

INTRODUCTION

Melville's writing is, at times, like a graveyard of failed metaphors. It is a language that expects miscommunication and overcommunication, redundancy and paradox. It is a language that relentlessly states and restates. It only expects so much from its symbols, and so, in acknowledging their specific failure, forges a specific idiomatic fix to match the unique communication problems of the novel's subject-matter. If Moby-Dick is a tragedy, it is a hopeful one; hopeful in the sense that despite its own self-negation, it still must be told.

I suggest in this thesis that Moby-Dick is a bi-level system, both in concept and in language. J.W. Nechas writes that "*Moby-Dick* is really two books: one is a philosophical treatise on the nature of reality, and the other is the journal of a common and somewhat loquacious sailor."¹ Nechas might be half right, but he's also definitely half wrong. The novel is indeed concerned with the nature of reality, but Ishmael as a narrator is the case study, not the distraction from that concern. A great deal of uproar and disagreement happens over the rather quibbling question of whether or not narrators are like authors, or indeed, like real people. I suppose a long, and very arduously researched thesis could determine whether or not Ishmael is like Herman Melville, and whether they talked in similar diction and whether they both liked chowder, or whatever, and then maybe I could say definitively, "Yes, when we talk about Ishmael, we are really talking about Melville." Or not. But that is not the concern of this thesis. I am content to say that for the purposes of this writing, Ishmael is designed to seem like a real writer. At first. But any close reader will find that this "seeming" doesn't hold out very well. Ishmael starts to sound very quickly like an encyclopedia, or like other characters, or like Melville, or like a madman, depending on how you look at it. Maybe Melville was just a bad writer and couldn't keep his narrative voice unified and it slipped into other modes. If that's the case, we can all go home and sleep soundly. But I suspect that Melville was in fact a very good writer, maybe the best one I've ever read, and that what Ishmael says, does, and is, is a very complicated problem that is just one of a series of very complicated problems in the novel Moby-Dick.

¹ Nechas, James William. Synonymy, Repetition, and Restatement in the Vocabulary of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Page 2.

Problem one on this list is the difference between the real world and fiction books. Even the smallest child knows the difference between the true, and the make-believe. Right? What happens between the covers of a story is something somebody made up, and its just not true. The people, the places, the things said and done, though they might seem real, and inspire the thoughts and emotions that similar things in the real world might, they are somehow intrinsically unreal. Safer maybe. More virtualized, hypothetical. Maybe a testing ground for our minds and emotions and philosophies. Or not, maybe just fun or escapism. Whatever your pet theory about art and Kant and the distance between the real and the imagined may be, we might first agree that Moby-Dick is not a history book. Indeed, it tells us a great deal about whaling, diction, thought, publishing, sexuality, whatever, in the middle of the 19th century, but its not the same as pure fact. There is a tacit understanding that the reader has with the subject being read. We understand that though a piece of fiction may enlist factuality about things, people, and events, it is not the same as fact reported. Agreed?

Here's the catch. Moby-Dick (like most novels maybe, but specifically so) claims that it is true. And it tells us, in many different ways, that in some special way, things like fiction books, or stories that seem like lies, are in fact extremely true. Maybe hyper-true. Truer than anything the reader could say back to Ishmael, that made-up little man inside a book. Factuality and truth diverge. Why?

How dare Melville do that? This is dangerous, maddening stuff, Melville. Ishmael tells a story within a story one time in the novel. He discusses a mutiny with some Dons in Lima, and when they question him, thinking his story was too fantastic to be believed, he swears "So help me Heaven, and on my honor the story I have told ye, gentlemen, is in substance and its great items, true." (Ch. 54)

But you say, "Every fiction book claims to be true--that's what they do!" Fair enough. But Moby-Dick is a different sort of a fiction book. For one, it doesn't try very hard to hang together as a narrative. Only about a third of its chapters might be considered narrative at all. It's filled with a great deal of other material, strange material, that I hope to make sense of in this thesis. Second, I think that Moby-Dick doesn't try very hard to be novel at all. The "loquacious sailor" that Nechas complains about is more like a theory, a sketch, an afterthought of a character. Many times, we examine Ishmael's voice, and find weird contradictions, or strange

absorptions of other characters' speech patterns. We frequently find him reporting facts he couldn't possibly have known. We often enjoy him telling us the private thoughts of other characters. "Sure," you say, "Semi-omniscient narrator, free, indirect discourse...Noah, this isn't terribly convincing." Again, conceded, but please, I'm getting to it.

The bi-level organizational structure of the novel is this. We have a narrator, Ishmael, who is, in varying degrees, a facsimile of a person. We have a world in the book, that is, I think, largely a factual facsimile of our world. If this was the extent of it, then Ishmael and Ahab and all their friends would catch their whale, or not, die, or live, and then the book would end, leaving their world where it is, and ours where ours is. But fortunately (for this thesis, and for art, unfortunately for Ishmael) that is not so. Something breaks into that simple, one-layer scheme that changes it, profoundly. Something sneaks into the world of Ishmael, and then, after enough has sneaked into, sneaks into him, into his mind, his voice, his description of his world. Things happen in the book that wouldn't make sense in our world. Words are used to describe things in uncomfortable ways. Events happen in surprising, difficult-to-understand ways, and the people involved experience emotions and thoughts that I, and I hope, most readers find surprising.

There is a great betrayal in Moby-Dick. On the one hand, there is a contract that says, For the purposes of this novel, these are the rules of the world. On the other hand, that contract is qualified by us saying "Fine, do your worst, even break the contract, because a book will stay a book, and our world will stay our world, no matter what kind of crazy nonsense you toss in there, Herman." But what ends up happening, and what I want to write about, indeed, what I need to write about, is the way in which the contract *is* broken, but doesn't result in nonsense, or a bad book, or a wacky, anything-goes experiment. Instead, the glass screen between the world on the page and the world around the reader cracks a little, and all sorts of nasty things break in.

This other state of reality, often frightening, always difficult to describe, is what I try to call *inversion*. That is probably a poor word, because what I really mean, is that inversions, of many different types, tend to happen *around* this altered reality, as more symptoms than causes. I guess a good metaphor (and they're hard to come for, believe me) is that of localized earthquakes. Every so often, there is a truthquake in Moby-Dick that isn't terribly observable at the time (we can feel a shake, a little rumble, but everything, including our narrator, and his

descriptions, are shaking simultaneously, preventing much relative difference from being observable). Afterwards, though, we can see the damage that localized quake has done. We see certain parts of the book, of characters, the language, changed, broken down, reformed, while other parts remain untouched. It is in the contrast that the nature of the event is charted.

The book is a battle. It is a battle both to describe and organize these strange attacks on status quo thought, these *inversions*, but it is also a battle to control them. And in this paradox resides the key scheme to understanding the book (I think): describing the inversion invites further inversion. (Once a disjunct in the traditional/historical truth-finding modes happens, new facts, strange or not strange, are filtered through the inverted lens that was forged by the initial break.) The process of controlling prevents understanding, but the process of understanding tempts a loss of control. Ishmael tells us:

“‘the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain’ (i. e. even while living) ‘in the congregation of the dead’. Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me.” (Ch. 96)

Ishmael himself becomes inverted, which creates a lurking variable in separating the events from the voice. The background noise created when one’s own mind is affected by what that mind analyzes is like a double lens; strange things, when viewed through a strange mind seem normal, and normal things come out upside down. Ishmael says that the mental inversion process has an aspect of “deaden[ing];” nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Pip.

Pip, acting as a replacement oarsman, jumps from the boat in fear (of the sound of the running rope) and is lost alone at sea. After a day, he is found again by the Pequod, “but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was.” (Ch. 93)

Pip’s abandonment renders him a crazed prophet (much like Elijah, and later, Gabriel). The status of mad soothsayer is a very specific one in Moby-Dick: rarely are they listened to, and rarely are they wrong. Elijah in Nantucket and Gabriel aboard the Jeroboam both correctly predict Ahab’s hubris and the fall of the Pequod. But Pip’s case is the most interesting. Being alone on the open ocean permanently disconnects him from the rational, known world, and connects him to somewhere else. “The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?” The decontextualized person, the self apart from other selves, causes the prophetic insanity. Surprisingly, Ishmael says “my God! who can *tell*

it?" (emphasis added); he feels that a failure of language, not a failure of empathy, is what makes it hard for us to comprehend Pip's experience. This is because Ishmael himself experienced the *same* abandonment. But more of that in a few moments.

Ahab notices Pip's "insanity" is not incoherent: "Some unknown conduits from the unknown worlds must empty into thee!" (Ch. 127) Ahab sees that Pip is a channel for inverted knowledge. Pip sees "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" and sees the "joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities." Ishmael tells us that "...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." The knowledge Pip has isn't useful to survival or to the mission of collecting whale oil. It is, however, useful to Ahab who is seeking to punch through the mask of Moby Dick to see the cosmic structure that lurks behind.

So what's the point? Pip is nuts, perhaps, sees the secrets of the universe, perhaps, and seems mad to his shipmates. So what? Well, remember, Ishmael, our narrator, floated also in the open ocean, for three days, before being picked up by the "devious-cruising Rachel." (Epilogue) Ishmael's qualified credibility is the same as Pip's; Ishmael too was inverted, and Ishmael too we must question as a narrator.

Just to get us started, let's look at a few obvious cases of Ishmael's narrative voice exposing inversion and being inverted in return. Ishmael, in describing a wounded and dying whale, tells us that the animal "impotently flapped with his stumped fin, then over and over slowly revolved like a waning world..." (Ch. 81) Here's a very problematic metaphor. If I can presume to say something like "a normal metaphor," I would certainly say that this is an abnormal one. The model I suggest of metaphor, at its very minimum, is that metaphor ought to bring us closer to *a* meaning. Maybe not the right one, maybe not the one the writer intended--that's a battle for another critic--but the goal of metaphor, as I articulate it, is to zoom in on something. So when I say something like "My love is a red, red rose" I take something rather abstract, or ostensibly more difficult to understand such as "love" and use "a red, red rose" to help get a reader closer to comprehending the difficult concept of love. So maybe, (I'm probably stepping on some toes here) most metaphors tend to take something that is *abstract, large, or complex* and attempt to filter it through another thing, something that is *more concrete, smaller,*

or *simpler*. I'm not pretending this is how all metaphor works, or even that metaphor "works" at all in a cognitive sense. I'm just setting out an idea of what seems to be observable in most common metaphors. Either way, Moby-Dick is rarely like "a red, red rose." The "waning world" example takes something really huge and complicated like a waning world, and uses it to explain something that seems simpler and almost not in need of a metaphor at all: a dying whale. If Ishmael had said "The waning world is like a dying whale." then he would be more within the realm of predictable metaphor. We don't really know what a waning world is like, and so to explain it, he takes a visual metaphor, and brings death and waning down to the lower-level concreteness of a single whale, being observed in death. However, this is the opposite. Ishmael assumes that we understand the concept of a waning world quite well, and so he uses it to describe something that he thinks is complicated and abstract: the dying whale. This is what I call a signifier-signified inversion. To a narrator trying to find the language to describe the inverted world, the abstract and the symbolic seem simple and inadequate to describe the physical and observable universe, because the observable universe has gotten so much weirder than any idea that anyone could come up with before witnessing inversion. It's like reverse Platonism. Rather than the physical world being an imperfect facsimile of the abstract idea, the inverted mind sees all ideas, all symbols, all "perfect" abstractions as poor representations of the vibrantly alien actuality of the world. Everything is strange when described specifically. "Damn me, but all things are queer, come to think of 'em." (Stubb, Ch. 29) Any examination of actuality, untutored by expectation leads to incongruity. One must expect a sensical unity in the universe in order to find a sensical unity. To begin with, this makes the project of learning, remembering, charting, and communicating really difficult. Anything we can think about or talk about involves some level of editing, abstraction, or summary. But to Pip, Ahab, and Ishmael, it is the skipping of the details that robs the world of its meaning. The obsessive cataloguing, restatement, reuse of vocabulary, and constant qualification of statements that Ishmael utilizes all reflect a fundamental truism: he's witnessed a new world order that is impossible to articulate in the pure terms of the old world order. He must hijack modify the terms of pre-inversion English in special ways to explain the nature of post-inversion reality. And that I think is the fundamental nature of the idiom of the book.

