

**Melville's Cetological Theodicy:
Justifying the Ways of Whale to Man**

by

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Acknowledgments

To my mother, who inexplicably thought I could graduate from college with no familial precedent.

To my teachers—in no specific order, Professors Trevor, M. Levinson, Hartley, R. Williams, Sanok, Bauland, Parrish, Whitter-Ferguson, Wenzel, Goodison—the ten of whom deserve every ounce of praise hereafter, as all criticisms I take direct responsibility for.

To my friends, who constantly beguiled me into staying sane.

And to Herman Melville, who after nine close months thrills me as much as he did on our first encounter.

Abstract

This thesis argues that Melville rebuffs nineteenth-century intellectual and religious norms in *Moby-Dick* and in their place interpolates a new God figure, Moby Dick. I will give a biographical analysis of Melville to reveal the influences fermenting in his mind as he sat to write this novel, and will look at how he systematically disseminates the Calvinist and Transcendental theories and goes about reconstructing the God-head in his novel's most oft-analyzed and oft-misinterpreted character: the whale, Moby Dick.

My introduction is a microcosm of the larger thesis, which provides the critical orientation into which I interpolate myself. This focuses on the biblical story of Ahab provided in 1 Kings, and exegetically sets the ground for how I will analyze *Moby-Dick* and its captain. This section gives the initial rationale for Ahab's later death by way of adherence to the wrong prophets and the wrong God.

My first chapter analyzes the transcendental movement of nineteenth-century New England, where I focus specifically on the movement's leader, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his landmark treatise, *Nature*. I will analyze Emerson's theory on how man relates to God through nature and as nature, and how Melville picks the theory apart as impractical, overly intellectual and idyllic theorizing through his narrator, Ishmael. Through Melville's dismissal of the transcendental God, he removes as an influence in the novel one burgeoning nineteenth-century conception of the God figure.

My second chapter focuses on Melville's religious upbringing and specifically locates Melville's religious indoctrination so as to justify my exploring the shadows thereof that are cast onto his novel. I will analyze the Reformed Dutch Church, with which Melville's family was affiliated, and also look to its progenitor, John Calvin, whose religion and thinkings provide a basis for the sect. I explore the skepticism yet adherences to this God figure in Melville's Captain Ahab, and hope to provide proof that He does not rule over the sea, but still rules over Ahab's mind, allowing the captain an imagined justification to chase the whale.

My third chapter conflates and moves forward with the previous two, as I analyze the portents of the work, the ignorance of which gives Melville's forlorn captain a free will he refuses to value. This chapter has two roles: to analyze how Moby Dick offers Ahab free will and to present Ahab's ship as metonymic of its captain, which harkens back to the Emersonian view that all of nature is but a microcosm of its master. The end of this chapter should leave the idea of God, as described in those first two chapters, dead and buried, allowing my final chapter to show Melville's re-conceptualization of Him in the White Whale.

My fourth chapter shows Melville's deification of the whale and gives a theodicean analysis of His actions by way of His motives. The whale proves to be only fueled to destruction through incessant provocation, and my analysis of the portents as well as His traits show that it is only in Ahab's steadfast adherence to (and adherence to a rejection of) the religious understandings expatiated upon in the first two chapters that he is eventually executed.

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Short Titles

MD: Melville, Herman. Moby-Dick; or, The Whale: A Norton Critical Edition. 2nd Edition. New York: W. W.

Nature: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ed. William H. Gilman. New York: Signet Classics, 2003.

Introduction

Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O mine enemy?” He answered, “I have found you: because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord.” (1 Kings 21.20)

There is no clear indication of when exactly Herman Melville began work on *Moby-Dick*. The two works which immediately preceded *Moby-Dick*, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, were written in less than two months apiece and, by his own admission, solely for profit (H. Parker, *Damned by Dollars: Moby-Dick and the Price of Reason* 715). Melville was in something of a creative rut as he sat down to write this book, and, though struggling for funds, decided to explore his ambitions in the novel. Having written five books prior to *Moby-Dick*—all maritime adventures laced with elements of the fantastic—he had become static, a rather predictable author whose notable brilliance was somewhat disappointed by his un-variegated subject matter. One reviewer for the *Albion* claimed Melville was “a practical and practised sea-novelist,” (Higgins and Parker 380) putting *Moby-Dick* in sequence with Melville’s previous works, when in fact “of [Melville’s] first five books, all deriving from his travel experiences, not one centers around whaling” (Adler 55). The near-sighted critics of Melville’s time thus considered him limited despite the fact that he analyzed “the ocean . . . which is two thirds of this earth,” (MD 328) therefore allowing him far wider expanses to let his characters roam than other major

American authors of the time and, more importantly, allowing him an opportunity to evaluate how man's knowledge of nature can be subverted once at sea.

Critics lambasted Melville upon *Moby-Dick's* release. The *New York Independent* wrote that it was "impossible for a religious journal heartily to commend any of the works of this author," later predicting that "[t]he Judgment day will hold [Melville] liable for not turning his talents to better account" (Higgins and Parker 380). The reviewers saw in Melville's story a resistance to the Calvinist doctrine that had been imposed upon him at an early age, which played out in the battle between a monomaniac captain and a whale defined by its "predestinating head" (MD 425). Though not elaborated on nor satisfactorily explained, the contemporary reviewers of *Moby-Dick* found in the work a deeply seeded skepticism towards religious doctrine being uprooted by its author through the guise of a peg-legged captain and his largely pagan crew. These critics likely considered as examples of Melville's heresy such passages as "[f]rom hell's heart I stab at thee!," (MD 426) and "[w]ho's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?" (MD 407). They stood at least ostensibly correct, but were only noticing the surface of a larger forsaking on Melville's part, in which he rebuffs the Reformed Dutch Calvinist conception of God through his prose.

The current critical stance on Melville's epic is, though somewhat more intricate and less derisory, hardly different from those original reviews. In William Spanos' *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick* he reviews Ahab's baptismal speech "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli," (MD 372) and concludes:

on the basis of Melville's dramatic invocation of the name of the *Diablos*, it has become dully customary for liberal humanist critics to refer to his fiction as a

‘diabolic art’ . . . ‘of the Devil’s party’ against the vulgar God of the American moral majority. (Spanos 232)

Spanos digresses from here into an analysis of the ‘*Diablos*’ in the entirety of Melville’s oeuvre, but he does crystallize the issue: Melvillean criticism has evolved, in some ways, very little from those original reviewers that so doomed its success in the mid nineteenth-century. It is as though the criticism remains stagnant while society evolves, allowing what was previously derided to become wildly popular in the twentieth century; whereas the novel was previously ridiculed for its blasphemy, critics now praise it for its daring¹. I do not believe the novel is so simply heretical. Rather, I will consider that, by killing off the Calvinist God Melville was raised under, he replaces it with another—a whale—and legitimizes it through the heretical actions of his peg-legged captain, Ahab.

The effect of Calvinism on Melville is a critical field almost monopolized by T. Walter Herbert, whose book *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* is little more than a biography of Herman Melville and a reading of *Moby-Dick* through a Calvinist lens. Herbert’s conclusion in the book is that Ahab embodies all of man’s woe (Herbert, *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* 144) and that his attack is thus against the white whale, or, in his opinion, Calvinism incarnate. I argue that Ahab indeed attacks a Calvinist God—which is not, as I will show, the same God as Moby Dick—but also that his justification for doing so is the ‘enlightenment’ he received in Transcendentalism’s proposals. Specifically, Transcendentalism gives Ahab the idea that there are no restricted

¹ Denis Donoghue’s essay “*Moby-Dick* After September 11th” is a good example of this. The essay claims the whale is “the wall, the hard circumference of things, as well as everything contained in Robert Lowell’s ‘IS, the whited monster’ in ‘The Quake Graveyard in Nantucket’: life itself, and beyond that there is nothing, the void” (Donoghue 164). Progressive though Donoghue may consider himself, this is simply an elucidation of those earlier critics, another entombment of Melville’s God, albeit one that more intricately explores the implications that arise.

truths, and it is the un-obtainability of certain knowledge, a basic theory of Calvinism that drives Ahab's quest.

In the thirty-eighth year of King Asa of Judah, Ahab son of Omri began to reign over Israel; Ahab son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. (1 Kings 16.29-30)

Melville wrote at a time and in a place where religion was, in numerous factions, reaching feverish levels; at the same time it was being rethought and challenged by the leaders of the nineteenth-century New England transcendental movement. This is exemplified in the words of American Transcendentalist Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister who believed of Christianity:

With a philosophy . . . too sensual to embrace the spiritual method, and ask no person to meditate between man and God, it oscillates between the two. . . it censures the traditionary sects, yet sits itself among the tombs, and mourns over things past and gone . . . It blinds men's eyes with the letter, yet bids them look for the spirit; stops their ears with texts of the Old Testament, and then asks them to listen to the voice of God in their heart. (T. Parker 315)

Needless to say, he renounced the Church soon after this declaration, exemplifying the schism forming between religion and intellectualism in nineteenth-century America. One of Parker's

most persistent thoughts features a man chasing after a God who, by virtue of all theories about Him, is infinitely elusive. He derides a religion that doesn't provide man access to the God for whom he propitiates, and in doing so questions the will of He who should be unrelentingly praised. He inquires whether or not—in the Calvinist version of Christianity that he also addresses—“The knowledge of God [had] been naturally implanted in the human mind,” (Calvin 27) and in doing rebukes the will of God as proposed by Calvin. Transcendentalism was thus an attempt to rediscover God and circumvent the ungraspable truths and predestination that were so imperative to the movement, and the movement's defining theory was that such could be done through man's relation to nature.

The most visible figure of mid-nineteenth century Transcendentalism is Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his treatise *Nature* is the movement's most influential text. The critic Regis Michaud concludes of *Nature*:

There is recognizable beneath these beautiful myths a translation of the Christian dogma. It was Calvin set to music and transposed by Plato, Plotinus, and Swedenborg. The theologians have not been mistaken on the bearing of this Purana and this new fashion of interpreting the dogma of the fall and the redemption. Emerson juggles away God as serenely as the world. For Jehovah he boldly substitutes Prometheus. In the land of the Puritans such audacity and poetry had never been seen, but a whole generation of youth thrilled at the voice of the Enchanter. (Michaud 129-30)

Emerson recreates the method of finding God but subtly removes Him from the equation, replacing Him with nature, and His great benevolence with nature's. This is noticed in the first

line of Emerson's landmark essay, as he says "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society," conceding that he is "not solitary whilst [he] read[s] and write[s], though nobody is with [him]" (Nature 183). The contrivances of society surround him in his house, and it is only when he harkens back to nature that he can ever find the solitude to which he alludes. Melville proves to be incredibly critical of the practicality of Emerson's theory, and in *Moby-Dick* he disavows not only the more obvious Calvinist God but also his transcendental progeny.

Moby-Dick is replete with criticisms of Emerson's transcendentalism, and Emerson's theory proves through practice not only unpractical, but also in fact dangerous. Ishmael, the story's ponderous narrator, says in one moment atop the foremast-head, "No resolution could withstand it; in that dreamy mood losing all consciousness, at last my soul went out of my body; though my body still continued to sway as a pendulum will, long after the power which first moved it is withdrawn" (MD 230). What Ishmael notices are the effects of transcendentalism in practice; that is, hazardous transcendence from the body when consciousness is necessary to stay alive. Melville, as I shall show, rejects Emerson's theory of spirituality just as strongly as he does Calvin's, leaving him no contemporary deity to preside over the novel, and making him not only a blasphemer, but also a literary atheist. This would seem so, unless one considers Moby Dick the lord of the sea, and thus the lord of Melville's novel.

There has been a large amount of criticism written on Melville's opinion of transcendentalism and how it is reflected in *Moby-Dick*, and the opinions of these critics tend to fall either as Melville the skeptic², or, in a more recent development, Melville the ambivalent³.

² Michael J. Hoffman's "The Anti-Transcendentalism of *Moby-Dick*" gives an excellent biographical analysis of Melville's critical thoughts on Emerson and William Braswell's

The latter theory, in my opinion, is the more insightful of the two; just as we saw in the above passage that Ishmael's transcendental high is unpractical and even dangerous, there must be something said for the fantastical moment, which causes even Ishmael to warn any captain looking for a potential ship-hand: "Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad . . . given to unseasonable meditateness" (MD 135). The impracticality Transcendentalism thus begins as soon as the ship leaves port, which, coincidentally, is where the jurisdiction of Emerson's "Nature" ends.

Then the king of Israel gathered the prophets together, about four hundred of them, "Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?" They said, "Go up; for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king." (1 Kings 22.6)

When writing *Moby-Dick* Melville looked out upon a society where evil lost its face and dignity and, consequently, its influence over the daily lives of the country's denizens. Farcical works on Satan—previously unheard of due to early American, religiously instilled fears—became commonplace by the time of Melville's writing when "the natural consequences of the accelerating retreat from Calvinist suspicion of the unregenerate self" (Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* 93).

"Melville as a Critic of Emerson" has a general analysis of Melville's thoughts on Emerson and how they are reflected throughout his oeuvre.

³ E.J. Rose's "Melville, Emerson, and the Sphinx," though it presents Emerson and Melville's interpretation of the unknowable in contrast to one another, shows the respect Melville had for Emerson that such critics as Hoffman generally leave out; Sidney P. Moss' "'Cock-A-Doodle-Do!' and Some Legends in Melville Scholarship" provides an analysis of the critical landscape in relation to Melville's Emersonean thinkings.

In Melville's time "The self was coming to be understood not as a created entity with a distinct soul, but as an unformed substance . . . A human being was a kind of accident, and, as such, he was an entity not quite responsible for himself" (Ibid 83). The people of nineteenth-century America had lost the parameters by which they could judge themselves in terms of good and evil, and so self-definition became somewhat obsolete in those terms. In losing such understanding of the self, America lost understanding of good and evil at large; Delbanco notes the relativity that springs forth from this, saying, "Wherever one looked in this novel America, the prosperity of one man, or faction, or region, had visibly cruel consequences for another" (Ibid 99). Evil did not take shape as a monolithic creature formed in the Bible as the strict opposite of good; rather it came to be seen in the master by the slave and in the merciless landlord by the tenant.

Moby Dick; or, the whale, presents himself as god in increasingly obvious instances throughout the *Pequod's* journey, eventually destroying the ship for not heeding his warnings soon enough. Prophecies present themselves to Ahab throughout but, much like his biblical namesake, he ignores any prophets that bring him undesirable news. All of the prophecies, the gams, the forebodings, tell Ahab to change his wicked ways—which invariable stem from his monomaniac chase of the whale—yet he ignores them, preferring the saccharine stories of his oriental harpooner, Fedallah. He responds foolishly to his chief mate Starbuck near the end "Omen? omen?—the dictionary! If the gods think to speak outright to man, they will honorably speak outright; not shake their heads, and give an old wives' darkling hint" (MD 413). Ahab's willful ignorance at last leads to his and the *Pequod's* demise, and his disregard for the whale as the sea's deity proves his ultimate downfall.

There has been mention throughout *Moby-Dick*'s critical history that the whale is indeed a godly figure, but rarely do critics further analyze this beyond Ishmael's own statements of the whale's godly resemblances. Critics tend to believe Moby Dick is either God⁴ or the devil⁵, and they attempt to analyze Ahab's actions based off their respective interpretations, while some other critics also take the whale's power as a matter of interpretation between Ahab and Ishmael's respective views⁶. None of the aforementioned types of critics take into account the corpus of Moby Dick's transgressions and myths throughout the novel, and as a result they do not consider the whale an all-powerful yet just God presiding over the ocean. I do not believe that the whale is simply a godly figure or has godly traits, but rather I will prove that Moby Dick is the God of the novel, who takes up His proper place as God once the transcendental and Christian ideas thereof are left ashore. Through an analysis of Moby Dick's actions and his constant warnings to Ahab I will prove that the white whale is Melville's God in the novel. I will also prove that since the whale promises free will (MD 179) and realizes said promise He is

⁴ The equation of Moby Dick to a godly figure is seen in numerous *Moby-Dick* criticisms. Some exemplary instances of this are H. Bruce Franklin's *The Wake of the Gods*, which discusses the instances where Moby Dick is called a godly figure (Franklin 62), but Franklin quickly changes his belief to the whale as more of a mythological figure with supernatural powers; another essay that hints at Moby Dick as God without fully realizing the possibilities of this is James McIntosh's "The Mariner's Multiple Quest," which analyzes Pip's divine vision as the sight of God but also as Melville's reimagining of madness. (Mcintosh 38)

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre's essay "Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*" uses this belief, as he calls Moby Dick a "demoniacal character" whose actions justify Ahab's attempt to be the "scourge of animals (Sartre 96) as does Carl Van Doren in his essay "Mr. Melville's 'Moby Dick,'" which says that Ahab "is in rebellion against whatever god or whatever godless chaos," (Doren 59) wronged him but, in the overall tone of the essay, leans towards the whale as an embodiment of evil rather than good.

⁶ Examples of this include John Seelye's "*Moby-Dick: Line and Circle*," which claims that "Ahab's mad subjectivity creates a symbol of universal malignity [while] Ishmael's rational relativity creates a universe of being," (Seelye 121) as well as Merton Sealts' essay "Whose Book is Moby-Dick?" which, though more biographical than critical, analyzes how the whale's place in the novel—as well as Ishmael's and Ahab's—is mainly perspectival.

a fair God who gives Ahab dozens of chances to save himself and his crew, the rejection of which necessitate the maniacal captain's demise.

