

Laughing in the Watery World:  
the telling of the Joke in *Moby Dick*

by

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## Abstract

At one end *Moby Dick* begins as travel literature—"WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL," as the first chapter describes it. At the other end the book has transformed into a tragedy that pits Ahab's fierce will to conquer against the White Whale's ultimate resistance. In between the two ends, Ishmael repeatedly deploys a particular pattern of humor that shapes a tragic plot out of his narrative of exploration. This thesis argues that the tragedy of *Moby Dick* is precisely a tragedy of exploration created and completed by the telling of jokes—or rather, the same Joke repeated over and over until at last it is no longer funny.

Ishmael tells the Joke like this: take a thing, any object or person, from the nearby world. Now take a second thing from a distant part of the world. Set them next to each other for contrast. Laugh, because the contrast demonstrates the foibles and failures of both.

A second element, however, complicates the matter: the Prophet is a figure who proclaims a limit to the ability of the Joke to successfully describe the entire world through the act of contrast. On one hand the world defies piecemeal separation; on the other contrasts threaten unthinkable violence if successful. Trying to navigate between these two extremes, Ishmael finds it difficult even to speak at times, much less to laugh.

In a series of short sections, this thesis traces the formation of these two structural elements in the narrative progress of *Moby-Dick* as Ishmael tells the Joke with increasingly serious subjects and increasingly serious failures. When the last Joke has finished, no one laughs: they have all died in the cataclysm foretold by the Prophets—but Ishmael survives to tell all the Jokes again as he narrates from optimistic beginning to tragic end. He therefore testifies that within a fine balance, individual identities may resist the erasure of unification of violence in the watery world.

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## Laughing in the Watery World

### Introductory

There she blows! Leviathans of laughter swim through *Moby-Dick*, to be sighted and chased again and again for the precious oil of joking that Ishmael uses to light our way through the dark narrative of the *Pequod's* doomed voyage. So boundless is his grinning geniality that it overflows the novel proper and compels the narrator to preface not one but eighty epigraphs to his tale, and an etymology of the word *whale* itself before that<sup>1</sup>. Nor yet is Ishmael's broad humor content with these testaments to the whale, but he further adds a description of the Late Consumptive Usher and the Sub-Sub-Librarian who supply these textual sideshows. This unmistakable voice of playfulness and willing digression leads the reader around the globe and through one hundred thirty-two chapters before coming at last to the whale named in the title. Yet despite the prominence of such humor—the reader encounters it before anything else—the use and meaning of humor remains poorly understood in *Moby-Dick*.

In the introduction to *Melville's Humor*, Jane Mushabac proposes as an explanation:

humor suggests the contagion of sentimentality. After all

that has been said about the American classical novel being

1. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, Ety and Ext. I hereafter cite this book parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *MD*. I cite by chapter, since the chapters are small enough to sufficiently locate each passage while allowing a more economical use of citation while discussing extended passages. I use Ety="Etymology," Ext="Extracts," and Epi="Epilogue" for the unnumbered sections.

in part a rebellion against the popular female sentimental novel, what if it turned out that Melville's work only departs from popular fiction in creating the *male* sentimental novel?<sup>2</sup>

That is, with the revival of Melville's work in this century, and especially in the case of *Moby-Dick*, the humor is *not* the first thing that the reader encounters. Long before opening the cover, a popular perception fed by critical analyses tells the reader, misleadingly, how to read the novel, and the critics themselves have no small stake in maintaining this viewpoint. Several critics have attempted to correct the marginalization of Melville's humor, largely in the last two decades. Particularly, Mushabac (1981) situates Melville within a tradition of Renaissance writing characterized by outsized characters and the giddiness of new discoveries both scientific and geographical, a tradition that Melville eagerly borrows from in his own age of optimism and westward expansion. John Bryant in *Melville and Repose* (1993) looks more to Melville's contemporaries for the source of a philosophy of humor in which the ability to laugh allows the mind to attain a transcendental state of peace named "repose"<sup>3</sup>. Both of these critics enhance our understanding of Melville's context within literary and philosophical tradition, yet their books perform broad surveys of Melville's prose works that smooth over particular questions in each book. These critics tie the use of humor with Melville's characteristic stance of pessimistic relativism—his despair with the limits of human

2. Jane Mushabac, *Melville's Humor: A Critical Study*, 3.

3. John Bryant, *Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance*.

knowledge—and the development of this stance over the course of his career, but they fail to appreciate how this stance develops thematically within the course of any single book. I intend to demonstrate how the transformation of a single joke within *Moby-Dick* fashions Ishmael's buoyant and exuberant embarkation into a tragedy of mad pursuit.

I say "a single joke" because the structure of the text reads in a recurrent pattern of humorous comparison. Rather than a series of several jokes, *Moby-Dick* contains a series of the Joke, where each telling consists of the close comparison of unlike subjects that exposes the laughable follies of each<sup>4</sup>. The effects of the Joke are cumulative so that retelling reveals another facet of the world at which to laugh. In the course of the narrative, however, a measure of seriousness infiltrates the Joke. As the Joke continues in the story, this seriousness overtakes the laughing—a process that lends momentum to the tragic conclusion.

While a joke often has no identifiable author, every instance of a joke has a teller<sup>5</sup>; the Joke of *Moby-Dick* is no exception. In this book Ishmael tells the Joke to the reader, and so to understand the telling and transformation of the Joke we shall do well to understand Ishmael. Freda Yeager's article, "The Dark Ishmael," typifies a characterization of Ishmael as narrator held, with varying details, by many critics<sup>6</sup>. She

4. The structure of the Joke in all its variations begins to resemble a fractal image, with Jokes the size of several chapters composed of sub-Jokes and sub-sub-Jokes all on the same pattern. I further suspect that individual iterations of it may account for the chapter divisions, though that proposal is beyond my ability to prove.

5. Elliot Oring discusses the personal relationship of the teller to a joke, even though the teller is almost certainly not the original author of the material. *Jokes and Their Relations*, see especially chapter 8.

6. Freda E. Yeager, "The Dark Ishmael and the First Weaver in *Moby Dick*," 152-168.

proposes a split narrator who appears jovial and ebullient at first glance, but between and behind the lines lurks a "dark Ishmael" who sprinkles the text with disturbing fits of irony and sarcasm. The split is also temporal in that the dark Ishmael is an experienced and jaded Ishmael who refuses the consoling belief in a Christian God after the terrible experiences of the naive and trusting Ishmael who set out on the *Pequod*. In addition

one should not conclude that the dark Ishmael is necessarily the final Ishmael. Perhaps the mature narrator has managed to grow beyond the polarities. . . "this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye."<sup>7</sup>

The double vision remains difficult and even disturbing, for if the young Ishmael is a believer and the dark Ishmael is an infidel, then how shall we name the narrator who seemingly stands apart?

We might call him an author, but I will not explain this answer before examining the second element of this narrative: the figure that I will call the Prophet. The Prophet, like the Joke, recurs in several places and several individuals: they are the characters who believe but cannot witness to belief. Although the Joke appears as statement of belief, in fact the role of the Prophet as a believer calls into question the very possibility of such a statement. Faced with its own annulment, the Joke loses its power of laughter and the tragedy of Ahab's chase follows as a consequence. If Ishmael, the man who names himself as outcast, belongs to the company of despairing Prophets—never welcome in

7. Yeager, 168, quoting from *MD*, Ch. 85.

their own land—then we must have little hope of discovering any redemptive power that might avert Ahab's doom. If on the other hand both Ishmael and his Joke survive the catastrophe that leads Ahab to death, then perhaps this Joke-teller tells a message of salvation.

### Loomings

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago . . . I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. . . . (*MD*, Ch. 1)

So the story of Ishmael begins: here we have the voice that eulogizes the Usher and the Sub-Sub<sup>8</sup>, but only now in the imposingly-titled "Loomings" do we find a proper form

8. Though the Sub-Sub-Librarian apparently has not yet died, the narrator of the Extracts does not let mere temporal inconvenience stand in the way of his discourse.

coalescing around this narrator. The opening sentence is a mere three words, something of an uncharacteristically straightforward statement. It need perplex us only briefly, though, for he launches immediately into a cumulative parataxis of "whenever" clauses by which he describes himself as grim, depressed, fascinated by death, and angry at the hats of social convention in addition to being "Ishmael." The shortness of his first phrase serves to underscore the inadequacy of one word to comprehend the whole, lengthy truth. He requires these several images because he is a narrator who tells multiple stories about himself and his subjects of whales, whale hunters, and the watery world. At the same time he recognizes his audience: speaking in the imperative, he creates for the reader an identity to which these many moods and stories may belong: an identity to which every word, whether Ishmael's own or his report of another character's speech, attaches itself.