Chapter One: Inversions of Signifier

Part I: CONCEIT and ASPECT

Moby-Dick is a novel of special cases, special scenarios laid out by Ishmael where the regular rules of the universe and the language used to describe it don't really apply. These special cases are the points where things seem "strange" or "crazy" and where the sense-making process of narrator and reader dips into nonsense. Or seems to. When Ishmael prefaces an even with "by some crazy conceit," he's preparing us for an event that seems to be without comprehensible meaning. But as we know, descriptions, objects, and events that seem "blank," that is, bereft of meaning, are in fact, "full of meaning." The special cases, the conceits, the aspects, the strange language Ishmael has drafted to describe strange events, are cues for the reader to switch over into a reading style that matches the subject matter.

These special exempt events, pockets of altered reality in the novel, are what I call in-breakings. They are moments when the ultimate reality of the novel slips, (or often) rips into the regular perceived reality of the novel. Of course, to the reading mind schooled in typical sense-making processes, these strange in-breakings seem like nonsense. But they are not. In fact, I argue, these are the moments of trump-sense, where everything else, all the day-to-day sense of the book is made to look like nonsense in the light of the blinding reality that is made visible. This is inversion.

But enough of that nonsense; let's look at some cases to unpack their significance.

The first instance of the word conceit in Moby-Dick:

By reason of these things, then, the whaling voyage was welcome; the great floodgates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air². (Ch. 1)

The chapter is, after all, called "Loomings" and foreshadowed here are the major themes of the

² Melville returns to this very specific image once more, near the end of the novel: "There she blows -- there she blows! A hump like a snow-hill!" (Ch. 133)

Noah Barron; *In Some Enchanted Way, Inverted: Herman Melville's Moby Dick*; 7

novel. (Inversion, special cases and conceits, and the Phantom).

However, I must focus on the topic at hand. In this first chapter, we have regular reality being “flooded,” indeed, fundamentally altered or replaced, by the “wonder-world.” It’s worth noting, of course, that it rhymes with Underworld. Obvious yes, but significant. Often in Melville, the stupid puns, the wordplay that seems the most disposable, can provide the cypher for a whole cache of hidden understanding. So, we have Ishmael being freed by the knowledge of embarking on a whaling voyage. His drab world, filled with “hypos” and anxious thoughts of suicide has been forcefully cleansed by a palpable rush of knowledge itself, of possibility. This knowledge is the flip side of the underworld he has been living in, death, depression, neurosis. Wonderworldliness is an inversion of underworldliness. Ishmael retains knowledge of his previous dark worldview, but having been flipped all his fears have turned into visions of access to hidden knowledge.

None of these perspectival shifts would be possible without “wild conceits.” Ishmael’s primary conceit, at this early point in the novel, is that, all things being equal, shipping out to sea is superior to suicide. Not an earth-shattering premise, to be sure, but significant in the fact that all of the life Ishmael leads from the first line of the novel onwards, is, in a sense, a gift from himself. His conceit is one of loaned experience. He says of the decision to go whaling:

Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces - though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment.

(Ch. I)

First of all, he doesn’t consider his decision willed at all. “The Fates” have written a part for him, and he’s following along. To someone considering suicide, this must be an incredible rush of cosmic importance: if you think your life is so devoid of meaning as to consider “pistol and ball,” then to suddenly feel the hand of the Fates moving you into place for a dramatic part

(even a “shabby” one) must indeed feel like a “wonder-world.” (That is, the Fates, or the invisible hand of Melville the author.)

Further, he has a vision of hidden knowledge--access to the machinery of the Fates, the cogs of false freewill--and now believes he understands how he got to where he is. Ironically, he considers his role in the tragedy of the Pequod minor, and considers the Pequod’s story “a whaling voyage” apart from the other categories he enumerates: “high tragedies,” “genteel comedies,” and “jolly farces.” To the reader, especially the careful reader, the tragedy of Shakespeare and the genteel comedy of Dante come through in the book easily. And indeed, the whole book may be a farce, but I’m not sure it is jolly.

In any case, the conceits that lead Ishmael to the open gates of the wonder-world are the decision (which is not really a decision) to raincheck his own suicide in a last ditch attempt to make his life meaningful. From this highly qualified premise, the novel springs.

Let’s look at another example:

One of the wild suggestings referred to, as at last coming to be linked with the White Whale in the minds of the superstitiously inclined, was the unearthly conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time. (Ch. XLI)

Again, a heavily qualified, passive-voice construction is used to conceal hidden, rationally-impossible knowledge: that Moby Dick is not a creature who obeys the laws of time, space, and finite identity that the rest of us seem to be constrained by.

The words of the “superstitious,” the Manxman sailor, for example, are frequently used as puppet-narrators from whose mouths the profound truths of the novel can be spoken early, and dismissed by Ishmael. On the one hand, this is a delaying tactic. On the other, it is a way for Ishmael to acclimatize us to uncomfortable environments slowly. The more he introduces us to supernatural, or meta-natural phenomena, (even if only to deny their legitimacy) the readier we are by the end for the ultimate magnitude of the Truth.

In this case, the conceit is that Moby Dick can be in more than one place at once. First of all, this seems pragmatically true: when one actually imagines the sheer size and statistical system of the entire ocean, the prospect of Ahab finding him at all seems ludicrous. (Of course, this function is entirely dependent upon the conceit that Moby is a whale like any other, which I

think we are being constantly reminded that he is not.) So, can he be ubiquitous? Yes. In an “unearthly” way. We don’t expect him to be actually moving around the earth in a sensical way. Rather, he obeys the rules of location that are unearthly. That is, his landscape is the landscape of the minds that imagine him, and so wherever they are, he can be. Examine:

Queequeg was a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. It is not down in any map; true places never are. (Ch. XII)

The quest for Moby Dick is the quest for the True; Ishmael tells us that true locations are by definition unchartable. Therefore, traditional methods of finding a “true” entity, like the White Whale, don’t apply.

“Some whalemens go still further in their superstitions;” Ishmael tells us, “declaring Moby-Dick not only ubiquitous but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time.” (Ch. XLI) So if we take all these “conceits” to be true (which almost amounts to the idea that whatever one imagines about Moby Dick is the observable truth), how we find him and how do we kill him? He’s everywhere at once (except where rational sense would put him) and he’s everywhen in all places, which makes him unkillable. This, fundamentally, is Ahab’s dilemma.

Ahab’s answer, literally and metaphorically, is “dead reckoning.”³

Then falling into a moment’s reverie, he again looked up towards the sun and murmured to himself: “Thou sea-mark! thou high and mighty Pilot! thou tellest me truly where I am--but canst thou cast the least hint where I shall be? Or canst thou tell where some other thing besides me is this moment living? Where is Moby Dick? This instant thou must be eyeing him. These eyes of mine look into the very eye that is even now beholding him; aye, and into the eye that is even now equally beholding the objects on the unknown, thither side of thee, thou sun!”

Then gazing at his quadrant, and handling, one after the other, its numerous cabalistical contrivances, he pondered again, and muttered: “Foolish toy! babies’

³ The estimation of a ship’s position from the distance run by the log and the courses steered by the compass, with corrections for current, leeway, etc., but without astronomical observations. Hence *dead* LATITUDE (q.v.), that computed by dead reckoning. (OED.)

plaything of haughty Admirals, and Commodores, and Captains; the world brags of thee, of thy cunning and might; but what after all canst thou do, but tell the poor, pitiful point, where thou thyself happenest to be on this wide planet, and the hand that holds thee: no! not one jot more! Thou canst not tell where one drop of water or one grain of sand will be to-morrow noon; and yet with thy impotence thou insultest the sun! Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy; and 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, as if God had meant him to gaze on his firmament. Curse thee, thou quadrant!" dashing it to the deck, "no longer will I guide my earthly way by thee; the level ship's compass, and the level dead-reckoning, by log and by line; these shall conduct me, and show me my place on the sea. Aye," lighting from the boat to the deck, "thus I trample on thee, thou paltry thing that feebly pointest on high; thus I split and destroy thee!"

(Ch. 118)

Dead reckoning is Ahab's act of killing off sense, killing off science, murdering modernity and returning to the primary tools of navigation: the compass, the chart, and the pencil. Dead reckoning alone matches the criteria for finding Moby Dick. It is an act of raw will, raw imagining, raw text-making, separate and discontinuous from the surrounding world. Not even the sun will be involved in Ahab's logic. He will write it from nothing.

His last connection to rational systems and traditional thought is the compass. But even that is undermined eleven pages later when the "corpusants," the St. Elmo's fire electricity reverses the magnetism. "But Ahab is lord over the level loadstone yet." (Ch. 124) Ahab takes the "inverted compasses" and by "some strange small motions" he restores them to their original magnetism. The in-breaking of power from above (the corpusants), the reversal of sense making systems (the compasses inverted), and the subsequent redefinition of sense-making and power structures (Ahab claiming to master the elements) all emblemize the major scheme of Moby-Dick. By the time Moby Dick is sighted (by Ahab himself, winning his own doubloon) the Pequod is navigating almost randomly. She is a ship whose course is laid out by applied inversion logic. Ahab, making sense of nonsense, or nonsense of sense, depending on how we choose to read the ethics of his actions, leads his ship to the White Whale.

But remember, this abandonment of rational navigation behavior is not without its cost.

Noah Barron; In Some Enchanted Way, Inverted: Herman Melville's Moby Dick; 11

Finding the whale is only half of Ahab's mission, and it is the only part he will complete. Meeting Moby Dick is the reckoning that leaves all but Ishmael dead.

Let's examine one final conceit before we move on to the problematic vocabulary of "aspect." This last example is really central to Melville's entire scheme of inversion in the novel, and I'll return to it several times, but for now I just want to carefully break open the conceit of Ishmael's experience at the tiller:

A stark, bewildered feeling, as of death, came over me. Convulsively my hands grasped the tiller, but with the crazy conceit that the tiller was, somehow, in some enchanted way, inverted. My God! what is the matter with me? thought I. Lo! in my brief sleep I had turned myself about, and was fronting the ship's stern, with my back to her prow and the compass. In an instant I faced back, just in time to prevent the vessel from flying up into the wind, and very probably capsizing her. How glad and how grateful the relief from this unnatural hallucination of the night, and the fatal contingency of being brought by the lee!

(Ch. 96)

Worth noting first of all is the triple qualification: "crazy conceit," "somehow," "in some enchanted way." Ishmael feels the need profoundly to excuse the nonsensicality of the event by denying knowledge. He doesn't *know* how he got to this situation, he claims to only be reporting the facts of it. Like attributing nonsense to superstitious other speakers, joining the action *in media res* and disavowing knowledge of how he got there allows Ishmael to focus on the inversion event itself rather than the problem of contextualizing it in the sensical world. The fact is, it doesn't make sense like a typical event, and looking for the missing link in the timeless, that is, when sense turned to nonsense, is a fruitless and infinitely subjective mission. If, as I posit, the inversions represent the in-breaking of a true knowledge form, the moments of inversion, where the weirdly otherworldly truth pops in are of course experienced as hallucinations, as dreams, or as incomprehensible nonsense events which just sort of happen organically within the larger sensical system. Like an ecstatic religious experience or a visit from the dead, the possibility of a nonsense event being somehow cosmically true changes the way in which everything else, the 'normal' world makes sense and seems true. But onward.

Ishmael (imagining himself as a miniature Pequod) "turned himself about," and turns his

back on history, rationality, and sense-making (the compass) and gives us a profound vision of man's paradoxical project in life: the examined life seeks to navigate forward, (into the future) by looking backward (into the past). The "conceit"⁴ is that which allows Ishmael to have this shattering realization without actually *capsizing* (literally, fatally inverting) the Pequod. This inversion is small enough that Ishmael can have a glimpse of transcendent knowledge without annihilating himself and everyone else. Ahab is not so lucky (or refuses to be so humble.)

And now "aspect." No word is hung with such a complex cache of meanings as "aspect" in Moby-Dick. In regular language, aspect is related to appearance (in sight or in mind), to the side or surface of a presented object, or to the direction in which one thing has bearing on another. Already, the word is problematically vague. But in Melville hands it becomes a nightmarishly malleable catch-all articulation for all that is difficult to articulate. I offer a few examples:

"an aspect of the deepest yet manliest humility" (Ch. 9)

"his aspect seemed to have authority" (Ch. 16)

"the whole grim aspect of Ahab" (Ch. 28)

"overbearing terrors in his aspect" (Ch. 29)

"analogous to the aspect of a clumsy left-handed man" (Ch. 32)

"this mere aspect of all-pervading whiteness" (Ch. 42)

"altogether of an irregular, random aspect" (Ch. 68)

"different aspects, according to your point of view" (Ch. 75)

"awestruck by the aspect" (Ch. 118)

"petrified by his aspect" (119)

"so appalling was the White Whale's aspect" (133)

These is just a small sampling. The words "aspect" or "aspects" appear 42 times in the novel. Ishmael/Melville is using aspect to be able to refer to that which by its very definition escapes specificity. This is fundamental for talking about Moby Dick himself. As the word aspect is used over and over again, it gathers incidental meaning and cumulative valence that it didn't have at the beginning of the novel, so by the time we hear about how "appalling" Moby-Dick's

⁴ The word conceit is employed by Melville/Ishmael here with all its meanings intact: 1) philosophical premise, 2) excessive pride, and 3) "conception, notion, idea" (OED, Obs.)

