the representatives of its fictions. It does not return on land, but at sea, moreover. Which is to say, the idea of the Whale returns once the charade on land becomes intolerable and men decide to venture into the sea. Men always misperceive the sea, Melville thinks, but objectively the sea is a masterless, horizonless globe. And they *must* misperceive the sea, he thinks, because it

is only by distorting the amoral, meaningless, horizonless sea that they can scan the horizon with purpose. This distortion is their faith, as developed earlier, and it is only through such faith that they can maintain the idea with which they set out to sea. And they must scan the horizon if they are to satisfy this idea with the body of some agent. And so, they will scan in until some white hump, out in the distance, appears. When the Whale returns it return in defiance of the skies, it defies them by making an empty sky appear to them as if it contains the Heavens, Heavens that do not exist but which these men want to and will believe in and which they will believe can be reached if only that white hump on the horizon, standing between them and their fictions, is annihilated and removed. The Whale spouts its frothy defiance, in other words, by defying that there is only nothingness above (and, as we have seen, a corresponding nothingness within the orphaned soul).

> But how? Genius in the Sperm Whale? Has the Sperm Whale ever written a book, spoken a speech? No, his great genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it. It is moreover declared in his pyramidical silence. [...] If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation shall lure back to their birth-right, the merry May-day gods of old; and livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; on the now unhaunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove's high seat, the great Sperm Whale shall lord it (274).

Men inhabit an "unhaunted hill" only when they live below an "egotistical sky," and it is the Whale that lords over any such hill (274). The role of the subject is all too evident here: the subject projects the phantom that haunts it, as already developed; but more than that, it is the subject that allows (to not say "makes") the sky to be "egotistical," which it does through the Whale. We could read "egotistical" in a few ways, but all of them point to the "Truth" of the subject and the Whale: it is the subject's presupposition that makes the emptiness into more, it is Whale that allows men to believe that there is some ego there, some order or some plan, it is both of them that allow men to continue to believe—in the absence of evidence—that the Heavens are full of themselves, so to speak.

This, as Ishmael insists upon time and again, appears only at sea; and this Truth *can* be adequately understood *only* in the midst of the hunt. All men will head to sea and all men will take up the hunt—all men, therefore, will confront the truth at sea, but some men may also come to understand and know this truth and thus they may return.

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Prior to setting sail, Ishmael makes an inconspicuous comment that encapsulates the worlds in question, their differences, and the transitions between them: "To truly enjoy bodily warmth," he says, "some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself" (58). The intended meaning is that everything defines itself by its opposite. However, because there is "naught beneath," this image offers a second, more complex and, I would suggest, more enlightening meaning: nothing exists in itself, except that nothing does exist in itself. Read as such, it is an image of differentiality. In which case, this small, offhand remark is a synecdoche for the epistemic reality in *Moby Dick*, where waves seamlessly slide into one another, leaving behind only traces that vanish as soon as they appear, for the sea of deferrals and hints leading nowhere and of constant negations and their negations that never amount to anything positive. The logic contained in this image, however, contains more than just the impersonal in *Moby Dick*, it also contains within itself the entire passage from Woe to Madness Maddened. In this logic, the true binary of a term like "cold" would not be its contrary, "warm," for instance, but its own absence or a void in the place of its inscription. The opposite of "cold," in other words, is the absence of "cold, which is nothing. There is no signification in such a world, nothing in it means what it is supposed to mean—it is, so to speak, a world of "cold" and nothing. This absence is ultimately filled in through a second, contrary term, such as "warm," but this binary signifier is initially missing for the same reason that "cold" signifies nothing, namely because there is nothing beneath and so no representation, no signification. For Melville, this results from the "skewer of the world [having] fallen out"—one of his names for parricide. As a result, there is just the meaningless term "cold," which is to say, there is only "cold" and nothing. The

difference between Woe and Madness can be illustrated through this framework: a world of "cold" and nothing is a world of Woe, a nihilistic world where there is no legitimacy to existing representation and nothing to represent, nor anything that could represent adequately; a world of madness, on the other hand, is one where "cold" seeks its binary and thereby itself. What permits the move from "cold" and nothing to "cold" and some significance or hope for signification? What permits "cold" to seek out "warmth"? Given that "qualities" exist only "by contrast," these questions are equivalent. Rhetorically speaking, therefore: what makes "cold" go in search of "warmth" in a world of nothing and lies? Ishmael's response, we will see, is the veil of Whiteness, which transforms nothing into "a nothing." This veil is his name for the effect produced by the principle's presupposition, which distorts lack into loss or, in the case of Pierre, nothingness into "a nothing." "Cold" can seek out "warmth," and thus its own signification, only through this intervention. As the principle torments Pierre, so this dumb blankness spurs on the supposition that there is some meaning, that meaning is possible, but provides no orientation, no horizon, no haven. It promises significance but refuses all signification. The world produced by this veil (or the principle) is a world where seeking "warmth" is possible but where it is also madness to do so. But it is a madness that, Melville tells us, is sane because the subject is subjectivized into this madness by its conditions and because, so determined, it seeks only that which it finds necessary but missing, the precondition of which is its spontaneous or unconscious principle.[286] As an act, it is a madness a desperate subject cannot resist because it is unconscious and because it promises asylum from meaninglessness and nihilistic woe. The world of madness it produces is not a nihilistic world that has given up on meaning but a world tormented by a "nothing" producing shadows and surfaces that promises but forever defers meaning. It is Pierre's world, yes, but it is also Ahab's world

[286] Recall the earlier-discuss self-description of Ahab's madness: "All my means are sane, my motive and my object mad." And Ishamel's subsequent description of how Ahab's madness condensed onto, or, better yet, *through* an object: "far from having lost his strength, Ahab, to that one end, did not possess a thousand-fold more potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear upon any one reasonable object." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 157.

before the Moby Dick—a world of "cold" and "nothing," a world that leaves man striving atop "a dumb blankness, full of meaning," but with "[not] one point" of orientation in an "undifferentiated space" (165). The world of madness is a world of only "cold" and "nothing" with man forever striving in vain for "warmth."[287] Ahab recognizes the torment of such a world, hence his confession of what drives him to Moby Dick: "No fear; I like a good grip; I like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold, man" (359). As the key that makes all that was inscrutable plain, Moby Dick settles the sliding of significance. What mediates between representation representing nothing and representation trying but failing to represent something, what mediates between woe and madness is the principle or the veil of Whiteness, a subjective distortion that turns nothing into "nothing" and thus offers the prospect of "cold" seeking, albeit in madness, for "warmth." In the world of woe there is no meaning. In the world of madness there is meaning but it can never be grasped, never captured, never settled. Somewhere along the line, however, there is a second distortion: a point is posited but appears as if it was found, a point from which something speaks "from behind the unreasoning mask" (140). That point is Moby Dick. "Cold" and nothing is the world of woe. The want of "warmth," so to speak, in this world of "cold" and "nothing" is madness. But finding it, finding "warmth" and thereby itself in the modern episteme, that is madness maddened.

Here, then, is the sequence of worlds and the pivots of their successive transformations: (1) a world of nothing and woe, (2) the principle or the "veil of Whiteness," (3) a world of "nothing" and madness, (4) the agent or Moby Dick, (5) a world of madness maddened, where some cause is discerned, and some resolution found. After that, there is Ishmael's traversal and his subtraction of the White Whale from Moby Dick, which gives us the Gospels of *Moby Dick*.

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[287] The contrast to woe is expressed by the Lazarus Ishmael encounters on the streets of New Bedford, shivering from the cold and sleeping on the street, who has clearly given up any hope for finding warmth. Because this Lazarus is not wrong, the madness of seeking out "warmth" at sea is madness in the colloquial sense of the term. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of this moment.

Chapter 6: The Maddened Pit of Ahab's Mind

"all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad."
Melville, *Moby Dick*

6.1 Ahab

Few things written about *Moby Dick* are as true as Matthiessen's observation that in Melville's works external and internal facts correspond.[288] The Pequod, plunging "into that blackness of darkness" is, as Ishmael learns, "the material counterpart of Ahab's soul" (326). This correspondence applies from the other direction, as well: "For surely no mere mortal who has at all gone down into himself will ever pretend that his slightest thought or act solely originates in his own defined identity (178). The inside is a reflection of the outside, or, in Melville's terms, character is the "impersonal personified" (356). But the outside, in the sense of what the subject does and sees, what it believes in and what it obeys, is simultaneously also a projection of the inside. The problem, as Melville sees it, is that the outside is composed of and constituted through impostors behind which there is a fiction, while the inside, above all the soul of man, is appallingly empty (283). Men live as if there was Virtue and Vice, but Virtue and Vice 'are only falsely diverging shadows of the same nothing,' and men act as if there was a given, inherent soul within, but that too is a deception of a shadow: "Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair, and the blackness of the shaft" (273, 287). Nothing above and nothing within, except

[288] Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 436-44.

that which is produced by impostors, by fathers, representatives of fictions, like "the Church, the monument, and the Bible" (204). All such things are shadows cast by nothing, yes, but a nothing mediated, as it were, confined and turned into a fiction that can be believed and from which laws and meanings, virtues and vices, norms and customs, from which entire institutions and forms of life could be drawn. Melville readily admits that all such things are "arbitrary lines," but not without adding the warning that such lines, like the seemingly artificial institutions from which they stem, is what composes a world and how the world surrounds man for his "worldly good" (178). "Impostors," he writes in *Pierre*, "are not unknown in this curious world," but he is downplaying his point: impostors are all there is in this curious world, above which there is no Heaven, below which there is no Hell, and for which there is no Judgment (23-5).

The trouble at the root of Ahab's lunacy is that life "doth truly come from that which all men are agreed to call by the name of God," access to which, moreover, is only through the father (145). Life, in other words, depends on accessing fictions *through* impostors. There are two such fictions: the Divine order above and the moral soul within. If impostors are deposed and discredited, if men decide they are falsehoods and set out to access the truth themselves, immediately, unencumbered by the contrivances of tradition, they will find themselves in the position of Pierre, a nothing tormented by another nothing. Such men, or men so disposed, Melville calls orphans. Ahab is among them. And orphanhood is a catastrophe, an inner catastrophe results in woe, then madness, and then the hunt. Like Frued would diagnose in his patients half a century later, Melville viewed "the end of the world [as] the projection of internal catastrophe."[289] Orphanhood is woe, a woe that will be triggered into madness and thereafter seek asylum through a delusional metaphor. The other cause of the trouble is the above disposition: a conviction that rules, laws and meanings are arbitrary and the institutions from which they extend artificial and unhelpful, moreover that they are not needed and

[289] Sigmund Freud, "The Case of Schreber: in Sigmund Freud, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 12: The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique, and Other Works, trans. James Strachey (New York: Vintage Classics, 2001), 70.

that they only obstruct, distort, and stultify; a conviction which, if its holder is not a supreme nihilist, is supported by a pair of metaphysical beliefs that Melville thinks are fictions, an inherent moral soul inside of man and a Divine order outside of him. The men who board the Pequod are such men:

> 'Jonah did the Almighty's bidding. And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it!'
>
> 'This, shipmates, this is that other lesson; and woe to that pilot of the living God who slights it. Woe to him whom this world charms from Gospel duty! Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the waters when God has brewed them into a gale! Woe to him who seeks to please rather than to appal! Woe to him whose good name is more to him than goodness! Woe to him who, in this world, courts not dishonor! Woe to him who would not be true, even though to be false were salvation! Yea, woe to him who, as the great Pilot Paul has it, while preaching to others is himself a castaway!'
>
> He drooped and fell away from himself for a moment; then lifting his face to them again, showed a deep joy in his eyes, as he cried out with a heavenly enthusiasm,—'But oh! shipmates! on the starboard hand of every woe, there is a sure delight; and higher the top of that delight, than the bottom of the woe is deep. Is not the main-truck higher than the kelson is low? 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. Delight is to him whose strong arms yet support him, when the ship of this base treacherous world has gone down beneath him. Delight is to him, who gives no quarter in the truth, and kills, burns, and destroys all sin though he pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges. Delight,—top-gallant delight is to him, who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven. 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. And eternal delight and deliciousness will be his, who coming to lay him down, can say with his final breath—O

> Father!—chiefly known to me by Thy rod—mortal or immortal, here I die. I have striven to be Thine, more than to be this world's, or mine own. Yet this is nothing; I leave eternity to Thee; for what is man that he should live out the lifetime of his God?' (53-4).

Hope had already brought down much of the "Falsehood," much of the artifice and imposture, all of which led to the great American desert—the Pequod sets out to bring down the rest. Ahab and the men accompanying him to lay the world's grievances before the bar will encounter an irony. This conflict between "goodness" and a "good name," which is to say, between the "Truth" and the "Falsehood," is the context within which Ahab must be understood and his declarations read. For instance: "Where do murderers go, man! Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?" (407). Ahab says this the day before the chase begins, and it is all too clear who "the judge" being dragged before the bar is: Moby Dick or, more precisely, all the enervating falsehoods condensed in Moby Dick. What Ahab intends to drag before the bar are the remains of the Falsehoods, their ultimate origin finally identified. He is, of course , the arbiter but the bar is set by what he imagines to be "the Truth." Standing on the deck, his avenging dream is about to become a reality: he will annihilate the remnants of Falsehood that have not only tricked him, like they have tricked humanity since Adam, but which have stood between him (and all humanity since Adam) and the alignment of the world of men with the order of God. You are all "foolish mortals," Ishmael says, who do not realize that "Noah's flood is not yet subsided" (224). The "same ocean," he adds, "that same ocean rolls now" as rolled back them. Ahab does not think he is the latest of men that will kill Moby Dick, no, he would be the first and the last. Moby Dick is the agent, the brute onto which Ahab has piled all his (and humanity's) rage and misery, and because he has never yet been properly identified *and killed*, all of history's efforts to amend the world and align it with Divinity have thus far failed. All the other attempts, insofar as they misidentified the cause, have wasted their strength—and if any did find Moby Dick, their strength failed them and they never

returned. The hunt has been repeating because the wrong targets were killed or because the ships and crews were "stove and sunk by him" (218). Ahab intends to bring all the misery *and* all the failure to an end.

As is so often the case with the most seminal sentences and passages of *Moby Dick*, this one too has one meaning for Ahab and another for Ishmael: Ishmael would also admit that the judge is dragged before the bar, but the judge is man, or, better put, the judge is the composite of artifices and imposters that man has invented. As a result, while Ahab can maintain that there is some bar before which the false judges can be brought, namely the bar before the True God, Ishmael would reply that there is no judge, that there is no judge because *such a God* is a fiction, a fiction that is lost and dysfunctional in the absence of representatives. Within the same world, but from a slightly different perspective, there can be no judge because "the Church, the monument, [and] the Bibe" were the only bars that there ever were, and they have been discredited or abolished, while, as he mused about the governors ashore, after finding Lazarus abandoned to the frigid cold and wondering if he was not in old Gomorrah, they officers and legislators have themselves grown indifferent to and decided to neglected their duties. There is no bar and there are no officers of the court: Ahab's judge and bar are also nowhere, they are phantoms of his imagination, but he neither realizes nor accepts this.

In addition to offering a view of Ahab's maddened mind, *Moby Dick* also supplies a view of Ahab's mind at other moments of the process. For instance:

> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me (140).

Ahab has moved beyond woe through the act of deciding to break through the mask, through the falsehoods of land, and seek out the truth he believes exists behind these falsehoods. In the same passage, he also expresses the subsequent moment at sea:

> Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me (140).

Aside from the intention of killing Moby Dick and the inability to distinguish between principle and agent, note what is most intolerable for Ahab: the inscrutability of his miseries and failures, behind which he suspects the existence of a single original and unifying agent sinewing its malice within everything he can see and feel but cannot understand. It is not the misery or the pain that torments him most, but the inability to comprehend the source and the many chains of cause and effect. Note that he has already presupposed the idea of ultimate malice in the absence of being able to identify it and, in turn, is convinced that the incoherent and intractable battery of negative effects are all but fibers, expressions of what must be a single underlying agent. Finally, note that Ahab refuses the charge of blasphemy even as he intends to wreak hate upon the last vestiges and the alleged ultimate source of the falsehoods that have been pressed and imposed upon him as legitimate representatives. If "the Church, the monument, [and] the bible"—or to use the terms from the quote above: "the good name… the proud gods and commodores of this earth… Senators and Judges"—are the target, then Ahab is guilty of blasphemy, or *he would be if* he recognized them as legitimate instead of seeing them as impostors. His presupposition of a Divine order, along with his refusal of its earthly representatives and his certainty that this Divine can be reached more immediately, are all evident in the above. Ahab is doing what he believes to be the "Almighty's bidding," albeit he intends not to "preach the

Truth to the face of Falsehood" so much as destroy the Falsehood that has barred his (and humanity's) access to the Truth.

A few pages later, we get a closer look at the effect of madness on Ahab and how he resolves its torments through Moby Dick:

> All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it (156).

The tormenting, the subtle demonism, and the malice sinewed in what passes (or passed) as truth on land have all been addressed at length, the remaining elements of this description, however, demand attention. In this vein, consider the acute articulation of the passage from madness to its maddening. The cause denoted by "all that" is, of course, "~~God~~ hunt us" or the "Voice of Silence." If it "stirs up the *lees* in things," it agitates and unravels whatever time or repetition sedimented into place; and if it "cracks the *sinews*," it causes the connective tissues or relations between individual or smaller units to be torn, dismembering the whole and weakening by exposing each isolated constituent to tensions it cannot withstand. By describing what is stirred up as "lees," meaning things that have sedimented into their current stable state or shielded from the disturbing effects of wind, Melville is confirming the prior description of the masterless sea as a mad steed returning to its original, ontological state free of subjective constitution through artifice and imposture. Put another way, he is again confirming that there was no original, natural unity to which one could return through a destruction of history and an elevation of innocence. This process of stirring and cracking, in turn, has no inherent limit, exactly as—and for the same reasons that—the "universal cannibalism" of the sea devours everything, *including* the offspring *it* created. Like Pierre's memories, and later his trust in and use of words, the world

has become not just uncertain and doubtful for Whalemen at sea, rather it is being relentlessly fragmented into atomized units, each of which is (or will) itself be undermined and further broken up. Each of these ever-more fragmented units, like words in the modern episteme, have no meaning or value on their own; instead, they can have meaning and value only on condition of their placement and strict obedience to a linguistic totality—a totality that is impossible for men like Ahab and Pierre who neither know nor can discover the grammar and syntax that would tie all these fragments together, and certainly cannot accept the tricks of master signifiers nor themselves decide as such rules on their own. This cracking and stirring does not, however, herald meaninglessness but an opaque web of deferrals and broken promises. And as is the case for Pierre, so for Ahab there is a correspondence here between the external and internal environments: in front of him is the sea, a pandemonium of waves forming out of and then immediately collapsing into one another, moving constantly but, in the absence of horizons, heading nowhere, while within him, the lees stir and the sinews crack. Simultaneously to this deteriorating sprawl, however, this same "all that" "cakes the brain," it forms an impermeable, solid coat cast over this now enervated and disoriented mind. The image is fitting: a meaningful order of identities, difference, and chains of causality is dissolving into an intractable and proliferating web of deferrals and inversions, but this anarchic web does not devolve into meaninglessness because it is contained within or below the shadow of an indecipherable projected unity—it is contained, in other words, by a faith that below or behind this pandemonium there is some order. For Ahab, there are two distinct projections: one, the projection of Moby Dick, the malice that is sinewed in all of his otherwise inscrutable suffering and which is allegedly their sole source, and the antecedent presupposition of the place of Divine order, which is empty but whose emptiness is obscured such that he can maintain his faith in it despite all evidence to the contrary, which he does through the identification of Moby Dick as the cause of this therefore only apparent absence, the manifestation of which is the disorder outside and the torment within. First the presupposition that produces "~~God~~ hunt us," and then the asylum of "unless we hunt Moby Dick." "~~God~~ hunt us" imposes a madness within which not only are established relations and thus established

meanings and values negated, thereby weakening its constituents through a pervasive confusion, uncertainty and ambiguity, but within which the shadow cast imposes an impermeable and unfixed boundary that leaves the mind with no outside of anxiety over significance without signification while assuring it that there is an end to it. "Lees" and "sinews" should be understood as metaphors not only for values, meanings, and relations, but also for cognitive elements such as schemas, categories, logics, and laws on which perception, comprehension, and action are all constitutively dependent. The only certainty within such madness is the supposition of some sovereign point that holds the secret knowledge that would resolve the anarchy and absolve the anxiety. As there is no Moby Dick, there is no single cause that would explain the misery, and as there is no God, there is no point that would resolve the anarchy, but insofar as Ahab imagines Moby Dick, the misery and failures will appear to him as if they could be resolved and insofar as he imagines some such agent to blame for the suffering and the anarchy he can maintain that there is some God, some order that could be (re)established through the removal of Moby Dick.

Bereft of fathers that put life into man and grant him his Tahiti—within and without—Ahab is cast into anarchy, an entropic psychosocial world, wherein causality and identity have lost any consistent or consensual status they may have had, leaving him in a situation of extreme interpretive agitation, inundated by an onslaught of unconnected and opaque words and things, and lacking the key or code that would return order or rebuild his world. Atop such a sea, its surface quivering and its waves seamlessly sliding into one another, leaving behind only traces that vanish as soon as they appear to be discerned, Ahab is abandoned to a reality of deferrals and hints leading nowhere. He is, in a word, in barren mazes. As developed earlier, Ahab is attuned to this impersonal, but the mood that subtends his actions, thoughts, and experience is not reducible to a reflection of his impersonal conditions. Ahab is a "manufactured" man, he is the "impersonal personified," but within this personification there remains a point of personality, the principle that presupposes the place of Divine order and calls for alienation by representatives (392-3). Ahab's problem is that he has no

representatives that could confine that faith, nor does he display any willingness (or capacity) to accept some new representatives, in the absence of which he is subject to "~~God~~ hunt us." Within the epistemic experience created under this shadow nothing has any certain meaning and the only certainty is that meaninglessness will be seen as significance because the subject has presupposed some subject supposed to know. This presupposition, as developed earlier, arises from the lower layer and merits being called Melville's concept of the unconscious. The "unconscious understanding" mentioned by Ishmael as the central mechanism leading to the crew's assent, now shows itself in fuller light: it is the understanding that operates atop (or with the framework established by) the unconscious presupposition and the commitments at the lower layer. The mood produced by this situation of sprawling meaninglessness and the principle, within which the only certainty is that somewhere, someone possesses (or is) the key to resolving this apparent anarchy, subtends and determines what he says, thinks, and does. The mood mediating between what I proposed to call the objective and subjective causes is, therefore, composed of their synthesis—and if "the Truth" resides in the sea and appears truly only in the midst of the hunt, then this mood is also composed of the two halves of this Truth.

