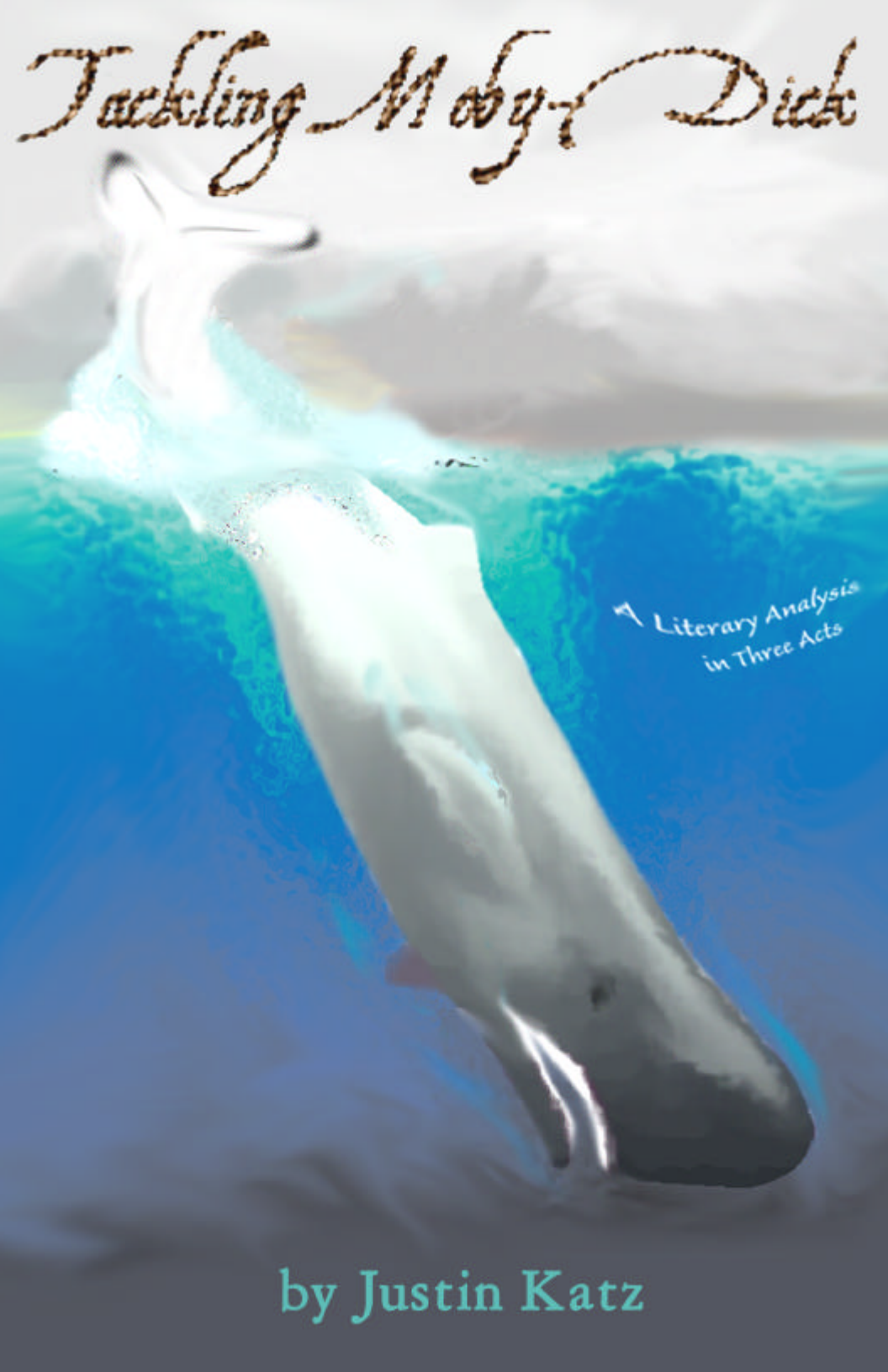


# Tackling Moby-Dick

A white whale is shown breaching the surface of the ocean, splashing water. The whale's body is white, and its tail is visible above the water. The ocean is a deep blue, and the sky is a pale, overcast grey. The overall scene is dramatic and evocative of the novel Moby-Dick.

A Literary Analysis  
in Three Acts

by Justin Katz

Tackling  
Moby-Dick

A Literary Analysis in Three Acts

by Justin Katz

Published by  
Timshel Literature  
P.O. Box 751  
Portsmouth, RI 02871  
[www.timshelarts.com](http://www.timshelarts.com)



© 2001 by Timshel Literature

All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America in 2002

# *Table of Contents*

## Prologue

Tackling Moby-Dick .....1

## Act I

Points and Pulpits .....4

Janus .....5

Theory and Artistry .....8

Realists and Idealists .....12

## Intermission

Old Richard and his Crosswords .....17

## Act II

Ishmael .....22

Ahab .....32

## Intermission

.....52

## Act III

Fate .....53

Stubb .....57

Starbuck .....59

Elijah .....60

Flask .....60

Fedallah .....61

Pip .....61

Queequeg .....	.62
Whales .....	.63
Whiteness .....	.65
Moby-Dick .....	.66

## Conclusion

Truth .....	.67
Melville .....	.71
Epilogue .....	.74

## Notes

.....	.75
-------	-----

# *Prologue*

Tackling Moby-Dick.

“What?” you exclaim. “You intend to tackle Moby-Dick?”

“Nay,” say I, “for too expansive is the competition.” And far greater pens than mine have broached the subject. Surely have gold-plated fountains and peacock-plumed quills spread their splotches smartly on the spelding of that infamous whale. What hope have I, writing as I do with whatever random ball-point (or even pencil) falls most conveniently into my grasp? No, I will attempt no tackling for tackling implies a reel, and I lack rig or moral. Nor have I the balance for such confused spinning. But moreover, I find the illusory to be much more comfortable an intrigue. Yet, or perhaps (depending upon which perspective you’re following) yea, I believe my claim to a word or two on the topic at hand to be no less deserving of attention for all my varied casts. Even so, with the mildest of interests in modesty, I will content myself with just a lowering. My desire is merely to take a look: an investigation for which I have been commissioned by that highest of patrons: Fate. I have been called. Rather, invited. Let me take a moment to tell you the story; for while only time issues merit, perhaps still may you understand.

When I was but a lad of sixteen, and there were those amongst my crew who had not just license but autonomy as well, we found our way to Hoboken, NJ, a city which resembled, if not in landscape or

architecture then in sentiment, New Bedford, MA. Much like Ishmael, we would then cross a relatively short expanse of water to an island colony. The minor differences being, of course, that he took a ferry over salt water to Nantucket, and we took a train under (debatably) fresh water to New York. But verily, our paths were very similar in direction, not necessarily by the points of the compass (to be honest I don't know the bearing of either heading), but by intent: each drawn away from the mainland in a quest for new experiences.

Now, were reality not such an expertly allegorical author, I would be compelled to change fact to historical fiction; but true names are ever the most appropriate, and across from the Blue Note in Greenwich Village swings a small sign resembling a cauldron (or, appropriately, a black pot). Under this sign and through two doors we found our premier watering-hole: the Kettle of Fish. If you should visit this historical site, over head you may notice several dozen large baseballs, all scribbled upon by patrons. Look closely if you wish and you shall come across at least three on which my name is sloppily scrawled.<sup>1</sup> It was here, after a game of darts and a group wailing of “Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da,” that I flopped down in a random seat only to be greeted by an exclaimed, “Thou!” Startled, I turned to my left to find myself face to face with an odd, pock-faced and shabby, old man who was glaring at me with a precognitive sort of consternation.

“Seek the Leviathan!” he shouted, but between his slight accent and my slight discombobulation, I misunderstood.

I looked at my watch, it was 12:52 am, and even with the relatively light traffic, I thought there was very little chance this man would be able to make it to either the Laguardia or the Newark airport for a “red-eye flight at one.” “If you mean to catch a plane,” I informed him, “I don't think you're going to make it.”

At this the old hermit swung his body up until he loomed over me and his knees knocked at the edge of my chair. “Seek the Leviathan!” he shouted again and gesticulated wildly toward the floor, “o’er there ere long thy go.”

“Look here,” I said, jumping to my feet, “I’ll not sit here and listen to your gibberish! You may do what you like, but I see no reason to escort you to the airport, nor will I pay your cab fare!”

He kicked over the chair upon which I had been sitting, and, oddly, looked much relieved as he sat down and began rubbing his right foot. He then stood, shot me a nasty glare, and hobbled out of the bar. Looking back, it is the memory of that obviously prosthetic limp that now clarifies for me the entire encounter. Yes, dear reader, six years ago, Fate sent me a messenger. Pity for both he and I that I was too young — and the night not young enough — for me to understand his message.

## *Act I*

Points and pulpits.

So, now you have an inkling as to why I would attempt to write such a paper but are still no closer to understanding why you should read it. Perhaps you would prefer to read *Moby-Dick* with an unbiased eye. Truly I encourage this. Draw your own conclusions: Herman Melville would have asked no less for his book. But having read it; having waded through its vast breadth and depth of meaning; having considered each allegorical meandering and researched every literary, scientific, and artistic reference; then, if you still feel insignificantly nearer completion, come ye to me. For surely may you waste away your entire life on an eternal sabbatical in handling this subject. Ah, but our allotted time is too short; we must use strategy in all our ventures.

Step back a moment. Unfocus your eyes and view the entire novel as a whole. Consider the interactions of each color and their total effects. Now look more closely and observe the artistry of each stroke of the pen and the care with which they were pieced together. Since every word appears placed conscientiously in its position, it follows that the answers to all problems there-in worked through must be accessible within not much more time than it took Melville to conceive of them. This is not to say that if Herman questioned humanity, then we ought to be able to solve that problem so quickly (in fact, I would suggest that

one of the reasons that question is so unanswerable is that we persist in asking it), but that the level of the pulpit from which he wrote must be reachable within a reasonable amount of time — that if he had any answers in mind for any questions he put forth, then those should be attainable; or, if his premier desire was to present something as out of reach, then, since even he must not be able to grasp it, the only valid question is: what can be learned from his pointing out that it is untouchable?

Janus.

While words are invaluable, sections of them come cheaply, so allow me a slight digression. In an age when even what can be considered as literature is subject to endless debate, I'd like to take a moment to specify exactly what it is I'm interested in discussing. Many an argument has been left open to criticism by the simplest of detractors, and I'd like to minimize this possibility by making it clear that I know there may be other ways of looking at Moby-Dick. Let's begin with a question:

Why do we read this grandiloquent book? Or more to the point: why do we still read this grandiloquent book? Well, why do we read any novels at all? Since they don't derive, for the majority of us readers, our income, they must, by definition, be read for some sort of extracurricular entertainment. This translates most directly as an escape into a compelling story, and indeed, with a plot consisting of an obsessed captain risking the lives of his entire crew in a quest for revenge against an infamous white whale, the action aspect of the story is intriguing.

However, if action is your object, then I would recommend reading an abridged version designed to indoctrinate children into the world of

American Classics or simply watching one of the movie adaptations of the book; but if you're of a mind to read from the full text, I will readily suggest 521 pages that you may tear from it in order to maximize your excitement — and then which of those remaining you should read to minimize your labor. Unless, of course, labor is something into which you've been seduced, and then you may want to read the entire Melville catalogue word by word to kill more time, for of it you'd have much (and nobody expects much from one whose terms culminate in labor). Readers may find Melville's observation of his book, *Mardi*, to be true of *Moby-Dick* as well: "the metaphysical ingredients (for want of a better term) of the book, must of course repel some of those who read simply for amusement."<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately for Melville's legacy, there are those of us who are more entertained by abstract queries concerning a grander meaning of some kind. In 1849, Melville told his American publisher and friend, Evert Duyckinck, that "we that write & print have all our books predestinated— & for me, I shall write such things as the Great Publisher of Mankind ordained ages before he published 'The World;'<sup>3</sup> and in his view, as he told his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, a few months previous, "so far as I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to 'fail.'"<sup>4</sup> It almost seems as if he patently believed that a deeper meaning petitioned him to write about it.

The question now becomes that of for which meaning to look. For the sake of this argument, perhaps we can vaguely apply the theory of sound to that of meaning. A sound is said to have three components, to which I will impart the not-so-accidental categorical nomenclature of: creator, medium, and discernor. The discernor, or reader, is the person who observes the message. Just as the same growl that incites

fear in a human who has inadvertently stumbled upon a wounded baby wolf translates into deliverance for that pup, so does the reader's perception of a book's meaning differ from person to person. Perhaps the voice of one you despise, though they spew the greatest wisdom of the heavens, grates you, and so you miss the message; or you are charmed by the mellifluous pronunciation of idiocies. However, this meaning, by virtue of its very specific scope of application, is of limited value to the rest of the world.

It is the world that can be seen to function as the medium through which a message is transmitted. Imagine being woken up by a car radio loudly playing the Fifth Movement of Berlioz's *Symphony Fantastique*. The walls of your house transport lower frequencies more readily, so perhaps you can only hear the funereal "Dies Irae." A frightening awakening indeed! However, as the car drives away, you stick your head out the window to make sure it wasn't a band of musically inclined demons, and the air readily carries to you the higher, "jig-like" melody of the pizzicato strings, which, at least in my opinion, make the darkness of the piece appear almost comical.<sup>5</sup>

The comparison here-in presented comes to light when considered in tandem with culturalization and the selective cognizance there-in imparted. This is to say, through issues on which the world, or the culture in which the reader has been educated, places specific emphasis, particular aspects of a work will be more readily noticeable or more obliquely obscure. Consider the prominence of race issues in today's society. Empirical evidence leaves little doubt that the modern American can hardly hear the words "black and white" without thinking of skin pigmentation, but to a pre-Age-of-Exploration Great Plains Indian, there may have been no associative tendency of this type (for it is likely that they would have never seen members of either

race). From this point of view, the most readily discovered meaning is that to which the world gives precedence, and the meaning that is given the most precedence is that which is most readily discovered. These truths, which are more commentaries on current societal priorities, are also those that are, possibly, mistaken for universal human truths though they fall short by only applying to a section of humanity.

However much these previous two imparters of meaning (or skewers there-of) are unavoidable, it is with the creator that all inquiries must begin if we are to discover what a book is really about. One reader, Professor Stoll, asks, “Is not a critic a judge, who does not explore his own consciousness, but determines the author’s meaning or intention, as if the poem were a will, a contract, or the constitution?”<sup>6</sup> So, the question is now, what was the author trying to say with his creation?<sup>9</sup> As the years increasingly separate the reader and the author, this question becomes increasingly difficult to answer, but I maintain that it is, at the very least, the meaning that we should all attempt to uncover with our analytical carnival games, as it were.