“aspect” was in *The Chase--First Day*, we, the readers have triggered for us a who subcategory of special meaning. Granted, this is one very viable model of how *all* words work, but for Melville, it is especially important to remodel the idiom in order to talk about something like the White Whale, a concept on the very outskirts of human thought. We’re all aware that if you stare at the word “the” for ten minutes, the nonsense of ordered letters, little black marks on the page starts to seem really creepy. This is part of Melville’s mission. But beyond that, “aspect” is the central focal point of a system of understanding Truth. That is to say, Ishmael rarely tells us that “The White Whale was terrifying.” Rather, we are told over and over that his “aspect” was horrible. *The Whiteness of the Whale* is filled with these sorts of circumlocutions. On the one hand, this is to point out the utter subjectivity of meaning; aspect is what lies between the observer and the observed, and so it is in fact the interplay itself that is the source of meaning. On the other hand, “aspect” is the vocabulary of total objectivity. “Aspect” is a form of being that trumps even the “to be” verb. But what am I talking about? As usual, the idiom gallops ahead of the content, and my mouth runs ahead of my mind. Let’s look at *The Whiteness of the Whale*:

Moby Dick awakens a “rather vague, nameless horror.” The horror is “so mystical and well nigh ineffable...that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form.” “But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.” So, ever the qualifier, Ishmael informs us that his articulation of the White Whale’s horror is provisional at best, and random, or even futile at worst. (Namelessness, especially “nameless terror” is a major trope, but more of that in the section called, unsurprisingly, “Naming.”)

The whale’s whiteness becomes emblematic of a quality that exposes the lurking terror in reality. The white aspect is the “mystic sign” that hints at the existence of an alternative reality. “Though in many of its aspects, this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.” It is the aspect, the indirect view, the glancing image, the acute angle of reflection that allows this fearsome invisible state of being to be momentarily visible. It is not the thing itself that Ishmael finds so horrible. Moby Dick is a whale. The “albino” is just a man. It is the aspect, the “intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind” that transforms everyday sensical objects into dangerous reality-inverters. Aspect is fully dependent on the

position and nature of the observer. Without a particular eye and a particular mind with “the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism in the world,” there is no aspect at all. Something just is. And until observed, the is-ness of the White Whale has no qualities, no aspects. But when Ishmael’s eyes meet his “dumb blankness,” it is suddenly “full of meaning.” All the light of the world, Ishmael claims, is just the “mystical cosmetic” of “a harlot.” All colors are actually “white or colorless.” As long as we wear “colored or coloring glasses” we are protected from the blinding reality all around us. But as soon as the charade slips, the towering horror looms into view. “There is a sense in which *Moby Dick* is *not* himself until Ishmael, with his readers, has brought the creature into being.”⁵

It is a strange state of affairs in *Moby-Dick*. The horror of the novel has something to do with an indifferent universe. Ishmael’s scheme of fear is fear of “heartless voids.” However, the greatest terror of *Moby Dick* himself is that he is *not* indifferent, that he is a reasoning, malevolent agent of some kind, or a proxy pawn in the hands of another agent. Aspect is the word that has been chosen to carry around both these opposites and unify them into a common sense of dread. There is a duality to “aspect.” Something can be blank and yet full of meaning. Something can be colorless and an “all-color of atheism.” Gradually, however, the duality of the White Whale’s aspect resolves into singularity. One possible model of the plot progression of *Moby-Dick* is that of Ahab’s gradual conversion of the entire ship to his worldview. At the beginning, we have a ship whose motivations are all the same, except for Ahab’s. That is to say, when the Pequod leaves Nantucket everyone aboard is there to go on a whaling voyage, fill the holds with oil, and return from the adventure richer and alive. Everyone, that is, except the Captain, whose express goal is to locate and kill a particular whale, named Moby Dick. But by the end of the novel, everyone aboard has been converted to Ahab’s mission. Everyone except Starbuck. I’m not sure this is a meaningful picture of the novel on the whole, but indulge me for a moment. As the motivations aboard ship are homogenized and standardized to match Ahab’s scheme of killing the Moby Dick, so are the potential different visions and interpretations of his “aspect.” In fact, he is called “the White Whale” in the first half of the novel drastically more often than he is called “Moby Dick.” Here is the first incidence of Ishmael describing his aspect:

⁵ Brodtkorb, Paul Jr. *Ishmael’s White World*, 146.

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The rest of his body was so streaked, and spotted, and marbled with the same shrouded hue, that, in the end, he had gained his distinctive appellation of the White Whale; a name, indeed, literally justified by his vivid aspect, when seen gliding at high noon through a dark blue sea, leaving a milky-way wake of creamy foam, all spangled with golden gleamings. (Ch. 41)

Strangely, this description of the White Whale is almost pastoral; in any case, it is “vivid,” not “terrifying” and his whiteness is a source of beauty and mystery, not emblematic of his otherworldly evil. Even stranger, it almost seems like Melville is channeling “The Star Spangled Banner” a little bit. In any case, Ishmael, (having not yet seen Moby Dick) paints his aspect with the wonder that he (Ishmael) is feeling about all his whaling experiences.

But Ishmael’s “wonderworld” doesn’t last. Ahab’s force of will bends Ishmael’s vision of the Whale, and so by *The Chase--Third Day*, Moby Dick’s aspect is unified and non-dualistic:

Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect, and spite of all that mortal man could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship’s starboard bow, till men and timbers reeled. (Ch. 135)

The Whale’s “whole aspect” carries thinking, reasoning, evil thoughts, and his white brow is no longer even and abstract symbol of fear, it is a palpable and effective weapon. Moby Dick has become, for everyone (Starbuck included, against his will) the Moby Dick of Ahab’s fevered dreams. By the force of his will, Ahab has made his crew believe, and believing has made it so. Ishmael, the crew, and the reader now cannot see any aspect of Moby Dick other than the one that reveals him to be the avatar of otherworldly malice.

Part II: NAMING

For a narrator that seeks to articulate the unarticulable word choice becomes crucial. For a narrator that seeks to join the world of history with a world of alien nonhistory, careful use of reference touchstones becomes essential. For a novel that seeks to trace the break with the known, establishing first exactly what *is* known is primary. At the center of all this is naming. Naming in a very real and basic way is the fundamental action of language. “To name is implicitly to define.”⁶ The first willed act of Adam in the Garden of Eden was to name every living creature⁷, (and we know where free will got him); Melville doesn’t neglect to model the fall of his namers after the fall of the first “orchard-thieves.” (Ch. 1)

Since, as I stated earlier, ordered systems and trump-values in ordered systems are central to the way Moby-Dick works, naming as an empirical, psychological, and Platonic factors become crucial to Melville/Ishmael’s project of sense-making. The act of naming presents a complex matrix of problems: in the world of the novel, does a name *predict* the nature of the named, or does it *cause* certain qualities to manifest? Does naming make a character live up to their name, or rebel against it? What are the effects of being given a moniker that is heavily Biblically loaded? What are the effects of a wholly invented name? Should we choose our own names in life, lest those names choose our lives for us? As an author, the prime namer in his invented universe, Melville has embedded a scheme for understanding the power of naming; that act that mutually categorizes and creates meaning; in creating a signifier we create the reason to signify, and in so doing, modify the signified.

It is fitting then that we should begin with Ishmael.

"Call me Ishmael." It is one of the most famous lines in American fiction. Offhand? In a surgically precise way, yes. First of all, we are struck by the hypothetical insistence of the line. Not "I am Ishmael." Not "My name is Ishmael." Not even "I am called Ishmael." Call me Ishmael. For the purposes of this story, you, the reader must call me, the narrator, Ishmael. It is imperative, there's no question about it, but it's also loose, as if the reader might be inclined to

⁶ Brotkorb. Ishmael's White World. Pg. 130.

⁷ Genesis 2:19: “So out of the ground the LORD GOD formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.”

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call him something else. Above all, I marvel at the economy of the line. By calling him anything other than Ishmael, we miss the entire point. Then there is the name he chooses. Ishmael.

Biblically, Ishmael is Isaac's older half-brother, son of Abram (Abraham) and the slave-girl Hagar. In Genesis, Sarai (later Sarah) is barren, and sends Abram to consort with Hagar to have a child, and after conceiving, Hagar is contemptuous of Sarai, perhaps thinking herself superior due to fertility to her aged mistress. Sarai is angry and "dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her." An angel of the Lord finds Hagar by a spring and tells her "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." (Gen. 16:11) Later, Sarah conceives Isaac. God says to Abraham "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year." (Gen. 17:20-21)

Just as the angel tells Hagar to call her son Ishmael, our narrator asks us to do the same. In Hebrew, Ishmael means literally "God hears." The arrival of Ishmael is an answered prayer, but he is not the son of Abraham who was to be the father of the great line of Israel. His is an outcast, a wild man, the dark, rejected half-brother. He is the progeny of God's most chosen and a rebellious lowborn slave. Already, in this very first sentence, we begin to get an idea of the sorts of tensions that Moby-Dick is playing with. Ishmael as a Hebrew Bible figure is both at odds with everyone (his family included) but he is also fruitful and the father of the Ishmaelites. As a narrator, the Ishmael of Moby-Dick produces a great text, but is at odds with it. His own kin, his story, often rises up against him, and he against it. His very name contains the inversions of the book. This construction of the interchangeability of holy and unholy, the symbolic with the insignificant, the isolated person conflated with the central person, is at the very essence of what the novel is about. The general scheme continuously emerges and continuously restates itself: if pieces of a cohesive worldview are made separate and mobile, and treated as interchangeable variables in a system, each reconfiguration creates a new and internally sensical worldview with a hierarchy, a center, and a periphery. We have heard Isaac's story time and time

again--he's one of the three primary figures of Jewish scripture. But what if we tell Ishmael's story as if it were equally important? "An Ishmael of the world becomes an Isaac, so to speak, and is incorporated into the main line of human history...it is this inversion the entire novel depicts."⁸ In this one simple twist, Melville has taken the marginal figure and made him the focus, and forces us to reevaluate the hierarchical order of the novel after this inversion.

The act of choosing one's own name is an act of rebellion. It is a break with human tradition and a break with personal history. Ishmael, as a narrator is born the moment he rechristens himself. Whatever historical valence is attached to "Ishmael" as a word becomes attached to the person now known as "Ishmael."

* * *

⁸ Cowan, Bainard. Exiled Waters, 61.

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But what about words/names with no history? Take the harpooners, Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo? To be more precise, what is the significance of a purely invented name history. We are told of Queequeg, “There was excellent blood in his veins -- royal stuff;” (Chapter 12) and we get the generated history of his island and his family. Now, granted, these are not fictions generated from the ether--both Melville’s experiences in Nukuheva⁹ and his readings about Tupai Cupa¹⁰ both prepared him to generate the character, and indeed, his aspect and behavior evoke and provoke readers’ prejudices and stereotypes, but as a raw collection of syllables, “Queequeg” is a fundamentally new word.


In Chapter 18--*His Mark*, Queequeg encounters the powerful effects of his name: “I say, Quohog, or whatever your name is, did you ever stand at the head of a whaleboat?” Captains Peleg and Bildad muddle his name by converting it to “Quohog¹¹,” a more familiar word, and then later, “Hedgehog there, I mean, Quohog...” The Quaker captains feel the need to Westernize Queequeg’s name, first by changing it to a Native American name co-opted by whites, and then to a diminutive, roly-polly, nonthreatening animal. The need to retroject a familiar history in place of the contextual blankness that an alien word creates. The very sound of “Queequeg” is unsettling because it suggests a parallel and nonintersecting history where a man can be given a moniker that carries collected meaning, accumulated in a system entirely separate from the Western one. But the desire to disarm Queequeg’s name doesn’t end there.

Later in the same chapter, when Queequeg is asked to sign the ship’s roster, (and being illiterate) he makes “his mark.” The powerful identity source of this symbol is his own textualized body: his mark is a duplicate of a symbol “which was tattooed on his arm.” Connections to Tupai Cupa jump to mind--the recreation of one’s body art (without a mirror)--becomes a form of self-representation, an auto-naming like Ishmael’s based upon personal fact. But in a turn of sublime, (or sickening) irony, the symbol that shows up is not a “queer round figure” at all:

⁹ Semi-fictionalized in *Typee*, (1846).