This mood is also a ~~state~~-of-exception, misrecognized by Ahab as a state-of-exception, wherein because the law is suspended while the force-of-~~law~~ remains, not only is all activity riddled with uncertainty, anxiety, and paranoia, potentially up to the point of paralyzing all actions and negating the possibility of comprehension, but wherein any *a priori* limits to the force-of-~~law~~'s jurisdiction are negated, thus exposing subject to an experience of confusion and uncertainty to which there is no outside and so no resolution to the anxiety and enervation. Like the sea without, the madness within Ahab's mind assumes such semantic confusion: nothing has any valid meaning but for that very reason nothing can be validated as definitely meaningless—the tides of the sea, as Ishmael vicariously says, appear as if they are the "tormented conscience" of God (193-4). Figuratively speaking, this madness must have tormented Ahab right down to the leg he

stands on. Prior to Moby Dick bearing the blame, Ahab's rage must have been without a target or, better yet, a rage looking for a target, no differently than the rage with which his crew boarded the Pequod. Perhaps Moby Dick did take Ahab's leg in their first encounter, off the coast of Japan, but, as Ishmael informs, whatever fury Ahab displayed leaping at that whale with his six-inch blade in hand only to have his limb ripped off, was not the rage he later piled on Moby Dick's white hump. Perhaps that brute did take his leg, but if he did, that assault served the purpose of offering Ahab a target for his preexisting rage, the same rage that man has been collecting and hoarding since Adam. That assault offered him, in other words, a particular agent into which he could posit the idea of the Whale. This "perishable" particular, who gashed and tore his body, fit the bill. We could well imagine that it was in the days and weeks of delirium that followed, as his crew raced their captain back to shore, that Ahab found his Moby Dick.[290] We could imagine this, but we do not need to—Ishmael says it: "then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another, and so interfusing, made him mad" (156). Ishmael makes a slight error here: Ahab was already mad—what this interfusing of torn body and gashed soul did is *madden* his madness. He continues:

> That it was then, on the homeward voyage, after the encounter, that the final monomania seized him, seems all but certain from the fact that, at intervals during the passage, he was a raving lunatic; and though unlimbed of a leg, yet such vital strength remained in his Egyptian chest, and was moreover intensified by his delirium,, that his mates were forced to lace him fast, even there, as he sailed, raving in his hammock (157).

[290] That it was his leg that was torn off, leaving him unable to stand on his own two feet, and that it was a creature monstrous in size and strength and living below the visible surface, who only infrequently reveals itself and whose features make him so perfectly impenetrable, moreover that his dizzyingly disorienting skin make him perfect for the veil of Whiteness, are serendipitous coincidences, nothing more. In this respect, there is a parallel between Moby Dick and gold, both of which are simultaneously contingent and perfect objects for the function they serve.

As that strange guest arrived at the peak of Pierre's madness, walking into his room and taking a seat as the young man scribbled away on a desk he called his "plank," so it was at some point during these days of delirium that Ahab "piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then… burst his hot heart's shell upon it (156). Moby Dick enters this confusion as a master signifier, establishing relations among sprawling traces of significance and instituting an order of meaning: all the pain, his and that of man and men had found its cause.[291] Put another way, this piling of responsibility onto Moby Dick is, as proposed earlier, Melville's parallel to the task Schmitt's sovereign's must accomplish as a prerequisite for his restoration of order to the underlying situation, after which the norm can be reinstalled: blaming Moby Dick for all of humanity's woes is the equivalent of the sovereign coming to understand the disruption that induced the exceptional situation. Hence why it is valid to say that the men arrive enraged but without a target—they are ready to kill, yes, but they lack something. Ahab, as foreshadowed by Elijah, arrives as their savior by providing them what they lack. It is crucial to recognize that what Ahab provides has two layers. One, he confirms their *suspicions* that there is *a* cause, a single cause, which is to say, he confirms the suspicion that turned them to the sea, the suspicion that Job is wrong, i.e., that the suffering and pain are not meaningless, that they are no accident, no contingent or inevitable reality of life in a senseless universe. Why does Ahab chase *Job's* Whale? Ishmael's formulation is somewhat confusing, and could be seen as a misnomer, but the meaning is clear: Ahab hunt's Job's Whale because Job denies that there is any meaning to his suffering, he hunts Moby Dick, in other words, to refute the idea—to refute the possibility—that suffering and misery, failure and pain are just facts of human life, facts that must be accepted and for which nothing other than accidents or human limitations are responsible. That cannot be, according to Ahab's Hopeful mind: no, there are no meaningless tragedies, no inevitable but contingent accidents and failures; no, there is a Divine order and just governance and there is, of course, the goodness

[291] See Zizek, *Parallax View*, 37-41.

and fitness of innocent man. Job's Whale, his cetology, that is a falsehood, a falsehood Ahab can annihilate through the hunt for Moby Dick. This, in fact, is implicit in the hunt: if Job's ceteology was not mistaken, if it was right, then there would be conditions of possibility for Ahab or the crew; instead, there could only be Ishmael's aimless delinquency or the gun, the enfeebled "right-mindedness" of Starbuck or the "mediocrity" in Flask, or, finally, Stubb's "invulnerable jollity of indifference and recklessness." If Job is right, the Pequod could never set sail—it does, because men, according to Melville, neither think, nor see, nor feel like Job does. From a psychoanalytic perspective, but one could equally—and perhaps more fittingly—say from a Pascalian perspective, the fact that the hunt cannot succeed and cannot end is irrelevant: the hunt itself, for as long as it lasts gives the men what they want, purpose, a cause, a distraction, as Pascal would say, from the boredom of purposelessness they would have to accept in a Godless or, better yet, a faithless world. Pascal or psychoanalysis, it matters not, for both confirm what is implicit in the enthusiasm of Melville's sailors: they are enjoying the hunt, all the more so because its inevitable failures result in a frustration and rage that can be repeatedly reposited into the uncatchable Moby Dick. At some point in his many investigations, Ishmael wonders if the Whale is getting smaller; he concludes that it is. The conclusion is a subtle suggestion in support of his more often remarked upon conclusion that "Human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing. When you think it fled, it may have but become transfigured into some still subtler form" (157). It is beyond doubt that this point of both is to say that what Ahab and his men hunt in Moby Dick, all men hunt in some and almost always smaller, more subtle form. The Whale is getting smaller, probably, but given the logic of hunt's failure, it is also the case that Moby Dick is getting larger, figuratively speaking, as the hunt passes from one failed attempt onto another—he is getting larger because the frustration of failure and rage at having been misled are ascribed and then further piled atop his white hump. Two, the other layer of what Ahab provides, after assuring them there is *a* cause, is naming it or pointing a finger at. As proposed at the outset, what Ahab says to the men on the quarter deck is, in essence, just this: 'there is a cause to your

suffering,' he assures them, 'there it is!' he adds, pointing to Moby Dick. After that, he does not need to offer them a harpoon; no, he only heads to hand it to them, for they will come and grab it of their own accord.

Notwithstanding the risk of confusion by jumping ahead, three points can be mentioned here: one, if we recall how Melville defines the soul and conceives of its source, it should not surprise that what Ahab gives his men (and what they lack), as Elijah informed Ishmael, is a soul, albeit a substitute that is a little distorted, a little perverter; two, Ahab errs in identifying Moby Dick, yes, but his greatness is also and nonetheless contained within that act; and three, according to Ahab, but also according to Ishmael, given the universal applicability of his prophecy to all men born and raised in the woe of the desert, whatever differences exist between enfeebled right-mindedness, mediocrity, indifference, and delinquency, these differences prove irrelevant in contrast to the common difference between them and what Ahab offers his men: "Ye two are the opposite poles of one thing; Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind; and Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors!" (413)—once again, all differences, according to Melville, boil down to cetological ones.

With Moby Dick identified, the sea gains horizons and Ahab's madness contracts:

> Ahab's full lunacy subsided not, but deepeningly contracted.... But, as in his narrow-flowing monomania, not one jot of Ahab's broad madness had been left behind; so in that broad madness, not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished.... his special lunacy stormed his general sanity, and carried it, and turned all its concentred cannon upon its own mad mark; so that far from having lost his strength, Ahab, to that one end, did now possess a thousand fold more potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear upon any one reasonable object (157).

This lunacy is not negated but transformed, transformed through contraction. All uncertainty, slippage, deferral, and inconsistency are condensed into a single point, a master signifier that stabilizes significance into signification. Moby Dick is a master signifier, but we must be more precise. At greater scale, Ahab's

identification of Moby Dick mirrors Ishmael's comprehension of the oil painting: identifying the Whale in its midst, this, he says, "once found out, and all the rest were plain" (26). The chaos is not negated or transformed into some discernable object or original order, rather the painting *remains* an image of chaos and what becomes "plain" is why there is this disorder. Identifying Moby Dick as the cause accomplishes the same for Ahab: it does not supplement humanity's inadequacies or restore its alignment with God, but explains its failures, displacing the cause from the empty heavens and humanity's fallenness onto some intruder. The restoration, on the other hand, is what it would accomplish if it could kill Moby Dick. As the hidden, absolute deceiver, Moby Dick is a fetish giving the crew the impression that all their previously inscrutable and irresolvable misery can be explained and resolved. The courage to hunt him, moreover, gives them meaning and purpose and the dignity proper to those that feel some power over their fate. Ahab is Pierre with the addition that he has something to blame. Foreclosure is the inner catastrophe as the basis of this vengeance and Moby Dick is a return of the father in the real, but he returns not as one of Shakespeare's fathers but as the father of privation, standing immovably between God and the immiserated but fanatical subject, which is to say, between the mother and the child's fantasy of what would be their glorious reunification. It is the object that confirms the presuppositions of the fantasy2, and as such it is a fetish *par excellance*.[292]

Melville refers to Ahab's contracted lunacy as monomania, a 19th-century clinical category for subjects pathologically consumed by a single obsession, but otherwise maintaining normal relations to all else. Clearly, this is an inadequate diagnosis for Ahab; above all, because all else is not exempt from but definitely dependent on the object Ahab obsesses over. Instead of monomaniacal, Ahab is better understood as a paranoid psychotic, with Moby Dick serving as the delusional metaphor that quilts signifiers to signifieds and meaning to being.[293] For Melville, 19th century modernity, as discussed earlier, leaves the world in a state of

[292] Note that it is a fetish at the lower layer of the riddle. For Ahab, on the other hand, Moby Dick is a delusional metaphor. I return to this shortly.

[293] See Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in *Ecrits*, 412-41.

Woe. The primary cause, according to him, was not a loss of faith in God but a breakdown of the relation between religion and the Bible—or, more generally put, it was not a loss of faith in some Divine order but a loss of faith in the Bible or the church as representative of Divinity. His position, therefore, is similar to Schleiermacher's: he would agree that there is a religious core or base in depths of human nature, i.e., that man is religious "whether he likes it or not," but he would object to Schleiermacher proposition that, in view of this religious core, religion and the Bible should and could be divided.[294] And so, while Schleiermacher encouraged disposing of the Bible and pursuing an allegedly purer form of religiosity, Melville warned that without the Bible, whatever faith there may be in man—conscious or unconscious—would impose torment rather than liberty and, with respect to one's avowed convictions, a Starbuck-like impotence rather than courage. The separation of religion from the Bible, that is, the separation of faith in a fiction from the representatives of that fiction, would, Melville warns, lead to inherited forms of life losing their legitimacy and its laws and norms, as Lefort and Lukacs both observed, morphing into cumbersome customs with little to no purchase on the soul. The symbolic place of power that permitted the "flesh of the world" to be bound to the space of representation, or body politic, in a manner that allowed subjects to recognize themselves in words and actions, find their social world intelligible, and experience the structures and institutions as legitimate has been lost, Melville thinks, but the cause of this loss is not secularization, but the turning away from "the Church, the monument, [and] the Bible"—the cause is a break between the church and the faith. Fathers would remain, of course, for a time, at least, but they would be viewed like Tocqueville's democrats view the standing traditions and institutions: cumbersome impositions, hollow but pretentious relics that are nothing more than useless, obstructive, and distorting obstacles that impose on them and burden them while giving nothing in return. It was legitimate representatives of fictions that permitted subjects to experience

[294] Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Second Speech: On the Essence of Religion," in *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 102.

their form of life as having coherence, consistency, continuation, and vibrancy; in addition to which, they also—and this is Melville's more unique point—manufactured subjects with souls, subjects whose minds were not absent, subjects that were not melancholic, and, above all, subjects that could act and act with conviction in moments of decision in the absence of authorities that could be imitated, as Pierre did and Starbucks does, or opposed, in the manner that Stubb does. Stubb and Starbuck, two opposing sides of the same coin.

The subjective correlate of this rupture with tradition is the foreclosure of what psychoanalysis calls the Name-of-the-Father, which results in psychosis. In *Pierre*, Melville develops a stunningly similar theory, including the idea that this madness is latent until triggered by an event that calls on the subject to assume the role of a sovereign, i.e., the role of founding or deciding (as opposed to finding) the law. After such a trigger, the subject confronts a reality that until a moment ago it inhabited and whose rules and protocols it automatically or instinctively obeyed but which it now perceives as entirely delegitimized and deceptive, as a world "soaked in lies," "masks," "shadows," and "surfaces." The principle explains why Melville's characters do not perceive meaninglessness at sea but instead experience sprawling networks of transient and sliding meaning, forever subject to further ambiguities. Psychoanalysis explains the same distortion through the unconscious, specifically through the subject supposed to know, a presupposition that, much like Melville's principle, posits the place that assures order—Lacan calls it a subject, Melville conceives of it as the place of the fiction. In either case, the result of this presupposition for an unalienated subject is a mood of paranoia. Hence, for instance, Ishmael's irresistible disposition for finding some meaning in everything even as he repeatedly fails to find it. Ahab does the same with one difference: while the latter views the Whale as centrifugally giving meaning to all else, the former comes to see the Whale as what receives meaning centripetally. Foreclosure, according to Lacanian doctrine, leaves a hole that can never be filled and thus sets off a cascade of attempted linkages of signifiers aiming at the establishment of consistent signification, a relentless, ceaseless but tentative and transitory cascade that settles only when the signifier and signified

relationship is stabilized through a delusional metaphor.[295] Ishmael's investigations, in other words, and then some Whale, Ahab's or otherwise. Psychotic delusional formations are pathological, certainly, but, as Freud pointed out, they must also be recognized as attempts at recovery, attempts at constructing the stable world of meaning that has been lost. Hence the parallel between Melville's characters and the situational task imposed on an isolated consciousness by the modern episteme, but also the earlier interpretation of Ahab's means *and* motive as "sane." Within such an entropic psychosocial world, stranded within a inscrutable onslaught of unconnected events and words but lacking any master code or space of order, Melville's characters respond by inventing or dreaming up, if you will, a totalizing interpretation that would redeem the situation by imposing some form of order. Paranoia is a pathological structural effect, but it is also a remedial subjective reaction, "an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction."[296] Simply put, it is a "self-authoring substitute, a fully independent system of empirical perceptions, causal explanations, and ethical justifications" invented and imposed on an otherwise masterless situation haunted by the want of a sovereign (153). It is a fantasy, of course, but it is subjectively necessary and the code—the code allegedly contained in the will of Moby Dick—presupposed by the subject will appear as if it was independent of and discovered by the subject. This conflation is, as Freud described, a particular feature of paranoid symptoms: the mechanism of paranoia requires that internal perceptions, feelings, thoughts, etc., are replaced by external ones, an inversion to which he gave the name "projection" (13). No less than in the case of Judge Schreber, in *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*, "the end of the world is the projection of inner catastrophe" (24). The cause and resolution of this inner catastrophe echoes another psychoanalytic maxim: what is expelled from the symbolic returns in the real.

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[295] See Lacan, *Book III, The Psychoses*, 150. See also Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," *Ecrits*, 445-88.

[296] Sigmund Freud, *Three Case Histories* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 173. Subsequent references are made in the text.

The two causes proposed at the outset as constitutive of the causal structure underlying the prophecy, the juncture of which is the mood at sea, culminate in the delusional metaphor. The motivation for this delusion is subjective discontent, which the subject attempts to resolve by compensating for what its impersonal conditions have deprived it of: alienation and an intelligible world wherein it could find meaning and purpose and within which it could find a space for itself and recover its ability to act. All three protagonists, as mentioned above, are manifestations of this constitutive mood: Ahab finds asylum from the madness through Moby Dick, Ishmael escapes Ahab's fantasy by capturing the White Whale instead, while Pierre arrives at the point where some strange creature, which no reader will fail to recognize is a precursor to his Moby Dick, literally walks right into the room and takes a seat. Pierre is interrupted by some household duties, however, and he dies soon thereafter, and so before this delusional formation could begin to speak. A final consideration before moving on: psychosis, according to psychoanalysis, results from two factors, an underlying but latent psychotic structure, consequent to foreclosure, and a trigger, specifically an episode when the subject is called to assume some Name-of-the-Father, i.e., when it must enact a sovereign judgment of deciding on the law. A psychotically structured subject will fail to enact such a mandate because its subjectivization lacks the prototype for such an act—the psychotic can never be a father because it was never subject to a father, or in Melville's terms, Shakespeare could not have been Shakespeare were it not for his having had fathers. When do Melville's characters descend into madness? For Pierre, it is his when his imaginary father is abandoned, leaving him a symbolic orphan now condemned to empty social space wherein he will be forced to announce or found the law himself. For Ahab and Ishmael, it is the silent, almost invisible moment between the torment of life on land and the hunt for some Whale, the moment they recognize the masterlessness the sea, a reality said to be "forever alien to man," and so the moment they must produce the law or the conditions on the basis of which they can enact some form of redemption. The problem they confront, exactly like the problem confronted by the psychotic, is in their own minds and they cannot resolve it in their minds alone.

In addition to the above, a series of further confirmations of Ahab's paranoid delusion are found in the text. Ahab proclaims himself to be a prophet and a redeemer. From the standpoint of the fact that he is hunting a Whale as the cause and means, calling Ahab a prophet or redeemer is lunacy, but from *his* standpoint (and from the standpoint of his men) it does not appear so: his projection settles the sea and redeems the men as capable of affecting their own fate; moreover, while the projection itself does not (re)untie the men with Divinity, it does—from their perspective—reorder the intractable cause of their misery through the delusional formation, which his (and their) paranoid interpretation subsequently confirms. Suddenly, the Pequod is not in barren mazes or on a horizonless sea but sailing with direction and purpose, the prerequisite for which is some set of horizons or heavens—they were disoriented and the sea was horizonless *until* Moby Dick gives them orientation by giving them a horizon. Once again, we encounter decisionism: Ahab orients the Pequod not with compasses, maps, or even the log, and certainly not by some financial objectives, but solely through his intuition of where Moby Dick is; Ishmael's search for the will in the Whale is no different, as is obvious from his investigations, all of which alone, paired, or all together amount to nothing in the absence of locating the secret allegedly in the Whale. What is more, all their actions now appear to possess meaning, in the sense of purpose. It is a simple dynamic, the essential features of which display a paranoid loop: 'There is a cause to all your suffering—Moby Dick!' Ahab says as prophet, and once they believe this (a belief that carries within it a definition of Moby Dick), the sea gains heavens and horizons, metaphorically speaking, after which even if they sail on forever and without end, and regardless of whether they manage to kill no Whales or a thousand Whales mistaken for Moby Dick, that is, insofar as they continue to sail towards Moby Dick, there is an implicit interpretation confirming their delusional formation. If the loop was broken, the Pequod would stop—insofar as it continues, its men are stuck in a paranoid loop. With Moby Dick in mind, even if not in hand, so to speak, Ahab can recognize everything he sees as meaningful: some wave or some school of fish, why the carcass he kills is not Moby Dick or why he is not in this ocean but in another, etc. He can recognize all such phenomena because all of them are, in his mind, explained by Moby Dick, by

his malice, his trickery, and his cunning. The only thing he does not recognize is his own implication in this fantasy.

Another confirmation of paranoia is in the knowledge with which Ahab hunts Moby Dick. If Moby Dick moved as other sperm whales move, Ahab could not know where Moby Dick is because, Ishamel informs us, because full knowledge of the tides and currents followed by these leviathans does not exists; ; in fact, as he later adds, such knowledge is impossible (154).[297] But Moby Dick does not move as the others move, for two reasons: one, he moves with such speed and through such channels that he can be found in the Pacific one day and the north Atlantic the next, and two, his movement is determined not by currents or the migration patterns of the fish on which whales feed but by his malicious will to destroy Whaleships and crews.[298] Ahab's disregard for maps, compasses, and compiled records of migration is, therefore, neither irrational nor an obstacle. He would not need them even if they could be accurate. So how does he hunt Moby Dick? He hunt him based on nothing other than his intuition of where he is. To us this appears a ridiculous and, moreover, impossible method, but for Ahab it is neither ridiculous nor impossible. If Moby Dick's movement is determined by such motives and if he swims with such pace and through impossible passages, his location at any given moment should be an impenetrable mystery, and yet Ahab knows where he will be. The objection that such knowledge is impossible is, to Ahab's mind, as valid as the compasses and maps brought from land, which is to say, not at all. Another objection could be mounted on the basis of Ahab's confession that he does not know what lies it the head of the Whale but only that the secret lies there, but

[297] In Chapter 41, "Moby Dick," for instance, Ishmael says the following: "For as the secrets of the currents in the seas have never yet been divulged, even to the most erudite research; so the hidden ways of the Sperm Whale when beneath the surface remain, in great part, unaccountable to his pursuers; and from time to time have originated the most curious and contradictory speculations regarding them, especially concerning the mystic modes whereby, after sounding to a great depth, he transports himself with such vast swiftness to the most widely distant points." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 154.

