

From the Dented Earth to Eternity:

Time in *Moby-Dick*

by

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A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2003

For my father,
Ken Deneau

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank, with full appreciation, my advisor Professor Sanchez, who helped me navigate my way through the research process and broadened my perspective of the subject matter. I am also especially thankful for the time Professor Pinch and Professor Blair took in reviewing my work and answering any questions I had throughout the last two semesters. And most importantly, I want to thank my family and friends for their support and love: Mom, Dad, Julie and Katie; Sven, Sally, Serene, Ryan and David.

Abstract

What I hope to demonstrate in the body of this thesis are the ways in which *Moby-Dick*, through its representation of time, works to undermine the industrial project of a progressive and linearly driven society by converting its readers to a vision of nature and mankind as eternal. In other words, I will trace Melville's use of temporal experience as a means of altering his readers' vision so that they can understand and interact with the economic and ideological forces that shape their lives.

I will begin my discussion by examining Ishmael's shifting experience of time both off and on the Pequod and end it by investigating the reader's experience of time before, during and after her encounter with the book. In doing this, I advance the argument that Ishmael and the reader's temporal experiences are somewhat reflective of one another and both potentially disruptive for Capitalist institutions.

In chapter one, I account for the economic, social and intellectual positions of nineteenth century America as they relate to the shifting concept of time. My object in doing this is to demonstrate that *Moby-Dick* is an historically motivated tool of rebellion shaped by the rapidly shifting environment of America in the nineteenth century.

In chapter two I discuss Melville's fictionalization of the overwhelming, though undetected, presence of quantification within the life of an average worker such as Ishmael in the nineteenth century. I focus on the first fifth of the novel, before Ishmael's entrance on the Pequod, since, at this point in the novel, Ishmael does not have the mental remove to apprehend the extent or import of his social conditioning, and therefore, most strongly reflects it.

In chapter three I focus on Melville's representation of the experience of eternity at sea while divulging the differences between Ishmael and Ahab's reactions to that experience. From this discussion I make the case that Melville supports Ishmael's approach to eternity as a model for the reader in that he undergo a conversion, or change, as a result. While at first he merely tries to blend into the eternal rhythm of nature, which is inhuman—losing himself in death-like reverie—he learns to embrace a living and human eternity lodged within the unity and communal bonds between men.

Finally, in chapter four, I examine the reader's experience of *Moby-Dick* as she moves through its various temporal modes. In doing this I argue that Melville is prompting his reader to undergo a conversion wherein her experience of eternity allows her to become active in defining reality and in questioning/rebelling against hierarchic figures such as Ahab.

*Note: I identify the reader of Melville's text as female so as to avoid pronoun confusion in chapters where I discuss the reader alongside Ishmael, Melville and Ahab. My intention is not to exclude the masculine experience from *Moby-Dick*, which is central to its work.

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Introduction: If the Land Stopped Eternity from Happening

How I spurned that turnpike earth!—that common highway all over dented with the marks of slavish heels; and turned me to admire the magnanimity of the sea which will permit no records.

~Ishmael¹

The “turnpike” earth Ishmael describes above is America at the middle of the nineteenth century—the height of the industrial revolution when man was beginning to harness the earth’s natural resources on a large scale through mining, logging, the creation of canals, railroads, etcetera. With the rise of industry, then, the landscape was being turned into a source of wealth, which could be plotted off, excavated, sold and used to create profit. As a result, its physical appearance had been irremediably altered from that of a vast wilderness to an increasingly cultivated frontier thereby losing its status as an emblem of the untamed or sublime, a position it had held in the West since it’s founding in the fifteenth century. For Ishmael, these alterations constitute a fundamental betrayal of nature, compelling him to turn his back on America—to “spurn” it in other words. But why is this?

The physical presence of “records” or “marks” on earth has much to do with the indignant attitude Ishmael expresses in that they reveal the extent to which the land is participating in and reflecting human activity rather than a divine order. Forensic in quality, they bear witness to the land’s involvement in the creation of human profit. Moreover, they demonstrate that while the land is being physically divided, marked, stripped, turned into money, and superceded by numbers, it loses its status as nature. By contrast, the ocean, which will “permit no records,” remains free of man’s reductive

¹ Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. Ed, Tony Tanner. Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford University Press: Oxford. 1998). Herein, I will use this copy in referring to the text. (53)

powers; because it is ever changing it can resist systems of quantification. In Ishmael's account this fact defines the ocean as both natural and magnanimous. Standing outside the impress of Western progress, the ocean embraces measurelessness, eternity and the sublime, reminding man that nature is not something he can own.

Written in 1850, *Moby-Dick* emerged during the industrial revolution when individualism and unrestrained competition were the ideologies fueling America's dream of progress (Mattheissen, 183). At this time, man's place in the world became a negotiable subject. With large-scale settlement of the frontier, people were gaining a sense of increased control over the circumstances of their lives. In the same stroke, however, they began to lose their religious sense of order and place within the universe. Foundational concepts such as the primacy of God over man² came to be questioned for the first time. In their stead, new laws—the principles of quantification, time and money—were erected, which would reflect the conditions of modern life and dictate the way men and women lived their lives.

By examining the social effects of technological progress in America in the nineteenth century through the lens of Ishmael's narrative, I take the position in this thesis that Herman Melville is deeply concerned with the effects of quantification in *Moby-Dick*. In my interpretation, Ahab's struggle to kill the whale represents industrial society's effort to kill and consume nature through measurement and the tragic outcome of this effort is testimony to the flawed logic that undergirds that drive. By contrast, the super-narrative involving Ishmael's description of the whale stages an effort to by-pass measurement, thereby redressing the discontinuous effects of quantification on the self.

² Quoting Mattheissen, "Anyone concerned with orthodoxy holds that the spiritual decadence of the Nineteenth century can be measured according to the alteration in the object of its belief from God-Man to Man-God, and to the corresponding shift in emphasis from Incarnation to Deification (446).

The novel as I read it is therefore a cautionary tale meant to deflect Industrial America's pursuit of progress through measurement, or the institution of marks upon nature.

Literary critics of the past century such as Lewis Mumford (1977) and Wai-Chee Dimock (1989) do not agree with my reading of Ahab's tragedy, or the novel's aim. Mumford understands Ahab's monomaniac quest to kill the whale in mainly progressive and triumphant terms. Despite the fact that Ahab kills his entire crew, he writes:

The whole tale of the West, in mind and action, in the moral wrestling of the Jews, in the philosophy and art of the Greeks, in the organization and technique of the Romans, in the precise skills and unceasing spiritual quests of modern man, is a tale of this effort to combat the whale—to ward off his blows, to counteract his aimless thrusts, to create a purpose that will offset the empty malice of *Moby Dick* (79).

To make up for the fact that Ahab creates human destruction rather than progress, Mumford circuitously ascribes victory to the book's author. Applauding Melville for his ability to create meaning in the face of random disorder, Mumford describes his success in the novel as an embodiment of the triumph of Western progress. The specific meaning achieved by the book, however, is not an issue for him. He disingenuously glosses over the philosophic uncertainty and pessimism Melville grapples with throughout *Moby-Dick*, neglecting to mention that being titled *The Whale* it is itself aligned with the evasive, "aimless thrusts" of nature.

Wai Chee Dimock, completely opposed to Mumford, takes an historical tack in her analysis of *Moby-Dick* to demonstrate the ways in which the book reinforces the failure of Western culture by endorsing the empirical ideologies of Jacksonian empire. Dimock therefore reads *Moby-Dick* in reference to the dialogue of nineteenth individualism, which, she argues, is central to the textual freedom Melville is attempting

to achieve in the novel³. According to this reading, Melville's "project in *Moby-Dick* is to achieve an island of immunity... an institution of the discrete, a faith in the self-contained and self-sufficient" (110). Thus, Dimock aligns antebellum America's efforts to achieve empire and self-sufficiency with Melville, and ascribes the destruction that takes place within the novel to him⁴. The victim of the novel, for her, is Ahab, a figure of feudal barbarism resembling the Native American insofar as he is fated to become extinct within the allegory of linear progress, or Manifest Destiny, which is the allegory of individualism.

Both of these approaches are extremely wrong headed in my opinion. The object of the text is neither quite so positive nor negative, but markedly ambivalent. Though it offers itself as a warning against American industry's technological drive to mark and kill nature, it provides few answers or corrective examples. What it does do is attempt to raise interest in the unresolved nature of human life, demonstrating that there will be no moment of triumph over nature in which man can celebrate the completion of his progressive vision. Through its representation of the whale and eternity at sea, the book emphasizes the unbounded within nature, which is and will always be, thus compelling readers to question their position in the world.

³ My thesis disagrees on a fundamental level with Dimock's work. Though each of us looks at *Moby-Dick* in reference to time and American society in the antebellum period, we come to very different conclusions. There are three major fronts on which this disagreement becomes most apparent to me. First, I conceive Melville's project in *Moby-Dick* not as an effort to create authorial freedom, but as a project in sharing voice and authorship with the proletariat figure of Ishmael. Second, I do not consider the doubloon and Ambergris to be symbolic representations of freedom, but as nexuses of diverse meaning, or ciphers with alterable meaning, as the chapter "The Doubloon" demonstrates. Moreover, I do not consider these symbols to carry as much weight in the text as Dimock assumes. Third, I consider Melville's larger motivations for writing *Moby-Dick* to lie in his desire to subvert industrial power in the nineteenth century by promoting the establishment of a democratic people. Hence, Dimock's focus on individualism does not, even at the most fundamental level, register as being true to my understanding of *Moby-Dick*.

⁴ It needs to be stressed that the basis of Dimock's argument rests on the tentative claim that Melville is making efforts to become a supreme judge and ruler in his writing, and that his motivation in destroying the Pequod is to demonstrate his power.

Melville's use of time as a means of reorienting his reader within nature, or the world, is highly motivated by historic circumstances. In the nineteenth century, time was a volatile concept both within the realm of personal experience and philosophic thought. In other words, its parameters were uncertain. Undefined as a normative experience, time occupied a potentially disruptive position within American society. Seen for what it is—a negotiable subject—time had the capacity to upset people's notion of reality. By disrupting the common sense view of time as general succession, it could wrench individuals out of their routinized sense of belonging to a society that limited time to mere economic exchange⁵. Melville demonstrates this fact in the way he unharnesses the revolutionary potential of time as a concept within *Moby-Dick*.

Up to the nineteenth century, time had been negatively conceived as a threat to man as both the destroyer of humanity (or art, civilization etc.) and the bringer of death. With the rise of industry, it came to be seen as a measurement of human progress taking place in a linear-historic progression and acquired a neutral character. Experienced more and more as constant change (Meyerhoff, 89), time in the nineteenth century no longer occupied a cognitive or experiential realm of its own, but reflected and was confined to the human pattern outside the natural or divine. Surprisingly, the clerical order did not fight this shift; according to Douglas the protestant clergy kept pace with changing opinions by arguing that time was no longer an issue of "God's days and years marshaled toward the relentless revelation of the divine will," but belonged to man as "moments running freely into space" (140).

⁵ The ideas I put forth here are greatly influence by Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension*, where he discusses art as having the same disruptive potential that I ascribe to Melville's handling of time in *Moby-Dick*.

Philosophers of the nineteenth century such as Hegel defined human reality as a process of constant change and historic movement, which exists only in time. Thus, Hegel posited, "the dialectic operates only in time" (Douglas, 171), reflecting the Enlightenment notion that time will of itself yield progress (Bacon, 100). With this premise, philosophers discarded the Augustinian belief that reality is experienced in reference to a divine realm which is the opposite of succession and where there is "full possession of an endless life that is all one" (Quinones, 14). The concept of eternity, being superfluous to their efforts to understand the parameters of human life, did not concern them.

To make this reduced view of time viable—or to enact a means of forgetting the otherness of time represented by notions of eternity (Meyerhoff, 77)—the industrial world engaged in a race against it. Improvements in technology and rapid production rates constituted efforts to prove man's control over time by demonstrating the ways in which it could be monitored and made material. As a result of their efforts, time came to be seen as the defeated opponent rather than the destroyer of man for the first time in history.

In contrast to these progressive trends within economy and society, time in *Moby-Dick* is fundamentally inhuman. In his representation of the white whale, Melville embodies a view of time divorced from human progress: "I am horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, which, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over" (408). To highlight the contrast of this view with that of nineteenth century industry, Melville deploys the

whale as an ironic manifestation of humanity's impotent triumph over nature and time.

He writes:

[T]he mighty iron Leviathan of the modern railway is so familiarly known in its severy pace, that, with watches in their hands, men time his rate as doctors that of a baby's pulse; and lightly say of it, the up train or the down train will reach such or such a spot, at such or such an hour (491).

Unlike the railroad, which is utterly predictable and controlled, the whale exerts free will through evasion, inspiring horror rather than complacency in its beholder. It is therefore the more potent and sublime reality. But more importantly, the whale offers proof that the effort to control the mysteries of nature are both futile and destructive. For, it is indomitable: "though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks, he would still swim away unharmed" (163).

The whale's indominability, to my mind, is a re-confirmation of the natural sublime, which had lost significance in due proportion to the rise of technology. With the invention and quick establishment of the cross continental railroad, the American people came to glorify technology as a source of wonder that surpassed the natural frontier through its domination of space and time. In train-coaches men and women could travel at speeds never before achieved, paying little regard to weather conditions and rough terrain (Martin, 248). By thus subjugating the landscape to the service of human operations, technology stripped the natural world of its previous capacity to inspire. This loss created a narrowing (or division) in American thought⁶. On the one hand, technology and the popular culture of progress sought to deny nature's power. On the other, a

⁶ Ann Douglas' book, *The Feminization of American Culture* is devoted to mapping out this division.

minority of intellectuals, such as Melville, Emerson and Thoreau, continued to argue for its essential dignity.

Melville certainly understood the value of time as a variable of diverse interpretation within the nineteenth century, for he supplies a multifaceted characterization of it within *Moby-Dick*. Representing first the industrial view of time as succession, he then goes on to create an inverse view of time as eternity aboard the Pequod. In doing this, he generates two corresponding ways in which man can experience temporality, the first as Newtonian progress⁷ or unit production and the second as an eternal or rhythmic experience. Thus, he refutes industrial society's notion that time has one face and can be simply demarcated in a predictable and consumable fashion. For him, it is a sublime, rhythmically moving force, variously manifested—the deep, all-inclusive center of nature.

In many ways, Melville addresses the anxiety of a people living within a century of change, wherein they will be irrevocably cut off from the precedent of history. Emerson expresses this anxiety in the introduction to his essay "Nature," where, embedded within his expansive praise of America's novelty and potential growth we begin to detect that the poet is so effusive on the subject precisely because he is unconvinced that novelty is an absolute positive: "why should we grope among the dry bones of the past... There are new lands, new men, new thoughts" (7). And if the world of the future can, at times, seem daunting for an oracular figure such as Emerson, what might have been the experience of the average man? One can justly assume Americans

⁷ The Newtonian concept of time is one of "serial designation," which "puts time completely under the jurisdiction of number" (911) according to Wai Chee Dimock; it is immutable and forever flowing in one even direction (915). "Non-Newtonian Time: Robert Lowell, Roman History, Vietnam War." American Literature.

were searching for a connection to things known, be it England, European architecture, history, nature or eternity. They were searching for continuation through time, and Melville, it seems to me, was cognizant of this fact in *Moby-Dick*. By removing his reader from the linearly driven continent where time is change to an eternity at sea he is working to give his readers a sense of continuity.