¹⁰ Sanborn, Geoffrey. *Norton Critical Edition of Moby-Dick*. (2002). Melville saw the self-portrait of Cupa’s tattooed face in *The New Zealanders* (1830).

¹¹ a variant of “quahaug” or “quahog.” The common round clam (*Venus mercenaria*) of the Atlantic coast of North America. (*OED*.)

“Quohog. his  mark.” (Ch. 18)

Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, in their editorial footnote in the Norton Moby-Dick write, “The cross printed in the English and American editions in 1851 (and imitated here) is not ‘a queer round figure’ and was probably supplied by the original typesetter in place of the figure in the manuscript, the words of which were most likely in Melville’s sister Augusta’s hand.”¹²

Miraculously, the transition from description to in-print facsimile actually *changes* Queequeg’s name. In the act of *christening* himself, the very print itself *Christianizes* him with a cruciform symbol. A history is forcefully grafted onto his name, and the text that is created in the process a text that is contextualized within the Christian naming tradition.

Upon further examination, all three “savage” invented names, Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo possess a strange doubling quality. The twinned phonemes “quee” and “queg,” “tash,” and “tego,” and the doubled “gg” and “oo” of Daggoo all create an effect of sonic and conceptual repetition. It is as if the very act of saying the name once utters it twice, and in so doing, creates a memory of past experience. The first encounter with such a word is already the second, and thus a history, an expectation, and an accumulated meaning are already embedded in the very syllables themselves. In naming the harpooners, Melville has created a brilliant phonetic *deja vu* that we as readers perceive as our own subconscious associations.

But perhaps I’ve gotten a little overexcited. More than anything, I want to stress the mutually-informing nature of naming. When we name something, we change it. A name is more like an adjective than a noun, it describes more than it identifies. Often, we say approvingly “Yeah, he *seems* like a Simon.” Sometimes have trouble remembering someone’s name, and we excuse ourselves by saying, “Oh, she doesn’t seem like a Lucy.” The “seeming” of names, the accumulated cultural material that attaches to them as they roll through the ages, this is the medium Melville explores. When we name something inherently new, inherently unique, like each person, we cut them down to a smaller, more digestible cultural token. Otherwise, the prospect of negotiating a social interaction would seem infinite and impossible. (Autism?) The

¹² Hayford and Parker. Norton Critical Edition of Moby-Dick, 85.

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doubling of the harpooneer's names is necessary; otherwise, we as readers might not accept them as names at all. Names without history and association seem like nonsense, just as people, if wholly unreduced, unsimplified, and uncomparing, seem impossible to understand. This impossible type of understanding, the type of understanding that is wholly unreliable on preexisting forms and hierarchies, that I think is what Moby-Dick is about. Ishmael names himself to set himself against history, yes, but he also *names himself* to show the essential artifice of naming. "What's in a name?"¹³ Juliet asks, but answers her own question: not that much, not the smell of a rose, nor the quality of a person that makes you love him. A name is a word that is supposed to mean a specific person, but we have too few names and too many people to contain any sort of rational meaning. That's why names start to disappear.

And though on the surface, the harpooneers' names seem alien, indeed stereotypically so, they are in fact designed to make us question the way names are largely invisible to us. Names are blank, but full of meaning, in Moby-Dick. This lesson hits home for me, someone blessed (cursed?) with a known Old Testament moniker. Being a Noah, I'm constantly reminded of the banal associations my name creates; every loud, irritating wiseacre I meet has an "Ark" reference up his sleeve. But if anything, as a non-Christian, non-Jew, my name has forged me in the negative. I suppose, in a strange way, I live my life to surprise people who think they know Noahs.

This brings me to Ahab. Ahab is a strange case. To me, until very recently, Ahab carried no Biblical valence--the power of Melville's novel had culturally trumped the Hebrew Bible in terms of supplying associated material to the name "Ahab." First Kings accounts the idolatrous reign of King Ahab, Baal-worshipper and enemy of Elijah, God's last living prophet. In the Bible, Ahab is the servant of an absent, impotent deity, unable to cause miracles or consume sacrificial meat. The God of Israel literally blows Baal's worshippers away with the force of his stormy power. "I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free in Israel..."¹⁴ Unlike the Ahab of Melville, the wicked king repents, avoids being eaten, and the ruin God has planned for him is deferred to "his son's days." The real villain, possibly, is Ahab's wife, Jezebel, who urged Ahab to sell himself to Baal, and who

¹³ Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Sc. ii, Ln. 47-48.

¹⁴ 1 Kings 21:21. HB.

God punishes most cruelly: she's eaten by dogs.

The Ahab of Moby-Dick is given this cursed name on “a foolish, ignorant whim of his crazy, widowed mother, who died when he was only a twelvemonth old.” (Chapter 16) Notice, how “crazy” and “widowed” are given almost equal weight--Ahab's fatherlessness is as significant as his parent's insanity. Did he die after Ahab was conceived, or is Ahab a bastard? (Both can still be true, I suppose.) If we are to read an inverted immaculate conception, then the introduction of Ahab's prophet is necessary: “And yet, the old squaw Tistig; at Gay-head, said that the name would somehow prove prophetic.” First of all, I suppose we have to assume that “Ahab” still had meaningful enough Biblical gravity as to be ominous. (Maybe not--we are told that the Quakers, “named with Scripture names” (Ch. 16) uphold traditions of American Christianity that had already eroded by Melville's time-- “the stately thee and thou...”--and perhaps Melville, in reintroducing “Ahab” into the idiom, is forcing his readers to dig deep to try to catch the reference.) Even old Tistig has a “conceit”: Ahab's name must “somehow” be prophetic. Now, I don't want to get too sidetracked on a close reading of a Bible passage, but consider for a moment: God decides not to physically consume Ahab of old, and Moby Dick, though he consumes Ahab of Melville, may not God of old. But the idea of an Old Testament God, opaque, omnipotent, frustratingly arbitrary/interventionist and yet terrifyingly outside of our world, this is an *idea* that consumes them both. Baal certainly seems more manageable. To both Ahabs, the God of Israel is an “enemy.”¹⁵:

Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines.

Ahab's war against God is a war against the paradox of created free will. If God exists, and God created Man, and gave Man free will (if only to screw up), then really, Man has no free will except that which God allots him. But, if we can *deny* God, that gives us at least temporary power over him. If God then steps in with a miracle, an insult from the sun, as it were, then Man, having broken the Covenant with God, can either surrender all illusions of willed action

¹⁵ Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” (1 Kings 21:20)

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and devote his life to God, or insult God back. Ahab is an orphan, both parentally and spiritually. He raised himself. So when God would step in, late in the game, and claim fatherhood over Ahab, Ahab would say “Who’s over me?” i.e. You’re not my father.

In the Hebrew Bible, God rainchecks his destruction of Ahab, saving it for Ahab’s son. Ahab of Melville, too, has a wife¹⁶ and a son. Is the ruin of Captain Ahab also paid forward to his son, in the repeating of the psychology of fatherlessness? Must we all wage war against our absentee fathers and absentee God? Not exactly the focus of my thesis, but interesting to keep in mind.

“Ahab did not name himself.” (Ch. 16) Captain Peleg says this to excuse Ahab of his blasphemous name. But does anyone choose his own name? Ishmael does, as I said earlier, but ultimately, Ishmael is always a problematically thin veneer over an abstract philosophical point of view. The self-christened Ishmael-narrator is “a presence, a visionary activity, rather than a man.”¹⁷

In any case, Ahab doesn’t name himself, but he does define himself. In one sense, we wills himself into existence: his fundamental act of selfhood is self-assertion. “In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here.” (Ch. 119) His definition of the universe is qualitative, it *is* impersonal, and it *is* personified (by whom: us or itself?). But his definition of his own selfhood is largely a symptom of selfhood: a “personality.” A personality without a person is more like a ghost or a thesis statement or something. Ahab’s *is* statement is so tied up in his desires and designs on himself and on the world, that the whole idea of world becomes inverted. Whereas Ishmael dissolves into a voice describing the world without selfhood, Ahab dissolves the world into a framework for describing Ahab. Ahab’s “queenly personality” demands the known universe reform itself in reverence to his supremely audacious will. Since his universe hinges so solipsistically and phenomenologically on the value of willed selfhood, he cannot help but see flattering images of himself in the universe:

The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round

¹⁶ Though not exactly a wily Jezebel. Ahab’s bride is a “girl-wife.” “I widowed that poor girl when I married her...” (Ch. 132-*The Symphony*)

¹⁷ Fiedelson, Charles. *Symbolism and American Literature*. Reprinted in Herman Melville: Moby Dick, Ed. Nick Selby. Pg. 86.

gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. (Ch. 99)

Ironically, Ahab assumes that the universe functions this way for “each and every man.” The assumption that his world-view must be universal is truly a testament to the magnitude of his monomania. Ahab sees allegories of himself in everything, and imagines his own mind contained in everyone else’s skull. Perhaps that alone is the reason Ishmael survives and Ahab doesn’t. Ishmael is able to meld his point of view to seem like someone else’s, and Ahab strains to bend everyone else’s point of view to mirror his own.

Ultimately, Ahab as a name and Ahab as a man are fundamentally tautological. “Ahab is for ever Ahab” he tells us in *The Chase--Second Day*. He was named Ahab and lives to be an Ahab. He declares his free will to become exactly that which was prophesied. “He is both doomed and free: free, that is, to choose his doom.”¹⁸

And indeed, what of Ahab’s chosen doom, the named whale Moby Dick? How did he get his name? There’s a great deal of research into the oral traditions and sailor’s legends of the white whale as it precedes Melville’s novel. The primary printed account of this mostly-oral tale is J.N. Reynolds’ *Mocha Dick: Or the white whale of the Pacific*.¹⁹ Reynolds describes the first appearance of a white sperm whale in 1810 near the island. Reynolds claims this whale shattered many boats on several different occasions, each time, emerging victorious over his would-be assassins.

But most interesting in the Reynolds fragment is the way in which he handles Mocha Dick as a creation of sailor lore. Rather than focusing on the factual account, Reynolds is interested in the development of the Mocha Dick legend. He writes, “From the period of Dick’s first appearance, his celebrity continued to increase, until his name seemed naturally to mingle with the salutations which whalemens were in the habit of exchanging, in their encounters upon the broad Pacific; the customary interrogatories almost always closing with, ‘Any news from Mocha Dick?’”²⁰

His *celebrity*. Melville uses the same word. Of whale celebrity, Ishmael says this:

¹⁸ Dimock, Wai-Chee. ‘Ahab’s Manifest Destiny.’ Reprinted in Selby, Pg. 156.

¹⁹ Originally printed in the New York *Knickerbocker*. (1839)

²⁰ Reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition.

But not only did each of these famous whales enjoy great individual celebrity - nay, you may call it an ocean-wide renown; not only was he famous in life and now is immortal in fore-castle stories after death, but he was admitted into all the rights, privileges, and distinctions of a name; had as much a name indeed as Cambyses or Caesar. Was it not so, O Timor Tom! thou famed leviathan, scarred like an iceberg, who so long did'st lurk in the Oriental straits of that name, whose spout was oft seen from the palmy beach of Ombay? Was it not so, O New Zealand Jack! thou terror of all cruisers that crossed their wakes in the vicinity of the Tattoo Land? Was it not so, O Morquan! King of Japan, whose lofty jet they say at times assumed the semblance of a snow-white cross against the sky? Was it not so, O Don Miguel! thou Chilian whale, marked like an old tortoise with mystic hieroglyphics upon the back! In plain prose, here are four whales as well known to the students of Cetacean History as Marius or Sylla to the classic scholar.

(Chapter 45)

The “rights, privileges, and distinctions of a name”; that is *personhood*. Granted, Ishmael/Melville is indulging himself here, allowing the hyperbole to surge ahead of the fact. Parker/Hayford write “Melville found ‘Timor Jack’ and ‘New Zealand Tom’ in Beale (1839) but may have invented Morquan and Don Miguel.” Nonetheless, the phenomenon of specific animals in the wild obtaining special status and individuals, celebrity individuals, among disparate people on the far-flung reaches of the ocean is, in fact, a real one. That an whale, among millions of whales, across thousands of miles of sea, might be so distinctive as to merit fame, a name, an associated mythological personality, is metaphorically central to the paradox of selfhood in Moby-Dick.