### Theory and Artistry.

The meaning intended by the author, or his intention, “corresponds,” according to William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “to what he intended in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance.”<sup>7</sup> The problem, as they see it, is “that the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art, and it seems to [them] that this is a principle which goes deep into some differences in the history of critical attitudes.” (3)

Their argument is directed toward the study of poetry, not novels, but this fact only makes it more relevant to our discussion of *Moby-*

Dick, because they both “[succeed] because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant.” (4) As for literary criticism aimed at the discovery of authorial intention, they ask how we can possibly “find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is no adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem-for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem.” (4) As they see it, this would be “an art separate from criticism... a psychological discipline, a system of self-development, a yoga.” The most admirable admission of their argument, because it allows for other opinions, is that “the young poet perhaps does well to notice” these aspects of the art, but that they are then performing “something different from the public art of evaluating poems.” (9)

But I’m not concerned with this argument. I’m more interested in what seems to be a side effect of it. If, as they suggest, studies of a poem can be performed regarding different aspects, but filed under separate stylistic headings, then “judgment of poems” must be even more differently considered than “the art of producing them.” (9) They envision “evaluation of the work of art” as a “public” process, one that deals with extra-authorial inferences of the poem. (10) The “semantics and syntax” of a work are “public” and “internal” to the work. That is, the work says something of itself by the way in which it is put together, and, according to Wimsatt and Beardsley, this is the meaning to be sought. The author’s intentions, however, are “external” and “private”: only discernible through “an intermediate kind of evidence” regarding common meanings of specific words or phrases or their personal implications for that particular author. (10)

Admittedly, these individualized meanings are more often than not unavailable, but Wimsatt and Beardsley would say that even having a complete list of an author's previous readings does not prove that they had any one reference in mind for any random instance of a phrase's usage. Interestingly, in their criticism of one critic, Professor Lowes, who attempts just this type of analysis, they complain that "there is a certain deceptive variation in [his] fancy chapter titles; one expects to pass on to a new stage in the argument, and one finds — more and more sources, more and more about 'the streamy nature of associations.'"<sup>8</sup> One may take note that to people of other philosophies, a large amount of corroborative sources constitutes a well-substantiated argument, but the significant point here, and the one that moves us onward, is that they appear to believe that Lowes has relinquished some sort of analytical purity with his chapter titles. Regardless of the quantity of analytical references, his chapter titles are seen as misleading and unprofessional.

If, by Wimsatt and Beardsley's schemata, it is possible for the critic to cross some imaginary line, then so too must the author have an antipodal restriction. "Since every rule for a poet is but another side of a judgment by a critic, and since the past is the realm of the scholar and critic, and the future and present that of the poet and the critical leaders of taste, we may say that the problems arising in literary scholarship from the intentional fallacy are matched by others which arise in the world of progressive experiment." (14) While it might allow for an interesting quip to interpret this sentence as a complaint that poets mess things up by having intentions, that is not how it is used. The example that directly follows the quote concerns the use of allusions.

It is not a jump, from the discussion so far, to say that "poets have... something to say that the critic and professor could not" (7) and that

“there is a gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience, which lies behind and in some sense causes every poem, but can never be and need not be known in the verbal and hence intellectual composition which is the poem.” (12) Taken together, these two sentiments seem to imply that poets, while they may have something different to say than critics, might more properly comment on their lives, but that any specific references are not only impossible to find, but also irrelevant to the study of the work of its own merit.

“But sometimes we find allusions supported by notes,” sayth W&B, “and it is a nice question whether the notes function more as guides to send us where we may be educated, or more as indications in themselves about the character of the allusions.” (15) So the “nice” question here is whether or not the poet has the ability, yea the right, to direct his reader’s path in some way outside of the actual poems. But it has been previously advised that “we ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic speaker, and if to the author at all, only by an act of biographical inference.” (5) Carry this logic over to the idea of allusiveness, and “it may begin to appear that it would not much matter if [the poet] invented his sources.”<sup>9</sup>

The solution, should an author deign to step over the line and out of his stanzas, to use a technical writer’s tool, is to “focus on the integrity of such notes as parts of the poem, for where they constitute special information about the meaning of phrases in the poem, they ought to be subject to the same scrutiny as any of the other words in which it is written.” (16) Though this may hold true in some, perhaps many, works, the problem here is the same as with any blanket statement. W&B, in order to keep this line between those who compose literature and those who discuss it, must refuse to admit that

author's notes may "justify themselves as external indexes to the author's intention," because, in light of the source, "they ought to be judged like any other parts of a composition." What's more, having decided to read them in this way, "their reality as parts of the poem, or their imaginative integration with the rest of the poem, may come into question." (16) So, in an instance in which the author may be trying to prevent misunderstandings, he may be chastised for not doing so imaginatively.<sup>10</sup>

The main detriment to this argument, one that makes it seem as if W&B are mainly interested in justifying their occupations, is the "us and them" type of division drawn between critics and writers. Whereas flowery language by a critic is unprofessional and to be avoided, technical usage of tools by a writer is best applied only as part of the imaginative creativity that is their own forté. This reaction to the blurring of lines, so to speak, is something that I may return to later on.

### Realists and Idealists.

I realize that by now, if your crown is not reeling with theories of your own, then at the very least your eyes must be tiring from the reading of such heady concepts. So here I'll be as brief as possible. After all, it is not my desire to either conform to nor refute the points made by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in their essay, "Against Theory," but to look at an incidental schism arising there-in.

The "theory" that they are against is "the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general." (723) According to them, the problem is that "critical theory" requires an "[imagining] that these problems are real. In fact, [they claim that] such problems only seem real – and theory itself only seems possible or relevant – when theorists fail to

recognize the fundamental inseparability of the elements involved.” (724) For example, they take the intentions of the author and the meaning of the text to be one and the same, and so dispute the idea that “all literary interpretation ‘must stress a reconstruction of the author’s aims and attitudes in order to evolve guides and norms for construing the meaning of his text.’”<sup>11</sup> Along the same lines, they presume that, were you to remove the author from the text, the random conglomeration of words that remains — or waves of sand molded to look like words by the ocean<sup>12</sup> — are not even language at all in that they have no meaning particular to them. Words, then, are merely sequential slashes unless there is some conscious motivation to the sequence.

Like meaning and intention, so too are belief and knowledge inseparable. They believe that “knowledge and true belief are the same.” (738) In other words, if you know a belief to be correct, then you will believe it, or if you believe something to be true, you will undoubtedly find yourself correct in your assumption. The result of this type of inquiry, “a belief about the nature of beliefs, is inconsequential because it merely tells you what beliefs are, not whether they are true or false in particular or in general.” (740) What’s more, and more poetically stated, “the only relevant truth about belief is that you can’t go outside it and, far from being unlivable, this is a truth that you can’t help but live.” (741)

Ultimately, they conclude that “theory is not just another name for practice. It is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without.” (742) With a nod to this grand appeal to the masses, and ignoring the fact that they are disallowing theoretical interpretation through their stand-offish theoretical standpoint, let’s move on to what interests me in this essay.

To illustrate their argument, K&M break theorists into two extreme groups: the realists and idealists (they give a ton of these-and-thems, but the categorizing of them all together is my insightful inference). To borrow (and modify) a technique used by John Barth:<sup>13</sup>

“Some theorists have sought to ground the reading of literary texts in methods designed to guarantee the objectivity and validity of interpretations. Others, impressed by the inability of such procedures to produce agreement among interpreters, have translated that failure into an alternative mode of theory that denies the possibility of correct interpretations.”<sup>14</sup>

“Some theorists have claimed that valid interpretations can only be obtained through an appeal to authorial intentions. This assumption is shared by theorists who, denying the possibility of recovering authorial intentions, also deny the possibility of valid interpretations.” (724)

“A realist thinks that theory allows us to stand outside our beliefs in a neutral encounter with the objects of interpretation; an idealist thinks that theory allows us to stand outside our beliefs in a neutral encounter with our beliefs themselves.” (739)

“For the realist, the object exists independent of beliefs, and knowledge requires that we shed our beliefs in a disinterested quest for the object. For the idealist, who insists that we can never shed our beliefs, knowledge means recognizing the role beliefs play in constituting their objects.”(740)

Regarding the poem created in the sand, “you will either be ascribing these marks to some agent capable of intentions,

or you will count them as nonintentional effects of mechanical processes.” (728)

Positive theorists, or maybe we can call them the optimists, want “to base interpretation on a direct encounter with its object, an encounter undistorted by the influence of the interpreter’s particular beliefs.” (737) One such interpreter, according to K&M, Stanley Fish, maintains “that beliefs cannot be grounded in some deeper condition

of knowledge,” but “that this impossibility does not in any way weaken their claims to be true.” (738) They then state that, having supposed it possible to not have any pesky biases, Fish’s decision is to believe in “beliefless knowledge.” (741)

I must admit that, were this possible, it does not seem at all human. On the other hand (or not), having had cause to become acquainted with several lawyers, I’ve found several who can know for a fact (for to know certain facts about something is the only way to prove it) the guilt or innocence of their clients, depending upon their commissioned opinion, but who don’t necessarily believe it in the slightest.

On the non-theoretical side, or the pessimistic one, K&M position P.D. Juhl, who “thinks that one can interpret the random marks, though only in the somewhat specialized sense in which we might be said to interpret a sentence when we explain its meaning to a foreigner, by explaining to him what the individual words mean, how they function in the sentence, and thus how the sentence could be used or what it could be used to express or convey.” (732) Thus is theory validated by allowing the critic to apply meaning, much as another such champion of this self-absorbed argument, Paul de Man, suggests by stating that “language consists of inherently meaningless sounds to which one adds meanings — in other words, that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary,”<sup>15</sup> and “all imputations of meaning are equally groundless.” (735) While this seems to me to allow anyone to apply any meaning to any text, non-theorists aren’t concerned with “how to interpret, but whether to interpret” (736), perhaps depending upon the difficulty of converting a given text’s dogma to their own.

So here we find those who think that they are the prophets interpreting the truth of some greater god, and others who consider themselves the oracles of their own intentions, as related by a

bipartisan refutation of both. Who is the wisest? At this point I have no opinion, but a young, reputable, and well-informed owl suggested to me that there may have been ulterior motives to this rampant messianism, so I must allow for the contingency that all parties involved are, in reality, nuts.

## *Intermission*

Old Richard and his Crosswords.

My hand is sore, with a blister forming on the smaller knuckle of my right ring finger, so recline and let me tell you a story about Old Richard — not so much for any relevance, but because he is a venerable and companionable fellow to whom I’ve been meaning to make reference since I met him; and this essay, being of a non-fictional tone contrary to my general subject matter, is the best vessel as yet provided.

We called him “Old Richard” to draw a distinction between him and “Young Richard,” who was an entirely different character altogether. Old Richard was of the bare-knuckle, boot-strap school, long accustomed to laboring with his hands and uncomfortable when away from the ocean. His features were lined and stained with the tale of his years; long working habits in the sea salty air and an equally zealous dedication to forgetting his days through his nights had drawn circles about his eyes and managed to draw him into that most terrible of whirlpools: work to drink and drink to forget your work.

Little wonder he was so bitter! But then, there is nothing spectacular in these habits — surely many a fisherman and dock-worker know the words to that shanty. And it was there that I met Richard, on the moldy and knotted planks of a small commercial fishing dock, where we both assisted the fishermen in the lightening of their vessels and added girth to our employer’s stocks.

It took several weeks before Richard and I exchanged more than frivolities, for we were separated in our positions though we stood shoulder to shoulder, he illustriously grading the Flukes as they slid by on the cull-board, and I dumping the baskets of them into boxes when their weight was reasonably (and legally, I might add) over 60 lbs. But it often happens in that occupation that one boat will be unloaded with no others expected for several hours, and, fearing that an absent worker was surely a drunken one, management insisted that we linger about the dock, expecting the lower ranking among us to rehearse the fine art of looking busy whenever they passed by.<sup>16</sup> Being among the higher-ups of the lower echelon, Richard would spend this “free-time” working toward the completion of the daily crossword puzzle (I quote “free-time” because the boss sometimes commented that the puzzle cost him fifty dollars a pop).

I bided my time, waiting patiently for the opportunity to work my way out of the Play Worker’s Guild into the more honest Work Avoidance Discussion Group, until one day I overheard Richard inquiring of his contemporaries:

“Does anybody know a nine letter word for ‘a Greek hero’s puzzle,’ starting with L?”

After an interminably long time waiting for one of my superiors to offer the answer to this simple question, I answered, “Leviathan.”

Richard looked at me as if I were a Salmon who had just offered a wish to he that would set me free. “And what makes you say that?” he asked.

I related to him a brief synopsis of the trials of Perseus, which, truth be told, were so many plays in the games of the gods, and assured him that I had heard from a very reliable source that the Kracken which threatened Andromeda was, in reality, a whale. Just so, true histories

are often made the more intriguing by mystical, mythical, flourishes of the imagination, but the slaying of such a giant, real or exaggerated, would have been quite a puzzle in those days, indeed.

He penciled in my answer (I do not take this to be an insult, for he was of that age when anything as permanent as a pen is frighteningly symbolic) and moved on. The entire discourse had taken almost twenty minutes, during which time several of the foremen had passed by and, merely nodding at me, acknowledged my right to paid speech. Feeling secure now to recline nearby, I awaited my next instance of usefulness.

“Alright college-boy,<sup>17</sup> you must be wrong because the fourth letter has to be a ‘y.’”

I was startled. “What casuistic clue has led you to this capricious conceit?”

“‘Make discernible,’ seven letters.”

“And I imagine that you take the answer to be ‘clarify.’”

“Yup.”

“It seems to me that if they had wanted a verb, they would have posed the question with an infinitive: ‘to make discernible.’ Since they did not, it follows that they are looking for a noun, so the clue must be read as ‘those who make discernible.’ Now, judging by their use of ‘discern,’ which implies an intelligent distinction, such as that between different stylistic presentations of meaning in literature, I’d say the answer they’re looking for would have to be ‘literati.’”

“But wait a minute here, that’s one letter too long.”

“Well, a little research would show that ‘literati’ is of Latin derivation and that a Renaissance poet, had he wanted to put the accent on the ‘a,’ would have apostrophized the ‘e.’ Now, I’ve yet to see a crossword allowing for accents, so the ‘e’ would just be left out.”

Looking a little abashed at his oversight, Richard filled in the boxes as I advised. Unfortunately, a docking boat prevented our checking the answer, and when we returned, the newspaper had disappeared (a fact that I persuaded Richard was a subtle comment on the efforts of the oligarchy to prevent the education of the masses). But a bond had been formed, and a fast friendship developed.

What can be said of the ensuing summer? Fetid surely, but pleasant for our harmonious bitterness. We spoke of the decline of civilization. Of the coldness of each to each. Of the unjust disparity between the employer and the employed. Of the foremen in their air-conditioned office watching basketball on a satellite linked 35in. television, while we watched the waves ripple amongst putrefaction. But these are old themes, and we just the latest to speak of them.