Who is Ishmael? He is a recurring depressive, for one thing: these hypos drive him to sea not once but "whenever" and he informs Captain Peleg that he has served four times in the merchant service (*MD*, Ch. 16). But this depression is only periodic and the story about the *Pequod* thus engendered took place "[s]ome years ago." He gives no indication whether hypos do or do not bother him at the moment of narration; in fact, the energy with which he launches the story argues against such a circumstance. All the description of spleen and hypos forms but a small part of the whole. This much is not enough description to satisfactorily know his character.

But just a little further on it becomes clear that Ishmael is not satisfied either. For having said that he goes to sea, he must further demonstrate that every person longs for the ocean, or at least some stretch of open water. This from the start proves to be the

chief characteristic of Ishmael as narrator: he will be satisfied with no single description<sup>9</sup>. Even more, he delights in oppositions and paradoxes: his world is a world in which metaphysical professors meditate (not drink!) by the side of water in the desert and in which the Egyptian pyramids are grand bakehouses made to cook an ibis for dinner. He does not find it sufficient to say that he travels as an ordinary seaman, but he must contrast that lowly position with the duties of Commodore, Captain, and Cook; and also contrast the indignity of a common sailor with the pride of three "old established famil[ies];" and furthermore contrast the sailor's lot to the authority of a schoolmaster. And after that he compares the sailor's obedience to the captain with the Christian's obedience to God and with the slave's obedience to the master. Yet these images, though of disparate origin, share a common theme of social superiority: that will not do, but Ishmael must directly contrast Christian humility with the love of money and the sailor's wages which become the wages of sin—and goes on to say that the true benefit of sailing is the free exercise in the open air (*MD*, Ch. 1). All this summary is not a waste: barely four pages of the novel have elapsed and already Ishmael has culled his images from around the world and even the afterlife just in an attempt to say that he went to sea as a common sailor before the mast. His stylistic desire to use various images—and as

9. Carolyn Porter argues that Ishmael does so to break down borders of classification in a very modern-looking move of defamiliarizing our ordinary perspective in "Call Me Ishmael, or How to Make Double-Talk Speak." I oppositely view this move as recognizing and defining borders, although I admit that it does create a like sensation by placing borders in unexpected places. Where Porter might read, "Call me Ishmael. . . . In fact, call everybody Ishmael," I would prefer, "Call me Ishmael. . . . I'm a human being, which is the same as saying I am attracted to open water."

various as possible—in support of a single theme forms the shape of the entire text, so the speed and fluidity with which he changes his explanations must be known from the start.

Ishmael as a narrator will not settle for a single image; rather he needs a great series of expansive and contrasting images—these successive contrasts being short tellings of the Joke—in order to achieve the sense of a particular idea. In the string of "whenever"s at the beginning, each image approaches his sense of desperation from a different perspective of gloom, anger, etc. They do not offer a whole picture of Ishmael, but each presents a slice. Each series of images is a cumulative representation of Ishmael's concept. Furthermore, the series are cumulative with each other in that the sequence of them in these first pages builds into a more complete portrait of Ishmael in his moods and beliefs, as when he Jokingly contrasts his initial hypos with the bright satisfaction of finding one's way to the sea: both belong to him and therefore he voices both. Though neither any image nor series of images nor group of series carries a complete description, the addition of each one enlarges the seed idea. The accumulation of images, particularly into the Joke structure, being the most distinctive trait of Ishmael as narrator, it stands to reason that the entire text he narrates functions as an accumulation of these similar and dissimilar images, all building a conceptual center upon the foundation of the Joke.

#### The Bed in New Bedford

There she blows! We have sighted the Joke before, but not much more than the Duodecimo sort, hardly worth pursuing. At the Spouter Inn we find a fine Folio specimen worth trying out. This telling extends over at least two chapters as Ishmael

meets, befriends, and admires Queequeg. It is rich with laughter and brimming with cheerful optimism, for the young Ishmael just going to sea has not yet encountered the Prophetic agents of despair<sup>10</sup>.

"The Spouter Inn" (*MD* Ch. 3) begins by giving the reader a reassuring ball of "Arsicadean twine" (*MD*, Ch. 102) in the form of Ishmael's voice describing the painting, the public room, and the patrons. Some of the images may be discomfiting, but certainly no more so than the wide variety called forth in the first two chapters. Ishmael summons each one and dismisses it quickly: it is the same rapid succession of multiple imagery the reader encounters in the first few paragraphs, and the reader uses it as a guide as Ishmael now begins to anatomize something other than himself.

Wait, though, for where is this something other? The hour grows late and no sign of his harpooneer bedmate. Ishmael must fill in the space with his own soliloquy of shifting thoughts and opinions about the desirability and necessity of sharing his bed. Though he must climb in at last, sleep proves as unrestful as wakefulness. These small devices of plot heighten the dramatic tension and allow the harpooneer to approach in the darkness of full night: an object truly unknown and whose identity may only be guessed at. By the light of a single lantern, Ishmael performs a series of guesses and conclusions ever more frightening until at last he reveals his bedmate as a pagan South Seas islander—and likely a cannibal—who brandishes a tomahawk and shouts "Speak-e! tell-ee me who-ee be, or dam-me, I kill-e!" (*MD*, Ch.3)

10. What of the hypos that send Ishmael to sea in the first place? They are depressing, to be sure, but they are no more than physical irregularities in the spleen, an ailment for which Ishmael has already prescribed a treatment and testified to the efficacy of its cure.

Then the proprietor enters grinning and all the dramatic tension is dispelled. The whole chapter has been a joke, a prank for the proprietor's own amusement. Chapter 3 ends with the conclusion of the proprietor's joke, but for Ishmael the Joke has just gotten under way. "The Spouter Inn" defines certain boundaries between Ishmael and Queequeg, Christian and pagan, civilized and cannibal. Those are the terms and subjects of the Joke, and Chapter 4 begins by placing these contradictory subjects in direct contact with each other. Queequeg has thrown his arm across Ishmael "in the most loving and affectionate manner." The tattoos on that arm blend imperceptibly into the patchwork counterpane symbolic of domesticity. Mushabac recognizes in this scene a recurring pattern called the universal hug: "[y]ou hug yourself, you hug your cannibal bedmate, you lick your paws, you even hug your agony (Ahab for the latter two)" <sup>11</sup>. She sees the hug as a celebration of erotic bounty, but at this very point Ishmael recounts a vivid ghost story of his childhood encounter with a supernatural hand. The hug is not necessarily a moment of splendid embrace; rather it is the point of closest contact with the absolute other. This point of contact sits at the center of the Joke, and that contact is a nexus of terrible, supernatural fear.

However, Mushabac's mistake is only a problem of reading ahead of the narrator. As soon as he describes his childhood fright, Ishmael goes on to say:

Now, take away the awful fear, and my sensations at  
feeling the supernatural hand in mine were very similar, in  
their strangeness, to those which I experienced on waking

11. Mushabac, *Melville's Humor*, 87.

up and seeing Queequeg's pagan arm thrown round me.

But at length all the past night's events soberly recurred,

and then I lay only alive to the comic predicament. For

though I tried to move his arm . . . he still hugged me

tightly, as though naught but death should part us

twain. (*MD*, Ch. 4)

The "comic predicament" begins not with the hug but with Ishmael trying to extract himself. Fear, in this testimony, was not part of the scene, yet the narrator nevertheless adds the story. The moment of fear marks the moment of contact, and including it clarifies the terms of the Joke: here are two men, from opposite parts of the world, placed together in the most intimate circumstances. There is a moment of fearful contact, then only laughter. Just as the landlord laughed at Ishmael's fear last night, now Ishmael laughs at his own fear—because he never had a good reason to be afraid. This is the punch line of the Joke: it turns out that the other we fear is our bedmate near at hand, and having slept together<sup>12</sup> what else can we do but laugh at our unfounded fear.