Now the rest of the acts of Ahab, and all that he did, and the ivory house that he built, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel? So Ahab slept with his ancestors; and his son Ahaziah succeeded him. (1 Kings 22.39-40)

I will here make a number of defenses of my very particular methodology in this thesis. First, I will not be considering *Moby-Dick* in the entirety of Melville's oeuvre. Perhaps I give Melville too much credit in my reading, but I do not believe that his characters and character types are so static that a character of either similar actions or importance in, say, *Omoo*, can be directly translated onto the motives or autobiographical revelations of a similar character in *Moby-Dick*. Such claims often make specious claims to authorial intention, and I find their scholarliness, at best, disingenuous⁷. Whereas Barthes calls for the corpse of the author, I instead claim the corpse of his corpus; it is too often in Melville criticism that a critic looks for validation of their theories on *Moby-Dick* through Melville's earlier or later texts, and I hereby refuse to add to that fallacy.

⁷ Though the perpetrators are endless here, I am specifically rejecting the methodology of such works as Spanos' *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick* which tangentially trails off into precedents and later uses of various symbols to justify his claims of those symbols in *Moby-Dick* as well as Bryan C. Short's "Multitudinous, God-omnipresent, Coral Insects," which attempts to justify his idea of the sublime in *Moby-Dick* with a concurrent analysis of Melville's subsequent novel, *Pierre*.

Secondly, I hope to analyze *Moby-Dick* only so far as Melville's authorial intention leads, which, again, seems too often disregarded in not just Melvillean criticism but literary criticism as a whole. I bring this up because it forces me to justify the inkhorn trifurcation I use throughout my third chapter to analyze the novel's gams. My rationale for doing this is not so much to say that those differently titled groups of gams are what Melville intended, but rather to show how Melville has his whale send portents of increasing import and palpability throughout the novel. Other than that, every claim I make in this thesis is an attempt to understand what Melville intended with the novel based on the biographical and textual proof I provide.

Chapter 1

Melville's Transcendental War: The Impractical Practice

“A seaman in the coach told the story of an old sperm whale which he called a white whale which was known for many years by the whalers as Old Tom & who rushed up on the boats which attacked him and crushed the boats to small chips in his jaws, the men generally escaping by jumping overboard & being picked up”

Ralph Waldo Emerson in his journal on Feb. 19, 1834

Emerson and Melville convey the story of an over-powering whale and the destruction it causes in markedly dissimilar ways, and in these differences we see their divergent ideologies and theories pertaining to man's relationship with nature. Emerson presents no impetus for the whale's attack, instead presenting the story as though the great whale was unprovoked. Emerson's telling features men strewn about the sea alongside their capsized ship who are all eventually rescued, the result of Emerson's belief in an inalterable fairness in the workings of the world which is explained by William Braswell: “Emerson . . . maintained that evil is merely the privation of good, as darkness is the privation of light, and that all tends toward the ultimate good” (Braswell, *Melville as a Critic of Emerson* 25). He describes the whale as an uniformly evil being, whose attack represents the minute presence of evil in the world while those benevolent, savior ships picking up the men are the presence of a more commonly benevolent

nature. Melville's telling of the events that lead to the *Pequod's* foundering differs: Ishmael, in the wake of his destroyed ship, says:

It so chanced, that after the Parsee's disappearance, I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab's bowsman . . . when the half-spent suction of the sunk ship reached me, I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex . . . Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle . . . Till, gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst . . . and, owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. (MD 427)

That life buoy, Ishmael's *deus ex machina*, is not representative of the benevolent side of nature as Emerson considers it, but rather, it is extant only due to the severe and near-death illness of his friend Queequeg. Though this constitutes a benevolent act on Queequeg's behalf, the God that sent him into such throes could not be considered so compassionate. The captain of the *Delight* comments when he sees the coffin hanging from the *Pequod* as it attempts to escape his burial at sea, "In vain, oh, ye strangers, ye flee our sad burial; ye but turn us your taffrail to show us your coffin," (MD 404). The coffin is not a symbol of Queequeg's benevolence; instead it is an ominous sign, symbolic of the destruction awaiting the *Pequod*. Whereas the men of Emerson's tale survive because of the benevolent will of a nature that would not allow such unfair chaos to endure, the man of Melville's story lives on only as the result of the crew's collective misery. The inherent goodness of the world does not exist to Melville, but he instead leaves floating upon his ocean the overbearing will of Moby Dick, who instead acts with neither or goodness or badness in mind.

My thesis will focus primarily on Ralph Waldo Emerson when discussing American Transcendentalism, and as qualification I will analyze the international fame he achieved as leader of the movement. By the mid nineteenth-century Transcendentalism had dominated the intellectual discourse in New England and Charles Dickens, on one of his numerous trips to America, heard of it and found, upon further inquiry, that “whatever was unintelligible would certainly be transcendental” (Dickens 27). This gleaming sums up the international as well as general understanding of the intellectual movement. Transcendentalism ostensibly strived to complete Americans’ knowledge of their God by way of their relationship to the natural world, and in doing so looked to complete the gaps in human knowledge and the problems of modern society by referring back to nature. Dickens, not satisfied with so general a response, “found that the Transcendentalists are followers of Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson . . . [who] has written a volume of Essays in which, among much that is dreamy and fanciful there is much more that is true and manly, honest and bold” (Dickens 27). Ever the pragmatist, Dickens discusses an outsider’s view of transcendentalism: that is, a wild movement away from the constructions of a quickly advancing industrial society in the hopes of discerning the world’s governing truths truth. After further reflection on the movement, Dickens concluded that Transcendentalism was influenced by his contemporary Thomas Carlyle, a thinker of the time who believed the remedy for all of society’s evils was “universal education, emigration, and, over and above all, work” (Christian 14). Through Carlyle’s influence, Dickens thus saw in Transcendentalism an idea of evil predicated on the belief that society had grown away from the necessary and therefore away from the good; that the rudiments of societal happiness were being disavowed in a rapidly evolving nation. The social theories of Carlyle are also heavily reflected in Dickens’ own novels, which he shows by concluding “if I were a Bostonian, I think I would be a

Transcendentalist” (Dickens 27). Dickens’ acknowledgement show that Transcendentalism was an internationally famous movement, and an analysis of its international as well as domestic appeal reveals exactly who was leading the movement and spreading it throughout America. Transcendentalism was ostensibly the fight back to nature, and at the pulpit preaching it to a still young America was the minister Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lectures and essays dominated the transcendental movement of New England during the nineteenth century and, consequently, his beliefs were greatly influential. His veristic philosophical tenets, which came to define the group at large, were that “1. Words are signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit” (Howe 620). In what was a still young America, Emerson eschewed the belief that man could only find the spirit through an understanding of God, but rather thought that the spirit was “that ineffable essence” on which “he that thinks most, will say least” (Nature 215). He considered the spirit that piece of God instilled in all men, meaning that man can only come to know his God through an understanding of himself, which makes external praise unnecessary. Considering Emerson’s theological background (a Harvard trained minister), such a reductionist view of man’s relation to God became massively influential within intellectual circles, prompting such contemporaries as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller to take notice and incorporate his ideas into their writing. Emerson attempted to deconstruct the conceptions his young America had taken for granted—namely the Calvinist and more generally English ideas of religion, which continued to have a strong influence on both the literature and thought of New England. In doing so Emerson created his own aforementioned strictures that were largely taken in by the transcendentalists, and which formulated for Melville the critical theory dominant in his mind as he sat down to write *Moby-Dick*.

Herman Melville did not embrace Emerson's theories and instead fought against a number of both his beliefs and methods for conveying those beliefs, and his earliest preconception of Emerson was that he was "full of transcendentalism, myths & oracular gibberish" (H. Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography* 617). Speaking of Emerson's most famous essay, *Nature*, Melville perused its pages "once in Putnam's store," and "that was all I knew of him, till I heard him lecture," (H. Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography* 617). *Nature* thus influenced Melville's thoughts more than any of Emerson's other written work, and must be analyzed to understand where Melville's skepticism of Transcendentalism originated. As was detailed in his whaling story earlier, Emerson broaches evil but once—a reflection of his essay's diminution of the existence thereof—near the end, when he says, speaking of summer, that "it shall draw beautiful faces, warm hearts, wise discourse, and heroic acts, around its way until evil is no more seen" (*Nature* 224). He defines evil as the leftover product to be discarded when our realizations of intrinsic spiritual truths are understood, that when the accumulations of winter pass away we are left with the essentials for goodness. Emerson's assumption is that evil exists in our attempt to build lives farther and farther from where we came, even saying that religion and its demands put "an affront upon nature" (*Nature* 213). Emerson uses nature as his spiritual guidance, and disavows the more common belief that such guidance could only come from a Church pew before a preacher.

The Emersonian idea of evil has concrete reflections in *Moby-Dick*, namely in Melville's Captain Ahab, whose theory on the existence of evil directly opposes the one put forth by Emerson in *Nature*. The idea of evil is one Emerson rarely toys with directly; instead, he lets it sprout from that passage in *Nature* throughout his works. Michael Hoffman sums this up in when he says:

Evil, to Emerson, though it existed, was more than counter-balanced cosmically by a prevailing tendency to goodness in the collective actions of the world. He thus gave the impression to his contemporaries and to following generations that evil was of no great consequence in human events. (Hoffman 174)

To Melville, evil is *the* great consequent in *Moby-Dick*. While reflecting on the futile voyage of his ship, Ahab confides to his young disciple, Pip, “So far gone am I in the dark side of the earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me” (MD 396).

Melville creates and thrusts Ahab into an opposition of the ‘goodness’ in the world that is greater than that goodness. The proclivity of man towards moral righteousness in Emerson’s theory is absent in Ahab’s mind, that bright sunny world merely a theory of opposition to the darkness he inhabits; whereas in Emerson’s mind evil is a negligible facet on the peripheries of existence, Ahab considers it the major ruling factor of his world, standing at the forefront as goodness fades to the background. This transcendental law Ahab considers, however, is not one that extends to the sea where he has spent the greater part of his life. In a more practical—some would say, more natural—look at Emerson’s essay, it becomes increasingly obvious that Emerson’s focus is only on the land, making Melville’s sea-bound tale that much more a rejection of Transcendentalism.

Emerson’s *Nature* holds within its explicit jurisdiction only the land, never reaching the ocean with its veristic theories. Though Emerson considers rivers on numerous occasions as part of his theory on nature, he never follows them to the ocean, only using water so long as it is contained by land. He questions, in trying to convey the entirety of God’s creation, “What angels invented these splendid ornaments, these rich conveniences, this ocean of air above, this ocean of water beneath, this firmament of earth between?” (Nature 186). Emerson does not

consider as part of his treatise the sky or the sea, instead focusing on the land, inverting the heavenly firmament so that nature is God's "floor, his workyard, his play-ground, his garden, and his bed"⁸ (Nature 186). Ocean and air are interchangeable to him because neither are focuses of his essay, and in this one simple inquiry he drops them both below the land that best exemplifies God's great gift of nature. As such, another rejection of Emerson's essay is seen in *Moby-Dick's* focus on the "two thirds of the fair world [Noah's flood—the ocean] yet covers" (Nature 224). Emerson does not look to the sea to find his God, and Ahab's repetition of this mistake throughout the book proves fatal.

Melville's rejection of Emerson becomes noticeable when analyzing a series of letters sent to his editor, Evert Duyckinck. During the general time of his writing of *Moby-Dick*, Melville sent a thoroughly personal analysis of Emerson to his editor:

Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in mine own halter than swing in any other man's swing. Yet I think Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow. Be his stuff begged, borrowed, or stolen, or of his own domestic manufacture he is an uncommon man . . . for the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool; -- then had I rather be a fool than a wise man. --I love all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more; & if he dont attain the bottom, why, all the lead in Galena can't fashion the plummet that will. I'm not talking of Mr Emerson now—but of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with blood-shot eyes since the world began. (Leyda 292)

⁸ To defend this passage from mis-contextualization: I realize that Emerson is speaking of man, but in going along with Emerson's theory that man and God are coterminous (i.e. "I am part or particle of God" (Nature 184)) I believe the passage similarly pertains to God.

Melville shows an amount of respect and even admiration for Emerson, but he also shows a desire to remove himself from the literary categorization of Transcendentalism, which became influential to his closest literary companion, Nathaniel Hawthorne, among others. He refuses Emerson's idea that one could create his own mode of religious thought by reevaluating his surroundings, that "The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship" (Nature 215). By saying that he wishes himself a fool as though fools were innovators of thought, Melville shows that he is looking to move past—or rather, dive below—the strict intellectual designations he finds in the literary landscape. With that belief Melville frees himself to further explore, on his own, the ideas of God and how one comes to know Him externally of the current conceptions of the time—effectively 'diving down' to define these terms below the surface of nineteenth-century American thought. Melville was fascinated by the ingenuity and conviction Emerson evinced in his orations, but became hesitant when he realized Emerson's 'dive' was simply an attempt to get below the surface of American thought, without a map or a palpable goal in sight. As the letter goes on, Melville changes his praise from Emerson to all great thinkers and then inserts himself into the group, calling himself a fool and praising the 'divers-down.' He thus praises Emerson's action but not its purpose, stopping short of praising his specific theory and pulling back to laud any critic, agreeable or otherwise, who thinks with such ingenuity. Melville was certainly intrigued by Emerson's ambition and the risks he took to advertise his ideas but, so far as this letter extends, resists conforming to his Transcendentalist mode of thought.

Ishmael's time atop the mast-head shows the impracticality of Emerson's theory and Melville's skepticism of Transcendentalism. One harpooner comments to Ishmael, "we've been cruising now hard upon three years, and thou hast not raised a whale yet. Whales are as scarce

as hen's teeth whenever thou art up there," (MD 136) to which Ishmael responds, in a warning directed towards any prospective whaling captain, "Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unreasonable meditateness" (MD 135). Ishmael's inefficiency as a whale spotter stems from his overly meditative worldview, and problems arise, as Ishmael says, in the moments of great ponderation atop the mast-head:

There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through the transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. (MD 136)

It is no coincidence that the mast-head is the farthest place aboard the *Pequod* from the sea and closest to the firmament where Ishmael's 'transcendental high' is obtained. By climbing high, Ishmael's mind fills with fancies and a certain sense of completion, where his "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" (MD 136). This transcendence through a completion of the human body with nature directly satirizes Emerson's theory put forth in his essay "The Over-Soul," which says:

the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest . . .
That unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other . . . within man is the soul of the whole; the wise

silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. And this deep power within which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficient and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. (Emerson, *The Over-Soul* 138)

Emerson preaches the completion of man through his relation to nature, idealizing that his connection to the creator and to his past is found in the nature around him. Through Ishmael, Melville criticizes the practicality of such a theory, and reveals the disastrous results that would befall one should they put Emerson's theory into practice. Just as Melville shows ambivalence to Emerson's theory in his letter to Duyckinck, he does so again here, revealing the beauty that can be attained by subscribing to transcendentalism but exposing the flaws inherent in its practice. The action of transcendental realization is not criticized, but rather its purpose—to get closer to God through that realization—proves too impractical for Melville. Another large part of Emerson's theory is that there are no unknowable truths in the world, and Melville criticizes that as well in *Moby-Dick*.

Melville's opinions on the existence of unknowable truths clash with Emerson's, which we again see reflected in *Moby-Dick*. Edward J. Rose attempts to sum up the stances of Emerson and Melville by saying, in reference to the unintelligible, that Emerson's treatment "reveals his characteristic confidence in the explicability of the 'all' as well as his confidence in the justice and goodness inherent in existence once the enigma is solved" (Rose, *Melville, Emerson, and the Sphinx* 250). To Emerson, man has available and comprehensible to him all the knowledge that could lead to his happiness, and this is the result of the fairness that is so inextricably linked to the natural world. In contrast, Rose says Melville's "treatment of the symbol, once again

characteristically, reveals his belief in the inexplicability of the ‘all’ and his skeptical views about any possible inherent justice or goodness in what appears to be a hostile universe” (Rose, Melville, Emerson, and the Sphinx 250). A significant motivating factor in Ahab’s quest is his wishful attainment of an ungraspable truth, and his rationale for so maniacally chasing it is the belief in an inherently fair world that contains no such unobtainable truths. The origin of Melville’s skepticism and, consequently, Ahab’s anger will be discussed in the next chapter, where I will analyze the limited knowledge available to man indoctrinated in Calvinism.

In *Moby-Dick* there are also a number of criticisms of the ostentatious showmanship Melville found in Emerson’s oration. Melville took note of the pontifical awe he saw in the fawning crowds around him as he watched Emerson’s lecture, which he later satirizes in *Moby-Dick* when Captain Ahab, having destroyed one of the *Pequod*’s contrivances of maritime travel, creates his own compass. As he works on this device, “Abashed glances of servile wonder were exchanged by the sailors . . . and with fascinated eyes they awaited whatever magic might follow” (MD 390). Each of these sailors disavow religious standards, and Melville shows, through Ahab, his detestation of the ceremonious nature of ‘intellectual enlightenment.’ Captain Ahab’s intention greatly differs from Emerson’s: he is looking to chase down a monolithic, immutable progenitor whose existence and man’s capability to comprehend such have been precluded from man’s intrinsic knowledge. Emerson believes that nature provides a universal truth, the discovery of which leads to sublimity; with the caveat that what people mainly know “in the present stage of our knowledge,” is merely “a useful introductory hypothesis, serving to apprise us of the eternal distinction between the soul and the world” (Nature 216). Melville rejects the intrinsic knowledge that Emerson proposes, instead making the unintelligible of *Moby-Dick* infinitely so. Consequently, Ahab chases truth as it is proposed by Emerson, never

realizing that it is unobtainable; instead, he believes in an inherent fairness in the world that does not exist in *Moby-Dick*. Through Ishmael, Melville criticizes the transcendental high that one can attain through meditation, but through Ahab he criticizes the search for truth in a world where such is impossible to comprehend.