That Melville's represents time in *Moby-Dick* in a fashion adverse to the progressive thrust of his society is no surprise when one considers the alienation Melville experienced within nineteenth century culture. This alienation is well documented, having been pointed out by numerous critics⁸ as well as Melville himself⁹. In brief accounts, it has even been looked at in regards to Melville's view of time. William Ellery Sedgwick notes that Melville's interests did not lie in the "foreground truth about men in the nineteenth century but the eternal background truth of man" (93). Though his focus is not eternity per se, Sedgwick points to an enlarged understanding of time beyond the contemporary in Melville's work. Dimock as well looks at Melville's view of time, describing *Moby-Dick* as being involved in an investigation of timelessness, which is opposed to everyday temporality. For her, however, this focus does not demonstrate Melville to be broad-minded, but reflects nineteenth century allegoric representations of time, which were programmatic and socially repressive. For her, Melville is an allegorist (54) and she assigns him a specific orientation toward time endemic to its use. The allegorist's time is always "an ideal time that is never here and now but always a past or

⁸ To cite a few, Joseph Flibbert in *Melville and the Art of Burlesque*, and Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of America*, discuss Melville's alienation in socio-historical terms. On the philosophic front, William Ellery Sedgwick, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Lawrence Buell, see Melville's divergence from antebellum America as having to do with a clash of philosophic viewpoints.

⁹ Melville's oft-quoted letter to Hawthorne is helpful in understanding this point; "Dollars damn me...What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches"(Yanella, 64).

an endless future" (22); being utterly static, it represents the plane of fate, which renders the individual passive to its occurrence. I will take issue with this view further on in chapter three; for now I feel it is enough to state that my own sense of Melville's view of time in *Moby-Dick* is anything but static. Making note of these several approaches, I find myself at a jumping off point where the current critical understanding of the topic is inadequate, and where the importance of issues such as quantification and eternity within the text warrants further discussion.

Born at the dawn of the modern era, *Moby-Dick* was conceived at a unique moment in history when the notion that man stood on the cusp of time irreparably divided from his past first began to take hold. It therefore marks an originary moment in our cultural history, which has much to say about the present¹⁰. Because *Moby-Dick* strives to invoke a temporality lost to the industrial world, it serves as a commemoration of the past, reminding us that technology has come at a steep price. It also continues to impress us with the need to see past our diurnal, human-centered understanding of time, which enables and compels us to seek dominance over nature.

* * *

Again, it is my aim to demonstrate that *Moby-Dick* is a socially subversive text which makes a serious attempt at altering the vision of its readership. Several critics have described the structure of the novel as a conversion process in which the reader, like Ishmael, undergoes a transformation as a result of his experience on the *Pequod*. Ann Douglas discusses this process in social historic terms by outlining Melville's

¹⁰ Much of Ann Douglas' argument in *The Feminization of American Culture* focuses on the ways in which contemporary consumer culture has its roots in nineteenth century thought.

disagreement with the moral thrust of his social environment (304) and his attempt to “put the shark back” into religion (305). Daniel Hoffman takes a more textual approach by noting the importance of the myth of Jonah’s conversion as a structural element of the story. Joseph Flibbert describes the novel as a “scathing indictment of society’s stratagems to avoid the truth” (92), which is meant to awaken readers to the fact that nature cannot be controlled. With these viewpoints in mind, I find that the source of the book’s power lies in the temporal experience it exerts on the reader.

Its principle subject being movement, both physical and temporal, *Moby-Dick* progresses through three distinct experiences of movement within time, or speeds: linear, eternal, and a forced repetition of linear time. I organize my thesis around these movements in an attempt to delineate how the conversion process works. For a visual representation of these different temporal modes as well as the organization of my thesis, see figure three.

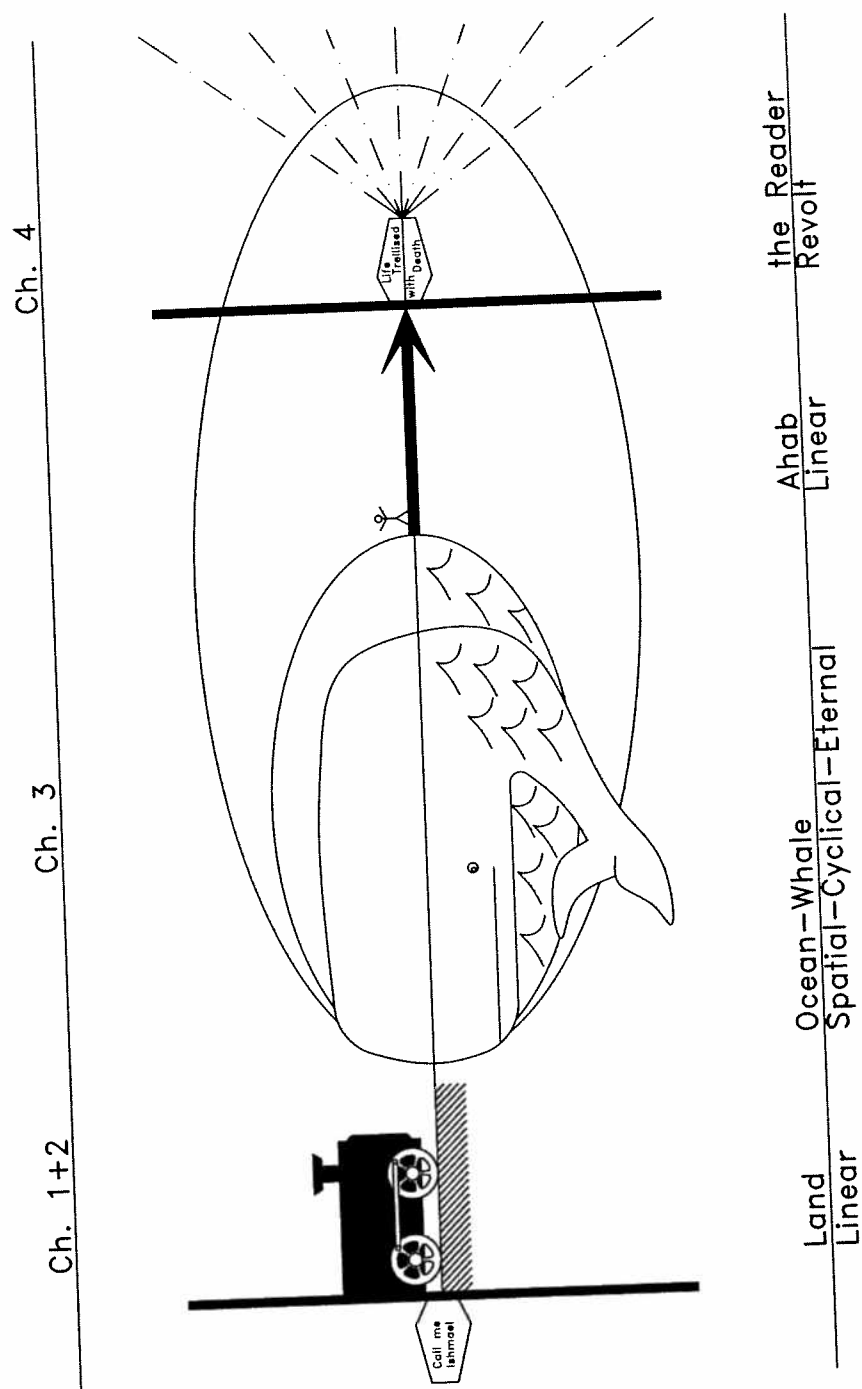


Figure 1: The temporal movements of *Moby-Dick* are given as geometric properties, which coincide with the organization of my thesis.

Chapter One: Nineteenth Century American Time

As a result of vast improvements in technology and industrial growth in the nineteenth century, the American people experienced a speeding up of their daily lives, which destabilized time as an experience and as a tool of measurement.

To conceptualize the extent to which people's experience of time had become unstable in this period, it is helpful to consider first and foremost the experience of travel, which was constantly undergoing change. Improvements in transportation technology occurred at an incredible rate within the period extending from 1800 to 1860 when the turnpike and stagecoach succeeded to the steamboat (which could reach a maximum speed of 20-miles per hour) (Martin, 245), and all three fell to the railroad, (which by 1861 had reached a speed of 40-miles per hour and railroad tracks had increased from 9,000 miles to 30,000) (Martin, 252). For people living in this period, their notion of movement though space was one that occurred at progressively reduced rates in time. Thus, they confronted the loss of normative measurements such as the 60-mile per hour, which stabilize time as a measurement of speed.

Increased movement within cities further disrupted people's experience of time at a fundamental level during this period. Before the turn of the century, American cities were primarily slow-paced centers of domestic commerce characterized by face-to-face contact between workers and townspeople, the lower and higher class. By 1850, however, a quickly moving, industrial matrix full of the bustle of omnibuses, stagecoaches, trolleys and so on, had been built up, increasing the pace of life exponentially. With the influx of immigrants that more than doubled the size of cities such as New York, whose population rose from 300,000 inhabitants in 1840 to 800,000 in 1850 (merely a decade of growth) (Blumin, 147) the commuter population grew (164), spurring the need for increased

movement and speedier transportation. Meanwhile, the dense population within city neighborhoods fueled an overwhelming desire among the people to move, to view life as incremental and the present as temporary. According to Martin, Americans at this time had little attachment to their dwelling places, and “expected to move as soon as they could afford better homes” (401).

The work environment of the nineteenth century also underwent vast changes, which disrupted the temporal order. With the rise of specialized firms that sought to establish a competitive edge over artisan-merchants, the pace of production increased. As a result, time management became a central concern (Blumin, 82) both for large corporations and consumers who were encouraged to view time efficiency as the thing that made social progress, in the form of standardized merchandise, possible. Unlike the individual craftsman, who set the pace of production according to his own taste, or nature of the task, (76) large firms portrayed themselves as catering to the customer’s schedule and needs. According to Stuart Blumin, this strategy worked:

In the Jacksonian era, commentators applauded the efficiencies of specialized firms...and ridiculed general merchants and storekeepers as quaint survivals from a day gone by...Whether a store was large or small, wholesale or retail, what was admired was systematic management of the routine tasks that made up the business day of a specialized firm” (82).

With time efficiency and regularity established as values that would ensure social progress, specialized firms reorganized society so as to promote increased production at the cost of human standards. One of the major shifts that took place at this time was a downgrading and deskilling of manual as opposed to nonmanual labor, which corresponded to the creation of wage labor. The annual income of wage laborers in 1850 averaged at approximately \$300, not nearly enough to cover the minimal living costs of

an average sized family, which Stuart Blumin suggests to have exceeded \$500 (109-110). Nonmanual workers, on the other hand, earned in the thousands annually and could easily afford the costs of living.

The difference in the wages of manual and nonmanual workers created two alternate experiences of time for people in the nineteenth century. The first, that of manual workers, who put in 11+ hour days, describes a lifestyle of not being able to “live” in the present. This class of people was “likely to attend to.... matters of old-age security” before they concerned themselves with the “present comforts of a well-furnished home” (Blumin, 163). The present, for them, consisted of the need to earn money, while the future loomed far ahead in an unachieved (unbought) realm. This experience of time reinforced the progressive thrust of Capitalism, as workers were too busy struggling in the present to make significant, or long-range social demands. As Dimock justly points out, “it was the constitution of a proprietary self—the inscription of a contractual relation within the structure of personhood—that underwrote the labor relations of industrial Capitalism” (31). The ultimate goal of this proprietary self, according to Dimock was to “lay claim not to a tract of land, but to a better lot: a sort of temporal real estate, the self’s property in time” (39). Hence, the manual worker led a diverted existence.

The second experience of time, that of nonmanual workers, also paradoxically describes an inability to “live” in the present. Though capable of attaining physical comfort, nonmanual workers were not encouraged to indulge in leisure. The value of efficiency being so deeply engrained within antebellum American culture, leisure, like idleness, was frowned on as a poor use of time. According to Edgar W. Martin, “business men continued to work, either in deference to public opinion or because they would not

otherwise have known what to do with their time" (399). Moreover, there was no tradition of leisure activity in this period, and miniscule participation in sports to encourage present-oriented lifestyles (366).

With the hastening of America's productive life, popular culture also embraced the value of rapidity and turnover through the newspaper, which served as its main outlet. According to Martin, "every family subscribed to a paper, even rural families taking the local if not the metropolitan paper...the newspaper was the 'most serious of daily considerations'" (314). As the single most powerful institution in America, the newspaper established the hot off the presses, breaking news standard as a barometer of informational importance. In doing this, it shaped social values to reinforce the Capitalist understanding of time's passage as resulting in a series of consumable dates and products. In other words, the newspaper encouraged people to see time as a kind of input, "directly proportional to productivity, inversely proportional to consumption" and therefore "useless as soon as it is worn out" (Meyerhoff, 108). This standard precluded a serious interest in lasting forms of literature, accounting for the fact that though America was an unusually literate nation for the time, people did not read classic literature (Martin, 325). Instead, reading was considered a consumer activity—a time killer (327)—, which exhausted itself in the present (Meyerhoff, 109).

Further reinforcing the present, isolated moment within the nineteenth century of progress, Romantic historians of the time, such as George Bancroft, Jared Sparks, William Prescott and John L. Motley¹¹ did little to correct trends of fragmentation by offering a synthetic outlook on human history. Fascinated by the fact of constant change, the work of Romantic historians is "marked by a sense of unending motion which...

¹¹ Also included in this list are Francis Parkman, George Ticknor and Edward Everett who Ann Douglas talks about in *The Feminization of American Culture* (170-173).

parallels ... the aspiring will" (Douglas, 177). In an effort to express this type of unending motion within history, Romantic historians paradoxically devalued the importance of the past in its link to the present, for they cared less about continuity than the creation of an "epic panorama" in which great figures emerged from the mass in order to further imperialism and human progress (176). In more concise terms, they sought to "invoke and control the ungovernable spirit animating capitalist culture, which was change itself" (Douglas, 177).

Viewing time as constant change, Romantic historians reinforced the industrial project by excluding the concept of eternity from the metaphysical outlook of the nineteenth century. Whereas an eternal order had figured prominently within religious accounts of human history, which were dominant up to the turn of the century, the new secular, historicist account of history had no use for realities outside temporal succession. According to Meyerhoff, the "fading of the belief in an eternal order" led to an experience of time "more and more within the context, order and direction of human history" (94). And whether historians intended to or not, truth like people's lifestyles "became a function of time, or the historical process," and "no longer a reflection of an 'eternal' order" (94). The religious belief that man had fallen from a more perfect, timeless state into succession was therefore no longer comprehensive. And insofar as human progress seemed to complete and encompass the temporal design, it was no longer obvious that man stood below his creator. For F.O. Matthiessen, this shift in temporal thought therefore involved an "alteration in the object of [19th century America's] belief."

Th[e] celebration of Man's triumph involved also the loss of several important attitudes: that there was anything more important than the individual; that he might find his completion in something greater than himself; that the real basis for human brotherhood was not in humanitarianism

but in men's common aspiration and fallibility, in their humility before God (446).