Once alerted to the necessity of laughter, Ishmael offers his reader plenty of opportunities to laugh: here is Queequeg diving under the bed to pull his boots on, then stomping around the room wearing nothing but his hat and boots; there is Queequeg at

12. The marriage symbolism of Ishmael's own report entirely justifies the innuendo of my phrase, with a caveat provided by extending Mushabac's passage about the hug: "In those great hugs, squeezing hands, you dream of all of nature's bounty, all the creams and milks of sperm and gold, without ever touching your precarious individual selfhood or engaging in the fruitful—hence pedestrian—business of sex." *Melville's Humor*, 87. The innuendo refers not to acts but teasingly to their fruits without suggesting how they came to grow.

the head of the table harpooning a beefsteak breakfast. No wonder Ishmael "cherish[es] no malice toward him [the landlord], though he had been skylarking me not a little," since the chance to watch the cannibal among the civilized men quite repays the earlier inconvenience (*MD*, Ch. 4-5). Indeed Ishmael himself likens a good joke to an economic exchange with his next turn of imagery. Thus Queequeg the foreign and unknown other becomes a valuable object of trade among the New England humor-mongers.

Such trade points out that at least one part of the Joke—the other that is brought into contact with the familiar—is unfamiliar and exotic. To reach this exotic element, someone must first go and find it. *Moby-Dick* is set in an era of expansion and exploration, and the many digressions it takes from the main plot constitute part of that exploration. Ishmael sets himself as the chief authority on whales, whaling ships, nautical law, South Seas religions, in short on any subject that crosses his path, most or all of them unfamiliar (or at least he insists they are unfamiliar) to the general reader. Like a true explorer, he balks at nothing, and the Joke is the ship he commands for the journey of discovery. By using the joke, Ishmael is able to bring himself and his familiar worlds into close connection with faraway objects such as whales and cannibals. This explains why the Joke of Ishmael and Queequeg sharing a bed is particularly marked by dramatic tension and supernatural fears. These elements appear only under the special purpose of telling the first Folio-scale Joke, because Ishmael wants and needs the reader to understand the structure of it as a literary device before embarking on his voyage of discovery. He tells the joke countless times in the narrative, but it can only be effective as a vehicle for exploration if the reader understands the purpose of telling it.

We should remember as well that Queequeg arrives in New Bedford as an explorer himself (*MD*, Ch. 12). He is not just a humorous cargo but one of the traders as well, and he trades the Joke with Ishmael. When Ishmael comments on Queequeg's first wheelbarrow, the harpooneer replies with the story of his sister's wedding at which a visiting sea captain mistakes the ceremony: "'Now,' said Queequeg, 'what you tink now?—Didn't our people laugh?'" (*MD*, Ch. 13). So the Joke passes around and around in the world: whether sharing a bed or at the wedding feast, it is the guest, the stranger, the other who forces us to recognize that fear ought to be laughed away. With every telling, the Joke exposes the fallibility of the other, but Queequeg's ability to tell it reminds Ishmael that he too may be the other with the attendant failings. So everybody laughs at everybody and then we get on to the business of sleeping and feasting.

It is tempting therefore to read the Joke as a cosmic equalizer, especially as Ishmael subsequently expands the telling of the joke to include all the denizens of the sea. Certainly it creates a plane of equality simply because the subjects have some basis for comparison. Furthermore, the punch line of the fallible other and the constant potential of exchange show that all mortal creatures face the prospect of sitting in as the other and the other is always at a humorous disadvantage as a guest of the familiar. "It's a mutual, joint-stock world in all meridians," runs the thought Ishmael imputes to Queequeg, "We cannibals must help these Christians" (*MD*, Ch. 13). In blissful optimism the turning Joke suggests each person equally receives and provides humor, thus each helps the other in this "mutual, joint-stock world."

Nevertheless, the Joke is not a permanent structure. When the laughter is over, the subjects remain in their categories. After sharing a bed, Ishmael and Queequeg will sleep in separate hammocks aboard ship. The sea captain will leave the wedding feast and sail for home. The Joke explores the world always by means of contrasts, never unisons. Were Ishmael waiting at the Spouter Inn and a second Ishmael walked through the door, the consequences might be shallowly funny but they would not contain a humor of exploration<sup>13</sup>. Even as we recognize a certain irrelevancy of categories in the matter of exchanging Jokes, we also see the practical level of meaning that continues to separate the classes of subjects from one another. The use of the Joke lies in setting the subjects together to sharpen the contrasts between them. Ishmael exposes a system of classifications by the process of telling Jokes, for such is the role of the explorer who undertakes to describe and extend the world's knowledge.

### The Watery World

If there is some truth to Mushabac's statement that the first twenty chapters "spell out the game too clearly . . . [they] are grating by their very insistence upon being funny,"<sup>14</sup> the explanation for Ishmael's improper aesthetic proceeds from his dual role as character and narrator. It is not the case that he has not yet found his topic, but that he

13. As for those psychological theories that might contend that the self is properly a realm of exploration as well, I have not yet known any that could do so without supposing that the "self" is actually divided into self and other. In this story representations of the other are kept neatly apart in separate individuals—with the possible exception of Ahab, who nevertheless perceives and soliloquizes his suspected psychological other as an external fate (*MD*, Ch. 132). (The next best case lies in Pip's play with grammar, but I believe this is only a figure of speech, not a figuration in speech of some underlying neurosis.)

14. Mushabac, *Melville's Humor*, 82.

found it out of proper literary order. He describes the tool for exploration before he mentions just what he intends to explore. Ishmael as narrator knows his destination; but he starts along with Ishmael the character: at the beginning instead of on the voyage. The New Bedford experience yields a grand prototype for the Joke. Could there be any two men better contrasted and better laughed at than the scion of "established" New England families (*MD*, Ch. 1) and the heir to the throne of Kokovoko (*MD*, Ch. 12)? While aboard the *Pequod*, Ishmael and Queequeg will not sleep together nor eat together, so that their interaction is limited. As narrator, Ishmael has no grounds to bring them close enough to properly tell the Joke<sup>15</sup>.

Additionally, Queequeg's insistence that Ishmael alone find their ship creates a perfect opportunity to introduce the object of exploration by way of signing on. Ishmael first explicitly mentions his grand purpose when he voices his wish, "I want to see the world"<sup>16</sup>. Captain Peleg prankishly indicates that the world lies just over the weather-bow; Ishmael peers out and finds "the open ocean. The prospect was unlimited, but extremely monotonous and forbidding; not the slightest variety that I could see" (*MD*, Ch. 16). Here is a thing for which a single category must suffice, and Peleg, in order to

15. Although Ishmael takes liberties with time for his expository digressions, in the details of the voyage proper he remains meticulous and straightforward, since only upon the grounds of appearing realistically true does the tragedy of Ahab's monomania acquire dramatic force.

16. When writing this, I had overlooked that the second sentence of "Loomings" also says, "I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world." I have kept the text from Chapter 16 in the body to be more continuous with the narrative of Peleg's prank. In support of that decision, I observe that the universal drops out in favor of mundanely packing the carpet-bag, and so "The Ship" must reintroduce the subject more decisively.

try the prospective sailor's mettle, promises that "the world" is only more of the same. Ishmael even admits, "I was a little staggered," because, although Peleg seems to use it for a joke on a suspected lubber, the ocean defies the Joke of multiple subjects. Peleg's commentary underscores the serious view that structures of multiplicity cannot explain the world in its undifferentiated totality. This fundamental unity of the world enters the text as a challenge to the Joke, a challenge that Ishmael cannot ignore. The Joke is a tool of exploration, and here is a world to explore. If it is possible, then Ishmael will dissect it with humor; and at this point he remains sure of his ability to do so.

Nor do his readers doubt, since this is by no means the first time the universal appears in the text. The Etymology section with its listing of names for the whale and the Extracts section with its citations of the whale from literature suggest the universality of the whale as a topic of discourse; and in the first chapter when Ishmael insists that water is a necessary aesthetic part of any landscape he makes a universal claim about human values. Ishmael's method of probing multiple images includes images of the universal—all landscapes must have water, every Manhatta feels an attraction to the wharves (*MD*, Ch. 1)—displaying an easy familiarity with the universal tendency.