Emerson's journal specifies some of his thoughts from around the time he delivered the aforementioned lecture before Melville and provides some insight into what exactly Melville was criticizing in his letters to Duyckinck⁹. Emerson postulates in his notes that "In morals, again, Gravity is the Laissez faire principle, or Destiny, or Optimism, than which nothing is wiser or stronger" (Gilman 77). Emerson makes this comment in response to the westward expansion he recently saw¹⁰ and uses his theory pertaining to the intrinsic goodness of nature to criticize the capitalist desire to expand the country's boundaries. He delivered a lecture to Melville with the necessity of his theory reignited by a new threat, one that was attempting to further American society from the basics to which he adhered. He spoke before Melville when his own theory was being tested, and when his treatise required its creator to defensively uphold its goals in a rapidly changing country.

Melville wrote again to reveal some of the greater flaws and issues he found in Emerson's presentation. He writes:

⁹ Though the specific oration Emerson delivered to Melville is currently considered lost, it falls within a series of six lectures of his entitled "Mind and Manners in the Nineteenth Century," which Emerson delivered in an attempt to connect his transcendental ideologies with the pertinent topics of the time.

¹⁰ Emerson says in the same journal "Our science is very shiftless & morbidly wise; wise where it is not wanted; blind where we most wish to see . . . Geologists were crossing all seas & lands, like so many squibs. Well, why did they not find California? They all knew what most men wanted . . . There is no Columbus in these sciences with an anticipating mind; but they are like critics & amateurs; when the heel of a trapper's foot has turned up gold or copper or quicksilver, they come & give it a name" (Gilman 77).

I could readily see in Emerson, notwithstanding his merit, a gaping flaw. It was, the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions. These men are all cracked right across the brow. And never will the pullers-down be able to cope with the builders-up. (Hoffman 171)

Melville reacted to one of Emerson's speeches which challenged "orthodoxy, not by questioning whether the miracles had really occurred, but by claiming that religious faith came *before*, not *after*, belief in the biblical miracles," and postulated that "People believed in the biblical miracles because they had faith, not the other way around" (Howe 621). Though he was somewhat undecided on his own religious thoughts at the time, Melville took offense to Emerson's proposal here. He argues against Emerson's reevaluation of the methods by which we come to understand the world without God, believing that a reassessment of our ability to comprehend Him will instead prove more fruitful and, indeed, more effective than the extant religious practices. Michael Hoffman transposes Melville's belief into *Moby-Dick*, saying that

Ishmael is a "puller-down" because he is a skeptic, because he attempts to see the universe as clearly as possible without projecting his own values upon it. Ahab is a "builder-up," like Emerson, in that he comes to his perception of the world with his mind already made up, and so he "builds up" the real world into something that reflects his own preconceived idea as to what it means and contains. (Hoffman 171)

I disagree with Hoffman's analysis pertaining to Emerson because he considers Emerson's personality rather than his theory. Melville more accurately considers the theories he gleans

from Emerson to be those of a ‘puller-down,’ as those theories basically looks to strip the world back down to find fulfillment. Thus, as a puller-down, Emerson fails to excite or gain Melville’s approval. Melville did not consider Emerson’s ideology an affront to God, but rather believed that such reductivism was counterintuitive to the needs of American literature, and that Emerson’s attempt to rethink how the country evaluated those ideas was overly impractical on his part. Melville’s captain Ahab is, just like Emerson, a puller-down, in that his vengeance is on the totality of the beast’s traits, claiming late in the novel, “He’s all a magnet!,” (MD 340) and it is surmised by Ishmael that Ahab “piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (MD 156). That whale, built upon with both the abstract vengeful wishes of Ahab and the real rusted harpoons thrust by whalers throughout history, stands in line with the Emersonian assessment of evil, in that he is removed from the inherent goodness of nature. Emerson then says of the ‘spirit’—more accurately, man’s conception of God when He becomes relatable to us through nature—that it “does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old” (Nature 216). Emerson, puller-down that he is, would have the whale, a creature that harkens back to nature, stripped of all these things, whereas Melville continues thrusting things atop it, letting the variegated perceptions of the whale coalesce into a deepening manifestation of evil in Ahab’s mind. Instead of building up his knowledge in order to understand the ramifications of his journey, Ahab tries to pull down the whale upon which he heaped so much anger. Ahab perishes while still trying to pull down this whale, and it is his inability to build around his monomaniacism that proves to be his fatal mistake.

A close physical analysis of Captain Ahab reveals semblances of Melville’s recorded criticism of Emerson. Melville’s claim that transcendentalists—namely, Emerson—are “cracked

right across the brow” finds resonance in his Captain Ahab, who has, “Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing . . . a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish” (MD 108). Cracked from head to toe is Captain Ahab, the retribution of that ungraspable truth he pursued around the globe, which causes one critic to ask “And who in *Moby-Dick* is cracked right across the brow but Captain Ahab, with a jagged scar running from the side of his forehead down the side of his body?” (Hoffman 170). This cracked brow reappears intermittently throughout *Moby-Dick*, such as when, thinking “that all the anguish of that present suffering was but the direct issue of a former woe,” Ahab ponders:

To trail the genealogies of these high mortal miseries, carries us at last among the sourceless primogenitures of the gods; so that, in the face of all the glad, hay making suns, and soft-cymballing, round harvest-moons, we must needs give in to this: that the gods themselves are not forever glad. The ineffaceable, sad birth-mark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the signers. (MD 355)

To Melville, Emerson’s cracked brow is symbolic of his failed judgment, and for Ahab it is the result of his inability to escape the monomaniacism that controls him. Emerson’s theory that, “As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God,” (Nature 216) and that “Idealism sees the world in God” (Nature 214) are rejected by Ahab, who refuses to believe that God instills in man a relation to Himself. Thus Ahab sees in God unhappiness and evil that cannot exist in Emerson’s theory, but instead to Ahab He marks man with His sadness; never with His joy. Though Ahab accepts Emerson’s theory on the fairness of the world and the reductivist way of living, he rejects his idea that the ruling forces of the world are inherently good.

Melville shows occasionally in *Moby-Dick* a predilection towards physiognomy, such as one instance when his narrator Ishmael says the sperm whale has a “high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow” (MD 274). He finds in the whale—in Melville’s ungraspable truth—perfection, even sublimity, but later relents, questioning, “how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow?” (MD 275). Melville then asks the reader to accompany him in determining the nature of the whale, claiming to “put the brow before you,” and asking us to “Read it if [we] can” (MD 275). If the whale truly is the monolithic formation of evil, as Ahab would like his crew to believe, than Ishmael here can’t perceive it, relating that, in being unintelligible, the whale is open to interpretation. Whereas Emerson believes “the enigma of existence . . . must be swallowed whole,” Melville believes that to understand the unintelligible truths we must let that enigma “swallow us whole” (Rose, *Melville, Emerson, and the Sphinx* 250-1). The difference between the two is that Emerson believes we can control the truth and thus use it to our benefit, while Melville believes that the truth controls us, and in our attempts to comprehend it we must give ourselves in and be consumed by it to satiate our desire. Ahab justifies his suicidal quest by saying he is owed this ungraspable truth on the basis of a theory of fairness in the world, and he dies believing that his cause was just.

Ahab exists, in part, to attack and thus reveal the flaws in the Emersonian belief that “every truth properly understood implies all other truths” (Yu 116). The problem is that the truth Ahab is chasing is not such a monolithic understanding of mankind’s inherent goodness as Emerson would wish; rather, he voyages in search of a truth that puts as many hindrances to man’s understanding of it between them as possible, and these hindrances only add to Ahab’s frustration. Through three days of chase the white whale capsizes Ahab, takes the life of his

(false) prophet, destroys his ship, and, in a final act of indignation, drags him into the depths of the Pacific Ocean. To Emerson there is no hindrance to man's understanding of that unalterable truth, but rather, the searcher of truth

will see that there remains much to learn of his relation to the world, and that it is not to be learned by any addition or subtraction or other comparison of known quantities, but is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility. (Nature 218)

Ahab fails here at humility, crying out “for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee,” (MD 426) directly before the whale wraps a rope around his neck and drags him down into a watery coffin. He gives up a spear consecrated by the blood of his pagan harpooners only in a final gasp at life, having already concluded that it was either he or the whale that would meet their end by its edge. Ahab rejects the idea of propitiation to the natural truth as Emerson would have one do, and instead, by considering this whale innately evil, attacks it. When the whale kills him, having not allowed him to discern the truth he so insatiably chases, the Emersonian ideology is finally put to rest: in searching for truth, Ahab ultimately perishes, proving Emerson's theory that such is a life-affirming endeavor false. The inherent, fully obtainable truths of the Emersonian world are not extant in *Moby-Dick*, and by maniacally chasing them in the belief that the world's fairness would recompense his suffering, Ahab perishes.

Chapter 2

Melville's 19th Century God: The Ungraspable Free Will

Religion played for Herman Melville, as for most people in nineteenth-century America, a significant part in his intellectual development. One critic claims of Melville that “None of the English men of letters affected by the skepticism of the time . . . were hit quite so hard by their disillusionment [with religion]” (Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought* 3). Before writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville lived in poverty, among the whales, and with a wife and growing family he struggled to support. Religious enlightenment never reached him, but rather, all of those experiences only caused him to question the religion instilled in his youth. Melville sat to write *Moby-Dick* not only with the intellectual debate of Transcendentalism raging in his mind but also the reemerging skepticism of Calvinism boiling over in the Reformed Dutch version under which he was indoctrinated.

Herman's mother, Maria Melvill, maiden name Gansevoort, descended from an illustrious family of Dutch immigrants to the extent that “The Gansevoort house contained treasures of Dutch, colonial, and revolutionary silver and china” (Parker 30). Melville¹¹ was thus

¹¹ The Melvill's changed their names after Alan's death in an attempt to escape the derogated title he bequeathed to them. I will hereafter use Melvill in speaking of Herman's family and Melville when speaking of the author.

brought up in a dominantly Dutch home, an American raised under the religious teachings of his immigrant forefathers and thus under a very specific, Calvinist view of God.

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville's captain Ahab attacks this Calvinist God, whose controversial doctrine is outlined by T. Walter Herbert:

Calvinist doctrine had been attacked during Calvin's own lifetime on grounds that were to remain troublesome throughout the life of the tradition. Calvin's doctrine of Providence was the crux of the matter; he held that "the world is so governed by God that nothing is done therein but by His *secret counsel and decree*." Catholic theologians were quick to argue that this theory obliterates the moral freedom of man, and impugns the justice of God Himself. Opponents of Calvin were especially horrified by the decrees of "predestination" by which God "elected" a certain number of men for salvation and "reprobated" the unfortunate remainder. (Herbert, *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* 38)

Calvinism's downfall was the result of criticisms of two main doctrines: the idea of predestination and the existence of unobtainable truths, the latter of which was discussed in the previous chapter as Ahab's motivation for attacking Moby Dick. Ahab derides Moby Dick for his secrecy, saying, "that inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate," (MD 140) yet he accepts and resigns to that theory of predestination, bemoaning, "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron nails, whereon my soul is grooved to run" (MD 143). Whether or not Ahab believes in the Calvinist God is irrelevant; he uses its doctrines to provide the impetus for his anger as well as the justification for his means of mollification. Herbert's final line aligns with Ahab's justification for his actions; that is, that the course he is on was preordained, and his actions are

in accordance with this implacable god's design. This chapter will prove, by giving biographical and doctrinal data, that the god Ahab rejects and adheres to is a strictly Reformed Dutch and Calvinist version thereof, and in doing so will put to rest this God as the deity in the work and give vindication for Moby Dick's—the novel's true godhead—final annihilation of the heretic Ahab.

Though Maria was not an actual member of the Reformed Dutch Church during Herman's early childhood, she was "reared in the Church as a member of the mighty Gansevoort clan of Albany . . . [who] were staunch supporters of the Dutch Church" (Herbert, *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* 29). The Reformed Dutch Church came into being as the "coincidence of mass immigration with Neo-Calvinist revival," (Bratt 38) and was thus an attempt to reexamine the fundamental roots of Calvinism. Abraham Kuyper, a leading thinker in the Neo-Calvinist leanings of the Reformed Dutch Church, lists the intentions of the Church:

[The Dutch Reform Church looks to place] Nineteenth-century commonplaces into a Calvinistic system by one crucial operation, declaring all fundamental principles to be religious, commitments to or defiance of God's will. From their response to God, every person and society—more or less consciously, with greater or lesser system—built an operative philosophy, a culture, a way of life. For Neo-Calvinists, therefore, every school of thought, all political and economic action, all human behavior whatsoever had religious roots and might be legitimately evaluated by religious criteria. (Bratt 17)

The aims of the Reformed Dutch Church, somewhat analogous to those of the transcendental movement evaluated earlier, were inherently to rediscover the basic 'truths' of the world. The

Church sought to have all of its constituents view their daily quandaries through a strictly Calvinist lens, and as a result it opened itself to the aforementioned criticisms and ponderings which fomented Calvinism's downfall centuries prior in Europe. Ahab's transgressions, and the constancy with which they are aimed at his God, prove that he took Kuyper's view of Reformed Dutch practice to heart. It is through Ahab's skepticism that he lashes out at the Calvinist God and what he perceives as the unfair facets of His doctrine: the ideas of predestination and unobtainable truths.

Melville was not raised in a family that too strongly enforced the tenets of the Church to which they subscribed, but as his family's fortunes fell Herman was forced into a stricter understanding of the Church. Whatever religious understanding Melville did have in his early childhood, it was instilled by his mother, from whom he "received the rudiments of religious education" (Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* 21). Compared to his father, Melville's mother "not only took her Churchgoing more seriously but was warmly committed to the Calvinist creed to which her family had subscribed in its Reformed Dutch version" (Ibid 22). Melville was never a bright scholar, as his father notes (Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography* 48), and one could only imagine that his laziness in school was exacerbated in religious learnings by the relatively languid style of his mother and complete apathy on the part of his father. Maria Melvill did not officially become a member of the Reformed Dutch Church until her husband died, after which "All frivolous books, sewing, knitting, or any other handiwork, were put away and religious tracts took their place. They had a cold dinner and attended Church twice [a day]" (Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought* 6). Melville was not born into this religious system that would come to define his thoughts, but rather he only came upon it after his father's death, when his mother "needed her Church more than ever," (Parker 67) to help her get through the

emotional turmoil of the time. Despite this late asceticism, Melville's religious understanding from that young age would form the most complete view of Christianity in his life and in his literature and the disagreeable circumstances that brought it about would feed his skepticism. The Reformed Dutch Church and with it the ideas of Calvinism were instilled in Melville at a relatively late age, and they would go on to have extensive permeations in *Moby-Dick*.

With every nautical mile closer Ahab gets to Moby Dick, he finds further justification for his actions through his Calvinist God. Ahab thus fulfills the Reformed Dutch idea of the heretic, who, "Filled with a hatred of the divine so profound that all the flames of hell can never consume it . . . blasphemously holds God responsible for all the sin and misery of life" (Herbert, *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* 40). This is evident in Ahab's belief that he follows a predestined track and therefore has no control over the ramifications of his life, which will be reaffirmed during the next chapter in his handling of the various portents and prophecies sent to him. Ahab also imagines this predestination through the idea of fate, one instance being when he claims to have first sighted Moby Dick, after which he cries out to Tashtego, who objects that they laid eyes upon the whale at the same time, "Not the same instant; not the same—no, the doubloon is mine, Fate reserves the doubloon for me. *I* only; none of ye could have raised the White Whale first" (MD 408). Ahab assumes that everything happening is preordained, allowing him to constantly move forward to attack a whale that will ultimately destroy him. He thus lashes out against a god that decides his constituents' fates long before they came into being; a god whose doctrine says "that the truth about the nature of the universe and the unfolding of human experience is what God has ordained" (Herbert, *Calvinist Earthquake: Moby-Dick and Religious Tradition* 110). Ahab uses this predestination to justify his actions, which prove to be against another major facet of Calvinism: the unobtainable knowledge of the world.