[298] There are several such anecdotes about Moby Dick, each alleging something that would be impossible for any mortal or physical being. See, for instance, Chapter 41, "Moby Dick" in Melville, *Moby Dick*.

such an objection is easily voided by the fact that his expressed humility, if honest, refers only to the conscious content of his thought. Far more important is that within the paranoid form of his though he knows Moby Dick's will—and why wouldn't he, given that he has created him? It bears mention that if Ahab was not so humble and assumed he knew exactly that Moby Dick was thinking, in other words, if he claimed to know not only what Moby Dick does and where he will do it but also why he does it, and was then proven wrong, the epistemic limitations of paranoia would absolve him of his mistake by assigning Ahab's mistake to Moby Dick's cunning. Ishmael settles for deeming all this knowledge an "art," but we can be more precise: Ahab knows what is in Moby Dick's mind, i.e., he knows his will, because Moby Dick is his own creation and whatever guesses Ahab makes about the contents and decisions of this mind, given what he believes Moby Dick to be, cannot falsified and thus cannot shake his certainty.[299] Pierre, recall, faced the insurmountable challenge of not being able to solve the problem in his own mind alone—Ahab, in a sense, solves the problem within his mind because he solves it through a creation of his mind projected outside. I say "in a sense" because while Moby Dick is Ahab's creation, he is also ex-timate: the idea is Ahab's but the brute he invests this idea with is, of course, other or external to Ahab. Because Moby Dick is an ex-time composed of the idea *and* the dumb brute, Ahab is dependent on crossing paths with some such brute in order to find Moby Dick. Hence the peculiar precision of his intuition: while fully assured he will meet Moby Dick at the exact place and time he forecasts, Ahab counts neither the days nor the miles as he approaches the predetermined place and time; instead, he measures the duration, distance, and direction by feeling himself getting ever closer with each passing mile and hour. Given his idea's dependence on a material embodiment, Ahab cannot positively know the exact time and place but whenever and wherever that turns out to be will have been exactly what he will have known that Moby Dick would do. The paranoid loop permits no falsification, nor any objection. In a

[299] As readers, thanks to Ishmael's treatise, we can give a more honest answer: How does Ahab know where Moby Dick is and will be? He knows because he projected him. And, moreover, what we he finds in Moby Dick, if he catches him? Exactly what he posited therein: everything, but sadly also nothing.

sense, Moby Dick will be whatever Whale Ahab decides is Moby Dick and the encounter will be whichever encounter with some dumb brute he decides is the encounter with Moby Dick.

Further, the paranoia's delusional formation, with Moby Dick as its centrifugal center, incorporates everything synchronically and diachronically. A brief story about Ahab told by Ishmael confirms that for men like him, the entire "trail of mortal miseries" goes back to Moby Dick: one night in Nantucket, not long before the Pequod set sail, Ahab was found "lying prone upon the ground, and insensible"—it was, Ishmael adds, an "unimaginable casualty" (355); presumably, Ahab slipped and as he fell his "ivory limb… [was somehow] so violently displaced" that it was "stake-wise smitten, and all but pierced his groin" (355); while lying there, Ishmael adds, it did not escape his "monomaniac mind" that all the anguish of his pain was a direct issue of a former woe" (355). All pain the world over, down to an accident which, if Ahab is like other sailors, is certainly the result of rum and ale, is blamed on Moby Dick. Synchronically too, everything is incorporated because to the "monomaniac man, the verist trifles capriciously carry meanings" (195). Another of his seemingly senseless remarks confirms as much: "How dost thou know that some entire, living, thinking thing may not be invisibly and uninterpenetratingly standing precisely where thou now standest," he says to the carpenter, "aye, and standing there in thy spite? In thy most solitary hours, then, dost thou not fear eavesdroppers?" (369). Apparently exaggerated and figurative assertions are intended quite literally, by Ahab. Rumors, recall, spoke of Moby Dick as eternal and immortal, and that he could not be killed, but all of these claims proved to be true, once what Moby Dick is was understood. Consider another such claim: Moby Dick is suspected of being omnipresent, having allegedly been seen in different oceans and sides of the world on the same day, down to the same minute and hour. Ridiculous, nothing but the tall tales and exaggerations to which, we are told, sailors are prone. But, once again, once the Whale is known, his omnipresence is shown to not be a lie, not at all. He is, as he has always been, omnipresent in space, as well as in time. Moby Dick is the cause of Ahab's fall and his pain, the cause of human misery dating back to Adam, and of all human failures

in between, he wreaks havoc on the drunkards tottering and staggering on streets of Nantucket and his malice dashes ships at sea, in the Pacific and the Atlantic, often at the exact same time. Finally, Ahab is not mistaken when he declares, "Ahab can mend all," but he is ignorant of the extend of his involvement (391).[300] He *could* mend all if he manages to kill Moby Dick, but prior to that he has already mended all: the overt referent in the text is to the log-line, which had just broken, but the figurative meaning is what Ahab mended when he assured his men and pointed them to Moby Dick. One of things he has mended is the soullessness and purposelessness of his men by offering them a crusade the object of which is a phantom of his invention. The delusional metaphor these men chase is ultimately a creature born of woe, born of that sovereign point of darkness in Ahab which leaps back against its creator—it is the creature of woe in two ways: as the creation of its impersonal conditions and as the creation of the common configuration of the riddle of what troubles Ahab's leg. He is, in a word, the manifest vengeful discontent of Ahab's unconscious—and like the unconscious of every psychotic, it is out there, existing and moving like an independent thing. Though he lacked the terms and concepts that were developed decades after *Moby Dick*, none of this was missed by Melville—I will quote at length:

> Often, when forced from his hammock by exhausting and intolerably vivid dreams of the night, which, resuming his own intense thoughts through the day, carried them on amid a clashing of phrensies, and whirled them round and round in his blazing brain, till the very throbbing of his life-spot became insufferable anguish; and when, as was sometimes the case, these spiritual throes in him

[300] With compasses and maps discarded and the needle broken, the Pequod uses the "log and line" to orient itself. Soon, however, this line proves "rotten" and breaks. Ahab assures the crew that he will "mend all" (391). The immediate reference is to the log and line but the true reference is Moby Dick: Ahab has, in a sense, mended all because he has, through the identification of Moby Dick, explained the cause of suffering; moreover, he has reconstructed the world through his delusional formation; the problem, however, is that Moby Dick is not actually the cause of humanity's suffering. Moreover, while Ahab has mended all, he remains ignorant of the extent of his involvement: he believes that by identifying Moby Dick he has discovered horizons and direction, but, in fact, it was he who projected and constructed this thing that he misrecognizes as only having discovered.

> heaved his being up from its base, and a chasm seemed opening in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship; and with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his state room, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire. Yet these, perhaps, instead of being the unsuppressable symptoms of some latent weakness, or fright at his own resolve, were but the plainest tokens of its intensity. For, at such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, *was not the agent that so caused him* to burst from it in horror again. *The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him*; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral. But as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul, therefore it must have been that, in Ahab's case, yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; *that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own*. Nay, could grimly live and burn, while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-stricken from the *unbidden and unfathered birth*. Therefore, *the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes*, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing*, a formless somnambulistic being*, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself. 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 (169-70, emphasis added).

Attempting to express the substance of this passage more effectively than Melville did would be a fool's errand. Instead, I will simply highlight a few of its central elements and posit that it confirms much of the

interpretation of Ahab's mind developed thus far, while delegating the verification of this claim to a patient reading of the passage: Ahab is not the agent, nor in control; instead, it is the "eternal, living principle," to which Melville also refers to as his "soul," that is driving his actions; his monomaniacal madness is a creature of his own creation, which has become and acts as a "independent being of its own"; this created creature, moreover, is of "unbidden and unfathered birth"; what appears as Ahab is neither in control nor capable of bringing this madness to an end, instead he seems to be complete subject to a now-independent things that his very suffering feeds; finally, note that "spiritual" throes initiated this mania, and that while the origin of this insanity is within Ahab its ultimate expression, an expression that simultaneously robs of him of autonomy and quiets throbbing and restlessness within him, manifests as something ex-time.

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We know that Ahab is sane, that he is a common, ordinary man, who's distinction is not essential but developmental. We also know that he is an orphan, discontent, enraged, and divided within himself. We also know that his madness maddens, that he stands before the others a hero, and that is a representative man. We do not yet fully know what troubles him, nor why he was destined to hunt Moby Dick nor why he cannot view the failure of every hunt as something other than a further proof of Moby Dick's malice. Fittingly, the trouble motivating Ahab's vengeful dream is condensed into what troubles Ahab's leg—the leg on which, literally and figuratively, Ahab and the ship he captains from the ports of New England to within an arm's length of Moby Dick stand. A brief exchange with the carpenter offers the key to lower layer of the hunt:

> Look ye, carpenter, I dare say thou callest thyself a right good workmanlike workman, eh? Well, then, will it speak thoroughly well for thy work, if, when I come to mount this leg thou makest, I shall nevertheless feel another leg in the same identical place with it; that is, carpenter, my old lost leg; the flesh and blood one, I mean. Canst thou not drive that old Adam away? (360)

The carpenter, Ahab insists, is a "manmaker," and so he offers him his model of the ideal man and asks if the carpenter could manufacture such a thing. To be sure the symbolism is not missed, Melville repeats it more unambiguously: "Carpenter, I may say, an extremely gentlemanlike sort of business thou art in here, carpenter;—or would'st thou rather work in clay?" (359). More than just another of its citizens, the carpenter represents the ambitions, means, and limitations of Woe's form of life, i.e., what manufactures and shapes the men that stock the decks of Whaleships.[301] Clearly, Ahab knows the source of his troubles to be in Woe's form of life, and that it cannot resolve them. "Then tell me," he says to the manmaker, "art thou not an arrant, all-grasping, intermeddling, monopolizing, heathenish old scamp, to be one day making legs, and the next day coffins to clap them in, and yet again lifebuoys out of those same coffins? Thou art as unprincipled as the gods, and as much of a jack-of-all-trades" (395).[302] The carpenter's response confirms what Ahab did not confirmed: "But I do not mean anything, sir. I do as I do" (395). Further, note that Ahab is not troubled by

[301] Ahab's turning to the carpenter, a man for whom Moby Dick is an apparition as much as it is for the whalemen who hunt whales for tar and blubber alone, already implies the symbolism in questions because he is unambiguously asking the carpenter, who has no means other than the physical, to address a metaphysical would. As he will shortly declare to the blacksmith, after asking him to smooth out a wrinkled seam in his mind, Ahab already knows that the carpenter can do nothing to heal his wound. As much, in fact, is implicit in his having abandoned the world of Woe and taken to the sea.

[302] From Ahab's perspective, the carpenter belongs to the same world of Woe: after admitting his talent and usefulness, Ahab deems him a "mindless," "manufactured" modern man. The grounds for this categorization and condemnation are within his activities. In short, he reduces different concrete things to a common abstract substance, i.e., the wood of a coffin morphs into the wood of a life-buoy, and thus negates that anything is what it appears to be. Moreover, his objective slides seamlessly from making legs, which enable life, to coffins, which mark its end, to life-buoys, which try to preserve it. This obliteration of identities and distinctions and the pressing and folding of opposites into one another is, as Ahab deduces, possible only because there is naught beneath: "Aye, and that's because the lid there's a sounding-board; and what in all things makes the sounding-board is this—there's naught beneath." His remark is not an abrupt change of topic or a leap of faith. No, Ahab's comment strictly follows. If a coffin can turn into a life-buoy, it can do so only because there is naught beneath, because the wood is not essentially tied to either manifestation. It can appear as both only because it is neither. The naught beneath makes the material a sounding-board and all activity ultimately ethical. Having no inherent form, the wood is formless and demands a subjective decision. Indeed, the naught beneath makes the carpenter a carpenter, it makes him a manmaker. Were it otherwise, were the wood inherently a coffin, a life-buoy, or anything else, there would be no grounds for judgment and decision, no grounds for their formulation, expression, and even promulgation—the wood would not be a sounding-board in second sense, that is, it would not be something on which man could lay a claim or take a stand.

the continued, psychosomatic experience of his lost limb as such, nor by the new limb in itself, rather, what troubles him is the continued existence of the lost original *after* a replacement has been made (by the manmaker) and accepted (by Ahab). An exchange with another "manmaker," the blacksmith, adds context. Ahab, aware that there is some "wrinkle" in his mind, asks whether this manmaker could "smoothe" this crease. The latter replies that he can do no such thing, to which Ahab responds without surprise, as if he knew that no manmaker was equipped to treat such a wound. "I know it, old man," he says, and the immediately adds, "Quick! forge me the harpoon" (371).[303] Land cannot cure what ails Ahab, so he responds through the hunt—in this brief exchange is the condensed essence of the hero-level narrative.[304]

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[303] In Chapter 108, "Ahab and the Carpenter," Ahab says the following: "No fear; I like a good grip; I like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold, man. What's Prometheus about there?—the blacksmith, I mean—what's he about?" The signification of "Prometheus" is, here, clearly synonymous with "manmaker," which Ahab uses to describe the carpenter. See *Moby Dick*, 358-61.

[304] Ahab's response is coherent: because he has already set out to sea, he must already know the manmaker incapable; and his demand for a harpoon is consistent with the principle-based faith that within the sea "resides" the promise of resolution. The full exchange merits attention:

> "And can'st thou make it all smooth again, blacksmith, after such hard usage as it had?"
> "I think so, sir."
> "And I suppose thou can'st smoothe almost any seams and dents; never mind how hard the metal, blacksmith?"
> "Aye, sir, I think I can; all seams and dents but one."
> "Look ye here, then," cried Ahab, passionately advancing, and leaning with both hands on Perth's shoulders; "look ye here—*here*—can ye smoothe out a seam like this, blacksmith," sweeping one hand across his ribbed brow; "if thou could'st, blacksmith, glad enough would I lay my head upon thy anvil, and feel thy heaviest hammer between my eyes. Answer! Can'st thou smoothe this seam?"
> "Oh! that is the one, sir! Said I not all seams and dents but one?"
> "Aye, blacksmith, it is the one; aye, man, it is unsmoothable; for though thou only see'st it here in my flesh, it has worked down into the bone of my skull—*that* is all wrinkles! But, away with child's play; no more gaffs and pikes to-day. Look ye here!" jingling the leathern bag, as if it were full of gold coins. "I, too, want a harpoon made; one that a thousand yoke of fiends could not part, Perth; something that will stick in a whale like his own fin-bone. There's the stuff," flinging the pouch upon the anvil. "Look ye, blacksmith, these are the gathered nail-stubbs of the steel shoes of racing horses."
> "Horse-shoe stubbs, sir? Why, Captain Ahab, thou hast here, then, the best and stubbornest stuff we blacksmiths ever work."
> "I know it, old man; these stubbs will weld together like glue from the melted bones of murderers. Quick! forge me the harpoon. And forge me first, twelve rods for its shank; then wind, and twist, and hammer these twelve together like the yarns and strands of a tow-line. Quick! I'll blow the fire."

Ahab's remarks leave the carpenter confused: "what was that now about one leg standing in three places, and all three places standing in one hell—how was that?" (361). We could read his confusion as signifying nothing but his stupidity, in which case it would confirm Ahab's judgment of the carpenter as mindless. Alternatively, we could assign the confusion to his naïve and vain attempt to make sense of Ahab's incoherent babbling, in which case it suggests that Ahab's reasons cannot be followed. By this point in the voyage, Ahab's words are, to be sure, becoming increasingly obscure and hard to follow. The carpenter's simplicity and Ahab's obscurity notwithstanding, taking either of these approaches would be a mistake. Ahab has said something crucial, and the carpenter's confusion is valid and instructive: the number of things involved, one of three, is neither simple nor unequivocal. Ahab himself admits that what is troubling his leg is "riddle," a riddle to which there are at least two solutions (360). Ahab configures the riddle as having three elements: one, the lost original leg, two, its replacement, and three, the discord between them. In Ishmael's configuration, on the other hand, there are not three things, nor exactly two: if the old leg is lacking (as opposed to being merely lost), then there is only the replacement and the discord; but if the original is lacking, then so are the condition required for judging the replacement unfit, in which case this dissonance cannot be a self-standing third thing but something more peculiar. Ahab calls the trouble "old Adam," the signification of which is easy to discern: expelled from Eden, Adam is left with a certainty that there is a Divine moral law but without the knowledge of what it is. Once again, Ahab confirms the interpretation: "I feel deadly faint, bowed, and humped," he confesses to Starbuck, "as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise. God! God! God!—crack my heart!—stave my brain!— mockery! mockery! bitter, biting mockery of grey hairs…" (406).

See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 370.

Specifically, the harpoon has the purpose of establishing a line of access to the Whale, which is not only the cause and means, as noted throughout, but also something that is denied existence in the world of Woe, hence the need for the harpoon to attach Ahab to the Whale and thus pull him into a different reality.

The framework developed thus far allows for two possible solutions, reflecting the difference between Ahab and Ishmael: for Ahab, it is a metaphor for the trouble to which mortals are condemned by the Fall, i.e., a moral state of exception, within which something obstructs the relationship between humanity and Divine order; for Ishmael, conversely, the trouble results from the ontological fact of nothingness and the orphan's spontaneous principle, which combine to condemn the orphaned 19th century to a moral ~~state~~-of-exception. Ahab's configuration involves three elements, where, to his mind, there should be just one. Ishmael's configuration, as we will see, involves a different number and set of elements. In both cases, the effect appears even in the empty space of the "most candid seas," but their respective conceptions of the source (and its resolution) differ. If read in a manner that includes both the context and its underlying commitments, Ahab's complaint about the quadrant expresses his configuration of the riddle: "Thou high and mighty Pilot! Thou tellest me truly where I *am*—but canst thou cast the least hint of where I *shall* be? Or canst thou tell where some other thing besides me is this moment living?" (378). Ishmael's configuration and solution, on the other hand, is discernable in the logic of his return and the object through which he makes it: his White Whale.

Ahab's configuration involves three elements, while what troubles him is that there are three things where there should be just one. His resolution, in turn, will try to reduce the three to one. It is important to note that neither harpoons nor their lines are intended to attach men to Moby Dick forever, instead they serve as means for accessing him so that he can be killed. Moby Dick is the resolution, yes, but more precision is needed: Moby Dick as an idea arises from the level of configuration, but it is at the level of resolution that something is invested and then as Moby Dick. He is the obstructive, third element at the lower layer, which is to say that he is the solution to or the means by which Ahab's priors are maintained, while at the upper layer of the hunt he appears as the problem, so to speak, as the agent to be killed. It is plain to see that Ahab's proposition of hunting Moby Dick is coherent only on condition of his interpretation of the riddle: there is

man, inherently good and innocent, and there is Divine order, accessible and just; if there is a discord or misalignment between them, if men have failed to establish a harmonious, moral, and just world, if God appears absent in the world of men, if injustice persists or if men have repeatedly failed to redress misery and injustice despite their earnest willingness to do so, i.e., if the cities of men are not reflections of the city of God, the fault is not with (or not inherent to) men, nor is the fault on behalf of God, be it due to some imperfection, indifference, or a lack of existence. Given Ahab's Hopeful metaphysical priors, the fact of misery et al. must be explained by an alternative cause. That cause is Moby Dick—*the* cause of humanity's suffering since Adam. The resolution, on the other hand, is his death—his death is the *means.* Ahab can hunt Moby Dick only on condition of his underlying configuration of what troubles his 'leg,' with which his conceptions of the hunt and of what Moby Dick is must align. The same, naturally, applies to the crew's assent and assumption of his vengeance as their own: their immediate assent is possible only if they too assume the same underlying configuration.[305] Killing Moby Dick, given Ahab's underlying assumptions, would reduce the three things down to one. By analyzing the riddle, its assumptions and layers, and the distinct role Moby Dick plays each layer, the impossibility of completing this crusade becomes obvious: killing Moby Dick resolves the problem at the upper layer, and perhaps it would provide a moments peace, but killing him would also conflict with the solution to the problem at the lower layer. Solving the problem at the level of resolution, in short, negates the underlying and logically anterior solution to the problem at the layer of configuration. A successful hunt, in other words, is self-defeating—it would undermine its own condition of

[305] In this chapter, their common subjectivization was identified as orphanhood, while their common reaction is a discreditation and abandonment of impostors followed by the haunting and tormenting effect of their principle. In other words, we have established the inner and subsequently outer catastrophe that catalyzes and the unconscious understanding that enacts their avenging dream. This causal structure can now be supplemented by the underlying configuration of the riddle, which serves as the prerequisite condition of possibility for the fantasy of hunting Moby Dick. The crew's assent, which is also to say, Ishmael's prophesy, is still the primary object of concern. Their orphanhood, abandonment of impostors, and principle align with the conditions of Woe, the state of Madness, and even the return of the foreclosed, but the fantasy of hunting Moby Dick as cause and means, which is to say, the logic of Madness Maddened, involves this return *and* Ahab's configuration of the riddle.

possibility. According to Melville, the lower layer takes precedence, it is the constitutive layer, configuring the problem that the upper layer is tasked with solving. This logical priority of the lower layer explains why Moby Dick cannot be killed and why no brute killed can be Moby Dick. More abstractly stated: the solution at the lower layer demands an irresolvable problem at the upper layer, while a solution at the upper layer reintroduces the problem at the lower layer. At bottom, therefore, any 'successful' hunt present a choice between denying that the Whale killed is Moby Dick, which would keep the problem unresolved at the upper layer while securing the solution to the problem at the lower layer, or changing the underlying configuration through changing the metaphysical assumptions at the lower layer, in which case the Whale killed is still not Moby Dick but not because he has tricked his pursuers and remains out there, somewhere, but because there is no Moby Dick. There would be no Moby Dick, because an alternative set of underlying assumptions would negate the configuration of the trouble and thus negate the necessity of positing the existence of Moby Dick. Either the Pequod cannot stop and cannot ever end its crusade, or its men will simply walk away from the fantasy of the hunt—the first path is Ahab's, the second is Ishmael's.

*It merits mention here that even if some Ahab killed a Whale he thought—and remained convinced—was Moby Dick, the hunt would begin again, nonetheless. This Ahab's heroics would be forgotten, indeed his deeds would soon be condemned for their pretense and inadequacy, for their premature satisfaction and for not having gone far enough. The fantasy of the hunt is common, and it is common at both levels of the riddle. This Ahab, therefore, would be no hero, in fact, if maintained convinced of his success, he would be far closer to a traitor because in the eyes of the next generation of men set to sail the malice remains, more cunningly hidden in the depths. There is no end because there can be no end—for such an Ahab the only thing that can end is his belonging to the fellowship.

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If the crew's assumption of their captain's vengeance as their own is as described, i.e., immediate, seamless, enthusiastic, and attained without trickery or coercion, then their configuration of the riddle must be the same as his, in which case, they must have the same underlying metaphysical commitments. Beginning from the premise that *Moby Dick* lives up to the demands of being a Gospel derived out of a comprehension of the causal logic underlying the prophecy, put another way, beginning from the premise that Ishmael's return is not only possible but rational, the crew's assent can be interpreted within the parameters of what Ahab does and does not say and what the men do or do not express an objection to or demand an explanation of. [306] Any constitutive components required for their assent but unaddressed by Ahab in the quarter-deck scene, therefore, must be assumptions the crew already hold—if they hold them only unconsciously, all the better because these assumptions would then be within their common manufacture and spontaneous understanding. Whatever Ahab does not say, it follows, he does not say because he does not need to. Ahab, recall, never convinces, in fact, he never even mentions to his men that there is some Divine order, nor does he explicitly say that Moby Dick obstructs their access to it or their realization of a world aligned with it. Instead, on the quarter-deck, he only says that Moby Dick is the cause of *his* pain—it is only later that hie words imply that Moby Dick is the cause of humanity's misery. Prior to that, the reader only knows this thanks to Ishmael. The crew's ready assent, therefore, suggests that they draw the conclusion that his misery and woe—or, for that matter, any person's misery and woe, including their own—is due to the same cause. Further, he never explicitly indites the world ashore as the cause of their suffering and indignity, nor does he inform them that it is incapable of treating their discontent. These propositions and conclusions are, instead, either voiced by Ishmael for the benefit of the reader or extracted from a careful reading of *Moby Dick* (and

[306] Given Melville's and Ishmael's dispositions to describe and account for everything that happens and why or how it happens, were is justification to assume that *Moby Dick* accounts for everything necessary for the crew to assume Ahab's vengeance as theirs; in which case, whatever Ahab does not say but is necessary for the crew's assent to his fantasy must be within the crew, so to speak, prior to their encounter with Ahab.