We should remember that these examples of the partly universal (partly because dealing with landscapes or populations rather than with everything) come *chronologically* after the fully universal image of the flat sea as "the world:" the narrative structure of *Moby-Dick* distinguishes between Ishmael the sailor and Ishmael the narrator who recounts his travels of "[s]ome time ago." The generalizations made by Ishmael the narrator show that he has learned to incorporate, at least in parts, the universal image that

staggers the earlier character. Despite the blow to his confidence from this vision, Ishmael presses forward in his intentions and the text hereafter concerns Ishmael learning to negotiate the tension between his own tendency toward Joking multiplicity and the ocean's tendency toward unity.

Having gotten to sea, he adopts the strategy of Father Mapple's sermon (*MD*, Ch. 9) and uses shipboard life as a continuing source of comparison to all of life. That is, he narrates his experience with whaling so that by way of Jokes he can vicariously experience any human activity. This tactic allows his thoughts to find an expansive freedom that allows him to take on many roles as naturalist, philosopher, lawyer, etc. while remaining "grounded" in the open sea. At the same time, the plot moves away from Ishmael's own actions to the rest of the crew and the whales themselves. The Etymology and Extracts show that the subject of this novel is whales, and "The Advocate" (*MD*, Ch. 24) expands the topic to include those who hunt them. Among these ocean inhabitants, Ishmael finds plenty of people to animate the watery world. The ocean and the world only seem empty and unified at first glance; as he explores their depths Ishmael encounters whales, sharks, ships, storms, the sun, the moon, officers from America, crewmen from China, a French captain, a cannibal harpooneer, cooks, lawyers, kings and queens, islands and even continents, himself, Ahab, God, and at last even Moby-Dick the White Whale. The whole is simple: endless water; but the variety of life and experience above and below the surface occupies an endless stream of material for Jokes. "Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters," says Ishmael before launching yet another explanation of

whaling equipment and custom (MD, Ch. 62). Certainly he finds the watery world of the *Pequod* an adequate subject for an extended volume! His many explanations, though at times straying far from the ship and farther from Ahab's monomania, still remain within his course: for Ishmael intends nothing less than to explore the whole of this watery world, scribed in terms of whales and whaling but not less extensive because of that.

By no means is *Moby-Dick* thereby an allegory with a correspondence between each element of the watery world and each element of the "real" world. Quite the opposite, Ishmael's multiple images prevent any symbolic correlation from taking hold. James McIntosh demonstrates how this process works: Ishmael reports on one object or incident in the watery world, such as Ahab's scar or the gold doubloon (MD, Ch. 28,99), and then presents a series of remarks by several crew members. These several perspectives lead up to and include a voice of nihilism in which multiple views cancel each other out. Yet Ishmael allows nihilism no more than equal chance, for buoyed up by an unexplained faith he finds nihilism as inadequate to the whole as any other explanation<sup>17</sup>. Although it seems a bit of a stretch to call these Jokes, they do follow the form of contrasts. Successive interpretations highlight the failures of the others—including any the reader might privately form—and establishes the multitude of categories to which the interpretations might belong. We laugh less easily at these Jokes because they pass by too quickly to develop into the release of tension present in the early scenes at New Bedford. Nevertheless, we may regard them as jokes in miniature, and the multiplicity of categories they establish for elements of the watery world shows that an

17. James McIntosh, "The Mariner's Multiple Quest," 26-28.

allegorical structure would be impossible. Because of all that diversity, *watery* correctly describes the world that Ishmael sails through, because meanings and symbols continually mix and separate in the stream of Jokes without finding a stable surface of meaning.

### Cetology

There she blows! A whole group of them! Jokes spout off as soon as Ishmael boards the *Pequod*. The ship almost seems like a whale itself from being trimmed all over with whale ivory, but the Joke is not between ships and whales. Rather, the decoration of the vessel prompts a comparison to "any barbaric Ethiopian emperor" and a "cannibal." At the same time, the "helmsman . . . felt like the Tartar" (*MD*, Ch. 16). The skeletal appearance of the *Pequod* provides an opportunity to tell a Joke with different classes of humans. The punch line, though, is several chapters removed to "The Advocate," where Ishmael Jokes with the subjects of glorious soldiers and inglorious whalers (*MD*, Ch. 24). Ethiopian, cannibal, Tartar, soldier, and whale hunter all reflect each other's imperfections. The Joke allows Ishmael to bring these imperfections into relief against the common motif of battle.

Ishmael Jokes with the whale's skeleton directly when he wanders into the "Bower in the Arsacides," describing how native priests conserve an empty but massive skeleton as a temple and a god, and even the dead bones may be held "as an object of virtù" by a tranquil king (*MD*, Ch. 102). But even the whale—god at the end of its spine is no larger than marbles, tapering "at last into simple child's play" (*MD*, Cp. 103). The

skeletal whale combines high religious zeal with the carefree games of children; the Joke establishes both impulses as categories in the watery world.

However this single whale Joke cannot suffice for his exploratory purpose, using as it does only the skeleton of the whale: here we have but the bare bones presentation and as Ishmael starts to add on meanings he includes several negative qualifications. Most obviously missing are the whale's "boneless flukes," the source of its motive power in life; and from measurement of the ribs Ishmael believes that the living whale must have twice the height of its dead bones (*MD*, Ch. 103). By appearing as a skeleton, the bower loses its vigor and appears as only a sign of the foundations of life: it is profound religion or careless playing, but the intermediary modes of life are missing.

It is precisely the living whale that the *Pequod's* crew hunts and that Ishmael studies. The whalers seek to fill their skeleton-decorated hold with oil distilled from the whale's flesh; Ishmael seeks to fill his tale with the adventures of life in the watery world; both parties appropriate the whale's living essence to fill up the life they lack. Ishmael describes the whale's essence in a series of whale Jokes spouting throughout the book.

The first great hint of the extent of the whale's life appears in the Extracts, where Ishmael imparts a summary history of the whale's treatment in literature. Isaiah treats the Leviathan as a beast of malice, compared to the serpent; Other reports to Alfred upon the value of whales' teeth; Sir William Devenant comments on their sheer physical power; and the other extracts focus mainly on those three themes of danger, value, and, above all, size (*MD*, Ext). Ishmael takes some pride, it seems, in choosing for his subject "the largest inhabitant of the globe; the most formidable of all whales to encounter; the most

majestic in aspect; and lastly, by far the most valuable in commerce," as he describes the sperm whale. Yet the same chapter that enthrones the spermaceti belies that pride by treating individually each of the known whales from greatest to least. If most of his tale concerns only the superlative whale, Ishmael still recognizes the existence of whales of all races and habits, their distinctions established with the "Bibliographical" analogy of Folio, Octavo, and Duodecimo types. Holding the whales up for comparison by the Joke, Ishmael boasts of achieving a task of sorting that escaped the great naturalists before him (*MD*, Ch. 32). Thus his Joke contributes positively to the sum of knowledge about the watery world: his exploration succeeds.

And as to that one species, the sperm whale, Ishmael testifies that "[w]hen overflowing with mutual esteem, the whales salute *more hominum*" (*MD*, Ch. 87). In the context of the passage this is surely a sexual double entendre<sup>18</sup>, but the reader should not forget that such a phrase truly is double and has a first meaning as well as second. The sperm whale in the company of its fellow whales act in a manner like human society. Ishmael treats the sperm whales of the watery world as if they were humans in a human world: as when in "The Grand Armada" the gallied whales act like humans in a crowded theater who trample each other at the slightest alarm of fire. At the center of that same commotion Starbuck's whaleboat comes across a "lake" of nursing whales so calm and unafraid that it even evinces some gentle pets and scratches from the hunters (*MD*, Ch. 87). The scene might describe an idealized human lifestyle as well with the commotion and bustle occurring outside and tranquil domesticity and procreation

18. Mushabac pointed me indirectly to this passage in *Melville's Humor*, page 87.

contained inside a "wall." The Joke establishes in this case the categories of the external and the domestic, displayed prominently in those activities of whales that are most similar to human pursuits. Here is a double exploration of two creatures at once.