Further upsetting the metaphysics of time in this era, discoveries by paleontologists such as Cuiver and Hutton at the end of the 18th century made it clear that the earth was much older than had been projected by the Bible¹². Opening up "entire new vistas and territories of time" (Guthrie, 6-7) in which theories of the past could no longer be taken seriously, paleontologists introduced a need to re-mythologize man's position in the world. Thus, thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson made important attempts to synthesize the unsettling knowledge of modern science with established religious views from the past. The argument Emerson presented was one in which, despite the expansion of geologic time, and the relative brevity of mankind's presence on earth, man continued to be the primary subject or mover within nature. In one of his Journals¹³ Emerson writes,

Nature deposited her secret, and notched every day of her thousand thousand millenniums. A wood sawyer may read it. The facts are capable of but one interpretation...no magic—eternal tranquil procession of old, familiar laws...a perpetual solicitation of man's faculties to read the riddle (Guthrie, 19).

Persistent in the idea that man is central within nature, Emerson lays out beautifully inspired rhetoric to demonstrate that millennia do not equal chaos. Rather, the unfathomable reaches of time constitute a process by which God's message is coded within nature, a message that only man can interpret in its singular truth. Theologically, one might read this passage as an effort to reinstate Christian mythology to its former

¹² James R. Guthrie discusses the essential link between the biblical explanation of time and man's orientation in the world in *Time: Emerson and Thoreau's Temporal Revolutions*. He writes, "Up until the early nineteenth century, time, history, man, and the planet had all been considered roughly contemporary with each other. The earth itself, according to Genesis, had been created only six days before Adam, so that heretofore, humankind's existence had provided not only an index to virtually all time, but, because God had fabricated man and woman after he had already completed the rest of Creation, a telos for time, as well. Man was therefore instrumental not only to time's origin, but also to its ends" (8).

¹³ Transcription appears in the Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. J.T.Fraser (George Braziller: New York, 1966) 12.

status. And yet, Emerson makes a crucial move away from precedent by neglecting to define eternity as something outside earthly history and human control. For him, the present moment or the “everyday” of earth is eternal. Emerson encouraged people to abandon themselves within the present (Poulet, 325) as a redemptive and holy place. Curiously enough, however, this argument that man ought to become engulfed in the present closely resembles that of Romantic historicists and industrialists of the nineteenth century, whose focus on the present, which is constantly changing, deprives workers of a sense of continuity over time and within themselves. Despite its inspirational outlook, then, it seems more interested in maintaining the status quo than in altering the restrictive conditions of nineteenth century society.

Being abandoned by the institutions of industry and culture to the present moment, many individuals in the nineteenth century could not help becoming caught up in the volatile and disruptive flow of change. Urbanization, as the result of industrial progress, brought about a decline in the importance of the family (Meyerhoff, 112). Consequently, lifestyles of detachment from community and history became increasingly popular for young people cut off from their ancestral homes or disinherited, as Melville was. Hence, the disruptive nature of industrial progress demanded the loss and recreation of one’s personal identity. Dimock points this out by arguing that people of the nineteenth century experienced themselves as orphans whose essential identity consisted in their position outside history (142). The construction of identity on such a foundation did nothing to elevate the individual, however; it merely reinforced the disruptive effects of industrial growth by promoting the loss of social and temporal networks, which may have enabled the masses to claim social power.

Encouraged to live in the present without recourse to a familial or religious sense of the past, and yet unable to “live” in that present because of a lack of economic resources, the American people felt the heavy and paradoxical influence of time in their day-to-day lives. A thing in itself, time was constantly made visible as the input of wage-labor and production, while it was, at the same time, forever elusive as a productive output—something one can possess. Thus, time came to be the object of acute desire for many Americans. According to Meyerhoff, “Time was... of supreme value, because it produced things of value... time itself came to be looked upon as a precious commodity” (106). To conceptualize the extent to which time was of essence in this period one might refer to the prevalence of pocket watch ownership. Blumin maintains that clocks and good watches were among the most valuable and basic furniture of artisans among the middling classes—a non-aristocratic social group—in the eighteenth century (53-56). By 1853 manufactured watches with inter-changeable parts were being sold on the mass market at standardized prices (Martin, 213) making it possible for nearly everyone with some means to own one. Thus, by the antebellum period, time had become a product of the efficient labor practices it reinforced and a commodity of mass consumption.

The desire to possess time, which was experienced on an individual level, also had its place among the corporate power structure, which sought possession of time to further its profit-making capacity. The present oriented focus of American society made the satisfaction of this desire possible, in that corporations could collect the residue of labor and progress. The individual, on the other hand, became increasingly enslaved by time so much so that her subjective worth was in severe jeopardy. In “The Tartarus of Maids” Melville portrays the effects of industrial society on the experience of workers trapped within industry’s effort to purchase time: “at rows of blank-looking counters sat

rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper" (Bryant, 159). In this passage, Melville aptly demonstrates, through his syntax and repetition of "blank," the idea that, where time and profit are the guiding objects behind labor, the individual is wiped clean away; committed to a specific kind of production for her livelihood, she becomes instrumental, "just like any other commodity.... worth the price he can fetch" (Meyerhoff, 114). He also demonstrates that where the self is "broken up into fragmentary pieces of experience and production," as a result of being too much defined by the present expendable moment, "it is a 'divided and unhappy consciousness.'" Hence, "the question of man's ultimate worth looms large and ominous" (114) in Melville's work.

For the average individual working in 19th century America, who wore a manufactured watch to regulate his movements—hastening to the factory and plunging through the work day to return to his boarding house—time as a social and economic concept dictated every aspect of his life. And yet, even while the effects of time were spelled out in every one of his movements and actions, he did not have the mental or historic remove to recognize this fact. In other words, he didn't have the time or freedom to think. This state of affairs reflects Herbert Marcuse's theory of repressive tolerance, in which an individual is so fully integrated into the ideology of his historical moment, he can no longer understand his own experience (Marcuse, 81-123). At the outset of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael occupies this position; caught in the flux of the present moment, he is unable to diagnose the source of his discontent as being linked to the larger social environment and oppressive influence of time on his working life. This, too, is the reader at the start of the novel, from which point she gains a critical purchase on her world and begins to enter into Melville's conversion process.

Chapter Two: Time on Land and Exiting

Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand
thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean
reveries... But these are all landsmen; of week days pent up
in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches,
clinchd to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields
gone? What do they here?

~Ishmael¹⁴

It was during the industrial age, according to Ortega Y Gasset, when the modern mass came into being and men lost touch with their inner selves; “herded together in crowds...[men] cannot reconstruct their individuality in the one place it can be reconstructed which is silence,” (200). Ralph Waldo Emerson echoes this view in his essay, “Self-Reliance:” “[i]t is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps.... independence of solitude” (263). Waging that it is in fact possible to keep independence of solitude within a crowd, Emerson confirms that living well within an industrial world is contingent on one’s ability to locate silence. Melville, too, recognized the need for silence, but explores its relative absence on land in *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael’s depleted experience as a worker compel him to leave society behind altogether in his pursuit of silence. In other words, Ishmael’s experience forces him to commit an act of escape, which is one step away from death. Confirming the seriousness of the industrial worker’s situation, Meyerhoff describes the necessity of extreme measures in dispelling the negative and fragmentary impact of industrial time on the self.

Time as experienced by man came to exhaust itself more
and more in the quantitative units measurable here and
now.... it now requires a special effort, special skills and
training, or a peculiar frame of mind, to keep in touch with
the past, to reconstruct one’s own personal biography

¹⁴ Pp. 1

according to a coherent, unified, and significant pattern (109).

In the terms Meyerhoff provides, Ishmael's ability to leave the land is "special" in that it is neither an obvious move—as Emerson suggests—nor easy. The product of American values and community, Ishmael's ability to detach himself from that world will involve a significant detachment from important aspects of his identity. In other words, it is just as much an internal departure as it is external.

Because readers are asked to identify with Ishmael, insofar as we are intimately acquainted with his progress and dilemma, we come to know the impact of Capitalist society on the individual through him. Ishmael's role in *Moby-Dick*, therefore, is to act as a conduit for the reader's enlightenment. He is offered as a repository for the confused and restricting affects of industrial society, and in our efforts to tease out points of confusion within his character, we are able to view the presuppositions about time and other means of quantification that undergird Capitalist society. Through him, also, we discern what is at stake in the attempt to step outside the dominant pattern—to bypass or reform systems of quantification. Within the following chapter, therefore, I will trace the influence of measurement on the lives of workers within industrial society through a study of Ishmael's character. In doing this, I account for the economic, social and textual factors that culminate in Ishmael's disavowal of time on land and make his voyage into eternity at sea possible.

Early on in the novel, it is evident to the reader that Ishmael is struggling to meet the demands of his society and that these demands have a grave hold on his identity. Interestingly enough, however, Ishmael is not fully aware of this fact. From a Marxist perspective, he does not have the means of recognizing the hand of economics as a shaping force within his experience, and he is unable to see himself as belonging to a

class of similarly exploited people. Any effort on his part to understand the causes of his discontent are therefore confused. When Ishmael speculates on the reason men long for the ocean, rather than achieve a general truth about nature, he perpetuates a feeling of discontent that is specific to the industrial worker. In other words, while attempting to philosophize from a point of objectivity about the ocean's universal draw, Ishmael cannot avoid making comments such as "I find myself growing grim about the mouth" (1), which suggest that his admiration for the ocean is bound up with feelings of bitterness toward the conditions of his life.

Not only does Ishmael underestimate the effect of society upon him, but he also consistently misrepresents the extent of his own rebelliousness or antipathy toward society. Only moments after introducing himself, Ishmael describes a desire to methodically knock peoples' hats off (1), which, it would follow, is in some way fundamental to his identity. Though this fact may not immediately register as important, it suggests a cold, hostility toward social marks¹⁵ of position and power. The only thing holding Ishmael back from an outburst of this kind is the "moral principle" he describes, an abstract notion of conduct. While this statement confirms that Ishmael is sufficiently controlled by the standards of civilized behavior, we are also aware of the fact that those standards are what Ishmael would rebel against. That such decorum could be knocked aside is a very real possibility, demonstrating that the revolution in Ishmael's physical and instinctual body is at the tipping point. The question we must ask, therefore, is what will cause Ishmael to go over the edge.

¹⁵ According to Stuart Blumin, the mid-nineteenth century was period, in which people tended to dress above their means, and where social class produced much anxiety. Melville saw this as a means of disusing the real struggle of the period.

It becomes increasingly evident through the first fifth of the book that Ishmael's animosity toward industrial society and conflict within it are the result of enormous economic pressures bearing down on him, coupled with the absence of a social network or welfare system. Ishmael confesses to the precariousness of this situation by telling the reader, "besides, I ain't insured" (22). While the tone he uses to make this statement is flippant, it is an attempt to deflect attention from the import of its message, clearly suggesting that Ishmael is anxious about his position as an expendable and anonymous figure in his society. For, insofar as his world cares nothing for him, he has no reason, nor liability, for complying with its demands and must seek his own standard of action. Moreover, where the simple act of walking, for him, is laden with pain he cannot ignore the injustice that surrounds him: "the congealed frost lay ten inches thick in a hard, asphaltic pavement,—rather weary for me...because from hard, remorseless service the soles of my boots were in a most miserable plight" (7). To a man who performs "remorseless" service, this bodily pain is a constant reminder that Capitalism, which has "congealed" against pity, is not natural. It does not pay the worker back in kind, but robs him of his existence. For, even the air is closed off and deadly within a Capitalist society where workers such as Ishmael are "over conscious of [their] lungs" (2). A haunting idea, this statement alludes to the avarice of industry's drive to buy up the resources of nature and ration them out at a high cost.

The question as to how a worker survives within Capitalism is prominent in *Moby-Dick* and Melville answers it by demonstrating the effects of corrosive quantification within Ishmael's moral character. Because Capitalist society operates by a pair of measurements, which include money and time, individuals within Capitalism, according to Melville, must become oriented to these measurements. Thus, he has

Ishmael describe his attitude toward money, which can be taken as normative, wherein the difference between being paid and paying is the basis of one's happiness and self-worth.

There is all the difference in the world between paying and being paid. The act of paying is perhaps the most uncomfortable infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us. But being paid—what will compare with it? (4).

Within such an orientation, separation from money is an agony on the level of originary punishment, inflicted by God. The opposite of such punishment in this equation is the ability to hoard money, an act that would be akin to God's reward for virtue. Being religiously figured in this way, Ishmael's attachment to money hits readers as absolutely perverse. Though we might accept that payment is superior to paying, we question the extent to which this difference should become a value system.

The logic behind Ishmael's description of payment and paying rests on an assumption that people enjoy being paid as a thing in itself and would willingly submit to relentless labor to attain money. Of course, this logic is flawed. It is more likely true that workers similar to Ishmael have been thrown into a historical situation where they have no choice but to desire money, and no means to do without it. Therefore, money for such workers is rather a trap than a blessing. Though Ishmael can find it good to receive money, as a worker he will never get enough to secure himself; therefore he can't stop wanting it. Like the worst industrialist, he must hoard the money he gains because it is precious. Having spent his entire adulthood in the pursuit of money, losing it constitutes a loss of self as well as the slight freedom his society offers. Moreover, it is a loss of time, which, for the working class individual, is the only asset one owns in a wage-labor

market. In a very real sense, therefore, to lose money within this system is to embrace death.

Before Ishmael is willing to abnegate his hold on life as a result of having no money, he attempts to negotiate his monetary position to gain freedom, or rather, comfort within the parameters of his society. Counseling himself on the seriousness of such negotiation Ishmael says, "Wherever in your wisdom you may conclude to lodge for the night, my dear Ishmael, be sure to inquire the price, and don't be too particular" (6). Apparent within this speech is the idea that being forced to determine the price tag of one's life requires effort. Within the pathos of his self-counsel we realize that the need to "inquire the price" tortures his humanity and Ishmael is losing the ability to keep body and soul together. It would seem, then, for Ishmael, an embrace of death in some form or another is inevitable.

Surrounding Ishmael in his efforts to negotiate money is a world of working class individuals, who are also pre-occupied with the need to negotiate their freedom or against their money in *Moby-Dick*. Drinking in the dim "public room" of the Spouter-Inn, the workingmen seek oblivion—a brand freedom that translates to an escape from time and other forms of social order. Their search, of course, does not lead to freedom but a trap where the effort to forget time through alcohol causes them to forget themselves as well. As with Ishmael, the negotiation for self seems to have erased their souls, instilling them with death-like inactivity devoid of desire. Even in this state of absence, however, money is still the deciding and central factor in determining how much and what degree of oblivion they can obtain. Thus, Ishmael describes the more expensive inns in New Bedford as simultaneously "too expensive and too jolly" (7) demonstrating that the two adjectives denote the same meaning. Comfortable and warm, jolly inns represent a world

in which men can escape the reductive influence of money to exercise humor and feelings of comradery, for, insofar as a person is not reminded of the role money plays in creating happiness, he is happy—neither disillusioned nor angry. Ishmael, on the other hand, cannot avoid recognizing money's role in the creation of happiness. His position outside the inn demands this of him.