Pierre). Further, the men assent to a hunt, the terms of which are very precise: Moby Dick *is the cause of all of humanity's suffering* and killing him *is the complete means* of their redemption. Within the above premise—justifiable, given Melville's propensity to leave no causal element and condition of possibility unaddressed in depth—the above textual data of what the men must believe if their assent is as described but which Ahab makes no mention and certainly no explanation of, allows us to justifiably posit that the crew (i) recognize Moby Dick not as a God but as the agent obstructing humanity's alignment with Divine order, (ii) already presuppose the existence of Divine order and believe that Divine governance is the default worldly reality, so long as some malicious agent does not obstruct it, (iii) have not only abandoned but also discredited Woe's form of life, (iv) believe, or at the very least they suspected, that a single cause was behind their inscrutable troubles, and (iv) that Woe is neither a reflection to God's indifference to humanity nor of humanity's inherent unfitness to live in accordance with His Divine order. Taken together, these assumptions align the crew's unconscious understanding with Ahab's configuration, thus establishing the conditions for their seamless assumption of his vengeance as theirs. The proposition of the hunt, in short, is immediately acceptable and sensible to them because at the lower layer—if not also at the level of their conscious ideological beliefs—they already maintain commitments and a configuration that allows for and, in fact, calls for the idea of Moby Dick. It makes sense to them, intuitively, as it were. The hunt, as proposed at the outset, involves a "common fantasy"—it is common to all who configure the riddle of what troubles man and men, of what has troubled all humanity with the metaphysical assumptions that Ahab holds at a lower layer, a layer of cognition that underlies and subtends the way he sees and experiences himself, the world, and everything in between. When Ishmael refers to the hunt as "unfathered" he is correct, on condition that "unfathered" refers to the men themselves, i.e., insofar as it a response of orphans. It is not, however, "unfathered" if by that is meant without a source—the hunt is born of the lower layer of 19th century orphans, it is the child of unreflective Hope.

Herein, I would add, is found the reason why Moby Dick, while eternal and omnipresent, is *not* present at every moment of every age, and why, by extension, Ishmael can maintain that the prophecy of the hunt is universal and that the same cetology has been in place since Adam and yet, simultaneously, locate the prophecy in a concrete and specific moment, i.e., it is "nowadays…." Instead, as Ishmael instructs, Moby Dick appears whenever the "world is… again flooded," at which point the "eternal whale" will rise again and "spout his frothed defiance to the skies" (354). Every word here—"flooded," "eternal," "defiance," and "skies"—is significant, as we will see.

Were it otherwise, their assent would have required Ahab to either convince them of these underlying commitments, which would have involved explaining them and explaining how the hunt aligns with them, or trick or coerce them into agreement. He does nothing of the kind. Instead, the men immediately and willingly identify with and internalize his avenging dream as their own. He does nothing of the kind because he does not need to; and he does not need to because they have already turned away from land and, more importantly, because at the lower layer they already maintain the same metaphysical assumptions he maintains. The only alternative would be to deny that their assent is coherent from the standpoint of their historico-philosophical conditions, their subjectivization by them, and their principled reactions to them, i.e., from the standpoint of their impersonal conditions, their manufacture as the impersonal personified, and the irreducible sovereign point of personality that remains and rebels against these conditions. Such an option, however, would come at a great cost: the prophesy would not be sound, *Moby Dick* would be deprived of everything that makes it a significant contribution to political psychology and a treatise on the discontents and challenges of modernity, and its status as the Gospels for the century would be lost—to this list, I would add that the significance of its genre would be another victim of such a bargain.[307]

[307] Ishmael's return becomes incoherent because it would be based either on some sentiment or on some preexisting condition, in which case Melville fails to be other than a "sentimentalist" or all the assertions about universality, fate, determination, etc., are null. Further, the prophecy is also invalidated in this scenario

If *Moby Dick* was deprived of these elements, that is, if we as readers failed to recognize them, then this book would be little more than a few hundred pages of rhetorical fear mongering and the musings of one madman about another madman. We would, in short, be neglecting the grounds for calling *Moby Dick* more than beautiful and thrilling, we would give up the justification for deeming it a masterpiece.[308]

This lower layer also merits being described as a fantasy—I will refer to it as "fantasy2." It establishes the hunt's conditions of possibility by configuring the riddle as composed of three elements where there should be just one: the Divine order, the world of Woe, and their lack of alignment. This configuration involves three rather than two (misaligned) elements because of the two aforementioned metaphysical assumptions, i.e., the existence of a Divine order that justly governs the world and innocent man as inherently good, rational, and capable of action. Together, they justify the belief that man can realize, manage, and inhabit a world organized and governed according to Divine order and justice. At this lower layer, in other words, is the myth of the American Adam, capable of reflecting this order on condition of his unencumbered innocence, which he can attain if he unfetters himself from all the contrivances of history. Insofar as these two assumptions are maintained and left unquestioned, the discord between this perfect order and the world of men, which is undeniable, must be explained through a third element, preventing or obstructing man from

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because the men referred to are either not true representations of the human subject, so to speak, or because the voyage was imposed or forced onto them. The entire emphasis of *Moby Dick* is that assuming Ahab's fantasy is fated for all with no exceptions, that all will eventually assume some such fantasy and do it of their own volition, as it were, and that Ishmael begins like all the rest, as he confesses, i.e., "shouts (of 'death to Moby Dick') went up with the rest," indeed that he may well be the one who believes the most, but that by identifying and overidentifying with this fantasy he traverses it, and thereby establishes the conditions of his return.

[308] By referring to *Moby Dick* as a "masterpiece," I am not being rhetorical, whether to express my appreciation for the book or otherwise. Instead, I am calling *Moby Dick* a masterpiece for specific reasons, to which I will turn at the very end of the Conclusion. See Todd McGowan, "The Bankruptcy of Historicism: Introducing Disruption into Literary Studies," in *SIC 10: Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Literature but Were Afraid to Ask Zizek*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 89-106. Subsequent references are made directly in the text.

realizing what is at a more primordial, lower layer of his understanding or vision believed to be his proper destiny. It is not the fault of men, nor is it the result of the lack of some such model, instead the miseries and the justices of history are due to some external malice and, moreover, the failures of humanity to redress these miseries and injustices successfully or without creating others is the consequence of having mistakenly identified the true cause. On condition of these primordial assumptions and the configuration of the trouble they permit, it is inevitable and certain, Melville thinks, that there must be some Moby Dick that is the cause and whose death will be the means. The idea of the Whale is preordained at the lower layer, while the particular brute invested is a historical contingency at the upper layer of resolution, i.e., the level of the hunt. As such, whatever dumb brute is identified, it will be the proper object of rage and vengeance and its death the true object of desire—true, it need not be said, from the perspective of those that hunt it. Woe is not the result of God's lack or His indifference, nor of humanity's fallenness, but the consequence of an alien intruder obstructing and distorting humanity's relation with the Divine. The riddle of what troubles Ahab's leg, has two layers, a layer of resolution and an underlying layer of configuration—the latter is determinate, the former an inevitable consequence. There is a fantasy at both levels, the cumulative effect of which explains why Hope's crusade is a common fantasy of an avenging dream that can never be complete and thus a venture from which none return.

As developed earlier, the commitments at this lower layer align with the basic premises of Hope. Once this is recognized, the story at the hero-level of *Moby Dick* becomes clear: it is a warning about the degree that lunacy and vengeance can reach when a nation of orphans, made confused, bored, and desperate seeks to act in the name of some moral cause, under the false premises that they are not flawed and that if unfettered from alienating structures, forms, and traditions utopian order is in their grasp—premises that force their suffering and failures to be piled on some agent that can be annihilated. If the Pequod is Hope, then Moby Dick is whatever element of tradition and history Hope conceives as illegitimate and unnecessary

impostors obstructing, stunting, distorting, or poisoning the true and inherent potentials of man and men, either as norms embedded in the rules and laws that organize life or as values and beliefs that have been internalized.

Further confirmation of the hunt's ambitions and assumptions can be found in Ahab's expressed desire: "By heavens! I'll get a crucible, and into it, and dissolve myself down to one small, compendious vertebra," he confesses (360). Recalling Ishmael's allegory of the spine, we see that Ahab wants only a compendious place, defined and harmonious, in a greater order of being. He wants to be rid of the torment of thinking in a world made inscrutable and of the pain inherent to a world divorced from its true nature. His desire is not marked by any intention to impose upon the world some interpretation of his invention, nor by some dream of tyrannical or authoritarian control. It is, instead, defensive. Hope, of course, has such a desire but Ahab, with his Hopeful ideology operating at the lower layer, holds no such dreams at the upper layer of his conscious wants and intentions. Instead, he only wants to purify the world of what he imagines is already distorting it. In another moment, this desire is even more pathetically on display:

> "Look ye here, then," cried Ahab, passionately advancing, and leaning with both hands on Perth's shoulders; "look ye here—*here*—can ye smoothe out a seam like this, blacksmith," sweeping one hand across his ribbed brow; "if thou could'st, blacksmith, glad enough would I lay my head upon thy anvil, and feel thy heaviest hammer between my eyes. Answer! Can'st thou smoothe this seam?" (370).

The old Adam maddens him, yes, but his challenge to the blacksmith to "smoothe this seam" does not suggest that Ahab's recognizes what appears as a state of exception is, in fact, a ~~state~~-of-exception, from which would follow a recognition of Moby Dick as invented not found. Instead, it signifies his desire to be rid of the torment and struggle consequent to being deprived of the great order and a small compendious place within it for him. He asks this manmaker to heal this wound *because* he does not know what Ishmael comes to understand. The

manmaker's response, "Oh! that is the one, sir! Said I not all seams and dents but one?" confirms that his troubles cannot be solved by any means available on land, to which Ahab responds by reaching for the thing that would give him a line, as it were, to the cause and the means—he reaches for a harpoon (370).[309] An exchange with Starbuck provides further confirmation: "Let it leak!," he replies to Starbuck's worries about the oil intended for the Nantucket market, before adding, "I'm all aleak myself. Aye! Leaks in leaks! Not only full of leaky casks, but those casks in a leaky ship; and, that's a far worse plight than the Pequod's, man.... Yet I do not stop to plug my leak; for who can find it in the deep-loaded hull; or, how hope to plug it, even if found, in this life's howling gale?" (362). Woe makes him mad and, aside from pistols, offers no resource to stop the pain, hence why Ahab is at sea and why oil and money hold no value for him. His refusal to halt even for a day to tend to very real economic concerns and Starbuck's insistence that not doing so is blasphemy, echoes what we already know: Starbuck, nihilistic as he is, clings to the idea that, in essence, all is fine on land and that money (or some other more immediate means) can resolve the troubles and cares of lie ashore. Ahab, on the other hand, knows his troubles are "incurable" on land.

Ahab nowhere suggests that Moby Dick must be hunted forever or that were the Pequod to succeed, another hunt for another foe would eventually have to be taken up. No, he is convinced that there is only one Moby Dick and that he must be killed just once. If this hunt repeats it is because the subject's spontaneous and common unconscious understanding refuses to accept that what killing Moby Dick would result in does not in fact exist—if there is no God, then killing Moby Dick will not, because it cannot, result in the hoped for reconciliation. The same applies to the myth of the American Adam—the inherent virtue of innocent man will not return if all impostors are deposed and destroyed because there is no inherent virtue, no God given

[309] Ahab, recall, is not exceptional but ordinary, and he too, like Ishmael, was determined to head out to sea by "the stage-managing Fates," and, moreover, that, like Ishmael, he confesses the Whale-fishery to be his resolution to the unacceptable choice offered ashore: indignity within meaningless and directionless nihilism or the "pistol." Ahab's admission is made far more obscurely than Ishmael's but it is, nonetheless, made. See Chapter 108, "Ahab and the Carpenter," in *Moby Dick*.

soul, and no intuitive untutored reason in man; and, certainly, there can be no more perfect union in the absence of those institutions, along with the laws, restraints, and tradeoffs they administer, that 19th-century American were so prone, and so quick and foolish, Melville thinks, to deem artificial, unnecessary, and illegitimate.[310] If some brute hunted as Moby Dick is killed, it will not have been Moby Dick—the proof is the world these men would see: if the mass of dead flesh before them was Moby Dick, then the world should have changed and their misery should be absolved, but that is not what they will see. Moby Dick is immortal because he cannot be killed, and he cannot be killed because he does not exist. But he is also eternal because at the lower layer the metaphysical assumptions of these 19th-century men predisposed them to the belief that Moby Dick *must* exist, that it is not possible for him to not exist. Moby Dick, Ahab thinks, only needs to be killed once, yes, but in truth he will be hunted again and again because he can never be caught. Ishmael can write "no voyage complete" because, in addition to learning the truth and logic of the impostor-fiction dynamic and the dynamic of the principle and agent, he has come to understand the layers of the riddle, their respective assumptions, problems, and solutions. The identification of an underlying fantasy2 below the hunt is, without a doubt, a speculative reconstruction on my part, but it is everywhere implied by Melville's logic and symbolism; and, moreover, it must be there if what takes place in *Moby Dick* is coherent. It allows the hunt for Moby Dick to appear to the common unconscious understanding of orphans as the necessary and sufficient condition for humanity's redemption—it is, in a word, one facet of the often referred to but rarely developed "lower layer" of *Moby Dick*. Like the idea of the Whale, this lower layer of the riddle is the unconscious of the hero-level narrative. It is part of the truth, part of the "unconscious understanding" that Ishmael must have uncovered and understood if, as Buell's thesis about *Moby Dick*'s double-structure suggests, he could have assumed Ahab's dream *and then* escaped and returned.

Consider now what Moby Dick was to Ahab:

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[310] As Sundquist notes, Melville's saw a fascination with this idea, so zealous and enthusiastic, that it ignored or suppressed its flaws. See Sundquist, *Home as Found*, 152-3.

> he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating at them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to which even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds…. Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but *deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale*, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it (156). [311]

Investing some dumb brute with the idea of the Whale is lunacy, to be sure, but from Ahab's perspective it is inevitable and not irrational.[312] In addition to what has already been developed, there is another facet of what Ahab gains through Moby Dick that merits attention.[313] Recall Ahab's declaration: "Who's over me?

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[311] In this passage, Ishmael is using the term "white whale" to designate what I have been calling "Moby Dick. the Whale for which I have used *Moby Dick*

[312] From the interpretation developed thus far, that a sperm whale becomes Moby Dick through a subjective investment, need not be argued here. Nor is there any need to do more than reiterate that this "dumb brute" gives body to the bodiless cause of spiritual exasperation, the principle that haunts orphans immiserated by Woe and abandoned in the empty space of the sea, which is another way of saying that it is the torment consequent to the conjunction of the ontological and the subjective truth. It manifests, moreover, first as the Whale as principle and then as the Whale as agent. Instead, we can focus on how Moby Dick accords with fantasy[2], wherein Moby Dick is assumed responsible for humanity's suffering by obstructing its otherwise possible return to Eden or establishment of heaven on earth, his death is already its redemption.

[313] We can note here why Moby Dick *cannot* be God, i.e., why Ahab cannot have found God at sea. One, if God was what he found in Moby Dick, then Ahab would have lacked the precondition for abandoning Woe and plunging into the sea in the first place, since at that moment he could not have viewed the sea as containing what it promised, as developed in Chapter 2, i.e., he could not have believed that there was something beyond Woe—put another way: his act of pride would have been impossible because he would have lacked the prerequisite act of faith. Moreover, the sea on its own, that is, the sea without the principle's distorting presupposition, could not have induced the mood of paranoia, which we know to be the form of his madness, as such the sea could not have induced the feeling of a state of exception, nor the projection of a ~~state~~-of-exception. Ahab misrecognizes the ~~state~~-of-exception as a state of exception but that is irrelevant here. This effect cannot be produced if prior to finding Moby Dick Ahab does not already believe in God; nor could there be the "intangible malice" or Voice of Silence that he resolves through Moby Dick. Further, if it was God, then his objective could not be killing but only capturing and holding onto Moby Dick. Finally, if it was God, then proposition of Moby Dick as the cause of humanity's suffering and his death its redemption could not be made without contradicting the ontological reality symbolized by the sea, the transcendental function

Truth hath no confines" (140). The first part, "Who's over me," can be read as an iconoclastic avowal, but it can be equally understood as indicating Ahab's suspicion (or even outright conviction) that there *is* something above him. Which significations it carries depends on what Ahab is addressing: if he is addressing the position of the impostor, then it declares that he is not and will not be subject to any impostors, but if he is addressing the position of the fiction, then it indicates the existence of something he cannot discern. The second, "Truth hath no confines," accommodates both readings and confirms what is common between them: a belief that some truth exists in the place of the fiction. Understand the statement requires reading the latter part through both readings of the first part simultaneously: the insistence that there is no impostor above to whom Ahab would submit implies that he believes in the existence of some truth that could be (or would be) misrepresented; in which case, "Truth has no confines" is a rejection of representation; on the other hand, this belief in some truth above, in the absence of (mis)representations confining it, leaves Ahab in a state of madness, in which case the phrase expresses a plea for something that would allow him to (i) discern this truth, to produce a Word out of the Voice of Silence, and, even more urgently, to (ii) find asylum from the torment of existence under such conditions. On the one hand, therefore, Ahab is insisting that the truth *must* remain unconfined, on the other, however, he is pleading for some confinement. The statement, therefore, appears to involve a contradiction—and in this case, the appearance is *not* deceiving.

As should be clear, Ahab is in the same quagmire as the one Pierre finds himself in. The truth in question is, of course, the product of the principle's presupposition, more precisely, of Ahab's misperception of that presupposition. Ahab, on the one hand, refuses representations, all of which he deems "pasteboard masks," on the other, he needs something to "confine" the presupposition that, if unconfined, will torment

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of the Whaleship, and the constitutive and cognitive needs and dispositions of Melville's embedded theory of the subject. In sum, it cannot be that what Ahab finds at sea through Moby Dick is God, either as the presupposed place of the Divine or as some positive substance in that place, without the remainder of the book's argument, including the entire causal structure, collapsing into incoherence.

him to no end. Like Pierre, he wants what he cannot have, and he refuses what he cannot deny. This rather confusing formulation requires Ishmael's (or the narrator's) understanding of the principle-agent and impostor-fiction dynamics: he wants what he cannot have, i.e., access to the pure, unrepresented truth, which he cannot have because the impostor produces such a fiction, and he refuses what he cannot deny. Ahab's problem is that he does not know that impostors produce the fiction of the truth they represent, and so he cannot recognize that in refusing the impostor he is negating his ability to have some manageable relationship to the truth he presupposes, moreover, this same ignorance explains 'why he refuses what he cannot deny,' i.e., by refusing the impostor he loses the conditions for what he cannot deny, namely his presupposition of the place. He is in Pierre's conundrum, i.e., in the tormenting and maddening ambiguity from which Pierre finds no escape. As a few astute scholars of Melville have concluded that Pierre sorely needs a Whale—this is undoubtedly true.[314] But why, exactly? And, moreover, what type of Whale or what cetology does he need? He needs Moby Dick *because Moby Dick* offers a solution to exactly this conundrum. And how does Ahab's cetology resolve Pierre's problem? By giving the truth above the "confines" for which Ahab pleads, not, however, by being its representation, which Ahab would have to reject, nor by itself being that truth (God, or otherwise), which would be incoherent with the rest of the book's logic; rather, Moby Dick confines it by obstructing or veiling it. Through this act, Moby Dick protects the subject's faith by preventing or blocking it from pursuing (or continuing on) the "trail of truth," it prevents Ahab from going "too far" down this path—a path that long ago turned Pierre (and Ahab) mad. It prevents Ahab from confronting the nothingness where God was supposed to be and it relieves him of the haunting and torment of looking up at this truth and hearing no Word but only the Voice of Silence. It secures his faith and offers asylum by obstructing the nothingness Ahab has distorted into a little more than nothingness. It prevents the subject from existing under the shadow

[314] See Brodhead, in *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel*, as well as Sundquist, in *Home as Found*, and Murray, in his "Introduction" to *Pierre*, all make this observation. None of them, however, investigate what type of Whale Pierre needs.

of "God hunt us all" by offering itself as what is to be hunted. Moby Dick, in other words, is what allows the passage from "God hunt us all" to "if we do not we hunt Moby Dick" (142). He is a delusional formation that offers a two-fold solution while respecting Ahab's refusal and rejection of representation—Moby Dick is *not* the name, nor some interpretation or representation; no, he is another thing standing in the way of the fiction in which Ahab believes. Moby Dick, in short, allows Ahab to escape from the madness in which Pierre is riddled because he protects all of Ahab's priors, permits his ideological beliefs, and resolves his torment, all the while offering him the chance to regain some dignity by granting him an orientation and thus a capacity to act, and, of course, an object against which he can exact his rage and vengeance while absolving himself of any and all responsibility.

Once we understand Ahab and Moby Dick for what they are, Melville seems to be almost mocking the reader by having Ishmael express the desire to hunt Moby Dick in the form of a question: "And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" (165).

Because Moby Dick returns not as the father that was foreclosed, the father that performs the trick but as a malicious agent that obstructs, he returns as a phantom of the very thing that Hope objected to and did away with as it turned a world into a desert. The Pequod, therefore, is Hope refusing to admit its mistakes and demanding instead more of the same. The myth of the American Adam and the fantasy of a more perfect union failed to materialize, in response to which Hope declares not that it has failed, that its ideas are flawed, but rather that it has not gone far enough and sets out to remove what remains until "the masterless ocean overruns the globe" (224). Consider the following passage:

> But not only is the sea such a foe to man who is an alien to it, but it is also a fiend to its own offspring; worse than the Persian host who murdered his own guests; sparing not the creatures which itself hath spawned. Like a savage tigress that tossing in the jungle overlays her own cubs, so the sea dashes even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leaves them there side by side with the split wrecks of

> ships. No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe.
>
> Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began (224-5).