Critics of Calvinism have derided it for taking from mankind the ability to act in the corporeal in a manner that would affect their lives in the ethereal. Calvinism is a fight back to the Old Testament and claims:

The authority of the Pope was rejected and the Bible, as the Word of God, was declared to be the supreme and final authority. Any religious doctrines or institutions or ceremonies, sometimes even civil institutions, and social customs, which appeared to be contrary to Scripture, or for which authority could not be found in Scripture, were liable to be questioned and to be swept away. (Ross 438)

Evil in Calvinism is, much like that of Transcendentalism, the result of man fleeing from the origin of things, namely the inherent truths of the world. In the case of Calvinism, this means looking to understand more than the two genuine divisions of wisdom, bifurcated as “the knowledge of God and of ourselves” (Calvin 21). In Calvin’s doctrine God gives man a limited capacity for understanding, and his desire for more is the result of his inherently sinful existence. Calvinism proposes that even when man’s “mind is enlightened . . . and he recovers something of the pristine glory of man before the fall . . . there is still . . . in his nature a spring of evil, and he is not freed from the taint of sin as long as he remains in this life” (Ross 441). Glory is not something attainable in earthly existence, and Ahab justifies his attack on Moby Dick as an attack on this unobtainable knowledge, which contrasts what he perceives to be “a sort of fair play herein, jealously presiding over all creations,” (MD 140) a fairness which he found in Transcendentalism.

Ahab maledicts the whale, crying, “What is best let alone, that accursed thing is not always what least allures!” (MD 340). Melville here provides the justification of his critics who

claimed him a heretic and blasphemer in this work¹². His captain defies the religion that we find to have so greatly influenced the author, and thus dives headfirst into the Calvinist conception of evil, looking to obtain knowledge he knows himself to have been precluded from. This exemplifies how Melville uses his characters to resist a God figure external of the work, and it is in Ahab's transgression that we find Melville actively attacking the religious ideas instilled in him as a young man.

The aforementioned Calvinist idea of unobtainable knowledge is elucidated by the Reformed Dutch Church, which argues that there are only three things man must know to lead a happy life: "the first, how great my sins and miseries are : the second, how I may be delivered from all my sins and miseries : the third, how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance" (Milledoler 43). This provides motivation for Ahab's issue with the unintelligible by proposing that the only acceptable knowledge is that which supports man's deference to God. The Reformed Dutch Church's thoughts on obtainable knowledge thus elaborates on Calvin's original theory of acceptable forms of knowledge, as the knowledge of ourselves becomes the knowledge of our inherently sinful existence and the knowledge of God becomes the knowledge of how we may eventually transcend earthly existence. The Reformed Dutch belief thus provides a connection between Calvin's disparate areas of knowledge, showing us that they are connected rather than simply being two separate ideas. All other knowledge, as the Church proposes, is superfluous, and in its superfluity it gets farther from the Church, and, consequently,

¹² Such as the New York *Independent*, which, on 20 November 1851, claims "The Judgment day will hold [Melville] liable for not turning his talents to better account" and the Washington *National Intelligencer* on 16 December 1851 that protests "against the querulous and caviling innuendos which he so loves to discharge," saying *Moby-Dick* "has all that is disgusting in Goethe's "Witches' Kitchen," without its genius."

farther from the propositions of the *Old Testament*. The Catechism of the Church believes that the only way to heaven is through a true faith, which is defined as:

not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in his word, but also an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel, in my heart; that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness and salvation, are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits. (Milledoler 46)

To the Reformed Dutch Church, salvation is something that is selectively doled out by God, and the understanding of such salvation is handed to those chosen ones accordingly. In the eyes of the Church, knowledge and salvation are coterminous, a fact that further exacerbates and elucidates the angst with which Ahab pursues the whale.

Ahab's insatiable pursuit of truth provides another attack on Calvinist doctrine. Calvin says that, as creatures of God, all humans are instilled with an understanding of Him, but "barely one in a hundred really nurtures this seed," and, as a result, "nothing they attempt to give him by way of worship or obedience is of any value in his sight" (Calvin 28). 'Truth,' as it exists to Calvin, is thus only available in the heavenly predestined life he proposes to a minority of humans, making its obtainability, to Ahab—who believed in the intrinsic truths of the world proposed in Transcendentalism—unfairly exclusive. While encouraging the crew to aid his vengeful search for Moby Dick, Ahab claims that "Truth hath no confines," (MD 140) believing it to instead, as in the Emersonian sense previously detailed, be ubiquitous, attainable by all men without the substantial exceptions of Calvin's theory. The fact that it is not, that Ahab cannot grasp truth as I have previously detailed, infuriates him, as he says "I'd strike the sun if it

insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other” (140). Ahab assumes fairness in the universe, a certain equilibrium that makes all actions—even those of God—capable of indemnification, and his belief that there can be no unattainable truth is, along with predestination, justification enough for him to continue in pursuit of Moby Dick.

The Catechisms of the Reformed Dutch Church, which apply the Church’s doctrine to real life, elucidate the religious beliefs Melville was grappling with in *Moby-Dick*. When asked “Did God then create man so wicked and perverse”, the response of the Church is:

By no means; but God created man good, and after his own image, in righteousness and true holiness, that he might rightly know God his creator, heartily love him, and live with him in eternal happiness, to glorify and praise him. (Milledoler 44)

Melville was indoctrinated in a Church that preached the Calvinist belief of man’s fall as the result of his own action, wherein people are “so corrupt that [they] are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness” (Milledoler 44). Melville was raised in a Church that proposed and enforced the Holy Scripture under the pretense that the people being preached to were intrinsically evil and did not have the power to commit good deeds in God’s eyes. The fall of man and his (specifically, Melville’s) inherent inability to again attain His good graces is the result of an action that occurred countless millennia before his existence and thus out of his control. The theodicean response from the Church is that evil is the result of man’s sinful inclinations and failure to follow the holy light. The paradox again arises, however, that predestination, which takes from man the ability to alter his place in the afterlife, necessitates a

God who places men upon the earth as inherently evil or good, a binary that cannot be circumvented by either side.

There are semblances in *Moby-Dick* of Melville's understanding of the world as taught by Calvinist preachers. Unjustifiably (in Ahab's opinion) vengeful, Moby Dick smashes down upon the *Pequod*, "vibrating its predestinating head," (MD 425) and obliterating the vessel. Though innocent of the intense hatred Ahab displays, the crew is complicit enough that their fate has already been assumed. When the whale strikes the ship, "Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and spite of all that mortal man could do," (MD 425) the ship begins to sink. The whale acts as though it is the hand of an unforgiving God, the predestinating head a reminder of the "Eternal Election . . . by which God has predestined some to salvation and others to destruction" (Calvin 213). Ahab's foe is the physical manifestation of all he considers unfair as promoted by Calvinism: the inability to affect his life's outcome (as evinced in the prophecies of Fedallah being validated) and the ungraspable truths precluded from man's cognition (his inability to understand and thus defeat the whale). By attacking the unattainable truth through the justification of predestination, Ahab strikes what he considers a completely Calvinist God, attacking the whale as a promulgator of that God's will and thus considering it justifiably assailable.

When Ahab disbelieves in god he is doing so as the Reform Dutch Church defines belief; as a result, he must go strictly against the following thought:

That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is for the sake of Christ his son, my God and my Father; on whom I rely so entirely, that I have no doubt, but he will provide me with all things necessary for soul and body: and further, that he

will make whatever evils he sends upon me, in this valley of tears, turn out to my advantage; for he is able to do it, being almighty God, and willing, being a faithful father¹³. (Milledoler 47)

Ahab does not appeal to God or Jesus to rescue him in the novel, but rather, every instance in which he does call out to Him is an explicit rejection or questioning of His will. Ahab's doubt of God as a savior becomes more apparent as he questions, near the novel's end, "Who's to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar," (MD 407) thereby demanding accountability from God for the wrongs in the world and reaffirming his belief that there is an inherent fairness in the world. As Ahab reflects on the journey he has taken in search of the white whale, he weeps, and "From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop" (MD 405). Within the Pacific— what becomes Ahab's own 'valley of tears'—floats a mass of evil that Ahab is in search of. The evil that floats in a pool of Ahab's tears is in Ahab's estimation a symbol of God's providence, evading him at each turn and striking him unfairly when they do meet.

Late in the novel, Ahab baptizes his harpoon with the blood of his pagan harpooners, and in doing so he eschews the Reformed Dutch belief of baptism, by which man is "washed by [Christ's] blood," (Milledoler 55) instead sanctifying his weapons with the blood of sinners. Ahab neglects the understanding that "one, who is himself a sinner, cannot satisfy for others," (Milledoler 45) meaning that his sinful baptism would be, even under less pernicious circumstances, unholy. He revels in the company of sinners and substitutes the blood of the holy with the blood of the actively unholy, carrying out the sacred deed of baptism with the blood of

¹³ It is difficult to believe that for the few years in which Melville lived in an ascetic worship that his eyes never happened to come across nor his ears happen to take in this specific catechism, so I consider myself just in specifically analyzing similar imagery in *Moby-Dick*.

those pagans who a remorseless Christian God looks down on with contempt. Such contempt is met by Ahab, who concludes his baptism howling “Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!” (372). Ahab actively excludes God from the ceremony, vocally rejecting Him from a profoundly religious activity and further positioning himself in opposition to the Reformed Dutch deity.

Constantly appearing in the book is Melville’s “meditation upon the meaning of human suffering [which] are immeasurably deepened because he explores the implications of Calvin’s belief that man cannot suffer unmerited affliction” (Herbert 109). Ahab’s vendetta against the whale is formulated on the belief that the whale attacked him with no impetus other than its unnatural malevolence. Instilled in Ahab is the transcendental belief that his world should be inherently fair, and he says such when proclaiming “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play,” (MD 140) and again later, as he stops his crew from wetting a burning lightning-rod, “let’s have fair play here, though we be the weaker side . . . Let them be, sir” (381). Ahab believes in fairness, and both blasphemes and justifies his chasing of the whale in an attempt to validate the belief that he, in his earlier dismemberment, was unfairly wronged. Ahab subscribes to the transcendental belief that all the actions of the world are fairly recompensed, and in this belief feels as though his action against the whale in no way earned him the retribution he received.

I have proven over the course of these last two chapters the motivations and justifications Ahab uses to attack Moby Dick. Ahab vengefully searches for the whale believing that, in the transcendental tradition, the world is inherently fair and there are no unobtainable truths. He

angrily assaults the whale than believing his life to be governed by Calvinist ideas, namely that his life is predestined and there are truths in the world that are precluded from man. For this Calvinist belief to be validated, however, Ahab would have to be unable to alter his journey, but I will prove in the following chapter that such is not the case. I will show that Ahab is fairly, and plentifully, warned to desist from his vengeful journey, and by ignoring such warnings he freely chooses to die, all the while using those aforementioned belief systems to justify and fuel his demise.

Chapter 3

Pequod Synecdoche: The Free Will of Ahab

To look at how Ahab's ship befalls the same fate as its captain, I will here explore how the *Pequod* becomes metonymic of its him in *Moby-Dick*. By resembling its captain, the *Pequod* becomes a physical part of him and is thus as complicit in his mission as the damned crew and Ahab himself. I will also explore how the ships with which the *Pequod* comes in contact throughout the novel provide portents sent by Moby Dick, the rejection of which provide Ahab indisputable free will in his ultimate demise.

Pequod Synecdoche

The first signification of Ahab's physical relationship with the ship comes early in the work, where a series of forebodings carefully lay for Ishmael the doomed course of the *Pequod*. As Ishmael visually explores the ship, he explains:

She was a ship of the old school, rather small if anything; with an old-fashioned claw-footed look about her. Long seasoned and weather-stained in the typhoons and calms of all four oceans, her old hull's complexion was darkened like a

French grenadier's, who has alike fought in Egypt and Siberia. Her venerable bows looked bearded. Her masts—cut somewhere on the coast of Japan, where her original ones were lost overboard in a gale—her masts stood stiffly up like the spines of the three old kings of Cologne. Her ancient decks were worn and wrinkled, like the pilgrim-worshipped flagstone in Canterbury Cathedral where Becket bled. But to all these her old antiquities, were added new and marvelous features, pertaining to the wild business that for more than half a century she had followed. (MD 69-70)

These physical traits of the ship have line-by-line references to the *Pequod's* reclusive captain. The ship's owner, Bildad, exclaims to Ishmael "His lance! aye, the keenest and the surest that, out of all our isle! . . . I've sailed with him as mates years ago," (MD 78) showing that Ahab is a sailor of a previous generation, whose experience, regardless of the rumors currently haunting him, validate his ability to captain a ship. Claw-footed literally means "a foot on a piece of furniture or a standing fixture," (OED) which is reflected later in the novel, when Ahab's ivory leg is recreated by a carpenter who Melville exhaustively renders as a general ivory-molding factotum for the ship's crew (MD 356-8). Though he never considers Ahab's complexion, in his initial sighting of Ahab Ishmael believes he "seemed made of solid bronze," at least in contrast to the "lividly whitish," (MD 108) scar that runs from his head to toes. The beard of the ship I will consider in a moment, as it requires more thorough analysis. The mast evokes Ahab's ivory leg because he recalls it was on the coast of Japan that "he found himself hard by the very latitude and longitude where his tormenting wound had been inflicted" (MD 400). The decks are worn and wrinkled, much like Ahab's forehead, featuring

planks so familiar to his tread, that they were all over dented, like geological stones, with the peculiar mark of his walk. Did you fixedly gaze, too, upon that ribbed and dented brow; there also, you would see still stranger foot-prints—the foot-prints of his one unsleeping, ever-pacing thought. (MD 137)

I will return to this passage later, but for now it suitably furthers the *Pequod*-Ahab physical correlation that defines Ishmael's initial description of the ship. The final line of Ishmael's description also, in close analysis, proves the most tragic: it later evokes Ahab's newly bred family, as he laments:

away, whole oceans away, from that young girl-wife I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow—wife? wife?—rather a widow with her husband alive! Aye, I widowed that poor girl when I married her. (MD 405)

Ahab has a wife and child so that he can leave something ashore, two embodied longings for his return, 'marvelous features' that are, though indirectly, the product of nearly a half-century¹⁴ of whaling. Ahab is thus physically and emotionally reflected in his ship.

I mentioned a moment earlier the beard of the *Pequod* that so strikes Ishmael in delineating that "Her venerable bows looked bearded" (MD 69). This description stands out among Ishmael's thoughts pertaining to the *Pequod* because it is terse and objective; also, it is the only trait that Ishmael admits to be solely perspectival. None of the various crewmembers aboard the *Pequod* has a beard, and it is not until the chase is afoot that Ahab begins his, when he admits, after giving the carpenter his razors, that he will "now neither shave, sup, nor pray," (MD

¹⁴ Ahab confides to Starbuck that he is at the culmination of "Forty years of continual whaling" (MD 405).

371) resulting in a beard “which darkly grew all gnarled, as unearthed roots of trees blown over, which still grow idly on at naked base, though perished in the upper verdure” (MD 401). Ahab becomes the only one aboard the *Pequod* who grows a beard, thus furthering my belief that the ship is synecdochic of its captain.

Ishmael’s Landlocked Portents

Ishmael sees signs ashore warning him against setting to the sea, signs I believe to be of three categories repeated later in the novel’s nine gams. I have categorized these prophecies as the passively portentous, the actively oblivious, and the actively portentous. The first type of portent is seen when Ishmael notices, upon entering the Spouter-Inn in search of a room, its sign “The Spouter-Inn:—Peter Coffin,” which causes Ishmael to wonder “Coffin?—Spouter?—Rather ominous in that particular connexion” (MD 24). Ishmael ignores these forebodings because “it is a common name in Nantucket,” (MD 24) unaware that the coffin will return at the story’s end, when, being pulled in by the vortex of the foundering *Pequod*, “the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by [his] side,” (MD 427) saving Ishmael’s life. The portent is but a passing curiosity that catches his eye but provides little substance to actually deter his boarding of the *Pequod*. It is passive in that it is prophetic but gives Ishmael little motive to change course, something which will be reversed in the next portent he encounters.

Ishmael next moves on to the actively oblivious prophecy, where he comments on the portentousness of Ahab’s name by claiming it “a very vile one,” going on to ask “When that

wicked king was slain, the dogs, did they not lick his blood?” to which the ship’s owner mollifies:

Captain Ahab did not name himself. ‘Twas a foolish, ignorant whim of his crazy, widowed mother, who died when he was only a twelvemonth old. And yet the old squaw Tistig . . . said that the name would somehow prove prophetic . . . I wish to warn thee. It’s a lie. I know Captain Ahab well; I’ve sailed with him as mate years ago; I know what he is—a good man—not a pious, good man, like Bildad, but a swearing good man . . . he has a wife. . . Think of that; by that sweet girl that old man has a child: hold ye then there can be any utter, hopeless harm in Ahab? (MD 78)

Little does Ishmael know, Bildad’s story proves prophetic: Ahab will, during the journey on which Ishmael joins him, make a widow of his wife and recently born child, much as his father did to him. I consider this actively oblivious because Ishmael is conveyed a strongly portentous tale by one oblivious to its repercussion, and is thus given an enervated version of what would otherwise be a strongly deterrent narrative of his future captain. The issue with this prophecy is thus, as will be seen again in the gams, one of conveyance, where an oblivious speaker relays what will later prove prophetic to Ishmael. Bildad was aboard the *Pequod* when Moby Dick destroyed the ship and dismembered Ahab, but he says nothing about that to Ishmael, thus transposing his obliviousness and not giving Ishmael enough evidence to reject the offer of employment aboard the *Pequod*. This actively oblivious prophecy combines with the passively portentous to create next the actively portentous, in which Ishmael is directly warned of the dangers of sailing with Ahab, but willfully ignores such forebodings.

