

REFLECTIONS ON THE WATER:  
THE OCEAN IN *MOBY-DICK*

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## **DEDICATION**

For my mother,  
Susan Elisa Parham Carter,  
who first taught me how to read  
and  
for my husband,  
Gibson Kersting de Moraes,  
for his constant patience, encouragement, and support

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## Introduction

In 1839, nineteen-year-old Herman Melville first set out to sea on board the *St. Lawrence*, a merchant ship bound for England. His biographer Hershel Parker writes that “more than he wanted to glimpse any part of Europe, Herman wanted to see the Pacific” (1: 142). Although dire economic circumstances and lack of adequate education were decisive factors in his embarking on a career as a sailor, he had grown up hearing stories of sea adventures from his uncle and cousin and was eager, as Ishmael is in the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, “to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts” (8). From 1839 through 1844, Melville worked and lived at sea in many different capacities, including working aboard a whaling ship, which, in the words of Ishmael in “The Advocate,” became Melville’s “Yale College and [his] Harvard” (*Moby-Dick* 122).

His most successful works are strongly influenced by his experiences during his years at sea. *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Billy Budd, Sailor*, as well as much of his lesser-known writing, show evidence of “[s]omething of the salt sea” lingering in the language (*Moby-Dick* 99). The ocean continued to bear upon his imagination years later, as evinced in a letter he wrote on December 13, 1850 to Evert A. Duyckinck:

I have a sort of sea-feeling here in the country, now that the ground is all covered with snow. I look out of my window in the morning when I rise as I would out of a port-hole of a ship in the Atlantic. My room seems a



ship's cabin; & at nights when I wake up & hear the wind shrieking, I almost fancy there is too much sail on the house, & I had better go on the roof & rig in the chimney. (*Correspondence* 173)

Shawn Thomson writes that “Melville’s imaginative life carries him from the safe confines of his home into the very midst of the wild thrashing sea” (183). Through the language of fiction, Melville brings his readers alongside in his imaginative sea adventures.

By the time he wrote *Moby-Dick*, however, Melville strove to write beyond the tales of adventure that had originally brought him literary success. *Mardi* was his first attempt to write “something more than a mere romantic narrative of adventure. He had voyaged into a new world, he was sure, ‘the world of the mind’ – the world of ideas” (Parker 611). Despite the poor reception of the novel, he began planning for “a still more ambitious book” (624) that would grow into his masterpiece.

The ocean of *Moby-Dick* is integral to the book’s intricacy and ultimate success as a work of metaphysical art. Dan Beachy-Quick writes that in “Loomings,” the “meditation on water provides [. . .] the first philosophical depth *Moby-Dick* explores. The ocean prefigures in its symbolic complexity the difficulty of the book to follow” (181). The sea and its rich symbolism provide the undulating foundations of the novel – the beauty, chaos, instability, mystery, and rhythms of the ocean are among the elements that Melville reflects in his language and structure.

In this thesis, I propose an investigation of how Melville uses the sea as a literary space in which to search for a more complete, but ever-elusive vision of truth. Melville wrote in “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” “it is hard to be finite upon an infinite subject, and

all subjects are infinite” (253). His choice to take on the whale as his subject and the ocean as his setting show his courage to proceed into what could have easily turned out to be literary suicide. Using Ishmael’s voice, he conveys the kind of faith he must have had in order to delve into this grand project: [S]mall erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught — nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, Patience! (*Moby-Dick* 157). While he recognizes the impossibility of his task, he takes it on with the same attitude he must have summoned on his first whaling excursion. In my own decision to study and interact with his words, I hope in some small way to honor his brave literary voyage.

## CHAPTER I

“THE NEW FOUND SEA”:

### THE EVOLUTION OF ROMANTIC OCEAN IMAGERY IN *MOBY-DICK*

*I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans*  
-- Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

*Oh ye who have your eyeballs vex'd and tir'd,  
Feast them upon the wideness of the sea;  
Oh ye whose ears are din'd with uproar rude,  
Or fed too much with cloying melody—  
Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth and brood,  
Until ye start, as if the sea nymphs quired.*  
-- John Keats, “On the Sea”

In his pursuit of a new and more complex vision of truth through fiction in *Moby-Dick*, Melville drew upon life experience as well as a wealth of reading. His literary influences include, perhaps most notably, the Bible and Shakespeare's dramas. His more immediate precursors – English poets including Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, and Byron and his fellow American writers, Emerson and Hawthorne – also helped to shape the language and philosophy Melville weaves into his own text. These writers and their work marked a new appreciation of human interaction with the natural world. They explored mountains, valleys, rivers, and deserts, imbuing them with new significance and lending new insights to our collective imagination. Perhaps the most intriguing setting of

all, however, remained the vast and mysterious sea. The ocean was prime territory for both actual and imaginary exploration when *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851. While much of the physical seascape remained unsounded, the history of human imagination of the ocean extended from classical mythology through the then-recent musings of the Romantic poets. This chapter will provide a focused comparison of the image of the ocean envisioned by several of these poets and Melville's vision of the ocean in *Moby-Dick*. This analysis will establish the sea as an essential setting for literary art that Melville transforms into his own vision of the cosmos.

Keats's "On the Sea" makes a fitting point of departure for Ishmael's narration in "Loomings." Although Herschel Parker writes that "Keats had not been a powerful early influence on [Melville]" (2: 325), "On the Sea" provides an example of the quintessential vision of the ocean in Romantic poetry. Melville takes up the simple, elegant expressions set out by Keats's poem and expands them into a grander, more detailed vision. It is as if in his time spent commiserating with a sub-sub librarian or as a country schoolmaster, Ishmael has come across this poem and taken it as an invocation. He embarks on a sea quest, ostensibly hunting for whales, but more importantly searching for what he calls the "ungraspable phantom of life" (*Moby-Dick* 4). "On the Sea" bears most similarity to "Loomings" when the speaker shifts from observation and wonder into an invitation: "Oh ye who have your eyeballs vex'd and tir'd, / Feast them upon the wideness of the sea" (Keats 9-10). The imperative form of the verb indicates a kindhearted command of sorts, urging men to take comfort in the sea. According to Alain Corbin, the idea of visiting the sea to regain one's health and well-being was a popular notion that began in the middle of the eighteenth century. He writes that the "sea was expected to cure the

evils of urban civilization” (62). This sentiment is one that both Keats and Melville use as a jumping-off point to sea exploration.

“Vex’d and tir’d” is exactly how one may describe Ishmael’s state of mind at the outset of “Loomings.” Ishmael, however, details in more evocative, concrete terms why he feels thus: he has no money, he’s bored, with “nothing particular to interest [him] on shore.” He finds himself “growing grim about the mouth,” “involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral” he encounters (*Moby-Dick* 3). In short, Ishmael is depressed to the point of suicide. As he sees it, it’s either the “pistol and ball” or “take quietly to the ship” to “sail about a little and see the watery part of the world” (3). Even within these first few lines of Ishmael’s narration, Melville begins to create a book whose “force and stature heightens the soft idealistic ruminations and metaphysics of the Romantics, pronouncing instead a rawness of expression that achieves singular clarity and resolution (Thomson 11). This shift continues to intensify as “Loomings” unfolds.

Melville exponentially increases the size and scope of the Romantic idea of human interaction with the sea. Keats uses the word “feast” to emphasize how the sight of “the wideness of the sea” can nourish men’s souls (10). Melville, in turn, makes much of this connection between the “eyeball” and the sea. Ishmael contends that, “If they but knew it, almost all men [. . .] cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me” (3). He proceeds to take the reader on a visual tour of all the instances in which men commune through eye contact with water, all of which, he illustrates, is ultimately a part of the sea. He starts in Manhattan, observing how all of “streets take you waterward,” and once we arrive at the shore, points to “the crowds of water-gazers there”

(3). Interestingly enough, Ishmael compares these crowds of men standing at the edge of the city to “silent sentinels” (4), and it is this remarkable quiet that complements Keats’s evocation of the value of escaping to the sea to relieve our “ears [. . .] din’d with uproar rude, / Or fed too much with cloying melody” (11-12). Melville posits that the sights and sounds of the ocean are somehow universally appealing to our human sensibilities. He muses that its “magnetic virtue” exerts a force attracting men from all walks of life and all corners of the world to the water’s edge: “here they all unite” (4). This common fascination with the sea remains a mystery – one Ishmael is eager to explore.

Melville also argues for the necessity of water imagery in art. Ishmael directs our attention to an artist who “desires to paint you the dreamiest, shadiest, quietest, most enchanting bit of romantic landscape” (4). The overtly syrupy tone of this paragraph belies more than a hint of criticism of such an idyllic scene, which can be read as a dig at his Romantic precursors; nevertheless, Ishmael insists that “the chief element” the artist employs in his rendering of idealized nature can be nothing other than water: “yet all were in vain, unless the shepherd’s eye were fixed upon the magic stream before him” (*Moby-Dick* 4-5). Here again, Melville draws the reader’s attention to the connection between the human eye and water, adding more force to a theme that he methodically builds into a climax.

This meditative relationship with water leads to a mystical revelation, both in the last two lines of Keats’s “On the Sea” and then more fully and emphatically in Melville’s “Loomings.” It is as though the inhabitants of “Looming” described by Ishmael are following Keats’s urging to “Sit ye near some old cavern’s mouth and brood / Until ye start, as if the sea nymphs quired” (13-14). Here, Melville echoes Keats’s notion that

something ancient and mystical, like the song of sea nymphs, speaks to us through the ocean. Ishmael's series of rhetorical questions leads up to Melville's recognition of the mythical history associated with the ocean:

Go visit the Prairies in June, when for scores on scores of miles you wade knee-deep among Tiger-lilies — what is the one charm wanting? — Water — there is not a drop of water there! Were Niagara but a cataract of sand, would you travel your thousand miles to see it? Why did the poor poet of Tennessee, upon suddenly receiving two handfuls of silver, deliberate whether to buy him a coat, which he badly needed, or invest his money in a pedestrian trip to Rockaway Beach? Why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea? Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and make him the own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. (*Moby-Dick* 5)

Here Melville insists on the universality of humanity's deep connection to the sea and the myth-making with which it has always been accompanied. After this crescendoing list of examples of man's universal attraction to water, Ishmael returns to the image of eye contact with water. He proposes that the deep meaning of the myth of Narcissus is that because "he could not grasp the tormenting mild image he saw in the fountain, [he] plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all"

(*Moby-Dick* 5). In this naturally reflective, fluid element, Melville posits, we all find “the tormenting mild image” of ourselves, and that is why we embark upon the water to find our place in the world.

Already, in the first chapter of the novel, Melville has expanded upon the Romantic vision of the sea. Keats’s clean, elegant language renders the sea as the ideal place for self-contemplation and an escape from the daily grind. But Melville develops the sea into a far grander and more comprehensive literary space: the essential setting of the quest for the meaning of life. Ishmael cannot be content with sitting on the shore for a few hours on his day off, as “On the Sea” suggests one might; instead, he signs on as sailor on a whaling voyage. Such a journey is perhaps truly “as nigh the water as [he] can get without falling in” (*Moby-Dick* 4), though falling in is certainly a very real danger, as Ishmael cautions at the end of “The Mast-Head.” Here again, Melville amplifies our vision of the sea by having Ishmael not only dreamily ponder the “mystic ocean at his feet,” taking it for the “visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature,” but also realize the physical reality of the precarious situation in which he finds himself. He cautions the “sunken-eyed young Platonist,” lest in such a romantic daydream he should slip and fall off the mast-head, and his “identity come back in horror” (*Moby-Dick* 173). The ocean provides an enchanting escape from the fixity of land, but as a physical reality, it also threatens sudden death for those who see it as nothing more than a lovely symbol. Mere “Pantheists,” or “absent-minded young philosophers,” who seems to refer to some Romantic poets and/or Transcendentalists, may be better off contemplating their romantic ocean from the safety of the shore (172-3).