The problem of naming in the novel is presented on the very first page. The full title of the book, Moby-Dick; or The Whale articulates the fundamental issue that concerns the text, that is, the problem of differentiating between the profoundly specific and the vastly general. If Moby-Dick is in fact Moby Dick as Ahab would articulate him, then he is clearly the most important creature mankind could ever encounter, be him divine, demonic, or some transcendent category of both. If not, if he is as Starbuck would fashion him, "a dumb brute," (Ch. 39) and forgettable. The crew would simply be better served hunting an easier whale. Moby Dick is either an entity of earth-shattering import, or just an example of a type of creature of which there are many others.

If we take it to be “somehow” (conceits galore) true that Moby Dick is unique on Earth,

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than we must accept Ahab's position wholesale. There is no middle ground between animal and preternatural agency; it is a binary system. If we indeed say Moby Dick is Moby Dick, and not a whale, then naming Moby Dick is an act of disambiguating him, and limiting his sphere of influence. Unnamed, he is an abstract, a mental emblem of the creeping, maddening dread can lurk into any well-lit room of the mind when the daily mental chores have ended. As Paul Brotkorb, Jr. writes, "The mind thinks it controls by naming. Thus the white whale 'is' to Ishmael, and to Ahab, and to each reader. But in itself it "is" itself, and it cannot in itself be named, or structured and explained and categorized; nothingness floods through the interstices of any conceptual net designed to hold Moby Dick's essence."²¹ In naming Moby Dick, just as in naming any entity, there is an editing process, and certain qualities drop out. But for Moby Dick, that editing is censorship. The minds of the characters block out the elements of the Whale that undermine their ability to successfully mentally tokenize and manipulate his aspect. Indeed, if there were a name for Moby Dick that actually performed the work that names attempt to do, such a name would wipe all other names off our minds' landscape. Moby Dick is the sort of a primary form entity that needs a *logos* that is interchangeable with his power itself, rather than reductive of it.

Moby Dick and Moby-Dick are both bi-level concepts. On the surface, Moby Dick looks like a whale from the readers' world and Moby-Dick looks like a series of events in a world that is reasonably analogous to the readers' world. But as was stated by Brotkorb earlier, something slips out when we try to treat the Whale as a whale and Moby-Dick like a regular novel. That horrific essence, the terrible aspect, evades naming and categorization, and loosens the grip that names and categories have on everything else. For lack of a better word, I call this phenomenon "The Phantom." This entity is personified in Chapter 6--*The Counterpane* in the "nameless, unimaginable" entity that has its "supernatural hand" placed in Ishmael's. It is a childhood memory that Ishmael includes early in the narrative as if to say that the events of the novel are not an entirely new thing to him; he has had one interaction with a non-categorizeable being, and "to this very hour" he "often puzzle[s]" with it. Bainard Cowan sees the interlude with the Phantom as "deliverance from the riddle of Christ versus Christendom, text versus culture..."²²

²¹ Brotkorb, Paul Jr. Ishmael's White World. Pg. 147.

²² Cowan, Bainard. Exiled Waters. Pg. 40.

He claims, I think rightly, that “[i]n determinable experience, and in language” the mysterious core of truth is lost. So rather than attempt to distill an recordable answer from the experience, Ishmael is content to report it and offer it up for further thought. But I don’t think the mystery is a Christian one, and I don’t think the difference is one of textual versus cultural traditions. If there is an allegory in Moby-Dick it is one that is designed to break from allegorical tradition. No preordained modes of thought, especially not the ‘find-the-Christ-figure’ game apply with any certainty, since for one, ambiguity is proven to be the most accurate method of description. If we are looking to find Christ in *The Counterpane*, we find a pretty unlikeable, indeed, unknowable Christ. If anything, Christ is imminently namable. The mystery of the God-man may be bottomless, but we must first know Jesus as the Christ to even approach it. The Phantom of Moby-Dick is something else. Not knowing the name, and letting go of the knee-jerk reflex to name, is the first step to otherworldly understanding.

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozzening, 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; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare?

(Captain Ahab, in Chapter 132)

The problem of the nameless is the problem of Moby Dick as a force. Ishmael and Ahab both know, at some almost precognitive level, that Moby Dick is powerful. And so he is named and known. But in that naming and knowing, his power is diminished. This is both wrong and dangerous. So how can an actual entity be discussed in the context of the unknowability of the known? That is precisely why the White Whale is terrifying, and why the language of namelessness is essential to Melville’s layered constructions (“accumulated associations” [Ch. 42]) of Moby Dick as articulated entity. The the thing that is white ought to be explicitly known. The white is light, the white is illumined, the white the opposition to darkness, and unknown. But Moby Dick is white, Moby Dick is dragged into the light of empirical study, and yet his mystery is completely undiminished. His whiteness is an “abhorrent mildness,” (42) the whiteness of the sharks with “dumb gloating of their aspect.” But any analogy, any name Ishmael applies to the problem of whiteness is “a dim, random” explanation, incapable of imparting the “vague, nameless horror concerning him.” (42)

Namelessness. Or rather, the unnamable. That which any name will reduce. Various iterations occur: the “grand hooded phantom” (1) of the idea of Moby Dick, and the “gamboge²³ ghost of a Fedallah” (73). Phantoms are even paired and doubled (which I will discuss more in detail later): “Ahab in his scuttle, the Parsee by the mainmast; but still fixedly gazing upon each other; as if in the Parsee Ahab saw his forethrown shadow, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance.” (Ch. 130) The nameless, phantasmic shadow hanging over Moby-Dick is the shadowed projection of the actual truth of Moby Dick onto a plane that cannot contain it. Imagine explaining three-dimensionality to a two-dimensional person: nearly impossible. But one might project a shadow of a three dimensional object onto their 2-D plane, and they could watch it spin and change, to try to get a feel for its boundaries, even though the conceptual leap of its actual nature will allude them.

Ishmael knows that we are reading his book from a dimension one level simpler than Moby Dick’s and so, like Plato’s cave²⁴, we must watch the shadows that Moby Dick casts on the wall of our world; they are merely aspects of his actuality, but in our reality, those shadows are the sum totality of the knowable.

²³ Gum-tree resin.

²⁴ “Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being.” (Chapter 7)

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CHAPTER II: Inversions of the Signified

Part I: SCALES OF MAGNITUDE

“To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme.” (Ch. 44)

Over and over, Melville returns to the Whale’s magnitude as a key to unlocking his meaning. Size is connected to immortality in the chapter *Does the Whale’s Magnitude Diminish? Will He Perish?* Modeling, and scaled replicas are the keys to understanding the whale: “But the next time you have a chance, watch him; and you will then see the great Sperm Whale himself in miniature.” (Ch. 32) Here the Porpoise is articulated as a visual metaphor for the Sperm Whale. There is a sense that because of the Whale’s size, certain “aspects” of his meaning are unapproachable from the front, and so sideways gestures at significance are required. Size, great size in the novel, is a trump-card that makes representation difficult.

The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters; and afloat the vast bulk of him is out of sight, like a launched line-of-battle ship; and out of that element it is a thing eternally impossible for mortal man to hoist him bodily into the air, so as to preserve all his mighty swells and undulations. And, not to speak of the highly presumable difference of contour between a young sucking whale and a full-grown Platonian Leviathan; yet, even in the case of one of those young sucking whales hoisted to a ship's deck, such is then the outlandish, eel-like, limbered, varying shape of him, that his precise expression the devil himself could not catch. (Ch. 55)

Ultimate magnitude is ultimate form. A full-sized leviathan is “Platonian” not only because he is the perfect example of his type, but also because his image is too large to be represented, too massive to be imitated, communicated, or even imagined. The true form cannot exist in anything but itself. But Melville’s Platonism is a strange brand. There is a note of deception in the giant leviathan’s magnitude: like the false leg Ahab stands on, “The whale, like all things that are mighty, wears a false brow to the common world.” (Ch. 80) The brow, the center of all that is implacable and terrifying about the whale, that seeping leak in reality where the whole of “aspect” creeps through: that brow is false, fatty, filled with sperm and not with

brains. But it is the very falseness that makes it a weapon against reality. Melville's concern is with the "seeming" of reality. Are we to believe that Moby Dick is really a malevolent force? Or does he just seem so? And what's the difference? The brow, precisely because of its false padding, becomes the weapon that bashes in the hull of the Pequod. If it had been filled with malevolent intelligence, intelligence outright in the form of gray matter, the whale would have brained himself and died in killing the crew. But he did not. His immortality is rooted in the magnitude of his imitation. His godlikeness is false, and in that falseness lies its power.

Onwards with the question of magnitude. The chapter that simply cannot be ignored any longer is *Cetology*. This oft-quoted chapter makes the pregnant connection between textual magnitude and animal magnitude: "As the type of the FOLIO I present the Sperm Whale; of the OCTAVO, the Grampus; of the DUODECIMO, the Porpoise." (Ch. 32)

This is a strange way to organize whales, and a strange way to organize books. Melville is telling us quite literally, that you can judge a book by its cover, specifically the size of its cover. Against all qualitative distinctions and groupings, the sheer size of book leaves and aquatic mammals is chosen. Ponder for a moment the ridiculousness of this line of thinking. In most areas of knowledge, size is the poorest indicator of known facts. Imagine if people, countries, books, art, anything were organized and evaluated based upon size alone....if this were the thought system used in most things, incalculable knowledge would be lost to the inadequacy of the indexing plan. But, Melville tells us why:

...yet it is in vain to attempt a clear classification of the Leviathan, founded upon either his baleen, or hump, or fin, or teeth; notwithstanding that those marked parts or features very obviously seem better adapted to afford the basis for a regular system of Cetology than any other detached bodily distinctions, which the whale, in his kinds, presents. How then? The baleen, hump, back-fin, and teeth; these are things whose peculiarities are indiscriminately dispersed among all sorts of whales, without any regard to what may be the nature of their structure in other and more essential particulars. (Ch. 32)

Translation: the facts, the "essential particulars" of whale anatomy, don't matter. They are "indiscriminately dispersed" across the whole of whaledom without "regard." Whose regard? God's? Melville, somewhat absurdly, takes issue with the way in which whales as a genus share

qualities across categories, making their categorization into species more difficult. His battle against factual categorization continues: “irregular combinations; or, in each case of any one of them detached, such an irregular isolation; as to defy all general methodization formed upon such a basis.” Later, of the whale’s “internal parts”:

*...why there you will not find distinctions a fiftieth part as available to the systemizer as those external one already enumerated. **What then remains? nothing but to take hold of the whales bodily, in their entire liberal volume, and boldly sort them that way.** And it is this the Bibliographical system here adopted; and it is the only one that can possibly succeed, for it alone is practicable.*

(Ch. 32, emphasis added.)

How very strange. The “volume” of the whales, that is their size and the books that they are, must be filed away in a library, with shelves organized not by author, subject, or title, but by physical magnitude. One wonders what Herman Melville’s personal shelves looked like. The inversion of qualitative distinction leaves us feeling that “nothing” remains at all: what a poor indicator of anything is size, and yet, it seems all that is constantly “practicable” about whales to Ishmael.

The project of organizing the world, organizing knowledge into parts, categories, and subcategories carries with it a sense of the doomed in Moby-Dick. “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.” (Ch. 32) Melville feels the Platonic paradox smarting in his writer’s hands and artist’s eyes. This book, more than any other book I have read, churns with tensions and magnitudes that seem uncreated or unwarranted by the constituent parts that make up its framework. This is the largest book a writer can write. Certain points in the novel have a sort of a point of critical density, where the amount of meaning packed into a few scant words forces the metaphor to collapse into a singularity. But indeed, that is the whole problem of Moby-Dick: can something be so meaningful that it becomes a black hole (or more appropriately, a White hole) that prevents any information from escaping?

There is a chasm between two concepts: one, the Platonic, is so perfectly itself that it cannot fall into any category; it is whatever category you put it in. Two, the Whale, that is, the

thing that nullifies any category you stick it into. Between these two points lies the frustration of Ishmael in charting the world.

On the one side: “Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air.” (Ch. 7) (If all water is Plato’s cave preventing us from seeing the sun truly, what does it mean that Ahab wants to “strike” the sun?) All symbolic systems are somehow incomplete, Ishmael/Melville’s book is a “draught of a draught.” In the same paragraph, Ishmael makes the analogy of “the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing on the top of the uncompleted tower.” (Ch. 32) “The copestone is left to posterity” and the tools of construction are left visible, and integrated into the aesthetic whole. Contrast this to Ishmael’s description of God’s created universe: “But it’s too late to make any improvements now. The universe is finished; the copestone is on, and the chips were carted off a million years ago.” (Ch. 2 *The Carpet-Bag*) The universe, if created, is complete, capped off, and the agents of construction have been carried out of sight. The utterly complete nature of the universe renders all charting devices incomplete. Man’s constructions and abstractions must by definition be starkly haphazard, mere gestures, because anything more complete wouldn’t look like it had a place in the universe at all. Plato would be proud.