The final representative of Ishmael's land-locked prophecies is the actively portentous, which is introduced to Ishmael in the fittingly titled chapter 'The Prophet.' The chapter's titular character is Elijah, who, having confirmed Ishmael's intention to sail aboard the *Pequod*, asks has he heard "nothing about that thing that happened to [Ahab] off Cape Horn, long ago, when he lay like dead for three days and nights; . . . And nothing about his losing his leg last voyage, according to the prophecy?" and follows up his own question, "No, I don't think you could, how could ye?" (MD 87). Ishmael ignores the 'prophet' Elijah, who imparts very little actual prophecy, claiming "It is the easiest thing in the world for a man to look as if he had a great secret in him" (MD 88). Ishmael is just as incredulous when Elijah reappears to ask "Did ye see anything looking like men going towards that ship a while ago?," to which Ishmael replies in validation, causing Elijah to follow up, "See if you can find 'em now, will ye?" (MD 91). Elijah illuminates Ahab's past and exposes his hidden mates, portending the madness and secrecy of purpose that will come to define Ahab to his crew. Ishmael, however, rejects these forebodings, making the fate that befalls him later in the work self-inflicted; a fact repeated in Ahab through the nine gams¹⁵ of the *Pequod*.

The Nine Gams: Forebodings at Sea

¹⁵ Though Ishmael contends otherwise, it appears the term 'gam' is a Melvillean neologism, and he provides a dictionary entry for it: "GAM. NOUN—*A social meeting of two (or more) Whale-ships, generally on a cruising ground; when, after exchanging hails, they exchange visits by boats' crews: the two captains remaining, for the time, on board of one ship, and the two chief mates on the other*" (MD 198).

James Dean Young sums the gams up—with an acceptance of the prevalent Melville scholarship considering the *Pequod* as a microcosm on nineteenth-century America¹⁶—by saying:

The individual, like the ship, is still a microcosm related to a macrocosm and a cosmos. The gams are, then, relations to the world, inevitable relations which must be accepted . . . whatever our profit in these relations, the other worlds are alternatives to ours; the nine gams of the *Pequod* are meetings with other possible worlds. (Young 450)

Though he gives a cogent analysis of each gam, Young fails to consider the adherence each crewmember aboard the ships has to their captain. With the exception of the *Town-Ho* and the *Jeroboam*, mutiny is never mentioned aboard the various ships with which the *Pequod* gams, showing a uniform acquiescence among the ships that Young fails to take into account. I also take issue with his belief that the various ships present various worlds, because it instead appears as though all of the ships the *Pequod* meets represent one world that proves dissimilar to the *Pequod*'s own world. That world which the other ships inhabit is Moby Dick's, and they relay his warnings to Ahab in order to give him the necessary information with which he can choose how to direct his voyage.

¹⁶ Two examples that show how deeply this permeates *Moby-Dick* criticism are Dan Vogel's "The Dramatic Chapters in *Moby Dick*," in which he prepares an analysis of the thirteen staged chapters of the novel and comments, among the traits of one of the chapters, a broadening of "the gradations of mankind from the mates to cover the entire crew: that is, to complete the microcosm" (Vogel 243); also using this analysis is David Charles Leonard in his essay "*The Cartesian Vortex in Moby-Dick*," in which he reads the book with a constant eye on Descartes concept of vortices and philosophy and says, in relating this Cartesian system to Ahab's centrifugal influence on the crew, "The Grand Armada Vortex . . . is a microcosm of the violent cosmic macrocosm," (Leonard 107) pervading the *Pequod*.

In continuing Ishmael's tradition of providing taxonomical systems, I will divide the gams into the three aforementioned categories: the passively portentous (*The Albatross*, *The Town-Ho*, *The Jeroboam*), the actively oblivious (*The Virgin*, *The Bouton de Rose*, *The Bachelor*), and the actively portentous (*The Samuel Enderby*¹⁷, *The Rachel*, *The Delight*). Each category presents an escalating perilousness for the *Pequod*, and Melville uses the different gams to give Ahab proper warning and thus provide him opportunities to display his free will, ultimately making Ahab responsible for his and his ship's destruction. Ahab rejects the prophecies that tell him to desist from attacking Moby Dick and instead believes those of his harpooner, Fedallah, choosing to accept that one voice over the many others that detail his fate should he continue attacking the white whale. Later in the novel, with the chase of Moby Dick nearing its end, Ahab exclaims "Omen? omen?—the dictionary! If the gods think to speak outright to man, they will honorably speak outright; not shake their heads, and give an old wives' darkling hint," (MD 413). He ignores the portents and thinks that they cannot be the will of God as they are, in his maniac assertion, not explicit. I will prove that Ahab is given the options of right and wrong—with the right options being of vastly greater quantity than the wrong ones—and that his downfall can only be attributed to himself, not the previously detailed higher powers he defers to.

¹⁷ I would like the reader to note here that I have switched the *Bachelor* with the *Samuel Enderby* in textual order, and I draw attention to this so I will not be thought of as an unsavory scholar. I exchange their order, not to simply suit my theory, but because the *Bachelor*, like the *Virgin* and the *Rose-Bud*, is defined by its competency and its general ignorance of or obliviousness to Moby Dick. Whereas the *Bachelor*, much like those previous two ships, is effectively done whaling due to its captain, the last three gams I will analyze—among which I include the *Samuel Enderby*—know the whale personally and traverse the sea with a fear of Moby Dick in mind.

The *Pequod*'s first series of gams provide hints to its ultimate fate, but in their passivity do little to affect Ahab and his determined crew. The *Albatross* is passive in its silence, which is revealed when Ahab yells to it an inquiry of the white whale, to which its captain,

leaning over the pallid bulwarks, was in the act of putting his trumpet to his mouth, it somehow fell from his hand into the sea . . . While in various silent ways the seaman of the *Pequod* were evincing their observance of this ominous incident at the first mere mention of the White Whale's name to another ship.
(MD 195)

Though he attempts to actively portend Ahab's fate, the *Albatross*' captain is passive because he is unable to convey his message to Ahab's ship, providing no substantial information that could deter the *Pequod*'s journey. The *Pequod* can but look on in silence as the ship passes by, a portentous passage in that, as Ishmael says, "all ships separately sailing the sea have most reason to be sociable" (MD 197). The captain's crew and ship resemble him in their general torpidity, and they float silently by, unable to answer Ahab's inquiry. In its silent drift Ahab finds no warning, as Ishmael speculates, "in the course of his continual voyage Ahab must often before have noticed a similar sight, yet, to any monomaniac man, the veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings" (MD 195). Ahab thus twists the portents he sees into mere abstractions, as though they are inexplicit and variable in their meaning. As the gams continue, this excuse proves less and less viable. With this excuse, as well as the aforementioned code of maritime sociability, Ahab assumes the silence and the drifting of the *Albatross* an insult to him, and thus ignores its ominous appearance and foreboding actions.

The next gam is somewhat odd in Ishmael's rendering because, as William Spofford puts it, "The events of the *Town-Ho's* tale occur two years prior to its meeting with the *Pequod*", (Spofford 265) and it is for this reason that I consider it passively portentous. Edward J. Rose considers of the *Town-Ho's* that "All the figures in the novel are present in the chapter in reduced magnificence, but the import of the whole is the same" (Rose, *Annihilation and Ambiguity: Moby-Dick and "The Town-Ho's Story"* 548). It is ostensibly a tale of divine intervention, in which a brave sailor gets retribution on a cruel mate with the assistance of Moby Dick, who smites the mate in question. This imparts upon the crew of the *Pequod* a pontifical awe for the white whale, but the crew who knew the tale (for it was not revealed to all) "kept the secret among themselves so that it never transpired above the *Pequod's* main-mast" (MD 200). Despite the terror and awe evoked by the *Town-Ho*, its tale remains passive because it becomes little more than a myth for the crew of the *Pequod*, never reaching Ahab and thus making it impossible for him to act on.

The third of the passively portentous gams is with the *Jeroboam*, which is both similar and dissimilar to the story of the *Town-Ho*: similar in that its tale is both retrospective and of divine intervention by the white whale, dissimilar in that this intervention is of somewhat more questionable benevolence and fairness. Whereas the white whale saved the *Town-Ho's* protagonist, the *Jeroboam's* antagonist is the beneficiary of Moby Dick's involvement. Ishmael remains incredulous throughout the *Jeroboam's* recitation, as he says of that ship's crew that they "believed that [the antagonist] had specifically fore-announced it, instead of only making a general prophecy, which any one might have done, and so have chanced to hit one of many marks in the wide margin allowed" (MD 253). As a result, the white whale's interpolation into that story seems but chance, and thus it is viewed passively, as though its actions are of little

consequence to the still-sailing *Pequod*. Ahab becomes infuriated by the tale, crying out, after the antagonist prophesies his approaching demise, “Curses throttle thee!” (MD 254). This event is passive because Ahab and the rest of his crew view this antagonist as little more than a false prophet, whose supposed prescience is more the result of luck than divine wisdom. Because the crew so incredulously receives the *Jeroboam*’s story, it proves passive, as its message does little to alter or palpably warn the *Pequod*’s crew about the fate of their ongoing journey.

The next series of gams—the *Virgin*, the *Bouton de Rose*, and the *Bachelor*—are actively oblivious to Ahab’s monomaniac chase. Whether by language or skepticism, none of the three help Ahab to locate the white whale, instead slowing him or deterring his progress and in their ignorance actively portending the *Pequod*’s destruction by showing the result of an antithetical course, all the while allowing Ahab to ignore their forebodings. This series of gams represent the transition of Moby Dick’s portents from passive to active, and so become closer to explicitly telling Ahab to desist from chasing the whale by showing him the consequences of ending his maniacal hunt. Through their innocence, inexperience, and ignorance, these gams prove actively yet obviously prophetic by providing templates of how to survive the sea, templates which Ahab ignores in order to continue with his monomaniacal journey.

The *Virgin* is the first ship with which the *Pequod* gams that proves completely oblivious to Moby Dick, where “in his broken lingo, the German [captain] soon evinced his complete ignorance of the White Whale” (MD 277). I will here deliberate on and dispel Young’s analysis, as he considers the meeting with the *Jeroboam* “the first of the three impossible attitudes . . . innocence,” (Young 455) which Young believes stems from the German captain’s difficulty in conveying purpose. The gam expresses innocence primarily to better expose Ahab’s lack thereof because, not only is the German captain oblivious to the white whale, he is unable to, with a

substantial lead, secure a sperm whale ahead of Ahab's crew, causing him to finally give up and chasing the fin-back whale (which is later described by Ishmael as "the species of uncapturable whales" (MD 284)). The ignorance of the *Virgin* has little purpose but to reveal the erudition of Ahab, as he—unlike the captain of that ship—is capable of sustaining his oil needs, celeritously pouncing upon a whale, and distinguishing the catchable from the uncapturable whales. This gam distinguishes the knowing from the unknowing of the whalery, but in its active prophecy shows just how regressive Ahab's actions are, as he too chases a creature that proves "not only ubiquitous, but immortal" (MD 155). I hereafter conflate Young's analyses, as he considers the following gam representative of "The second impossible attitude . . . inexperience," (Young 456) whereas I have proven that the *Virgin* was indeed an interaction of both inexperience and innocence. I will thus consider the following gam, like I did this one, as a conflation of Young's two 'impossible attitudes.'

The fifth gam, and second that I believe presents an actively oblivious prophecy, is with the *Bouton de Rose*, or, as it will be called by Ahab's crew, the *Rose-Bud*. Young believes this gam introduces inexperience as an 'impossible attitude' because "The barriers to communication with the *Rose-Bud* are still those of language," (Young 456) and that since there is a polyglot aboard who is somewhat familiar with whales, theirs is an issue of inexperience rather than innocence. Young focuses, however, on the wrong person; for his theory to be true the Guernsey-man translating would need some sort of control aboard his ship, but instead he is merely a conduit of communication between the ships and their respective knowledge. While he may aid and even manipulate the captain's understanding of whaling, it is only through the false translations of Ahab's mate that he at all affects his captain's actions. The ship's captain, who proves too inexperienced to successfully lead and too innocent to question his translator,

becomes prophetic to Ahab because, regardless of Stubb's bedevilment, he proves capable of realizing when the simple attainment of a whale is superseded by its danger to his crew. By sundering the noisome whale from aside his ship, the captain shows more humility than Ahab is capable of, prophesying that Ahab's ways will lead to his downfall. Through his antithetical action, the captain of the *Rose-Bud* actively exemplifies the reward for being oblivious to the white whale. This is again a gam in which Ahab's power is bolstered through the innocence and inexperience of his counterpart, reinforcing him as captain of his ship but showing the myopic maniacs that will ultimately destroy the *Pequod*. By not heeding the implicit lesson put forth by the captain of the *Rose-Bud*, Ahab again portends his downfall.

The final gam that I believe reinforces Ahab's volition due to its actively oblivious prophecy is with the *Bachelor*. The *Bachelor*, like the previous two ships in this mode of foreboding, has not seen the white whale, but rather its captain admits that he has "only heard of him," continuing that he "don't believe in him at all" (MD 375). The *Bachelor* overflows with whale oil, which appears to be the result of its ship's captain's ignorance of Ahab's goal. The ship's gaiety juxtaposes Ahab's solemnity, which we see in Ishmael's comment that "their two captains in themselves impersonated the whole striking contrast of the scene" between the two passing vessels (MD 375). Each ship slows to converse, and by revealing to Ahab and his crew what an incredulous approach to the white whale may bear, the *Bachelor* actively portends what will occur should the *Pequod* continue floating in opposition. The *Bachelor*'s crew goes on towards Nantucket "cheerily before the breeze," whereas the *Pequod*'s crew "stubbornly [fights] against" said breeze (MD 375). Like the previous two gams, we see captains acting in opposition to Ahab, whether through willful ignorance, innocence, or inexperience; in these gams we see very active examples of what traits allow one to survive years at sea without

perishing at Moby Dick's tail. These gams were oblivious to the white whale, and in their antithetical examples show what will befall the *Pequod* if it does not change course. Ahab's monomaniacism allows him to ignore their portents, and, as a result, Moby Dick sends a third grouping to actively portend the *Pequod's* destruction by clearly showing Ahab what will befall he and his crew should they continue in pursuit of Moby Dick.

The final grouping of gams, which I designate the actively portentous, begins with the eerie similarity of the *Samuel Enderby*, moves to the tragic loss of the *Rachel*, and ends with the solemn abnegation of the *Delight*. By calling these gams 'actively portentous prophecies,' I will show how the enumerated traits of the previous two groupings combine to justify the whale's actions and draw it closer to a 'god' figure in the work. Each of these gams has direct, recent contact with Moby Dick, thereby providing Ahab with a very real, very potent image of what his aggression will bring upon himself, and, consequently, the ship and crew that are complicit in his vengeful mission.

The *Samuel Enderby* is the first gam in which the corresponding captain responds 'aye' to Ahab's query of the white whale, and proves itself similar to the *Pequod* in more ways than just its knowledge of the whale due to its captain, Boomer, who "held up a white arm of sperm whale bone" which came about by the mouth of Moby Dick, as the captain recalls "Aye, he was the cause of it" (MD 337). The two captains share a similar tale—each had a limb torn off by Moby Dick, each suffered an agonizing trip back to their respective continent, and each replaced said limb with ivory. It is in this last similarity that they also diverge, however; whereas Ahab's leg, in its three iterations throughout the novel, is solid ivory, Boomer's arm has a "wooden head like a mallet," (MD 336) a connection back to land that Ahab avoids, and a physical representation of humility that rebuffs the monomaniacism seen in Ahab's chase of Moby Dick.

Boomer admits to have seen Moby Dick twice since that initial encounter, including once days before meeting the *Pequod*, commenting “No more White Whales for me; I’ve lowered for him once, and that has satisfied me . . . There would be glory in killing him, I know that . . . but, hark ye, he’s best let alone; don’t you think so, Captain?” (MD 340). This comment enumerates my theory of the ‘actively portentous prophecy’: having just recently seen Moby Dick, and being fully aware of his powers and not oblivious like the antecedent grouping, Boomer avoids it in the belief that it “only thinks to terrify by feints” (MD 339). Boomer is aware, meeting Moby Dick twice since that initial encounter, that the whale’s terror lies more in its threat than in its actions, as it only attacks after it comes under attack itself. He is the antithesis of Ahab because he has learned of Moby Dick and with that chooses to avoid him, knowing that the whale only kills in retribution to its aggressors. Ahab rejects this, responding to Boomer’s inquiry “He is. But he will still be hunted, for all that. What is best let alone, that accursed thing is not always what least allures. He’s all magnet!” (MD 340). The gam with the *Samuel Enderby* provides Ahab with a path to his salvation or at least his survival, which he rejects. The gam puts forth a mirror for Ahab to draw influence from, but he rejects the prophecy shown, foregoing the lesson that Boomer conveys in favor of his monomaniacism. The *Samuel Enderby*’s tale is an actively prophetic one because, unlike the previous two groupings, it takes place in the very recent past and provides a palpable, incontrovertible revelation of the whale’s indifference to the people who previously attacked him. The next gam proves less ostensibly similar but more tragic than the *Samuel Enderby*’s, ultimately proving as actively portentous a prophecy.