‘[I]t maketh a marvelous difference, whether thou lookest out at it [Euroclydon] from a glass window where the frost is all on the outside, or whether thou observest it from that sashless window, where the frost is on both sides, and of which the wight Death is the only glazier’ (8).

In this passage, we see that within Capitalism a lack of money is a harbinger of death, and achievable happiness is a kind of oblivion or escape from reality. By making this comparison, Melville proves that within Capitalist society every aspect of life is founded on monetary values.

What is unique about Ishmael is that because he cannot ignore the sordidness of this set-up he does not buy into the notion that oblivion, or escape from time, equals happiness. In describing the bartender's method of portioning off drinks, Ishmael reveals as false, or ironic, the supposition that what one spends will determine what one receives in terms of personal fulfillment.

Parallel meridians rudely pecked into the glass, surround these footpads' goblets. Fill to this mark, and your charge is but a penny; to this a penny more; and so on to the full glass—the Cape Horn measure, which you may gulp down for a shilling (11).

Here, the “full glass” indicates the full measure of consumable happiness. By taking time to notice the significance of these measurements, Ishmael recognizes, to some extent, the lack of true happiness within his society. The men at the bar, on the other hand, are literally and figuratively drunk in their pursuit of the illusion that what is for sale and

within the system of quantification will bring happiness, and that by buying the privileges society has to offer they will somehow be given back to themselves. But more or less, this drunken illusion is the normative response of workers to the pressures of Capitalism in Ishmael's world.

Without alternatives, according to Robert B. Pippin, "what ought to be understood as contingent, one option among others... is instead falsely understood as necessary" (96). Within nineteenth century America, the absence of alternative forms of happiness created a world in which the need to exchange time for money was fundamental to the pursuit of happiness. Queequeg's presence in *Moby-Dick*, however, breaks this illusion. An ambassador from another world, Queequeg brings with him the knowledge that other social systems exist in which money is not central to one's happiness or identity. By placing value elsewhere, namely, in his relationship with Ishmael, Queequeg is able to give his money away—that awful punishment we discussed earlier. In witnessing this act, we discover that the renunciation of money does not, in any objective sense, equal a fundamental loss of life. Because his sense of freedom cannot be reduced to an equation, Queequeg circumvents the need to receive, hoard and be alone. As an alternative, he creates a friendship with Ishmael in "A Bosom Friend" through which he can realize joy and love. And later, in "The Monkey-Rope" this friendship becomes a bond of livelihood, or welfare system, which, like money, supports them both.

Through his acquaintance with Queequeg, Ishmael gains a new perspective and sense of self that allows him to repudiate his society. While he couldn't previously conceive of any happiness other than hoarding money and establishing his own autonomous space, he later describes himself as becoming conscious of the "household joy" of partnership.

For now I liked nothing better than to have Queequeg smoking by me, even in bed, because he seemed to be full of such serene household joy then. I no more felt unduly concerned for the landlord's policy of insurance. I was only alive to the condensed confidential comfortableness of sharing a pipe and a blanket with a real friend (48).

Within this partnership, Ishmael is freed from the necessity of being "unduly concerned" with the standing insurance policy and can act with a sense of personal freedom.

The fact that Ishmael is able to escape a normative relationship with money is not altogether Queequeg's doing however. Ishmael's orientation toward Capitalist society is already complicated when they meet. Upon introducing himself, Ishmael speaks of money in such a way that his negligent attitude toward it is part and parcel with who he is as a person.

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing in particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world (1).

Looking at this passage, it is clear that Ishmael, pre-novel, is indifferent, if not antipathetic, to money, which he describes as being for his "purse," as well as time, which he computes as "some years," thus demonstrating an inability to precisely quantify. And despite any action or decision of his own, Ishmael is an antithetical presence within nineteenth century society. An outcast going by the name of the cast-off son of Abraham, he is an archetype of the denied and disinherited of the world. In terms of the nineteenth century, this role translates to the unattached youth without capital.

Ishmael occupies a position of ambivalence in terms of his attitude toward time and money, which define who he is on a fundamental level. He is the not-money, or not-time, which, like being called "not a bad guy", is neither a positive nor negative. By recognizing this ambivalence we realize again that Ishmael's identity is caught up with

the world he inhabits and that to leave that world behind is more difficult than it may at first appear. To answer the question of how Ishmael finally gets on the ship, therefore, we need now to open our discussion to an examination of the ways in which Ishmael is being directed by his social environment, industrial economy, and the fate Melville fashions, to leave his world behind. By doing this we may come to understand the ways in which Ishmael's departure is an act of necessity rather than choice.

On a social level, Ishmael is a human within a world of machinery, and his lack of money to make up for this inadequacy renders him a hindrance to be got rid of. The fact that he is turned away from the windows of the Sword-Fish Inn on the basis of his patched up boots, demonstrates that social rejection within Ishmael's world is very real. Ishmael describes his rejection to himself thus, "But go on, Ishmael, said I at last; don't you hear? Get away from before the door; your patched boots are stopping the way" (7). Without fully analyzing the import of this scene, Ishmael hints that his humanity is being denied him. With nowhere to turn, he is led by necessity toward the peripheries of society; "I now by instinct followed the streets that took me waterward; for there, doubtless, were the cheapest, if not the cheeriest inns" (7).

As Ishmael progresses toward the "cheapest" inns and becomes aligned with an economic sector that is on its way out, we realize that the forces of industry, which alter whole cities and landscapes, have a hand in pushing Ishmael seaward. In other words, this alignment is impressed upon him more than it is chosen, as Ishmael would like us to think. Sharing a similar fate with those marginalized figures of his culture, Ishmael chooses to associate himself with Nantucket instead of New Bedford, the *Pequod* rather than the *Devil-dam* and *Tit-bit*. Thus, he willingly becomes (though he is more likely forced) caught up in the larger trends of modernization within his society. Within such a

position, it becomes a personal affront that “New Bedford has of late been gradually monopolizing the business of whaling” (6), and the old, slow-paced industries, like Nantucket whaling, have given way. And, it may be noted that while the reader is aligned with Ishmael, she will also feel a personal loss connected to the fact that the independent islands and scattered communities of the past are losing status in a world of progress and railways.

Industrialization was a serious and disruptive reality for the individual associated with Nantucket in Ishmael’s day. The physical isolation of such people outside the reach of industry was a factor that cut them off from progress, which translates to social suicide. For this reason, in *Moby-Dick* they occupy a marginal space between nature and society, life and death; the Nantucketer wears “quicksand shoes” and is “so shut up, belted about, every way inclosed, surrounded, and made an utter island of by the ocean” (55). To highlight this isolation, Ishmael states, “Nantucket is no Illinois” (55), meaning that it is opposed to every idea Illinois represents: Chicago, the future, economic opportunity, Westward progress, and, of course, railroads. Rather, Nantucket is a world being overrun by “clams.” Too much surrounded by the ocean’s eternal silence—no railroads connecting—it cannot speak the language of quantification and commerce. Like Ishmael, Nantucket is a symbol of the disinherited and represents a world that has lost its footing in social time.

Despite being rejected by the mainland and industry, the people of Nantucket find themselves at home on the sea, where nature is unmarked. “The Nantucketer, he alone resides and riots on the sea.... He lives on the sea as prairie cocks in the prairie; he hides among the waves” (56). The land being so alien to them, it is to the ocean therefore that

those such as Ishmael must go: "For years he knows not the land; so that when he comes to it at last, it smells like another world, more strangely than the moon would to an Earthsman" (56).

That those who associate with Nantucket are impelled to go to sea, suggests there is a psychological or, perhaps, divine plan beyond the forces of industrialization, urging Ishmael to board the *Pequod*. This larger plan, we may discern, has much to do with fate. For Ishmael the power of fate to guide his movements is very real when he states, "it's too late to make any improvements now. The universe is finished: the copestone is on, and the chips were carted off a million years ago" (8). Here, Ishmael reveals an impressive belief in a divine order, which correlates to the fatalistic Calvinism¹⁶ that characterizes Melville's works. According to Georges Poulet, in Melville's fictional representation of the world "[n]othing is and nothing shall be that has not been fixed by a divine antecedent will" (338). Ishmael's half mocking assertion that his voyage is part of divine providence may therefore be taken seriously.

Doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago. It came in as a sort of brief interlude and solo between more extensive performances (5).

That a divine force would concern itself with Ishmael is hard for the socially conditioned reader within a secular society to accept. And yet it carries weight in this context where the sense that Ishmael is being controlled by larger forces is starting to take shape.

¹⁶ Ann Douglas describes Melville's work as embodying an essential Calvinism, though he may not have been a devoted adherent of that religion. She writes, "he apparently found it necessary to utilize the ideas and structures of Calvinism. Its hieratic form, its preoccupation with pain, defiance, and grandiosity, its complex confrontation of the human and inhuman, give Melville a suitable object for imitation, exploration and attack...Melville is putting the shark back into religion" (305). Similarly, Lawrence Buell describes Melville as a "disaffected Calvinist" (69), while William Ellery Sedgewick describes the structure of the book as a Puritan quest "to confront the ultimate without benefit of mediator or intercessor" (89).

In that moment when the reader begins to speculate on the role of divine order, the conversion process is set in motion. Though not on board the Pequod, or out at sea, this contemplation of the divine allows the reader and Ishmael to embrace a logic system, which recognizes a higher order above man and is opposed to industrial society's singular focus on human progress and the triumph of technology over nature. And rather than continue under the assumption that Ishmael is completely bowed down by his economic and social environment, we gain access to a state of being that goes beyond social constraints. By reminding us that compliance with social demands is not the primary concern of any individual, though personal and religious concerns are, it is particularly liberating. Later on, in chapter four I will discuss how this sort of knowledge opens a door through which readers can critique the construct of reality within the nineteenth century and thereby enact change.

Insofar as Ishmael's actions are determined by industrial society's efforts to disprove or supercede the religious order, one can assume that the effect of divine authority on Ishmael will produce the opposite effect: to disprove the industrial order. Thus, as fate takes Ishmael away from land and places him on a whaling voyage, it also works to upset the social and political system that makes that voyage necessary. This fact explains Ishmael's quotation of God's "bill:"

*“‘Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the
United States.’*

‘WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL.’

‘BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN’” (5).

In this half-serious, half-jesting statement, one finds the perfect recipe for revolution within nineteenth century American society. The first line offers an account of

a “grand contested” election, which reveals the latent conflict within American politics and the efforts of that society to maintain a calm façade through rhetoric. The second line is a humorously, estranged notation of Ishmael and the reader’s conversion process, in which the book exits social time to reorient man within an eternal experience of nature. The third line presents a factual statement of violence and uprising in a foreign country. Though the three phrases seem to have nothing to do with each other, Ishmael’s voyage brings them together in a way that undermines their cognitive dissonance in the reader’s mind and their physical distance in space and time. By demonstrating that the president of the US and the mobs of Afghanistan can occupy the same space, Melville reveals the existence of a logic that is large and liberal enough to include such opposites in the same stroke, and more powerful than the liner thinking of industrial society. Moreover, this logic contains an experience that has the capacity to relativize the world by disrupting its hierarchic categories.

Knowing that Melville was deeply involved in cultural comparison, as Bruce H. Franklin demonstrates in *The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology*, I do not hesitate to read Melville’s text in this way. And though such a reading is markedly deconstructive and therefore post-modern, such formulas were not out of the range of Melville’s comparative notion of mythology, which he used to enlarge his society’s view of itself. Indeed, he believed that people can improve by embracing foreign ways of life, such as Queequeg’s¹⁷. Moreover, Melville did not often subscribe to rigid categories of thought, but liked to advance paradoxical concepts in his effort to convey truth. Even his own

¹⁷ Queequeg is an example of the deconstructive project personified. By Western standards he is a contradiction in terms, both savage and noble king, protagonist and enemy of white men, which the reader must wrestle with. The effort to resolve the paradox of Queequeg’s character, like that of the whale, however, leads to a disruption of common logic. It requires the reader to reevaluate her assumptions about Queequeg and accept a more relative or fluid system of judgment.

identity was not settled upon one point. When trying to locate his own position in American society, he felt himself to be both “protagonist and victim of America’s imperialism” (Douglas, 293). Consequently, I conclude that the Pequod’s voyage is meant to operate as a multicultural mixer, which brings disparate realities into closer proximity. And more importantly, by setting the comparative wheels in motion, Melville is attempting to create new, and more fluid logic systems.

The divine presence that stands above US society and Ishmael in the novel is of course a creation that derives from Melville. When considering the influence or objectives of fate and divinity within the book, we must therefore consider the position of the author and his intentions. To do this, we need to ask why Melville fashioned the book so that its meaning and source—Melville, Ishmael, God—are unclearly represented. I look to the following quote for answers.

But look! Here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremist limit of the land; loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice. No. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in (2).

In this passage, man is characterized according to an essential paradox. On the one hand, he is artificially limited by the circumstances of his labor and seeks liberation; on the other, man limits himself by choosing to keep a distance from the water for fear of falling in. The creation of this paradox belongs to Melville rather than Ishmael in that he is capable of endowing the situation with irony.

By recognizing that Melville has a significant voice of his own in the novel, one begins to realize that he is enacting a design through Ishmael. It seems to me that the whole thrust of the first part of the book is to get the reader, like Ishmael, on board ship

so that she will be receptive to the experience it offers of the ocean and eternity. To do this, Ishmael is used as a lure. In the passage just previous to the one above, Ishmael pointedly questions man's fascination with the sea: "How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they do here?" (1), but neither receives nor gives an answer. This rhetorical absence alerts the reader to the fact that a structural act is being deployed, and that, most likely, Melville is behind it. Stringing the reader along by baiting his curiosity, Melville unleashes strong rhetoric to pursue answers, which are embedded within the larger scope of the book.

Not only is Melville trying to get his reader involved in the story, but he is also working to get her involved in life as well. To do this, he uses Ishmael as a reader of the text's symbols and signs, which convey a level of meaning beyond the given value of things. When Ishmael is disposed to analyze signs, therefore, "Coffin?—Spouter?—Rather ominous in that particular connection, thought I" (8), he does so as an interpreter of Melville's text, mediating between author and reader. In this way, Melville introduces his reader to a mode of interpretation that allows her to decipher the effects of industry in her life by dislodging its hidden and overarching structures out of everyday stuff.

As it stands, the book reveals only half the truth at any one time so that Melville resembles the whittling landlord at the Spouter-Inn. He invites the reader in for shelter but offers him half of what might be considered the agreed-on bargain of fiction.

Ishmael's exasperation with the landlord can therefore be read as belonging to the reader.

'Landlord' said I, going up to him as cool as Mt. Hecla in a snow storm—'landlord, stop whittling. You and I must understand one another, and that too without delay. I come to your house and want a bed; you tell me you can only give me half a one; that the other half belongs to a certain harpooner (16).

Like the whittler, Melville is playing a game of evasion, but he does this to wake his reader up, and set her on a pursuit of knowledge. His goal is to get the reader, like Ishmael, to read her life, which is shaped by the invisible reign of symbols such as time and money.