Yes, we were bitter, and that was our badge! His was earned by long experience, and mine from experiences I never expected to have. And so it is in that world. Those who know little, and wish to know less, may be happy with their circumstances, but damned be those who know their position and wish to learn more. Richard read Keats by candle light, and I had followed Whitman through seas of humanity: we were angry for the wisdom that all of our knowledge was useless.

But I was wise enough to leave before the weather turned frigid, and Richard had not fallen prey too much to resignation to attempt to follow. I took an office job. The last I'd heard of Richard he had taken a job at the bait shop one dock over. Hardly broken habits, it seems, had too long held him.

So bow now for him for he represents the paradox of progress. A fallen soldier in the battle between two extreme opposites. O Old Richard! take this as your Ode. We will complain of your loss and so perhaps gain perspective. True enough, if each generation is to find

itself justified in complaining of the forbearance of its elders, then each generation must further degenerate until we've sunken deep into the flames of Hell. But fear not sir, for I will smuggle us a bottle of champagne and two glasses into Heaven. We shall watch the waters ripple and speak crossly of those who lord over us yet!

## *Act II*

Ishmael.

Any theatrical production, having just allowed the audience a break for refreshment and not wanting to induce cramps with a rapid submersion back into the story will ease into it. I will do the same with my analysis.

The primary similarity between Charles Olson and Melville's narrator, and the one to which he was likely making an allusion with the title, *Call Me Ishmael*, given to his book-length analysis of *Moby-Dick*, is that they both try to tell the tale of Ahab in such a way as to find the deeper meaning of the saga itself: "I am willing to ride Melville's image of man, whale and ocean to find in him prophesies, lessons he himself would not have spelled out."<sup>18</sup> However, after several readings of his work, I'm fairly certain that Olson did not comprehend the extent of the irony in the connection.

His style, format, and strategy are all so similar to Ishmael's that it is as if that fictional character has come to life and decided to try his hand at the tale from his new human perspective. Certainly is a more in-depth look into this striking kinship called for. In each citation that follows, see if you can figure out to which narrator it should be attributed.<sup>19</sup>

*Call Me Ishmael* opens with a fact. An interesting one considering the context, yes, but how much it relates to his thesis is a question to

be asked, though not by me. “I care not to perform this part of my task methodically; but shall be content to produce the desired impression by separate citations of items.”<sup>20</sup> The descriptively titled “Fact #2” chapter is a grand illustration:

On the night of January 26, 1824, as the Nantucket whaleship the *Globe* cruised in the Pacific Ocean off Fannings Island, latitude 3 49' North, longitude 158 29' West, one of the vessel's two harpooners, called boatsteerers, Samuel B. Comstock, aged 21, the son of a Quaker schoolmaster of Nantucket and a descendent on his mother's side of the Mitchells, a family as organic to the life of the island as the Coffins, Starbucks, Gardners and Macys, went down into the cabin shortly after 12 o'clock and, with a short axe, split the Captain's head in two as he slept, killed the Chief Mate the same way, confronted the two remaining officers with the cry, “I am the bloody man, I have the bloody hand and I will have revenge,” shot the Third Mate with a musket and left the Second Mate dying from wounds he gave him with a boarding knife, a two-edge instrument four feet long, three inches wide, used in whaling to cut the blubber from the body of a whale.<sup>21</sup>

[Sorry to extend the quote for so long, but, as it is all one sentence, I wasn't sure where to stop (the attentive reader of *Moby-Dick* may have noticed similarly long sentences there-in).]

Perhaps these factual interludes are to offer a respite from the head-work, “for few men's courage is proof against protracted meditation unrelieved by action,”<sup>22</sup> but the stylistic similarity between the two works is difficult to deny. Regarding styles, Olson states that he believes that “the long ease and swell of Ishmael's narrative prose[, similar to that of all ‘writers that rise and swell with their subject, though it may seem but an ordinary one,’<sup>23</sup>] contrasts [with the] short, rent language of Ahab. The opposition of cadence is part of the counterpoint of the book.”<sup>24</sup> With this wonderful bit of analytical jargon, Olson sounds much like Ishmael when describing whale bones

(archeology being a science that he is competently unqualified to discuss) in “The Fossil Whale” chapter, in which he is “fain... to stagger to this emprise under the weightiest words of the dictionary”;<sup>25</sup> or when investigating the whale’s spout in “The Fountain” chapter – in which he does “not think [he] shall err; though [he] may possibly use some superfluous scientific words.”<sup>26</sup>

These two prolix writers are alike in intent as well. Olson wants Melville’s meaning as much as Ishmael, but to Ishmael, it is called Fate’s meaning (this assumption comes a bit early, so take it for granted until we’ve the opportunity to look at it in more detail). For example, to Olson, “the chapter on THE DOUBLOON dramatizes the attempts on the part of the chief active characters to reach truth. In that place Starbuck, in his ‘mere unaided virtue,’ is revealed to have no abiding faith: he retreats before ‘Truth,’ fearing to lose his ‘righteousness.’... Stubb’s jollity and Flask’s clod-like stupidity blunt the spiritual... The Manxman has mere superstition, Queequeg mere curiosity... Fedallah worships the doubloon evilly... Ahab sees the gold coin solipsistically: ‘three peaks as proud as Lucifer’ and all named ‘Ahab!’ Pip alone, of all, has true prescience: he names the doubloon the ‘navel’ of the ship – ‘Truth’ its life.”<sup>27</sup>

The validity of some of these preposterous assumptions is something upon which I have no opinion. However, “some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher,”<sup>28</sup> and the centrally located doubloon seems, in focus and embracement of vastly differing perspectives, much like a pulpit, which is “earth’s foremost part: all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world,”<sup>29</sup> to which the church interior is designed to draw attention, and for which church patrons are roused to renounce impugners.

Ah, but “there are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method,”<sup>30</sup> and like Fate, “Melville didn’t put [all his disparate meanings] on the surface of *Moby-Dick*. You’ll find the frontier all right, and Andrew Jackson regarded as heavyweight champion... And the technique of the industry analyzed, scrupulously described.”<sup>31</sup> This thread may be difficult to unravel, but a “classification of the constituents of a chaos” is necessary if one would attempt “a thorough appreciative understanding of the more special leviathanic revelations and allusions of all sorts which are to follow.”<sup>32</sup> Where to begin?

“There is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast... nothing exists in itself,”<sup>33</sup> and, because “nothing” must be inversely all inclusive as “everything,” a category which includes literature, Olson would suggest that “Melville’s reading is a gauge of him, at all points of his life.”<sup>34</sup>

Luckily for Olson, he happened to have access to “the only copy [of Shakespeare’s complete plays] extant”<sup>35</sup> that was underscored and scribbled upon by Melville because without such insightful observations as “madness is undefinable,”<sup>36</sup> the analyzing of *Moby-Dick* would be as impossible as the analysis performed by Ishmael in “The Whiteness of the Whale” chapter. Unlike whiteness, in which “subtlety appeals to subtlety,”<sup>37</sup> however, *Moby-Dick* does not require too imaginative an approach from analysts: “the significant thing is the rough notes for the composition of *Moby-Dick* on the fly-leaf of the last volume, [that] involve Ahab, Pip, Bulkington, Ishmael, and are the key to Melville’s intention with these characters.”<sup>38</sup>

All these notes, however valuable they are as guides, are useless unless their meaning to Melville is understood. Olson takes this into account with his discussion of “right reason, [which] described the

highest range of the intelligence and stood in contrast to ‘understanding.’ Melville had used the phrase in *Mardi*. What he did with it there discloses what meaning it had for him when he used it in these cryptic notes for the composition of *Moby-Dick*.”<sup>39</sup> With a little imagination it is possible to see this argument as comprehensive. Let’s move on.

“Right reason” is important to Olson, and, for slightly different reasons, to me. To him it is the opposite of madness. It “is the other way to God. It is the way of man’s sanity, the pure forging of his intelligence in the smithy of life. To understand what use Melville made of it in *Moby-Dick* two characters, both inactive to the plot, have to be brought forth”<sup>40</sup>: Bulkington and Ishmael. While, to my reading, Ishmael’s sanity is not so obvious, it makes sense that Olson would have to see him in this way in order for his analysis to have any foundation. Olson sees Ishmael as “not his creator only: he is a chorus through whom Ahab’s tragedy is seen, by whom what is black and what is white magic is made clear.”<sup>41</sup>

True, Ishmael does, at one point refer to himself “as a looker on,”<sup>42</sup> and he suggests that “the Fates put [him] down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies.”<sup>43</sup> However, I imagine that it is rather rare for a dramatic chorus to “abominate all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever”<sup>44</sup> and for one who makes the story “clear” to believe that “the soundest advice ever is... indefinite.”<sup>45</sup> The truth of the matter is that Ishmael is the most unreliable of narrators. “How may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow? [He] but put[s] that brow before you. Read it if you can.”<sup>46</sup> As for the tail, the more he investigates it, “the more [does he] deplore [his] ability to express it.”<sup>47</sup>

No, much like “The Fountain,” or the spout, “it is not so easy to settle these plain things.”<sup>48</sup>

Olson might argue that, even so, “the choric Ishmael can, like the catskill eagle, find the light, but Ahab, whose only magic is Goetic, remains dark.”<sup>49</sup> Alas, here too must Charlie fall short in his explanation. Ishmael is far from removed from the story, like K&M’s belief on belief, he can’t help but be involved. This is why he speaks of other whaling trips that he could only have taken post-Pequod. Why would he take such risks after his terrible first experience? Because Ishmael has “the problem of the universe revolving in” him.

While he “but lightly hold[s his] obligations to observe all whale-ships standing orders,”<sup>50</sup> he is not “inactive to the plot.” His duty to the Pequod is to record her, and his action is the relation of the story. What’s more — “I find so many great demi-gods and heroes, prophets of all sorts, who one way or other have shed distinction upon [whaling], I am transported with the reflection that I myself belong, though but subordinately, to so emblazoned a fraternity.”<sup>51</sup> Were his story not so self-involved, perhaps he could be seen as the passive narrator that Olson takes him to be, but Ishmael’s story is more about Ishmael than Ahab, making him an active narrator. His “I” is not that of a fly-on-the-wall because, with the absence of corroborative logs, it is through him that we must pierce to have our look at the truths of the story.

For be a man’s intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men, without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always, in themselves, more or less paltry and base. This it is, that for ever keeps God’s true princes of the Empire from the world’s hustlings; and leaves the highest honors that this air can give, to those men who become famous more through their infinite inferiority to the choice hidden handful of the Divine Inert, than through their undoubted superiority over the dead level of the mass. Such large virtue lurks

in these small things when extreme political superstitions invest them, that in some royal instances even to idiot imbecility they have imparted potency.<sup>52</sup>

So you tell me: who is this passage about? It is prefaced by, and the “for” seems to indicate some explanation of, Ahab’s position as captain and usurer of the conventions of the sea, and it is followed by a paragraph lamenting the fact that Ishmael is denied “majestically trappings” because his renown is as a subservient to “a poor old whale-hunter like” Ahab.

Be what as it will, this passage serves me merely as a segue for Ishmael, by making Ahab his “Divine Inert,” is also making him the hero of the story. But an awkward tragic hero he is, when considered by “OVER ALL, hate – huge and fixed upon the imperceptible. Not man but all the hidden forces that terrorize man is assailed by [Ahab]. That HATE, extra-human, involves his Crew, and Moby-Dick drags them to their death as well as Ahab to his, a collapse of a hero through solipsism which brings down a world.”<sup>53</sup> Essentially what this means (I had to look “solipsism” up, so I’ll explain it to you), is that because the crew is tied to Ahab, and Ahab has come to believe that his reality is the only important one (the use of “solipsism” actually implies that it would have been the only reality altogether), when his quest for vengeance ends in his death, so do (maybe must) they all die: the collapse is not only of Ahab’s world, but of all of their worlds.

“The history of fanatics [is not] half so striking in respect to the measureless self-deception of the fanatic himself, as his measureless power of deceiving and bedeviling so many others.”<sup>54</sup> This statement is, on the surface, actually in reference to Gabriel of the Jeroboam, but the deeper reference seems to be to Ahab. Especially when, just following this quote, Ishmael says, “but it is time to return to the

Pequod,” a statement which, by its apparent superfluity, implies that we have never left. Perhaps Melville made this statement in reference to a different character in order to allow for misreadings such as Olson’s because if Ahab is to be seen as a hero-figure, then we must be able to have more sympathy for him than we might for just any random lunatic who makes “a general prophecy, which any one might [do], and so has chanced to hit one of many marks in the wide margin allowed” as compared to “specifically fore-announc[ing] it.”<sup>55</sup>

In Olson’s mind, this sympathy is bolstered through Melville’s usage of Pip, who “permits a sympathy for the stricken man that Ahab’s insistent diabolism up to the storm would not have evoked. The end of this fire-forked tragedy is enriched by a pity in the very jaws of terror.”<sup>56</sup> Without Pip, perhaps the reader would tire of Ahab’s selfishness. “Ahab never thought, as he paced the deck at night in fever of anger, how his whalebone stump rapping the boards waked his crew and officers,”<sup>57</sup> but when Pip, who has the ability to “affect Ahab,” breaks through Ahab’s rough exterior, the captain’s humanity is accessible to the audience once again.

The affection Ahab comes to have for the innocent, little, tambourine-wielding Pip, when seen in this light, appears to be a conscious intention of Melville’s, but for Olson’s reading to work, Melville must have created Ahab specifically to be seen as a tragic hero. “Hawthorne,” according to Olson, “was right, Melville could not rest without a belief, he had to have a god. In *Moby-Dick* he had one. I called him the Ancient of Days. The job was a giant’s, to make a new god. To do it, it was necessary for Melville, because Christianity surrounded him as it surrounds us, to be as Anti-Christ as Ahab was. When he denied Ahab, he lost the Ancient. And Christianity closed in. But he had done his job.”<sup>58</sup>

So Ahab was messiah to Melville's new god, but who was the god? Olson never explicitly tells us, but consider the world in which Ahab lived: the whaling industry. "A whaleship reminded Melville of two things: (1) democracy had not rid itself of overlords; (2) the common man [who 'for the most part... seem a mob of unnecessary duplicates, both contemporary and hereditary'<sup>59</sup>], however free, leans on a leader, the leader, however dedicated, leans on a straw."<sup>60</sup> I'll agree that an investigation of the whaling industry was at least a small part of Melville's design and that he "carefully controls [his] chapters, skillfully breaking them up: the eight different vessels the Pequod meets as she moves across the oceans slip in and cut between the considerations of cetology. Actually and deliberately the whaling chapters brake the advance of the plot."<sup>61</sup> However, as you'll see later, I believe the ends of these means was differently intended than god-making.