And on the other side of the equation there is a logical impossibility: the Whale is the metaphor designed to contain the summation of unknown meaning. If the Whale is truly a “dumb blankness, full of meaning” then it must contain all meaning, without containing its own meaning. The logical paradox surfaces: Moby Dick is a set of all sets that don’t contain themselves. If he contains his own meaning, he violates his fundamental symbolic criteria. If he doesn’t contain himself, then he is contained in the world he supposedly signifies, and the nullifying cycle repeats.²⁵

How then does magnitude allow Ishmael to make sense? How do these two problems get solved with ordering by magnitude? Tough question. First stab: because magnitude is both quantifiable and relative. If Ishmael places the White Whale at the top of the size hierarchy, we don’t actually know anything liminal about it, just that it is *larger* than a specific animal (or

²⁵ Russell's Paradox.

idea). Orders of magnitude allow for the infinite to be fixed into a system. But Ishmael says that “the Bibliographical method” is imperfect and can’t quite contain the necessary meaning.

But Moby-Dick is a provisional book and this provisional solution will have to stand, for Ishmael, and for us. It is worth noting also, that since the novel was published in three volumes originally, each purchased separately, that the Bibliographical Method must have seemed much more meta because Moby-Dick itself was a small library in and of itself.

In any case, the size typology is designed to trigger deep distrust in the readers. After so much verbal dexterity, can we really believe that *size* is really the best way to discuss the Whale? Yes, simply because more words give the meaning more chances to slip out uninterpreted. And yes, because since any typology will be inverted, the size typology sets Ishmael up to show us what happens when variables of unequal weight are contrapositioned in an ordered typology.

Part II: SUBSTITUTION of IDEAS in an ORDERED SYSTEM

Because Ishmael has established the orders of magnitude as a working typology, he is then able to deconstruct the typology to shed light on the problems of organizing inverted knowledge. Specifically, since inverted knowledge is by definition difficult if not impossible to organize through absolute typologies, an intrinsically relative typology such as magnitude (larger or smaller than a breadbox, etc.) becomes ideal for allowing us to see the nature of the thing being discussed, if only in relief.

I present this example:

Though amid all the smoking horror and diabolism of a sea-fight, sharks will be seen longingly gazing up to the ship's decks, like hungry dogs round a table where red meat is being carved, ready to bolt down every killed man that is tossed to them; and though, while the valiant butchers over the deck-table are thus cannibally carving each other's live meat with carving-knives all gilded and tasselled, the sharks, also, with their jewel-hilted mouths, are quarrelsome carving away under the table at the dead meat; and though, were you to turn the whole affair upside down, it would still be pretty much the same thing, that is to say, a shocking sharkish business enough for all parties; and though sharks are the invariable outsiders of all slave ships crossing the Atlantic, systematically trotting alongside, to be handy in case a parcel is to be carried anywhere, or a dead slave to be decently buried, and though one or two other like instances might be set down, touching the set terms, places, and occasions, when sharks to most socially congregate, and most hilariously feast; yet there is no conceivable time or occasion when you will find them in such countless numbers and in gayer or more jovial spirits, than around a dead sperm whale, moored by night to a whale-ship at sea. (Ch. 64 -- Stubb's Supper)

Talk about conceits; Melville switches it on us not once, but many times. In this one long sentence, the word “though” appears *four* times, and “yet” appears once. Again, we have a series of restated metaphors, Russian nesting dolls of imagery which concentrically zero-in on specificity of meaning whilst annihilating the previous metaphoric tool. This is a perfect example of the Ishmaelian metaphoric process: as he leads us higher and higher (or lower and lower, if we are like Ahab) he sets up metaphoric ladders that help us traverse each successive

conceptual cataract, but once a ladder has served its purpose, he kicks it away behind us.

First we must imagine a whale fight as a sea fight, complete with “smoking horror” that can only be attributed to the firing of cannons (canons?). So then, once we are in the mindset of envisioning whaling as naval warfare, we must imagine the sharks as dogs (of war?) and then the harpooners are envisioned as valiant butchers--warriors--carving the opposing army (whales) to bits. Ishmael tells us that “were you to turn the whole affair upside down, it would still be pretty much the same thing, that is to say, a shocking sharkish business enough for all parties.” This is a sort of Rosetta Stone for inversion. Inverted knowledge is a sort of foreign language for describing reality, and on the rare occasion where the inverted view and the traditional view lead to the same translation (“a shocking sharking business”) we can get a cypher for understanding inversion in other places in the book.

This is an example of an inversion of the actual objects (the signified), not the metaphors in which the two variables are given equal weight by Ishmael. This seems to result in nothing too dangerous (other than the tongue in-cheek references to dead slaves buried at sea as “parcels,” bringing our attention deftly to humans as property, and injustice as business-as-usual.) I think perhaps the most dangerous type of thinking that happens in the book, indeed, Ahab’s biggest crime, is inversions of variables of unequal value. Ishmael gives us the sharkish example to show that sometimes inversion allows us to learn something very tangible and helpful: in the mirror of the metaphor, we see ourselves as brutish and bloodthirsty, and we see the natural world (a construct) as no longer mindless and bloody, but rather obeying a certain “hilarious” order. This is the sort of philosophical h’ors d’œuvre that makes inversion seem likable and a little trivial, a novel Socratic device for modeling systems in unexpected ways. However, we are also given examples of said device taken to the logical endpoint...and it isn’t nice at all.

Captain Ahab. Captain Ahab treats everything as a mobile variable. He thinks, (correctly but immorally, with the exception of Starbuck) that he can substitute a very private and specific agenda (vengeance on Dick) in place of a very public and general agenda (capture many whales, get oil, get rich). In doing so, he exposes the fearsome fact that most people, presented with an ordered system, even an inverted one, will just follow along. Humans in Moby-Dick are oddly goal-oriented. Even if the goals change, or no longer make sense, they will

to carry out the process continues. Ahab substitutes a circular and paradoxical goal (to revenge the insult of cosmic indifference) in favor of a teleological one (obtain X by performing Y) and thus we see a finite course of action mapped onto an endless loop. Unsurprisingly, the result is death.

It is debatable whether Ahab actually attempts to raise himself up to the level of a god or to pull down God and instate himself. He does, however, utilize the language, imagery, and evocative feeling of the ecstatic religious experience in order to present his less-than-spiritual quest. It's the oldest trick in the book. Perhaps the greatest inversion in the real world is the ability of a man or nation to convince believers of a religion that he is synonymous with that faith, and that his political goals are coterminous with that religion's spiritual objectives. I'm talking about demagoguery.

Ahab enacts a meta-inversion of Christian warfare. In the ritual of the harpoon-heads, he directs the harpooners to make a symbolic glyph with their spears. "[H]e grasped the three level, radiating lances at their crossed centre; while so doing, suddenly and nervously twitched them." (Ch. 36) Parker and Hayford find in this scene echoes of *Hamlet*²⁶ as well as in Jacques Louis David prints which Melville may have seen. (See appendix.)

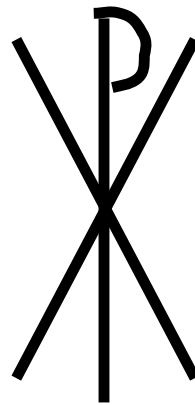
However, I trace the image further back. I suggest Ahab invokes the crossed spears evoke the Cross of Constantine, or as it is also known, the *Labarum*, the symbol of Christ composed of the Greek letters *X* and *P*, "although pagans might have recognized here an icon of the sun."²⁷ (Might this spin Ahab's striking of the sun in an interesting direction?)

²⁶ 1.5.146 Shakespeare isn't innocent of all inversions of his own. Whereas Melville is having his revengers swear to kill the whale or die trying, Hamlet is asking Horatio and Marcellus *not* to take action "Never make known what you have seen to-night."

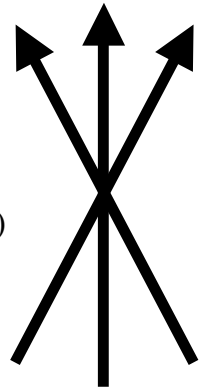
²⁷ Edwards, Mark. Ed. and Trans. *Constantine and Christendom*. Pg. 64

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“Cross your lances full
before me!” (Ch.36)



Constantine's Cross (*chi-rho*)
“*In hoc signo vinces*”
(In this sign you will conquer.)



There is a similarity, but in a larger sense, my point is this: demagogues have been enlisting Christianity as a tool and a symbol of war as long as Christianity has had symbology. When Ahab stages his inverted Eucharist, he enlists not only the cumulative valence of the Last Supper and its symbolic traditions, but also the cumulative symbolic weight of all the inverted Eucharists of the past. Subverting Christian imagery is as old as Christian imagery, and indeed, Christian imagery has elements of hijacked Judaism, and Judaism may be a patchwork of pre-YHWH symbology on into the dawn gloom of the distant past. But I diverge.

When God is pulled down to the level of human agendas, especially base and circular agendas like Ahab's, God becomes too heavy for the scaffolding the typology, and the vacuum at the top of the hierarchy left by God's absence sucks something up into its place that cannot seem to do the same conceptual work.

Ahab as substitution for the Christian deity, or Moby Dick as substitute for God or the Devil cannot ever be satisfactory proxies. At least, the traditions, mores, and subordinate belief systems attached to the refined Christian hierarchies seem suddenly and completely anchorless. Searching for a new Christ is not the same as locating a Christ metaphor. A replacement Christ will be unable to sustain the weight of all the contextual tags around Him. But a Christ metaphor

just adds an additional tag. Luckily Ahab's inversion plan isn't that simple. Rather than selecting Christ or the Devil as the located centers of Moby Dick, he treats them as equal and opposite pointers to the center of Moby Dick himself. Restated: Moby Dick is not a Christ metaphor. Christ is a metaphor for Moby Dick. That's catchy, but what I really mean is that rather than treating the past as a reflection of history, Ahab treats the past as a useful, but ultimately inadequate metaphor. But it's good enough to get his crew on board.

Re-introduction: A Reflexive Inversion of My Very Own

I started this thesis by saying Moby-Dick is really two books. What I mean by that, given all we've been through, is that the novel, Moby-Dick, is a special kind of a book; and that in order to be what it is, must be composed of two types of narratives. The first is the story of Ishmael, Ahab, Queequeg, Moby Dick, and all their friends and adventures. It is a story which stands for itself unexamined. The action described in this book, better titled The Whale, is easily sped by language and driven by familiar pathos and conventional ideas of sanity and madness, good and evil, and whatever other simple dialectics that you want to talk about. But that book is visible only as broken pieces. Digested, maybe. Of course, those fragments of conventional structure are what everyone picks up on, simply because they are instantly recognizable. As much as I respect John Huston, Gregory Peck, and Ray Bradbury (and Patrick Stewart), this is the book that surfaces on the screens of Moby-Dick adaptations. An adventure story, with gestures at high Shakespearean tragedy. Sometimes ridiculous. Always dated, even nostalgic. But anyone who actually sits down with the novel is surprised. Any 8th grader who has read it finds material that seems like it doesn't belong. I have been stating over and over, in different ways, and from different angles, that there is a philosophy and a rhetorical mode, and a reality-bending effect that I call inversion, and that the parts we recognize, the parts about swashbuckling and God and America are all actually bits of thought and culture that have been chewed up and spat out upside down, and that the connective tissue of the novel, the stomach lining, if you will, of Ishmael's voice, is above all else, *changed* by the experiences he describes, and again, *changed by describing them*. To continue the shaky Job metaphor, Ishmael's voice is the voice of someone who has been spat back out, but indeed, a part of his narrative persona, a part of his human perspective, is still inside the whale of an idea that swallowed him. He's halfway between the two worlds of the book, the expected and the strange, and he, like Pip, Elijah, Gabriel, Ahab, Queequeg, and the rest, is trying to find a language that defines the bridge between the world of old sense and the world of new. Job's whale vomiting back up the pieces of Melville's book seems apt: the evidence that would have added up to an American boy's adventure story is still present, but it no longer adds up to a whole we recognize.