At only one point in the novel does Melville openly reveal himself and the design of his book as a means of converting the reader. He does this with a foreshadowing, or prophetic countenance by speaking through the figure of Father Mapple—also the author of a whale conversion story. In the seminal chapter, “The Sermon,” this preacher acts out in physical movement Melville’s stance as an author. Ascending a pulpit—a place where the discourse of conversion takes place—he mounts by a ladder, which is symbolic of Melville’s ironic, half-exposed use of language. Seen from the side, this ladder is at first thought to be solid. Yet suddenly, Father Maple pulls it up, revealing a hidden movement, a hidden design by which he pulls away from his physical surroundings. He uses this design or device as a means of abandoning himself before God, where, cut off from the temporal concerns of the surrounding world, he can enter into an experience of eternity much like that of the Pequod. Ishmael aids our interpretation in this:

It must symbolize something unseen. Can it be, then, that by the act of physical isolation, he signifies his spiritual withdrawal from the time, from all outward worldly ties and connections? Yes.... this pulpit, I see, is a self-containing stronghold (34).

Like Ishmael, Father Mapple has come to the conclusion that it is necessary to leave the mortal world behind. And yet, his decision is not economic, but an entirely spiritual one in which the need to isolate oneself is an effort to reclaim the soul. By watching Father Mapple, we are able to consider the movement away from land purely as

a choice—a deeply driven need for silence. It is not a perfunctory, or forced effort at escapism, but a chosen confrontation with reality. The content of Father Mapple's sermon extends this choice to all of industrial society by launching a social commentary. In the sermon's mythology, industry and its leaders embody the Jonah-figure in flight from God, who must reconcile themselves to punishment. "He [Jonah] thinks that a ship made by men, will carry him into countries where God does not reign, but only the Captains of this earth" (37). If we follow the logic of this myth, the threat industry poses is one that will harm all of humanity.

Ricardo J. Quinones writes in *The Renaissance Discovery of Time* that the process of modernization has been one in which "the more of his own experience the individual managed to control.... the less inclined he would be to let things be, to rely with patient trust in a providential Creator" (8). As a result of his desire to control his experience by repudiating God and reverence, Jonah eventually upsets the human order and threatens his shipmates' survival. The only choice they have, in the end, is to throw him overboard and thereby reestablish contact with God's law within an eternal world. Carried over to the context of the nineteenth century, industrial workers bear the burden of pushing industry off the land. Though Ishmael can only push himself off land, for Melville, the Pequod's voyage is an attempt to prompt such a movement within American society.

By the end of the sermon, Melville leaves us with the understanding that quantification has reduced mankind's proper relationship with God. Unable to view nature outside the marks of linear progress, man can no longer confront Him in his own realm, which is eternity. Thus, Melville urges us to step off the shore by offering us these

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words: “[y]et this [human effort] is nothing. I leave eternity to Thee [God as well as the reader]” (43).

Chapter Three: Eternity Aboard the Ship

While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me; and ere long saw reflected there, a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head (335).

George Poulet has described Melville as “the Job of temporality” (338), an apt title for the author of a treatise on eternity, which Melville, in his whittling way, takes himself to be in the above passage. A book that relentlessly investigates the essence of eternity as it is manifested in nature and in man’s response to the natural sublime, *Moby-Dick* is more a dramatization of a specific philosophy than a novel. What that philosophy consists of, however, Melville does not fully elucidate. Moreover, it cannot be fully schematized or definitively explained through critical analysis as it belongs to the experience and language of the novel, folded deep within its own materials, which, like the sea, will “permit no records.”

What I hope to accomplish in this chapter is a sketch of the various methods Melville uses to create an experience of eternity at sea for his characters and the reader. In doing this I will discuss the effects of eternity on Ishmael and Ahab as two extremes on the spectrum of possible reactions to the sublime power of nature within the novel. At the same time, I will argue that Ishmael’s method of embracing eternity, which does not lead to a desire for domination or control, is the basis for the conversion process that Melville creates.

Constructed against the backdrop of nineteenth century industrialization, Melville’s representation of eternity cannot be thought of as objective. It is both determined by the concerns of a specific historical moment and the limitations of the human mind, which is susceptible to reductive thinking. The questions, “What is

eternity?" and "What is the experience of eternity?" in *Moby-Dick*, are therefore not easy ones to answer.

To begin, eternity is nothing we can encounter with a sense of sureness, but a concept created by philosophy and religion. And while we can claim to have experienced eternity in mystic or near death experiences, it has no actual presence for us on earth. As a result, we confront a great difficulty in trying to give a name or comprehensive meaning to what eternity is: hence the "involved worming" above Melville/Ishmael's head. Going back to Plato, Western philosophy has long defined eternity in comparative terms as a state of timelessness—the opposite of succession on earth. In itself, though, eternity has not acquired a settled meaning in that it has been paradoxically conceived as both the seat of chaos by those who agree with Plato (Plato, 12) and the realm of perfection by those who follow Augustine's model (Quinones, 14).

The first strategy Melville uses in his efforts to introduce eternity into the text is to describe it in relation to what it is not. As the Pequod is leaving the land, therefore, he presents the ocean's reality in contrast to what the men leave behind.

There you stand with nothing but the infinite series of the sea, with nothing ruffled but the waves.... a sublime uneventfulness invests you; you hear no news; read no gazettes; extras with startling accounts of commonplaces never delude you into unnecessary excitements; you hear of no domestic afflictions; bankrupt securities; fall of stocks (137).

What we determine about the infinity of the sea from this passage is that it does not include the quotidian, the mundane, the momentary or the inconsequential; it is the antithesis of these and must therefore consist of continuity, sublimity, and ultimate truth. We also discover that eternity does not include domestic and economic afflictions, which are commonly considered to be of serious import. And yet, when cast in the light of

metaphysical concerns, these afflictions are the primary barriers that separate man and the truths of nature and eternity by tying him down to the worries of his physical existence. Therefore, Melville puts them in the category of eternity's opposite of unnecessary excitements. When combined, the delusionary nature of all these considerations is exemplified by the fact that they cannot, at any time, come under the heading of Melville's associative definition for eternity as "sublime uneventfulness."

Our physical encounter with eternity in *Moby-Dick*, like the conceptual, also occurs in a comparative framework, where the Pequod is moving away from land to encounter the larger ocean. Heading south, the Pequod travels away from winter, suggesting, in an obvious sense, that eternity exists where there is no seasonal change. But it is also to be found outside the Northern Hemisphere where the Industrial world has not yet imposed itself in the form of charting and trade routes. As such, it lies in a domain that resembles Western man's historical past where the waters flow with the same mysterious range as they did in the 15th century, the 1st century and in Genesis, before time began: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. / And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness / was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God / moved upon the face of the waters." In the relatively uncharted waters of the Pacific, which unlike the Atlantic have not yet been made into a turnpike for commerce, the impression one gets is of limitless physical expansion and extensiveness in time (Mattheissen, 391).

This mysterious, divine Pacific zones the world's whole bulk about; makes all coasts one bay to it; seems the tide-beating heart of earth. Lifted by those eternal swells, you needs must own the seductive god, bowing your head to Pan" (430).

From a Western perspective, the Pacific is not bound by land as is the Atlantic, but is a boundary, and as such, a thing in itself. It therefore offers itself as the definition or image of eternity Melville is searching for: a reality that exists outside comparison in positive terms.

With the Pacific as a symbolic ideal for eternity, Melville builds the images, associations and syntax that surround the Pequod's progress in an attempt to create a linguistic experience that will reflect it. Thus, he describes one's reaction to the Pacific Ocean as the feeling that one must give way to Pan, the Greek god of fertility. As if entering the irresistible movement of a dance, one enters the rhythm of the ocean, sensing that oceanic rhythm—quotal rocking backed by eternal swelling—is reality, which is in fact eternity. Rather than continue to look at and experience the world through one's panoramic view from land, one begins to "own" a rhythmic perspective, which is centrally located within the body. The seduction of this rhythm is such that it reorients the individual in her position on earth. For Ishmael, receptivity to rhythm allows him to become connected in his vital self to nature: "There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by the gentle rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God" (141).

To extend this intercourse with eternity to the reader, Melville explores the intrinsic rhythms of language as the human conveyor or response to deeply felt emotions or rhythmic experiences. Mattheissen describes Melville's success at endowing language with the ocean's rhythmic seduction of eternal rise and fall when he writes:

For he speaks as though out of deep dreams and yet carries the reader with him by his incantatory rhythm. This combination helped him to break through the restrictions of space and time, and seemingly to resurrect the entire past in the embrace of his thought (464).

Mattheissen cites “The Pacific” as an outstanding example of Melville’s rhythm, for the chapter like much of the book comes close to poetic verse by using a very pronounced meter and rhyme scheme, which links meaning to sound. We might take the following, which I have converted into verse form by inserting line breaks where I think they are appropriate, as a representative example of this phenomena:

There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea,
Whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden
soul beneath;
Like those fabled undulations of the Ephesian sod
Over the buried Evangelist St. John.
And meet it is that over these sea-pastures,
Wide-rolling watery prairies and Potters' Fields of all four
continents
The waves should rise and fall, and ebb and flow
unceasingly (429-430).

Like much of Walt Whitman's poetry, these lines expand beyond a tightly controlled meter, but are nonetheless markedly rhythmic. Melville generates a wave-like pulse in this passage, which is begun with the phrase, "There is, one knows," and is carried out in phrases that echo its rhythm, such as, "mystery about this sea," "rise and fall," "ebb and flow," and even in the word "unceasingly." He also makes use of a pronounced rhyme scheme (sea/beneath/unceasingly, sod/John), which highlights the ways in which his book is constantly returning, like the eternally rising, falling waves, to the same eternal idea or feeling.

Lewis Mumford also describes the effects of rhythm in Melville's language, which he considers to be rising "again and again... to polyphonic verse" (76). And it is through rhythm, Mumford argues, that Melville is able to sustain the credibility of the "deeper half" of his subject, exposing Ahab's unfathomable soul as well as Moby Dick, who must needs stand outside usual descriptive modes. For me, what is most important about Melville's use of rhythm is that through the musicality of such language, the reader

has access to an experience of the ocean's eternity. Like Ishmael, who has no life except that which he borrows from the sea, the reader's is bound up with the rhythms of *Moby-Dick*. I say this in the sense that her access to eternity at sea is mediated by her experience of the book.

It is necessary to point out that Ishmael and the reader's experience of eternity are in fact equally mediated. Both confront an analogue rather than eternity itself. Insofar as this is true, an experiential gap remains in which it is unclear how the analogue connects to reality and we are compelled to ask how closely any experience on earth reflects an eternal order. Moreover, oceanic rhythm is by no means an entirely positive definition of eternity as one cannot state its meaning outright, but merely intuit or feel what it conveys. Any effort to translate this experience into words in such a way that others can understand its essence—to write a treatise on eternity in other words—will create confusion. Inevitably, the concept of eternity will become different for people who experience it through different modes.

The fact that eternity is not settled as a concept within *Moby-Dick* is made obvious by the fact that every speaking character in the novel is compelled, at some time or other, to variously speculate on the metaphysical. In chapters 37-40 we hear a succession of voices from Ahab to Starbuck, Stubb to the Harpooners and Sailors, all questioning the circumstances of a boat amidst an eternal sea. Part of the seductiveness of eternal rhythm, it would seem, is the desire to speak it; akin to a sex act, one takes the rhythm in, becomes filled with it and then seeks to give birth to some kind of meaning. Of course, the most rigorous examination of eternity on board the Pequod comes from Ahab and Ishmael, who, curiously, do much in determining the nature of the Pequod's voyage to fit their understanding of the sea. Reading and interpreting the ocean's expanse

through their experiences of it, Ishmael and Ahab perpetuate those experiences in the form of the novel and the Pequod's quest to kill the whale. In doing this, both end up setting the ship off-balance by altering its purpose from a strictly commercial whaling voyage, which Starbuck and the others take it to be, to a philosophic effort to uncover the meaning of the ocean.

Ishmael's experience of eternity on board the Pequod upsets the course of the ship in that he seeks to become incorporated within nature, which leads him to forget himself and the ship's safety. Approaching his voyage as the fall-out of his experiences within nineteenth century society, Ishmael behaves much like an invalid getting over an illness. In the chapter "The Quarter Deck" he describes himself as a "sunken-eyed Platonist," who will more likely fall over board and drown in reverie before he contributes to an increase in the profits of whaling. Thus daydreaming in the crow's nest and at the helm, he nearly causes the ship to capsize and repeatedly puts his own life in danger. The reason for his negligence is that he does not care about the practical needs of the moment, but longs to embrace the lull of eternity as it sways in the background. He is eager to enter into the larger rhythm, to feel himself correspondent with nature rather than opposed to it, but in doing this he forgets his humanity, which is dangerous according to Melville.

What Melville presents as positive about Ishmael's response to eternal rhythm is that, unlike all the others aboard the Pequod, he brings it into himself. By regarding eternity at sea not just as an analogue for a divine order far beyond him, but as something that resides in man as well, he allows his experience of it to become a means for creating unity within himself and between himself and nature.

[B]y the blending cadences of waves with thoughts...at last
he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for

the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul
 pervading mankind and nature...thy spirit ebbs away to
 whence it came; becomes diffused through time and
 space...forming at last a part of every shore the round
 globe over (141).

This position is far from Emerson's view that man "cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time" (270). For, according to Emerson, eternity exists in a timeless state, where identity is contingent on the presently expansive and erasable moment: "[t]his one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes; for that for ever degrades the past," (271) and one might add, one's selfhood as well. Philosophers such as David Hume have argued that one's sense of self depends on the accumulation of daily examples, on habit and continuity (Hume: 1.4.2. 134); in other words, identity depends on the existence of a past. Without these things we are not who we are.

As the locus of continuity on earth in terms of geography, history and rhythmic experience, the ocean in *Moby-Dick* is figured as an unconscious world. Because its depth and breadth remain unmarked, the reality of the ocean has no means of representing itself for what it is in conscious terms and no access to the conscious world. For humans, the ocean is therefore a repressed reality. This fact is not surprising when we take Freud's description of time into account; according to him, "temporal relations are... connected with the working of the conscious system" (121), and moreover, "the events of the unconscious system are timeless" (144). Thus, it would make logical sense that an eternal space such as the ocean should exist below our understanding of conscious fact. According to Meyerhoff, the source of continuity within the self is the unconscious, demonstrating the ease with which this fact carries over to Melville's representation of the ocean as continuity.

The psychoanalytic quest for the buried treasure and
 agonies of the unconscious also serves the purpose of

reinstating a sense of continuity, functional unity, and identity within the self, which was impaired or lost" (59).

The expression or definition of eternity we get from Ishmael, therefore, is that it embodies a quality of continuous flow, necessary to one's selfhood and health. As such, eternity is to be embraced rather than resisted with the understanding that human life is similarly continuous and only seems to operate through temporal change.