We know who or what the lost rider is—the fathers of the orphans. Melville's intention here is not fearmonger, but to draw attention to the force and cunning of principles and assumptions moving with inertia, completely beyond the control of initial intentions or, as Ishmael will repeat time and again, common sense and reason. The fantasies posited and silently operating at the lower layer of Hope will, he fears, frustrate and enervate that already mad battle steed until all that stood is overrun by the sea. Note the conflicting word choices: "treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure," "the devilish brilliance and beauty… of its most remorseless tribes," etc. An alluring but deceptive beauty, in short, conceals what is most dreaded, gliding unseen just below the surface. The universal cannibalism of the sea, as developed earlier and confirmed here, can only lead to more of the same until all ships are sunk, all leviathans dashed, its own offspring devoured, and all creatures return not to some allegedly original Edenic order but to an eternal war where everything is prey to the anarchy of the masterless sea. The same characterization of the sea and the true groundlessness of life are aplenty in *Moby Dick*.[315]

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[315] In Chapter 72, "The Monkey-Rope," we find the following: "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." See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 256. At this moment, Ishmael is holding a rope attached to Queequeg, who has been tasked with diving into a dead whale still floating by the side of the Pequod. If Ishamel loses his grip or if Queequeg slips, the latter will be lost in the swarm of sharks feasting

Aside from the fantasy of some complete and consistent Divine order, accessible through the removal of artificial institutions and the knowledge of which would allow for just governance, the other ultimate fantasy Melville warns about is the fantasy that there is some noble and capable unalienated subject, the fantasy of negative liberty or of freedom unrestrained, which he warns is, at best, licentiousness but more likely a paralyzing madness—Ishmael's aimless delinquency ashore or Pierre, in other words. It is the fantasy of the dove, gliding on the air's resistance and imagining that its flight would be all the freer in empty space. Their combination, Melville warns, produces a righteousness and self-assurance that responds to its own failures by saying 'not enough'—and so, from the world of Woe, Hope heads out on the Pequod.

One irony of *Moby Dick* is that Madness Maddened is only ever so slightly different than Woe. In Woe, the subject suspects that the truth is concealed or hidden by impostors, while in Madness Maddened the truth is again inaccessible, albeit the subject is more certain of its existence. In a sense, the only differences are what is obstructing the subject from the believed in truth and that Moby Dick, by virtue of its form of obstruction, grants Ahab all that woe deprives him of: meaning, comprehension, purpose, and the dignity of controlling his fate. Moby Dick grants this by concentrating all that produces the slipperiness and deferrals of signification into a single point or master signifier, thus assuring that the masterless globe can be redeemed, and placing that signifier such that it covers the void, behind which faith in the fiction of God is posited and secured. It produces a different reality and absolves the subject and its assumptions and ideological beliefs of responsibility to answer for failure, misery, meaningless, and epistemic inscrutability, and piles all the blame on something else, against which the subject can exact all its all vengeance. Moby Dick saves Ahab by offering him a malice to annihilate in the name of morality without a moral law and in the name of humanity without a soul.

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on the whale. A thin rope tied around their waists, to which Melville refers to as "the line," is the only thing separating Queequeg from death, and, to a considerable degree, Ishmael, as well, who could easily be pulled overboard if the other slips. In this moment, with both of their lives hanging by a string, Ishmael, considers whether a fall into such shark-infested waters is not, in fact, a perfect image of the truth of life.

The proposition that *Pierre* and *Moby Dick* are complementary can now be concluded: the Pequod is Pierre's fate, and Pierre's inner catastrophe is what leads to Ahab's vengeance. Pierre needs a father, he needs the Name-of-the-Father he never had, but what he will receive—or would have received had he lived long enough—is a psychotic variation, a distorted, pathological return of the broken sire, forgotten in the inaccessible depths of the orphan. The strange visitor who walks in his room near the novel's end cannot be God but a Mephistopheles-like figure. Had their interaction not been interrupted, Pierre would not have received the truth he intended but failed to Gospelize, instead he would have been pointed towards his own Moby Dick, a delusional formation that would have ended his torment by relieving him of the impossible task of turning the Voice of Silence into a Word and unburdening him of the equally impossible task of an orphan, a toddler, toddling along trying to act on its own. Consider the descriptions of Pierre's and Ahab's respective capacities to act: Pierre, after all his valiant but ultimately vain effort, "began to feel that in him, the thews of a Titan were forestallingly cut by the scissors of Fate," while the maddening of Ahab's madness gave him "a thousand fold more potency" (157).[316] The cutting of Pierre's "thews" is a clear synonym for "cracked sinews" of Ahab's madness, while the "scissors of Fate," it should now be obvious, is just another name for the debilitations of orphanhood. The maddening contraction of Ahab's madness within grants him this power and purpose, while a corresponding contraction without offers him a horizons by which to discern the innumerable and obscure causes, effects, and relations comprising the misery of humanity onto what is, in the end, literally his "own mad mark" (157). The Whale-less orphan, on the other hand, is condemned to

[316] Another parallel between Ahab and Pierre is that both shut themselves off from the world for a period, during which they gnawed at themselves: Pierre shuts himself in his study, while Ahab is shut in his cabin as his crew race to shore. Further, while Pierre shut himself into his study, he is said to have ruthlessly inverter all his attention into himself, Ahab does something similar, albeit at a later stage of development and without recognizing that he is tormenting himself. Fitting, Pierre is described as holding the dagger in his would, while Ahab is being torment by a vulture of his own creation; both, in other words, are doing it to themselves, the difference is that Pierre is doing so immediately while Ahab is doing it through something he himself created but projected outside, as a result of which he experiences it as the act of some other being.

empty space experienced as barren mazes, to a madness it cannot resolve because of a problem "in his own mind," which manifests as the torment of a "wretched infidel" and a paradoxical juncture of frantic activity and paralysis that it is impotent to resolve in his mind alone. Maddening resolves this quagmire through the foreclosed father's return as a delusional formation. The result is an ironic twist of fate: the pursuit of unbridled liberty culminates in a madness from which the only asylum will be through a transforms from "living agent" into a "living instrument" of something that is its "own creation" but is experienced as wholly other (157). The end of Hope's pursuit of liberty is, Melville thinks, Ahab's subjection to a tyrant of his own mad mind: "Ahab seemed an independent lord; the Parsee but his slave. Still again both seemed yoked together, and an unseen tyrant driving them" (401). Pierre is Hope and Hope is destined for the Pequod. And once aboard, it will be marshaled into the hunt by whatever delusion offers it what appears to be a soul. Pierre is destined to follow Ahab.

"For in this case," Melville writes, referring to Pierre, "to comprehend, is himself to condemn himself, which is always highly inconvenient and uncomfortable to a man" (208-9). In Chapter 4 we saw the inconveniences Melville had in mind, but once Pierre is recognized as the precursor to Ahab, two more inconvenient truths may appear. One, if Hope's only way out of madness is the hunt, which turns the "living agent" into a "living instrument" and sets its "fate on iron rails," then Hope will lose its autonomy and its initial, avowed objective; it will become subject to a tyrant and its objective, as it were, will morph from a self-less pursuit of liberty and the moral good into an inquisition motivated by hate. Hope, in short, will be distorted into hate. And two, if Hope leads to Woe and if Hope sails on the Pequod, then it is Hope that turns its back to the world ashore with "disgust," convinced that nothing ashore can resolve its misery. It follows that what Hope hates includes landsmen, specifically the partisans of Hope who, in their opinion, are satisfied with life ashore, ignorant of the fact that misery persists, or too cowardly or too self-interested to continue the struggle and do what needs to be done in pursuit of the values that have not yet been achieved. The

inconvenient truth, in short, is that Hope, unbeknownst to itself can morph into hate, a hate all the more vicious when directed at its less radical allies.

From the other direction, Pierre's orphanhood and soullessness divulge the ultimate secret of Ahab's vengeance. Melville mentions that all the Pequod's men must be orphans and hints at how this inner catastrophe catalyzes all that follows, but it is only through what is developed in *Pierre* that the cryptic hints and secrets given in *Moby Dick* can be properly understood:

> And take your way, ye nobler, sadder souls, to those vast Roman halls of Thermes; where far beneath the fantastic towers of man's upper earth, his root of grandeur, his whole awful essence sits in bearded state; an antique buried beneath antiquities, and throned on torsoes! So with a broken throne, the great gods mock that captive king; so like a Caryatid, he patient sits, upholding on his frozen brow the piled entablatures of ages. Wind ye down there, ye prouder, sadder souls! question that proud, sad king! A family likeness! aye, he did beget ye, ye young exiled royalties; and from your grim sire only will the old State-secret come (157).

Orphanhood is not reducible to fatherlessness because the specter of the father remains buried beneath the orphan. Though unseen and forgotten, "captive" and sitting on a "broken throne," there is nonetheless a "family likeness" between this "sad king" and its "exiled royalties." His foreclosure begot the orphan, that is, shaped the orphan into the absent-minded, melancholic toddler, exposes to the ensuing madness and helpless to resolve it because of a problem in its "own mind"; but something of this sire continues to haunt the orphan, who blindly and pathologically repeats what the function of this lost sire. Foreclosure leads the subject to ruin and to empty space, into a complete destruction of itself and the world, but then returns in spectral form. That is "the law," we read in *Pierre*, namely, that "a nothing should torment another nothing" (273). The torment contracts, as we saw, through what Melville fittingly describes as a "unbidden and unfathered birth," produced by the "eternal living principle" and producing a "creature" of his own making—a creature, the

description of which perfectly captures the persecution Ahab will suffer from his own delusional formation: "a vulture feeds upon the heart forever; that vulture the very creature he created" (170). Melville describes Ahab as a Prometheus, and he is a Prometheus, except that this Prometheus did not attempt to rob and replace gods, but something else.

Ahab began with pride and strength, standing "god-like" amongst his men and with "vital strength lurk[ing] in his Egyptian chest," and with defiance, refusing any "insult" or earthly authority, and determined to "strike through the mask" (78,157,140). "Proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on!" Ahab refused to bow before the pretenses of life on land, and he promises his men a cause and redemption (360). It is not difficult to see how Ahab began as a hero—in Ishmael's eyes no less than in the eyes of any of the others. And yet, before the voyage's end Ahab, in Ishmael's eyes, is far from the prophet and redeemer he appeared to be:

> Slowly crossing the deck from the scuttle, Ahab leaned over the side, and watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze, the more and the more that he strove to pierce the profundity. But the lovely aromas in that enchanted air did at last seem to dispel, for a moment, the cankerous thing in his soul. That glad, happy air, that winsome sky, did at last stroke and caress him; the step-mother world, so long cruel— forbidding—now threw affectionate arms round his stubborn neck, and did seem to joyously sob over him, as if over one, that however wilful and erring, she could yet find it in her heart to save and to bless. From beneath his slouched hat, Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop (405).

He began with glory, so to speak, but by the end Ishmael sees him as something else, a madman feverishly trying to grasp something ungraspable—ungraspable because it is a shadow he himself cast into the sea. It is not Moby Dick that men project into the sea, he arrives later; instead, what is projected into the sea and dived after is a fiction, an ungraspable fiction. Moby Dick is something else, something that allows men who have

plunged into the sea in chase of this fiction to imagine that this ungraspable fiction is, in fact, within their grasp. By the end, we see that Ahab and his hunt were foreshadowed long before he walked onto the quarter-deck. It was all foreshadowed by the story of Narcissus: "Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans" (20). But read also the line that follows and closes the paragraph: "It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all" (20).

He began as a hero, but by the end he's exposed as a narcissus. In a sense, the message borne by Ahab seems to be this: "Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease" (74).

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Given all that, it would appear impossible to attribute greatness to Ahab, but there is greatness in him. His greatness is in the faith by which he refused the parameters of Woe, it is in the pride by which he refused to suffer the indignity of powerlessness, and it is in the maddening by which piled all of humanity's misery onto a single white hump. The Whale, Ishmael writes, "swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung" (156). "That intangible malignity," he continues, "which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east reverenced in their statue devil," before which most men tremble, or worse, cower so pathetically as to deny its existence, Ahab did neither flinched, nor recoiled (156). "Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it" (156). It is lunacy, it is a madness that is *not* sane. But there is greatness in this, above all *if an Ishmeal rises out of Ahab's madness*. Ahab is a mistake, but a mistake that needs to be made for the possibility of an Ishmael to arise.

Before addressing this, we should attend to Ahab's greatness at a more immediate level. Recall the earlier description of life in the great American desert: a nation of citizens ridden with anxiety over retaining

what little they have and restlessly but vainly striving for more, isolated, enervated, frustrated, and miserable; disappointed by the promises made and broken, disoriented and reduced to parroting words and values they no longer believe; wondering in obscurity, confused, aimless, and bored within a world that offers no causes and no purposes, no exist and viable path for improvement. This is the world into which Ahab enters. He was one of them, but he refused to bow down and suffer in silence. Ahab lifts what was silencing their discontent, voices what they dared not say, discerns what they could not see; he recognizes their anger and confirms their suspicions, and then offers them a cause, hands them a harpoon, and points Moby Dick. He is offering them a false cause and a false redemption, but even so he is offering them what the world denies to them: hope, faith, above all in themselves. He grants them a chance at dignity and purpose, and through his madness convinces them that there is something that could be done. His greatness is in his pride, strength, and courage, and in his defiance and refusal to submit. Much of this comes from his madness, to be sure, but to the soulless men before him, men who have been reduced to "living on with half a heart and half a lung," he stands as hero, as an example of the courage and pride they have lost but could regain. That he suffered like them is what makes his heroic stature all the greater in their eyes. Ishmael puts it all in Biblical terms: to the crew, looking around at life on land, "Noah's flood had not yet subsided," but they dared not say so and treaded water instead; when Ahab enter, he tell them, "well, boys, here's the ark!" (298).

None of this is negligible, even if the cause he offers them would at best make them a motley crew of quixotic men. But Ahab's true greatness is *in* his mistake. Better put: his mistake can become—or will have been—his greatness insofar as there is an Ishmael. Why? For the moment, let this suffice: because "the Truth" resides in the sea and because the fully invested Whale can only and truly be found out in the midst of the hunt—the truth of the subject and the truth of the sea, and at their juncture the truth of the Whale. At a more abstract level, his greatness involves the fact that his mistakes expose two things that resist and refuse

the historicist reduction of everything to "its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge": the subject and the Whale.[317]

[317] See Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 5-7.

Conclusion: The Gospel of Ishmael

"But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet,
in some dim, random way, explain myself I must,
else all these chapters might be naught."
Melville, *Moby Dick*

7.1 Moby Dick and *Moby Dick*

Moby Dick contains two distinct symbolic acts: Ahab's and Ishmael's. We can identify them by first recognizing what Moby Dick is not. It is, without a doubt, an instance of the Great American Novel—perhaps the greatest of them. But unlike some members of this genre, Moby Dick does not cast its heroes into a "world elsewhere."[318] Melville does not strip "consciousness" of its historical determination, nor does the Pequod sail onto an empty canvas, upon which his characters create a world to their measure, as Poirier's interpretation would demand.[319] Ahab and Ishmael both attempt to construct something, and their activities could be categorized as constructions through "style", as Poirier would want, but both are restricted by a series of factors. The sea in Moby Dick would be misconceived if understood as virgin land, and not one of the Pequod's is some form of natural *pensée sauvage*. On a first reading, that is precisely what appears to be the case in Moby Dick: the existing world has been left ashore, and the sea is a masterless globe, and the Pequod's men are orphans, freed from alienation and relieved of the conventions and restraints of tradition and its institutions. But appearances can—and often are—deceiving in Melville. Moreover, there is a subtle but

[318] Buell, *The Great American Novel*, 349-88.
[319] Poirier, *Worlds Elsewhere*, 3-49.

crucial difference between an orphan and an ahistorical innocence, as there is between the sea and virgin land: the latter in each case would be a default, or natural state, while the former in each of these cases is the consequence of a change, more precisely, the consequences of a change to what Melville considers to be matters of natural law. On the surface, therefore, there appears to be no difference between innocence and orphanhood, but, as Melville recognizes, such an equation is the result of an antecedent ideological commitment. For Hope, there is no difference between orphanhood and innocence; indeed, for Hope, orphanhood is innocence reclaimed. 'Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains,' to paraphrase Rousseau. For Hope, orphanhood is a return to such a state of freedom. For Melville, conversely, there is no state of freedom prior to—or in the absence of—chains. Freedom and restraints are not antagonistic, Melville thinks, but symbiotic. What sets sail, therefore, is not a crew of men freed from unnecessary and illegitimate restraints, but men deprived of constitutive alienation. Recall the declaration from the beginning of Pierre: "political institutions which in other lands seem intensely artificial, in America seem to possess the divine virtue of natural law" (16). The same applies to the sea: it is not virgin land but a masterless globe, masterless because it has lost its rider, masterless because the natural state always already involves a rider. If there is something like the phenomenon Poirier describes, it is the experiment tried on land, the experiment that promised liberty but delivered woe—a promise it made because it assumed that orphanhood is the natural and the adequate state of man and because it assumed that some underlying and just order exists independently of human institutions and impostors, an order it would access through their removal. Hope, in other words, was an attempted world elsewhere—the Pequod is the reaction, the madness born from within the folly and from within the woe it produced.

Further, the men of the Pequod are "manufactured" men, who are neither innocent, nor autonomous, nor even transparent to themselves. Instead, they are "blind moles," Ishmael insists, whose lives are "but an acting upon mysterious hints," and "no mere mortal who has at all gone down into himself," he adds, "will ever pretend that his slightest thought or act solely originates in his own defined identity" (178).

They are enervated and enfeebled by their impersonal conditions of life, defined by what has been broken, left behind, and forgotten. Melville believes that their discontents and actions speak to their need for and unconscious repetition of the abandoned sire lying in their inaccessible depths. There is a "family likeness" between their blind actions and this sire, actions that Melville fittingly describes as the "muffled sounds of its pick" (158). In place of the now "sad king," there are only young "exiled royalties"—Melville is not overstating his case when he writes: "from your grim sire only will the old State-secret come" (157).

Neither autonomous, nor natural, Melville's subjects are not even, as Freud would say, "in control of [their] own minds."[320] It is their "unconscious understanding" that drives them to sea, and the same unconscious understanding leads them to assent to the hunt. What really determines these men is neither their own decisions nor their own reasons, but, as Ishmael comes to realize, the "subterranean miner" within, that is, their own lower layers. He confesses the same of himself, as we saw earlier, about what drove him to sea and later into the hunt.[321]

The determination of these men is not definitive, however. There is some latitude—as there must be if it is possible for one of these men to have returned, returned not because of luck, nor because of some prior, pre-existing difference. If Ishmael's "shouts had gone up with the rest" and if his return is not the consequence of dumb fortune, then there is some opening within their manufacture for a different fate. It bears repeating that Moby Dick, while a subjective creation, is also misrecognized as something found; moreover, he is not reducible to the subject alone because Moby Dick—in contrast to the Whale, more generally—is the product of the objective conditions mediated through the subjective discontent they produce. Put another way: while every world is a cetology, according to Melville, not every potential world is defined by Moby Dick. Moby Dick is not a world elsewhere because while Ahab and Ishmael both escape

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[320] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A.A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 457.
[321] See Chapter 4 of this dissertation, as well as Chapters 1 and 2 of *Moby Dick*, for what drove Ishmael to sea, and Chapters 36, 41, and 42, for what drove him to assume the hunt.

the form of life on land, when they leave it ashore they do not sail into a neutral world fit for their imaginations nor do they sail as subjects unfettered from history; rather, they sail into the truth of the conditions they sought to escape, and they sail as the unconscious reactions of their historical manufacture. Instead of a world elsewhere, Moby Dick stages a struggle between a historically determined subject and its determinate conditions, which is also to say, between the subject and itself, i.e., between the sovereign point of personality and its personification of the impersonal. Even mad Ahab recognizes this: "Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee. [...] Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee! (382-3). Because the empty point of personality is what produces Moby Dick, we know that what takes to sea is no conflict but a contradiction.[322] Despite appearances to the contrary, what takes to sea is not an ahistorical subject intent on constructing a world to the tune of its imagination, which it will then inhabit or watch fall; rather, what takes to the sea is a contradiction, more precisely, an unconscious discontent that has assumed its sovereign rights against the very thing that made it. The hunt for Moby Dick is not a fanciful dream of a world elsewhere, regardless of whether it turns into a nightmare or not, but a fantasy of vengeance exacted onto an innocent brute.

Melville's characters are representative, not only because they are men manufactured by their age, but also because they are full realizations or actualizations of their historico-philosophical conditions.[323] To say so is not to impose onto Melville something he did not say: "great hearts," he writes in Moby Dick,

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[322] A conflict, in contrast to a contradiction, can be resolved by way of common underlying commitments and/or conditions. A contradiction, on the other hand, cannot, and so it enacts an antagonism between the parts or parties involved. Rahel Jaeggi, "Crisis, Contradiction, and the Task of a Critical Theory," Feminism, Capitalism, and Critique, May 2017, pp. 209-224.

[323] They are representative, as James would have it, because they are a step or two ahead of their peers. As a result, their lives foreshadow the fates of the men and women still waiting for the moment their torment crosses the threshold necessary for setting out to sea. This form of representativeness is unambiguously expressed in *Pierre*, but it is also issued as a warning: "believe me, you will pronounce Pierre a thoroughgoing Democrat in time; perhaps a little too Radical altogether to your fancy" See Melville, *Pierre*, 18.

"condense to one deep pang the sum total of those shallow pains kindly diffused through feebler men's whole lives," and so "in their life-times [they] aggregate a whole age of woe" (411-2).[324] Nor would we be imposing by asserting something he did not say: because the Pequod's men manifest and attempt to resolve the contradictions inherent in their conditions and manufacture, they are representative because they are irreducible to the positive effects of their constitutive conditions. James' insight is correct, but it must be supplemented with a qualification: the Pequod's men are representative because through their actions, crazy as they may be, they become more than their time. This is their greatness, and Ahab stands at their head. The result is paradoxical, or at least appears so: first, they are representative because they are in excess of their conditions, because they are not pure reflections of their age; and second, their actions are simultaneously immanent and irreducible to their conditions. The unconscious, we know, resolves this paradox. Another problem remains, however: how to distinguish between Ahab and Ishmael? Agamben's notion of "the contemporary" is useful here: "the contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light but rather its darkness," and to perceive the darkness, Agamben adds, is to perceive that which must be held in darkness as a condition of the rest coming to light" (13).[325] Such a formulation of the notion seems tailor fit for Ahab, but it does not suit Ahab: Ahab feels himself to be a darkness rising from a repressed empty point of sovereign personality and leaping in vengeance as the light around him, but he does not 'see' the darkness in the sense intended by Agamben; he is that darkness, he is that act, so to speak, but he is also blind to it. What the contemporary sees, Agamben is suggesting, is the unconscious—one definition

[324] The full remark bears quotation here: "But this intensity of his physical prostration did but so much the more abbreviate it. In an instant's compass, great hearts sometimes condense to one deep pang, the sum total of those shallow pains kindly diffused through feebler men's whole lives. And so, such hearts, though summary in each one suffering; still, if the gods decree it, in their life-time aggregate a whole age of woe, wholly made up of instantaneous intensities; for even in their pointless centers, those noble natures contain the entire circumferences of inferior souls." See *Moby Dick*, 411-2.