You ask, what is this second introduction doing here in the 8th inning of a thesis? Well,

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this section is about substituting variables and changing scaled magnitudes. I guess I'm a little curious about how you, the reader, will cope if I change the introduction, revamp the frame narrative, and expect you to keep my evidence, except now it is supposed to prove a different thing. Is it fair? No, it's inversion.

I introduce a new fundamental, which, like the best ideas in Moby-Dick is completely the same yet totally different: Moby-Dick is a bi-level novel, with the first level being composed of Ahab's monomaniac search for his Whale, and the second being composed of the narrator's search for a unified system of symbology and representation. The reader is positioned outside both of these tracks, and views Ahab's arc through the lens of Ishmael's narrative, but finds herself implicated in the shortcomings of both. That is to say, the quest for the Whale results in death for the crew. The quest for a unity, even an allegory, of Moby-Dick the novel results in a fatality for the novel's meaning for the reader. How does Ishmael survive? By telling his story. How does Moby-Dick survive? In multiply telling itself, it sustains itself, and in forcing juxtaposed systems to flip, transform, and replace one-another in an endless loop. There is no rest position of interpretation. How do we the readers sustain a reading of Moby-Dick? We must create (as I have tried) systems of interpretation which allow multiple angles for viewing a text, and allow for the illusion of totality and unity to occur, and then be dispersed by the rigors of the system itself. Ultimately, I would like for this paper to be as blank and as full of meaning is the novel itself.

THE PYRAMID PROBLEM

The fallacy here is that once I have determined how I want the book to look, that is how it will look to me. Indeed, my technique does try to critique itself and refine itself, but that dynamism is what prevents me from seeing actual flaws in my system. When I present an idea, examine it, and then revise the idea, and re-present it, I'm so sure that my initial scheme for the larger Moby-Dick is right that I usually revise my ideas in terms of hanging together as a whole rather than being uniquely cohesive as separate units. This is flawed thinking, and represents one of the main pitfalls of the theory I call inversion.

I'm talking about the difference between example and microcosm. Ideally, I locate examples of things working in the text in a specific way, describe them, restate them, and fit them schematically into my picture of the text as a whole. However, what tends to happen, with my inversion plan in specific, but I think with all complex adaptive literary theories, is that points in the text that seem like excellent examples start to seem, especially at a late date in the development of the theory, to be mini-systems playing out the theory in microcosm, rather than constituent parts of the larger system. In short, chaos theory has crept into my essay.

At some fundamental level, the truth value of Moby-Dick, as well as this critical essay about it, must come under scrutiny. Does Moby-Dick mean? If so, how? (That's the mission of my paper.) But the same must be directed to this paper itself. Does this essay mean? If so, how? If I allow all my evidence to turn into microcosmic systems, then I lose the thread of argument completely, because all I'm doing is pointing out a hierarchy of systems and then asserting my theory about the way they work with absolutely no evidence. This is weak logic, and does a disservice to Melville, and to the merit of what I think, humbly, are my interesting and correct ideas about the novel.

I suppose the best way to approach this problem and defend my paper against it is to take a fresh evidence set (some aspect of the novel I haven't yet discussed) and pit my theories against other possible theories.

I present the question of pyramidal imagery in Moby-Dick. Why is it there and what function does it perform? One could easily write an Honors thesis with pyramids as the central organizational and conceptual framework. So why didn't I? And how does the structure I chose

stand up against the pyramid? How do the various schools of critical thought evaluate the pyramid evidence set? How does my inversion theory reconcile? I think the strongest place to start is Stubb's dream in the chapter entitled *Queen Mab*:

"Such a queer dream, King-Post, I never had. You know the old man's ivory leg, well I dreamed he kicked me with it; and when I tried to kick back, upon my soul, my little man, I kicked my leg right off! And then, presto! Ahab seemed a pyramid, and I, like a blazing fool, kept kicking at it. But what was still more curious, Flask - you know how curious all dreams are - through all this rage that I was in, I somehow seemed to be thinking to myself, that after all, it was not much of an insult, that kick from Ahab. "Why," thinks I, "what's the row? It's not a real leg, only a false leg." And there's a mighty difference between a living thump and a dead thump. That's what makes a blow from the hand, Flask, fifty times more savage to bear than a blow from a cane. The living member - that makes the living insult, my little man. And thinks I to myself all the while, mind, while I was stubbing my silly toes against that cursed pyramid - so confoundedly contradictory was it all, all the while, I say, I was thinking to myself, "what's his leg now, but a cane - a whalebone cane. (Chapter 31)

Since the goal of this portion is to defend my ideas rather than catalogue the history of Melville criticism, I will limit myself to three significant main groups of critical thought, and further I'll pick a single figurehead to sum up each group's theories. Those groups are the first Melville Revivalists, the American Renaissance (mainly Olson), and the constellated groups of folks that I lump under the (inadequate) subheading of Deconstructionists.

First of all, it is important to note that I dismiss criticism written in Melville's time about Moby-Dick. Tragically, most published reviewers disliked the novel, and those that did like it, seem to have liked it for the weirdest reasons. I'll briefly summarize:

"Captain Ahab, who is the **hero** of the whaling voyage, the commander of the Pequod, and thereafter **the soul of the romance**, is now introduced."²⁸ (Emphasis added.) What? What novel did you read?

"This is an **ill-compounded mixture** of romance and matter-of-fact. The idea of a **connected and collected** story has obviously visited and abandoned its writer again and again in

²⁸ Anonymous. A Credit to His Country. Published in the London *Morning Advertiser*. 1851. Reprinted in Parker-Hayford.

the course of composition.”²⁹ As you can see, most of Melville’s contemporary critics aren’t even worth addressing. If Moby-Dick is anything, it is compulsively, stunningly, compellingly connected and collected. One last knucklehead and then I’ll get down to the meat of the criticism.

And finally, the most damning: “Typee was just perfect.” The reviewer goes on, “In the attempt to make the rest better, and improve upon perfection, we think he runs into the grave error of giving us altogether too much for our money.”³⁰ Basically, all these “Anonymous” reviewers (the unsigned “we” of newspaper and magazine critics) decided that the vague, saccharine soft-core porn of Typee was what they wanted Melville to write, and anything else was a drag. (Ironically, one can see the inklings of inversion slyly appearing in Typee.)

But onward. My first straw man, er, critic is D.H. Lawrence. Lawrence I have selected as my representative of what is called the Melville Revival in the first quarter of the 20th Century. Rightly, these critics saw in Moby-Dick the precursor to Modernism, thanks in part to the way in which it “pushes localized events toward universalised meanings.”³¹ Lawrence, in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*³² (1922) finds in Moby-Dick and in Moby Dick, “A hunt. The last great hunt. For what? For Moby Dick, the huge sperm whale: who is old, hoary, monstrous, and swims alone; who is unspeakably terrible in his wrath, having so often been attacked; and snow-white.”

Strangely, it sounds as if Lawrence’s sympathies lie with Moby Dick. “old, hoary...alone” sounds like he’s describing Emerson or Moses or something. A Romantic figure, a sage. Further, he ascribes the Whale’s “wrath” to “having so often been attacked.” He’s *retaliating* against a human crime. Interesting. And his whiteness segues to this passage: “Of course he is a symbol. Of what? I doubt if even Melville knew exactly. That’s the best of it.” Well, Lawrence has already checked out. In Lawrence we see the trends emerging that have defined the important Melville criticism. Mainly, there is a strange sentence structure, an evasive posture, and a certain glibness that reviewers adopt (it explodes in Olson) that seems to

²⁹ Anonymous. An Ill-Compounded Mixture. London *Athenaeum*. 1851. Reprinted in Parker-Hayford.

³⁰ Anonymous. Too Much for Our Money. New York *Parker’s Journal*. 1851. Reprinted in Parker-Hayford.

³¹ Selby, Nick. Columbia Critical Guides: Moby Dick.

³² Reprinted in Selby’s Columbia Critical Guides: Moby-Dick. Pgs. 35-41.

me to be a testament to the power of Melville's writing. Once a reviewer, especially a Modernist, feels Melville's harpoon under his skin, he starts to talk like Ishmael in order to talk about Ishmael. I'm guilty of it too. There is a compelling purity to Melville's prose that convinces readers that the idiom of Moby-Dick is the most effective for discussing the concerns of Moby-Dick.

What would Lawrence say about pyramids? (Now I sound like *him*, replete with stupid rhetorical questions.) Lawrence is not convinced that there is a direct mappable allegory to the novel. (Correct!) He is also unsure that we can take the comedy as funny and the tragedy as sad. (Correct again!) Lawrence's arch tone (a little foppish, maybe) is effective as a warning. "Again, as a revelation of destiny the book is too deep even for sorrow. Profound beyond feeling." Now we're getting somewhere. Despite his ridiculousness, Lawrence has stumbled on a truism: instead of relying on our emotions, or trusting our facts, we must forge a new kind of knowing. Lawrence is so close. And then he blows it: "What then is Moby Dick? - He is the deepest blood-being of the white race. ... The last phallic being of the white man." Whoops. We lost more than the bathwater with that one. Lawrence, in all his bumbling, comes incredibly close to exposing the gossamer network of ideas inside the concealed heart of the book, but then screws it all up in the worst kind of way: he turns it into a racist allegory. It's easy to condemn dated criticism as racist. But in light of Melville's novel, it is imperative to condemn Lawrence as an allegorizer. Racism is just a form of reduction.

If he were looking at the pyramid metaphor, he would explore it in terms of what Post-colonialist-type folks would call sneeringly "the Other." That is, Lawrence would decide that the pyramid is a mystery, another allegory unknowable, and ascribe to it all the darkness of loaded racial mystery, and leave it there. If Moby-Dick is just a tension between the "white day" of America and the "dark trees" of "doom" then there is a whole bunch of stuff, beautiful stuff in the book, that's completely wasted. Simple racism needs unsolvable mysteries. It needs a dark heart that it refuses to plumb. But Moby-Dick shrugs off all subordinate mysteries and darts straight for the heart. An unwillingness in the reader to look closer is inexcusable. What would Lawrence say to that?

The next guy on our list in chronological order is Olson. Now, I think Olson is probably the best there is. He finds an idiom that compliments Ishmael's: Olson writes in short, blunt,

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declarative sentences that expose the poetry in Melville by exaggerating their own choppiness. His book reads a little like the Gospel of Mark. Forceful and cryptic. One senses a logic, but couldn't really describe it except in weak, holistic terms. Olson is my man for the American Renaissance of Melville criticism. He roots Melville rightly in history. The American Renaissance, (a problematic term) seeks maybe to break away from British Literary traditions while paradoxically bringing them to their apex. "Not as a rebirth of values that had existed previously in America, but as America's way of producing a renaissance, by coming to its first maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture."³³ In that context, they are correct to read Melville as the first truly American author; Hawthorne was just treading English waters.

Olson, luckily, doesn't leave it there. National identity plays a major role in *Call Me Ishmael*, but ultimately, he understands that Melville digs much deeper:

"Beginner--and interested in beginnings. Melville had a way of reaching back through time until he got history pushed back so far he turned time into space....we are the last "first" people. We forget that."³⁴ America as Israel. America as ship. Or America as yet another example of a deep trope that extends beyond the scope of human memory. ("Immortality is but ubiquity in time." [Ch. 41]) Olson's construction of Melville is one of a sort of metaphysical guide to the world of *Moby-Dick* as an exaggerated version of our own. *Moby-Dick* is a passion play for Olson, a conscious dramatization of a culturally shared memory. His CAPITALIZATION of words like FIRST, FACT, SPACE, POTENTIAL, and so on highlight our receptivity to Western/American constructs. He knows Melville played with them, but was suspicious. Still, however, Olson shies away from laying down a definitive theory of how *Moby-Dick* works. He treats the novel, as well as his own text about it, as experimental probes that found their own idioms as they progressed.

What about pyramids in *Moby-Dick*? Olson includes portions of Melville's journals about his trip to the Middle East, including Melville's explorations of the real pyramids. Those writings are central to my theory of how pyramids work in *Moby-Dick*, but Olson reads Christian hope in the fear of ancient Egypt and Christian disappointment in the experience of

³³ Matthiesen. *American Renaissance*. Reprinted in Selby, Pg. 52.

³⁴ Olson, Charles. *Call Me Ishmael*. Pg. 14.

actual Judea:

“It is a LAST ACT. When Melville went from the pyramids to Jerusalem he lost all he had gained. The power so to describe the Pyramids leaves him, as did the power to do *Moby-Dick*, prey to Christ. He had observed in Egypt that the Sphinx has its ‘back to the desert & face to the verdure.’ Melville reversed his Sphinx. He thought he faced verdure in Christ. It turned out to be desert.”³⁵ Inversion! But an inversion of blankness, *not* full of meaning. Indeed, Melville was vexed when he looked for the Christian God. But he didn’t find desert. He found reflexivity. Reflectivity. Ocean.