The *Pequod* next meets the *Rachel*, a ship hailing from Nantucket and captained by a man with whom Ahab is acquainted. Like the *Samuel Enderby*, the *Rachel* answers aye in response to Ahab’s inquiry of its spotting Moby Dick, to which Ahab elatedly inquires “Where

was he?—not killed!—not killed!” (MD 397). The *Rachel* lost a boat of crewmembers after chasing Moby Dick, of which its captain confesses and later requests,

“My boy, my own boy is among them. For God’s sake—I beg, I conjure”—here exclaimed the stranger Captain to Ahab, who thus far had but icily received his petition. “Forty eight-and-forty hours let me charter your ship—I will gladly pay for it . . . Do to me as you would have me do to you in the like case. For *you* too have a boy Captain Ahab—though but a child, and nestling safely at home now—a child of your old age too—Yes, yes, you relent. (MD 398)

The captain futilely evokes Jesus’ ruling that “all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets,” (Matthew 7.12) unaware that, in Ahab’s monomaniacism, he would have done unto himself exactly as he does; that is, reject his pleas and set sail for Moby Dick. Since I have already proven that Ahab’s method for finding and understanding God is transcendental, this scriptural appeal is ineffective. The reason this prophecy is actively portentous is because it is the first to explicitly reveal what will befall Ahab should he continue in pursuit of Moby Dick. Whereas Boomer’s warning was analogous to Ahab’s experiences but unrelated to his motives, the captain of the *Rachel* provides the outcome if Ahab continues on with his monomaniacal journey. The prophecy is put forth and later proven correct that Ahab, much like the captain of the *Rachel*, will lose his son by chasing Moby Dick, in that he will have no heir, no masculine progeny to live with him in mind, as his was but a baby when Ahab shipped off in pursuit of the whale. His son’s only knowledge of him will be when “his mother tells him of me, of cannibal old me; how I am abroad upon the deep, but will yet come back to dance him again” (MD 406). Even though he is given a clear glimpse

into what will befall him by chasing Moby Dick, Ahab carries on, the explicit warning of the *Rachel* unheeded.

The final gam is the book's most directly portentous and is explicit in its warnings, thus becoming the last actively portentous prophecy of the *Pequod's* destruction. As the *Delight* approaches, Ishmael is instantly drawn to the ship's exterior, noticing "Upon the stranger's shears were beheld the shattered, white ribs, and some few splintered planks, of what had once been a whale boat" (MD 403). Given the increasingly portentous games leading up to this encounter, the crew is instantly aware of the cause of this destruction, which is proven when Ahab inquires of the white whale to which the *Delight's* dejected captain exclaims "'Look!' . . . and with his trumpet he pointed to the wreck" (MD 403). Just as the first gam was passive due to the *Albatross's* captain's inability to warn Ahab with, and then, without his trumpet, this one proves active in its captain's conveyance by motioning his trumpet. A similar fate befalls the *Pequod* as did the *Delight* when it descends on Moby Dick, and in this later instance "the solid white buttress of [Moby Dick's] forehead smote the ship's starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled" (MD 425). The ship encountered Moby Dick just a day sooner, and for that encounter lost five men, four of whom "were buried [in the ocean] before they died," (MD 404) the fifth left to complete the portentous prophecy. Ahab tries to flee but "was not quick enough to escape the sound of the splash that the corpse soon made as it struck the sea; not so quick, indeed, but that some of the flying bubbles might have sprinkled her hull with their ghostly baptism" (MD 404). Moby Dick leaves in this final gam one last sign—a corpse—of his retribution should Ahab continue in chase, and Ahab's denial of this seals his ship's fate. Like the previous two games, Ahab is shown what will befall his ship if he continues in pursuit of Moby Dick; he is provided explicit prophecies that outline the ramifications should he not change course, and because of his

refusal to acknowledge their portents Ahab dooms himself and his crew to each of those previous ships' sorrows.

Fedallah: Possibility of Evil

By analyzing the gams I revealed portents from *Moby Dick* that heighten in magnitude as the story goes on, but these portents are constantly circumvented throughout by a prophecy which compels Ahab along his vengeful quest. *Moby-Dick's* false prophet comes in the form of Fedallah, Ahab's chief harpooner. Fedallah's control over Ahab throughout the book proves strange and indeed, when the captain seemingly avoids all warning and portents, his adherence to Fedallah's words becomes most suspicious. There are two main theories on the origin of Fedallah's name which, when considering the etymology section preceding the work, become important for understanding such a mysterious character: 1) it was derived from the Persian name Fadlallah from the eighteenth century Persian tale "Fadlallah and Zemroude", in which he is a "crafty and villainous Indian dervish who has the power to enter the soulless bodies of others" (Ali Isani 382) or 2) "The name is a compound made up of two elements: *feda*, the Arabic word for 'sacrifice' or 'ransom' . . . [while] The second element is *Allah*, familiar in Arabic names," (Grdseloff 398) Allah being the Arabic word for God. In the latter instance than Fedallah would translate as "The sacrifice or Ransom of God" (Grdseloff 398). I agree with and will use the latter claim because Grdseloff goes on to disseminate the physical and thematic differences between Melville's character and Fadlallah, concluding that "Both Fadlallah and Fedallah are pure Arabic forms . . . [that] represent two different names bearing two different

meanings” (398). Fedallah thus rides aboard the *Pequod* with the purpose of sacrificing to a God, and upon further analysis of his character it becomes apparent that this God is Moby Dick.

Ahab’s most explicit prophecy is presented by Fedallah, who prophesies of Ahab that “neither hearse nor coffin can be [his] . . . [and] ere [he] couldst die on this voyage, two hearses must verily be seen by [him] on the sea; the first not made by mortal hands; and the visible wood of the last one must be grown in America . . . [also,] Hemp only can kill thee,” and, finally, “[Fedallah] shall still go before thee thy pilot” (MD 377). Ahab responds in pensive speech:

And when thou art so gone before—if that ever befell—then ere I can follow, thou must appear to me, to pilot me still?—Was it not so? Well, then, did I believe all ye say, oh my pilot! I have here two pledges that I shall yet slay Moby Dick and survive it . . . I am immortal then . . . Immortal on land and on sea! (MD 377)

Fedallah, much like in the biblical story of Ahab, became Captain Ahab’s prophet because his words “are favorable to the king [Ahab],” (2 Chronicles 18.12) allowing Ahab to ignore all of the previous portents just as his biblical namesake did; that is, because they “never prophesied anything favorable about [him], but only disaster” (2 Chronicles 18.7). Nathalia Wright, in her book *Melville’s Religious Thought*, determines between the biblical tale of Ahab and Melville’s novel that “The balance of influence is reversed in the two stories. King Ahab had four hundred prophets and one who was true, but Melville sees it, with characteristic irony, that Captain Ahab defies all creation in order to believe his single malevolent angel” (Wright, *Melville’s Religious Thought* 65). Ahab in both stories surrounds himself with prophets who speak favorably of his actions, choosing to believe false prophecies rather than acknowledge the negative consequences

of his intentions. Fedallah's prophecy comes true by the story's conclusion, and through a Macbeth-esque failed prophetic analysis Ahab meets his end, unaware that through an improbable series of events Fedallah's prerequisites to his mortality would each come to pass. One critic, William Gleim, argues, "Fedallah, who foretold the fates of Ahab and himself, personified *The Future*, although his prophecy was false and misleading" (Gleim 414). Misleading, yes; false, no. Gleim's attempt to correlate each character of *Moby-Dick* to a different symbol over-extends itself here, as Fedallah does not lie to become a false prophet, rather he "gives Ahab specious comfort when he prophesies equivocally," (Gale 136) just as the prophets of biblical time were equivocal when they said to both King Ahab and King Jehoshaphat that "the Lord will give [Ramothe-gilead] into the hand of the king," (2 Chronicles: 18.22) never specifying which king exactly their prophesy addressed. Fedallah's equivocations directly lead to Ahab's downfall because they adhere to the captain's monomaniacism and allow him to continue in pursuit of Moby Dick. Fedallah is thus a false prophet to Ahab, and it becomes apparent that he was sent by the book's God figure, Moby Dick, to provide Ahab an alternative prophet to the ones presented in the gams.

As the book nears its end and the portents escalate in magnitude, it becomes increasingly evident that Ahab's personal prophet, Fedallah, is acting under commands from Moby Dick. Hints of this are dropped along the way, such as when Captain Boomer of the *Samuel Enderby* appeals to Fedallah to calm Ahab from his maniacs and he responds by "putting a finger on his lip," (MD 340) as if to silence the Captain and allow Ahab to continue in his quest. Fedallah then takes the steering oar to direct his captain eastwards, toward Moby Dick, further aiding his quest for vengeance and fleeing from reason. Ishmael also notices Fedallah once "eyeing [a] right whale's head, and ever and anon glancing from the deep wrinkles there to the lines in his

own hand” (MD 261). In these two instances we find Fedallah pushing Ahab away from an actively portentous prophecy and becoming an extension of the whale, respectively. Fedallah’s status as a prophet sent by Moby Dick is finalized in two later passages: the first coming after Ahab finally dispirits Starbuck, when he “crosse[s] the deck to gaze over on the other side; but started at two reflected, fixed eyes in the water there. Fedallah was motionlessly leaning over the same rail” (MD 407). When Ahab looks into the sea, he sees not his own reflection but Fedallah’s, which looks back up at him from the dominion of Moby Dick. Fedallah is at last completely exposed to Ahab after his death, when Ahab sees:

Lashed round and round to the fish’s back; pinioned in the turns upon turns in which, during the past night, the whale had reeled the involutions of the lines around him, the half torn body of the Parsee was seen; his sable raiment frayed to shreds; his distended eyes turned full upon old Ahab. (MD 423)

Moby Dick last looks at Ahab through his dead prophet, revealing the two to have been all along coterminous, a prophet of the white whale aboard the *Pequod*. Despite all the warnings otherwise, Ahab followed the guidance of his false prophet who filled his ears with saccharine prophecies discernable as immortality divinations by the monomaniac captain. In this last instance we find Fedallah’s prophecy morbidly validated; just as the false prophets of biblical Ahab, sent forth by God, led him to his demise, so too does Fedallah lead Ahab to a watery death.

Because Fedallah’s prophecy provides Ahab an option leading away from salvation and towards his demise, it is necessary for providing the doomed captain free will. Moby Dick sends numerous signs throughout the *Pequod*’s journey which portend its fate if it continues hunting

him, but as an alternative, and in order to give Ahab the free will to choose his fate, he puts Fedallah aboard the *Pequod* to resist the inordinate number of more accurate prophecies. When Ahab chooses to follow Fedallah at the expense of the other prophets he is choosing to destroy himself and his ship; his own justification that “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron nails, whereon my soul is grooved to run” (MD 143) is not sufficient for his actions because he chooses to attack the whale, disregarding all the portents that directed him not to. As a result, Ahab’s internal adherence to the facets of both Transcendentalism and Calvinism is proven a foolhardy one, as neither of the thoughts for religious enlightenment either save Ahab or help him discover realize a greater truth. As a result, the God he so resists yet adheres to throughout the novel is dead, or at least ineffective, once at sea. I will now go about the final task of revealing how and why Melville makes Moby Dick the God of his novel.

Chapter 4

God Cetologically Reincarnated: A Theodicy

Having proven Ahab's concept of God in *Moby Dick* incorrect, I will now go about outlining Melville's restructuring of the deity in the eponymous white whale. I cannot argue that the aforementioned God is dead completely in the work, as I do not account for the third of the globe that is outside of Moby Dick's dominion, but rather I will attempt to describe the God of "That same ocean [that] rolls now; that same ocean [that] . . . two thirds of the fair world it yet covers" (MD 224).

The Cetology Chapters: Fact vs. Fiction

Moby-Dick has been considered through countless interpretive strategies, which Betsy Hilbert attempt to reconcile when she says "*Moby-Dick*, after all, is as much a book about whaling as a book about good and evil" (Hilbert 824). She later says in the same essay:

. . . the readers of *Moby-Dick* are presented with onion-like, translucent layers of truths: real stuff about whaling, fictionalized and fancied-up, an extraordinary combination of romance and textbook, and all of it simultaneously a massive exercise in point-of-view, a tale told by a pedantic ex-schoolmaster who goes to

sea to escape the dreary November of his soul and gets somewhat more adventure than he bargained for. (Hilbert 824)

In Hilbert's terse, overly romanticized synopsis of the novel she exposes one key truth: that points-of-view determine the events of the novel. When I exposed and then killed off the Calvinist God, it was because he was the God specifically attacked by Ahab, the *Pequod's* incontestable navigator. While restructuring Melville's God figure, I step back from such points-of-view and instead look at the corpus of Moby Dick's actions, showing Him to be the unequivocal God-figure of the work whose laws starkly contrast the Emersonian and Calvinist thoughts of the time. Melville's inclusion of the cetological chapters, which advertise themselves as the most objective sections of the novel, provide his readers "an understanding of terminology and methods, as well as a basis for accepting what otherwise would be the incredible strength and maliciousness of the white whale" (Ward 168). My goal in this chapter will be to prove that Melville creates in *Moby-Dick* a completely fictionalized God figure, and that this figure resides and rules from beneath the wood planks and ivory of the *Pequod*.

Lawrence Buell's analysis of the cetological chapters attempts to sum them up in eight invariable parts:

1. A substratum of cetological data, testifying to the American—and Melvillean—passion for "informative" unfamiliar lore.
2. Rhetorical intensification of the data.
3. Metaphorization of the data, so as to begin to dissolve the shipboard context.
4. Mythification of the data.

5. Complication of the mythic framework so as to introduce the possibility of solipsism.
6. Comic disruption of the mythic framework.
7. Self-conscious proclamation of scribal inadequacy.
8. Ambiguous reformulation of the whale as mystery. (Buell 60)

This is the only attempt I have come across to codify the cetological chapters, and it is to some extent successful, albeit with some rather outstanding flaws. Buell never takes into consideration how the chapters in question exclude one whale in particular, but rather he believes they speak equally of all whales. My main point of contention is Buell's decision not to define which chapters classify as cetological, because some such as "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales" and "Ambergris" are as imperative as "Cetology" and "The Tail" in aiding the book's conception of the normative whale, and it is Moby Dick's digression from the traits of a 'normative whale' that, in part, deify him. If I consider all of these chapters that add to the reader's knowledge of the whale, Buell's codification proves unsuccessful. Instead, I find a more astute analysis to demarcate the fictive from the non-fictive chapters, such as Nina Baym's belief that *Moby-Dick* "contains much more than Ahab and Ishmael's story—embed[ing] the characters, rather, in a structure that is a compendium of fictional and nonfictional modes of writing" (Baym 910). Rather than classifying *Moby-Dick* as a text with sub-stratified cetological elements, Baym distinguishes between the fictional and the non-fictional. Melville sends Ishmael to convey the non-fictional elements, and in his descriptions we are provided what a whale is and should be, allowing Moby Dick's later abnormalities to further aggrandize and deify him.

The non-fictional chapters of *Moby-Dick* do not move the plot forward, but rather, they elucidate and provide data for the novel's most mysterious, fictional creature: Moby Dick. Ward says that in Melville's "treatment of the whale, in his analysis of its anatomy, its bone structure, its eating and breeding habits, and its every physical detail, he makes the whale a physical object, comprehensible to the reader" (Ward 170). Melville crafts a fictional work but interpolates Ishmael, and Ishmael's taxonomical systems, to introduce non-fiction into the novel. Ishmael expresses humility in going about this task when he promises, before giving his treatise on whales, "nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty . . . My object here is simply to project the draught of a systemization of cetology. I am the architect, not the builder" (MD 116). Ishmael takes the role of the conveyer, systematizing the previously disparate ideas of what whales are, as though he is finally classifying what had been around for ages. What he is doing and what he believes he is doing differ though; Ishmael sets the parameters for what a whale can and should be so they can be broken later on, unbeknownst to him, by Moby Dick, ultimately making the white whale an outlier and, as I will prove, the God of the novel.

Ishmael presents a simple maxim that he believes is necessary for any sea creature to be considered a whale, saying, "To be short, then, a whale is *a spouting fish with a horizontal tail*," and qualifying that "However contracted, that definition is the result of expanded meditation" (MD 117). This second claim makes Ishmael's classification universal because it is the general maxim by which one can hold any sea creature against to determine whether it is a whale or not. Indeed, every whale in the work adheres invariably, and simply, to this maxim; one whale, however, is differentiated from the rest in how closely it approaches the boundaries of the maxim. When Ahab introduces to his crew the true purpose of their voyage—that is, to hunt and

kill Moby Dick—he is flooded with inquiries and speculations: Daggoo first questions “has he a curious spout . . . very bushy, even for a parmaccetty?” and Tashtego then asks “Does he fan-tail a little curious, sir, before he goes down?” (MD 138). During Moby Dick’s introduction he appears to be an anomaly—though he is perfectly discernible as a whale, having both the requisite spout and horizontal tale, he has those to an exaggerated degree—and, as William Gleim says, “Moby Dick was the idealized representative of his species” (Gleim 406). He is above a normal whale, which is shown when Ahab answers these inquiries, “aye, Daggoo, his spout is a big one, like a whole shock of wheat, and white as a pile of our Nantucket wool after the great annual sheep-shearing; aye Tashtego, and he fan-tails like a split-jib in a squall” (MD 138-9). These elaborations prove that Moby Dick carries these general whale traits to outrageous magnitudes, making him seem larger and more destructive than any of the other whales in Ishmael’s cetological catalogue.