[325] See "What is the Contemporary," in Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 10-19.

of which (or one defining feature of which) is that it is constitutively excluded in the name of consistency.[326] Ahab is representative because he manifests the unconscious of his conditions and manufacture, i.e., of his impersonal and the impersonal personified that he is, but it is Ishmael who is contemporary. Recall that "unconscious understanding" drove Ahab and the others into the hunt, but also recall that Ishmael was lying when he said that their "unconscious understanding" is deeper than he can go (158). Ishmael is contemporary because he sees—better yet, because he knows—their common historical conditions, the common fate that drove him to sea, while cajoling him into thinking it was his decision, their common manufacture, etc. On land, he comes to see the foreclosure and the need for a Whale, in the sense of impostor. And at sea and in the hunt, he comes to see the faith and the distortion by which men are not made to feel as if they are "fowls and fish," as well as the lower layer of the fantasy2, but also that there is God omnipresent at the bottom of the sea, the appalling "horror" of man's real "identity," and, of course, that there is no Moby Dick. In a word, on land, at sea, and in the hunt, he comes to see all that must be kept in the darkness and all that men must be blind to if they live in woe, set out to sea, survive or sail with purpose in the barren mazes of the sea, and, of course, if they hunt Moby Dick. Ahab is representative because he manifests the unconscious of his time and of the man it made him into, but Ishmael is the contemporary because he comes to know this unconscious. As should be clear, what Ishmael comes to see, know, and understand is the entire structure underlying the prophecy, including the lower layers involved and their assumptions and principles, the sea, his common unconscious understanding, the role of the forgotten sire, and, of course, the Whale.[327]

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[326] See Alenka Zupancic, *Why* Psychoanalysis: Three Interventions (Uppsala: NSU Press, 2008), 33-58.

[327] This immanent but irreducible excess, which must be kept silent for life on land to continue undisturbed, is a negativity that in Pierre, Ahab, and Ishmael has come to the surface and begun to, in Ahab's words, asserts its rights. Ahab calls it a darkness, but—and crucially—he also identifies it as a wound, a cut or rupture without any substance of its own, aside from the figurative scab, a compensation, if you will, for the cut. This darkness, he adds, is all there is of a "personality" produced by but irreducible to the constitutive impersonal, and which, though empty, will assert its sovereign right by reflexively acting back upon its creator. This irreducible negativity and its act prove to be what permits a periodizing resolution, and they do so by recalling something expelled and prohibited from the subjects' constitutive conditions—they allow a moment forward, in other words, by repeating something discarded with the past. Pierre, as we saw in Chapter 4,

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Towards the end of Moby Dick, we find a strange but elucidating passage: "If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation shall lure back to their birth-right, the merry May-day gods of old; and livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; on the now unhaunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove's high seat, the great Sperm Whale shall lord it" (274). This confusing passage when read within its context and the interpretation developed thus far reveals its meaning. The Whale, Ishmael adds, is "immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality" (354). The Whale, he further adds, has traversed all places and times, and if the world is ever consumed by another flood and turned into a "masterless globe," the "eternal" Whale will return and "spout his frothed defiance to the skies" (354). If the species is immortal and the particular is perishable, then the "eternal" Whale is the Whale as principle, and the particular Whale is just another mass of blubber in a long series of dumb brutes subjectively invested with this idea and thereby turned into and hunted as Moby Dick. The Whale returns whenever the world of men, i.e., the world ashore, devolves into a desert, a reality deprived of conviction in impostors and the fictions they secure. More precisely, the idea of the Whale returns whenever the form of life devolves into artifice and nihilism, into a forced obedience of conventions that have lost their legitimacy and grasp on the soul in consequence of some romantic rupture with its inherited tradition. But the Whale will not appear on land, naturally; rather, on land, men can only have a suspicion that some leviathan exists in the depths of the sea. Instead, he will appear only at sea, meaning that it returns when the world is reduced to an amoral and meaningless, horizonless and masterless globe. Because the sea, if viewed objectively, disappoints the hopes with which these melancholic and absent-minded romantics set out to sea, the Whale returns in defiance of the sky—in defiance, in other

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fails where Ahab and Ishmael succeed. He is not some ethical hero who refuses an Ahab-like fantasy, rather he is a tragic failure because he fails to resolve the contradiction he confronts, fails to find a Whale, and so dies mired in madness. The three protagonists, as proposed at the outset, are not merely different, rather they embody three distinct moments along one logical development: Pierre fails where Ahab succeeds, and Ishmael passes through Ahab, thereby succeeding where his crazed captain fails—Pierre, Ahab, Ishmael, in other words.

words, of what should be plain to see: there is no God. Close reading reveals the precision of the passage. On the one hand, the sky is "egotistical" because whatever substance is believed to exist in the starry heavens is the creation of those who believe in it, all the while these believers misunderstand what they have presupposed to be something that exists independently of them and thus something they have found, not something they have projected. Ignorant of their implication in the existence of this fiction, they are haunted by a silence they hear as the Voice of Silence but which speaks no Word. In truth, however, the rock on which they—like the rock on which all men live—is a not haunted hill because there is neither a God nor even the place of an absent God. The sky is empty, therefore, whenever it is not egotistical. With the idea of the Whale alone, the corresponding moment of which is the madness of the sea, it is haunted, but once Moby Dick takes his seat on the throne, then it is unhaunted. The emptiness is defied by the return of the idea, deluding men into believing in Divine order above and a Divine soul within despite the all-too-evident absence of both in the world of men. Moby Dick furthers this delusion by protecting and securing their faith by appearing as a malicious agent that explains their failures. It makes no significant difference if this malice is taken to be something that has corrupted men's souls or something that has hidden God's plan, or both. The men that board some Pequod may be "pantheists" or they may be "Apostles" or they may be some "peculiar society" intent on the "absolute overturning of Church and State"—avowedly religious or avowedly secular, it matters not, Melville thinks, so long as the underlying assumptions are philosophically equivalent.[328] Moby Dick defies

[328] The passage in full reads as follows: "But as every effect is but the cause of another and a subsequent one, so it now happened that finding themselves thus clannishly, and not altogether infelicitously entitled, the occupants of the venerable church began to come together out of their various dens, in more social communion; attracted toward each other by a title common to all. By-and-by, from this, they went further; and insensibly, at last became organized in a peculiar society, which, though exceedingly inconspicuous, and hardly perceptible in its public demonstrations, was still secretly suspected to have some mysterious ulterior object, vaguely connected with the absolute overturning of Church and State, and the hasty and premature advance of some unknown great political and religious Millennium. Still, though some zealous conservatives and devotees of morals, several times left warning at the police-office, to keep a wary eye on the old church; and though, indeed, sometimes an officer would look up inquiringly at the suspicious narrow window-slits in the lofty tower; yet, to say the truth, was the place, to all appearance, a very quiet and decorous one, and its occupants a company of harmless people, whose greatest reproach was efflorescent coats and crack-crowned

the truth of nothingness and deludes man through a pathological (or psychotic) variant of the impostor's trick, that is, by appearing as an alien malice standing between them and the realization of their mistaken assumptions as the lower layer.

The agent will be particular to the time and place, to the people, and what they have decided to blame for their misery and failures, but the idea that there is some alien malice to blame - an idea that arises out of and as the resolution to the problem at the lower layer of their assumptions and configuration the riddle, which is to say, out of their unconscious understanding - will forever remain the same and repeat so long as they continue to believe in this configuration without knowing it. In more popular terms: the idea of the Whale - and thus the hunt for Moby Dick - repeats as it always has so long as they continue in their ideology as if it were a fact of nature and not wishful thinking. Emerson cannot be a revolutionary because, to Melville's mind, he was not fundamentally saying anything that had not been said and believed many times before - each time, in fact, that the hump of some Moby Dick rises to the surface of the sea.

On the very next page, Ishmael confesses that "unwittingly here a secret has been divulged, which perhaps might more properly, in a set way, have been disclosed before" (355). The "secret" referred to is that "the ineffaceable, sad birth-mark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow of his signers" (355). Melville did not forget that some fifty pages earlier he identified life's essence as its disposition to die "sunwards full of faith" even on the "most candid seas." So, what is being denoted by "his signers"? Unlike the prophecy, which has a specific historical context, i.e., "nowadays," Ishmael gives no such reference here, suggesting something more abstract and universal is in question. For obvious reasons, it cannot be God that

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hats all podding in the sun." The peculiar society in question is "the Apostles," Melville's name, in *Pierre*, for the transcendentalists. "Pantheists" is the term he uses to denote the same, in *Moby Dick*. The end of passage referring to the pantheists, discussed in detail in Chapter 5, reads as follows: "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. 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 Descartian 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!" See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 136.

gives man his "ineffaceable, sad birth mark." A hint is contained in their characterization as being in a state of loss and that this loss is imprinted on the brow of man. Assuming that this formulation is more than rhetorical, only one coherent meaning is possible: the structure in question is one wherein impostors or representatives have lost that which they represented (or would represent) and, moreover, that which would be their guarantee. Their description as being in a state of "sorrow" and man's ineffaceable birthmark as being "sad" align with two of Moby Dick's central claims: one, because there are no Gods, impostors represent nothing but fictions, and two, the principle is the subject's defining and sole inherent feature, his "birthmark," in other words. Melville leaves no ambiguity here, despite the obscure language: "to trail the genealogies of these high mortal miseries," writes Melville, referring to the suffering of man since Ahab, "carries us at last among the sourceless primogenitures of the gods" (354). Man's misery is a sourceless inheritance from the gods: an inheritance of nothing from nowhere, administered by impostors in a state of loss. In the monomaniacal mind of a man like Ahab, the inherited misery includes every pain and ache, from the most grand to the most petty. Even his drunken fall outside a pub, which left him tangled and insensible on the ground, and his mangled ivory leg nearly piercing his groin, was a "direct issue of a former foe" (349). As he lay there, Ahab thought, "while even the highest earthly felicities ever have a certain unsignifying pettiness lurking in them, but, at bottom, all heart-woes, a mystic significance, and, in some men, an archangelic grandeur; so do their diligent tracings-out not belie the obvious deduction" (349). All misery stems from this sourceless progeniture, passed down by sorrowful signers, sorrowful on account of the loss of their authoritative status and thus passing onto man a gift of nothing, nothing but torment. Understood along these lines, the initial obscure passage confirms what was developed earlier and inscribes it as a universal condition of humanity: like a sword of Damocles, the hunt is the perpetual threat hanging above humanity, a threat that materializes whenever a brash and youthful enthusiasm, irreverent of tradition and restraints, ventures that its flight would be more free were it not for the resistance of the air—such naivety and blindness to the enabling nature of restraints harbors the potential for woe, and all men in woe, some time or other, will head

out to sea. Melville's warning, as it were, is not reactionary, nor dogmatically conservative, but a measured warning that humanity must maintain a certain form of reverence for "fathers," which is to say for its own inventions, precisely because they are impostors. Emerson's preference for Hope over Memory is not inverted by Melville—no, it is undermined by him. The ambitions of Hope, if they are to be attained, can only be attained through the means of Memory. Impostors, as proposed at the outset, are necessarily impostors, but for that very reason, they are also necessary. Because there is no God and because man's soul is empty, the only choice is: impostors *ou pire*.

Unpacking this passage does not reveal anything surprising but only confirms what should already be obvious: Moby Dick is neither God nor the false God of a madman but a particular name for the species of agents that every distressed mind invents to satisfy or compensate for what it finds itself and its world wanting while remaining blind to the implications of its own premises in its misery. Moby Dick is, in other words, the fantasmatic object of a desperate mind in a meaningless world. A second, less obvious but equally significant conclusion follows: Melville's Moby Dick, like the Gospels of old, attempts to contain the entirety of human history within its frame. "The Old Testament," Auerbach writes,

> presents universal history: it begins with the beginning of time, with the creation of the world, and will end with the Last Days, the fulfilling of the Covenant, with which the world will come to an end. Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence; into it, everything that is known about the world… must be fitted as an ingredient of the divine plan (16).[329]

All its various and rather ununified components, Auerbach adds, "belong to one concept of universal history and its interpretation," and by presenting itself as the "complete truth with a claim to sole authority," it forces

[329] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 16. Subsequent references are made directly in the text.

each subsequent age to interpret itself through it and thus subordinate itself to it (17). As it is with the Biblical gospels, so it is with the story of Ahab and his Whale: intended as what prefigures and prophecies all that follows, all of which will be realizations or interpretations of it, it functions as what Auerbach calls a "figura," something "real and historical announcing something else that is also real and historical" but also something that establishes the connection between past and present and history and truth.[330] The primary difference is that in Melville's Gospels, there is no God, only fictions, impostors, and humanity's constitutive need for them; in turn, the truth cannot reside in the Divine but only in the dynamics of fictions, impostors, and the minds of men. To Hawthorne, he said that he had written "the Gospels in this century"—in his name, we can add that he also wrote the Gospels for that century. In this Gospel, God is replaced with the mind of man, and theology with psychology, but religiosity remains. And he succeeded, he thinks, where his youthful, immature hero failed: he Gospelized nothingness. In fact, he conceived of two distinct Whales: one belonging to the prophecy of the avenging dream, the other allowing for the Gospel of the return.

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There are two levels at which the hunt can be read: on the one hand, it is a reaction to meaninglessness; on the other, it is Hope doubling down on its assumptions. Connecting this orphaned discontent and the radicalization of Hope is the return of the forgotten sire: to the orphan, it returns as a delusional metaphor, reconstructing the lost world of meaning and resolving the problem of its stunted manufacture; and to Hope, it returns as the allegedly hidden malice responsible for the failure of its convictions to deliver on their promise. But in both cases, it is a resolution to the problem posed at their respective lower layers, problems that resonate with one another because both reject the idea of representation.

[330] Aside from the fact that Melville would not say that his Gospel "forces" all subsequent ages to interpret themselves thought it (or, at the very least, nothing in *Moby Dick* suggests this), the function of his Gospel aligns with Auerbach's understanding of the function of Biblical Gospels as figura.

7.2 Ahab's Symbolic Act

A symbolic act confronts a real social contradiction, insurmountable in its own terms and provides a formal resolution in the aesthetic realm. It "draws the Real into its own texture," writes Jameson, rewrites or reorganizes the contradiction, and thereby providing a formal resolution.[331] Moby Dick is exemplary: first, he is produced by the empty point of personality, and second, his insertion into the situation resolves an otherwise irresolvable problem. Indeed, we could say that he resolves a series of problems: first, the insertion of the Whale into the situation on land resolves its inscrutability, giving meaning to both suffering and life; second, at sea, Moby Dick resolves the torment of madness, providing the Pequod with horizons and haven by being the malice responsible for the masterlessness of the sea; third, he resolves the problem in Hope's lower layer; and finally, he resolves the problem of the paralyzed orphan, returning as a pathological compensation for the lacking father. Above all, he permits Ahab to act, morphing his impotent and aimless discontent into a purpose promising satisfaction. No longer in a state of "rage without target," it is through the Whale that Ahab can pursue his redemption at sea, and it is through Moby Dick, who reconfigured, i.e., maddened, his madness, that he can act out his fantasy of vengeance. To those still cynically obeying the form of life on land, hunting Moby Dick might appear an unimaginable lunacy—that is no objection to the prophecy because Melville's point is that "some time or other" they too will turn towards the sea and at sea they will all seek asylum in this hunt that cannot end and from which none can return. It is a false redemption, but it is a cause that can keep men occupied forever and without end. This is the prophecy for all men of the age, on condition that they continue with their forms of life and thought, that is, on condition that they do not become Ishmael. Moby Dick is the name of what will reorganize the activity and thought of subjects born into and determined by the historico-philosophical conditions of the age by offering them a resolution that aligns with and protects their underlying assumptions. Ultimately, it is a false solution, but that, Melville thinks, is of

[331] Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 79.

little matter for it satisfies deeper longings: it resolves their discontents, the contradictions they confront, offers them what they want, and leaves them in a world they can experience neither as illegitimate nor as a field of "barren mazes" but as full of order, meaning, and purpose. At bottom, the hunt, like Hope, is a reactionary response to the modern condition and the enacted rupture after which *historia magistra* vitae was no longer true because that *magistra* was alleged to be and to always have been a fraud.

The overt lunacy of Ahab must not obscure the fact that Ishmael's resolution not only passes through Ahab's as a necessary condition of possibility, but also that it is impossible and prohibited in the historico-philosophical conditions in question. Melville's insistence that the ambitions of freedom can be attained only in the forms of Memory, including alienation by impostors, foreshadows Blumenberg's argument that the legitimacy of the modern age depends on establishing compensations for certain elements of the past, that a viable liberation from the past demands that the present assume and enact certain formal elements of the very inheritance it refuses and seeks freedom from.[332] The psychological and social need for such restraints is at the heart of Shulman's warning that Ahab's pathology must not be disavowed but owned and reworked.

Before delving into the details of these acts, I want to note a trap set by the requirement that symbolic acts rewrite or reconstruct the confronted reality. The acts' irreducibility tempts interpretation into some form of the Cold War or worlds elsewhere paradigms, which must conceive of the Whale as the product of some combination of essentialized identities and personalized pathologies or pathological forms of reasoning. In any such case, all of Melville's claims about historico-philosophical conditions manufacturing subjective character, the universality of the prophecy, and the sane nature of this madness would be incoherent. Neither the Whale nor Moby Dick, nor any of the other subjective experiences and dynamics would have any causal link to objective conditions or any place in the spontaneous dynamics of the common mind. Perhaps Moby Dick could still be said to announce a prophecy and even a Gospel, but in the absence of the above features

[332] See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 234.

and others like them, it would be declaring a prophesy and Gospel of little to no worth. The entire objective would be forsaken and any significance of Melville as a thinker would be lost, because in reading Moy Dick we would only be reading a story about an utterly exceptional and unrelatable man, who is too alien and whose madness is too incomprehensible for us. In short, Moby Dick would be just a story of one madman, written by another somewhat lesser madman. Fortunately, any such reading can be refuted with ease.[333] Pfau draws attention to this trap, pointing out that any strict distinction between context and rewriting or "fact and value" ignores that "both terms already operate within a preconscious, subjective economy—a 'mood'" (81). Instead of positing some duality or pre-existing or essential subjective difference to account for the irreducibility, the subjective act must be conceived as arising immanently from the given common reality and its subjectivizing effects. Relying on Heidegger, Pfau establishes that symbolic acts are subtended and determined by an underlying mood, a pre-propositional, pre-representational, indeed a pre-perceptual and pre-conscious "primordial attunement" of the subject to what Heidegger calls "world."[334] In Heidegger's phenomenology, mood is the primordial experience of one's attunement to the world into which it is thrown, and it disposes or orients the subject silently because constitutively, such that it subtends and predetermines, or orients and disposes the entire structure of activity from perception through understanding to utterance.

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[333] This textual evidence would include, but is not reducible to: Ishmael's identification with the crew and Ahab, his universal assertions, his prophecy as offering a choice between the spontaneous and alternative act, his confession to having "shouted with the rest," and the significance of his endless and earnest investigations of the Whale and Whaling, but also all arguments and assertions that the historico-philosophical conditions symbolized in *Moby Dick* constitute and subjectivize the characters, thus determining their desires, mood, wants, torments, thoughts, etc.

[334] Indeed, the identification of such a mood, and by extension the underlying world to which it is the attunement, permits a proper entry into the hermeneutic circle: a piece of literature, as he demonstrates in *Romantic Moods*, can become an object of knowledge only if the intellectual and aesthetic heritage of the text is, at every turn, recognized as both the driving motivation and abiding conceptual framework, not only, as he demonstrates, as the tools or framework with which the author thinks and writes but also as what disposes and orient the author as a pre-propositional level. See Pfau, *romantic Moods,* 14. For clarity: this attunement accounts for the concrete "being" in Heidegger's confounding formulation in the opening pages of *Being and Time*, namely, "the being of a being's being," which can be translated into the idiom used thus far as the subjectivity or subjective activity of a subject's constitutive subjectivization. See "Introduction" in Heidegger*, Being and Time.*

It is undeniable, as we have seen, that such determination operates in Moby Dick. Melville gives a final and unambiguous confirmation of such determination near the book's end: Ahab confesses that he is moved by Starbuck's pleas, that their "eyes have met" and that he feels a bond with the first mate, but then adds that "in this matter of the whale, be the front of thy face to me as the palm of this hand—a lipless, unfeatured blank" (418). Simply put, Ahab cannot truly relate to Starbuck—just as Starbuck cannot truly relate to Ahab—for the simple reason that they do not see the same reality, and they do not see the same reality because they are not disposed by the same mood. There may be sympathy or sentiment between them, certainly, but there can be no empathy because Starbuck is a man of woe and Ahab is a man of madness maddened. Because a given mood, as Pfau demonstrates, is a "historical mood" or "psychological climate" we can understand it as both universal and historical, in which case we can understand how Ishmael can maintain the prophesy applies "nowadays" but also to all men and women; and, moreover, why the prophesy addresses the common and ordinary, perfectly attuned subjects, and not the exceptional, extraordinary, or pathological.