It’s ironic that I will be using Olson’s excerpts of Melville’s journals to advance a completely different idea. I borrow most of my style and investigative technique for Melville from Olson, but arrive at a completely different place. At the end of the day, Olson sees Moby-Dick as a rebirth, a cleansing after a tragedy. He hangs a great deal of seemingly arbitrary importance on the fact that the novel ends in the Pacific Ocean. Olson sees the Pacific Ocean as the opening of “NEW HISTORY.”³⁶ The desert of belief doesn’t give way to a mirror-water of self-reflection (as I think it does) but rather a blank, new, culturally unhistoried ocean of opportunity. Olson articulates the Atlantic as an extension of the Mediterranean, of the Homeric, of the tired archetype, and Melville’s Pacific³⁷, as calm, new, and a blank canvas for a new hero archetype to be painted in. Melville’s pyramids are part of the old, the dead, the played out. I disagree. If anything, Melville sees the arbitrariness of categories like “OLD” and “NEW.” I agree that Moby-Dick is a perfectly American book. But I think that means that Melville knew that Americanness in books was really about taking something very old and lamely slapping a new paint job on it and calling it American. At the heart of Melville’s conception of America (if we can call it a heart at all) is a de Tocquevillian skepticism. Melville fears that the core of America (and the core of anything namable) is a meaningless tautology.

Finally, we have the recent and near recent criticism of Moby-Dick. I sort of skipped over the New Critics of Melville, such as Charles Fiedelson. Mostly, it seems to me, that the New Critics, the American Studies people, and all the purveyors of what Selby calls “myth

³⁵ Olson, 98.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 116.

³⁷ “You know what the Mexicans say about the Pacific? They say it has no memory.” The Shawshank Redemption.

criticism,” all sort of bend Melville to match their theories, and one can’t debate the application to Melville as much as one must debate the actual truth value of the theory in general. If you like New Criticism, then it works in Moby-Dick. If you don’t, then it doesn’t. Talk about tautologies. I really want to focus on critics whose theories emerge from this novel itself, rather than critics who imagine Melville’s novel emerging from their theory. Unfortunately, this road takes us straight to Deconstructionism, Postmodernism, and Post-humanism. So here we go.

I’ve selected Wai-Chee Dimock’s 1991 essay *Ahab’s Manifest Destiny*³⁸ to represent a huge span of time, partially because I don’t want to get bogged down in each successive generation of deconstruction, but mostly because I feel that much of the systematization of Melville that critics have advanced since the 60s is really cumulative (or erosive, depending on your point of view) and that it just makes sense to skip to a recent incarnation because it includes a pretty full history of the whole doctrine in each new iteration. Also, I wanted a voice that emerges from an academic setting similar to my own, and unfortunately, it would be my only chance to examine a female voice in this essay. Melville scholarship, like the Pequod, tends to be a boys’ club.³⁹

So one last time I must do my Ishmaelite magic trick, and virtualize the mind of a critic to imagine her response to an evidence set unexamined in her work. What would Dimock say about pyramids in Moby-Dick?

“Fate begins,” she writes, “with the name itself.” Sounds familiar. She points correctly to the naming problem of Moby-Dick and the funny way in which our expectations seem always to be correct in the novel, but also in a way we never expected. (Melville didn’t invent this. Birnham Wood has been marching death to hubristic heroes for as long as there has been tragedy.) Dimock finds also the terrifying tautology of “Ahab is forever Ahab,” but she rejects Moby Dick himself as an enemy at all. “Relation and temporality alike are excluded;” for her Ahab’s monomania is a refusal to see causality. But her hero is Starbuck, a seer of causality. Strangely, she also looks for “blame” in the novel (a markedly un-Deconstructionist mode) and finds that Ahab’s insistence on defining himself is interchangeable with his own insistence to damn himself.

³⁸ Reprinted in Selby, 156-162.

³⁹ Laurie Robertson-Lorant’s excellent Melville: A Biography (1996) may signal a change in this trend.

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(I earlier quoted the Ahab “free to choose his doom” passage.) However, Wai-Chee Dimock commits several rookie errors, and, I argue, misses the trees for the forest. (Sorry, can’t resist and inversion at this point.) She treats Ishmael as a completely reliable narrator. She treats Starbuck as a perfectly formed allegory of American philosophical selfhood: “It is no accident that the spokesman for the ‘Nantucket market’ should be a champion of the autonomous self.” In short, she makes the novel seem pretty smooth because she sands out all the really strange parts. Her Ahab isn’t as mad and thorny as mine. Her Ishmael is a clear eye with little or no mind. Her Moby-Dick looks a lot like the first level of my bi-level system. Hers is not a simple allegory, it is a complex one, but it is an allegory nonetheless. At no point does she implicate the narrator or the reader in dropping the bottom out of the book. This, I argue (even if not articulated) is felt by the reader. Why is the ending so uncomfortable? Why do we need so much book in between if the goal is just to let Ahab’s natural self-destruction play out?

Pyramids, to Dimock, are no different than other tropes in the novel (I would imagine.) She would probably discuss them as an emblem of “a timeless regime, a circuit of identity.” The rhetoric of self-imposed and internal oppression, alienation from society and from self, provide most of the explanations in Dimock’s account and justification of Moby-Dick’s structure. Pyramids, for her, would probably be loose and messy symbols of implacable power. Stubb would kick them in his, likely, because they are there to be kicked and unable to feel the kick. Dimock dooms us all to destroy ourselves, and likely Stubb stubs his toes simply because he is made and named that way, and Ahab is a pyramid because he sees himself as such.

* * *

So, what do I think? I think that by patching together bits and pieces of plausible theories from past critical undertakings, a scheme like mine begins to appear organically. However, that is not enough. If I want to argue meaningfully that my account of the book belongs shoulder-to-shoulder with those of people with more letters after their names and more birthdays under their belts, I must at least hold myself up to the criteria by which I judged them. How is the pyramid symbolism in Moby-Dick a part of the larger inversion scheme?

I present an extended quotation from Melville's *Journal*⁴⁰ :

The Pyramids loom, a long slope of crags and precipices, the tablerock overhanging, adhering solely by mortar, twisted at angles like broken cliffs. Masonry--and is it man's? The lines of stone do not seem like courses of masonry by like strata of rocks. Slanting up the sweeping flanks people move like mules on the Andes. They ascend guided by Arabs in flowing white mantles, conducted as by angels. These are the steps Jacob lay at.

I shudder at the idea of the ancient Egyptians. It was in these pyramids that the idea of Jehova was born. A terrible mixture of the cunning and the awful. Moses was learned in all the lore of the Egyptians.

No wall, no roof. In other buildings, however vast, the eye is gradually inured to the sense of magnitude by passing from part to part. But here there is no stay or stage. It is all or nothing. It is not the sense of height or breadth or length or depth that is stirred. It is the sense of immensity that is stirred.

The theory that they were build as a defense against the desert is absurd. They might have been created with the Creation.

As with the ocean, you learn as much of its vastness by the first five minutes' glance as you would in a month, so with a pyramid.

Its simplicity confounds you. Finding it vain to take in the sea's vastness man has taken to sounding it and weighing its density; so with the pyramid, he measures the base and composed the size of individual stones. It refuses to be studied or adequately comprehended. It still looms in my imagination, dim and indefinite.

The tearing away of the casing, though it removed enough stone to build a walled-town, has not one whit subtracted from the apparent magnitude. It has had just the contrary effect. When the pyramid presented a smooth plane, it must have lost as much in impressiveness as the ocean does when unfurrowed. A dead calm of masonry. But now the ridges majestically diversify.

It has been said in panegyric of some extraordinary works of man, that they affect the imagination like the works of Nature. But the pyramids affects one in neither way exactly. Man seems to have had as little to do with it as Nature.

It was that supernatural creature, the priest. They must needs have been terrible inventors, those Egyptian wise men. And one seems to see that, as out of the crude forms of the natural earth they could evoke by art the transcendent mass and symmetry and awe of the pyramid, so out of the rude elements of the insignificant thoughts that are in all men, they could rear the transcendent

⁴⁰ Reprinted in Olson, Pgs. 96-98.

conception of a God.

But for no holy purpose was the pyramid founded.

Olson locates and prints this quotation, but wastes it. This stunning passage seems to be to be a great lost portion of the novel itself. Pyramids in the real world take on the same significance as they do (I argue) in Moby-Dick; they are terrifying because they emblemize the arbitrary power of the idea of God. The simple fact that the pyramids outlive the gods they honor makes them terrible. “It was in these pyramids that the idea of Jehova was born.” The pyramids prove to Melville that the idea of God is “rear[ed]” in infinite ways, and the extinction of one conception (Egyptian) and the endurance of another (Judeo-Christian) is so terrifying because it is so arbitrary. Melville believes that God is an invented idea. Perhaps he thinks Nature is real. However, much of Moby-Dick is concerned with the construct of Nature rather than the concept. In any case, the pyramids represent for Ishmael/Melville the fearsome power that God has gotten since we invented Him. It is not God that is “supernatural,” it is the priest. Perhaps God is natural, but then he loses power, not gains it. Man is strange in Melville’s world precisely because he articulates his own naturality, and in so doing, becomes unnatural. But God, Moby Dick, the pyramids, these are things we have raised up as the unnatural constructs of natural men. But they have become something else entirely. The pyramid doesn’t seem to belong to Man or to nature. It transcends measurement. It “looms,” “dim and indefinite.” Sound familiar? The microcosm-example problem is here again. I set out to show how the use of the pyramid symbol is a constituent part of the larger scheme of the novel, and I find only a mini-Moby Dick inside the pyramid.

Like “Ozymandias⁴¹,” the pyramid is a symbol of a power that has disappeared. Ironically, though, the power of the symbol as non-symbol outweighs the original intention. A pyramid as a symbol of the dominion of Ramses II is large. A pyramid, found in the desert, with hieroglyphics untranslated, is nearly limitless. When allegories outlive their subject matter, they start to be something more like archetypes or typologies. Stubb’s dream has Ahab take the form of the pyramid, the pyramid is symbolic of that which is “confoundedly contradictory,” the symbol that refuses to unfold and yield its pure answer, yet also finds a way to be meaningful

⁴¹ “Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair! / Nothing beside remains.” P.B. Shelley, 1819.

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and evocative. The pyramid has faces, sides, dare I say, aspects, that glory enormously in their blankness, yet the pyramid itself, is a time capsule, a delivery device for information into the future. It is ultimately blank and profoundly full of meaning. When a symbol is created as a pointer to a given and fixed meaning, and then that meaning is lost, subtracted, shifted or inverted, the great and lasting lesson of Moby-Dick is that that signifier doesn't become meaningless. It keeps its charge. Pyramids, White Whales, characters like Ahab, and voices like Ishmael are all examples and all microcosms; they all show us a very unique and captivating thing. They show us that truth, meaning, and factuality are all different things. They show us that facts can have the truth and meaning swapped, and still look like facts while telling us different things. They show that we can hold truth in our hands, and yet be totally unable to articulate its meaning. They tell us that we can feel a profound, epic meaning contained in a book like Moby-Dick, and then find out that we don't have the facts to support it, or that the truth we articulate from the combination of the facts and the sense is more hollow than the sense of meaning, and therefore an inadequate account.

In the end, I come full circle, unsurprisingly. My first line was this: Melville's writing is, at times, like a graveyard of failed metaphors. I know what I said, but having traveled so far, it's hard to believe what I meant. Melville's writing has no failed metaphors. Metaphor is a failed description of Melville's writing. We will fail if we try to understand his writing in the context of straight metaphor, simple allegory, or any number of established rubrics by which to chop up and file away odd books. I have tried to create, in this thesis, a system of understanding Moby-Dick that emerges completely from Moby-Dick. I have tried to revise each account carefully as each new evidence set unfolds and reveals the next lower level. What I have found, over and over again, is that any box that the novel will fit into, will not fit Moby Dick the idea. And any box that is big enough and strangely-shaped enough for Moby Dick now no longer fits Moby-Dick the novel. We must constantly anticipate the shape of this novel, and follow each prediction until it fails. At some point, (and for me, that point is *now*, at least for a while) we have to stop. We come to a point where we are unwilling or unable to turn our minds upside down any more. And when it all comes to rest, Moby Dick yet looms, indefinite, tantalizing, just slightly beyond our conceptual vocabulary.

“There's another rendering now; but still one text.” (Chapter 99)

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