Earlier in “The Mast-Head,” Melville makes an explicit reference to Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold*, including him among the many “romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men” who seek to escape the “carking cares of earth” aboard a whale ship (172). Melville even quotes from the section of Canto IV in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* known as the “Apostrophe to the Ocean.” As Byron wrote it, the lines that Melville refers to are as follows: “Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll! / Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain” (IV.179.1603-4). But Melville makes a calculated substitution for Byron’s word *fleets*, rendering the second line, “Ten thousand *blubber-hunters* sweep over thee in vain” (*Moby-Dick* 172, emphasis added). At first, it may seem that this minor change does not amount to much, but Melville’s ironic word choice reveals a major difference of perspective between Ishmael’s and Harold’s perception of their relationship to the ocean, and therefore, to their sense of identity and place in the world.

The first difference one may notice between the two words, *fleets* and *blubber-hunters*, is their sound. A fairly general word, most commonly meaning a group of ships, *fleets* sounds swift and elegant, especially when followed by the assonance of the remainder of the line, “sweep over thee in vain.” Byron’s language is beautifully written, sonorous, and pleasing to our sense of literary aesthetics. But Melville proves throughout his writing career that he too can be just as poetic, which is why his choice to insert *blubber-hunters* (a seemingly unpoetic phrase in comparison) in the middle of the line jars our ears in a way that should alert us to a major shift in significance as well as sound. Most obvious, the blubber-hunters are men employed on whale ships, a reference to the characters in the novel, but this recognition merely skims the surface.

In his often-quoted letter to Richard Henry Dana, Jr., from May 1, 1850, Melville writes of his novel in progress:

It will be a strange sort of book, tho', I fear; blubber is blubber you know; tho' you might get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree; — & to cook the thing up, one must needs throw in a little fancy, which from the nature of the thing, must be ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves. Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this. (*Correspondence* 162)

This all-too-fitting quotation, when applied to Melville's rewriting of Byron's line, offers us a vivid evidence that *Moby-Dick*, while it retains a "little fancy" in its poetic language, also must necessarily employ some language as "ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves" if it is to achieve a larger measure of truth. By such revisions in language, Melville hoped to illuminate a more comprehensive view of that unreachable goal.

In order to better make a comparison between these two authors' work, it may prove helpful to review some features of Byron's writing and philosophical attitudes. Byron is known as one of the "dark Romantics," famous for his "heightened sensitivity to the dramatic and an inquiry into the depths of darkness and dread" (Thomson 12). He maintains a perfect Spenserian stanza and lush evocative language, however, even when addressing those favored dark themes. His "Apostrophe to the Ocean" continues in what approximates a hymn of praise addressed directly to the ocean for its omnipotence and violent glory. In the closing stanza of the "Apostrophe," Harold proffers an outright profession of love and affection for the vast body of water. This personification of the ocean, a tradition that goes back to ancient mythology, is also a literary trope that

Melville carries forward in *Moby-Dick*. Melville was inspired in part by Byron's poetry, which is apparent from his outright quoting of Byron and the fact that he had a great admiration for "blackness" in literature (In "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville praises what he calls the "great power of blackness" [234], in Hawthorne and Shakespeare alike). While he often echoes the Romantic poets in their perspective on man's interaction with nature, a close reading of the language Byron and Melville devote to the description of the ocean reveals Melville's innovation.

At the beginning of the "Apostrophe," Byron acknowledges the inadequacy and simultaneous urgency of language. He writes that he can "ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal" his human experience as a part of nature (IV.178.1602). This line points the reader back to Stanza 176, where the division between human existence and nature is described as being at paradoxical odds. Byron writes that communion with nature is our reward for toil and earthly strife: "That we can yet feel gladden'd by the sun, / And reap from earth, sea, joy almost as dear / As if there were no man to trouble what is clear" (IV.176.1582-4). The truth of life is simple, with the exception of man's struggle to find his place in the world, particularly in his compulsion to understand and express that struggle through language. The solution, it seems, according to Byron, is to recognize oneself as being at one with nature, submitting to its power and majesty in a loving respect, thus gaining its favor and protection. He supports this claim with the ultimate example: man's relationship with the sea.

The sea, according to Byron, is not susceptible to man's abuse of the land: "his control / Stops with the shore" (IV.179.1605-6). And in the next stanza he adds,

His steps are not upon thy paths, — thy fields

Are not a spoil for him, — thou dost arise  
 And shake him from thee; the vile strength he wields  
 For earth's destruction thou dost all despise,  
 Spurning him from thy bosom to the skies,  
 And send'st him, shivering in thy playful spray  
 And howling, to his Gods, where haply lies  
 His petty hope in some near port or bay,  
 And dashest him again to earth: — there let him lay. (IV.180.1612-20)

Here, as Rodney Farnsworth observes, “Byron seems to take sadistic delight in seeing humans suffer from the cruelly playful ebb and flow of the sea” (235). Indeed, his tone remains celebratory and almost self-congratulatory throughout the “Apostrophe,” especially when compared to Ishmael’s impressions of a similar scene in “Brit”:

[B]y vast odds, the most terrific of all mortal disasters have immemorially  
 and indiscriminately befallen tens and hundreds of thousands of those who  
 have gone upon the waters; though but a moment's consideration will  
 teach, that however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and  
 however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment;  
 yet for ever and ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder  
 him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make; nevertheless,  
 by the continual repetition of these very impressions, man has lost that  
 sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it.  
 (298)

Although he mocks “baby man” in this passage, Melville’s language contains none of the admiration that Byron’s does. Instead, Ishmael’s tone and perspective creates an ominous mood indicating his “sense of the full awfulness” of the sea. At this point in the novel, Ishmael perceives that the ocean harbors an overwhelming malice.

Harold addresses the sea in a laudatory yet increasingly familiar second person. Farnsworth observes that “[o]ne is indeed struck by the absolute and incontrovertible connection among the persona, Harold; the poet, Byron; and the image, the ocean” (239). Harold’s sense that he has somehow become worthy of a comfortable coexistence with the otherwise unfriendly ocean intensifies:

And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy  
Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be  
Borne, like thy bubbles, onward: from a boy  
I wantoned with thy breakers —they to me  
Were a delight; and if the freshening sea  
Made them a terror — ‘twas a pleasing fear,  
For I was as it were a child of thee,  
And trusted to thy billows far and near,  
And laid my hand upon thy mane — as I do here. (IV.184.1648-56)

Byron refers to his love for swimming in this stanza, one of the factors that “makes the reaction between the ocean and the speaker so personal as to seem autobiographical” (Farnsworth 239). Harold treats the ocean as a mother figure, calling himself “a child of thee” and hinting at its female gender, writing that he “was on thy breast to be / Borne.” Christopher Connery, in his chapter “Oceanic Feeling and Regional Imaginary,” even

goes so far as to use Byron as an example of a “Western romantic swimm[er]” who “partook of a masculinist sexual character that retained phallic penetration while maintaining a power-conferring outside that was at once the realm of origin, extratemporality, and maternity” (296). Applying Connery’s psychological reading, this stanza can be seen of as an example of “the male coital return to maternal water” in that Byron immerses himself in the “memory of an initial liquid state, a watery oneness with nature” (296), while paradoxically maintaining a kind of domination over nature, implicit in his image of the ocean as a horse, riding it with his “hand upon [its] mane.” Any momentary fright he might feel towards the ocean’s overwhelming power becomes a “pleasing fear” when he remembers that he is at one with the water.

At the end of “Brit,” Melville suggests that Byron’s positive personal associations with the sea are a bit naïve. Ishmael moves beyond the “continual repetition of these very impressions” (298) of the sea that have already lost their effect. He contends that not only will the sea continue to “insult and murder” man even after his best attempts to tame and understand it through “science and skill,” but that the ocean “is also a fiend to its own offspring [. . .] sparing not the creatures which itself hath spawned” (298-9). To further underscore his point and rule out any possibility of a pleasant relationship like the one to which Byron portrays, Ishmael compares the sea not to a domesticated animal like Byron’s horse, but rather to an indomitable wild beast:

Like a savage tigress that tossing in the jungle overlays her own cubs, so the sea dashes even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leaves them there side by side with the split wrecks of ships. No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed

that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe. (*Moby-Dick* 299)

Dramatic and frightening as this depiction of the ocean may be, it turns even more menacing in the subsequent paragraphs. The ocean is also a master of deception, Ishmael adds, lulling man into trusting it through its “subtleness”: hiding its true nature under a veil of “the loveliest tints of azure.” That true nature, it turns out, is “universal cannibalism” (299). More disturbing still is that Melville concedes to a much darker vision than Byron’s idea of union with the sea. Ishmael continues, “turn to this green, gentle and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?” Here, man’s union with the ocean is anything but the loving embrace that Byron offers as an answer. Ishmael elaborates, “For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!” (299). Union with ocean, in Ishmael’s view, symbolizes the journey of no return into the dark regions of one’s soul.

This vision resounds throughout the novel. In the previous chapter, Ishmael reports that a life at sea and “[l]ong exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, *i.e.*, savagery. Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois. I myself am a savage, owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him” (295). Notice the parallels in language: the savage sea is a cannibal, and with enough exposure to it, even introspective, scholarly Ishmael has come to realize that he

too inhabits the same cannibalistic nature. At one with the sea, engaging whales in a life-or-death struggle, he realizes his potential to become just as cruel and destructive. Later, in “The Try-Works,” the same comparison between the ocean and the dark side of man resurfaces: “The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true – not true, or undeveloped. With books the same” (465). Neither world, man, nor book can be true or complete until each fully develops an awareness of that dark fluidity of nature that the sea has come to signify to Ishmael. Through his meditations on the incomprehensible terror of the natural world, Melville expands Byron’s dark Romantic vision of the sea to reveal a more comprehensive vision of the evil side of human nature.

In his book *The Romantic Architecture of Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick*, Shawn Thomson argues that the poetry and philosophy of Percy Bysshe Shelley are also key influences on Melville’s language and philosophy. He writes that “Melville tests Shelley’s Romantic ideology” using Ahab as an embodiment of “Shelley’s approach to the universe; his feelings are primary and his imagination creates a world unto itself” (16). At the same time, “Ishmael’s part in the total structure of the novel serves as a counterpoint to the singular mission and absolutism of the Romantic ideology” (Thomson 16). Comparing Shelley’s and Melville’s characters in their quest for identity and a larger truth at sea allows the reader to recognize Melville’s movement towards a new literary space.

In Shelley’s “Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude,” there are only two unnamed characters. The Narrator, who according to Wasserman, is not Shelley’s personal voice,



but a Wordsworthian poet who exists to frame the story and offer moral reflection, serving as a contrast to the absolutism of the protagonist, known only as the Poet (11). The Poet embarks upon a journey in search of, as Shelley explains in his preface to the poem, “the Being whom he loves” (73). At the outset, the Poet is “a youth of uncorrupted feelings and adventurous genius led forth by an imagination inflamed” in his “contemplation of the universe” (73). Soon, however, he becomes dissatisfied with the world, deeming that “these objects cease to suffice.” He decides that he must find “an intelligence similar to himself,” or the aforementioned “Being” (Shelley 72-3). The qualities of this Being, which is purely a product of the Poet’s imagination, are as follows:

Conversant with speculations of the sublimest and most perfect natures, the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful with the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture. The intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense, have their respective requisitions on the sympathy of corresponding powers in other human beings. The Poet is represented as uniting these requisitions, and attaching them to a *single image*. (73, emphasis added)

Shelley continues to explain that the moral of his tale, “not barren of instruction to actual men,” is that “the Poet’s self-centered seclusion was avenged by the furies of an irresistible passion pursuing him to speedy ruin” (73). Melville’s development of his two main characters, Ishmael and Ahab, can be read as the expansion of Shelley’s Narrator and Poet in “Alastor.” In their interactions with the ocean, and in Shelley’s

case, also a river and a fountain, we find the characters feeling out their place in the world.