The white whale also emblemizes less definitive claims Ishmael makes of whales. One rumour about Moby Dick is that he is “immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time); that though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks, he would still swim away unharmed” (MD 155). Ahab already claimed in introducing the crew’s mission that “harpoons lie all twisted and wrenched in him,” (MD 138) and this is proven when they first lay eyes on Moby Dick and see “the tall but shattered pole of a recent lance projected from the whale’s back” (MD 409). This is revealed as a spectacular trait of Moby Dick when Ishmael later comments that whales commonly “have an entire nonvalvular structure of the blood-vessels, so that when pierced even by so small a point as a harpoon, a deadly drain is at once begun upon [their] whole arterial system” (MD 281). Moby Dick’s continued life then becomes remarkable in light of the numerous spears lodged in him over the course of the book, last of which is Ahab’s, which has as

its tip “the best of steel” (MD 371). The white whale proves himself to be impervious to the best attacks of man, making him a grand figure among whales and elevating him to immortality.

Another instance of Moby Dick’s aggrandizement above other whales comes when, detailing some fantastic instances of the whalery, Ishmael claims:

some whales have been captured far north in the Pacific, in whose bodies have been found the barbs of harpoons darted in the Greenland seas. Nor is it to be gainsaid, that in some of these instances it has been declared that the interval of time between the two assaults could not have exceeded very many days. (MD 154)

Ishmael presents this as an exemplary instance of cetological celerity, making Moby Dick all the more outstanding when he considers “the unearthly conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time” (MD 154). This latter claim may be dismissed as mere rumour, but considering that all the other rumours of the whale are either instantly or eventually validated, this can be accepted as a true, nonetheless fantastical, assessment of Moby Dick’s speed. Just as the God of land creates man in an enervated likeness of Himself, so is Moby Dick the apotheosis of the whale form. Moby Dick thus physically ascends and transcends Ishmael’s cetological classifications, reaching the highest limits of his maxim on whales and proving supernatural in comparison to the abilities of his fellow ‘*spouting fish with . . . horizontal tail[s]*’.

I will not discuss each category and sub-category of Ishmael’s cetological folios because they suitably analyze the different forms of the whales and invariably adhere to Ishmael’s original maxim. Rather, just as Moby Dick exists at the limits of Ishmael’s classifications, and

having already discussed the beginning of “Cetology,” I will now look to its end, where Ishmael says of his recently concluded treatise:

Above, you have all the Leviathans of note. But there are a rabble of uncertain, fugitive, half-fabulous whales, which, as an American whaleman I know by reputation, but not personally . . . such a list may be valuable to future investigators, who may complete what I have here but begun. (MD 124)

It is important to keep in mind that the ‘fictional’ sections of the work are presented retrospectively, whereas the ‘nonfictional’ sections are regaled in the present to Ishmael’s audience. This final claim of his than has a perplexing omission, as he comments that none of the outlying whales are familiar to him, whereas the story’s end shows a rather close encounter with Moby Dick. This omission raises Moby Dick above the classification of a whale: when Ishmael promised at the chapter’s outset “nothing complete,” he was hinting at what would later become—to Ahab—Moby Dick’s “outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it,” for which “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what [Ahab] hate[s]” (MD 140). That inscrutable, undecipherable whale eludes classification, which angers Ahab, who does not believe in the existence of unobtainable knowledge, and puts Moby Dick outside of either Ahab or Ishmael’s classification of a whale since he evades their conceptions and refuses their attempts to incorporate him within. Rather, Moby Dick becomes a God undersea, and their refusal and inability to observe such turns out to be their ultimate error. Though Moby Dick adheres to Ishmael’s maxim, the narrator’s inability to comprehend what ultimately befell the *Pequod* proves too baffling—just as it did earlier in Bildad’s ‘Japanese typhoon’—, and he ultimately leaves its perpetrator out of his cetological treatise.

The Whale as God

It was already proven in my second chapter that Ahab's conception of God was a strictly Dutch Reform one, but that his method for discovering this God, which I outlined in my first chapter, was a transcendental one. My belief, and the ultimate conclusion of this thesis, is that Ahab's end comes as the result of his striving towards a fate clearly portended to him by Moby Dick, the God of the novel, who adheres to neither of Ahab's conceptions.

When I analyze Moby Dick as God, I incorporate with that analysis a number of implications included by Melville in the novel. Chief among them is the inversion God's dominion, where the firmament is reflected onto the sea. Ahab's constant rejection of fire and the sun signifies his rejection of an incorrect or ineffective God, as he maledicts to his crew, "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me!" (MD 140). Charles Child Walcott provides an analysis of the use of fire in *Moby-Dick* in his essay "The Fire Symbolism of Moby-Dick," where he claims that, by attacking Moby Dick, "Ahab ranged himself against evil and even attempted to eradicate it. As this point, when searching out evil, he was smitten, not by evil but by what he considered an element of good" (Walcott, *The Fire Symbolism of Moby-Dick* 306). There is little proof in the work that Ahab considered Moby Dick at any point to be an element of goodness, but Walcott's continuation provides some fruitful analysis of the use of fire in the book:

Ahab first worshipped fire as the destroyer of evil, in the authentic Zoroastrian manner, considering it the principle of light. When doing so, he was struck by

lightning: fire burned him. The burning was the counterpart of his being maimed by Moby Dick . . . After this experience Ahab hates the fire as he hates Moby Dick because he considers it essential evil, alien to man and maliciously destructive. (Walcutt , The Fire Symbolism of Moby-Dick 307)

It must be said here in defense of Walcutt's equation of lightning to fire that my previous analysis of the *Pequod* as metonymic of its captain validates it because Ahab, allowing his ship's lightning rods to stay alight during a typhoon, cries "Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breath it back to thee" (MD 382). Lightning strikes his ship, lighting it afire, and Ahab takes it personally, as though the conflagration consumes him as well. Though Walcutt provides no such validation to his claim, it rings true within the confines of this thesis. An implication that arises from Walcutt's essay, and one he does not explore, is that fire can only exist above sea, outside of Moby Dick's dominion. Ahab again looks in angst towards a God that does not exist, appealing to a higher force when a creature that swims beneath him, portending his fate should he continue to ignore its warnings, provides the only path to his salvation.

Ahab's rejection thus becomes of a god that is, more than anything else, not the Whale. His blasphemy of that other God becomes explicit as Ahab begins his final malediction saying "I turn my body from the sun" (MD 426). Whether Zoroastrian or Christian, the ultimate deity either lives or can be found in the firmament, and Ahab's turning away from the sky is a final rejection of any of the religious practices aboard the *Pequod*. There is only one character aboard the ship, Pip, who realizes the deity ruling over it, but his late warnings go unheeded by the crew.

The first speculative deification of Moby Dick comes soon after the *Pequod's* gam with the *Town-Ho*, when Ishmael comments:

To some the general interest in the White Whale was now wildly heightened by a circumstance of the Town-Ho's story, which seemed obscurely to involve with the whale a certain wondrous, inverted visitation of one of those so called judgments of God which at times are said to overtake some men. (MD 199)

Ishmael begins to hint at Moby Dick's true significance here. The inversion referred to works on two levels: God's powers are transferred to a supposedly earthly creature, going from the ethereal to the corporeal, and, consequently, God's dominion is inverted, switching from the firmament to the sea. Speculation aboard the *Pequod* begins to hint towards the Whale's true power, and the crewmen consider Moby Dick's strike equitable to one of those 'divine judgments' of their land-based deity.

The Calvinist God who would deliver such 'divine judgements' in the work, who Ahab so often rejects and so commonly references, is dead, and His dominion is transitioned to the sea, his throne left to a white whale, which causes Ishmael to comment near the tale's end:

It was a clear steel-blue day. The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman's look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells, as Samson's chest in his sleep. (MD 404)

The sea takes its place as the masculine, overpowering dominion of the novel's God. Just as the sky is reflected in the sea, and just as they share a similar color and similar thoughts of infinitude, so are the heavens transposed onto that great mass of water. The air that so often

takes and transfers Ishmael to transcendental highs proves effeminate and ineffective, allowing the ocean to take its proper place as the dominion of the *Pequod*'s true Godhead.

Upon the *Pequod*'s first sighting of Moby Dick, Ishmael claims that “not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam” (MD 409). This sighting comes at the end of months of speculation, months in which Moby Dick the myth was juxtaposed and aggrandized alongside the dozens of whales—young and old, masculine and feminine—that the crew of the *Pequod* either killed or saw. As a result, when he initially sees the white whale, the only figure Ishmael finds fitting to relate Him to is god. Having watched the Christian god of land rendered ineffective over the course of the *Pequod*'s journey, Ishmael chooses Moby Dick as a fitting entity onto which he can transpose such a figure. The god figure was thus left ashore, as Emerson's essay would dictate, and it takes until Ishmael sees Moby Dick to realize what has been presiding over him and the *Pequod* since they shipped off to sea.

Another implication of the inverted heavens, simple though significant, is the previously stated fact that the flames of hell simply cannot exist within the depths of the sea. This fact resonates throughout the work, one instance being when Ishmael retells a scene of revelry aboard the *Pequod*:

As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like the flames from the furnace; as to and fro, in their front, the harpooners wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers; as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her

red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea 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 that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul. (MD 327)

The ship itself is a vision of hell, from the visible darkness surrounding it to the hellish flames it shoots upwards and outwards as it sails across the sea. Such revelry and destruction as occurs aboard the *Pequod* is physically impossible below the sea, in Moby Dick's dominion, because fire requires more oxygen to sustain itself than can be had under water. The sun and fire Ahab so clings to and rejects throughout the work as symbols of his godhead are thus, just as the god figure himself, proven meaningless aboard the *Pequod* and atop the sea. Paul Miller describes Ahab's propitiatory and anarchic actions accordingly when he says "fire and sun have been taken to symbolize in *Moby Dick* rejection of conventional deity and acceptance of the primitive, pagan life force. Ahab comes not only to reject the conventional God, but to defy the pagan god whose deity he recognizes," (Miller 143). As the book nears its end, Ahab comes to deny all the religious influences aboard the ship on the belief that each wronged him in one way or another. This scene of hellish revelry is thus only blasphemous to a God found ashore, where the laughter forked by their devilish tongues is an affront due to the terrors from which it is instigated. Ahab's final, fatal mistake is that he never turns to and realizes the preternatural whale he is in pursuit of to be the novel's actual God, whose dominion is the sea.

Pip is the only crewmember to realize that Moby Dick is the true God ruling over the *Pequod* before the ship founders. In one of the book's earliest encounters with him, during a bout of revelry among the crew, Pip steps aside and asks, "Oh, thou big white God aloft there

somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here” (MD 151). Pip appeals to an incomprehensible figure, wishing it to protect him from the horrors of the chase, but instead he is later left stranded about the sea, which Ishmael records:

had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, 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; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (MD 321-2)

Pip’s final payment of obeisance to the sea and the whale that lords over it provide him the only correct religious understanding of any crew member within the novel. It is only when his soul is pulled downward, into Moby Dick’s dominion—the inverted ‘firmament of the waters’—and away from the impractical imaginings of transcendentalism that he finds religious understanding, an ‘ineffable’ realization that no one aboard the *Pequod* can decipher due to their religious myopia. This is shown when, from the time of his rescue on, “that little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was” (MD 321). Pip’s realization is finalized near the tale’s end when Ishmael recalls that “the first man of the *Pequod* that mounted the mast to look out for the White Whale, on the White Whale’s own peculiar ground; that man was swallowed

up in the deep” (MD 393). Pip is the only crew member aboard the *Pequod* who recognizes Moby Dick as God before it becomes too late, but his realization provides further evidence that the White Whale is indeed what determines the *Pequod*’s fate.

With the inversion of the God-figure comes the inversion of the means for coming to know him. Just as Ishmael climbed atop the mast-head to attain his transcendental high, so must Pip climb the ‘mast-head’ into the sea to achieve an understanding of Moby Dick as God. The means for understanding God thus invert in the sea just as the God Himself does, forcing God’s follower to climb as close to His throne as possible and confront—if not comprehend—Him there.

Another, further interpretation of Pip’s exile at sea is through the perspective of the sublime¹⁸, namely Edmund Burke’s version¹⁹, which discusses the effect of a confrontation with a figure that is so powerful and indiscernible as God. In that vein, Bryan Short comments, “Pip’s madness amounts to a dissolution of ego that keeps ‘heaven’s sense’ behind the mask of the oracular nonsense he speaks” (Short 12). Pip becomes the only non-prophetic character of the novel that can hint towards Moby Dick’s power, but the confrontation that stripped him of his soul also left him without the ability to convey the experience. Barbara Glenn realizes the comparison of the sublime to the godly when she says:

¹⁸ I will not go into a full analysis of sublimity in *Moby-Dick* here, but two good essays on the subject are Barbara Glenn’s “Melville and the Sublime in *Moby-Dick*” provides an interesting reading of the work as an explicit journey in exploration of the Burkean sublime which she believes is inherently unsuccessful, and Bryan Wolf’s “When is a Painting Most Like a Whale?: Ishmael, *Moby-Dick*, and the Sublime,” which gives a concomitant analysis of the American sublime in *Moby-Dick* and the Hudson River Group’s paintings in the mid nineteenth-century.

¹⁹ It is documented that Melville read Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, a substantial 18th century treatise on the sublime and beautiful, which “was in [Melville’s] personal library” (Glenn 166).

Melville's depiction of the great white whale turns exactly on the "heightened circumstances" which Burke found in Job's leviathan—his 'pernicious' strength, 'his freedom and his setting mankind in defiance.' In all his appearances, he is sublime in the highest degree, a monarch and a god, powerful and terrible in his 'unexampled intelligent malignity.' (Glenn 169)

Moby Dick's aggrandizement throughout the work recurs here in an analysis of His power.

When Burke thinks of God, he imagines His vast, incomprehensible power, and continues to say "power is undoubtedly a capital source of the sublime" (Burke 64-5). Glenn's analysis of Moby Dick only considers Him godly insofar as He enumerates traits of Burke's sublime; she considers Him superficially godly, whereas I have proven the Moby Dick is, in his appearance as well as his actions, the novel's God.

The White Whale's Actions: A Theodicean Exegesis

It next becomes necessary to evaluate the actions of the whale regaled throughout the story so as to discern their possible purpose and coherence and to give them a theodicean analysis, so I can prove that not only was Moby Dick an intelligent God, but also a fair one.

Pip's vision of the 'God's foot on the treadle of the loom' that concluded the last section reconnects to a vision Ishmael had earlier in the work, when he attempted to define the workings of the world through the loom. Ishmael feeds Queequeg's loom with thread and records what follows:

Queequeg's impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric . . . this easy, indifferent sword must be chance—aye, chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together . . . chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events. (MD 179)

One key statement here is that indifference—which was already stated as a trait of the God who reveals himself to Pip—can still lead to difference; just as Moby Dick take Ahab's leg, so did Boomer lose his arm to Him. This metaphor of the loom comes to define Moby Dick's actions: He is indifferent to the people He attacks, but He invariably attacks those who descend upon Him. The ferocity of His attack and its effect are, despite His indifference, often different from one victim to another, which introduces the element of chance. The conclusion of Ishmael's pondering is that, of the fates, chance rises above all, and thus it was but chance and this difference of effect that dismembered Ahab as a result of his transgression.

Ishmael goes back to the loom metaphor later in the work, and further defines the workings of its weaver:

Oh busy weaver! unseen weaver . . . Speak, weaver! . . . but one single word with thee! Nay—the shuttle flies—the figures float from forth the loom; the freshet-rushing carpet forever slides away. The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who look on the loom are deafened. (MD 345)

The last line of this passage refers back to Pip, who, by looking upon the loom whilst stranded at sea, was effectively deafened from ‘reason’ aboard the *Pequod*. These figures Ishmael mentions—the aforementioned chance, necessity, and free will—extend from the God’s loom with no intervention from man. Every man in this God’s dominion has free will, but the repercussions of their actions are left to chance, ergo Ahab’s dismemberment came about as the result of him willing himself upon Moby Dick, and his final death is the result of him continually denying the portents sent forth by the Whale. Ahab’s inability to understand this is the result of his adherence to an incorrect God figure, as chance is not the defining trait of Calvinism for which chance and the free will to affect chance are never possible. Ahab thus attacks the Whale, unaware that, as was previously stated, He is immortal, and thus is obliterated as the result of his inability to understand Moby Dick’s laws. Those actions are just, however, because, having already attacked Ahab, He decides to give him hint after hint of what his fate will be if he continues forward in his irrational, blasphemous search for vengeance. I will now analyze the major instances where Moby Dick is seen throughout the work to show that they all prove the His general indifference.