For Ahab, however, who is all ego and drive, the ocean is in no sense a place of rejuvenation where he can discover the essential connection between himself and nature. Rather, it represents an opposition—a non-human, non-progressive wasteland—which he must conquer and control as though it were the next frontier for industry. Thus, Ahab's interaction with the ocean involves a fundamental struggle for dominance, and at a heightened moment in his journeying, he declares, "I drive the sea!" (457). In this mad self-possessed state, Ahab is attempting to impose his will on the ocean, to deprive it of agency in proportion to the enormous agency he assigns himself. His is an effort to erect the individual in isolation above everything. The logic runs that by standing outside of the surrounding world, by being able to maneuver within it, one can gain privileged status wherein one stand above it as well. Thus, Ahab would reduce every force of nature, not just the ocean, to a position below him in mobility, which is power. He addresses a lightening bolt thus: "[t]here is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whome all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical" (450). That unsuffusing thing Ahab refers to is the agency he assigns himself reflecting Donald Pease's argument that the ideology of nineteenth century progress approached the sublime within nature as though it were calling out for and soliciting man's agency. Pease writes, "[s]ome order beyond Nature seemed to command man to get in touch with nature's higher will and to obey the implicit command to move beyond nature" (46).

In his effort to assume an imperial position of command and control over the ocean, Ahab is attempting to become the super-ego that regulates its instinctual and lawless energy. Already designated by Ishmael as the locale of the unconscious, the ocean fits easily into this hierarchical dichotomy. Moreover, the entire novel is obsessively concerned with the psychological grappling of man when confronted with the sublime and his use of language to determine the essence of that interaction. This battle of the psyche, appropriately, takes place on the level of language. Ahab exploits his possession of language as a means for proving his consciousness and agency, which, again, he considers grounds for superiority. Addressing the ocean he states, "I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself, oh, thou omnipotent" (450). Though the ocean is beyond time, its power can be denied insofar as the human world of consciousness and spoken meaning constitute power. And for the human who creates these standards, the ocean easily becomes a repressed identity as something unrecognized by the conscious mind where it can truly remain "unaltered by the passage of time" (Freud, 144).

Of course, Ahab's power over the ocean is contingent on the presence of language and his ability to manipulate it. As a result, only those who understand the world through language, namely men, will recognize his power. This fact explains Ahab's need to constantly prove his dominion over his surroundings by speaking in apostrophe, addressing the voiceless objects of nature: the ocean, the lightening, the whale and sun. For, what Ahab suspects but cannot admit is that the silence of the natural world is not a cipher for human meaning, an empty and conquerable vessel, but rather indifference to the game of language altogether. Expressing itself through physical manifestations of meaning, which must be felt, the ocean's essence is far outside spoken meaning: "the secret of the currents in the seas have never yet been divulged, even to the most erudite

research” (62). Its presence is its proof, and the unreadability of that presence is its meaning. Hence, Ahab’s insistence that the ocean must be read renders inadequate any meaning he composes. Moreover, it negates the dominance he seeks to achieve by those means.

[H]owever man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet forever and forever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him (247-8).

All of this is offered as proof that there is no place for the super-ego within the natural world. A product of civilization and a record of linear human progress, the super-ego is highly specialized to the operations of men. The tragic flaw of the super-ego’s constitution is that it cannot recognize this about itself, its function being to aid man in asserting dominance and civilization’s linearity over the natural world. Built for this one purpose, the super-ego cannot recognize its incapacity to thrive among the barbarism of oceanic timelessness, where no regulating order nor hierarchy will ever gain a foothold: “[c]onsider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began” (248). For, where there is no essential progress to be accomplished, the super-ego cannot carry out its regulative functions, but will become superfluous and tragic in its efforts.

Ahab’s attempt to impose a linear construct of progress on an eternal model may seem ridiculous within the light I’ve presented it so far, but it is important to recognize that this effort is the basis for all human knowledge and meaning. Taking *Moby-Dick* as an example, we realize that its wonderfully intricate and undulating meanings are the product of Melville’s efforts to impose the linearity of narrative on an undefined and unprincipled subject, and his effort could be taken as similarly ridiculous. And yet, we do not assign it as such; we recognize that where the goal is to navigate through eternity

rather than be consumed by it, aspects of the linear super-ego must be imposed. The question is merely to what extent. For this reason, the confrontation with eternity that takes place in *Moby-Dick* is complicated by the concerns of measurement and degree.

As an embodied effort to know and express the sublime, *Moby-Dick* is a contradiction in terms, wedded to the essential paradox that man—and here I am speaking of Melville—can somehow take an accurate measurement of nature and do so by using the tools he has fashioned. In both the Ishmael and Ahab plot we see this paradox being played out. Where the confrontation with eternity involves an essentially human effort to compute its power, Ishmael's endeavor to dissect the whale in its body, history, geography, philosophy, etcetera, and Ahab's effort to kill it demonstrate that man is constantly making efforts to impose order upon chaos. These attempts describe a complicated co-existence by which man is not able to either blend simply into the ocean's unconsciousness, or to enact a progressive triumph over it. Rather, the inevitable presence of measurement suggests that the human must come to terms with eternity through his own methods, aiming to be neither a part of nor above nature. This standard, of course, informs Melville's goal in terms of how he wants his reader to react to the experience of eternity.

In coming to terms with eternity, man must learn the proper means of approaching nature; in other words, he must learn to view his interactions with it on a proper scale, and this effort demands measurement. By itself, measurement is a highly volatile medium, which man must come to terms with in the same stroke that he approaches an understanding of nature. The first truth about measurement is that it can be absolutely disruptive as well as creative. To begin with its negative aspect, by introducing measurement into nature, man erects a criteria of knowledge or possession over the

mysterious, which pits men against one another. In trying to measure the body of the whale, therefore, Ishmael sets off a theological battle.

From this arrow-slit in the skull, the priests perceived me taking the altitude of the final rib. 'How now!' they shouted; 'Dar'st thou measure this god! That's for us.' hereupon a fierce contest rose among them, concerning feet and inches; they cracked each other's sconces with their yard-sticks—the great skull echoed—and seizing that lucky chance, I quickly concluded my admeasurements (402).

Similarly, by assigning the whale a monetary value, that of a doubloon, Ahab unleashes covetousness among his crew and madness in himself. A serious critique of the human effort to define nature is therefore being launched in *Moby-Dick*, where according to Flibbert, Melville is “comically adopting techniques of scholarly competition” that set “in motion burlesque methods of reviewing that knowledge” (106).

What one realizes is that the attempt to measure eternity and thereby gain access to its secrets resembles original sin, where the effort to break through nature to gain the fruit of knowledge brings about human evil. One of the primary dangers Ishmael and Ahab confront, therefore, is the power of measurement to become an end in itself.

In the act of measuring, both Ahab and Ishmael abuse measurements as a means of humanizing or reducing the natural world. For Ishmael, measuring the unknown completely preoccupies him in his attempt to “manhandle th[e] Leviathan” (407); his awareness of this effort as unnatural saves him in the end by causing him to give it up. Ahab, on the other hand, cannot see the irony of his efforts and therefore becomes isolated in a self-reflexive hall of mirrors where measurement becomes an overwhelming imperative.

Ahab would take the time, and then pacing the deck, binnacle-watch in hand, so soon as the last second of the allotted hour expired, his voice was heard—'Whose is the doubloon now? D'ye see him? (488).

Here, Ahab is so caught up in his effort to construct a measured reality and is so heavily influenced by the doubloon's worth, he cannot conceive the whale as anything outside his effort to track it down. The whale, for him, is the doubloon.

Without direct access to the truth of the whale, Ishmael and Ahab's effort to know it are necessarily going to fail. The knowledge that will be asserted in place of this failure is that measurement is unnecessary insofar as the essence of eternity is best expressed, within human terms, by the failure of definition. Hence, we come to the positive aspect of measurement, which Ishmael comes closest to embracing when his speech is most indefinite, "in the tail the confluent measureless force of the whole whale seems concentrated to a point" (336). Within this paradoxical statement, Ishmael gains the wisdom of nature that Ahab refuses by insisting on definite meaning: "'Omen? Omen?—a dictionary! If the gods think to speak outright to men, they will honorably speak outright; not shake their heads and give an old wives' darkling hint'" (489).

A loaded silence, then, is man's best expression of what eternity is and means. In "A Squeeze of the Hand" we encounter the most important truth of the novel, through silence, which, according to Hoffman, is that in "the moral activity of becoming the Word is drowned" and "we can come no nearer to the Source than to behold the greatest of his works" (73-74). In this case, the great work closest to man's Source is man himself. Abandoned to the unconscious fluidity between men, Ishmael discovers an eternal socialism, which wholly belongs to the mystery of man in the same way that the whale's eternity belongs to it.

To get to this place of silent awareness and acceptance of eternity, Ishmael continually checks his need to know the whale by counseling himself in the following

fashion: “have a care how you seize the privilege of Jonah alone; the privilege of discoursing upon the joins and beans...making up the framework of Leviathan” (401). Within this process he gradually silences himself¹⁸ as a presence within the book so that he drops out of the last fifth of the book, merely bearing witness to the ocean and Ahab’s struggle against it.

Ahab’s continued insistence that he can know the whale through human means is grounded in his misapprehension that by sliding “upon his mark” (505) there will no longer be a gap between his action and the whale’s truth. With enough skill on his part, the whale will become what he defines it as: a thing to be hunted by his spear. Unlike Ishmael, Ahab’s efforts to know are written down in purposeful actions, which do not yield themselves to critical reading. Thus, when his attempts at measurement begin to fail, he does not recognize the source of his failure as residing in his own actions, but consigns them to the tools he uses. Ahab therefore successively denudes the ship of all its measuring devices in the last part of the book, arguing to himself that they are useless as signifiers of eternity.

Then gazing at his quadrant, and handling, one after the other, its numerous cabalistic contrivances, he...muttered....‘what after all cans’t thou do, but tell the poor, pitiful point, where thou thyself happenest to be on this wide planet, and the hand that holds thee: no! Not one jot more!’” (443).

By giving up his old tools, Ahab settles upon himself as the true conduit of measurement: “‘I crush the quadrant, the thunder turns the needles, and now the mad sea parts the log-line. But Ahab can mend all’” (461). Investing his own identity as security against the

¹⁸ “silently worship” (409).

perceived distance between nature and man's ability to know it, he makes the ultimate effort to align his actions with the truth.

Only within his own failure to finally kill the whale does Ahab begin to understand that he is not a source for nature's truth, and thereby admits his place within it: "I turn my body from the sun" (507). By saying this he accepts the distance between himself and nature; and yet, as death and eternity are approaching, Ahab cannot accept the ultimate silence of eternity as Ishmael does. For him, the undifferentiated inclusiveness of the eternal grave is overwhelming and he would deny it to the last.

[s]ink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! And
since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while
still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale!
Thus, I give up the spear! (506).

As the whale intercepts Ahab's final effort to prove his dominance within nature, his searing stab and the linear drive of his energy are converted into a cyclical vortex of time. Like the harpoons that jut out of the whale's back, distorted into the shape of corkscrews (144), Ahab and the Pequod exit human temporality by becoming enrapt with the whale and swallowed by a whirlpool: "concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew... all round and round in one vortex" (507). In the final pages of the novel, then, the linear drive, which had been animating the book's plot, becomes subsumed within the cyclical model of eternity. Death settles upon the lives of its characters, and out of their collective tragedy a shift takes place in which what was necessary throughout—the need to know and dominate the whale—becomes an accepted impossibility. Silence, being imposed, the effort to comprehend is turned into the need to admit incomprehension.

Chapter Four: The Reader at the Mast-Head

When *Moby-Dick* comes up in conversation, the most common reaction people have toward it is a feeling of exhaustion and dismissal¹⁹: someone made us read it in high school, and it was long and hard to get through; there was too much about whales and no plot; Ahab was cool, but there wasn't enough of him. And the critical complaint most often lodged against *Moby-Dick*, today as in its own time, is that the reader is never quite sure what the book is about. Thus, *Moby-Dick* has achieved the status of a monolith within our canon; though required reading, it stands surrounded by a dark cloud of ambivalent reactions—our own and those of the people we talk to. This, of course, is not without its source in the text.

Critics²⁰ have repeatedly made note of the nebulous, numinous, labyrinthine meanings of *Moby-Dick* and the albino whale. But the novel's incomprehensibility and estrangement from readers, they say, is the point. Lawrence Buell describes the book as “an allegory of reading and particularly...an allegory of unreadability: the undecipherability of the whale as a text” (61). It would seem, then, that the reader's project in *Moby-Dick*, much like Ishmael's, is to embrace incomprehension and live within it. But what is the point, or effect, of that embrace? This is the question we need to ask if we're going to continue assigning and reading *Moby-Dick* as great literature. Within this chapter, my goal is to demonstrate that by embracing a lack of definitive meaning in *Moby-Dick* we are exposed to a revolutionary and liberating way of thinking,

¹⁹ In the last six months while I've been writing this thesis, I've had many conversations about the *Moby-Dick* and discovered that not only are my friends and classmates intimidated by the book, but some professors, who asked me my thesis topic and raised their eyebrows afterwards, find it daunting as well.

²⁰ Almost every critic of *Moby-Dick* is compelled to make note of the whale's indecipherable character, but to be specific, the following critics use it as a founding premise within their criticism: Buell (61), Mumford (79), Franklin, Auden (11), Hoffman (69, 72), Sedgwick (98), Mattheissen and Douglas (306).

which will allow us to fight back against the industrial imperative that insists on definition, dominance and progress to the point of destroying nature.

Focusing on the reader's experience of time in *Moby-Dick*, I will equate incomprehensibility with eternity in the novel as a means for isolating a central aspect of the book, which is purposefully difficult. In doing this I hope to reveal the effect upon readers of the book's resistance to comprehension by asking the following questions: What kind of reader does the novel project or create and what are her expectations? What is the reader's experience of eternity? How does it differ from her experience of time on land? In what ways is the reader compelled to shift her conception of time as a result of being at sea, and to what extent can this shift be said to constitute a personal conversion? Finally, I hope to demonstrate that the reader's shifting temporal experience of *Moby-Dick* allows her to undergo a change in which she moves from a passive role within the book and society to one that is both active and revolutionary.

There is an embedded within *Moby-Dick*'s linguistic structure a sense that Melville is addressing his readers as central to the purposes of his book, and that readers' reactions and expectations are the basis for the kind of work the book performs. Previously, I discussed Melville's use of rhetorical questions to bait our curiosity for knowledge while leaving us unsatisfied so that the full impact of the whale and eternity do not overwhelm us at the get go, but are dispersed at intervals and overlaid with action so that we are led into a pursuit of meaning like Ishmael. This sort of rhetorical maneuvering is an obvious indication to me that Melville foresaw the need to ease his readers into the task of absorbing his book's meaning. Whether that resistance was a product of nineteenth century expectations, primarily, or rises out of the text is a question worth pursuing.

Upon examining the literary atmosphere of antebellum America, it becomes evident that Melville approached the novel with a completely opposite mind frame than that of his contemporaries. This fact is made particularly evident in that when it first came out, *Moby-Dick* was considered an anomalous piece of literature, disparaged by critics as something other than a novel (Baym, 46)²¹ and ignored by most readers. Much of the book's unpopularity for nineteenth century readers, it seems to me, was the result of Melville's approach to his audience. Nina Baym describes the purpose of popular novels in the mid-nineteenth century as the provision of entertainment to passive readers, which they both catered to and created. Melville, on the other hand, expected his readers to grapple with the metaphysical riddle of the universe in reading his texts, a fact which the critics of his were especially vociferous about in their reproval of *Moby-Dick*.