This notion of mood identifies a common determination that subtends all intentional and propositional activity, and it acts as the primordial disposition or orientation of the attuned subject—it is, simply put, the reflection of the objective conditions in the subject or as its subjectivization. In Melville's preferred terminology, it is the impersonal personified.[335] It is, as Heidegger puts it, the primordial attunement that determines the spontaneous parameters of all subjective activity. While there is such a lower layer of subjective activity in Melville's works, and it certainly establishes the parameters that determine the intentional and propositional activities of his characters, the mood that operates in Melville's works cannot be reduced to an attunement to such conditions alone. Consider the following: the conditions in Moby Dick expose its characters to an entropic psychosocial world, where causality, identity, and distinction have disappeared in any consistent, consensual, and permanent fashion, a situation of extreme interpretive

[335] Cameron, in her interpretation of Melville's impersonal, also relies on the Heideggerian notion of mood to conceptualize what she understands to be the impersonal in Melville's works. See Cameron, *Impersonality*.

agitation, where they are inundated by an onslaught of unconnected events, opaque and distorting words, and the lack of any master code or space of order, but the characters, as we have seen, do not perceive this anarchy as limitless and sprawling meaningless, instead they spontaneously perceive it as a closed or inescapable field of significance without signification. Meaning is gone, in other words, but significance remains. What accounts for the difference between "fact and value" or between the sea and the Whale is the subject, more precisely, the part of the subject that is irreducible to its impersonal conditions and manufacture. Melville calls it the principle and conceives of it as the sole ahistorical or inherent property of the subject, indeed as its very essence. The masterless sea is the manifestation of the ontological truth of Godlessness, cannot be the source of the Whale, nor can the idea of the Whale arise from the positive effects of the subject's manufacture. It is, in a word, lacking in the impersonal conditions of life, its personification, and the ontological truth. It arises at sea because it is the return of this repressed element of subjectivity that drives men to sea. Moby Dick confirms the irreducibility of the act and Pfau's thesis that fact and value have a common underlying mood, but it also confirms Lukacs' proposition that "the structure of the object supplies an indication of the form-giving intention."[336] The logic of the value, in other words, indicates the intention of the subject, which is to say, the cause of its discontent and the logic of what would resolve it. In the case of Moby Dick, where the subject is a manufactured personification, in the same gesture it indicates the structure of the logic of the orphaned psyche. It is because Pierre is Pierre that he reacts to the letter and the portraits of his father in the manner that he does—another subject, perhaps one that is not orphaned, would have reacted differently, or, at the very least, would not necessarily have reacted as Pierre did. To borrow a phrase from Lacan: we can read the structure of the subject by 'reading its desire.' Given what has been developed thus far, the cause of its discontent has two elements: one, the contradiction between the historico-philosophical conditions and the empty point of personality and between the impersonal personified and that same empty point of

[336] See Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel*, 60.

personality; more acutely, it is the contradiction between the great American desert and the subject's constitutive need for alienation. The Whale, in short, expresses what the subject's ahistorical form finds intolerably lacking in its impersonal and its personification, as well as how that subject would resolve its discontent. The Pequod's men wonder what is contained in the Whale, Melville provides the answer: a displaced articulation of the subject, its configuration of the riddle, its discontent, its desire, and its attempted resolution. The Whale does not exist on land or at sea, objectively speaking, but its introduction permits a transformation of the existing conditions in a manner that satisfies the irresolvable problem that the subject faces.

Melville's characters, in other words, spontaneously distort an ontological lack into an epistemic loss. Instead of experiencing and being attuned to the objective truth of meaninglessness, they experience and perceive a state of exception because they spontaneously presuppose the place where some Divine or otherwise absolute transcendent agent would be, which is to say, that they themselves install a state-of-exception and condemn themselves to it. The mood, therefore, is a synthesis of the objective historico-philosophical conditions and the subject's principle, the result of which is a historical mood or psychological climate of paranoid psychosis—not because there is some hidden or missing key that would tie the world back together but because Melville's characters are constitutively incapable of not positing such a presupposition. Once they find themselves at sea, therefore, they will find themselves confronted with a choice they cannot refuse: 'God hunt us, unless we hunt Moby Dick.'

The problem posed by the requirement that fact and value already operate within a common preconscious, subjective economy, or mood, all the while value is irreducible to fact, is resolved by the empty point of personality, which eventually tires of its exclusion and asserts its "royal rights." This irreducible element, fully deserving of being called Melville's notion of the unconscious, manifests as the Whale: first through the principle as a phantom, and then through the agent as Moby Dick. The distinction between these two Whales, which finds a homology in Lacan's distinction between the object-cause of desire and the object

of desire, proves crucial for Ishmael's escape and return, as we will see shortly. Setting that aside for the moment, we can conclude the case of Ahab and his Moby Dick. The value of Ahab's act is irreducible to the fact because of what his unconscious adds to the situation in which he finds himself, and what it adds is an expression of Ahab's orphaned mind, its stunted structure and reason, its inherent character and needs, and the form of its desired resolution to its troubles. If his Whale is understood, it would not be a simplification to answer the question, 'who is Ahab,' by pointing to Moby Dick. On land, the phantom expressed and resolved his discontents, at sea, Moby Dick resolved his torment. Moby is, therefore, the resolution for all who hold the same underlying assumptions and configurations that Ahab holds—at the same time, Moby Dick is also an indictment of Hope itself, an indictment because the hunt is lunacy, a lunacy brought on by its own mistaken assumptions.

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Mood as attunement to historico-philosophical conditions permits Moby Dick's universal claims and Ahab's ordinariness, but the entire causal structure leading from land to the hunt is possible only if the underlying mood is composed of these conditions and the subject's principle. Matthiessen's proposition that the inner and outer reality correspond in Melville's works is correct but also incomplete. Melville's characters are constituted or subjectivized as orphans because what has been abolished from their historico-philosophical conditions has been foreclosed from their psyches, namely, the father. In which case, the inner reality is a reflection of their outer reality. However, the inner reality also compensates for what it finds intolerably lacking in their outer conditions, the cause and the means of this reaction is the principle. This discontent and act of compensation identity what of the subject is not reducible to its historical determination, its ahistorical truth, as it were. But this same discontent and compensation also confirm the proposition about the objective and subjective cause involved in the causal structure leading from land to the hunt.

What Lefort calls the symbolic point of power, the deposition of which results in the modern conditions and in the form of life it had held together losing its intelligibility, coherence, continuity, and

legitimacy, is, for Melville, not something transcendent but a transcendentally produced place, concealed and secured by impostors. If the "skewer" has loosed out "from the middle of the world," it did so due to parricide. The place of this symbolic point, like the place of the Arkhe is, Melville thinks, a transcendental function inherent to the subject. As we saw through a reading of Pierre, this function corresponds to Lacan's concept of the unconscious *sujet supposé savoir*; and, as importantly, that the subject is constitutively dependent on it and on a father to confine it. Melville's notion of modernity and the challenge it poses is misunderstood if conceived as a death of God, regardless of whether the response is sorrow, jubilation, or indifference. This death, regardless of whether its consciously viewed as a loss or a lack will eventually be compensated for. In addition to the manufacture of sordid men and a life of aimlessness and delinquency, this vacuum, he thinks, can only ever be temporary. Five Chapter later, it should be clear that Clark's earlier-cited description matches Melville's evaluation perfectly:

> Modernity means contingency. It points to a social order that has turned away from the worship of ancestors and past authorities to the pursuit of a projected future — of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, or infinities of information. Without ancestor worship, meaning is in short supply — 'meaning' here meaning agreed-upon and instituted forms of value and understanding implicit orders, stories, and images in which a culture crystallizes its sense of the struggle with the realm of necessity and the reality of pain and death.… The disenchantment of the world is horrible, intolerable. Any mass movement or cult figure that promises a way out of it will be clung to like grim death. Better even fascism than technocracy: there is a social id in most of us that goes on being tempted by that proposition.[337]

The principle cannot accept perfect nihilism and always unconsciously distorts it into the imperfect kind, after

[337] Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 7.

which asylum will be sought in whatever can confine this suspected truth: if some are believed to embody it, they will be followed; if some are believed to obstruct it, they will be destroyed.

In *Clarel*, Melville's most sustained meditation on the modern condition or on the fate of "Christendom without Christianity," he writes: "is faith dead now/A petrifaction? Grant it so,/ Then what's in store? What shapeless birth?/Reveal the doom reserved for earth?/How far may seas retiring go?" Later in the poem, turning from subjects raised as Christians but now lacking faith to the generations raised on no faith at all, he concludes, "Negation, is there nothing more?" No, there is. One answer to this question was already given in Moby Dick: the result will not be negation and nothing more — if it was, then there would be just woe and madness, the desert and the sea, but not maddening, no hunt, no asylum; rather, the result will be the repeated invention of Whales and an endless series of hunts for an endless series of Moby Dicks — the result will be, in other words, a century of a passion for the real, pursued through purification. That will be the result unless Ishmael's alternative is followed. [338]

7.3 Ishmael's Gospel

What is the path taken by Ishmael? He was not exceptional when he boarded the Pequod— in fact, we can say that at that time he was not yet Ishmael. As he confesses, his "shouts" went up with the rest, and yet he returned from accompanying Old Ahab in the Pequod to lay the world's grievances before that bar from which none return. Yes, he identified with the fantasy of the hunt: "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" (152). But more than simply identifying with it, Ishmael over-identified with it. His investigations into the body of the Whale, aimed at finding the malicious will ultimately end in finding nothing. He began at the skin and

[338] I say "one" result because what the result will be, will be determined by the assumptions and subsequent configuration at the lower layer. If the dominant ideology is Hope, then the result will be, according to the treatise contained in *Moby Dick*, a series of hunt for a series of Moby Dicks, an endless series because Moby Dick, as developed earlier, cannot be killed *and* because each failed attempt only reinforces the motivating conviction.

worked his way to the innermost parts of the Whale but came up empty-handed. Committed to the fantasy, he refused to stop and worked his way back to the surface, only to find that the skin is pleaded with indecipherable hieroglyphics. His resolve led him to refuse this layer as the Whale's true skin, which, he decided, must be just below it. The blubber below this transparent film is twenty feet deep, however, and the blubber itself contains nothing. Once again, he found himself in the innermost depths of the Whale and once again he was empty-handed. Without repeating all the twists and turns of his relentless and dizzying investigation, it suffices to recall the conclusion: there is no secret key and no malicious will to be found in the Whale, in fact, there is nothing in the Whale except what he himself posited there. The Whale, by extension, he gathers, does not distribute meaning centripetally to all else but receives it centrifugally. His conclusion, it bears repeating, is the consequence of his initial acceptance of and over-identification with the fantasy of Moby Dick, not some preexisting difference or initial skepticism or lack of belief. Chapter 103, "Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton," captures his disenchantment: having determined that the spine takes precedence over the skull, Ishmael abandoned the head of the Whale, a monstrosity over 20 feet in length, and focused on the spine; working his way from the first to the last of the forty odd vertebrae, the largest of which are three feet in width and more than four in depth, he slowly and rather imperceptibly arrives at the smallest of the vertebrae, where the spine tapers off into the tail, and found a bone of no more than two inches in depth; he began with a head almost sublime in size but in the end he was left holding something resembling a small ball, fit for "child's play" (348).

Ishmael begins like the others, completely consumed by the hunt. But he escapes; he manages to traverse the fantasy and return. Put another way, he comes to know the truth of the hero-narrative, that is, of the prophecy, of the entire causal structure that underlies the passage from woe to the hunt. What is this truth he learns, the truth that allows him to escape the prophecy? It is, in a word, the entirety of what has been developed in the preceding pages. Or, put another way, all that composes the treatise embedded in Moby Dick, including: that there is no God in the depths, no inherent soul in man, and no malice in the

Whale, as well as that the sea is not a troubled conscience but a meaningless, masterless, and havenless torrent, exactly as aimless, meaningless, and indifferent as the weave in the jungle, and, of course, he learns the principle, he learns the difference and the dynamic between principle and agent, he also learns the dialectic of impostor and fiction, that the state of exception is a state-of-exception, and so on. As a result of this knowledge, in particular, as a result of learning that there is no Divine and just order and no inherent soul in man, he reconfigures the lower layer of the riddle, he reconfigures it by abandoning the assumptions that make Moby Dick necessary. Once he abandons these assumptions, the need for Moby Dick as a resolution at this lower layer disappears, and if the need for Moby Dick disappears, then Moby Dick disappears—or, better put, the Whale that had been identified as Moby Dick (and still is by the others) is disinvested of the idea of Moby Dick. And once disinvested, Ishmael sees that Ahab is really hunting just a dumb brute. The hunt, i.e., the upper level of resolution, where Moby Dick is the problem, which can only be solved through his death, now appears to Ishmael as what it always was: insanity, madness, lunacy. The proposition of the hunt no longer makes sense—not because it is a Whale, as opposed to some other thing, but because the idea that there is some third thing, some alien malice obstructing the unification of the two metaphysical assumptions of Hope is false. He traverses the hunt when the hunt as a resolution no longer aligns with his reconfigured lower layer of the riddle of what troubles mankind. Just as quickly as the men on the quarter-deck agreed to this lunacy, to whom this proposition was immediately sensible, Ishmael walks away from it because it is no longer sensible. At one level of analysis, that is all there is in the story. But a finer analysis, however, would contain all of the above, that is, all that he has learned about the "unconscious understanding" that led the men (him included) to assume the hunt willingly and enthusiastically, about what drove him to the sea, about what he learned of man at sea, about what the Whale is and about what it is not, etc., etc., etc.

Instead of rehearsing in abbreviated form all that is above, I want to focus on one element, which has been mentioned and hinted at but nowhere developed—the element of Moby Dick that must have seemed most strange: Ishmael had to follow Ahab if he was ever to escape the fate of being subject to the prophecy.

There are three reasons for this, all of which have been hinted at but none of which have been addressed explicitly. One, the form of life on land refuses the Whale; it has abolished the Whale in pursuit of its liberty and the other values it expected to be realized through the abandonment of impostors. Hence, why, as Ishmael learns, it is a suspicion that something like a Whale exists at sea that leads men to take to the ship. Moreover, there is discontent and frustration with life on land that this suspected thing in the sea will—they believe—satisfy. Man, Melville thinks, wants, desires, and needs both at the personal psychological level and the collective socio-political level, Whales. To simplify matters, we can say that it has a constitutive want of a Whale. This constitutive want of and for a Whale, as developed earlier, arises out of an irreducible element of subjectivity, but nothing in its impersonal conditions can either satisfy this want or confirm to the subject that what it desires and what it experiences the lack of as intolerable exists. So why must Ishmael follow Ahab? The first reason is that Ahab has the courage—or perhaps the insanity—to set out to sea. But more than that, it is because by going to sea in chase of the phantom he escapes the intolerable limitations of the form of life on land, and in this, he is dependent on the Whale, the Whale which as a phantom has what Kant called "negative magnitude." As Zizek has theorized: the void of desire must be embodied in an object, i.e., it cannot appear on its own. In this respect, the void of desire, or the object-cause of desire, is obscured by the object of desire; however, at the same time, the void or the gap of desire can only stay open through being embodied in some object (of desire). In simpler terms: to imagine that there is something one wants and to act upon that want, that want must appear, even if temporarily, in the body of something. The suspicion Ishmael has that there is more to the world than the masterless desert, the (mistaken) metaphysical assumptions that led to it, and the pathologies, enervations, charades, and aimlessness that consume life on land had to appear as something. It is not the Whale that he wanted and needed, but what he wanted and needed is, at bottom, a bodiless thing, as Ishmael (and Ahab) recognize, and to act in pursuit of this thing and to leave behind a world that denies its existence and certainly its utility and necessity required setting out after the Whale.

Two, as we saw, escaping the madness of the sea, a madness consequent to its masterlessness and the subjects' presupposition, is only possible through a specific Whale, or, put another way, through a specific cetology. The often-repeated remark by scholars that Pierre needs a Whale is true, but what they forget to add is that he needs Moby Dick, specifically Moby Dick, because Moby Dick, and only Moby Dick, allows asylum from the madness while protecting the faith produced by the subject's presupposition, confirming the mad subject's assumptions at the lower layer, and respecting the psychotic limits of its mind, most notably its refusal of representation. In a word, Moby Dick gives the subject everything it needs, i.e., asylum, everything it wants, i.e., purpose, meaning, etc., but without undermining, questioning, or neglecting any of its other commitments. The White Whale could never have pulled Ahab or Pierre out of their madness and provided asylum, nor could Ishmael have decided to seek the White Whale instead of Moby Dick initially. For him, like for the other two, this would have been impossible because it would have contradicted and undermined the madness. In this respect, the hunt for Moby Dick has the logic of forced choice, where the wrong choice must be made to open up the possibility of the correct choice. Put another way, Hope cannot chance the White Whale—Hope can only hunt Moby Dick.

And three, by assuming the hunt, Ishmael assumes the underlying causal structure that leads to the hunt. This proves significant for two reasons: one, the hunt at sea reduces man and the world to their bare conditions—through the hunt, as Ishmael says, he was getting his hands on "the foundations," on the very "pelvis" of the world. This same hunt at sea, where he gets his hands on the foundations, it need not be said, includes the foundations of the subject. Recall that it is only in the hunt that the truth of the fully invested Whale can be learned, but also that it is only at sea that "the Truth" of the subject and the world appear. By assuming the hunt, i.e., by enacting the prophecy, Ishmael embodies and experiences and thus has the opportunity to see and understand the underlying causal structure, which is, it can now be said, the foundations, so to speak, of man, the world, and cetology at work. By over-identifying with the fantasy of the hunt, that is, by taking it seriously, Ishmael is able to dissolve the fantasy of the hunt. He empties out the

fetish of Moby Dick at the lower layer and undermines the delusional fantasy at the upper layer. Not to be glib, but we can say that he tossed out the baby but keeps the bathwater; in other words, he gets exposed to all that is operating and true but manages to dispose of the object that turns these truths and operations mad. Above all, he learns what the Whale is and that man needs a Whale, that he needs a Levithan, indeed that he and society need many Leviathans, many churches, monuments, and Bibles, many impostors, all of which are fathers. Instead of three things being where there should be just one, as Ahab believes, Ishmael comes to see that there is only nothingness above and only nothingness within, only nothingness and a principle that presupposes and then needs some impostors to confine the fictions it has presupposed from driving it mad. He learns all that is contained in the treatise—or perhaps it would be better to say: the treatise embedded in Moby Dick is the sum of all that Ishmael learns, itemized and reconstructed. Out of this knowledge, two things follow: one, he escapes or traverses the fantasy, i.e., he survives, and two, he returns, and returns in a manner by which he will not be returning to the great American desert or the pitiful port, that is, to a form of life that will only ever offer him either the gun or the ship. This latter consequence follows from the cetology he constructs out of the treatise, the treatise he derived out of the understanding of the prophecy.

I turn now to the Whale at the center of the Gospel, which is to say, at the center of Ishmael's cetology. Immediately after concluding Chapter 41, "Moby Dick," wherein he detailed what Moby Dick was to Ahab and all the men aboard the Pequod, Ishmael writes the following: "What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid" (159). The past tense used for Ahab's Whale is not because Ahab has changed his mind but because he is dead. In Ishmael's case, on the other hand, there is a change: the Whale was one thing to him, and then it was another. We confirm, once more, therefore: Ishmael did not begin the voyage as essentially different from the others; rather, he ended the voyage as different from the rest. Moreover, we can also confirm that he assumed—fully assumed—Ahab's fantasy. Or, better put, that he identified—over-identified—with this fantasy of Moby Dick as cause and means. It follows that his lower layer was composed of the same assumptions Ahab held and that he configured

the lower layer of the riddle in the same way Ahab did—he had such assumptions and he held such a configuration, but he abandoned them and reconfigured the riddle.

Moby Dick, recall, is born out of the assumptions and the problem they pose at the lower layer. He is the resolution of this problem at the lower layer and thus part of the configuration of the puzzle that underlies the fantasy of the hunt, i.e., the level of resolution, where the problem is not solved through the idea of Moby Dick but posed by the existence of Moby Dick. He is, in a word, the solution at the lower layer and the problem at the upper layer, where the solution is not Moby Dick but his death. As developed earlier, the contradiction between the different statuses of Moby Dick at these two layers of the puzzle of what troubles Ahab's leg reveals why he can never be killed: killing him at the level of resolution resolves the problem at this upper layer, i.e., killing him removes the malice that Ahab alleges is the sole cause of humanity's suffering; but such an elimination of Moby Dick simultaneously undermines the solution to the problem posed by the assumptions at the lower layer of configuration. Killing Moby Dick, therefore, undermines the fantasy of the hunt because this fantasy is contingent upon the existence of Moby Dick at the lower layer. The underlying problem, i.e., the original problem, returns therefore if Moby Dick is killed. Moreover, if this underlying problem returns, then the completed resolution at the upper layer is for naught. Put another way, either killing the dumb brute identified as Moby Dick does not solve the underlying problem, i.e., what troubles Ahab's leg, or the kill is meaningless for it was not Moby Dick—it must not have been Moby Dick, because the problem remains. There is no way to resolve this loop, the hunt cannot succeed and so it cannot end. But this trap can be walked away from, which is what Ishmael does. He neither succeeds in the hunt, nor gives up on the hunt in despair, nor dies during the hunt—instead, he simply walks away. He walks away, as mentioned earlier, when the fantasy of the hunt as the resolution no longer makes sense, when it no longer aligns with his assumptions and configurations at the underlying, lower layer. The sudden shift in Ishmael's view of Ahab from seeing him as a god-like man, a hero of his men and of men all over, from his status as a prophet and redeemer to the pitiful, one-legged old man, driven mad, tormented and made

ruthless by a creature of his own creation, leaning over the hull, desperately and futilely trying to grasp in the depths of the sea a phantom that is nothing more than a shadow he himself casts, and which sinks ever deeper with each increasingly maddened but always failed attempt to grasp it. It does not take much empathy to imagine the degrees by which his rage and frustration, as well as his monomaniacal focus and madness, increase with each vain grasp of his futile hand.

> We know what Moby Dick was to Ahab; what remains is to grasp what he became for Ishmael. Aside from the more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not help but occasionally awaken some alarm in any man's soul, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times, by its intensity, completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught (159).

It is not Moby Dick's size or speed, nor his malice or strength, nor even his alleged role as the cause of humanity's suffering that most horrifies Ishmael. In this respect, he is not entirely different from Ahab.[339] Ahab's Whale is the cause of humanity's suffering, and his cetology is the hunt—a hunt that repeats incessantly, pausing every so often but only ever as a temporary respite before beginning again. For Ahab, the hunt is the default cetology, the default state of man, while those few short peaceful moments on land are exceptions—Tahitian islands in an endless sea, so to speak.35 Life on land will inevitably devolve into woe, and so the hunt will begin again. In a sense, his cetology is a reflection of his individual life:

> Oh, Starbuck! it is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky. On such a day—very much such a sweetness as this—I struck my first whale—a boy-harpooneer of eighteen! Forty—forty—forty

[339] Ahab, recall, confesses that inscrutable is what he hates most. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 140.

> years ago!—ago! Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep! Aye and yes, Starbuck, out of those forty years I have not spent three ashore (406).