Such an obvious equality of lifestyle would lead to a close identification between whales and humans, but in the constant exchange of the watery world that near-allegory is undone with further Jokes. Though they "salute *more hominum*," he also directly compares the whales to elephants, sheep, and buffalo; in fact humans are themselves compared to sheep in the same paragraph (*MD*, Ch. 87). The whales represent humans, true, but as with all things in the watery world they never represent only one aspect of the larger world. The Joke relies on nearness to display differences, and if whales, humans, and others share certain qualities, then we nevertheless recognize them as distinct in other qualities. Ishmael insists, "I take the good old-fashioned ground that the whale is a fish" rather than a mammal, precisely because the whale keeps company with "sharks and shad, alewives and herring" instead of walking about in human society (*MD*, Ch. 32). Ishmael expressly refuses to equate whales with mammals—humans—because doing so leads only to the conclusion of infinite sameness between all creatures and ignores real differences. Whenever the Joke reveals something in the other to be laughable, it does so only because it can affirm that difference.

### The Minor Prophets

So far I have described the structure of the Joke and its function as an analytical tool that Ishmael uses to describe the entities of the watery world. Already, however, deployment of the Joke runs into certain problems. Often, the contrast of subjects fails to

produce laughter as a Joke properly should. Was the identification of this structure as 'Joke' a mistake, despite the obvious humor of the early chapters? Alternatively, to take another problem, the Joke works very well with naturally polarized classes such as Christian and pagan, but it feels strained to apply the term to multiple images of the gold doubloon or the many categories of whales. Have I attributed too much power to the significance of a minor structure? These are not entirely my questions, though: they are genuine problems faced by Ishmael.

Some pages ago I wrote that the text hereafter (Ishmael's signing aboard the *Pequod*) concerns Ishmael learning to negotiate the tension between his own tendency toward Joking multiplicity and the ocean's tendency toward unity. The image of the watery world is the unbroken horizon. As the *Pequod* sails and Ishmael Jokes, they never get nearer to that horizon: to explore and categorize all the phenomena of the watery world proves a difficult and extensive task.

Many are the voices that insist that the task is not merely difficult but impossible. These voices often claim authority from the watery world itself and uphold the fundamental *unity* of the *universe*. I call such voices the Prophets because the most obvious of them is Elijah.

But nothing about that thing that happened to him off Cape  
Horn, long ago, when he lay like dead for three days and  
nights; nothing about that deadly skrimmage [sic] with the  
Spaniard afore the altar in Santa?—heard nothing about  
that, eh? Nothing about the silver calabash he spat into?

And nothing about losing his leg last voyage, according to the prophecy? Didn't ye hear a word about them matters and something more, eh? No, I don't think ye did; how could ye? Who knows it? (*MD*, Ch. 19)

Elijah's babbling promises hidden knowledge, access to wisdom that others do not know. Yet he fails to keep that promise—the fight with the Spaniard and Ahab's fit off Cape Horn remain unexplained to the last—he never reveals the knowledge itself. If Elijah has a story to tell, if he truly knows something about Ahab's previous adventures, then he does not speak it. Ishmael might easily dispense of him as "a humbug, trying to be a bugbear" if he did not reappear to speak about Ahab's stowaway boat crew (*MD*, Ch. 19,21). His success on that one point sticks in Ishmael's mind, provoking the uncertainty that Elijah knows more about the other matters as well. If so, Elijah's insane appearance tokens more than unwillingness to speak: his enigmatic knowledge may not be transferred by language. A limit to the power of words challenges the Joke as an exploration, because Ishmael must tell the Joke in the course of the narrative. He has no means for uncovering the unspeakable that Elijah portends.

The Prophet, then, is a voice that speaks the limit of voice. Appearing to manifest a superior, even ultimate, knowledge, the very manifestation proves that such knowledge is not transmitted by words. The preachers, Father Mapple, Captain Bildad, and Aunt Charity, form a group of Prophets. Motivated by inner faith in a Christian God, they attempt to convert the lapsed and unbelievers around them. But Queequeg leaves the chapel before Mapple's sermon is done; Aunt Charity's selection of hymns is lost in a

sailors' song about loose women; and even Bildad's partner Peleg appears completely uninhibited by the piousness of the former (*MD*, Ch. 10,16,22). None of these preacher-Prophets affects a single person who does not already claim the same knowledge by faith. However faith is not exploration and Ishmael is an explorer. Thus even as the voyage begins, already Ishmael has cause to fear that the words of the Joke alone can expose the unknown truths of the watery world.

Under such pressure from the Prophets, Ishmael no longer has the luxury of telling the Joke to be funny. Instead he must tell the Joke to prove that it *can* be told at all. Furthermore the pursuit of knowledge requires him to tell it quickly and as often as possible. The ocean is large, the horizon is far away, and his time is short. The more jokes he can tell, then the more classifications he can circumscribe with words. Only when Ishmael slows down long enough to let the categories fully develop does the Joke sound funny. In "Heads and Tails," for instance, he extends the comparison of king and queen by discussing sturgeon as well as whales. The point of contrast between the king's head and the queen's tail receives full play, and the Joke is funny (*MD*, Ch. 90). By contrast the Jokes of "The Doubloon" fall flat: although the individual views are somewhat longer if measured absolutely on the page, the contrasts are shallower. As a result they flash past subjectively: there is not enough momentum in one portrait before the next shoves it aside. The goal of enumerating several classes among the sailors on board succeeds—barely, for even then three of seven are astrological and two more involve the sun—yet the Joke fails to delight (*MD*, Ch. 99). Both these chapters follow

the intrusion of the Prophets into Ishmael's project of exploration, but only one of them is funny and in that one he takes the time to tell the Joke properly.

At places, as with "The Grand Armada," Ishmael overextends himself as well. Ishmael discusses the categories of external and domestic in whale life by way of analogy with human life. Such a move has dear consequences, because the reader invests too much in the comparison to care about the contrasts in the scene. By working at so many levels, Ishmael loses the simplicity of the original Joke structure and overturns his own express wish to keep whales among the fish. The tendency of the watery world to unify as an unbroken, uncomparable horizon overpowers the Joke's power to divide.

Ishmael himself falls prey to this tendency in unguarded moments. When he stands watch in "The Mast-Head," he "[keeps] but sorry guard. With the problem of the universe revolving in me, how could I . . . but lightly hold my obligations." The watery world in such a moment is a deadly magnet, threatening to swallow not only the mind but also the body into the "bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature" (*MD*, Ch. 35). While supposedly looking for individual whales in the ocean, Ishmael sees one problem of one universe spread out in one image of the soul beneath him. The unified world is a world without Jokes because it is a world radically without divisions. The Joke marks Ishmael as an explorer, and without creating distinctions—via the Joke—he is lost in the watery world.

Because of the Prophets, telling Jokes acquires a terrible urgency for Ishmael. The Prophets testify to a source of knowledge unknown and inaccessible except through nonverbal revelation. Ishmael as a self-proclaimed explorer seeks to circumscribe

knowledge with language, to assign a category to every entity of the watery world by telling Jokes that make the distinctions between different subjects clear by contrast. In order to prove the Prophets false, Ishmael needs to succeed in his own project, to establish by demonstration that Jokes really can discover and categorize all knowledge of worldly phenomena; but since the world is vast and his own Jokes each so limited, the possibility of success remains elusive. Rather than give up, Ishmael accelerates his pace and tries to make distinctions without telling the Joke properly. This in turn gives him an imperfect result in which the brief comparative level of the Joke begins to outweigh the lasting distinctions he desires. Soon Ishmael must tell Jokes simply to remind himself that differences do exist, or risk plunging into a universal abyss.

#### The Major Prophets: Pip and Ahab

One of the crew loses himself to the universal and bodily survives. Pip's place as a Prophet is unique because he holds a universal pedigree. For the others, their claims come from faith or experiences that Ishmael cannot witness directly. The account of Pip's journey into the depths of the sea leaves no doubt that the castaway makes contact with the act of creation: "Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it" (*MD*, Ch. 93). Unlike the prophets who speak from a point of faith or mysterious but human knowledge, Ishmael clearly sets Pip apart as one whose knowledge encompasses the foundation of the watery world—and by extension, the whole of the watery world. As such, Pip presents a special challenge to the power of the Joke.