In “Alastor,” the Poet’s dissatisfaction with life begins when a “veiled maid” whose “voice was like the voice of his own soul” (151-3) appears to him in a dream, prompting his obsession to find her: “He eagerly pursues / Beyond the realm of dream that fleeting shade” (205-6). The Poet uses the image of the reflective properties of water to express his dread that his search will be in vain. His disillusion is evident in his own feeling of emptiness, “His wan eyes / Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly / As ocean’s moon looks on the moon in heaven” (200-202). He suspects that nothing of substance lies beneath the ocean’s surface, making its reflective quality a fitting metaphor for vacancy behind his own reflective eyes. He fears that his search will “Lead only to a black and watery depth” or “death’s blue vault” (215-16). Nevertheless he feels compelled to pursue the Being so that he might apprehend it. Of course, as Shelley warns in his introduction to the poem, this singular quest for the imaginary Being results in the Poet’s eventual self-destruction. His fate is inescapable.

In *Moby-Dick* we find clear echoes of the initial scenes in “Alastor.” Beginning with the chapter “The Counterpane,” we encounter another young adventurer, Ishmael, remembering a dream state in which “a silent form or phantom” was seated at his bedside, placing its “supernatural hand” in his own (29). The memory of this mysterious spirit hearkens back to “Loomings” where Ishmael expresses his mission to search for the “ungraspable phantom of life” found in the reflective surfaces of “all rivers and oceans” (5). Like the Poet of “Alastor,” Ishmael begins the novel by embarking on a sea journey in search of that phantom. In “The Counterpane,” however, Melville develops Ishmael’s

character in significant ways that separate him from Shelley's Poet. Ishmael is reminded of his childhood dream-encounter with the phantom when he wakes up in the Spouter Inn to find himself enveloped in Queequeg's immense tattooed arms. He initially sees Queequeg as an outsider – a strange, otherworldly phantom of sorts – a ferocious cannibal to be avoided and feared. But fate forces them to share a bed, and by virtue of his inquiring mind, Ishmael quickly realizes that, despite differences in their outer appearances, he and Queequeg are of the same essence. This epiphany allows Ishmael to become more comfortable with the notion that his own imaginative inquiry is but a small part of the experience he will encounter on the whaling voyage. He submits himself to the realization that not only is he exploring the world, but the world is exploring him as well. As Thomson puts it, "Ishmael moves from the subjective oppression of everyday life toward the unlimited prospect of the open sea" (201). Ishmael's attitude allows for openness to an adventure without borders or boundaries, regardless of whether that experience fits within a tradition of ideal Romantic expectations. It is an essential realization to have before embarking on such a journey, and one that undoubtedly alters Ishmael's destiny.

Ahab, on the other hand, has confined his mind to the same subjective stance that ultimately destroys him. Melville enlarges Ahab into a far more nuanced and dramatic character than Shelley's Poet in "Alastor," but Ahab's motivation stems from the same fatal character flaw: self-absorbed obsession with the projection of his own image/imagination. Like the Poet, Ahab perceives the sea as a battleground on which he will die in a noble quest to right the world through his attempt to "strike through the mask" to expose the truth, even though, like Shelley's Poet, he sometimes suspects there

is “naught beyond” (*Moby-Dick* 178). In “The Symphony” he reflects on his lifetime spent fighting, and bemoans the “forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war to the horrors of the deep!” (590). He is irresistibly drawn to combat that which lies beneath the unfathomable surface of the ocean, that “horror of the deep,” the white whale, whose face represents to him yet another wall of inscrutability (178). Shelley’s Poet also battles the sea: “A strong impulse urged / His steps to the sea-shore” (274-5) where he finds a small boat upon which

[. . .] to embark

And meet lone Death on the drear ocean’s waste;

For well he knew that mighty Shadow loves

The slimy caverns of the populous deep. (304-7)

Once he gets out to sea, a storm pursues the Poet: “On every side / More horribly the multitudinous streams / of ocean’s mountainous waste to mutual war” (“Alastor” 340-42). In his “Vision of the Sea,” Shelley also compares the ocean’s surface to a frustrating reflective barrier to knowledge and truth: “the walls of the watery vale / Whose depths of dread calm are unmoved by the gale, / Dim mirrors of ruin, hang gleaming about” (15-17). For both Ahab and the Poet, the ocean is a limitless trial, a deceitful enemy they strive to conquer.

Each character fails to see anything but himself in the reflective surface of the water. In “Alastor,” Shelley’s paints his version of a sick Narcissus awaiting his own death:

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld

Their own wan light through the reflected lines  
 Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth  
 Of that still fountain; as the human heart,  
 Gazing in dreams over the gloom grave,  
 Sees its own treacherous likeness there. (469-74)

In “The Symphony,” Melville depicts Ahab in a remarkably similar attitude: “Ahab leaned over the side, and watched how his shadow in the water sank and sank to his gaze, the more and the more that he strove to pierce the profundity” (590). Ahab, however, has a momentary change of heart at this juncture. He implores Starbuck, “[L]et me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God [. . .] this is the magic glass, man” (591). But the hopeful moment passes when “Ahab’s glance was averted” (592). He breaks away from eye contact with Starbuck and quickly reverts to what he believes is his fate – to die, if need be, in pursuit of the phantom he has projected onto the white whale, whose realm lies beneath that reflective surface, “the vast blue eye of the sea” (*Moby-Dick* 240).

Through this examination of both Melville and Shelley’s conception of their characters and their interactions with the ocean, Melville’s innovation in creating a character like Ishmael becomes more apparent. In his book *Ishmael’s White World*, Paul Brodtkorb argues that Ishmael is the book or the embodiment of the consciousness through which the reader perceives the meaning of the space, events, and characters. One way that Melville accomplishes such a literary feat is by combining elements of Shelley’s omniscient Narrator with some of the actions of the Poet to invest Ishmael with a curiously hybrid omniscient narrator/character. As the Narrator knows the Poet’s

thoughts and motivations, likewise Ishmael has the ability to offer insight into those of Ahab and the other characters. He is both a single identity called Ishmael, but at the same time he is everyone and everything, even if those things do not fit into the category of the Romantic sublime. He is willing to embrace and be embraced by the blackness of the world, and in doing so, transcends Shelley's ideals. He inhabits the body of a humble sailor, but Ishmael is so fluid and malleable, much like the personified sea on which he embarks, that at times he is indistinguishable from the consciousness of the universe. In achieving this paradox of individualized identity and union with nature, Melville supersedes the goal of his Romantic precursors, moving toward a more comprehensive understanding of the world.

## CHAPTER II

“THAT DEEP, BLUE, BOTTOMLESS SOUL”:

### APPROACHING TRUTH THROUGH OCEANIC METAPHOR

*Am I a sea, or a whale, that thou settest a watch over me?*  
-- Job 7:12

On August 18, 2010, *The New York Times* published a review of the Folger Shakespeare Library’s new exhibition, “Lost at Sea: The Ocean in the English Imagination, 1550-1750.” The reviewer, Edward Rothstein, highlights salient aspects of the exhibition, including navigation tools, ocean charts, books, and paintings – all records of man’s efforts to understand the “medium for the exercise of international power, the site of exploratory fantasy and the terrain over which Divine Providence exacted mysterious judgments.” He quotes the exhibition’s framing of the various ways in which the English sought to make meaning of their relationship with the sea: “Technological know-how and cartographic knowledge were essential, but so also were narrative understanding and religious faith.” Perhaps it is inevitable, given the subject matter, that Rothstein includes Melville’s rendering of the ocean in his discussion of the lingering effects of Shakespeare’s vision of the sea as “a literal setting and metaphor for instability.” Rothstein adds that the depiction of the ocean in art and literature “implied a

spiritual instability, a powerful conception that reached across three centuries into the world of *Moby-Dick*.”

Scholars have approached the complex topic of Melville’s own spiritual instability in an effort to better understand his vision of truth as it relates to the concept of a higher power. Those looking to discover further insight into his religious and spiritual opinions must find new ways to approach the meticulously woven tapestry of his fiction. As Emory Elliot suggests, “An examination of the nature and role of religion in Melville’s works must begin with an acknowledgment: to focus on religion is to illuminate particular threads in the narratives that can never be fully unraveled from others – the philosophical, anthropological, political, psychological, economic, sexual, and aesthetic – that constitute the astonishing multiple perspectives of Melville’s work” (175). While unraveling these threads may prove impossible, it seems that one can still identify significant patterns to provide a clearer meaning. I would like to propose a comparison between two such threads in *Moby-Dick*: the dark mysterious ocean that serves as the essential backdrop to the novel and how it intersects with Melville’s much scrutinized religious views. A close reading of these two elements in the novel will show, more than a literal explanation of his personal beliefs could, how Melville develops the ocean into a compelling, accessible vision for his perception of the truth of both divine and human nature.

Based upon the letters and institutional associations of his family members, we know a great deal about the religious beliefs of the people who surrounded Herman Melville as he was growing up. His personal beliefs, however, have proven to be much more complex and elusive. Melville did not make a habit of recording his beliefs or even



his doubts about religion in literal terms. However, in the journal of perhaps his closest friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, we have a secondhand glimpse into Melville's views on spirituality and religion:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists – and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before – in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us. (432-3)

Hershel Parker writes that this excerpt from Hawthorne's journal "is the only known testimony that Melville was obsessed with the problem of his own immortality" (2: 300). He also points to Hawthorne's conclusion that Melville's honesty and courage make him "better worth immortality than most of us" as a defense against claims by Melville's contemporary reviewers that his writings in some way proved he was "not just irreverent but downright irreligious" (2: 301). It is worth noting that Hawthorne uses a specific landscape, the desert, to evoke the terrain over which he imagines Melville's spiritual wanderings occur. Melville himself, however, through the language of most of his novels

including *Moby-Dick*, offers a symbolic wilderness much more suited to his vision of spiritual questing: the ocean.

Melville was aware that on the surface, the ocean may appear “dismal and monotonous,” and as unlikely to provide meaningful insight as is the quest symbolized by Hawthorne’s image of the desert, but he offers an alternative perspective that matches his own perception of his relationship to religious belief. In addition to Hawthorne’s account of Melville’s spirituality, Parker also includes more direct evidence of Melville’s personal philosophy by citing notes about other writers Melville admired. Apparently, Melville found affinity with and confirmation in the religious perspectives of John Milton. Parker explains that

[w]hen he identified with Milton, it was as a rebellious thinker. John Mitford in the introductory “Life of Milton” mentioned the poet’s “wanderings in religious belief,” spurring Melville to comment: “He who thinks for himself never can rema[i]n of the same mind. I doubt not that darker doubts crossed Milton’s soul, than ever disturbed Voltaire. And he was more of what is called an Infidel.” Knowing the grandeur of his own literary achievements, whatever the opinion of the world, Melville did not scruple to acknowledge the “singular coincidence” that both he and Milton avoided churches, especially those in any way connected to the state, and both rejected “any settled articles of belief.” (2: 405)

Parker goes on to give several examples of issues about which Melville vehemently disagreed with Milton’s philosophy, in case anyone should mistake him for merely following in the same rhetorical footsteps of the great poet.

Two phrases included in Melville's notes on Milton stand out as especially telling when one considers some of Melville's aesthetic choices in *Moby-Dick*. His assertion that "He who thinks for himself never can rema[i]n of the same mind" and his rejection of "any settled articles of belief" have many echoes in Ishmael's explanations to the reader. One passage that affirms these statements comes at the end of "Cetology." Ishmael reiterates his promise to the reader that neither "this system" nor this novel is an attempt at perfection or finality. He emphasizes "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" (157). Of course all of these statements are paradoxical — they are declarations of truth unto themselves that deny the validity of such declarations. Melville rejects any stable belief, not excepting his own. He does not accept cultural or religious chauvinism, or the idea that any one tradition or religious code (including the Bible) is exempt from criticism or interpretation. In order to truly and personally experience the divine, Melville insists that each individual submit to constant change and even chaos — a perpetual state of liminality.