The effort to convey truth was, for Melville, the essential struggle of his life. In a letter to Hawthorne, he writes, "all Reformers are bottomed upon the truth, more or less; and to the world at large are not reformers almost universally laughing-stocks? Why so? Truth is ridiculous to me" (Melville, 511). Thus, it would seem that Melville ought to have given up his efforts all together. And yet, further on in the same letter he writes, "It seems to me now that Solomon was the truest man who ever spoke, and yet that he a little *managed* the truth with a view to popular conservatism" (513), suggesting that he was looking for ways to manage an exchange with a popular audience. To a greater or lesser degree, then, Melville had to be working with the literary standards of his time in view.

Taking Baym's *Novels, Readers and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum*

²¹ A reviewer in the *Literary World* (May 22, 1851) describes *Moby-Dick* as a problematic text, which cannot be properly considered a novel. "When to [romantic fictions and statements of absolute fact] is added that the romance is made a vehicle of opinion and satire through a more or less opaque allegorical veil, as particularly in the latter half of *Mardi*, and to some extent in this present volume [*Moby-Dick*], the critical difficulty is considerably thickened. It becomes quite impossible to submit such books to a distinct classification" (Baym, 93).

America, which provides an exhaustive study of trends within literary criticism of the antebellum period, as a definitive account of Melville's audience, I understand Melville's approach to his readers to be largely affected by and reactionary toward his historical moment²².

The most salient point Baym makes in her book is that readers and critics' judgment of literature hinged on a moral sense of the text's ability to cleanse or heighten its readers. As they conceived it, the novel was a substance to be taken into the body where it would work like a medicine, creating a tonic or soothing effect upon the reader (58). The social anxiety that men and especially women were not reconciled to their "earthly state of probation" (192) fueled the need for such novels. The ideological and propagandist potential of literature was evident to critics of the time, who viewed it as grounds for converting individuals to a moral lifestyle.

Antebellum critics endorsed novels that bred into readers, through a process of pacification, a sense of duty and morality. In acclaimed works of the period, Baym writes, "the world [is] detachedly contemplated and hence presented to the reader as an object from which detachment [is] possible" (213). Hence, the world-view these novels espoused was resistant to change; what could change and therefore needed to change was the reader, whose duty it was to fit into an already perfected world by accepting her social position. Forever endorsing that which is already given, antebellum critics discredited novels that seemed too heavily burdened with philosophic questions that pursued as yet unachieved truths, such as *Moby-Dick*. Rather, they promoted entertaining

²² Some criticism of popular, mainstream antebellum literature has advanced a critique of Baym's position by pointing out the fact that our comprehension of what constitutes "good" and "bad" literature, or what is intellectually challenging and what is simplistic entertainment, is shaped by aesthetic standards that came into being with the rise of Modernism. The primary text for re-evaluating nineteenth century popular fiction is Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs: the Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. (New York, NY: Oxford, 1985).

literature (58), which offered unforced interest to its readers through the transparency of its style (61). In sum, the reader of popular fiction in the mid-nineteenth century was more or less a passive recipient of literature, which, at that time, sought to reconcile her to a passive or uninventive role within society as well (193).

Self-avowedly conservative, antebellum critics promoted individualism in literature not as a means of liberating the worker from social institutions and duties, but as way of getting them to accept personal responsibility for those institutions (193) and uphold an ideal of self-regulation (Dimock, 38). Distrustful of the modes and aims of popular fiction in the nineteenth century, Melville fashioned *Moby-Dick* in opposition to that standard. According to Douglas, the complexity of Melville's work is often due to his effort to expand "the narrative form [so as] to express his hostility to it" (290). In other words, Melville seized upon the novel as a persuasive and politically charged forum through which he could shape public acceptance or rejection of the status quo. Casting his work onto the market like a wild card in a deck, Melville offered himself as a maverick or radical voice to readers who were accustomed to novels that encouraged the upholding of social institutions, asking them to assess for themselves what their duties consisted in—whose laws they must obey.

Melville understood literature, first and foremost, as the place where one confronts the essentials of life. With this view in mind, Melville as a novelist did not want to entertain his audience at the cost of asking larger social and philosophical questions (Douglas, 304). Moreover, he refused to allow the reader to become passive in her experience of literature by involving her in philosophic explorations of the individual's relationship with society and nature.

In light of temporality, the antebellum critic's ideal novel was one that conveyed a prescribed sense of duty within a world that had long been assembled in its proper order (Baym, 193). *Moby-Dick*, on the other hand, presents a view of time as a metamorphosing concept, which has many different faces. That is to say, the book juggles various temporal modes, which never quite resolve into a hierarchy or unified experience. The three most prominent of these is the linear, narrative model, which describe the progress of the ship and the hunt, the rhythmic model used to explore Ishmael's experience of eternity at sea, and the spatial model of interrogating the whale's mystery. As a result, the reader of *Moby-Dick* feels herself caught in a world still under construction, where there is no given experience of time, and where the reader must juggle those experiences as they come.

In getting his readers to become receptive to an unsettled temporality, Melville moves them out of the domain of duty and social morality toward a negation of institutions. *Moby-Dick*, according to Douglas, is a "challenge to the sentimental culture of his reader" (304). He affects this challenge by refusing to allow readers to fall into a pattern of complacent agreement with an authorial vision. In so many ways, Melville is asking the reader "to risk his life" (Douglas, 308) by navigating the moral and philosophical ambiguities of the text, and moreover "to help him write the book—if he dares" (308). As moral ambiguity takes the place of surety and the reader gets caught up in sorting out various textual complexities, her involvement debunks society's operative principle, which is that the capstone of moral life has already been put in place. Through textual involvement, the reader is made to reassess what her position as both a social and a spiritual being. Melville's hope in prompting this kind of reflection is that it will lead to

a confirmation of the reader's duties to the self, nature and the question of God's existence over her institutional obligations.

A series of temporal shifts take place in the novel, which shape the reader's sense of involvement. These shifts correspond to three symphonic movements: the linear notion of time on land (Allegro), the eternal, spatial, rhythmic notion of time at sea (Andante), and the repeated but heightened linear notion of time surrounding Ahab's hunt (Molto Allegro). Within the linear movement, the reader is relatively passive in that she is led along, in one fixed direction, by an exterior notion of time. In the eternal, spatial, cyclical movement, on the other hand, she is forced to negotiate her understanding of time by juggling three modes at once. And finally, in the repeated linear movement, she is forced to renounce activity once again by resigning herself to Ahab's monomaniac insistence on linear progress. Put into summary form, the reader's movement corresponds to the text's shifts in temporality.

Land: linear time: the reader is passive >>> Ocean:
juggling time: the reader is active >>> Ahab: reductive
linear time: the reader discovers the tyranny of pacification.

By viewing her place in the world from these altered perspectives, the reader becomes aware that one's sense of time sets the stage for one's relationship with nature and society. Within nineteenth century America, for example, linear time was the principle justification for progress, which undergirded every aspect of that world. By discovering the importance of time, then, the reader is alerted to the fact that her reality is mediated by time and by institutions that define the nature of its existence.

It is important to highlight the fact that the reader's awakening as to the importance of time is itself a temporal experience. Corresponding to the movements I laid

out above, Melville subjects the reader to an experience of abandonment within eternity at sea. Withdrawing further from the reader as the novel progresses, Melville leaves the reader, like Ishmael, without a guiding presence—the book, boat, or author. This withdrawal is most noticeable in terms of Melville's rhetoric. In the first section of the book, Melville uses coercive language to get his readers off the land (out of known experience) and onto the Pequod. In the second, he invokes rhythmic and spatial explorations of eternity as a means of converting his reader to an active role in the text. And finally, in the third section, he steps out of the text altogether, allowing Ahab to become the sole voice, against whom the reader must fight to retain her newfound agency. The rhetorical progression looks something like this:

Land: Coercion >>> Ocean: Conversion >>> Ahab:
Isolation

How these rhetorical and temporal alterations actually affect the reader is the question I will now try to answer.

By overlaying the narrative past onto the present in its opening line, "Call me Ishmael," *Moby-Dick* invites the reader to become a participant in its temporal voyage. Spoken in the present tense and offered as a greeting prompted by the presence the reader's presence, this line is a particularly effective framing device in that it allows the text to be read within a fictive present where the act of reading is privileged such that the novel's existence depends on it. A second effect of Melville's use of the present tense here is that it allows the book to extend itself outward into the reader's world. Insofar as Ishmael's voice is dependent on our hearing it in the present, the narrative becomes malleable in time and space. Its message can be applied to any present circumstance where the text can evolve and move forward.

By narrating from Ishmael's perspective so that the events are shown to have taken place in his past, Melville assumes a standard narrative mode based on linear progress, which steadily runs its course throughout the book. In the first fifth of *Moby-Dick* this mode is dominant where Melville is most concerned with allaying his reader's anxiety toward new knowledge. Thus, she is permitted the "luxury" of a familiar literary experience; she can passively follow a sequence of exciting events and feel herself entertained. In a metaphoric sense, however, the reader, like Ishmael, is on land in this section. Her experience of luxury is controlled by a larger force, available in the measurable doses that Melville, as whittling landlord, determines.

Surrounded by the customs of her society, which *Moby-Dick* is at this point reflecting, the reader's experience in the first fifth of the book is one of being compelled. Rather than choose herself to get on the Pequod, she is coerced into it by a persuasive and hidden rhetoric. This is evidenced by the fact that she and the American public have not yet, in a historical sense, sought the means of radically altering their reality; in a time before unions, strikes and civil rights, the reader is, on a day-to-day basis, still accustomed to obeying its precepts. As a result, all that changes for the reader at the beginning of the text is an aroused curiosity toward the ocean, that it exists and that it is something different than what is on land. While remaining ignorant of the trial that awaits her at sea, this curiosity compels her to follow Ishmael onto the Pequod.

Accustomed to moving along a linear path in her experience of literature, the reader does not give up her passivity with ease. Shortly after ushering us on board the ship, introducing its crew and Ahab, Melville begins his examination of the whale with the chapter "Cetology." This move may be shocking to readers who expect the novel to

proceed as it has up to that point, as a tale of adventures at sea rather than a “classification of the constituents of chaos” (116). And yet, Melville’s project at this point is to resist the temporal constraints of linear narrative by creating an alternative spatial model based on an analysis of the whale’s body (Bellis, 84). This project, if seen allegorically—as most of the book can be seen—is an act of relinquishing authorial vision and order. Melville summarizes this loss for the reader at the opening of the chapter: “Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored harborless immensities” (116). The “we” of these lines refers both to Ishmael and the reader; the “immensities” refer to the whale and the experience of spatial, eternal time that the whale symbolizes.

As the ship progresses through space Melville devotes more and more attention to the whale and the modes of whaling so that the narrative seems to get lost. The lack of a central temporality or narrative, where spatial, rhythmic and linear notions of time intermix, becomes increasingly difficult for the reader to bear. Deeply affected by the absence of order at sea so much so that, like the rest of the crew, the reader may become willing to align her experience of the book with her experience of Ahab, the “supreme lord and dictator” (107) of the ship. Becoming overly concerned with Ahab’s purpose is a real threat to understanding the book, which readers and modern day critics still enact. For example, the synopsis provided on the back cover of a standard Oxford edition of *Moby-Dick* focuses exclusively on Ahab, falsely suggesting that the book is mainly about him.

So, Captain Ahab binds his crew to fulfill his obsession—the destruction of the great white whale. Under his lordly but maniacal command the Pequod’s commercial mission is perverted to one of vengeance. To Ahab, the monster that

destroyed his body is not a creature, but the symbol of 'some unknown but still reasoning thing.' Uncowed by natural disasters, ill omens, even death, Ahab urges his ship towards 'the undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale.'

By ignoring Ishmael and the whale as central figures within the text, this summary implies that Ahab is the locus of its meaning. It also implies that Ahab is the only figure that can fully satisfy the reader's literary desires, which are founded on the need to locate motivation and action within a text. This summary, therefore, offers avid proof of Ahab's seductiveness insofar as he offers the possibility of simplification, readability and passivity within *Moby-Dick*. It also demonstrates a very real desire within one's experience of the text to give up active engagement with reality by relinquishing one's freedom at the hands of an authority. Where this occurs, and the reader is unable to search out her own meanings as Ishmael does²³, she will reduce the multifarious meanings of Melville's ocean to Ahab's quest, which is the madness of taking revenge against nature.

Despite Ahab's powerfully seductive presence, Melville does not leave us all alone with him as he leaves us alone with the ocean. Rather, he exposes a complex set of moral positions within Ahab's character, which make it impossible to fully submit to him. Unlike the standard heroes of Victorian fiction, Ahab is neither morally upright nor deserving of emulation in a practical sense; rather, he confounds the moral focus of heroic literature (Baym, 177) altogether. Though progressive in outlook, Ahab is not a protagonist striving toward the betterment of society, but rather an anti-Christ or unrepentant Jonah whose "aggressive will...is in flight from truth rather than possessing it" (Hoffman, 63). Within a Victorian context, then, readers could not accept his aims

²³ Douglas describes Ishmael's philosophy toward life and behavior at sea as being "pre-eminently engaged with experience" (308).

without perceiving that their values were being transgressed. This effect is still relevant for modern-day readers in that Ahab presents a challenge to notions of American individualism, which are still with us. Both the epitome of self-reliance and agency, he is also a tragically deluded figure, whose actions produce destruction rather than progress. Always shimmering before us, Ahab is a riddle, and rather than offer the means of escaping such questions, he is the bait with which Melville gets his reader to assume an active role. One prolonged nibble on Ahab and the reader is sent reeling into a sea of moral and philosophic ambiguities where she will either sink or swim.

Indeed, *Moby-Dick* abandons its reader to an incomprehensible ocean of meaning and riddles where any attempt to resist the pursuit of such meaning puts her back in the position she sought to escape: that of Pip, forsaken within the vast inhumanity of the ocean. Her experience is truly the "intense concentration of self in the middle of...a heartless immensity" (371), which is the novel in that the reader has no one to identify with or model herself after. Aside from Ahab, there is Ishmael, but he is too far removed from the action to provide an example to the reader. Moreover, he seems just as lost and just as much a reader of the text as she is. The result of this abandonment, then, is that no matter what the reader does, her experience of *Moby-Dick* will be her own; it will be to her what the actual voyage is to Ishmael, an opportunity to engage with experience. The reader's ability to accept isolation at sea depends on her ability to embrace the unresolved nature of reality rather than insist on order as Ahab does. To do this, she must learn from his mistake, that the linear model of industrial progress is insignificant, and at times its own destroyer within the immensities of nature. The consequence of such action is that she can negotiate for herself what will become her reality. Embracing the

questions that the book poses, the reader can become an enlightened and active investigator of her own experience. In place of defined, linear action, she can allow eternity to permeate her life with philosophic uncertainty, and with the Kantian notion of purposiveness without purpose. *Moby-Dick* offers a variety of templates in the construction of such a reality, such as the spatial and rhythmic modes of the sea, which demonstrate that life does not acquire meaning from the ends of action but the means.

Assuming that the reader abnegates the idea of temporal progress at some point in her reading of the novel, Melville introduces her to a cyclical means of viewing reality through an application of mythology to nature. In other words, as linear explanations of existence are rendered inadequate by the whale's eternity—ubiquity throughout space and time—Melville urges his readers to embrace an a-historical approach. In doing this, he exposes the “ordering” principle of his text, which is archetypal repetition—a type of patterning that invests the world with unresolved meaning (Franklin, 59). By attending to these patterns, Melville allows his reader to examine her place within eternity.