The first mention of the Whale, which often goes unnoticed in Melvillean scholarship, is by Captain Bildad who, while discussing when the *Pequod* “had her three masts overboard in [a] typhoon in Japan,” claims that he and Ahab could not “Think of Death and Judgment,” since there was “no time to think about Death then,” because “Life was what Captain Ahab and I was thinking of; and how to save all hands—how to rig jury-masts—how to get into the nearest port; that was what I was thinking of” (MD 86). Bildad’s systrophic tale is about Moby Dick, and this is revealed when a Gay-Head Indian aboard the ship claims of Ahab, “‘Aye, he was dismasted off Japan,’” (MD 109) which turns out to be “the very latitude and longitude where [Ahab’s]

tormenting wound had been inflicted” (MD 400). Two things stand out in Bildad’s retelling: he does not name Moby Dick as the source of the *Pequod*’s destruction, and he relents as the tale progresses from describing Ahab’s emotions, switching from the first-person plural to the first-person singular at the story’s end. Bildad’s encounter with the White Whale thus leads to repression, causing him to stay ashore, outside of Moby Dick’s dominion. The attack in this instance was provoked by Ahab, who “had dashed at the whale, as an Arkansas duelist at his foe, blindly seeking with a six inch blade to reach the fathom-deep life of the whale” (MD 156). From this encounter Ahab descends into madness while Bildad, an innocent captain of the ship, represses the scene and resigns to a life ashore. Bildad proves incapable of fully explaining what went on in his mate’s mind as Moby Dick decimated the ship and ravaged Ahab’s body, showing a more psychological difference of effect that, again, is the result of chance in a sea ruled by Moby Dick.

The next encounter with Moby Dick comes from the tale of the *Town-Ho*. Just as Steelkilt plans his revenge on Radney, something intercedes, and “by a mysterious fatality, Heaven itself seemed to step in to take out of his hands into its own the damning thing he would have done,” (211) in the form of Moby Dick. The whale leaves Steelkilt’s hands clean of murder, creating “a sudden maelstrom” from which he “seized [Radney] between his jaws” (212). This ‘sudden maelstrom’ recalls the ‘typhoon’ Bildad claims ravaged the *Pequod* off the coast of Japan, ramifying that Bildad’s story was indeed about Moby Dick and again showing the whale’s preternatural powers. Moby Dick seemingly offers retribution and maintains fairness in this story, killing Radney, who “was ugly as a mule; yet as hardy, as stubborn, as malicious,” and saving Steelkilt, who “was a tall and noble animal with a head like a Roman” (202-3). Radney both lashed Steelkilt when the *Town-Ho*’s captain proved incapable and, more importantly, threw

the first harpoon at Moby Dick; Steelkilt, on the other hand, fairly warned Radney of the consequences of his actions before resorting to violence and, after Moby Dick struck, departed from the *Town-Ho* peacefully. Moby Dick thus seems to act in support of fairness, stepping in to maintain it when the cause necessitates. This is more, however, an act of indifferent retribution from the Whale, just as Ishmael's analysis of the loom says, and the opposing 'justice' distributed in the next story of Moby Dick gives further proof of this.

The *Jeroboam* provides the next encounter with Moby Dick. Gabriel prophesies to the crew of the *Jeroboam* that Moby Dick is "no less a being than the Shaker god incarnated," (MD 252) and that any attack on Him is blasphemous and would consequently kill the perpetrator. While one of the *Jeroboam*'s mates readies his harpoon to strike the whale, the crew sees:

a broad white shadow rose from the sea; by its quick, fanning motion, taking the breath out of the bodies of the oarsmen. Next instant, the luckless mate, so full of furious life, was smitten bodily into the air, and making a long arc in his descent, fell into the sea at the distance of about fifty yards. Not a chip of the boat was harmed, nor a hair of any oarsman's head; but the mate forever sank. (MD 253)

The crew of the *Jeroboam* analyzes this as Gabriel's prophecy fulfilled, and from that moment on propitiates only him. It would than seem, despite Ishmael's incredulous retelling of the story, that Moby Dick sent a prophet to preach His strength, saving him when heretics disavowed his forebodings. My previous analysis of Fedallah proves this conclusion wrong because Fedallah, a far more believable prophet than Gabriel—who benefits from the luck of a "general prophecy" (MD 253)—is made a final example of, killed as part of the prophecy he was sent to convey. A

broader analysis reveals a pattern, wherein we find Moby Dick acting only and indifferently upon someone who attacks it. The last four gams of the work prove this pattern.

The final four gams—with the *Samuel Enderby*, the *Bachelor*, the *Rachel*, and the *Delight*—provide the last four encounters with Moby Dick before the *Pequod* finally sights Him. The *Samuel Enderby*'s captain, Boomer, befell a similar loss as Ahab in his dismemberment, and as a result decides Moby Dick is “best let alone,” (MD 340) aware that the whale will only attack after provocation. His theory is validated when he does not lower on two subsequent sightings of the Whale and escapes unscathed. Boomer apparently accepts the one law of Moby Dick's dominion: do not attack God, and as a result he is allowed to live despite encountering the Whale twice after his original dismemberment.

The *Bachelor* provides, as an antithesis, further proof that Moby Dick's aggression is only instigated by an attack upon Him. It is found that “the Bachelor had met with the most surprising success,” likely the result of its captain's actively oblivious attitude, where, when asked whether or not he saw the White Whale, he responds “No; only heard of him; but don't believe in him at all” (MD 375). The crewmembers of the *Bachelor* take as prizes for their successful journey a number of exotic women, and its captain expresses disbelief in the God of the sea, proving that the laws of religion on land that descry such actions are abrogated once the sails carry their ship adrift. By not attacking the whale, the *Bachelor* finds great success, providing further proof of how foolish it is to attack Moby Dick and, conversely, how fruitful it is to leave Him alone.

The next tale of Moby Dick is told by the *Rachel*, which suffers its major loss when its captain's son's boat, “After a keen sail before the wind . . . seemed to have succeeded in

fastening [Moby Dick]—at least, as well as the man at the mast-head could tell anything about it” (MD 397). By sending a crew after Moby Dick the captain loses four men, with the rest of his ship and its crew left unscathed. Again, it is only with provocation that Moby Dick reacts, His retribution with complete disregard to the familial attachments of His aggressor. Moby Dick is thus an indifferent God, implacably enforcing his will on those who choose to hunt Him.

The *Pequod*'s final encounter with a tale of Moby Dick is with the *Delight*. The *Delight*'s captain, standing aboard his wrecked ship, warns “I bury but one of five stout men, who were alive only yesterday; but were dead ere night. Only *that* one I bury; the rest were buried before they died; you sail upon their tomb” (MD 404). The rapidly escalating death count of these encounters was elaborated in the previous chapter as portents for what will befall Ahab should he continue on; here, they further prove that there is no rationale for Moby Dick's aggression besides retribution, where He kills—or at least, in Ahab and Boomers' instances, dismembers—those who descend upon Him. Ahab's disregard for the portents and his final attack on Moby Dick provide the last evidence that He is an indifferent, forewarning God who does not kill unless provoked.

On the first day of the chase, Moby Dick now in sight, Ahab's boat is initially warned by the Whale when the “bluish pearl-white of the inside of [Moby Dick's] jaw was within six inches of Ahab's head,” (MD 410) leaving him otherwise unharmed. Fedallah stands upright, unamused by the whole spectacle, and “with unastonished eyes Fedallah gazed, and crossed his arms,” (MD 410) as the Whale flew over the heads of the boat's crew. Similar to the months prior to this attack, Ahab is warned of the dangers that will befall him if he continue in chase, and his prophet proves strangely familiar with the Whale, such as when Moby Dick turns again toward their boat and “Fedallah incuriously and mildly eye[s] him” (MD 411). When it is

suggested by a crewmember in response to the whale's evisceration of their boat that such destruction was an ominous sign, Ahab responds "Omen? omen?—the dictionary! If the gods think to speak outright to man, they will honorably speak outright; not shake their heads, and give an old wives' darkling hint," (MD 413) which also shows his response to all of the ominous signs throughout the *Pequod's* voyage. Again, Ahab ignores Moby Dick as his God; even after He glides beside his head and destroys his boat, Ahab refuses to believe that these are signs of the awesome, godly power of the Whale. Ahab continues adhering to the Transcendental theory that the world is inherently fair, and thus refuses to acknowledge that his fight with Moby Dick not and never will be internecine. The next two days of the hunt prove even more explicitly ominous, ultimately forcing the whale to act upon Ahab despite an apparent desire to spare him.

As the *Pequod's* crew sets off in chase of Moby Dick for the second day, it becomes apparent that "They were one man, not thirty," (MD 415) and that Moby Dick's ominous signs warn everyone aboard the ship, not just Ahab. Ahab's baptisms and ceremonies, his metonymic relationship with the ship all come together here, forcing Moby Dick to not only destroy him, but his ship and entire crew to stop the attack. This will become necessary on the third day, after Moby Dick sends one final portent to Ahab and his crew, but is ramified in the first day's battle, which only ended when the *Pequod* "effectually parted the white whale from his victim" (411). On the second day Moby Dick attacks from below the surface of His ocean, inverting such lightning as would come from the firmament, pushing Ahab's boat upwards and causing his "yet unstricken boat [to draw] up towards Heaven by invisible wires" (MD 417). Even with his boat thus capsized, Ahab exclaims to Stubbs, who commented on Ahab's relative salubrity,

Aye! and all splintered to pieces, Stubb!—d'ye see it.—But even with a broken bone, old Ahab is untouched; and I account no living bone of mine one jot more

me, than this dead one that's lost. Nor white whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being. (MD 417)

Though personally attacked and damaged, Ahab considers his indomitable will impervious to the white whale's assailment, finalizing that it will take his death—and nothing less—to end the *Pequod's* hunt for Moby Dick. Ahab again justifies his transgression as the will of some unseen, preordaining God when he says to Starbuck, “This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before the ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders” (MD 418). Supposedly acting under the orders of a predestinating God, Ahab continues in hunt of the Whale, ignoring the portents sent forth and forcing the indifferent God to finally take his life.

The third day of close chase behind Moby Dick begins with another portent, where “scarce had [Ahab] pushed from the ship, when numbers of sharks, seemingly rising from out of the dark waters beneath the hull, maliciously snapped at the blades of the oars,” which Ishmael notes as odd, since “they seemed to follow that one boat without molesting the others” (MD 422). The Whale's disinterest in killing Ahab is shown when Ishmael comments: “He seemed swimming with his utmost velocity . . . only intent upon pursuing his own straight path in the sea,” causing Starbuck to proclaim “Oh Ahab! . . . Not too late is it, even now, the third day, to desist. See! Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!” (MD 423). Moby Dick shows Ahab, in a juxtaposition of their earliest encounter with His current noncombatant role in battle, great compassion and leniency, still resisting from annihilating Ahab after two days of harpoons being slung at His back. The Whale then turns from Ahab and attacks the *Pequod*, causing Starbuck to demand “My God, stand by me now,” (MD 425) which proves a fruitless request, as his god on land has already been proven nonexistent at sea. Ahab's

death, which had been portended to him throughout the novel, comes about soon after he spews his final curse at the whale: “I turn my body from the sun . . . Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee” (MD 426). This line represents the entirety of Ahab’s resentment: he considered the whale mindlessly malevolent, striking without cause or care. Through this thesis I reveal these as fallacies, modes of thought left landlocked by Melville, and it is only through Ahab’s vengeful myopia that he considers them justifications for his action. Ahab attacks Calvin’s unobtainable truth with the belief that Emerson’s theory is correct; believing there to be no knowledge which man cannot ascertain, he rebuffs the only God known to him in the work: the Calvinist one. Ahab’s inability to look into the sea for his deity proves to be his ultimate mistake, and he is finally killed for ignoring Moby Dick’s warnings and attacking Him even after the continual warning that doing so would bring about his demise.

Every boat, every instance of encounter with Moby Dick leaves at least one survivor to tell of the whale and give other whalemens proper warning of his law and how to survive in his domain.

Epilogue

The drama's done. Why then here does any one step forth?—Because one did survive the wreck.
(*Moby-Dick* 427)

In the original British edition of *Moby-Dick* the epilogue was left out, stranding the reader in the sea with no narrator to have survived to retell the story of the preceding cetological tome. The Longman Edition of the novel documents this mistake:

Since [the epilogue] is the only evidence of Ishmael's survival, the omission caused [Herman Melville] undeserved embarrassment when British reviewers marveled at the ineptitude of a narrative whose narrator seems to die with the rest of the crew. (Melville, *Moby-Dick: A Longman Critical Edition* 609)

The novel's epilogue answers a number of questions and justifies the story's existence by showing how Ishmael survives the *Pequod's* foundering. My epilogue has a similar purpose, and will attempt to clear up some possible questions left unanswered in my preceding essay.

Melville's decision to make the sea his God's dominion is the result of both biographical and historical influences on the author. By the time he began writing *Moby Dick*, Melville had already spent years in the mid eighteenth-century on a whaling ship, though he never traveled as far eastward as he sends the *Pequod* (Figure 1). When he came back to land and was thrust back into the religious and intellectual tradition he had left, he proved quite skeptical, as his time at sea showed that the comforts one demands on land are not so necessary aboard a whaling ship. Melville thus considered the ocean differently than he did the land, as Thornton Booth says:

In the middle of the nineteenth century Herman Melville, examining God's universe in his day, found in the ocean the symbol of the near chaos which he felt that sensitive and thoughtful men were having to live in: fluid, shifting, largely uncharted, vast, full of dangers and terrors. (Booth, *Moby Dick: Standing Up to God* 38)

Melville saw an opportunity to subvert God into the sea, allowing him to record what would happen if a man that adhered to the religious and intellectual thoughts of the time sailed this new heaven without ever understanding the inversion that took place. The result of this is Ahab's story, and by allowing people to survive *Moby Dick* reveals himself as an intelligent God who warns humanity with His one law: thou shalt not strike The Whale.

A last question that may arise from my thesis is the same one that befuddled British reviewers over one hundred fifty years ago: who survived the tale, and why? A look back through all of the gams shows another, smaller consistency among the stories about *Moby Dick*. Each time the Whale attacked, He left at least one survivor to go about the world, warning others against attacking Him by showing that such transgressions will only result in death and misery. Ahab's strict adherence to the earlier described intellectual and religious traditions of the time made for a series of conflicting ideas: the ungraspable truth and unquestionable God of Calvinism against the ubiquitous truth and inherent fairness of Transcendentalism. Melville's God in *Moby-Dick* enforces neither system's beliefs, and instead rules over a world defined by that one unarguable law. He promises free will and indeed provides it by sending previous Heretics out across the world to tell tales of His power and warn against attacking Him. He gives Ahab numerous chances to desist from attacking, but Ahab's refusal to understand His doctrine, regardless of how many portentous signs He provides Him, forces the Whale to finally

kill a man who had previously been let free to spread the aforementioned message around the world.

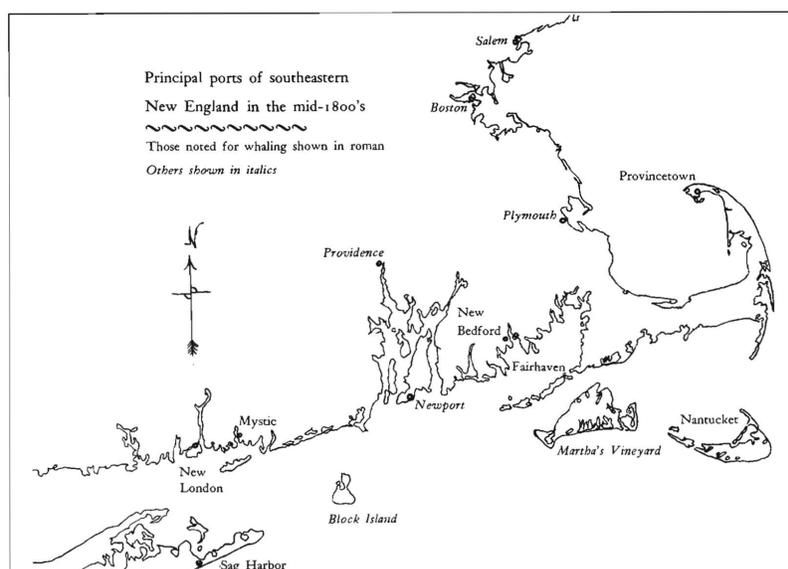
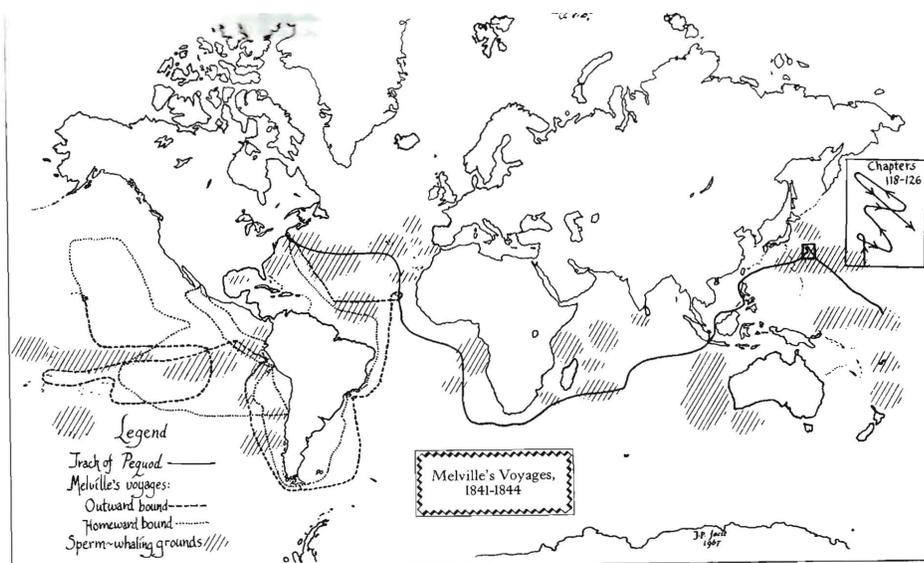


Figure 1: Melville's Whaling Voyage

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