Alright then, consider the hero and his tragedy:

As the strongest literary force Shakespeare caused Melville to approach tragedy in terms of the drama. As the strongest social force in America caused him to approach tragedy in terms of democracy.

It was not difficult for Melville to reconcile the two. Because of his perception of America: Ahab.

It has to do with size, and how you value it. You can approach **BIG** America and spread yourself like a pancake, sing her stretch as Whitman did, be puffed up as we are over **PRODUCTION**. It's easy. **THE AMERICAN WAY**. Soft. Turns out paper cups, lies flat on the brush. N.G.

Or recognize that our power is simply **QUANTITY**. Without considering purpose. Easy too. That is, so long as we continue to be **INGENIOUS** about machines, and have the resources.

Or you can take an attitude, the creative vantage. See her as **OBJECT** in **MOTION**, something to be shaped, for use. It involves a first act of physics. You can observe **POTENTIAL** and **VELOCITY** separately, have to, to measure **THE THING**. You get approximate results. They are usable enough if you include the Uncertainty Principle, Heisenberg's law that you learn the speed at

the cost of exact knowledge of the energy and the energy at the loss of exact knowledge of the speed.

Melville did his job. He calculated, and cast Ahab. **BIG** first of all. **ENERGY**, next. **PURPOSE**: lordship over nature. **SPEED**: of the brain. **DIRECTION**: vengeance. **COST**: the people, the Crew.

Ahab is the **FACT**, the Crew the **IDEA**. The Crew is where what America stands for got into Moby-Dick. They're what we imagine democracy to be. They're Melville's addition to tragedy as he took it from Shakespeare.<sup>62</sup>

Fear not if you're confused for so am I. Perhaps, were there no other similarities save this one, Olson and Ishmael are equatable for this very reason: neither really leaves the reader with a sense of completion (I'll try not to do the same). In fact, Olson thinks that Melville "missed his own truth."<sup>63</sup> Olson here has an advantage that Ishmael did not: he is real.

The second half of his book is based on Melville's Journals (a text that I have read and found to be almost entirely inapplicable to my own discussion of Moby-Dick). The truth Olson seems to think he has found lies in Egypt, where Melville "observed... that the Sphinx has its 'back to desert & face to verdure,'" the truth being that "Melville had reversed his Sphinx. He thought he faced verdure in Christ. It turned out to be desert."<sup>64</sup>

Oh! I nearly forgot that we were trying to figure out who or what Olson was referring to as Melville's new god-creation. I'd say that a sentiment expressed by Ishmael, and possibly taken too much to heart by Olson, might point us in the right direction: "Has the Sperm Whale ever written a book, spoken a speech? NO, his great genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it. It is moreover declared in his pyramidal silence."<sup>65</sup> But it is not a whale that is a god. The Whale speaks in the most convincing way possible: he sinks

the ship. The god can't possibly be Ishmael, he does everything he possibly can (short of an IQ test) to prove his genius. The only completely absent voice in *Moby-Dick* is Melville's. True he did write it, but he did so through a narrator who was carefully constructed to be separate from the author. Indeed, they say the Bible is the word of God, but His was not the pen that stroked the paper. By Olson's schemata, it can only be Melville who is Melville's new god.

[What's that? A striking revelation indeed! Well, tut-tut, away with it! We've one more issue yet to discuss before we come to an elaboration of this one...]

Ahab.

C.L.R. James' book, *Mariners Renegades and Castaways*, by the very virtue of its having been published, both diminishes my faith in the industry of literature and gives me hope that if I fail to ever make sense out of any work of literature, still may I have my rubbish collected. In fact, so much does he err that hardly any prestidigitation with his argument is necessary to suit my purposes. I but lay it before you, find it accurate if you can.

"That free enterprise should produce goods for sale, that by working for as much money as possible men helped themselves and made their country great, that it was every man's duty to do this, these were the unchallenged foundations of American civilization in 1851 and are still its official doctrines. But here was a man who trampled upon these sacred principles, derided them, and set up instead his own feelings as a human being."<sup>66</sup> Referring, of course, to Ahab, James seems, at first, to be looking at him in much the same way as does Olson.

Ahab “says, in effect, to hell with business and money.” (1) To James this is not only an honorable opinion, but proof that “it is obvious that whatever Moby-Dick is, it is no mere adventure story. If even it was such, it is no longer so. If Captain Ahab were to express these opinions today, he would no only be blackballed from any kind of job by every employer in the country, but he would be rigorously investigated by the F.B.I.” And this, according to James, makes him an “extraordinary character,” who can now, in a country that has experienced a Civil War and a world that has experienced two World Wars, be reconstructed and understood by us “far better than [by] the people for whom the book was written.” (1) “The gospel of America has been, first, above all things, devotion to work,” (4) and Ahab “is a man who wants to live fully and completely according to his beliefs.” (6) A position to which he devotes “an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsunderable wilfulness.”<sup>67</sup>

But this “precisely is the cause of his undoing” (6) because he is “gnawed within and scorched without, with the infixed, unrelenting fangs of [his] incurable idea.”<sup>68</sup> The “fatal flaw in his misery and his challenge and defiance [is that] never for a single moment does it cross his mind to question his relations with the people he works with. Those relations he accepts. His personality is suffering. He will defy his tormentor. He will find a way out. He has been trained in the school of individualism and an individualist he remains to the end.” (8) The problem arises when he “recognizes what the isolation of being in command has done to him” (4) and is “helpless,” though he “knows what is wrong.” (5) So perhaps we may begin to have an Olsonesque pity or sympathy for this forlorn but determined sea captain; especially when James explains that:

So far tens of millions of Americans can understand Ahab. They have worked under such men. A smaller but not insignificant number have gone through his experiences. The Diesel engine and now atomic energy face the vast majority with the same problem that he faced: the obvious, the immense, the fearful mechanical power of an industrial civilization which is now advancing by incredible leaps and bringing at the same time the mechanization and destruction of human personality.

Men who are thinking like that, classes of people in a nation who are thinking such thoughts, are being steadily prepared for desperate action. If now there descends upon them a violent catastrophe that ruins them and convinces them that the life that they have been living is intolerable and the grave doubts that have previously tormented them are justified, then they are going to throw aside all the traditional restraints of civilization. They are going to seek a new theory of society and a program of action, and, on the basis of this theory and this program, they are going to act. This is what happens to Ahab when a whale bites off his leg. The whale is Moby Dick. (8-9)

So, truly can we all empathize with this man on whom the world has been piling responsibility and to whom the loss of his leg was that last straw that broke his back. “This loss of his leg was for him final proof of the absolute unreasonableness of the world... If he killed Moby Dick it would solve all that was troubling him.” (9)

But before we see Ahab as a victim, consider “the meals[, which] are the symbol of Ahab’s isolation from the men with whom he works, an isolation forced upon him by his position of command.” (3) While James sees this as a constricting convention forced upon him by society, remember the other captains met along the way and their relationships with (at least the higher-ups of) their crew, and the rigidity of Ahab’s table manners seems a bit more self-inflicted.<sup>69</sup>

James loses his sympathy for Ahab, as well, when he concludes that “he is the most dangerous and destructive social type that has ever appeared in Western Civilization.” (5) Taking “that which was

madness in a book one hundred years ago” to be “the living madness of the age in which we live,” (10) James sees in Ahab a totalitarian national state. “The Nazis [also] said that world civilization was disintegrating, and they had a solution — the creation of a master race,” (10) just as “every single national state... has a racial doctrine.” (11)

While Ahab, with his multicultural crew, doesn't have so clearly defined a bias, the similarity is more in motivation: “wounded and stricken beyond all others, the national state of Germany sought a theory of society and a program.” (11) It is his monomaniacal program that is totalitarian. Perhaps James is indeed referring to Olson when he points out that “the national state was the one god without any hypocrisies or pretenses,” (11) but he never says that this is a god that Melville was creating.

“All the things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless, but only bodiless as objects, not as agents,”<sup>70</sup> and “humanity would go and there would remain only abstract intellect, abstract science, abstract technology, alive, but blank, serving no human purpose but merely the abstract purpose itself.” (14) This of the man who claims that he “never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels; that's tingling enough for mortal man! to think's audacity. God only has that right and priviledge.”<sup>71</sup> But, according to James, now “we can see in his full stature Ahab, embodiment of the totalitarian type. With his purpose clear before him, he is now concerned with two things only: 1) science, the management of things; and 2) politics, the management of men.” (13)

Regarding science, Ahab can be said to “rapidly [narrow] the very concept of science down to what serves his purpose simply and directly. Any other kind of science he will destroy.” (54) And where his crew is concerned, Ahab does, in fact, say that “the only real owner

of anything is its commander; and hark ye, [his] conscience is in this ships keel,"<sup>72</sup> but by this he means to change the emphasis from the control of absentee owners, not to bring to "the surface what has been the attitude for centuries of educated people to the great masses among whom they live," as James claims that Hitler and Stalin did. (15)

Ishmael's opinion may be valid that it is "vain to popularize profundities, and all truth is profound,"<sup>73</sup> but if Ahab had his druthers, he wouldn't have hidden his purpose, he would "have shocked into [his officers and crew] the same fiery emotion accumulated within the Leyden jar of his own magnetic life."<sup>74</sup> And though Ahab "sometimes masked himself... behind those forms and usages" of command, "making use of them for other and more private ends than they were legitimately intended to subserve,"<sup>75</sup> he is not doing so to "hide the purpose... [by falling] back once more on the business of the Pequod as being purely money-making." (15)

"Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air."<sup>76</sup> James admits that "Melville does not say this about Ahab and *Moby-Dick* in so many words," (81) but he strives so much to link the fact that Ahab intends to "solve everything [himself]" and "the biography of the last days of Adolf Hitler" (71) that he falls into blatant misreadings and complete ignorings of facts. Perhaps James has that "wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself,"<sup>77</sup> for "all [his] means are sane, [his] motive and [his] object mad."<sup>78</sup>

I'll resist the urge to make cultural assumptions, but it seems only appropriate that James, siding with the oppressed crew against the encumbered captain, would consider the greatest strength in the novel to be found in the workers because what he really wants to discuss, this man who wrote such books as *The Case for West Indian Self-*

Government, State Capitalism and World Revolution, and several other books about politics and revolution, what's really on his mind (and what he injects into Moby-Dick like a super-syphilitic virus) is that "equality is an illusion. No equality of knowledge can get rid of the inbred servility of mortal to mortal." (87) To this man, Ahab's most glaring offense is to believe that "the crew are not human beings but things, as he calls them, 'manufactured men.'" (15)

"The high purpose in reality is for [Ahab] alone," and for the crew to understand it, Ahab feels the need to doctor it just as, "if you read carefully the propaganda of Hitler and Stalin, you will see the purpose tailored to suit the manufactured man." (15) Perhaps this sentiment was inspired by Ahab's speech in "The Quarter-Deck" chapter, during which Ahab's propagandic pep-rally alerts and involves the crew of and in his personal mission. Of course, if you don't take Ahab as a prototypical Hitler, you might not see his words so much as deceptive tools as honest expressions of his insanity, and you might not find the crew as much fooled as corroboratively inspired to head their lives' vessels toward what might be a welcome distraction from the accustomed humdrum. Yes, the crew may have become "excited at such seemingly purposeless questions" put forth by Ahab, but they did so gazing "curiously at each other, as if marvelling how it was that" they were reacting so.<sup>79</sup>

People write repeatedly that Melville describes the technique of the whaling industry as if he were drawing up some sort of text-book or manual. Melville is doing nothing of the kind. He has painted a body of men at work, the skill and the danger, the laboriousness and the physical and mental mobilization of human resources, the comradeship and the unity, the simplicity and the naturalness. (30)

Is it possible that James is guilty of the peccadillo so common when making arguments like his? “The whale-fishery furnishes an asylum for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the carking cares of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber,”<sup>80</sup> categories, all, that may serve to help describe individuals, but hardly homogenize them. “The crew is ignorant and superstitious, but as has been noticed frequently with primitive savages, their ignorance and superstition are something that they hold quite apart from their immediate responses to Nature and technology, with both of which they are in perfect harmony.” (31) This certainly paints them in a pleasant light, but the problem is that it blends them unjustly together.

James’ type is just as detrimental to the image of workers as the type to which he ascribes Ahab, if conversely so. “For two hundred pages we shall see the men at work, and either Ahab does not come in at all, or when he does, he is concerned only with what life has done to him and his monomaniac revenge.” (5) Seeing the crew as one globular whole is a mistake. While some can be said to “cheerfully resign [them]selves to perdition,”<sup>81</sup> others miserably toil “away, as if toil were life itself, and the heavy beating of [the blacksmith’s] hammer the heavy beating of his heart.”<sup>82</sup>

[When describing the danger of the whale line,] Melville is so gay that at first reading you can easily miss the significance of [these] sentences for the world we live in. But re-read them. The humor and the wit of the mariners, renegades and castaways are beyond the cultivated inter-changes of those who sit around mahogany tables. They have to be. Hangman’s nooses hang loose around the necks of countless millions today, and for them their unflinching humor is an assertion of life and sanity against the ever-present threat of destruction and a world in chaos. (26)

James wants so badly to promote and relate to the crew that he almost entirely ignores how they are actually portrayed in the book. He tells us that “when you look again, you see that the crew is indestructible” through their jolly perspective. (50) One of the larger concepts that he completely misses, or chooses to disregard, is that each member of the crew has his own reasons for participating in the quest. Perhaps the whale “might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life.”<sup>83</sup> Whatever the case, they do enjoy making “Laplandish speculations [or those that are as indiscriminate as Laplandish snow]... concerning all these passing things.”<sup>84</sup> They are not as ignorant as James makes them out to be. By the end, even “the least heedful eye seemed to see some sort of cunning meaning in almost every sight.”<sup>85</sup>

This is why they don't revolt. Because deep down they have found their own reasons to hunt the whale. James, however, would say that to even “ask this question [of mutiny] is not merely to see the book of 1851 with the eyes of 1952, which, however we try, we cannot avoid doing. It is to do much worse, it is to inject the social problems of 1952 into the social problems of 1851. Whereby, it becomes impossible to understand either literature or society.” (59) I wonder if perhaps to criticize him with literary standards that were developed before 1952, but not used by me until 1998, would be similarly faulty.

This is not the only over-, under-, or short-sight of James'. You'd think (or at least I would) that when putting forth a potentially controversial argument, a critic/analyst would be particularly careful about his use of details from the text, especially when proclaiming, as does James, that his is not just a reading of the book, but the only one that makes sense! Many are the little faux pas throughout his book, and others may come to light further along in my discussion, but I will

here list two. The first would be minor, and my criticism of it would be nitpicking, were it not just one of many examples of carelessness and lack of concern for accuracy.