The Gospel depends on the success of "putting [the Whiteness of the Whale] in a comprehensible form" (159). What is the Whiteness? It is a "nameless horror," which overcomes all the rest (159). It is also, as he adds quickly thereafter, the "symbol of the divine spotlessness and power" (159). As is the case with his investigations of the Whale, Ishmael's approach to comprehending (and transmitting) this Whiteness is instructive. And we should follow it. He begins with example after example of white things, perfect in their beauty and horror. This list of examples with which he begins is, in fact, about three-quarters of the chapter dedicated to this allegedly most important idea of his Gospel—more than merely "most important," in fact, because in its absence all the other chapters are for "naught" (159). As such, they merit attention. Ishmael lists example after example of some particular Whiteness for three reasons: one, to highlight the features of these particulars, i.e., their revered beauty, the horror they strike into the hearts of men, the power they possess, and the status they bear, but also their sublimity, their unfathomable nature, etc.; two, to separate the color from the particular thing, the intention of which is to ascribe the characteristics attributed to the particular Whiteness not to the particular but to the Whiteness itself; and three, to suggest that these reactions to Whiteness are universal and, moreover, instinctual. The second of these objectives he attempts to accomplish through a series of comparisons between the same thing blue and the same thing perfectly white; and the third he attempts through examples that stretch from the most cerebral to the most visceral, and not only among men but also among the animals. In a word, Ishmael is subtracting Whiteness from the particular objects veiled by it, just as he subtracted the White Whale from Moby Dick. Insofar as these two objectives succeed, the first drains Whiteness of any exclusive predication: it is beauty and ugliness, power and

emptiness, horror and comfort, but also it is both light and blindness, both fullness and bareness, both "an abhorrent mildness" and a "ghastly whiteness," and it both appeals to and appalls the soul.

Ishmael continues: Something "elusive" lurks "in the innermost idea of this hue" (162). To this, he adds that Whiteness "clothes" in divineness—which would be an unambiguous compliment, were it not for the fact that neither Melville nor Ishmael has changed his mind about the existence of Divinity. There is no Divinity, yes, but Ishmael's characterization should be taken seriously, nonetheless. Whiteness commands worship, moreover, and simultaneously enforces a "nameless terror" (163). To this latest confounding pair of characteristics, Ishmael adds that there is a "supernaturalism" to its hue, which calls up a "peculiar apparition to the soul" (162). Whiteness, thus far, is a peculiar thing: it is a divineness and supernaturalism in a Godless world, which calls up ghostly figures to the soul, and we instinctually bow before and yet, simultaneously, willingly elevate and revere. Still, however, it is lacking any substance or intention. Ishmael then adds that most men with imaginations have shared some of these thoughts, though few were entirely conscious of them. But also that many, he admits, will say that he is exaggerating the effects of Whiteness, but then shrugs the objection off with ease. The reason for their ignorance should be clear: they have sutured Whiteness to the particular object veiled by it and, lacking imagination, mistook the properties of the former for those of the latter. More importantly, Ishmael adds that the feeling or reaction—whatever it may be—that men have for Whiteness is an "untutored ideality," by which he means that it is instinctual or spontaneous. A slight misnomer is made here: it is not an "ideality," in the sense of something being ideal, rather it is an untutored idealism, in the sense of a spontaneously posited transcendental idea. Recall that the elusive something he is seeking to comprehend, i.e., the hue in the Whiteness of some white thing, lurks in the "innermost idea of its hue" (160). If ideals follow, that is a secondary effect, a "secondary quality," as the "natural philosophers" would say, of the innermost idea of Whiteness. If they follow, moreover, that is perfectly fine; in fact, ideals certainly do and will follow from this untutored ideality—and not in the shape of kings and queens, heroes and beauties, but in the forms of norms and customs, rules and laws, meanings

and values in every shape, size, and color. From this elusive something in the idea of Whiteness, Ishmael thinks, all things follow because it establishes the space, barren and desolate but fertile and effective, wherein everything that appears will appear. It is, in a word, the space of possibility, but when perfectly barren, i.e., when perfectly white, it is a horror. Consider the example Ishmael gives of the sailor: "the shrouded phantom of the whitest waters is horrible to him as a real ghost… he never rests till blue water is under him again" (164). His horror should surely call to mind Pierre confronting the horror of the barren pole, or the crew stranded in the endless sea of barren mazes.

> Though neither knows where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints; yet with me, as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist. Though in many of its aspects, this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright (164).

There is a faith involved, a faith that arises by an irresistible and spontaneous, seemingly instinctual cognitive act. Ishmael calls it an "incantation," the magical spell by which Whiteness appeals and appalls with such power to the soul. But his intention is clearly to disenchant this power. Immediately, he proceeds to equate meaningfulness with what appeals to the soul and with the Christian deity, the "very veil" of which is this incanting idea of Whiteness—this Deity itself, recall, was earlier equated with "love." Ishmael also equates the absence of meaning with what appalls and horrifies, which he earlier called a demonism and associated with "fright," in contrast to love. It is not God, this Whiteness; but it is what the fiction of the Christian Deity clothes or veils itself with, and while meaningless in itself, it is what allows for meaning. If some meaning appears, it appeals to the soul of man; if it remains blank, it appalls and horrifies.

Furthermore, on the one hand, it offers the possibility of meaning; on the other, its "indefiniteness… shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" (165). If it shadows forth the heartless void, we cannot say that it conceals or denies it, and yet if its indefiniteness shadows it forth while offering the possibility of meaning, which if actualized, would appeal and produce a God-like effect, we must say that it, at the very least, keeps this void at bay, confining it like a dam. Satisfied that he has said what he needs to

say, Ishmael concludes in the form of a rhetorical question: "Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows" (165). Not a color but the absence of color which nonetheless serves as the prerequisite basis for any and all colors—"a dumb blankness, full of meaning," in other words. Surely, this description should call something to mind: the Whale.

> For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none, proper; nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, and ships, and men (274).

Immediately before this sentence, Ishmael explains the effect:

> But in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature (274).

Moby Dick is not a Deity, nor is Whiteness. As much is confirmed in his description of the latter: "a colorless, all-color of atheism" (165). Whiteness, in a word, covers the heartless voids of the universe, covers the nothingness. But not in the same way that Moby Dick covers, i.e., obstructs, the Divine Ahab presupposes exists behind him. Whiteness does not allow Ishmael to believe in a fiction as if it were a Divine fact—it is "a colorless, all color of atheism" and he is an "infidel" (165). Instead, Whiteness provides no meaning, but it invites meaning; it accommodates and allows for meaning, like a white canvas that offers no images, lines, or color but allows for all of them to appear. Whatever color or line is painted or drawn, it will in all cases be true that Whiteness is the precondition, even if it is itself pure non-color, pure silence, as it were. It is not Silence but a silence.

Consider Ishmael's penultimate remark on this incantation:

> all these [other hues and lines, and the images they compose] are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge (165).

If we gaze at the universe without color, we will not see the heartless voids, but the "colorless, all-color of atheism." The confusions of Ishmael's description and conceptualization will be forgiven, surely, by any reader who attempts, even for a moment, to imagine the difference between a "heartless void" and a "colorless, all color of atheism." Both must surely appear as nothing, all perfectly white or all perfectly black—at bottom it makes no difference. But there is a difference, and there must be a difference. Perhaps even those who have had this thought but not consciously, and those who deny the idea outright, merit some forgiveness too. The difference in question is between nothing and another nothing, after all. And very few, Melville thinks, can make see, make sense of, or understand that difference. In its purity, this Whiteness is intolerable, a maddening, blinding sight, but it is also necessary, all the more so—we can add to Ishmael's description—because there is nothing but heartless voids behind it or in its absence. Intolerable in its purity, necessary for meaning, and the result of a spontaneous cognitive instinct that establishes the underlying conditions for all the ideals, lines, and colors, and even horizons and havens, laws and meanings, etc. It hides godlessness, this Whiteness, but it does not offer another fiction as a substitute. If seen in its purity, it is a horrifying, completely undifferentiated field of meaningless meaningfulness. It torments, Pierre and Ahab would say. And anyone who gazes upon it in its purity, Ishmael insists, is not just tormented or blind, a fool or confused, but "a wretched infidel," he instructs, who will gaze himself blind or horrified seek asylum.

The Whale of Whiteness is what Ishmael subtracts from Ahab's Moby Dick. It is a product of the principle and agent, but only once it is subtracted from the dynamic that would—as it does in Ahab's case—

produce a fiction protected by an obstructing malice. But if Moby Dick and the fiction are separated from the principle-agent dynamic, what remains? For lack of a better name, it can only be called a meaningless imposture, a pretense that knows and admits that it's a pretense, which neither represents nor falsely purports to represent but which instead only keeps the nothingness at bay. It is, I would propose, the act of the principle after the agent and after the agent is subtracted or taken away. I leave it to the reader to consider this on their own: recall Melville's estimation of Shakespeare's greatness—does it not now read as another instance of senselessness that proves to be, in fact, a true statement.

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If Ahab intends to abolish the impostor in the name of the fiction, then Ishmael is the one who wants the impostor as an impostor, and he wants it because it is an impostor behind which there is only fiction and without which there can only ever be the woe, the madness, and the maddening of the hunt. He wants, in other words, a necessary fiction. A parallax takes place here: the Whale is not what it was. Ishmael's capture of the White Whale is not the capture of some other dumb brute, as if, on the very next day, after all the others drowned, he collected the shattered wood, hammered it into a new ship, and sailed off in chase of another Whale. No, the White Whale is a parallax of the Whale that was Moby Dick. Ishmael looks at the Whale differently, and in turn, the Whale changes, it changes ontologically. The mass of blubber does not physically change, of course, but it changes symbolically. The Whale is a parallax or anamorphic object. And what has changed? Ahab's Moby Dick is a delusional metaphor, at one level, and a fetish at another, lower layer, but in all cases, a dumb brute of tar and blubber possessed of characteristics invested in him but belonging to his position, i.e., a cause and a means born of the assumptions and configuration at the lower layer, and an object to feed Ahab's fantasies. At the lower layer, he is the solution by being identified as the cause; at the upper layer, he is the solution by being hunted as the means, but in fact, he is just an innocent brute. Ahab, in turn, pursues his Whale through purification, intent on destroying all representation as distortion and imposture (or, in his case, malicious obstruction). Ishmael's White Whale, on the other hand,

is pursued through subtraction and functions as a master signifier, devoid of any meaning (or, in this case, color), and yet its addition allows for the possibility of meaning. And how is this different Whale produced? Through a shift in his position, that is to say, through a shift in the underlying assumptions, a consequent reconfiguration of the riddle, and a proper understanding of the subject and the impostor-fiction dynamic.

With this Whale and the empty point of personality in hand, Ishmael's Gospel is the other symbolic act contained in Moby Dick. Moby Dick is not political in the sense that Jameson intends the term, but the two symbolic acts do have their own three levels of interpretation, which, for the sake of clarity, I will refer to with Jameson's terms. At the first political horizon, Moby Dick and the White Whale both resolve the contradictions faced by their respective characters, albeit they resolve them differently. Any such resolution, Jameson adds, is a "politico-historical pensée sauvage," i.e., a politico-historically conditioned spontaneous cognitive act. In this respect, it is no different than the spontaneous interpretations that "necessarily inform all our cultural activity, from the literary institutions of high modernism all the way to the products of mass culture" (80). What distinguishes them from more mundane enactments of a given politico-historical moment's inculcated nature is that they resolve a determinate social or political contradiction that is irresolvable in its own terms by drawing "the Real into its own texture" and then rewriting or reconstructing the confronted or existing situation through some formal transformation. Through such formal reconfigurations, symbolic acts, Jameson contends, "do something to the world" (81). Moby Dick is exemplary: his introduction reconfigures Ahab's experience from a situation that condemns him to nihilistic despair, inscrutability, indignity, and rage without a target, into a situation that offers him a cause, orientation, and purpose, because he enters as the secret agent responsible for humanity's suffering and whose death is the means of its salvation. A symbolic act imposes some "ur-narrative or master fantasy" about the given social or political state of affairs, thereby reconstructing it in one ideological key or another (80). Again, Moby Dick is exemplary: not only does Ahab pile all of humanity's suffering on his white hump, but the Whale itself is identified as "antediluvian," "per-adamite," "antechronical," and "antemosaic" (355). It arises,

Jameson adds, spontaneously from some logic of a political pensée sauvage, but the cause of this ideological act, or cultural object, to use a more general term, is absent at this horizon of interpretation, meaning that it cannot be fully accounted for by the literary work alone.

At the first horizon, the act in question is ideological because while it is predetermined, the subject enacts it without any knowledge or awareness that it was predetermined to do so. The cause of the act, therefore, is immanent to the situation at a lower layer, even if awareness of it is not accessible to the subjects in question. Marx's minimal definition of ideology applies here: 'they don't know it, but they're doing it.' But it is ideological in a second, related sense: not only are symbolic acts predetermined by something that may be "repressed," as Jameson notes, or by some predetermination of which the subject is not aware, more generally, but because distinct symbolic acts can be enacted within the same situation, each is not only predetermined by some larger factor but is predetermined by distinct—even antagonistic—larger factors, which is to say, by different underlying ideological positions. In this respect, Ishmael's capture of the White Whale is as much of a symbolic act as Ahab's hunt for Moby Dick. Both acts involve two things which are immanent to but also irreducible to the situation: the empty point of personality and, of course, the Whale.

To account for such acts, Jameson argues, they must be situated within a wider text that includes the social order, within which each is understood as a particular position within a class discourse or conflict. The cause of its ideological key, in other words, can be accounted for only by expanding the text beyond the limits of the literary work to includes the second horizon of interpretation, the social. So situated, these acts reveal themselves as ideologemes, minimal units of a larger class discourse or a particular position within a class conflict. This horizon, Jameson argues, is essentially dialogical because it houses positions that are essentially antagonistic but are nonetheless situated within a more "general unity" or "shared code" (84). In the case of Moby Dick, this level of analysis permits understanding Ishmael's White Whale and Ahab's Moby Dick as different and indeed antagonistically opposed, but as nonetheless arising from a common set of underlying conditions. This difference within common ground explains how Ishmael's prophecy can identify distinct and

antagonistic resolutions to the same objective situation. While Moby Dick is not, I think, best understood within a Marxist framework, there is within it a conflict between a dominant culture or ideology and an alternative one. Ishmael insists that hunting Moby Dick is the inevitable result of the form of life and thought dominant in the society he addresses, and Melville discerns an underlying set of assumptions, the assumptions operating at the level of the lower fantasy2, which predetermine the men and women manufactured by the common conditions. The combination of these assumptions makes assuming Ahab's symbolic act the dominant position because it is spontaneous or natural for them to do so. On the other hand, capturing the White Whale is not the intuitive, reflexive, or "common" position, but it is possible on the condition that the subject analyzes and comes to know the entire causal structure and set of conditions that lead from life on land to the hunt. Moreover, the latter is offered not only as an alternative to hunting Moby Dick but as an alternative that undermines the viability of the hunt. In fact, offering his public the means and logic by which to evade the fate of the Pequod is Ishmael's expressly stated purpose. The structure of his narrative and the logic of his alternative both confirm a common set of underlying conditions and the potential for ideological flexibility within them. Ishmael simultaneously narrates what happened to the Pequod and the means and logic of his alternative, but these means and logic are ultimately nothing other than the result of his investigations and analyses - in other words, his coming to know or his coming to self-consciousness of the entire causal structure and set of conditions, from the historico-philosophical conditions to the logic of their minds and hearts, that led the crew and will lead all others from life on land to the hunt. It should be recalled that Ishmael was constituted by the same conditions, that he came to the Pequod with the same despair, that his "shouts went out with the rest," and that he produced his alternative from within not only the same conditions but also initially from within a fidelity to the same ideological position. Therefore, the very production and conditions of possibility of his alternative confirm a common ground and the possibility of ideological flexibility within it. His alternative is, in fact, little more than Ishmael's self-consciousness of the underlying conditions and the spontaneous and predetermined dispositions of the *pensée sauvage* of the dominant ideologeme.

To comprehend antagonistic positions engaged in the ideological struggle within a single code, Jameson again expands the text to include a third and ultimate horizon: History. At this level, the organizing unity is a given historical mode of production, each of which has a "cultural dominant or form of ideological coding," by which he means all that is included in what Althusser designates as superstructure.[340] To prevent collapse into either mechanistic or expressive causality and to assure that the conception of this horizon does not make non-teleological periodization impossible, Jameson insists that (i) the horizon of modes of production must not be misconceived as some synchronic "total system," which, in all cases, he reminds us, slowly but surely "eliminate the possibility of the negative as such" and (ii) that within any moment there is a multitude of competing modes of production and their respective forms of ideological coding, such that the "triumphant moment in which a new systematic dominant gains ascendancy is…only the diachronic development of a constant struggle for the perpetuation and reproduction for its dominance," a struggle that, he adds, is constant across the life of that form and is at all times accompanied by "systemic or structural antagonism" with competing forms, both older and newer (90-7). As a result, cultural revolution, i.e., the "nonsynchronous development" of cultural and social life, is always ongoing, while the contradictions between various forms guard an irreducible negativity within any given synchronous moment (97). As such, there is a common basis for antagonistic ideologemes locked in a struggle for dominance over opposing modes of production and their superstructural supplements. For the social or cultural analyst, he concludes, the expanded text, which now contains everything from the contradiction resolved by the symbolic act to the perpetuation and reproduction of the modes of production, is the constitutive structure within which literary works can be given comprehensive intelligibility. More significantly, however, is the conclusion that directly affects not the analysis of cultural objects but their production. The textual object at this third horizon is the ideology of form, defined as the "determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by varied sign

[340] See Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014), and Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 89-97.

systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation" (99). In simpler terms, the ideological differences between the messages carried within distinct forms, each of which is both a determined cultural manifestation of and a cultural product acting to reinforce and reproduce its mode of production. These ideologies of form are what White calls the literary element of historiography, and their respective analyses reveal different conceptions of time and space, different subjective and social relations to alienation, customs, and laws, different modes of reification, different modes of emplotment, argument, and ideological implication, and so on.[341] The chronological coexistence of logically and ideologically contradictory and antagonistic forms assures that History's diachronic development is neither predetermined nor assured, in which case not only are opposing ideological positions possible but struggle over historiographic forms is politically indispensable. Necessity, as Jameson adds, does not preexist the ideology of form but is, instead, its outcome because Necessity is the form imposed on the raw material of history, rewriting what happened as what had to happen. The struggle over the ideology of form, therefore, can be conceived as the primary site of struggle over the transformation of fact into one value over another, with the triumphant form receiving the status of Necessity. So conceived, History as the ultimate horizon disappears as some reified force or master narrative, and what appears in its place is the absent cause with its formal effects. It is, Jameson insists, an untranscendable horizon but not because it is impervious to activity or because it is some origin seeking expression, but because behind its struggles and antagonisms, the forms of events, and their material conditions and consequences, there is nothing but an absent cause. Moby Dick is not concerned with modes of production, nor is that type of analysis, I contend, the most appropriate for the book of the symbolic acts within it. However, what in Moby Dick correlates to this horizon of Jameson's hermeneutic is what I have called fantasy2, a set of assumptions that underlie the distinct ideologemes of Ahab and Ishmael2. And Melville, in fact, offers their contrasting configurations in the "riddle" of what troubles

[341] See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 1-43.

Ahab's leg, which, of course, stands as a metonymy for what troubles Ahab and the rest of humanity. Below the common set of historico-philosophical conditions and within the parameters of his theory of the subject, are two distinct possibilities. It is sufficient to say that the distinction between them amounts to the following: Ahab's permits no negativity and conceives of History as a teleological development or humanity's progressive approximation of or proximity to some Divinely determined order, while Ishmael's configurations admit that there is no God and no teleological development and that there is an unconscious, and thereby opens the possibility of history as such. Ahab acts out the unconscious of this impersonal (and of his personification of the impersonal), yes, but his underlying assumptions negate the negativity of the unconscious because there is a God and He is whole and because there is an inherent positive substance to man, which is good and rational by nature.

In this respect, the conflict at the lower layer of Moby Dick is not between two competing political ideologies so much as between a position that admits and opens the possibility of history, which is to say, it insists that the cause is absent, and a position that admits only a form of what Lukacs calls pseudo-historicism or unhistorical struggle, and posits that the cause is not absent because the cause of humanity's troubles is Moby Dick, a malicious agent that has obstructed humanity's otherwise certain progress towards and ultimate union with Divinity.[342] At the first level, the two acts are situated within the same circumstances, and even at the social level, their diverging and antagonistic ideologemes are operating within common objective historico-philosophical conditions, but at this final level of interpretations, at the level where what is determinate are the assumptions of the lower layer of the riddle of what troubles Ahab's leg, their respective symbolic acts are founded on different grounds. One permits history, the other is not properly historical.

Earlier, I proposed that Ahab is not reactionary for the reasons most often stated, but that he is reactionary because he is a representative of Hope and Hope is reactionary. What I meant by reactionary is

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[342] See Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* trans. by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 19-30.

that it is not historical, that it does not permit history, above all because while it acts out the unconscious and while it is made mad and then maddened by a mismanagement of the impostor-fiction dynamic, it also denies what Melville calls the empty point of personality, a darkness, as he says, with no predicative qualities, with no substance, but which maintains its royal rights. It denies that the fiction of Divinity, the place of which is presupposed by the principle, is a fiction. A fiction secured by impostors but also a fiction that appears as if it is something independent and existing on its own behind and before impostors is a fiction created by the inherent inconsistencies of representation. As a result, Ahab and those like him can pursue a pseudo-historical path through the means of purification, relentlessly refusing any and all representation because they are convinced that some substantial real thing exists behind—and if there is a substantial truth, distorted, obscured, or veiled, then there is no limit to the violence that their passion can reach. All institutions, all impostors, may be discarded, as can all alienation which to them can never appear as anything but chains on innocence, as resistance preventing a more perfect and free flight. Ishmael, on the other hand, admits and comes to the empty point within and the trick and truth of the impostor-fiction. As such, his path is that of subtraction. Without pursuing the thesis here, I would submit that in the Gospel contained in *Moby Dick*, Melville identifies what Dialectical Materialism would, a century later, identify as the two negativities requisite for periodization: this school of thought calls them *objet peit a* and the unconscious—Melville calls them by a few names, but most of all that empty point of personality, that little more than nothing that Pierre is, and the Whale, the White Whale.[343]

In Chapter 6, I suggested that Moby Dick is a masterpiece. Here is my reason: if the middle of the 19th century was the age of Hope, then Moby Dick is a masterpiece because along with Ahab, it also invented Ishmael. It is not a masterpiece because it is the finest piece of writing produced at the time, though it may

[343] For the most comprehensive account of this philosophical position, see Zizek, *Less Than Nothing*. For an succinct and complete articulation of the argument in question, namely the limits of Foucauldian historicism and the involvement of *objet petit a* and the unconscious for periodization, see Copjec, *Read My Desire*, and Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner, *Ziek Beyond Foucault* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

well be that, nor because it best captures the essence of that time, though it may well do that too. Rather, it is a masterpiece because it challenges the symbolic coordinates of its time, it refuses the options offered by the ruling ideology and ventures into what seemed impossible. As Todd McGowan writes, "Great works evince a refusal to accept the socially determined alternatives and instead confront the traumatic groundlessness that these alternatives work to obscure" (99). And through this act of determinate negation, they may also open a new avenue precisely there where it seemed to have been an impossible choice.

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