Aware as he must have been of the logical fallacies in such a position, Melville sought out ways by which he could communicate these concepts without immediately being dismissed. Much in the way postcolonial writers have appropriated the language of the oppressive culture in order to construct an effective critique, Melville appropriates the familiar language of Christianity as well as typically Romantic language to express his ever-emerging, ever-changing, yet agonizingly detailed vision of truth. For Melville, it seems that the ocean is the obvious choice for a setting that is an indisputably real place

and yet has the potential to embody all of the chaos and liminality of his vision. It provides an all-encompassing symbol for the knowledge his characters seek but cannot obtain – it holds the secrets of the “ungraspable phantom,” and of course, the whale, which in many ways is a more concentrated symbol of the broader issues Melville explores.

Melville’s development of the ocean as a symbol capable of encompassing the unfathomable questions of life is evident throughout the narrative of *Moby-Dick*. In “The Ship,” Ishmael explains his desire to join the whaling voyage. Ishmael has been to sea before, he reports, having made “several voyages in the merchant services” (79). These previous voyages, however, are unsatisfactory to both Ishmael and Captain Peleg. Peleg scoffs at them and denies that they constitute any meaningful experience at all, at least as far as whaling is concerned. Ishmael senses Peleg’s distrust, and when pressed, says that he wants to join the crew of the Pequod for reasons that seem at once practical and Romantic: “to see what whaling is” and “to see the world” (79). He acknowledges that his previous experience at sea has afforded him neither opportunity, but he believes this voyage will simultaneously provide both. After testing Ishmael’s propensity to stomach the perils of whaling, Peleg orders him to “take a peep over the weather-bow” in an attempt to expose the “exceedingly monotonous and forbidding” aspect of the ocean, or “the world” that Ishmael hopes to see. “Can’t you see the world where you stand?” he challenges. Ishmael admits that while he feels a “little staggered” by these questions, he is still determined to “go a-whaling” (81). Even if he does not or cannot express his reasons, he has faith that through whaling he will gain access to at least a portion of what

lies beneath the surface of that apparently unfathomable sea, and thus amplify and enrich his vision of the previously unseen world.

This notion of belief in something beyond the visible resurfaces time and again throughout *Moby-Dick*. Both protagonists express varying degrees of faith in the possibility of knowing what lies beyond their reach through their meditation on the sea. One of the main themes that lurks in the unknown realm of the sea is that of the mystery of death. Early in the novel, in “The Chapel,” Ishmael examines the memorial plaques dedicated to sailors lost at sea. He ponders what he imagines to be the relative peace of mind of those who bury their dead “beneath the green grass,” compared to the “deadly voids and unbidden infidelities” endured by those family members who forever wonder what became of their loved ones buried at sea (41). This meditation builds on Ishmael’s previous wonderment in “Loomings” at how men are drawn to water, coming as close as they can to it, barely preventing themselves from falling in. In a structure mirroring that of his list of unsolved mysteries about man’s fascination with the sea, Melville details the similar persistence in our questioning of death. If we compare the two passages side by side, their similarities are remarkable:

Go visit the Prairies in June, when for scores on scores of miles you wade knee-deep among Tiger-lilies —what is the one charm wanting? —Water — there is not a drop of water there! Were Niagara but a cataract of sand, would you travel your thousand miles to see it? Why did the poor poet of Tennessee, upon suddenly receiving two handfuls of silver, deliberate whether to buy him a coat, which he badly needed, or invest his money in a pedestrian trip to Rockaway Beach? Why is almost every robust healthy

boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea? Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and make him the own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. (*Moby-Dick* 5)

And:

In what census of living creatures, the dead of mankind are included; why it is that a universal proverb says of them, that they tell no tales, though containing more secrets than the Goodwin Sands; how is it that to his name who yesterday departed for the other world, we prefix so significant and infidel a word, and yet do not thus entitle him, if he but embarks for the remotest Indies of this living earth; why the Life Insurance Companies pay death-forfeitures upon immortals; in what eternal, unstimulating paralysis, and deadly, hopeless trance, yet lies antique Adam who died sixty round centuries ago; how it is that we still refuse to be comforted for those who we nevertheless maintain are dwelling in unspeakable bliss; why all the living so strive to hush all the dead; wherefore but the rumor of a knocking in a tomb will terrify a whole city. All these things are not without their meanings. (42)

All of these carefully ordered questions and questioned assumptions do indeed lead us to wonder at their meaning. When the two themes are combined, the sea and death, and especially death at sea, the effect serves to intensify their mystery and possible

significance. Several examples of this conflation of significance abound throughout the text. At the end of “The Chapel,” Ishmael’s feverish tone belies his excitement at venturing out to sea and with it the possibility of death. He calls the prospect of death at sea “[d]elightful inducements to embark, fine chance for promotion, it seems — aye, a stove boat will make me an immortal by brevet” (42). He expounds upon his belief in his own indestructible immortality, supporting it with language that he knows will sound familiar and even welcome in the ears of his largely Christian audience, before he closes with subtle yet unmistakable blasphemy:

Yes, there is death in this business of whaling — a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity. But what then? Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. 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. In fact take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me. And therefore three cheers for Nantucket; and come a stove boat and stove body when they will, for stave my soul, Jove himself cannot. (42)

His choice to use the colloquial “Jove” diverts attention from the fact that Ishmael has just declared himself to be an equal power to the God of heaven, ready to toss away the temporary refuge of body and boat for a chance to face the knowledge hidden in the deep. This passage is one of many that support Lawrance Thompson’s theory that Melville was on an “anti-Christian” mission to quarrel directly with God. He writes that “In Hebrew

mythology, the sea is repeatedly represented as the element of disorder and of chaos: a howling infinite. More than that, the Hebrews doubled their symbolism, by representing disorder and chaos in the shape of that hideous sea monster, Leviathan” (171). Later, Thompson adds that the sea “represents, predominantly, the area of human experience which is uncertain, mysterious, uncomfortable, chaotic, evil, dangerous; but for these very reasons its vastness and seeming infinity offer (to the exploring, questioning mind) endless opportunities for various kinds of deep-sea fishing” (204). What Ahab and Ishmael (and Melville) are after is access to the same kind of fishing to which God himself has access, and the sea is the place that holds any hope of finding it.

In “The Lee Shore” we find an elaboration on Melville’s choice of the sea as the ideal setting for his characters’ spiritual and philosophical journeys. First he hints at the crew’s collective anger at the struggle they know they will face in such a quest: “the *Pequod* thrust her vindictive bows into the cold, malicious waves” (116). But anger alone is not complex enough a feeling to express Bulkington’s and the other truth seekers’ relationship to that vast body of mystery. Melville’s tone belies a conflicted affection and a longing for unity with the same ocean. Bulkington is so devoted to his desire to be at one with the ocean, he cannot bear to be ashore among the fixed falsity that it signifies to him. Upon arriving at port, he immediately signs on to a new voyage aboard the *Pequod*, and with her “seeks all the lashed sea’s landlessness again; for refuge’s sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe!” (116). Each phrase heaps deeper paradox upon the function of the ocean as the only place where man can escape the prison of stagnant thought, including that of religious tradition. Melville explicitly paints this dangerous, stormy sea as the only place to find the highest truth:



Know ye, now, Bulkington? Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?

But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God — so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land! Terrors of the terrible! is all this agony so vain? Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing — straight up, leaps thy apotheosis! (116-7)

This passage begins by addressing a rhetorical question to Bulkington, who has just thrown himself to the sea. Ishmael asks him if he knows – if he can now comprehend the same truth as God. We can assume Ishmael answers his own question in the affirmative, because in closing, he addresses Bulkington again, encouraging and praising him for his courageous “ocean-perishing” and calling attention to his instantaneous “apotheosis” and new status as a “demigod” (117). It is an enviable position, to be sure, but one that demands a literal leap of faith, which apparently is not one that Ishmael himself is quite ready to take. For now, he is challenged enough by his exploration of the surface and gleans the knowledge that occasionally breaches that border: namely, the whale.

The whale acts as an intermediary between the depths of secret undersea knowledge and the realm of human knowledge that is confined to the space above the

surface. As Ishmael explains in the chapter “Moby Dick,” “[f]or as the secrets of the currents of the seas have never yet been divulged, even to the most erudite research; so the hidden ways of the Sperm Whale when beneath the surface remain, in great part, unaccountable to his pursuers” (197). What happens beneath the barrier of the surface is open only to mere speculation, despite all man’s suspicion and theory. Nevertheless, the temptation to advance such research proves irresistible; killing and studying the whale’s body is undertaken as a way to approach this god-like knowledge and status without necessarily facing death.

We find yet another passage that hints at Melville’s and his characters’ desires to become like gods in their quest to know the truth in the chapter called “The Honor and Glory of Whaling.” Here, the tone implies a tongue-in-cheek argument that whalers are among the great religious gods and prophets of a universally representative group of heroes. Through their valiant deeds and experiences at sea, these “whalers” (including “Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnu”) achieve divine status and recognition through the ages. Ishmael concludes his observations on these revered mythical figures with his version of the Hindu story of Vishnu:

That wondrous oriental story is now to be rehearsed from the Shaster, which gives us the dread Vishnu, one of the three persons in the godhead of the Hindoos; gives us this divine Vishnu himself for our Lord; — Vishnu, who, by the first of his ten earthly incarnations, has for ever set apart and sanctified the whale. When Brahma, or the God of Gods, saith the Shaster, resolved to recreate the world after one of its periodical dissolutions, he gave birth to Vishnu, to preside over the work; but the

Vedas, or mystical books, whose perusal would seem to have been indispensable to Vishnoo before beginning the creation, and which therefore must have contained something in the shape of practical hints to young architects, these Vedas were lying at the bottom of the waters; so Vishnoo became incarnate in a whale, and sounding down in him to the uttermost depths, rescued the sacred volumes. Was not this Vishnoo a whaleman, then? even as a man who rides a horse is called a horseman? (397-8)

Melville make sure to include relevant parallels to the Christian God, including the concept of the trinity, the “three persons in the godhead”; the flood, “one of its periodical dissolutions”; and the birth of Jesus, known to Christians as the Word of God, here portrayed a double of Vishnoo, who brings the “sacred volumes” back to land. As in the story of Jesus, who gives up his earthly body to descend to the depths of hell to confront Satan, Vishnoo in this account also changes his form into a whale and descends into the darkest realms of the earth, the bottom of the ocean.

Jenny Franchot, in her essay “Melville’s Traveling God,” argues that in passages like this one, which reveal the remarkable similarities among stories from diverse religious traditions, Melville, through reinterpretation, resurrects the essential truth of Christianity and other world religions: the possibility of an intense personal interaction with the creator of the universe. Melville rejects the idea that the monopoly on truth can be held by one specific religion. Franchot explains, “we might consider this persistence as a form of travel crucial to the production of Melville’s seafaring fictions and to the production of a new god who emerges within them: a deity who is no longer a fixed

point, a ‘presence’ who will bring final quiet, but is instead also on the move” (159). To accept the dogma of religious tradition would be to accept a stable and unchanging truth, and Melville is not willing to lend credence to any belief that does not proceed from personal experience and independent thought. Franchot posits that every new religious belief emerges from what essentially amounts to cannibalism of the beliefs that came before, an idea that Melville bears out in his assertion of “the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began” (*Moby-Dick* 299). This passage reveals a dark version of the idea that it is “every soul for itself” within a universe full of individuals all after the same thing. As he concludes this meditation, Ishmael cautions those who are content to live as land dwellers, enjoying the “insular Tahiti” of traditional thought. He warns the blissfully ignorant and unquestioning masses that, if they choose to embark, they begin a journey of exploration into the dark seas of their being from which they can “never return” (299). Building on this thought, Ilana Pardes writes, “To follow Leviathan into distant or internal seas is not something everyone would venture to do” (26). Searching after the ultimate truth in nature or in one’s own soul is a dangerous undertaking, and may prove fatal to one’s sanity and well-being.