“New Bedford has the finest patrician houses in America and is the place for brilliant weddings. But in its streets are the meanest mariners from all over the world, savages from every part of the South Seas, and green boys from the hills of Vermont and New Hampshire. When Mrs. Hussey, the landlady where Ishmael stays, suspects that someone may have committed suicide in one of her rooms, she prays for his soul, but laments what has happened to her counterpane... In Nantucket, Ishmael is offered the only accommodations available — to share a bed with a savage. When he inquires more as to this man, he receives the laconic reply, ‘He pays reg’lar.’ Nothing else matters.” (39) I repeat that, of itself, the fact that James has put a New Bedford Inn on Nantucket island and a Nantucket landlady in New Bedford, would be insignificant were the rationale that caused the mistake not so obvious.

James is more interested in making Peter Coffin<sup>86</sup> seem like an ignorant materialist by quoting his dialect, and keeping Queequeg (whom James has previously introduced) an anonymous savage for a later attempt at a revelational revealing, to be concerned with locale. More severely, though, James’ misreading makes it impossible for him to consider anything that happens concerning Ishmael and Queequeg on the ferry between the two cities.

The second, perhaps more abstract — but only more drastic for it — mistake that I wish to point out shows that, if James isn’t necessarily “incapable of any reasoning which runs counter to his purpose” (as he accuses Ahab of being on page 63), then at least he becomes incapable of anything resembling a comprehensive reading of the words on the page.

What Ahab really wants in order to advance his purpose is to finish away altogether with men who think. This is what he tells the carpenter: “I’ll order a complete man after a desirable pattern. Imprimis, fifty feet high in his socks; then, chest modelled after the Thames Tunnel; then, legs with roots to ‘em, to stay in one place; then, arms three feet through the wrist; no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains; and let me see- shall I order eyes to see outwards? No, but put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards.” (55, interior quote on page 512 of *Moby-Dick*)

While I suppose James could have made a far fetched explanation of how “a quarter of an acre of fine brains” could fail to “think,” he doesn’t even make the attempt, leaving the perspicacious reader to come to the conclusion that James didn’t even realize that the quote he used to support his supposition might conflict with that supposition. Or perhaps he missed it purposely so he could then say, without reservation, that “it is precisely this that is the aim of every totalitarian dictator – hundreds of millions of inhumanly strong, capable, technically efficient men with no heart to feel, without aspirations, except what their masters tell them.” (55) I’ll admit that it would be possible for a Jamesian to suggest that the brains are what make them “capable” and “technically efficient,” but the fact remains that Ahab only wants one such creature.<sup>87</sup>

James thrusts himself so far away from what he sees as a horrible human type that he ends up mirroring Ahab. Toward the end of the book, when Moby Dick has disastrously foiled every lowering for him, Ahab says, “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.”<sup>88</sup> Both James and Ahab are so wrapped up in their quests that they cannot see obvious signs that they are wrong.

James might as well be talking about himself when he says that Ahab “so identifies himself with the purpose that his own ideas, his own feelings, his own needs become the standard by which reality is tested and whatever does not fit into that must be excluded.” (56) On the other hand, “to any monomaniac man, the veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings.”<sup>89</sup>

The complications with James’ argument increase exponentially once he finally mentions Ishmael for the first time almost a third of the way through his book. “As he works,” James writes, “Queequeg, unconsciousness personified, is looking idly at the water but Ishmael is busily constructing some complicated philosophical schema in which the whole operation is the Loom of Time, the cord is Necessity and Queequeg’s sword represents the free will of men.” (47) Four lines later, James cites the passage in which Ishmael drops the “ball of free will.” What’s this? Queequeg’s sword is in a ball? Or is free-will a necessity? No, not at all. Ishmael does indeed call the process “the Loom of Time, and [he himself] a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates;” and the “warp seemed necessity; and here... with [his] own hand [he plies his] own shuttle and [weaves his] own destiny into these unalterable threads.” However, the “easy, indifferent sword must be chance.”<sup>90</sup>

While his reading may be completely wrong, James’ first priority is proving that Ishmael is a distracted dreamer. In this he may not be too far off. “But soon it becomes apparent that Ishmael is no mere dreamer. He is a completely modern young intellectual who has broken with society and wavers constantly between totalitarianism and the crew.” (44) Fitting Ishmael into his reading of the text is a problem for James, so he calls him “an intellectual Ahab. As Ahab is enclosed in the masoned walled-town of the exclusiveness of authority, so

Ishmael is enclosed in the solitude of his social and intellectual speculation.” (44) Furthermore, he appeals to his audience by making him out to be another type that those of his time might recognize: “today they do not go to sea – they join the working class movement or the revolutionary movement instead. Who does not recognize Ishmael? He wants to be a plain ordinary seaman. He feels himself one of the people. But it isn’t that he likes workers. It is that he hates authority and responsibility of any kind.” (40) This “dissatisfied intellectual” type would eventually have to make a choice, “join the crew with its social and practically scientific attitude to Nature or guilt would drive him to where it drove Ishmael.” (101)

Where he is driven is never really specified, but it is enough for James to suggest that Ishmael never makes what James sees as the honorable decision of blending into the crew. “What keeps them apart is his intellectualism, his inability to embrace reality spontaneously, the doubt and fear and guilt and isolation from people, which compel him at all times to seek to find out what is happening to himself in relation to the world.” (47) According to James, Ishmael is inferior not only to Ahab, but to the crew as well. “Most of the men on the ship at some time or other show antagonism to Ahab. Ishmael never did – not once.” (43)

This is the first of James’ mistakes for which I am not able to provide textual evidence because the only complete proof would be the entire book. He is correct that Ishmael never openly confronts Ahab, but he is wrong that any of the crew (excepting Starbuck and, perhaps, Stubb and Pip to a lesser degree) ever does – he already told us that they do not revolt (additionally, as we’ll see later, if this is the test of virtue, so to speak, James is misdirected in his distaste for the first mate).

What makes Ishmael so weak and so quick to follow Ahab? A misreading of “The Whiteness of the Whale” chapter provides his answer. It seems as if James only actually read the first page-and-a-half of this nine-page chapter – the beginning of the chapter, during which Ishmael is merely listing the good connotations of the colorless color. “After an impressive list acknowledging what the color white has meant, he says that nevertheless it is a color of terror. The reason is clear. For him there is no longer anything beautiful or sincere, or grandly historical, and above all, there is no longer anything of spiritual beauty in the world any more. So that now wherever he sees whiteness, it is a symbol of his spiritual isolation, his loneliness, his revulsion against the world, his deep psychological misery.” (45) The following seven-and-a-half pages of reasoning, through which Ishmael concludes that it is the indefiniteness and unanalyzability of white that is frightening, though almost hilariously nebulous, cannot, in my opinion, be seen as merely a self-pitying monody to his lost humanity. But James attempts to tie it all together by dismissively claiming, “no wonder that, with terror in his soul, Ishmael follows Ahab, as the guilt-ridden intellectual of today, often with the same terror, finds some refuge in the idea of the one-party totalitarian state.” (46-47)

“The Try-Works” chapter is a decisive one for James because he thinks it is the one that proves that “Ishmael can go only so far. There comes a stage in the voyage of the Pequod which breaks him to pieces and leaves him worse than before.” (48) Why? Because “he is guiding the ship; in other words, however temporarily, he is in command of the ship of destiny, and such responsibility always overwhelms this type with terror.” (50)

Indeed, so horrified is Ishmael that he dozes off at the helm! See, for James, this must be the explanation, because otherwise he might

have to deal with what Ishmael calls “the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of” his precious crew before he can claim that they are haughtily laughing off the terrible experiences through which they have persevered.<sup>91</sup>

Other characters are treated in an equally poor manner. Starbuck, the most vocally (albeit ineffectually) opposed to Ahab of all the crew, is compared to “the liberals and democrats who during the [second] quarter of [this] century have led the capitulation to the totalitarians in country after country.” (56) Not only does James write Starbuck off as a blind follower, but he also suggests that he is an equally oppressive leader: “no need to emphasize that in reality, Starbuck hates the men and looks upon them as uncouth, barbarous sub-human beings.” (57) Again, I have as little specific proof to refute this as James has to support it, but the very fact that I, having read *Moby-Dick* several times, absolutely believe this statement to have no basis in the text implies that, at the very least, there is a “need to emphasize” it.

As it turns out, the only reality is that James draws only character names and partial plot structures from the actual text — the rest is a complete self-vilifying fabrication. Stubb can be understood not by thorough readers of *Moby-Dick*, but by “observers of communist totalitarianism in particular [who] will have noticed that most of its followers have an extraordinary capacity for accepting and accepting with apparent joy and enthusiasm policies which they execrated up to the very day they were announced, Stubb is their prototype. He goes to Ahab one day and makes a perfectly reasonable and civil request...” (58) The rest of the quote is not important to me because it is not important to James. He has already decided that “Stubb’s indifference and perpetual good humor and Starbuck’s life of unremitting moral crisis are merely different responses to the same weakness — the

inability to make of life a creative adventure.” (70) He may be correct, if a little overly caustic, regarding Starbuck, but Stubb does nothing but find creative ways to make his relatively ordinary life a little more interesting.

Argue as I may, it will still be written in James’ book that “Melville claims that [the officers of the Pequod] did not help the men, they demoralized them.” (59) I find myself at a loss. I can no more argue with this than I can convince one that is firmly convinced that a sphere has edges that there are in fact none.

So now James has found for his scenario, though questionably, the scholars and nobility who reluctantly follow and support a dictator. But “the totalitarian power must find, create, educate a special staff of men who are psychologically primitive, aborigines, with the added horror that they use modern weapons and modern science.” (61) Somehow, James fills this void with Fedallah. How does one see this mysterious character, who seems to have no effect on anybody but Ahab, as a symbol for the S.S.? Well, for starters, “this evil monster, Fedallah, poses in a very sharp way the relation between a writer’s creation and a reader. No one can say what exactly Fedallah is. And if Melville himself had tried to analyze and explain Fedallah, he would in all probability have made a mess of it and given up the attempt. His strength is not analysis but creation.” (61)

So obviously, Melville intended Fedallah to be the strong-arm of Ahab, but, due to deficient analytical skills (an assumption of James’ that we will see him contradict later on in this paper), he could only make it apparent by making the Parsee mysterious. However, “though [the appearance of Ahab’s secret crew] left abundant room for all manner of wild conjectures as to dark Ahab’s precise agency in the matter from the beginning,”<sup>92</sup> they never actively quell any dissension.

Nor, even, do any rebellious crew members (partly because there really are none) mysteriously disappear in the night.

So, James, what say you to this? What's that? Fedallah is not so much of a subservient as a coconspirator? Where's your proof?

“‘Hooped round by the gloom of the night they seemed the last men in a flooded world.’ The superb phrase is, as it is always, not something to admire, but a beacon-light in the illumination of Fedallah. Together he and Ahab are leading society to its destruction.” (62)

Alright, I can't claim that to be completely off, but wh...

“In Fedallah Ahab sees his forethrown shadow; in Ahab Fedallah sees his abandoned substance. Sometimes Ahab seems independent of him, sometimes they seem joined together. Ahab is power, Fedallah only a shade, but the shadow is always before him. Fedallah is certain that Ahab is doomed, that Ahab's attempt to humanize industry and science is doomed to failure. Fedallah waits the moment when once more man will bow down to fire, completely and abjectly. That is the way aboriginal man worshipped it. That is the substance which Ahab abandoned.” (62-63)

But I thought Fedallah was the one who had abandoned his substance. And didn't you just say that Ahab found, created, and educated Fedallah? Isn't Ahab the one using Fedallah? Well, dear reader, I cannot make sense of it. Perhaps there is none to be made, so let us move beyond this conundrum.

I think it is fitting, and probably too obvious to be valid, that James thinks that “it is Pip who in the end will be hailed as the greatest hero of all.” (18) He does, I guess, stand up to Ahab a little, but then he becomes almost codependent on him. True enough that Pip does bear an unarguably strong resemblance to Lear's fool and that “these

usually half-witted folk think simply and directly of what is humanly right or wrong.” (65) I guess.

Pip’s madness “is Melville’s way of saying that the perpetual preoccupation with human destiny, the thing that was eating the heart out of Ahab, Ishmael, and Starbuck, the profundities of philosophy and religion, this was madness. And madness it is, for men torment themselves about these abstractions only when they cannot make satisfactory contact with the reality around them.” (64) Well, I can’t dispute the majority of this logic, but I don’t know that it makes Pip the strongest or most heroic character. Ah, but best not to dwell on it. I’ll leave this, temporarily, as a relatively positive point so that I have the strength to attack the next, and probably most terrible, misconceptions.

This is horrible. I have the shakes, and bouts of dyspepsia come over me fitfully. To put together and organize such glaring fallacies and contradictions! As much as I hate to present random quotes, that is the only way I can conceive of to convey, and hopefully transfer, this feeling to you. First the more palatable:

“It is the unique and solitary greatness of Melville that he saw and understood the type to the last degree and the relation to it of all other social types.” (6)

All these social types sound kind of analytical; I thought that that wasn’t Melville’s talent...

“What Melville did was to place within the covers of one book a presentation of a whole civilization so that any ordinary human being today can read it in a few days and grasp the essentials of the world he lived in.” (137)

I thought it was more of your world, the future of his world, that he was describing...

“That this is how masses of men would sooner or later behave is what Melville was pointing out in 1851.” (11)

But you just said that he was describing the situation of his present...

“Melville does what he does all through the book, begins with the accepted practices, beliefs and even literary methods of his time, and then consciously and with the utmost sureness leaves them behind or rather takes them over into the world he saw ahead. He saw the future so confidently only because he saw so clearly what was going on around him.” (43)

Oh, I see...

“His analysis of the anatomy and physiology of every separate part of the whale is as complete as he can make it.” (102)

That must not be too complete if he's no good at analysis...

“He was doubtful if people would understand him. He certainly spared no effort to make himself clear from the very start.” (16)

How clear can it be if I disagree with you so much...

“It is clear that Melville intends to make the crew the real heroes of his book, but he is afraid of criticism.” (17)

The heroes let themselves be dragged to their deaths by a maniac?...

“To this day people read these chapters and will not understand them. But if these chapters are read and accepted, then right early the book itself can be seen for what it is, the grandest conception that has ever been made to see the modern world, our world, as it was, and the future that lay before it. The voyage of the Pequod is the voyage of modern civilization seeking its destiny.” (18)

So our heroes will let themselves be dragged to their deaths by a maniac?...

“The writer of this book[, C.L.R. James,] confesses frankly that it is only since the end of World War II, that the emergence of the people of the Far East and of Africa into the daily headlines, the spread of Russian totalitarianism, the emergence of America as a power in every quarter of the globe, it is only this that has enabled him to see the range, the power and the boldness of Melville and the certainty with which he wrote down what he intended to do.” (19)

You must not be that bright, considering that he made it so clear and all...