Pip turns the Joke inside-out. Pip's ability to prophesy, however, derives from his marginal status aboard the *Pequod*; his experience as a full castaway only tempers him from a self-described coward to one who profoundly speaks his status as other<sup>19</sup>. At the end of Chapter 40, Pip prays, "Oh, thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here." All that is fine material for a Joke—big and small, white and black, aloft and down, God and boy—except for one thing: the subjects are reversed. Even at this early chapter, Pip refers to himself in the third person, thereby casting himself into the role of the other. If God is far aloft, then Pip is similarly far below. Pip's voice, the speaking voice, demands that itself should be the other that that does not fit into familiar categories, that itself should be laughed at.

After the experience on the open ocean, Pip's voice becomes more insistent and imbued with the supernatural authority of his vision. Reciting all six subject pronouns, Pip's voice proclaims them all but itself a crow, as though speaking about Pip in *any* grammatical person is no longer appropriate. Standing over Queequeg's coffin Pip's voice castigates Pip in the heavenly Antilles for being a coward, as though even in heaven Pip must bear a curse. While watching the sailors haul in the broken line Pip's voice calls for a hatchet to cut away the Pip that might return (*MD*, Ch. 99, 110, 125). The direction of his madness through abandonment forces Pip to feel inconceivably alienated. Already prone to cast himself in terms of the other, a deep awareness of the watery world

19. After all, Ishmael has little basis for describing Pip's experience except by describing Ishmael's experience as a castaway on the ocean. "The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?" (*MD*, Ch. 93) If anybody, then Ishmael should be able to tell it. I shall return to the significance of this remark in a later discussion.

drives him to exclude himself from that world. The Joke is on Pip: he has been categorized out of existence.

It is all well enough for Ishmael to trade the Joke around with New England and South Seas residents taking turns in the position of funny outsider: that yields an even exchange. The Joke even stands Ishmael telling it about the society of whales, because in the Joke lies an implicit assumption that there is something equally humorous in our kings and queens when compared to the majestic whale. Those Jokes may be funny, although Ishmael sometimes stumbles over telling the Joke properly. With Pip, by contrast, the other speaks its own categorization and proclaims its own separation. Yet Pip's voice is the speaking voice—we observe that Pip's speeches are all places that Ishmael's narratorial identity disappears—and the reader almost surely therefore identifies with Pip while he speaks. Thus the role that seems *familiar* claims separation as the *other*<sup>20</sup>. The result is not humorous but pathetic.

"Ah now, had poor Pip but felt so kind a thing as  
this, perhaps he had ne'er been lost! This seems to me, sir,  
as a man-rope; something that weak souls may hold by. . . ."

20. My reader may object that we can accept Pip's self-marginalization—the more so if we accept the "black boy[s]" established status as marginal to begin with—thus accepting him as other and laughing at the Joke. Indeed we may, but I repeat myself to say that I belong to that school which believes of any work that we tend to identify at least on some level with the speaking voice, though I hardly have space here to defend the premise. Accepting reader-speaker identification, then when we laugh it is weak and self-conscious laughter.

"There go two daft ones now, . . . . One daft with strength, the other daft with weakness." (*MD*, Ch. 125)

Pip serves the role of the Prophet of weakness, Ahab a Prophet of strength. Ishmael has no complete knowledge about Ahab's past experience—as Elijah's warnings demonstrate—but he reveals enough in the course of the narrative to reconstruct a turning point similar to Pip's when Ahab lost his leg to Moby Dick. However the missing leg—a likely enough prospect in a dangerous occupation—holds less import than the white mark on his face. Whether the mark dates from birth or from his fortieth year (*MD*, Ch. 24), it visibly divides him in every scene that Ishmael describes<sup>21</sup>. The visual identification of the mark and its symbolic relationship to Ahab's inward spiritual division creates a lasting, though often unmentioned, symbolic correlation that rarely succeeds in the watery world. The symbolism endures, in fact, precisely because Ahab sets himself in opposition to the world: "ye've knocked me down, and I am up again; but *ye* have run and hidden" (*MD*, Ch. 37, italics original). When faced with the distinction between self and universe, Pip exiles himself; faced with the same distinction Ahab would rather exile the universe. His "strength" grants him the ability to preserve a sense of self that can fight back against the universal erasure of entities.

21. Notice that whether you believe the Tahitian or the Manxman, Ahab claims to be fifty-eight in "The Symphony" (*MD*, Ch. 132) and therefore both place the scar before the loss of his leg on the voyage previous to this one. The scar and Elijah's hints are the only testimony to Ahab's condition before meeting Moby Dick, but from analogy with Pip I think that the encounter only intensified Ahab's preexisting temperament. Contrasting the two Prophets would justify the reading that Ahab's central social status as an American and a captain (not at all like Pip's marginal status) fuels the strength of his self-identity.

Knowing the certainty of his own self-existence, Ahab immediately follows with the corollary existence of an other: Moby Dick<sup>22</sup>. The White Whale demonstrates that Ahab has a self by taking away part of that self; Ahab vows to return the Joke by demonstrating that the Whale, too, has a mortal self. Beginning with calling together his crew for the oath in "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab increasingly defines the world as self and other; he speaks nothing but one long Joke throughout the story. From the moment that the crew is "one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale" until "all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal that Ahab their one lord and keel did point to," the tragic story of Ahab takes shape as the captain gathers whatever he can into a single category of the self with which he can oppose the single category of the other (*MD*, Ch. 36,134). Inanimate objects including the doubloon, the quadrant, and the compass all fall into this same pattern, and Ahab attributes their success or failure as purposeful actions to help or hinder his quest (*MD*, Ch. 99,110,124). According to this Prophet only two categories exist, though variously described: the self and the other, will and fate, Ahab and Moby Dick.

Only death and destruction results from this binary vision. The first evidence of Ahab's supreme malevolence lies in Stubb's "kick:" Stubb translates Ahab's angry advance into a genuine assault, thereby translating Ahab's malevolence at any

22. Ahab's attitude toward Moby Dick closely resembles Freudian descriptions of paranoia persecutoria. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Lecture XXVI, especially p. 533. However, as I noted before, I think that only Ahab betrays any potential signal of psychologically unconscious workings; all the other crew voice more or less consciously a sense of inner self that matches Ishmael's outer description. Under such circumstances, I regard the diagnosis of paranoia as informative (*noteworthy*, even) but only warily.

interruption into the idea of physical abuse (*MD*, Ch. 29). There follows a series of devil images, most tied to Fedallah but clearly linked to Ahab who tempers his harpoon with the cry, "Ego non baptizo in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!"—thus linking the diabolic with the instruments of death (*MD*, Ch. 113). And faced with Starbuck's insistence to break out the leaking oil casks, Ahab nearly murders his first mate. In Ahab's monomaniacal Joke, any one thing is either for or against Ahab, so he has no greater qualm about killing Starbuck than about his final goal (*MD*, Ch. 109). That Ahab does relent toward Starbuck shows, I think, only that Ahab's telling of this diabolic Joke is incomplete: he has not yet decided which category Starbuck fits, Ahab's self or Ahab's other. Stubb never actually receives a kick, either, but Ahab's threats grow increasingly violent as his Joke continues the process of division.

Pip and Ahab as Prophets present a different problem for Ishmael and the exploratory Joke. The Joke begins with people who sleep together and eat together. Ishmael observes categories of life activities; even the whales of "The Grand Armada" have their domestic side, though death too must be dealt with as a category. This Joke operates simultaneously on levels of contact and levels of separation between familiar and other; the contact is transitory while the contrasts are lasting, but both are necessary components of the humorous original. When Pip or Ahab tells the Joke, however, they use only the power of contrast. As a result they divide the watery world into only the two categories of self and other, and the punch line is a recommendation of terrible violence, either suicidal or homicidal. The minor Prophets testified against the efficacy of the

Joke, but these two Prophets use an altered form of the Joke itself to propagate a message of annihilation.

This leaves Ishmael as a Joking explorer something like Jason facing the rocks of Symplegades: Prophets on either side threaten to crush him between two opposite extremes of the Joke. On the one hand, the preacher-Prophets testify that the level of comparison overpowers the contrasts so that the watery world stands unified in the end; on the other hand Pip and Ahab insist that emphasis on the contrasts divides the world fundamentally into two completely exclusive categories that may not coexist. Beyond it all lies the tempting Fleece of knowledge perfectly divided into categories, yet it remains hidden beyond a horizon that Elijah insists Ishmael can never reach.