While some modern scholars have argued that Melville provides an expansive vision of spirituality, Deleuze and Guattari critique Melville’s religious vision in *A Thousand Plateaus*, claiming that Melville did not progress far enough philosophically. They cite D. H. Lawrence’s opinion that Melville maintained “a nostalgia for the Home Country,” that he “refused life” because he “stuck to his ideal of a perfect relationship, possible perfect love.” They continue, writing that “Melville was, at the core, a mystic

and an idealist,” accusing him of sticking “to his ideal guns” instead of abandoning them for new ones, which is, of course, what Deleuze and Guattari claim to have done (188-9). What Franchot achieves in her reading of Melville is an insight into his call for refashioning new “ideal guns,” using the knowledge that comes from dissecting the old ones and combining them with the newest materials his language and imagination has to offer. Melville would be the first to agree that neither he, nor anyone else, will ever go far enough in his quest to illuminate the truth.

In addition to developing the ocean into an all-encompassing spiritual symbol, Melville also reinterprets some of the Bible’s best-known tales of spiritual exploration. Pardes’s book, *Melville’s Bibles*, takes a closer look at specific cases in which Melville rewrites some of the most compelling stories of biblical characters through his own characters in *Moby-Dick*. She contends that several of the *Pequod*’s crew members take their turns inhabiting the roles of such well-known characters as Job and Jonah. In doing so, they provide a kaleidoscope of different interpretations of these biblical classics in order to reveal Melville’s own multivalent readings and critiques, thus preserving his promise to make this new bible, *Moby-Dick*, a truthfully incomplete “draught of a draught.”

Pardes asserts that even Father Mapple’s sermon on Jonah is an obviously subjective interpretation of what is supposed to be the definitive word of God. She observes how Mapple crafts his language so that it “urges [the congregation] to cling to Jonah’s sea-line, to follow him way down to ‘the kelpy bottom of the waters,’ beneath the surging floods, the seductively dangerous, unknown, dark, slimy geography of the deep” (Pardes 46). Yet miraculously, the biblical Jonah is able to see through “these dark,

suffocating seascapes” and “discovers his prophetic-poetic potential” through “the liberating power of words,” which he later relates as God’s truth to the wicked sinners of Nineveh (Pardes 63). (Although, interestingly enough, Job’s story ends with his anger at God for showing mercy to the city). This is, in Melville’s ironic voice, the same truth echoed again at the end of Father Mapple’s sermon: “To preach the Truth in the face of Falsehood!” (*Moby-Dick* 54). This is the truth of divine revelation, perceived in the realms of secrets – in “‘the midst of the seas’ where the eddying depths sucked him ten thousand fathoms down, and ‘the weeds were wrapped about his head,’ and all the watery world of woe bowled over him” (53). This is the setting for a realization of the Truth that Melville carries forward into his own mystical tale.

Ishmael and Ahab (both interpretations of Jonah and Job alike) are keenly aware that these unknown realms under the sea are inaccessible to living men, yet each is eager in his own way to discover what it seems only the Omniscient can know. This human quest after the biblical concept of the “knowledge of good and evil,” or the privileged knowledge that belongs solely to God, is the source of original sin in the world, as Melville most certainly understands, considering his Calvinist upbringing. Ishmael and Ahab have slightly different ways of approaching this quest for knowledge, however, as does each individual character aboard the *Pequod*. If through Ishmael’s character, Melville expresses his faith that there is something to be sought out beneath such surfaces, it is through Ahab that he communicates the opposing fear that there is “naught beyond” the blank forehead of the whale or the monotonous surface of the sea. In his 1992 introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Andrew Delbanco writes that even Ahab, though he “sees only fragments of a human world when he looks to sea,” expresses

his longing for what he calls the “‘God omnipresent . . . unwarped primal world’ that the ocean comprehends. He longs for this world, but it is invisible to him.” Delbanco asserts that through his “sheer literary virtuosity” Melville “furnishes one dazzling solution after another to the persistent literary problem of conveying to an innocent reader the palpable reality of an unfamiliar world, thereby making us feel at least potentially Ahab’s anguish as our own” (xxvii). Of course, the ocean as setting is one of these “dazzling solution[s]” that makes Melville’s philosophy accessible to readers of any background.

Obviously, Ahab’s desire to conquer the White Whale is a representation of the desire to achieve that forbidden goal of omniscience. In his book *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick*, Robert Zoellner writes that what Melville attempts to capture in his writing is something similar to forbidden knowledge, something Zoellner calls “primal form.” He explains,

What distinguishes the metaphor of the primal form from the metaphor of illumination is that while the latter is addressed to the perceptual *process*, the former is directed to the perceptual *object*, as it would be viewed anteperceptually. The metaphor of the primal form makes possible that logical and phenomenological contradiction, anteperceptual perception.

The “matter” or “object” of such anteperception is the visual rendering of an essentially *conceptual* formulation. (34)

Zoellner focuses his analysis of this concept on the whale because he claims that “It is [. . .] the *animal* as primal form which most engages Melville’s attention” (35). He does grant, however, that “The broad ocean [. . .] is the most pervasive primal form in *Moby-*

*Dick*; it is the anteperceptual expression of that which may perhaps be expressed verbally as ‘the inchoateness of the primal liquidity’ (34).

Ahab’s aggressive yet fruitless interrogation of the dead whale’s head illustrates his attempt to apprehend the “primal forms” of the whale and the ocean:

. . . speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world’s foundations. Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions drowned; there, in that awful water-land, there was thy most familiar home. Thou hast been where bell or diver never went; hast slept by many a sailor’s side, where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down. Thou saw’st the locked lovers when leaping from their flaming ship; heart to heart they sank beneath the exulting wave; true to each other, when heaven seemed false to them. Thou saw’st the murdered mate when tossed by pirates from the midnight deck; for hours he fell into the deeper midnight of the insatiate maw; and his murderers still sailed on unharmed – while swift lightnings shivered the neighboring ship that would have borne a righteous husband to outstretched, longing arms. O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine! (*Moby-Dick* 339-40)

To Ahab it seems inordinately unfair the whale knows all the secrets that lie beneath the surface of the water, while a man cannot know what is there unless he tries to read clues



from the dead creatures hauled out of that world, or dies himself in order to pass through the barrier. Knowledge must have been contained there at some point when the head was alive, but all the scrutiny of it in its lifeless state, like reading the dead religious traditions of the past, cannot yield an explanation of the truth. As an incarnation of a blasphemous Job, Ahab has done what God claimed was impossible – he hooked a whale, a Leviathan, and many more, in fact, over his life-long career as a whaler; but all of his victories over these monsters of the deep do not secure his status as a god. He sets his sights on the one creature that might prove to be *the* Leviathan, the White Whale.

Toward the end of the novel, Ahab muses on what he senses will be his fate, to die drowned in the ocean. He tries to recall what Fedallah has prophesied, “What’s that he said? he should still go before me, my pilot; and yet to be seen again? But where? Will I have eyes at the bottom of the sea, supposing I descend those endless stairs?” (615). Here again, Melville makes reference to Jonah’s journey to the bottom of the ocean where he finally sees God’s truth. Ahab tries to make sense of Fedallah’s prophecy through what he knows of the biblical story. He strives to his utmost, but cannot overcome his belief that “this whole act’s immutably decreed.” He tells Starbuck that their collective fate was “rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled” (611). In other words, try as he might, he will not rewrite God’s will or his story.

One crew member, however, actually finds himself in a face-to-face encounter with the ocean and with God. Pip (yet another Jonah) follows the exception to Stubb’s rule to stay in the whaling boat. Ishmael does not even tell us what the exceptions to that rule might be, only that “all the rest [of Stubb’s advice] was indefinite, as the soundest advice ever is” (452). It is his fate, it seems, as an omniscient Ishmael narrates, “But we

are all in the hands of the Gods; and Pip jumped again” and “was left behind on the sea” (452). Since it is a calm, sunny day, Pip can easily swim and stay afloat, but “the awful loneliness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?” (453). When he is out of sight of the ship or any of the other boats, “Pip’s ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably” (453). Through this terrifying experience in the middle of the ocean, however, Pip has a mystical spiritual encounter with the prime mover of the world:

The sea had leeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (453-4)

Pip actually sees what Ahab, Ishmael, and everyone else have been searching for, “the unwarped primal world” or what Zoellner calls the “primal forms” of the universe, which include, of course, a vision of the “multitudinous, God-omnipresent.” The problem is, however that Pip cannot logically express his experience and insight through language,

and the rest of the “shipmates called him mad.” All except for Ishmael, apparently, who perceives that Pip’s madness is actually “heaven’s sense.” Ishmael even undercuts the other shipmates’ perception of Pip’s mental condition, qualifying their opinion that he “went about the deck as an idiot” with the phrase, “such, at least, they said he was” (453). That the other shipmates cannot appreciate the vision of truth Pip attempts to report from the depths of the sea does not invalidate it in Ishmael’s estimation.

After the wreck of the *Pequod*, Ishmael is the only surviving Jonah of *Moby-Dick*. He learns from Pip’s experience that he must find a way to tell his own story of revelation in a manner that will make at least some sense to his listeners. As he tells us in the epilogue, he escapes the circular vortex of the sea that swallows the rest of the crew. Likewise, through his visionary storytelling, Melville has found a philosophical loophole, an exit from that circular paradox that keeps other prophets from succeeding in their attempts to communicate the truth. Despite all of his previous warnings about not being able to return from the dark seascape of our interior soul, he finds a way to tell his story from a place between the solid certainty of the land and unstable chaos of the sea.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE OCEAN AS MACRO-MIRROR: COSMIC NARCISSISM IN *MOBY-DICK*

*O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! not the smallest atom stirs or lives in matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind.*

--Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

When we hear the word *narcissism* today, we probably most often think of the personality disorder characterized by an excess of self-consciousness, selfishness, and lack of empathy. In fact, the first documented use of the word *narcissism* is attributed to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote it in an 1822 letter now quoted under the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s first definition of the word: "Excessive self-love or vanity; self-admiration, self-centredness" ("Narcissism," def. 1). It was 1914, however, before Freud appropriated and popularized the word to use in the psychological sense. Before Freud, *narcissism* would have been understood to allude to the classical Greek myth of Narcissus, a young man who becomes fascinated with his own reflection in a fountain. There are several versions of the myth, but at the end of each, Narcissus suffers for his self-obsession. In the version that Melville reanimates in "Loomings," we are told that "Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned" (5). Ishmael widens the scope of the myth to

include “we ourselves,” or all of humanity, and insists that we are all inherently obsessed with the pursuit of “that same image” that we “see in all rivers and oceans.” Furthermore, Ishmael adds that this universalized reflection is “the ungraspable phantom of life” and “the key to it all” (5). While it is clear that Ishmael expects to come to a better understanding of himself through the whaling voyage on which he is about to embark, he is ultimately more interested in discovering and portraying something much larger than his own isolated ego. He sets out to better understand the enduring mysteries of life itself through his observations of the universe as seen reflected through the largest natural looking-glass in the world: the ocean.

The concept of “cosmic narcissism” is one of the intriguing theories on how man interacts with nature put forth by Gaston Bachelard in his book *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Bachelard focuses on the ways in which our collective imagination relates to the material elements of the universe and how we share that imaginative relationship through poetic language. Although Bachelard makes no mention of Melville, he does use excerpts from the writing of many of Melville’s Romantic precursors and contemporaries (Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Byron, and Poe) as examples. Employing Bachelard’s theory of our collective imagination of water as a framework, I will show how *Moby-Dick* moves beyond the all-too-limiting ego-reflection that is the downfall of the classical Narcissus toward an infinitely more inclusive and meaningful reflection of the world as a whole.