“First, while the captain and the officers are as American as Melville can make them, they are far more than Americans. They represent the science, knowledge, technical skill and ability to lead, of the world civilization. That is Melville’s vision. That the world is heading for a crisis which will be a world crisis, a total crisis in every sense of the word.” (36)

Weren’t the officers supposed to be incompetent and hate the crew?...

“Melville is aware [of the question of revolt] from the very beginning and he gives it his habitual systematic treatment.” (56)

The heroes let themselves be dragged to their deaths by a maniac?...

“But by Moby-Dick Melville has created for himself a total philosophy of life to replace the one he has rejected. It is not organized, but it is not in the slightest degree unconscious.” (101)

What about his habitual systematic treatment?...

“We have given examples of Melville’s strictly scientific method of selecting and defining his theme. All of Moby-Dick is built on this principle. From Chapter I to the last chapter he has his plan plotted and worked out in order, item after item stated, almost like a bill of lading. When he is finished with one topic he takes up another. He constantly classifies.” (146)

I thought it wasn’t organized...

“It is... extremely dangerous to take these ideas as specific political policies of Melville. He was an artist, and had made no consistent studies of economics and politics.” (88)

Didn’t you just say that he uses a strictly scientific method?

I thought he was developing a personal philosophy...

“We have to respect what a great writer says about what he is trying to do.” (45)

Isn’t that “extremely dangerous”?...

“Is it possible now to have any doubt as to what Melville had in mind when he wrote Moby-Dick?... Yet the ultimate question is not how Melville did it, but what he did. And the proof of that is in the world around us. It is not what he had in mind when he wrote that is important.” (99)

The heroes let themselves be dragged to their deaths by a maniac?...

“Just as from the real world of human beings, one can abstract philosophy, political economy, scientific theory, so from the partial account that is written down of this inherent world, one can deduce scientific theories of which the author was not at all directly conscious.” (142)

Didn't you say that it wasn't at all unconscious?...

“The artist's world is a total whole and its effects on the reader is designed to be total.” (144)

You certainly seem to feel free to disregard the total when it suits your purposes...

“His reference to Anacharsis Clootz is decisive.” (19)

Of all the varied references to be found throughout the total whole this is the decisive one?...

“His literary friends tried to make him one of their social groups of writing, criticizing, discussing intellectuals, but he kept them at a distance.” (110)

Didn't he hate Emerson and drive away Hawthorne with his near stalking of him?...

So now perhaps you see how much James is like Ahab. Facts and reality mean nothing to him. He's got a cause, and he will use any means possible, even nearly impossible, to force Moby-Dick into a reading that supports it.

Take a break, you've earned it (have a drink if you need it). But first, one last quote so it's still fresh in your mind when you come back. It is the one passage in James' entire book that I mostly agree with:

It is this weight of consciousness and of knowledge, absence of naturalness, lack of human association, delving into the inner consciousness, seeking to answer problems which cannot be answered, but which the tortured personality in its misery must continue to ask, it is this which Melville condemns. (32)

## *Intermission*

[I leave this space to you. Distract yourself. Perhaps write a poem or an outline of some grandiose plan for the saving of humanity. I assure you that this is sorely needed (the space and the saving). But whatever it is that you write below, for God's sake may it have nothing to do with Moby-Dick and deal even less with meaning.]

## *Act III*

Fate.

Quothe Ahab:

“Where lies the final harbor whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling’s father hidden?<sup>93</sup>... What cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time?”<sup>94</sup>

Settle this with yourself, reader, or throw this paper to the fire: the answer to this last question is Herman Melville, the Creator of not only Ahab, but Ahab’s entire world. The Fate of which nearly every character in the novel speaks is the Author himself, and it is he who has the “right and priviledge” to think, as “God only” does.<sup>95</sup>

Is this such a striking conclusion? I don’t think so. What is the author’s intention but the will of God to the world of his creation. What forced Ahab on in his quest even after all of the revelations of “The Symphony” chapter? The fact that the Author felt his death would more potently serve to prove some point.

This is not so foreign a concept. In September of 1851, Melville wrote to his friend, Sarah Huyler, that “the Fates have plunged me into certain silly thoughts and wayward speculations, which will prevent me, for a time, from falling into the reveries of these books [that you’ve

sent me] — for a fine book is a sort of reverie to us, — is it not? — So I shall regard them as my Paradise in store.”<sup>96</sup> Melville often spoke of the world as if it were a story told by some godly author.<sup>97</sup> Just as a planet is akin to a solar system in a galaxy and an electron to an atom in a molecule, so is a literary character akin to an author in what we see as the real world.

To Hawthorne, Melville wrote, “you did not care a penny for the book. But, now and then as you read, you understood the pervading thought that impelled the book — and that you praised. Was it not so? You were archangel enough to despise the imperfect body, and embrace the soul.”<sup>98</sup> It was more important to Herman than Nathaniel appreciate the idea of the author than the quality of the art.

What was that idea? James was wrong, Melville did not try to make it obvious, he wanted the reader to have to figure it out: “Truth is ever incoherent.” That was his reasoning behind asking Hawthorne to not “write a word about [Moby-Dick]. That would be robbing [him] of [his] miserly delight.”<sup>99</sup> Melville wanted Moby-Dick to be like the law of “Fast Fish and Loose Fish:” “the mischief [of] this masterly code is the admirable brevity of it, which necessitates a vast volume of commentaries to expound it.”<sup>100</sup> However, “to produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme [because] no great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it.”<sup>101</sup> To reconcile these two — seemingly contradictory — statements, I merely point out that Melville related them through the habitually contradictory Ishmael.

Why not have his friend Hawthorne promote his book with a review? Because then the secret would be out and those expounding commentaries would never be written. But Melville warns Ms. Huyler: “Don’t you buy it — don’t you read it, when it does come out,

because it is by no means the sort of book for you. It is not a piece of fine feminine Spitalfields silk — but is of the horrible texture of a fabric that should be woven of ships cables & hausers. A Polar wind blows through it, & birds of prey hover over it. Warn all gentle fastidious people from so much as peeping into the book — on risk of a lumbago & sciatics.”<sup>102</sup>

So why? Why would Melville want to warn people who are scrupulous with details — yet gentle — against reading the book? Because it is a trap for those “birds of prey!” Melville’s bitterness over the critical reception of *Mardi* is well enough documented that I needn’t go into it too much here. Melville vowed to “no more stab at a book (in print, I mean) than I would stab at a man... for [*Mardi*] was stabbed at (I do not say through) — & therefore, I am the wiser for it.”<sup>103</sup> But he also dealt with the rejection by seeing “these attacks [as] matters of course, and [as] essential to the building up of any permanent reputation — if, such should ever prove to be mine — ‘There’s nothing in it!’ cried the dunce, when he threw down the 47th problem of the 1st book of Euclid — ‘There’s nothing in it! — ’ Thus with the posed critic.”<sup>104</sup>

Yes, this bitterness is well documented, but, to my knowledge, nobody has ever postulated that *Moby-Dick*, his most scrutinized novel, was written as a comment on the whole situation. Melville realized that “this country is at present engaged in furnishing material for future authors; not in encouraging its living ones,”<sup>105</sup> so he took the opportunity to, as the bull whale in a school, “go abroad inculcating not what he learned there, but the folly of it.”<sup>106</sup> Perhaps Melville mixed his metaphors and made the sharks critics as well. That would certainly allow for an interesting reading of Fleece, the cook, and his sermon to them.<sup>107</sup>

Now whales begin to look like metaphors for metaphors – for “what are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the world but Loose-Fish? What all men’s minds and opinions but Loose-Fish? What is the principle of religious belief in them but a Loose-Fish? What to the ostentatious smuggling verbalists are the thoughts of thinkers but Loose-Fish? What the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish? And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?”<sup>108</sup> [but once again I’ve let slip something I hadn’t intended on pointing out until later, so let it slip from your mind for a bit...]

I’d suggest that no theory on the exact meaning of *Moby-Dick* can ever be completely proven to be true because the ever-defeating question, “did you get it from an unquestionable source?”,<sup>109</sup> may deflate any comprehensive argument because Ishmael is undoubtedly (and intentionally) a questionable narrator. Then again, this question is only universally deflating of analyses that don’t take it into account, and not only do I address the question itself by printing it verbatim in my paper, it topples easily with my explanation: that with *Moby-Dick*, Melville is presenting much the same argument as I have been with this paper.

Once Melville is seen as the Fate of the novel, and the novel itself seen as his comment on the discussion of criticism, the characters are each conspicuously like different types of readers: all put “down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies.”<sup>110</sup> The rest is so much tying up of loose ends. To Hawthorne, Melville wrote:

I am told, my fellow-man, that there is an aristocracy of the brain. Some men have boldly advocated and asserted it. Schiller seems to have done so, though I don’t know much about him. At any rate, it is true that there have been those who, while earnest in behalf of political equality, still accept the intellectual estates. And I can well

perceive, I think, how a man of superior mind can, by its intense cultivation, bring himself, as it were, into a certain spontaneous aristocracy of feeling, — exceedingly nice and fastidious, — similar to that which, in an English Howard, convey a torpedo-fish thrill at the slightest contact with a social plebian. So, when you see or hear of my ruthless democracy on all sides, you may possibly feel a touch of a shrink, or something of that sort. It is but nature to be shy of a mortal who boldly declares that a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as Gen. George Washington.<sup>111</sup>

This is Ishmael; and while his “ruthless democracy” may seem to be more akin to James, his means, or his “reading,” is Olson’s. But Sir James must not fear that he will be left out, for as I’ve said, he is Ahab:

By visible truth, we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him, — the man who, like Russia or the British Empire, declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven, hell, and earth. He may perish; but so long as he exists he insists upon treating with all powers upon an equal basis. If any of those other powers choose to withhold certain secrets, let them; that does not impair my sovereignty in myself, that does not make me tributary.<sup>112</sup>

Stubb.

Ahab laments that “gifted with the high perception, [he lacks] the low, enjoying power.”<sup>113</sup> “So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me.” (575) I’ll not take the time to list occurrences of this, but Ahab is often referred to as a tree; however, unlike the old saying, “it is alright to have your branches in the clouds as long as your roots are in the earth,”<sup>114</sup> Ahab has lost his roots (or foundation): his leg.

But when the upper part of a tree is removed, whether by cutting, lightning, or abstract thought, what's left is the (you guessed it) Stubb! I feel secure now in showing you my secret schema for this paper:

Sound Model of Meaning	Discernor	Stubb
	Medium	Starbuck
	Creator	Elijah
Wimsatt and Beardsley	Critic	Flask
	Poet	Fedallah
Knapp and Michaels	Realist	Pip
	Idealist	Queequeg
Olson	Researcher	Ishmael
Ahab	Activist	Ahab

There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own. (247)

Stubb is both the entire missing part of Ahab and only one third of the Sound Model of Meaning. He is the discernor. He sees everything as he would like to see it: as a joke. This does not make him merely a buffoon for “the man that has anything bountifully laughable about him, be sure there is more in that man than you perhaps think for.” (33) He is the one who observes the various characters looking at the doubloon and notices that there are a variety of possible readings from “one text” because there are “all sorts of men in one kind of world.” (474)

It is his choice to see everything as a joke. When he says, “pity if there is nothing wonderful in signs, and significant in wonders,” (473)

he means not only that there must be more to life than just living it, but that the “more” should be “wonderful.” “The fact is, you books must know your places. You’ll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts.” (473)

His strategy for dealing with the hardships of his life (and the hardships inherent in reading the signs of such a confusingly ambiguous world as that of *Moby-Dick*) is to forcibly apply humor to it: “long usage had, for this Stubb, converted the jaws of death into an easy chair.” (128) He is the archetype of what James sees as strength in the laughter of the men when surrounded by danger. However, though his view of the world is a choice, he is diminished by the fact that he never ventures outside of his point of view. While he believes that “a laugh’s the wisest, easiest answer to all that’s queer; and come what will, one comfort’s always left – that unfailing comfort is, it’s all predestinated,” (186) he fails to use this tool as a foundation from which to take a larger look at meaning.

Starbuck.

If Stubb sees the world only from his own singular point of view, Starbuck gets tied up trying to see it only from the world’s. Starbuck is a “mediumesque” reader. “I am here on this critical ocean to kill whales for my living, and not to be killed by them for theirs.” (125) Lacking creativity, Starbuck is involved in the story only as much as his society has told him he should to be.

He is “a staid, steadfast man, whose life for the most part was a telling pantomime of action, and not a tame chapter of words,” (124) an easily identifiable character with no pretext of second meanings or philosophy. However, this makes him ineffectual against those who live on separate planes. “Yet will I try to fight ye, ye grim, phantom

futures!” (185) But he cannot because you cannot fight what you cannot understand, or even see. What’s more, when separated from the society of the land, he gets mixed up in trying to figure out what it would have him do. His job is to follow the captain, but it is also his job to restrain that captain if he poses a threat to the ship. He realizes that the only way to stop Ahab is to kill him, but he also realizes that murder is wrong. In “The Musket” chapter he cannot shoot Ahab because first he must wrestle “with an angel,” (560) and his indeterminacy and lack of resolve render him impotent.

### Elijah.

I equate Elijah with my creator category because he believes that Fate has already written the future and it cannot be changed. Ishmael tells him that “it is the easiest thing in the world for a man to look as if he had a great secret in him,” (102) but it doesn’t matter whether he does or not. Whether Elijah foresees the outcome of the voyage of the Pequod or not is irrelevant: he believes that it is destined to end tragically and so concludes “not to make one of” the crew. (102)

If the author’s intended meaning is the only one and can’t be changed, then Elijah concludes not to read the book. Perhaps this makes him appear as a prophet of sorts, but his effect is that of “vague wonderments and half-apprehensions.” (103) He doesn’t participate and knows nothing concretely, so he is destined himself to always linger in the shadows outside of humanity.

### Flask.

Melville makes Flask absent of personality because he is the worst type of literary critic. “The wondrous whale was but a species of magnified mouse, or at least water-rat, requiring only a little

circumvention and some small application of time and trouble in order to kill and boil. This ignorant, unconscious fearlessness of his made him a little waggish in the matter of whales; he followed these fish for the fun of it.” (129) Or perhaps for money or — taking whales as symbols of symbols — the notoriety of having captured them.

Of the doubloon, he says, “I see nothing here, but a round thing made of gold, and whoever raises a certain whale, this round thing belongs to him.” (474) Like a critic who determines whether or not a book is of any value, he who spots the whale gets the prize: that is all. Stubb’s comment is telling: “if [Flask’s reading] be really wise it has a foolish look to it; yet, if it be really foolish, then has it a sort of wiseish look to it.” (474) Either way, it’s a pathetic linking of himself to another’s greatness.

Fedallah.