According to Poulet, Melville's sense of eternity is such that “the past and the future are...confounded with the present” (340), and together

[t]hey indescribably form... one and the same mythical time. It is the time of the mind, the time of fable, a time without determination or succession, in which all the hours in their variety resemble and equal each other (340).

Attending to this mythical time, the reader learns to reject progressive visions of reality in which the achievement of meaning exists outside the present moment. She also learns to organize reality in such a way that rhythmic (daily, seasonal, generational) patterns within nature inform one's understanding of humanity in its relationship with the

universe²⁴. And because patterns in myth reverberate across cultures and epochs, the mythic link between humans and their environment can be said to have a basis in the truth of human consciousness (Sedgwick, 93). Thus, the reader's exploration of eternity in *Moby-Dick* may be seen as yielding an integrated experience of nature.

In chapter three I explored the idea that the ocean is a locus of psychological conflict for both Ishmael and Ahab. As an emblem of the unconscious it represents an obstacle to the reader who must navigate its eternal, speechless and rhythmic abyss so as to negotiate reality and man's role in nature. In making this negotiation, the reader is presented with two psychological alternatives: that of the super-ego, following Ahab's example, and that of a diffuse ego, following Ishmael's. If she is to take on Ahab's corrective example, her experience will end in failure in that the ocean's meaning, as well as the book's, will be repressed. On the other hand, if the reader chooses to grapple with the unconscious as Ishmael does, she must learn to accept the riddle of her experience without recourse to definitive knowledge, measurement or speech. This choice involves adopting an attitude by which the paradoxes of reality silence her logical mind so that she can "silently worship" at nature's shrine (409). It is the attitude of Queequeg swinging in his hammock, whose meaning is spoken through silent rhythm.

[S]o his eyes seemed rounding and rounding, like the rings of Eternity... no dying Chaldee or Greek had higher and holier thoughts than those, whose mysterious shades you saw creeping over the face of poor Queequeg, as he quietly lay in his swaying hammock (425).

As Queequeg's identity diffuses into his surrounding environment in this passage, he becomes a living receptacle of eternity, conjoined with the impersonal within nature and

²⁴ Interestingly, it was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that mythology was beginning to "provide the means for exploring the human mind in terms of its myths" (Franklin, 3).

yet still human. Paradoxically, he becomes more human—a mythic figure connected to the heart and entire history of mankind—as a result of his contact with oceanic indifference. Thus, Melville demonstrates that admitting the ocean’s riddling silence as part of oneself does not put an end to human life, as Ahab fears, but lifts man out of his linear cast into the eternal design of mythic repetition. Man is then able to take his place beside the whale as another ubiquitous symbol of the godhead in nature, restored to the status of Adam before civilization and progress.

Mankind’s movement backward toward Adam, or rather outward, is contingent on the reader’s acceptance of the language of paradox in *Moby-Dick*, which is silence. Melville is constantly urging his readers to embrace paradox and does so by foregrounding the irresolvable quality of the whale: “no face; he has none, proper; nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles” (311). In so doing, he demonstrates the utter inefficacy of mankind’s attempt to solve nature’s riddles by measuring, demarcating or in any way killing nature. In the same stroke, he argues that the only way to deal with the whale’s presence on earth is to embrace dual notions of reality. In the chapter, “A Bower in the Arsacides,” we come upon an image of the whale in which paradox is the foundation of harmony between nature and men.

Now, amid the green, life-restless loom of that Arascidean wood, the great, white, worshipped skeleton lay lounging—a gigantic idler! Yet, as the ever-woven verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around him, the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with the vines; every month assuming greener, fresher verdure; but himself a skeleton. Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curly-headed glories (402).

What is most notable about this passage is that the whale's mystery is not made into a specimen of measurement, but is rather worshiped and wondered at in silence. The mystery of the whale's skeleton, which may be thought of as an emblem of the human mind, is left as it is, wedded to the contradictory, life-restless loom in a world where death may beget and glorify the godhead. Thus, one comes to understand that eternity has a chiasmic structure in *Moby-Dick*, which reflects the pattern "Life folded Death; Death trellised Life;" to navigate such a reality one must allow life to intermix and hum with one's silent observance so that there eventually appears a woven space between the mind and nature.

Before the reader can achieve this harmony within the novel she must survive Ahab's spear-like and disharmonious linear thrusting in the final fifth of the book. As the Pequod steers deeper into the Pacific Ocean and the hunt takes shape, Melville's explorations of eternity and the whale are laid aside. The narrative takes on a linear movement, over which Ahab and his monomaniac will preside. This time around, however, the reader's mind is active and in the habit of asking questions; as a result, she is capable of seeing the linear drive for what it is—an effort to kill the eternal, spatial and rhythmic models of life. No longer supported by the ideology or circumstances of industrial society, the linear model is exposed for what it is, a limited and restrictive vision where power rests in the machine, not the man. The furious and threatening nature of this energy deprives the reader of agency, but this time, significantly, her pacification comes as a loss. Through Ahab, she is made aware that industrial society is forcing her to sit back while it decides the philosophical and moral conditions of her life.

Knowing what it is to play an active part in literature and to confront the paradox of eternity, the reader approaches Ahab as an enemy (though with pity perhaps) in the last fifth of the book. To defend her agency and selfhood she must revolt against him though she has little support in doing this. The Pequod's crew has been too deeply wound up in Ahab's madness throughout to assert themselves now; moreover, they have become hypnotized by the growing intensity of his fire. And it seems, even the reader, strongly attracted to Ahab's purposeful energy before, can become susceptible to the effects of that fire. Over and again, therefore, Ishmael warns his audience against becoming too preoccupied with the thrill of the hunt: "Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me" (380). Hence, he pleads with his reader to maintain cognitive distance and to do what Starbuck cannot, which is to reject Ahab with an awareness of what he represents.

To a greater or lesser extent, the reader's position outside the text allows her to witness the book's final scenes with an awareness of their horror. Endowed with the dramatic privilege of distance, the reader can see what Starbuck and the others cannot: by remaining passive to Ahab she will lose her life to a force that negates the rhythms of eternal nature and man. Though abiding by Ahab may be part of the social standards of nineteenth century morality, the "sentimental creed" (Douglas 306) as Douglas calls it, she will be transgressing the eternal reality of nature. Thus, Melville describes the unforced cooperation of Ahab's crew in "The Try-Works" as a hellish inversion of life.

[T]he ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into the blackness

of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul (379).

Though the ship groans and dives on the rhythm of body of eternal time, it denies the presence of eternity by shooting forward. It kills the "the blackness" and mystery of nature.

The hell-bound ship and its burning crew are the direct antithesis of the weaving life Melville describes in the "A Bower in the Arsacides." Comparing the two, the reader is made aware that the whale and nature do not oppose man, but that man and his fire deaden nature. So too, she realizes that the enemy of mankind is not the whale, which is indifferent, but man's own ability to turn his back on life and allow fire to deaden his connection and sensitivity to other men. Hence, Melville argues with great vigor that his readers become active against the tyrannical forces, which Ahab represents. He also contends that if they choose to remain passive to the linear thrust of industry they are culpable because deadened. After falling asleep at the helm in "The Try-Works" Ishmael wakes to find that the Pequod's tiller is inverted, the boat nearly capsized, and passivity is just as great a threat to the crew as Ahab's madness.

Within the world outside the book where she is deprived of a privileged status, the reader runs as great a risk of becoming seduced by the industrial fire as Ishmael or any of his shipmates. Within a capitalist society that seeks to reduce nature, time and man to the linear project of economic progress, the notion that working class individuals can fight back against their social conditions is discouraged on every level. And in Melville's time, before Marxist ideas were in wide circulation, there wasn't even the support of a philosophy to legitimate that struggle. But still, within her world, the reader has Melville's support. Like Ishmael clinging to Queequeg's coffin for life-support at the end

of the Pequod's journey, the reader clings to Melville's coffin, which is *Moby-Dick*²⁵. And by holding to the book's sense of eternity, the reader continues to have access to an expansive vision of man and nature, which compels her to remain critical of industry's reductionism, and to rebel against the linear vision that pacifies by determining the basis of her reality.

In the Epilogue, the reader is again united with Ishmael in a moment where the narrative past and present overlap: "The drama's done. Why then here does any one step forth?" (509). Thus, the reader and Ishmael step out of the story together carrying with them a profound knowledge of Ahab and the world he represents. Together, they make up a community of active men and women outside the novel who will one day be capable of rebelling against the industrial imperative. To do this, they must insist that the eternal model not be subsumed by linear progress so that man is left the room he needs to actively negotiate his reality. Moreover, they must reject Capitalism's endorsement of individuals as isolated bodies by embracing the eternal connectedness of the mythic, human soul. In short, readers of *Moby-Dick* must accept Ishmael's invitation of community, "Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness" (373), if their aim is to fight industry. And as an individual, the reader must herself declare: "I am ready to squeeze case eternally" (373).

²⁵ The book can be thought of as a coffin in a number of ways. First, it is space in which Melville's immortality is preserved. Second, Melville considered *Moby-Dick* to be his greatest work and the one which came at the final unfurling of the bulb of himself (Melville, 513: Letters to Hawthorne, June 1, 1851) when he was performing at the peak of his creative energy.

Conclusion: Eternity on Land

Though *Moby-Dick* resists prognosis, it does provide its reader with a number of practicable solutions to the problem represented by Ahab and industrial society. These solutions center around an application of the eternal model to one's lifestyle, social institutions, government, etcetera. As a model of time, which is cyclical, spatial and rhythmic rather than rigidly fixed in one direction, eternity lends itself to an emphasis on the means of action rather than its ends. For this reason, it corresponds to the present well-being of humanity and nature rather than the achievement of an idyllic future. By applying an eternal mode to our conception of life, then, we seek to reconcile ourselves with the present demands of day-to-day living.

An embodiment of the Kantian notion of purposiveness without purpose, eternity in *Moby-Dick* is presented as a kind of music. As such, it resembles nature, which grows and evolves continually with energy, direction and organization, but without an endpoint or goal. It also resembles human play and creativity, which can be seen as ends in themselves, undisturbed by the notion of purpose or profit. In his book, *Meaning in Technology*, Arnold Pacey describes human meaning as having its foundation in such purposeless activities, while investigating the commonly held sentiment that modern life and work have been deprived of meaning as a result of a relative lack of such playful activities. By reflecting on and diagnosing the dilemma of modern life, then, Pacey looks for ways that we can recover meaning by connecting to the rhythms of nature.

Like Melville, Pacey suggests that modern man must change his mode of living radically in order to improve his situation. The first step in doing this is to get on board a ship, so to speak, wherein he can take stock of his notions of reality and the natural environment. For example, we might rethink the entire historical tradition of the west,

which, since Bacon, has been engaged in a celebration of human progress and technology. More accustomed to looking at the gains of technological improvements than the serious human losses, we have become desensitized to the notion that science is not always working in our favor and that it may be destroying nature.

By rethinking our world in this way, we can desensitize ourselves to some of the things we currently take for granted. For example, more often than not we believe in science as a neutral or objective application of the intellect to uncover nature's secret. Because we assume its findings are objective we infer that the application of those findings will be neutral as well. We ignore the fact that this notion has been proven wrong many times already. Overexploitation of the land in the fourteenth century helped to cause the Bubonic plague (Pacey, 116). Global warming and toxic waste are the result of an eager and over optimistic embrace of technology, which we will not know the full effects of for another twenty to thirty years. People's current disinclination to search out environmentally safe alternatives to fossil-fuel burning factories and cars will have grievous effects on the environment for years to come.

Despite our previous and current failings, there are examples within our culture and history that will help us to curb this tendency to celebrate technology without thinking about its consequences. Of course, *Moby-Dick* along with many Native American myths and traditions may be regarded as particularly relevant cultural texts in this regard. In terms of history, the Titanic's sinking has become a powerful rebuttal of the technological imperative, which has risen to mythic status within contemporary

popular culture²⁶. And according to Pacey, it is the creation of such myths that will ultimately refocus our society:

Those who survived into recent times were able to survive precisely because they managed to learn restraint, often by developing mythologies that encouraged a 'reverential attitude to the creatures they kill, and to nature as a whole'²⁷ (113).

Above all else, myths of restraint must demand a recovery of the reverential within contemporary culture, no matter if it comes in secular or religious form. What they must teach is respect for nature's own purposiveness rather than a desire to impose our own purposes without compromise (Pacey, 145).

Aside from environmental concerns, *Moby-Dick* is also seeks to redress the social failings of industrial society. Where Capitalism has emphasized individuality and personal isolation to maintain its power over workers, Melville stresses the restorative power of community in Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg. On an extremely practical level, Melville's understanding of an ideal community is one that provides universal life insurance so that no one is degraded to Ishmael's poverty despite "remorseless" work. On a more personal level, Melville's vision lends itself to the creation of communities where people can share living space, beds even, so that they are able to find the emotional and moral support of their fellow men.

Ultimately, the sense of community Melville is seeking is one that supports a democratic exercise of power rather than the top-down dictatorship Ahab represents. Rising out of his representation of eternity, therefore, every individual is able to define

²⁶ James Cameron's movie *Titanic* is one of many recent cultural productions, which include books, documentaries, museum exhibits (the Detroit Science Center is currently showcasing items retrieved from the ship), that demonstrate the importance of the Titanic's sinking as a contemporary mythology.

²⁷ In this line Pacey is quoting from Colin Tudge, *Last Animals in the Zoo* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 17-18).

his own sense of reality within a free democracy, rather than have it dictated to him. This connection between notions of eternity and democracy is an important point to grasp in that we are not often aware of the link between philosophic ideas and our day-to-day experience. Once we grasp it as true, we understand that we have the power to shape and shift our reality. In doing this, we can adopt the eternal as our dominant view of time, and thereby establish reverence for nature as a manifestation of that vision. No longer will it seem right to bulldoze land and forests insofar as the end result of such action, more human progress derived from a linear view of time, will no longer correlate with our notion of truth.

Melville's socialism also addresses the economic imperative of industrial and post-industrial life, which has forced people to take on jobs and living arrangements that are not personally rewarding. To redress this situation, Melville suggests that men need to feel more connected to the modes of their production. Thus, he has Ishmael take up sailing, an ancient occupation closely connected to its own modes of production, as a means of recovering his sense of selfhood. Though it may be impossible to eradicate wage labor outside a socialist society, Pacey offers many suggestions toward personalizing wage driven work. For one, we need to reevaluate our approach to work environments and see them not as utilitarian outposts on the road to progress, but as places where meaning is created without our culture. One way of doing this is to personalize technology and office spaces so that they reflect human rhythms and aesthetic sensibilities. In doing this we will thus be able to recover a sense of the integration men felt in the past, performing the rhythmic labor of farm work, craftsmanship and sailing.

What all this goes to say is that the white whale's strength in rebuking Ahab's spear in *Moby-Dick* ought to be taken as a symbol of hope for the future. Where we might

be led to think mankind is capable of destroying the whole of nature, we may be reassured that despite our worst efforts, the wilderness will retain its spirit of freedom. For Melville, the spirit of nature is eternal.

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