Mystical as it may seem, Bachelard argues there is an enduring truth in the classical notion that the four fundamental elements have influence on a person’s imagination and that each person is drawn towards a dominant element. He explains that

all four of these elements “have their faithful followers – or more exactly, each is profoundly and materially a *system of poetic fidelity*” (5). A poet may think he is “being faithful to a favorite image,” Bachelard posits, but “in reality” he is “being faithful to a primitive human feeling, to an elemental organic reality, a fundamental oneiric temperament” (5). Considering this description of poetic fidelity, is there really any question as to Melville’s dominant element? The vast majority of Melville’s writing, and certainly his most memorable and successful works (with the exception of “Bartleby”), are set upon and include meditations on water.

In his discussion of *Typee* and *Omoo*, D. H. Lawrence muses on Melville’s inclination towards the watery element. Lawrence writes that Melville “is the greatest seer and poet of the sea,” having “the strange, uncanny magic of sea-creatures, and some of their repulsiveness” (122). Lawrence even establishes a link between Melville’s physical appearance and his propensity for writing about the ocean. He draws attention to Melville’s eyes, writing that “About a real blue-eyed person there is usually something abstract, elemental,” part of a “sea-born people” who are compelled to “go back to the fierce, uncanny elements: the corrosive vast sea” (122-3). When we couple these observations with Melville’s expressed belief (in his annotations on Milton’s *Paradise Lost*) that “[h]e who thinks for himself never can rema[i]n of the same mind” and his rejection of “any settled articles of belief” (Parker 2: 405), we cannot deny that Melville is a “being dedicated to water [. . .] a being in flux” (Bachelard 6). It seems only natural that Melville approaches writing as a reflection upon the same water that is at the very core of his elemental self.

Through the language, allegorical themes, and complex system of symbols within *Moby-Dick*, Melville comes the closest to his goal of reflecting a larger truth of life in his writing. Matteson describes the complex relationship between Melville and his partially self-reflective writing: “The cetological chapters of the novel derive only partly from Ishmael’s experience; they are the work of a researcher and artist of language intent upon reconstruction of the whale neither as commodity nor as mythic antagonist, but as a mirror of the ungraspable phantom of life. As the poet of whaling, Ishmael merges with the author Melville” (179). This mirror of life extends from the whale to the ocean, which, like the fluid language both Ishmael and Melville employ, connects and unifies all the elements of the novel and the world.

Obviously, there are many other reflective surfaces to be used as tools by which we can see ourselves and thereby examine our own nature. What is it about water, then, that makes it such a popular mirror in our imagination and poetry? Bachelard writes that we must “understand the psychological advantage of using water for a mirror: water serves to make our image more natural” as opposed to the “too civilized, too geometrical, too easily handled an object,” a mirror made of glass and metal (21). He quotes Louis Lavelle’s explanation of the comparative merits of a watery mirror, because of its “natural depth” and “infinity of the dream” (21). Lavelle writes:

If we imagine Narcissus in front of a mirror, the resistance of glass and metal sets up a barrier to his ventures. His forehead and fists collide with it; and if he goes around it, he finds nothing. A mirror imprisons within itself a second-world which escapes him, in which he sees himself without being able to touch himself, and which is separated from him by a false

distance which he can shorten, but cannot cross over. On the other hand, a fountain is an open road for him. (11-12)

Bachelard extends this argument, calling the watery reflection an “opportunity for open imagination” because the image reflected in the surface is a hazy ideal that impels us to search after it. We instinctually know that there is something of substance under the reflective surface of the water that might be apprehended if we could only manage to approach it. The glass mirror, in contrast, like the solid land on which it rests, “gives too stable an image” (Bachelard 22).

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville elaborates time and again upon this elemental difference between our perceptions of life based upon the stable element of earth, and the more complete possibility for discovery of truth available to us at sea. From Bulkington’s desperate escape from restrictive life on shore (*Moby-Dick* 117) to Ishmael’s declaration that man is incomplete without an exploration of his inner ocean, his dark, mysterious soul (465), Melville insists upon the value of the sea as the only setting that allows for unlimited insight. While the uncertain and even chaotic life at sea may seem frightening, to Melville and Ishmael life on land is much more terrifying because of the apparent certainty and stability of that terror. One example of this seemingly certain apprehension of a fearful object occurs early in the novel before Ishmael gets to sea. In “The Spouter-Inn,” Ishmael rummages through his future roommate’s belongings, trying to discover what kind of person this mysterious harpooner might be. He carefully examines what appears to be some sort of a garment, but cannot imagine what it is until he tries it on and sees himself wearing it in the mirror. Ishmael narrates, “I went up in it to a bit of glass stuck against the wall, and I never saw such a sight in my life. I tore myself out of it in



such a hurry that I gave myself a kink in the neck” (22). Through his stable land vision, Ishmael only confirms his preconceived notions about the frightful qualities of a man he has yet to actually meet. This reflection of himself and the objects that surround him are reinforced by the stable “bit of glass stuck against the wall.” In order to really understand his relationship to the world, he must learn to see himself and the rest of the world as reflected and challenged by the vision that the ocean affords.

The reflection of himself that Ishmael encounters at sea yields a vastly different outcome from the one that he gains from the mirror at the Spouter Inn. Once again, a comparison to the myth of Narcissus helps to clarify the difference. Bachelard explains that “at the fountain Narcissus has not given himself over exclusively to contemplation of himself” (24). While at first he may see himself at the center of that reflective vision, “[w]ith and for Narcissus, the whole forest is mirrored, the whole sky approaches to take cognizance of its grandiose image” (24). Bachelard alludes to Joachim Gasquet, who “gives us a whole metaphysics of imagination in a single phrase of remarkable density: ‘The world is an immense Narcissus in the act of thinking about himself.’” This notion of “a *cosmic narcissism* [. . .] continues very naturally from the point where egoistic narcissism leaves off” (Bachelard 24). Departing from the fixed reflections inherent in the stable and limiting vision on land, Ishmael embarks on a sea journey and the possibility of gaining a more complete vision of life. Bachelard explains that in such a situation, “[i]nstead of the precise, analytic narcissism of brightly lit reflection, we may see a veiled, foggy narcissism intervene in our contemplation of autumnal waters” (25). Thus, Ishmael goes to sea to search for the broader vision of the entire universe dimly

reflected through the mirror of the sea, a situation that he deems more valuable than that of staying on land to see a clearer, but sadly smaller view of himself alone.

Not all of the crew members realize the potential they have to examine the universe through the reflection of the sea. Instead, out of habit and fear, they cling to the earthly objects brought aboard the ship and to the *Pequod* itself in hopes of preserving their individual identities. One of the passages that helps us to understand the value of our individual wills and how we try mistake our abilities to project meaning onto earthly objects is “The Doubloon.” The gold piece is a bit of earth element “raked somewhere out of the heart of the gorgeous hills [. . .] from a country planted in the middle of the world” (*Moby-Dick* 470-1). Like the mirror made from glass and metal, it serves as a means of reflecting and reinforcing the egos of several of the principle characters.

Perhaps most notably, Ahab recognizes his own ego in the doubloon. He soliloquizes:

There’s something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here, —three peaks as proud as Lucifer. 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 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. Great pains, small gains for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself. Methinks now this coined sun wears a ruddy face; but see! aye, he enters the sign of storms, the equinox! and but six months before he wheeled out of a former equinox at Aries! From storm to storm! So be it, then. Born in throes, ‘tis fit that man should live

in pains and die in pangs! So be it, then! Here's stout stuff for woe to work on. So be it, then. (*Moby-Dick* 471-2)

Robert Zoellner argues that “[s]ome reality-mirrors are both totally reflective and entirely opaque: the doubloon is an instance of this kind of solipsistic reflector” (18). Ironically, Ahab mistakes that this mirror reflects the truth about him, even as he compares it to “a magician’s glass,” a mere trick or sleight of hand. He does not realize the wisdom of his own comparison, and therefore, fails to sense the possibility for seeing a more comprehensive vision the natural ocean-mirror provides.

These dim reflections and revelations of “ungraspable phantom of life” appear through the image of the reflective ocean in many instances throughout the novel. Zoellner writes that “[e]very page of *Moby-Dick* is shaped by the idea of water-as-mirror,” and he places due emphasis on Melville’s reinterpretation of the myth of Narcissus through Ishmael’s point of view (46). In Zoellner’s reading, Melville’s ocean as macro-mirror is a curiosity because it is “simultaneously *partially opaque, partially reflective, and partially transparent*. It is this protean analogical capacity of the water-mirror which makes it the central figure of intuition in *Moby-Dick*” (44). The ocean is the entity through which Ishmael’s intuition about life is confirmed and further revealed. Ishmael is “tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote,” including knowledge of his own self, but suspects that he will encounter the “one grand hooded phantom” as he embarks on the whaling voyage and “the great flood-gates of the wonder-world sw[i]ng open” (8). As David Scott Arnold observes in his book *Liminal Readings*, “it is immediately apparent that Ishmael is not at fullest harmony with either himself or the land. The illimitable sea appeals strongly to his nature: ‘meditation and water are

wedded forever” (49). Ishmael trusts that at least portions of the knowledge encompassed in the omniscient sea will be revealed to him through his meditation on and interaction with it.

Ishmael observes the multitudinous ways in which the ocean variously conceals, reveals, and reflects the secret of life. In the chapter “Wheelbarrow,” Queequeg and Ishmael take a schooner to the island of Nantucket. Upon “[g]aining the more open water,” Ishmael observes one of many contrasts between the surface of the land and that of the water. He exclaims, “[H]ow I spurned that turnpike earth! — that common highway all over dented with the marks of slavish heels and hoofs.” He turns instead to admire “the magnanimity of the sea which will permit no records” (66). While the earth may reveal evidence of what actions have transpired upon it, the sea’s ever-changing liquid surface retains no memory of what men or animals have passed over or through it. At this point in the novel, this characteristic seems a positive one in Ishmael’s estimation – he calls it magnanimous. As his experience grows, however, his vision of the world expands, as evinced by his descriptions of how he sees it in the sea’s surface. At the end of “Brit,” of course, he finds the ocean’s lack of respect for man horribly miraculous in that it “swallows up ships and crews” without leaving a trace of their existence on its subtle surface, hiding its malicious nature “beneath the loveliest tints of azure” (299). While the sea’s surface is portrayed as mostly opaque in both of these passages, it still acts as a mirror or an analogy for an aspect of life that Ishmael strives to understand: the nature of the human soul.

Some of the sea’s mirroring of the human mind and soul occurs through its partial transparency. In *The Lure of the Sea*, Alain Corbin writes, “At the bottom of the poet’s

soul, there lay a submerged world that revealed itself only in the mirror of dreams.” He adds, “the dreamer, swayed by aquatic rhythms,” comes to recognize “a coenaesthetic attitude toward the self, and gives a somatic character to the quest for self” (169).

Ishmael recognizes our shared human tendency toward such projections of self onto and into that realm of the water. In “The Mast-Head,” instead of narrating exclusively in first person, he at once widens the scope and blurs the lines of point of view by writing in a third person that wavers between limited and omniscient to describe the mast-head stander’s experience:

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

In this passage, we can clearly see the reflection of human thoughts within the water’s partially transparent surface. We find ourselves absorbed in these mesmerizing ideas made possible through Melville’s mastery of oceanic language and imagery. Bachelard writes that “organically, human language has a *liquid quality*” (15). Here Melville intensifies this liquid quality by combining his organically rhythmic language with the “strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful” images he evokes in our imagination, thereby

succeeding in “the blending cadence of waves and thoughts.” In this partially transparent mirror of the sea, we find a vision of cosmic metacognition.