Fedallah’s vision is much like that which Wimsatt and Beardsley would have us impart to poets. He relates prophesies of which he has only the vaguest of comprehension. Just like W&B’s ideal poet strings together words to which any meanings implied may be applied, the Parsee is as useless as the Quadrant, which, appropriately, is the subject of the chapter directly following the relation of Fedallah’s prophesy. Doing exactly what W&B advise, Ahab reads Fedallah’s words exactly as he wants to — though it be overly literal.

Pip.

Pip must be seen abstractly because his purpose and use are abstract. “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.” (453–454) While I’ll admit that it is difficult to see Pip as a “realist,” remember that “realist” is a term used, by Knapp and Michaels, to describe one who believes that there can be an objective reading, or one outside of the self, of a text that has an inherent meaning intentionally given to it by some authorial agent.

Pip, you’ll recall, sees himself as being the vessel of some consciousness exterior to him: the real Pip has died of cowardice leaving the body to wander around objectively. Therefore, he is no longer among the characters of the book. Ahab sees “not [his] reflection in the pupils of [Pip’s] eyes” (567) because Pip can no longer reflect the world in which he exists — he is now an agent of Fate, or a literary tool for the author. He is not, however, the true prescient of Olson’s reading, and even less the hero of James’ (perhaps this is proof of the success of Melville’s trap).

As for the doubloon, the prize, “the precious, precious gold! — the green miser’ll hoard ye soon!” (475) The use of the word “green” I’ll deal with later, but for now, note that Melville calls himself a “miser,” hoarding the secret of the book.<sup>115</sup>

### Queequeg.

Like Juhl and de Man, Queequeg is a K&Mian idealist. At the Spouter Inn, Queequeg “took up a book there, and placing it on his lap began counting the pages with deliberate regularity; at ever fiftieth page — as [Ishmael] fancied — stopping a moment, looking vacantly around him, and giving utterance to a long-drawn gurgling whistle of astonishment.” (55) To him there is no meaning to the words, or at least none he cares to find; what amazes him about the book is that the

author took the time to make so many sequential slashes (or even that they had enough on their mind to write such a long book). The tattoos on his body are an even greater example of this because, not only doesn't he know what they mean, nobody does (and Ishmael is fond of thinking that they are some sort of guide to the meaning of the universe<sup>116</sup>).

But don't be fooled: Queequeg is not as uninvolved as Fedallah. Queequeg treats his physical world as many of the characters treat the symbolic one. When he becomes so sick that he has a coffin made, he remembers "a little duty ashore, which he was leaving undone; and therefore... changed his mind about dying." (523) So, like the idealist, Queequeg has neutral beliefs about his beliefs but, not believing you can be separate from them, he controls how they affect him. "In a word, it was Queequeg's conceit, that if a man made up his mind to live, mere sickness could not kill him; nothing but a whale, or a gale, or some violent, ungovernable, [separate from him,] unintelligent destroyer of that sort." (523)

Whales.

Lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. (172-173)

I take these hard-to-grasp ideas to be "the great whale himself" for he is "a portentous and mysterious monster." (8) How to understand

whales? What are they? “The only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems... you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan.” (289) Assuming, of course you do go whaling, the only way to get a whale to stop and put himself up for examination is to kill him, and even then he may float away “till lost in infinite perspectives.” (336) If you should happen to catch a whale and tie him to your boat, and if he should be a particularly mysterious one with many secrets held under his skin, as it were, he may sink before you discover much, for “every moment whole tons of ponderosity [may seem] added to the sinking bulk,” (393) until you must cut him loose or sink with him.

Now, assuming you catch a somewhat less momentous whale, he appears differently from each point of view until it seems as it did to Ishmael:

Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend is face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face. (414)

What is this mysterious creature? He “is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last.” (289) Ishmael takes the Right whale “to have been a Stoic; the Sperm whale, a Platonian, who might have taken up Spinoza in his latter years.” (367) Moreover, a Sperm whale’s genius, as we’ve noted, “is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it.” (380) It must be searched for and analyzed by us. Perhaps look at what he “stammer[s] out... by way of

getting a living," (407) when he breathes through his spout. No answers here, and dangerous to look! Look then at his skin and you see marks: "But these marks do not seem to be impressed upon the isinglass [or translucent] substance above mentioned, but seem to be seen through it, as if they were engraved upon the body itself. Nor is this all. In some instances, to the quick, observant eye, those linear marks, as in a veritable engraving, but afford the ground for far other delineations... like those mystic, rocks, too, the mystic marked whale remains undecipherable." (333)

So what have we here? What are these lines but the sequential slashes of a language representing abstract thought? What is the skin but the page of lines through which we may glimpse meaning? What are the whales themselves but books?

Whiteness.

Then what would it mean for the representation of a book to be white? The terror Ishmael has of that hue is "that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation." (212) A white wall or canvas appears blank to us because it reflects all colors equally and distinction cannot be made as it can when hue is added. Perhaps foundation could be developed for an analysis of a scarlet symbol on the basis of its passionate connotation; or maybe green can be attacked through its natural innocence or rejuvenance. But white is "the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors." (212) It is nothing because it is everything, and "so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him." (212)

## Moby-Dick.

Ishmael worries that people might take “Moby-Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory.” (223) A white whale would have to be a book to which no exact meaning may be perfectly imparted or from which extracted. “Nor did wild rumors of all sorts fail to exaggerate, and still the more horrify the true histories of these deadly encounters.” (195)

Of course, you’d have to expect that those despicable critic/analysts would be more than happy to apply their own splotches over that blank canvas. “The outblown rumors of the White Whale did in the end incorporate with themselves all manner of morbid hints, and half-formed foetal suggestions of supernatural agencies, which eventually invested Moby Dick with new terrors unborrowed from anything that visibly appears.” (197) Is this not exactly as many critics time and again have done in trying to define the book itself? (Myself included, of course.)

Melville created Moby Dick, the whale, as the symbol for Moby-Dick, the book: a grand, undefinable thing, the meaning and import of which will be surmised and/or attacked to no avail.<sup>117</sup> Just as some hold of Moby Dick, the whale, the “unearthly conceit that [he] was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same time;” (197) so will it be noted that the book has been said to be about and imply exactly opposite opinions. Those there are who’ve suggested that both whale and book will inevitably sink any who look for a truth to the matter and so suggest that there is none: that the fact that it asks these questions is the only answer.

## *Conclusion*

Truth.

You didn't think I would leave it thus, absent a final opinion, did you? Gracious, no! So far I've done nothing but use Olson's strategy (citing other, often seemingly unrelated, texts) to duplicate James' accomplishment (fitting all the characters of the book into a specific reading).

The real truth of *Moby-Dick* is the exact line between those who make it fit their meaning and those who think that its meaning is the absence of meaning. To find it, it is necessary not to look at what any characters see, but what they fail to see (this applies to the great mass of critics, too).

In pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed. (259)

Ishmael, in his quest for meaning, often comes to almost overly trite conclusions, yet lacks the ability to take his own advice. The reason for this is simple: like many critics who attempt to read *Moby-Dick*, the answer is exactly the thing that he is trying to disprove. He knows of himself that "amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still forever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep

inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy," (425) but his view is incessantly outward.

I won't linger on his outward search, the entire book is the only full coverage of this, but typically, of the whale's "fountain" he says, "the wisest thing the investigator can do then, it seems to me, is to let this deadly spout alone." (409) His mistake in his outward view is seeing truth as "a thing for salamander giants only to encounter" (370) because that perspective suggests that there is some gigantic universal truth, "provincials" just can't see it and retain their sanity. Examining the Sperm whale's head, he asks, almost jestingly, "why then do you try to 'enlarge' your mind? — Subtilize it." (362) The choice then, as Ishmael sees it, is between insanity or complacency.

"Consider [the subtleness and universal cannibalism of the seal; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?" (299) This duality seems, then, to be of two parts of a person, inextricable from that human whole. This is Ishmael's problem. You can and should shed your philosophies: "when on one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds for ever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right." (357)

He advises the reader to "look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. Tomorrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at

least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp—all others but liars!” (464) Yet still he can not help but wonder if those ghastly faces were the truer image, and the “truest of all men... the Man of Sorrows.” He continually returns to the ideas that “all is vanity. ALL” (465) and that the truth of depression is the more honest.

Ahab doesn’t waffle as much as Ishmael. Instead, he seems to have a sudden change of heart when the end draws palpably near. This is when he makes his famous turn on science: “cursed be all the things that cast man’s eyes aloft to that heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him, as these old eyes are even now scorched with thy light, O sun! level by nature to this earth’s horizon are the glances of man’s eyes, not shot from the crown of his head.” (118)

“The Symphony” chapter is Ahab’s decisive one. He comes to see himself in Starbuck and his entire life as wasted in whaling. “Let me look into a human eye, it is better than to gaze into sea or sky, better than to gaze upon God. By the green land; by the bright hearth-stone! this is the magic glass, man.” (591) But rather than turn back on what he has up to now believed unquestionably and make what he can of the life he has left, he does as Ishmael says of himself much earlier in the book: “when a man suspects any wrong, it sometimes happens that if he be already involved in the matter, he insensibly strives to cover up his suspicions even from himself.” (106)

I’ll say this for Ahab, he follows through and brings the saga to its inevitable conclusion.

---

Peleg: “Ye have been studying those scriptures, now, for the last thirty years, to my certain knowledge. How far ye got, Bildad?” (84)

---

The decisive chapter for Ishmael I take to be the “A Squeeze of the Hand” chapter (455), which follows every failed attempt to find truth

from the “Moby Dick” chapter on (what comes before that, I believe, can be taken as a setting of the stage). He states that squeezing the sperm is “a sweet and unctuous duty,” and that the sperm itself is “a cleaner... a sweetener... a softener... a delicious mollifier.” Furthermore, the manner in which this particular job is done is “at [one’s] ease... after the bitter exertion at the windlass... under a blue and tranquil sky; the ship under indolent sail, and gliding serenely along.” There is no questioning, no second meanings. As Ishmael “snuffed up that uncontaminated aroma, – literally and truly, like the smell of spring violets... for that time, [he] lived as in a musky meadow.”

He then tells us that all of the causes of the book are gone: “I forgot all about our horrible oath... I washed my hands and heart of it.” He “almost” believes in the alchemistic work of Philippus Aureolus Paracelsus, who preached that sperm could be used for cooling anger. Perhaps Ahab should have partaken of the substance, for it frees one “from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever.”

He is drawn away from the “intellect or the fancy” that has caused both he and the reader no little consternation, and from which all men “must eventually lower, or at least shift, [their] conceit of attainable felicity.” Ishmael, having had “many prolonged, repeated experiences” with this euphoric substance,<sup>118</sup> has realized that here-in the key to life lies: riding a horse through the countryside, sniffing those violets, and then returning home for a pleasant meal with the family by the fireside and finally to his cozy bed!<sup>119</sup>

Quite poetically, Ishmael tells us that “in thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti.” Angels, so close to God, and with access to all of the truths for which Ishmael and Ahab so desperately seek, choose instead to feel the “soft, gentle globules of infiltrated tissues” in jars of

the oil. This is “paradise.”

The changing point comes with the potent irony that follows, in the text, directly — though separated by a row of asterisks. He reverts right back to his old overly-intellectual habits with a descriptive analyzing of the sperm itself. After this, it is Ahab’s turn to come to the same conclusion and fail to act on it.

Melville.

The Extracts are narrated by Melville, not Ishmael. That is why they are separated from the rest of the book by an unnecessary title page, and the narrative is in brackets (not to mention that they aren’t included in the page numbering). Perhaps the Sub-Sub is an elderly Ishmael — I don’t care, its not important to me. What I want to point out is that Melville tells us that “these extracts are solely valuable or entertaining, as affording a glancing bird’s eye view of what has been promiscuously said, thought, fancied, and sung of Leviathan, by many nations and generations, including [his] own.”<sup>120</sup> “A glancing bird’s eye view.” Remember that Melville refers to critics as “birds of prey” and that the bird at the end of the novel, the one that persists in pecking at the Pequod’s flag (a flag being any ship’s defining symbol), is dragged into the ocean by one of the characters.

“Round the world! There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings; but where-to does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through numberless perils to the very point whence we started, where those that we left behind secure, were all the time before us.”<sup>121</sup> In his letters to Hawthorne, Melville gives his life’s work and his philosophies a tremendous amount of thought. “Let us speak, though we show all our faults and weaknesses, — for it is a sign of strength to be weak, to know it, and out with it, — not in a set way and ostentatiously, though,

but incidentally and without premeditation.”<sup>122</sup> He writes of a trip to New York City in an attempt to forcibly finish *Moby-Dick*, though he longs for “the calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man ought always to write, — that... can seldom be [his].”<sup>123</sup> He dreams of reclining in Heaven and “pleasantly discours[ing] of all the things manifold which now so distress us.”<sup>124</sup>

I have been building some shanties of houses and likewise some shanties of chapters and essays. I have been plowing and sowing and raising and painting and printing and praying, — and now begin to come out upon a less hustling time, and to enjoy the calm prospect of things from a fair piazza at the north of the old farm house here.<sup>125</sup>

Considering that these are the moods in which he wrote and finished *Moby-Dick*, can there be any doubt of what he is urging? “People think that if a man has undergone any hardship, he should have a reward; but for my part, if I have done the hardest possible day’s work, and then come to sit down in a corner and eat my supper comfortably — why, then I don’t think I deserve any reward for my hard day’s work — for am I not now at peace? Is not my supper good? My peace and my supper are my reward.”<sup>126</sup> Why, these words could have been placed right next to those of the “Squeeze” chapter and not a line be drawn. “It is a strange feeling — no hopefulness is in it, no despair. Content — that is it; and irresponsibility, but without licentious inclination. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling.”<sup>127</sup> “At such moments the problem of the universe seems a humbug, and epistolary obligations mere moonshine, and the — well, nepenthe seems all-in-all.”<sup>128</sup>

Melville writes of an “‘all’ feeling... lying on the grass on a warm

summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the all feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion."<sup>129</sup>

The solution to our greatest questions, it would seem, is to know that they all are questions of the intellect or fancy and be able to withdraw our inquiry when we get too tied to it. This is what Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* to prove. And he did so masterfully.

In reading all those long, seemingly conclusionless, chapters, you may take three approaches: 1) you can read from "within" the story and take the words as a grossly verbose gospel, 2) you can read from outside of the story and see the humor in the contradictions, or 3) you can effectually skim the more difficult chapters. The length and complexity don't really allow for comprehensive half-readings. "There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny places."<sup>130</sup>

Is this possible as a universal truth and guide to living?<sup>9</sup> Perhaps not; perhaps the world is too much in us.<sup>131</sup> But in life it is something to shoot for, and in reading, well, there it should be a requirement: for then we can take the book for whatever it may be, whatever that is. "Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye."<sup>132</sup>

Perhaps you are wondering, this being my conclusion and all, why I would write such a long analysis to prove that not analyzing is the point of the book. I don't mean to say that not analyzing is the point of the book, but that not getting caught up in your analysis is the point

of the book. Didn't I say at the very beginning that the majority of us read for entertainment? I enjoyed writing this paper. And hopefully, to some extent, you enjoyed reading it. What all critic/analysts need to do is to always be aware of the compass of what they are doing.