#### The Final Joke

The first Joke of the first chapter concerns a problem of life or death: "[w]ith a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship." When faced with insurmountable hypos, Ishmael chooses a life-preserving action over more drastic possibilities, and it seems that the cure works: for almost as quickly as he mentions the sea, Ishmael is off and running in the great series of multiple images previously described; the hypos stand no chance. However, as the Prophetic voices, especially Ahab's, become louder, Ishmael must deal with the serious issues upon which they keep insisting. In particular, at the heart of the Prophetic message lays death, by suicide, by homicide, and by erasure of self in the watery world.

So Ishmael escapes only for a short time, and during that time he can tell the pure Joke with subjects that contact by sleeping and feasting together. These activities

preserve and even generate life. However he cannot ignore death forever. One of the more successful Jokes lies in the Arsacidean bower where he uses the remnants of death to discuss religion and children, so that death appears generative (*MD*, Ch. 102-103); but by this point he has also told the less successful Joke of "The Grand Armada" that is broken up at last by the sudden and destructive appearance of unreasoning death (*MD*, Ch. 87). It is not a very funny punch line. The Jokes increase in morbidity—a general pattern, not always from one to the next—as the narrative continues. One of the later Jokes concerns the lost life-buoy replaced with Queequeg's coffin. The contrast should make a good Joke, but the stakes are a little high whenever mortals start discussing life and death. Not that humor is impossible, but laughter prevails only when the carpenter turns it back to "thirty lively fellows all fighting for one coffin," restoring emphasis to the life-preserving attributes of the coffin (*MD*, Ch. 126). Unfortunately, that is not quite the last word: a voice from the *Delight* cries out, "In vain, oh, ye strangers, ye fly our sad burial; ye but turn us your taffrail to show us your coffin!" (*MD*, Ch. 131). The depressive hypos associated with death continually chase Ishmael as he tries to sail away from them. The stakes are high: Ishmael trying to speak about life in the watery world or the Prophets insisting upon death. Ishmael flees in vain from the hypos of the first chapter; even at sea he finds himself standing before coffin warehouses and witness to funerals.

Finally, then, Ishmael must face the challenge of the Prophets. Before he can explore and catalogue the phenomena of life in the watery world, he must prove the validity of his method by showing that a mean exists between ultimate unity and ultimate

division. Properly told, the Joke navigates between these two forces to distinguish contrasts at the very site of connection. Ishmael calls upon the Joke to explain itself in his final telling: he takes for subjects the qualities of unity and division themselves so that he can demonstrate in the punch line that both categories exist and that the Prophets who espouse one or the other speak falsely.

Ahab has already been introduced as a voice of ultimate division between self and other, a division so radical that he divides his own body<sup>23</sup>. The White Whale stands as the bodily personification of the ocean's horizon, a connection Ishmael makes in the unapproachable spirit-spout (*MD*, Ch. 51). The spirit-spout clinches the argument from "The Whiteness of the Whale." Ishmael begins his chapter about the color white with a page-long sentence of exemplary uses of the color white in royal, joyful, and divine symbols, "yet lurks an elusive something . . . , which strikes more of a panic to the soul" (*MD*, Ch. 42). I believe Ishmael's terror lies in the fear that whiteness exceeds even the divine, that whiteness surpasses the category of the nominal ultimate. For him whiteness includes the objects of awe and terror in the perfectly natural world of polar bears, sharks, mountains, and icebergs, as well as the supernatural world of phantoms and ghosts. Whiteness transcends and erases the categories of divine, natural, and supernatural until paradoxically "in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors" (*MD*, Ch. 42). Like all other objects of the watery world, *Moby Dick* should not be read allegorically as a symbol of the universe

23. "Not this hand complies with my humor as genially as that boy [Pip]" (*MD*, Ch. 127).

in the proper sense of 'symbol'; rather Moby Dick is the *White* Whale, and by being white he creates a field of universal identification so powerful that it can contain even opposites. Ahab, so bent on reducing the world into opposites, cannot allow such identification to survive.

Those are the subjects of the final Joke. Ishmael has demonstrated previously the existence of distinct categories by using the structure of the Joke. The moment of contact, in bed or at table or using a skeleton or nursing or dying, demonstrates the separation of categories of phenomena within the watery world, self and other or pagan and Christian or religion and play or external and domestic or life and death. In the final three chapters, the battle of Ahab and Moby Dick decides whether such pairs possess any meaning or whether the final unity of the surrounding horizon overrides and contains them all. Inexorably, tragically, the White Whale prevails. A force capable of reconciling opposites will consume even its own opposite: Ahab and the principle of contradiction that Ishmael so desperately needs for the Joke never stood a chance. (Does not Ishmael already hint at the dark tragedy to come when he steps out from among the trappings of death in his introduction only to enter the black church behind the sign of the "Trap"?) Tashtego, obedient to Ahab's last command, captures the sea-hawk in a final statement of contrast between heavenly and demonic, "then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (*MD*, Ch. 135). All contrasts and paradoxes collapse into the primordial, undifferentiating watery world that existed before creation and will continue after every distinction has drowned.

Almost.

Reprise: Call Me Ishmael

"And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." *Job*.

The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless  
immensity, my God! who can tell it?

Call me Ishmael.

The watery world overpowers and consumes the individual identities of the entire "Anacharsis Cloutz deputation" of the *Pequod's* crew (*MD*, Ch. 27), with the sole exception of Ishmael. He is left castaway and alone; but in his loneliness lies salvation: the fact that he can recognize the condition of being alone means that he can recognize the existence of a distinct person who has that condition. He, Ishmael, is not united with the watery world, not yet anyway. The "intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity" proves that some distinctions do resist the unifying power of the watery world (*MD*, Ch. 93). So long as Ishmael lives, there can be no ultimate singularity of creation.

Will Ishmael live? Even "half-spent" the vortex may have the power to drown him (*MD*, Epi). Pip, who lives only on the margins of ship and society, loses grasp of his sense of self in the absence of any vortex at all. However Ishmael is not black, not persecuted, not considered a coward; if anything his lineage from an "old, distinguished family" places him within a centralized social identity that physical danger alone cannot unmake. In that case, though, he faces the fatal error of Ahab to divide the world murderously into self and other. Ahab's strength of mind preserved his sense of self during the first encounter with Moby Dick, yet the same strength preserves a self so

intensely concentrated that it cannot recognize its own imminent danger when facing the watery world: Ahab's misinterpretation of Fedallah's prophecy stems from a faith in his own immortality (*MD*, Ch. 117). In the end, Ahab loses himself to the impossible quest of self against the world, an encounter with a force so powerfully unifying that the self never survives. Death claims all, and Ishmael draws ever nearer to the spinning center of the vortex.

Ishmael survives only because the coffin life-buoy appears exactly as he reaches the potential vanishing point (*MD*, Epi). The carpenter planned that the single life-buoy would support the whole crew if the ship went down (*MD*, Ch. 126): Ishmael saves himself with the memories of his shipmates. The coffin carries particularly important associations with Queequeg, of course—perhaps this ending helps to explain Queequeg's strong presence in the early chapters—but the carpenter's craft transforms it into a life-buoy for the whole ship. As Ishmael reaches the center of the vortex that threatens him, he makes the vital discovery that eluded Ahab. Ishmael is not a self alone; he is a self among other selves. He does not need to swear a personal and self-destructive vendetta against the White Whale because he will not divide the world between only self and other. Rather, Ishmael realizes that there exists self and self and self and self . . . —a number of beings each distinct in some way from the universal whole. No single entity resists the unifying power of the world forever, but the bed sharing and meal sharing and laughter sharing of life ensure that neither will the supply of selves run low. "Wherefore, for all these things, we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality," sings Ishmael, and it holds just as true for the human species (*MD*, Ch.

105). If you tell the Joke as Ahab and Pip do, with only the same two categories endlessly repeated, then the watery world must prevail. If you tell the Joke as Ishmael does, to explore the world and uncover the vast and imperishable diversity of categories, then the cumulative force of each individual struggling against losing its self can burst the spinning vortex.