Another fascinating aspect of this passage, and actually, the rest of the novel after the *Pequod* gets out to sea, is how Ishmael’s reciprocal mirroring of the ocean surfaces in his constantly shifting point of view. In the last paragraph of “The Mast-Head,” he deftly shifts (almost imperceptibly) into second person, and in doing so, draws the reader closer to his own experience and elevated vision before he brings us crashing back down to reality: “There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror” (173). In order to indulge in our Narcissus-like reveries, it seems, we must not lose sight of the fact that the universe is not governed by our will only (although we do exercise our will to some extent), and that in fact, the universe never ceases to exercise its own will and narcissistic reveries. Bachelard explains that “Schopenhauer’s philosophy shows that aesthetic contemplation alleviates human sorrow for an instant by detaching man from the drama of will,” but stresses that “this separation of contemplation from will eliminates [. . .] the will to contemplate” (27). He continues, explaining that “contemplated nature helps in the contemplation, as though it contains within itself the means for contemplating. The poet asks us ‘to associate ourselves as closely as we can with those waters which we have delegated to the contemplation of what exists’” (Bachelard 28). Both Ishmael and Melville are such poets in *Moby-Dick*, asking us to see ourselves as small but essential parts of the paradox that is

the universe by exploring it and allowing ourselves to be explored by it. The ocean is the largest medium through which this mutual exploration is accomplished in the novel.

It proves difficult, however, for many of the characters in the novel to relinquish individual agency and acknowledge the ocean as a collective agent. Part of the critique of Starbuck's character in the novel is that he intentionally closes himself off to truth because he refuses to acknowledge anything but the pleasant or morally good qualities in nature or himself. He cannot help but perceive that chaos and cruelty exist, but he strives to ignore them. This critique is elaborated in different ways, but several times, it is revealed through his relationship to the sea. In "The Candles," Starbuck is annoyed with Stubb's attempt to calm himself by projecting and reflecting what he perceives to be the stormy ocean's sense of humor. Stubb explains his philosophy and his coping mechanisms:

[T]he sea will have its way. Stubb, for one, can't fight it. You see, Mr. Starbuck, a wave has such a great long start before it leaps, all round the world it runs, and then comes the spring! But as for me, all the start I have to meet it, is just across the deck here. But never mind; it's all in fun: so the old song says:" — (*sings.*)

*Oh! jolly is the gale,*

*And a joker is the whale,*

*A' flourishin' his tail, —*

Such a funny, sporty, gamy, jesty, joky, hoky-poky lad, is the Ocean, oh!

(547)

Starbuck fails to see the wisdom in Stubb's recognition of himself as an integral drop in the ocean's grand joke. He asks him to stop his silly singing and get to work preparing the ship for the typhoon. When Stubb retorts that he will only stop singing when he is dead, Starbuck exclaims, "Madman! look through my eyes if thou hast none of thine own" (*Moby-Dick* 547). In this statement, it becomes apparent Starbuck thinks that his vision of the ocean, and therefore of life, is somehow privileged and that he seeks to impose it on the second mate. Stubb, to his credit, immediately points out his superior's own faulty vision: "What! how can you see better of a dark night than anybody else, never mind how foolish?" (547). In this manner, Stubb indicates that, literally and figuratively, he and Starbuck are in the same boat when it comes to what their individual wills can and cannot see and/or accomplish. Stubb's resignation to his situation comes from his perception of unity with the ocean through his willed good humor. Despite his many faults, Stubb has incorporated more of the nature of the sea, and therefore, sees a more complete truth about the world it mirrors.

Later in the novel, in "The Gilder," Starbuck once again ignores the whole truth of life despite all his experience at sea. At the chapter's outset, Ishmael muses on the sometimes deceptive surface of the ocean, comparing "the soft waves themselves" to "hearthstone cats." He foreshadows Starbuck's perspective when he writes that "when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember, that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang" (534). Seeing past the surface to take account of the entire picture of the universe and one's own dark nature requires an act of will. Starbuck, however, cannot bring himself to recognize these elements. In a turn of phrase that



reminds us of the golden doubloon and its incomplete earthly reflection, Starbuck gazes “far down from his boat’s side into that same golden sea” and asks it not to reveal the truth to him: “Loveliness unfathomable, as ever lover saw in his young bride’s eye! — Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look deep down and do believe” (535). Starbuck tries to will away the complete reality of the world, one that includes sharks and cannibals, because it does not fit within his own moral expectations. He does not take advantage of his ability to see the oceanic mirror that reveals a complete vision of life, preferring instead to project his individual expectations on it.

Ishmael’s will to expand his perception of the grand scheme of the cosmos does not go unfulfilled. In “The Grand Armada,” the ocean’s surface at the center of the sperm whale herd becomes “exceedingly transparent” and reveals “[s]ome of the subtlest secrets of the seas” (*Moby-Dick* 423-4). Bachelard writes that when Narcissus sees himself in the fountain as a part of the larger picture of life, “[s]o much fragility, so much delicacy, so much unreality push Narcissus out of the present. Narcissus’s contemplation is almost inevitably linked to hope” (23). Likewise, Ishmael wonders in amazement at the revelation of the new-born whales and their mothers:

[a]s human infants while suckling will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast, as if leading two different lives at the time; and while yet drawing mortal nourishment, be still spiritually feasting upon some unearthly reminiscence; — even so did the young of these whales seem looking up towards us, but not at us, as if we were but a bit of Gulf-weed in their new-born sight. Floating on their sides, the mothers also seemed

quietly eyeing us [. . .] The delicate side-fins, and the palms of his flukes, still freshly retained the plaited crumpled appearance of a baby's ears newly arrived from foreign parts. (*Moby-Dick* 423-4)

This revelation of the sea is a welcome sight to Ishmael who, although he has been willing to see all of the darkness that the world has to show, still holds out some hope for the beauty and delicacy of life. The whales themselves are like mirrors – they reflect the potential for the future and the permanence of an element of good in the world. In fact, the whale is a kind of mirror that Ishmael observes throughout his journey. When he sees his first whale from the lookout, Ishmael describes the scene: “not forty fathoms off, a gigantic Sperm Whale lay rolling in the water like the capsized hull of a frigate, his broad, glossy back, of an Ethiopian hue, glistening in the sun's rays like a mirror” (*Moby-Dick* 308). Seeing a whale from far away, or a dead whale hoisted onto the ship, however, is a very different thing from the scene at the “serene valley lake” in the protected center of the herd. Ishmael considers the effects this vision has upon him:

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely reveled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy. (425)

This center of hope and joy mirrors the same indestructible center of Ishmael's soul. The ungraspable phantom of life that he has been searching for reveals itself most clearly

through this vision. Through his prolonged exposure to the oceanic mirror, Ishmael realizes a vast and complex reflection of the larger truth of life – one that encompasses the darkness as well as the hope in the world.

A point of poetic comparison to the hope and joy that come with the realization of cosmic narcissism through the contemplation of water is evident in the opening lines of a poem entitled “To a Fountain” / “A una fuente” by Spanish neoclassical poet, Juan Meléndez Valdés. Rodney Farnsworth offers an interpretation of this poem in his book, *Meditating Order and Chaos: the Water-Cycle in the Complex Adaptive Systems of Romantic Culture*:

¡Oh! ¡cómo en tus cristales,  
fuentecilla risueña,  
mi espíritu se goza,  
mis ojos se embelesan! (1-4)

Farnsworth offers this English translation: “Oh, smiling little fountain, how my spirit takes delight! -- my eyes become enchanted in your crystalline mirror!” He argues that the focus of the poem should be on the word *cristales*, “which in this context can mean ‘crystal’, ‘glass’, ‘mirror’, or ‘lens.’ Meléndez juxtaposes the fluid with the permanent [ . . . ] the objective and the subjective intertwine, and there is no fully developed symbolic meaning.” Furthermore, Farnsworth adds that this poem and other such Romantic meditations on the image of the fountain “embody permanence in change, with emphasis on the permanence” (86-7). This multiplicity of meaning attached to the crystal fountain, one that includes the possibilities of it being a glass, mirror, or lens, translates well to the sea in *Moby-Dick*. The sea is all of those and much more. The value of Melville’s ocean

symbolism is its profound and unlimited possibility for meaning, which is the extension of the idea in a simple poem like that of Meléndez. In the reflective sea of *Moby-Dick*, the reader perceives an all-encompassing vision of the entire world as opposed to the limited vision of an individual Narcissus figure.

Farnsworth's observations about the fluid meaning of Romantic fountain imagery also resonate in Melville's ocean imagery at the end of the novel's final chapter (excluding the epilogue). Before we know that Ishmael is watching from afar, the perspective of the voice that delivers the closing lines seems as if it had witnessed the millennia it now describes: "Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (*Moby-Dick* 624). This passage certainly embodies "permanence in change, with emphasis on the permanence" (Farnsworth 87). But unlike so many of the pleasant poems about fountains that preceded it, Melville's *Moby-Dick* holds up a mirror of such a grand scale that it refuses to be ignored.

## CHAPTER IV

“THE IMMENSE REMOTE, THE WILD, THE WATERY, THE UNSHORED”:

### THE OCEAN AS HETEROTOPIA

In his 2004 book *The Outlaw Sea: A World of Freedom, Chaos, and Crime*, William Langewieshe describes the enduring liberty afforded to people who live and conduct business at sea. He writes, “At a time when every last patch of land is claimed by one government or another, and when citizenship is treated as an absolute condition of human existence, the ocean is a realm that remains radically free” (3). He goes on to explain how despite many governments’ attempts to regulate and control international waters, the very nature of the ocean, its “easy disregard for human constructs, its size, the strength of its storms, and the privacy provided by its horizons” prevents them from effectively enforcing any law (Langewieshe 7). As his title indicates, the unrestricted freedom of the ocean also encompasses the results of such lawlessness, including piracy and terrorism. The allure of that all-encompassing liberty, however, proves to be an irresistible force drawing hundreds of thousands of people to a life at sea in a way that differs very little now from the mid-nineteenth century. Melville recognized the ageless appeal of the ocean’s boundlessness and made it a mainstay in his writing. In *Moby-Dick*, the sea is a space where people from all cultures can meet on an equal, if unstable

footing. Melville's ocean functions as an ever-shifting stage on which men seek and find inspiration for both individual and collective freedom.

In my exploration of this idea, I will compare *Moby-Dick*'s ocean to Foucault's concept of heterotopia. In his essay "Of Other Spaces," Foucault defines this new term, differentiating it from that of a utopia, or a "fundamentally unreal space" (24):

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (24)

Foucault further explains that heterotopias "have a function in relation to all the space that remains." Either the heterotopia, or "space of illusion," works to expose "every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" or "to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (27). Idealist colonies, brothels, and gardens are all instances of such heterotopias, according to Foucault, but he concludes his essay with the following example:

[I]f we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the

same time is given over to the infinity of the sea [. . .] you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development [. . .], but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination.

The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. (27)

Cesare Casarino takes his “historical and conceptual cue” from this notion of the ship as heterotopia. He writes that “[t]he modernist sea narrative in effect has already advanced such a claim” to the “space of the ship as its central focus and telos.” The modernist sea narrative, including *Moby-Dick*, Casarino argues, “questions not only its own foundation, but also reaches beyond itself to question the foundation of a world that for several centuries has been run in all sorts of ways by ships – in questioning itself, it questions the whole world” (13). Keeping Foucault’s theory and Casarino’s application in mind, I propose a widening of the focus of this notion of heterotopia in sea narratives to examine the vast space of the ocean as a prime example. Casarino makes an excellent case for Melville’s whaling ship as heterotopia, but the more significant and enduring heterotopia is the sea. The ocean as heterotopia functions to simultaneously represent, contest, and invert “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture” (Foucault 24). In *Moby-Dick*, Melville draws attention to each of these coexisting functions of the sea.