### Epilogue.

Ultimately, I can only attest to this all as what I believe to be true. Too many people think differently for me to state it as an out-and-out fact. But "any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that reason infallibly be faulty."<sup>133</sup> If you disagree with me, well, there is much to be said; if you agree, I've still not covered everything — I couldn't possibly, for fear that I would be dragged down into that unforgiving sea. If you're looking for a good place to continue with my reading (and I realize the conceit in this), one aspect I didn't really delve into is a look at the passing ships as other books, with other casts, so to speak.

But I leave it thus, "for small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught — nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!"<sup>134</sup>

135

At my years, and with my disposition, or rather, constitution, one gets to care less and less for everything except downright good feeling. Life is so short, and so ridiculous and irrational (from a certain point of view) that one knows not what to make of it, unless — well, finish the sentence for yourself.

H. Melville, 1877

(Correspondence, page 454)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I offer this tid-bit for those who would doubt my veracity and desire proof.

<sup>2</sup> Melville expressed this sentiment to his British publisher, Richard Bentley, in a letter written on June 5, 1849, which can be found on page 131 of the Correspondence book listed under “Works Cited” at the end of this essay. On page 619 of the same collection can be found a letter from Bentley written on May 5, 1852 in which he explains that “if [Melville] had revised [his] work ‘Mardi,’ to the latest, the ‘Whale,’ and restrained [his] imagination somewhat, and had written in a style to be understood by the great mass of readers... [he] would have succeeded in England.”

<sup>3</sup> This comment directly follows a statement of hope that Melville would never have to write a book like *Redburn*, one written solely to put “money into an empty purse,” again. Page 149 of Correspondence.

<sup>4</sup> Page 138 of Correspondence. Henceforth, if a page number is my only justification for a footnote, I’ll simply parenthesize the number.

<sup>5</sup> Not to mention the bloopy clarinets of the *Idée Fixe*.

<sup>6</sup> Here I am taking William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley at their word on page 5 of their own “Intentional Fallacy” that these are indeed Professor Stoll’s words, as the original was unavailable on the date of printing.

<sup>7</sup> Page 4 of their coauthored “Intentional Fallacy.”

<sup>8</sup> Quote cited here as on page 12 of “Intentional Fallacy,” Professor Lowes’ complete quote unavailable.

<sup>9</sup> Page 15, the poet they use as an example is T.S. Eliot and the notated poem is “The Waste Land.”

<sup>10</sup> I don’t mean to imply that this is or is not explicitly stated, but considering the common license taken with misinterpretation, the quote opens the door for such an attack (both in the sense that I may attack them and the author may be chastised).

<sup>11</sup> Page 725. Interior quote from “Validity in Interpretation” by E.D. Hirsch.

<sup>12</sup> They give this particular example quite a bit of lip-service on page 727.

<sup>13</sup> On page 172 of *The Floating Opera*. I've no evidence that he was the originator of this "two voice... stylistic trick," as he calls it, but then, I've no evidence that he wasn't.

<sup>14</sup> Page 723 of "Against Theory."

<sup>15</sup> Page 734. This paraphrasing is K&M's.

<sup>16</sup> A note here to express the opinion that the busy work to which we were assigned, as in many endeavors, required minimally, if any, more exertion than the act of pretending to do it. And while I'm at note-giving, let me point out that drunkenness is only the employers' enemy during working hours: in the grander scheme it is their greatest ally.

<sup>17</sup> This nickname, accurate at the time, did not, in my opinion, have the sarcastic connotation that generally accompanies it in similar settings.

<sup>18</sup> Page 13 of *Call Me Ishmael*.

<sup>19</sup> I had wanted, but was unable, to print the answers in an upside down mirror image, so, for the same effect when you check your answers, just stand on your head and look at the paper's reflection in two sequential mirrors.

<sup>20</sup> *Ishmael in Moby-Dick*, page 221.

<sup>21</sup> Olson in *Call Me Ishmael*, pages 77-78.

<sup>22</sup> *Ishmael*, page 231.

<sup>28</sup> *Ishmael*, page 470.

<sup>23</sup> *Ishmael*, pages 496-497.

<sup>29</sup> *Ishmael*, pages 44-45.

<sup>24</sup> Olson, page 68.

<sup>30</sup> *Ishmael*, page 395.

<sup>25</sup> *Ishmael*, page 496.

<sup>31</sup> Olson, page 24.

<sup>26</sup> *Ishmael*, page 406.

<sup>32</sup> *Ishmael*, page 145.

<sup>27</sup> Olson, page 56.

<sup>33</sup> *Ishmael*, page 59.

<sup>34</sup> Olson, page 36. I think I would be too lax in my duties as critic/analyst were I not to point out that other critic/analysts consider all conclusions involved to be faulty logic – see the Wimsatt and Beardsley section earlier in this paper for a refutation of Olson's conclusion – keep an eye out in current periodicals for a refutation of mine.

<sup>35</sup> *Ishmael*, page 11. This quote was actually describing a book by an old, unnamed, author to whom *Ishmael* makes reference. In *Ishmael's* case however, there is only one copy of the book altogether, underlined or not. So you must understand that this document was unavailable at print time.

<sup>36</sup> Olson is unclear regarding which play sparked this comment from Melville, but, because both *King Lear* and *Hamlet* are in the volume in which it appears, it is possibly one of those. The relation of the marginal thought

to Moby-Dick seems self apparent: the word “madness” appears in both.

<sup>37</sup> Ishmael, page 209.

<sup>38</sup> Olson, page 39. W & B might have something to say about this one, too.

<sup>39</sup> Olson, page 55. I think here, too, W & B might have something to say about the validity of this comment.

<sup>40</sup> Olson, page 57.

<sup>51</sup> Ishmael, page 395.

<sup>41</sup> Olson, page 57.

<sup>52</sup> Ishmael, page 160.

<sup>42</sup> Ishmael, while at “The Spouter-<sup>53</sup> Olson, page 73.

Inn” on page 16.

<sup>54</sup> Ishmael, page 343.

<sup>43</sup> Ishmael, page 7.

<sup>55</sup> Gabriel does the former according to Ishmael, page 345.

<sup>44</sup> Ishmael, page 5.

<sup>56</sup> Olson, pages 62-63.

<sup>45</sup> Ishmael, page 452.

<sup>57</sup> Olson, page 61.

<sup>46</sup> Ishmael page 380.

<sup>58</sup> Olson, page 102.

<sup>47</sup> Ishmael, page 414.

<sup>59</sup> Ishmael, page 508.

<sup>48</sup> Ishmael, page 408.

<sup>60</sup> Olson, page 64.

<sup>49</sup> Olson, page 68.

<sup>61</sup> Olson, pages 67-68.

<sup>50</sup> Ishmael, page 171.

<sup>62</sup> Olson, page 69. Again, I’m sorry to use so large a quote, but I was reluctant to paraphrase for fear of losing the Ishmaelian use of allusion and adding a feel of sense not already inherent.

<sup>63</sup> Olson, page 94.

<sup>64</sup> Olson, page 98.

<sup>65</sup> Ishmael, page 380.

<sup>66</sup> James, pages 1-2. For the remainder of this section, all references to James will be parenthesized, and references to other works will be footnoted.

<sup>67</sup> Moby-Dick, page 135.

<sup>68</sup> Moby-Dick, page 202.

<sup>69</sup> This is an argument I may present in more detail later, but for now it is farther from the topic at hand than I’d like to go.

<sup>70</sup> Moby-Dick, page 614.

<sup>76</sup> Moby-Dick, page 160.

<sup>71</sup> Moby-Dick, page 613.

<sup>77</sup> Moby-Dick, page 183.

<sup>72</sup> Moby-Dick, page 517.

<sup>78</sup> Moby-Dick, page 203.

<sup>73</sup> Moby-Dick, page 201.

<sup>79</sup> Moby-Dick, page 175.

<sup>74</sup> Moby-Dick, page 180.

<sup>80</sup> Moby-Dick, page 172.

<sup>75</sup> Moby-Dick, page 159.

<sup>81</sup> Moby-Dick, page 7.

<sup>82</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 527.

<sup>83</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 203. Ishmael does, however, admit that “all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than [he] can go.”

<sup>84</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 358. The “passing things” include the relationship of Ahab to Fedallah and the hoisting of two whale heads on the sides of the boat.

<sup>85</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 586.

<sup>86</sup> The landlord of the Spouter-Inn, who, incidentally is hardly “laconic” considering that he has just been garrulously participating in elusive word-play with Ishmael.

<sup>87</sup> I’ve read the opinion somewhere, don’t ask me where, that Ahab was describing the ideal man that he, himself, would like to be. I’d say this is a bit closer to correct. Considering Ahab’s lamentation in “The Symphony” chapter, his ideal man would be rooted to prevent his being as many years from home as Ahab, he would have no heart so he wouldn’t be hurt, his forehead would be brass so it couldn’t be wrinkled with concern, and the skylight on his head implies that true value can be found in the mind rather than anything that can be seen in the outside world.

<sup>88</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 602. I’m reminded of a joke told to me by a priest — a man’s three story home was being flooded. He was standing at his door when the flood began, and a man on a horse came by and offered him a ride to safety. The homeowner turned the man away saying that Jesus was going to save him. The flood forced the man to the second floor. Looking out the window, he saw a family in a boat float by, and they offered him a ride to safety. Again, the man refused because he believed Jesus would save him. The flood finally forced him to the roof, where a helicopter soon landed, and the pilot told him that they’d better fly to safety. Once again the man refused. The flood kept coming, and the man drowned. Up in Heaven, the man asked Jesus why he didn’t save him. Jesus told him that he had sent a man on horseback, a boat, and a helicopter, but the man had turned them all away.

<sup>89</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 258.

<sup>93</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 535.

<sup>90</sup> *Moby-Dick*, pages 233–234.

<sup>94</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 592.

<sup>91</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 463.

<sup>95</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 613.

<sup>92</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 239.

<sup>96</sup> Correspondence, page 206.

<sup>97</sup> “Is Jove appreciated? Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of hi-s great allegory — the world? Then we pigmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended.” Correspondence, page 212. To Hawthorne, 11/17/1851.

<sup>98</sup> Correspondence, page 212. Unfortunately, the letter from Hawthorne to

which this is a response has been lost.

<sup>99</sup> Correspondence, page 213.

<sup>100</sup> Moby-Dick, page 433.

<sup>101</sup> Moby-Dick, page 497.

<sup>102</sup> Correspondence, page 206.

<sup>103</sup> Correspondence, page 149. Interestingly to our discussion, Melville also writes that he is “but a poor mortal, & I admit that I learn by experience & not by divine intuitions.”

<sup>104</sup> Correspondence, page 130, to father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw, 4/23/1849.

<sup>105</sup> Correspondence, page 198, to Richard Bentley, 7/20/1851.

<sup>106</sup> Moby-Dick, page 430.

<sup>107</sup> Moby-Dick, page 322. “No use goin’ on, de dam willains will keep a scrougin’ and slappin’ each oder, Massa Stubb; dey don’t hear one word; no use a-preachin’ to such dam g’uttons as you call ‘em, till dare bellies is full, and dare bellies is bottomless and when dey do get em full, dey wont hear you den; for den dey sink in de sea, go fast to sleep on de coral, and can’t hear nothing at all, no more, for eber and eber.”

<sup>108</sup> Moby-Dick, page 435. Italics mine.

<sup>109</sup> Moby-Dick, page 284. This question is posed to Ishmael by Don Sebastion. Of course, this is the wrong question because Don Sebastion’s source is questionable.

<sup>110</sup> Moby-Dick, page 7.

<sup>111</sup> Correspondence, pages 190–191.

<sup>112</sup> Correspondence, page 186. Again to Hawthorne.

<sup>113</sup> Moby-Dick, page 182. Since the majority of the quotes will now be from Moby-Dick, unless otherwise footnoted, page numbers will be parenthesized.

<sup>114</sup> I don’t recall the exact wording, so I merely mirror the sentiment. The original had something to do with castles in the clouds and builders in the dirt, or maybe noses in the air and foot firmly on someone else’s back.

<sup>115</sup> Not to be guilty of the same kind of transferal of words for which I faulted Olson — for now, take this merely as an interesting coincidence.

<sup>116</sup> However, because this is practically the only origin of symbolism into which Ishmael doesn’t delve, I can only postulate that he either means this ironically, as a joke, or completely, in which case perhaps he is afraid to actually find “Truth.”

<sup>117</sup> I don’t know if this a stretch or not, so I’ll only give it the weight of a footnote; perhaps the full title is Moby-Dick or The Whale to make this

distinction: *Moby-Dick* is a title, taken from the character in the book, but *The Whale* is a name (a nickname if you will), as in “a whale of a book.”

<sup>118</sup> It is important to remember that these words are supposedly written after the sinking of the *Pequod* and numerous other whaling trips, none of which brought Ishmael any closer to that for which he was originally looking.

<sup>119</sup> Granted most of these words are mine, but the sentiment is implied as surely as the sexual innuendoes throughout the book.

<sup>120</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page xxxviii.

<sup>121</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 258.

<sup>122</sup> Correspondence, page 196.

<sup>123</sup> Correspondence, page 191.

<sup>124</sup> Correspondence, page 191.

<sup>125</sup> Correspondence, page 195.

<sup>126</sup> Correspondence, page 211.

<sup>127</sup> Correspondence, page 212.

<sup>128</sup> Correspondence, page 452.

<sup>129</sup> Correspondence, page 194.

<sup>130</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 465.

<sup>131</sup> I can't claim these words completely for I believe them to have first been stated, or something like them, by some British poet. Perhaps Wordsworth or Blake, I'm not sure.

<sup>132</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 409.

<sup>133</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 147.

<sup>134</sup> *Moby-Dick*, page 157.

<sup>135</sup> There is meaning in all things, but it can only be seen where we condescend to look.

## *Works Cited*

- Barth, John. *The Floating Opera and the End of the Road*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1988.
- James, C.L.R. *Mariners Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. Detroit: Bewick/ed, 1978.
- Knapp, Steven and Walter Benn Michaels. "Against Theory." *Critical Inquiry*. Summer (1982): 723-742.
- Melville, Herman. *Correspondence*. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1993.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick or The Whale*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Olson, Charles. *Call Me Ishmael*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Wimsatt Jr., W.K. and Monroe C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Verbal Icon*. Frankfort: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954.



Timshel Literature  
P.O. Box 751  
Portsmouth, RI 02871  
[www.timshelarts.com](http://www.timshelarts.com)