So Ishmael is saved from the destructive destiny of Pip and Ahab. Now he has a further reason to tell the Joke: he wishes to preserve himself by recognizing the other. The Joke as a structure of contrast suggests itself neatly for the task, since the same structure insists upon a moment of contact when the other is not entirely foreign. If Ishmael tells the Joke, then he will arrive at a midpoint between the blank unification predicted by Elijah and the preacher-Prophets while avoiding the violent destruction of the divisive Prophets. If he keeps the Joke in circulation, allowing every person the chance to recognize the self at the humorous expense of the other next door, then the differences created by the telling are renewed with each retelling and the Joke ensures the survival of categories even if individuals sometimes die. Ishmael the man will eventually succumb to the vortex of oblivion, but the definition of a type called Ishmael lasts just as the definition of each of the *Pequod's* crew survives by association with the life-buoy. Telling the Joke preserves the category from erasure by the watery world.

Following this line, I finally read Ishmael as making a statement of authorship: I know that I will never reach the ultimate horizon of the watery world, but I will proceed anyway, because the voyage is an end in itself. Ishmael the narrator can reject the claims of Elijahs and preachers, since he has already encountered the site of ultimate knowledge

and in that meeting he recognizes the possibility of categorical knowledge, a sort of communal self-knowledge that may be established by exchanging the Joke with each other<sup>24</sup>. That is, even at the heart of the vortex he recognizes between himself and the life-buoy at least two categories of subjects that are not covered by the waves. The depth of the ocean is unfathomable, but he can attain concrete knowledge of at least these things. Ishmael tells the Joke in order to establish the fact that the seemingly monolithic other consists of no more than many selves. He does not need to reach the horizon of perfect knowledge about the watery world; he only needs to keep recognizing the individuals that are part of it. The dark hints of the minor Prophets lose all their frightening allure: he has no fear of falling from the mast-head if he keeps his eye on the individual whales swimming on the ocean. He continues to explore in the words of the Joke, and continues to live because of the process of authorship that the Joke entails.

#### Concluding Remarks

Until this point, I have considered Ishmael as the sole narrator of the text, and the direction of my thesis nearly suggests that Ishmael is author, too, the name Herman Melville on the cover being only a pretty accessory; but no longer, now Ishmael must defend himself.

Ishmael as a narrating voice interests himself primarily with differences, because locating differences is the work of the Joke that keeps him balanced between two poles of oblivion. However, Ishmael as narrator sometimes disappears from the text; his voice

24. I recommend consulting *Jokes and their Relations* on this point: Oring's work has little relevance to *Moby-Dick* but every relevance to the question of building communities through the use of different forms of humor.

diminishes to parenthetical stage directions, or even as little as chapter titles while other voices take over the speaking role. However, Ishmael's discourse of the Joke surrounds the other passages, thus identifying the words with himself in a way that minimally unifies his own voice with the voice(s) that speak(s). For Ishmael fears unification: he has already met the watery world once and would rather avoid it again. Therefore he lets other selves speak for themselves. In "The Quarter-Deck" and the three following chapters, Ahab's oath and the crew's various reactions to it are presented without Ishmael speaking for himself; not until "Moby Dick" does he reenter the text with "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew" (*MD*, Ch. 36-41). Ishmael might have claimed to personally witness each of the particular responses to the oath demonstrated here, but he does not; in fact the brief scene-setting parentheticals often indicate that the subject muses alone. By allowing space for crew members to speak without his narratorial interruption<sup>25</sup>, Ishmael yields them a chance to tell their own version of the Joke within the space of the text. His recognition of selves that are not his self creates a deep respect for other selves; it is only by the mutual economic exchange of the Joke that a category called Ishmael will forestall erasure by the watery world. Even though in one sense the story is entirely his as the sole survivor, he therefore makes as much room as possible for other voices, even dissenting voices such as Ahab's or Pip's.

25. The experiments with dramatic form (Chapter 40, say) have a particular appeal to this kind of logic. The other characters each speak their own lines with only the most minimal unspoken text between them for identification; in exchanges between fewer characters (Ahab and the carpenter in Chapter 108, for instance) even that much will be dispensed with and a change of style and paragraphs alone marks the individuality of each speaker.

The absence of the narratorial voice becomes perhaps most conspicuous in the final day of the chase: "three of the oarsmen . . . were flung out . . . ; the third man helplessly dropping astern but still afloat and swimming" (*MD*, Ch. 135). Ishmael informs his reader only later, in the Epilogue, that he is the third oarsman knocked away. This moment, when the first-person narrator becomes a third-person subject, seems to be a moment of psychological disjunction similar to Pip's experience so that Ishmael no longer identifies his body with his self. Perhaps he does have that momentary experience, and unlike Pip recovers from it; but it also serves a more mundane dramatic purpose. Suppressing the first-person narrator at precisely this point allows the final reactions of the officers and of Ahab as they recognize approaching death to hold more individuality than if Ishmael reported them with his own I-inflected voice.

Now then, what happens to the true author, Melville as distinct from Ishmael? In most places, we cannot comfortably separate them. Melville depends too much on Ishmael's voice as a container for the multiple voices of the crew. Nevertheless, I hazard to guess that the chief evidence for the split between Ishmael and Melville comes from Yeager's "dark Ishmael" hypothesis. The dark Ishmael does not pose a particular problem for my own reading of the Joke, since Yeager points out that enough time has elapsed between the *Pequod's* sinking and the story's telling for Ishmael to recover somewhat<sup>26</sup>. However, my reading is slightly stronger if Ishmael immediately understands how he escapes erasure by acknowledging the existence of multiple selves

26. Yeager, "Dark Ishmael," 168.

not included in the watery world. The "dark" traces behind the text I would take to be the evidence of Melville himself.

In *Typee* and many his subsequent novels, Melville concerns himself with a certain politics of identity that distinguishes European and non-European categories of humans. In Melville's day that politics was highly prejudiced in favor of the European standards of religion and society. With his discussion of the Typee cannibals and their domestic life, Melville seems to want to demonstrate that the islanders' systems of culture are self-consistent as much or more so than European values. However Tommo as a narrator describes the Typee's valley in a series of contrasts with the familiar Europe-descended American life—the prototype of the Joke. The narratorial structure traps Melville's desire to speak for a level of equality into a language structure of differences.

With *Moby-Dick*, Melville gives up the prospect of talking about human societies in favor of talking about whale societies that he can perhaps more easily manipulate fictionally (the Typee do practice cannibalism, not an act well-calculated to endear them with a European audience<sup>27</sup>). But he has something of the same problem nevertheless: the narratorial structure gives his narrator an impulse to seek out differences where Melville would rather talk about an overarching level of equality. Thus Ishmael seems in constant danger of losing his individuality on the mast-head or while squeezing hands in the tubs of sperm; thus also the fatal encounter of Ahab the voice of difference against Moby Dick the personification of unity with the undifferentiated ocean as the victor. Yeager describes the chief quality of the dark Ishmael as his rejection of a Christian-style

27. Melville, *Typee*, 236-238.

God at "the treadle of the loom" (*MD*, Ch. 93) in favor of more cosmopolitan and pagan imagery that "acknowledges only a naturalistic, deterministic, or atheistic universe"<sup>28</sup>. I would rather read the description of Pip's experience as a close cognate, if not identical, to Ishmael's own experience as a castaway. The voice that Yeager hears remonstrating against an easy faith in God the Weaver is the dark Melville who despairs of ever communicating his vision of basic human equality in biased European language.

Ishmael takes on the role of explorer and reporter, using the structure of the Joke as a means to uncover differences between categories of subjects within the watery world. The categories may be specific, as in 'Ishmael' is not 'Queequeg' or they may be broad, as in whales live in a society characterized by the 'external' and the 'domestic.' Sometimes they are funny, so that kings have heads while queens have tails, while others are not funny, as when we discover that Pip is the butt of a cosmic Joke of exclusion. Always the Joke establishes these contrasting categories at a moment of intimate contact between the subjects. Melville would like to use that moment of contact to recognize a level of unity between all subjects of the watery world; yet the structure of the Joke told by his narrator always recognizes the contrasts displayed by the contact of the Joke's subjects. The final telling of the Joke uses the subjects of insistent contrast and a unity so powerful that it can reconcile all contrasts, yet even some contrast emerges even from that seeming oblivion. Ishmael survives to tell the Joke, and if now it has more serious consequences with regard to personal survival, still his ideal will be an exchange of humorous Jokes that preserves all subjects as laughable, but laughable as individuals and

28. Yeager, "Dark Ishmael," 167.

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