The ocean is a space vast enough to represent the entire world. In his book *Melville, Mapping and Globalization*, Robert T. Tally Jr. explains, “For Melville, *truth* is always related to *space*, and consequently, the ascertaining of truth, and truth-telling or narrative, are imagined as geographic or cartographic enterprises” (98). In order to express his vision of truth, Melville explores the real and imaginary geography of the sea.

He points to the ocean's potential for encompassing the infinite possibilities of life in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" when he writes, "You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in" (246). The specificity of "sea-room" indicates that not just any large space will suffice – the ocean has qualities that make it unique when compared to other elements. In "The Monkey-Rope" Melville offers this concise yet all-inclusive metaphor: "That unsounded ocean you gasp in, is Life" (*Moby-Dick* 351). Its size, therefore, is one of the characteristics of the ocean that makes it so appealing as a heterotopia in real life and fiction. Charles Olson supports the idea of the necessity for employing this physically and symbolically large space. He claims, "To MAGNIFY is the mark of *Moby-Dick*," evinced in part by "the scope and space of the sea" (71). He compares the novel to the play of Shakespeare's that "Melville penciled most heavily," *Antony and Cleopatra* (71): "It is built as Pyramids were built. There is space here, and objects big enough to contest space. These are men and women who live life large. The problems are the same but they work themselves out on a stage as wide as ocean" (72). Extending this reasoning, *Moby-Dick* is as immense and fluid as *Antony and Cleopatra* is imposing and solid. Melville uses the entire watery world as his stage to contrast the literary monoliths of Shakespeare and other precursors.

On this grand oceanic stage, Melville's drama unfolds, revealing layer after layer of conflict. This conflict takes the form of what at first glance seems to be an inherent duality in all aspects of the world. The ocean as heterotopia, like the stage in a theater, is the space "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 25). One prominent example of this elemental conflict is that of the juxtaposed sites of land and sea and how man relates to each. The



land is a stable yet inherently restrictive place, while the ocean is ultimate free space – ungovernable to the point of anarchy, representing, as we have seen in previous chapters, “the universal cannibalism” (*Moby-Dick* 299) of all nature, including man.

Throughout the course of the novel, the reader follows Ishmael’s learning curve, realizing along with him the truth revealed through his experience, reflection, and narration. Foucault’s second principle of heterotopias is that they can change over time according to a society’s evolving needs and attitudes (25). The heterotopia of the ocean in *Moby-Dick* changes from one that merely reflects and extends the land to one that challenges and even threatens it. Although his intuition in “Loomings” tells Ishmael that there is something inherently different about the ocean before he sets out on his voyage, he still holds to the idea that the sea is yet another territory to be conquered: “Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires” (*Moby-Dick* 70). However, as the novel progresses and Ishmael gains more and more insight at sea, he learns that his initial perception could not be further from the truth. Matteson argues that “the humbling outcome of the voyage argues the absurdity of subjecting the ocean to colonial claims” (172). As Ishmael observes at the end of “Brit,” the ocean alone is “masterless” in that “no power but its own controls it” (299). At the end of the novel, it alone remains unperturbed by all of man’s efforts to subdue it and its creatures: “the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (*Moby-Dick* 624). Deleuze and Guattari explain that the sea remains the “principal among smooth spaces” despite all human attempts to divide and conquer it:

But the sea is also, of all smooth spaces, the first one attempts were made to striate, to transform into a dependency of the land, with its fixed routes, constant directions, relative movements, a whole counterhydraulic of channels and conduits [. . .] But this undertaking had the most unexpected result: the multiplication of relative movements, the intensification of relative speeds in striated space, ended up reconstituting a smooth space or absolute movement [. . .] instead of striating space, one occupies it with a vector of deterritorialization in perpetual motion. (387)

In light of this explanation, we see how the ocean works as a heterotopia that manages to change yet stay the same over time. The sea both reacts to and absorbs all actions exacted upon it, transforming human effort while subduing it into a reinforcement of the ocean's sovereignty. Given this natural model of absolute freedom, it hardly seems a surprise that both Melville and Ishmael recognize the potential for imaginative storytelling, "as the sea surpasses the land in this matter" (*Moby-Dick* 195).

From the beginning of the novel, Melville sets out to emphasize the preeminence of the space of the sea. The *Pequod*, while it in itself offers a rich space for contemplation, is a means to an end. The ship functions as a vessel in which to search for the whale in his native environment, "the wild and distant seas where he rolls his island bulk" (*Moby-Dick* 8). In "Loomings," Ishmael lays the foundation for one of the most important mysteries of the novel: universal attraction to the sea. It is the water itself, not the many ships anchored at the harbor, that so fascinates the "thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries" (4). Ishmael observes these men all "striving to get a still better seaward peep," getting "just as nigh the water as they possibly can

without falling in” (4). These men are in dire need of this sea communion, for they are “all landmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster – tied to counters, nailed to benches, cinched to desks” (4). Contemplation of the “green fields” simply will not suffice for these men, the implication being that they must see themselves as a part of something to which they cannot be tied, nailed, or cinched, and thus enslaved. They crave to be reminded of their own free nature through contemplation of this heterotopia, this real space that seems to be “a kind of effectively enacted utopia” (Foucault 24). Here and throughout the text, Melville underscores the inherent condition of man as slave as he compares life on land to life at sea. In “The Lee Shore” the land, though the reader might traditionally associate it with “safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that’s kind to our mortalities,” in fact poses “direst jeopardy” to the *Pequod* since “one touch of land” would destroy it (116). While the stormy sea also poses danger, its flexible liquidity allows the freedom of movement the ship needs to remain intact. In this light, the ocean offers both chaos and liberty, infinitely preferable to the “treacherous, slavish shore” (117).

The problem with exploring this enormous free space of the ocean is that in one way or another, a person must surrender his freedom in order to gain it. Ishmael is aware of this conundrum, yet willingly gives himself over to the lowly job of “a simple sailor” (*Moby-Dick* 6) in hopes of compensation by way of an actual paycheck (a small percentage of the profits) and, as he explains to Captain Peleg, a chance to “see what whaling is” and “to see the world” (79). Ishmael, who has been “lording it as a country schoolmaster,” gives up his authority to become a common sailor, willing to “sweep down the decks” at the order of “some old hunks of a sea-captain.” He sees it as no great

indignity, though, since all men are inherently beholden to something or someone else. “Who aint a slave? Tell me that?” he challenges (6). As a simple sailor instead of an officer, he also gets the privilege of the “wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecastle deck” (7). His position as a common deck hand ensures him closer proximity to the sea than even the captain, paradoxically bringing him closer to the freedom it seems to promise.

Melville’s portrayal of the sailors’ lives aboard the *Pequod* is in many ways representative of real whaling ships’ crews in the mid-nineteenth century. Casarino writes that the whaling industry employed “the most international, multiethnic, multilingual, and especially multiracial labor force of any other sea practice” (5). The heterogeneous nature of such a group of sailors becomes most pronounced in “Midnight, Forecastle.” The way that the sailors are united by the oceanic space that surrounds them points to the ocean’s power as heterotopia. Melville structures this chapter like a play, writing each character’s name in all caps preceding his lines and stage directions. The secondary characters are identified by their respective place of origin, rendering names such as “AZORES SAILOR” or “CHINA SAILOR” (189), bringing attention to the diversity of the crew. Earlier, while introducing the “Knights and Squires” of the tale, Ishmael calls on the “just Spirit of Equality, which has spread one royal mantle of humanity over all [his] kind” to bear him out in his depiction of the “meanest mariners, and renegades, and castaways” as true nobility (126-7). Lawrence Buell calls this passage a “studiously bombastical [. . .] playful extravagance, a mask for the occasion” (229), but he still credits F. O. Matthiessen’s appraisal of Melville’s language here as a prime example of the “democratization of Shakespearean rhetoric,” a “full-voiced affirmation of democratic

dignity” (444-5). This seemingly ideal microcosm of diverse society seems a wondrous improvement from life in the antebellum United States, but Ishmael soon discovers that the interdependence of this social arrangement keeps each man indentured to his superiors and the ship as a whole. Not even the ship’s officers are comfortable or happy with their supposedly privileged positions, as we learn from the awkward and unsatisfying dinner scene in “The Cabin-Table.” Flask, the third mate, is in the unfortunate position of being the last to the table and the first to leave. If any lower ranking sailor envied Flask’s “official capacity, all that sailor had to do, in order to obtain ample vengeance, was to go aft at dinner-time and get a peep at Flask through the cabin sky-light, sitting silly and dumfounded before awful Ahab” (164). Not even Ahab, however, is free to do whatever he wants. He knows he must have the support of his crew if he is to even approach his goal of catching the White Whale. When Starbuck questions his judgment in “The Quarter-Deck,” Ahab recognizes the necessity for his subtlest rhetorical skills, “a little lower layer,” in order to persuade the first mate of the priority of his vengeful quest (178). Considering all these examples, the reader finds that while the whalemens are surrounded by and constantly reminded of the possibility of absolute freedom in the heterotopia of the ocean, all of them are enslaved by their dependence on the ship and each other.

Life at sea proves to be replete with such contradictions. In her article “The Paradox of Slave Mutiny in Herman Melville, Charles Johnson, and Frederick Douglass,” Helen Lock writes, “The sea has long been figured as a symbol of freedom, limitlessness, the absence of differentiation” (55). The strict hierarchical structure of the whaling ship was quite the opposite to the flexibility and latitude of the ocean. Therefore, “not only

were these sailors in a paradoxical situation with regard to the element they traversed, but there is also an element of paradox in the concept of their engaging in mutiny, given the inversion of mutually recognized natural hierarchy, based on class and capital” (55). In fact, these two situations are related. Their exposure to the limitless, chaotic ocean becomes an inspiration for the sailors to commit acts of mutiny against the strict hierarchy of the whaling ship. Foucault writes that a heterotopia is a space that functions to invert the status quo (27), which is precisely how the sea functions in this scenario. Individuals packed together in the relatively small space of a ship are forced to conform to the whims of the captain and his officers, who have essentially become their masters. When a disagreement arises, as it usually does among a crew as culturally diverse crew as the *Pequod*’s, it comes as no surprise that the lower-ranking party may attempt to overthrow what it sees as unjust power.

The fact that they are floating in the middle of the ocean is key to those who would incite mutiny. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison observes that “[t]he concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not in fact create it – like slavery” (38). If one applies this idea to the situation of the sailors who find themselves treated as slaves, the masterless ocean that surrounds them becomes an almost irresistible model for their own behavior. “The Town-Ho’s Story” provides evidence of the influence of the ocean’s freedom on man’s choices. Ishmael’s description of the principal mutineer, Steelkilt, focuses on the culture of the Great Lakes that made him the strong, free-spirited man he proves to be. “Though an inlander,” Ishmael tells, “Steelkilt was wild-ocean born, and wild-ocean nurtured; as much of an audacious mariner as any.” As long as he was treated with “that common decency of

human recognition which is the meanest slave's right [. . .] Steelkilt had long been retained harmless and docile" (*Moby-Dick* 268). Radney, the jealous mate, makes the grave mistake of dishonoring that "common human decency" in his dealings with Steelkilt and reaps the inevitable consequences of trying to enslave a nature so strongly influenced by the sovereignty of the sea. Steelkilt plans to kill Radney for his unjust abuses, but the sea offers up a better solution, namely, *Moby Dick* (281). In a fortuitous turn of events for Steelkilt, Radney literally throws himself into the jaws of death in his attempt to conquer the White Whale. Further emboldened by the apparent favor of the sea gods, Steelkilt, leading the majority of the crew, deserts the *Town-Ho* and embarks on his own series of independent voyages, indefinitely eluding the law and any consequences that may have befallen him on land. "Where Steelkilt now is, gentlemen, none know," Ishmael reports (283). His alliance with the independent oceanic spirit, evinced by his insistence on fairness and dignity in the face of unworthy oppression, makes Steelkilt a rebel hero and a legend of the whale fishery.

Of course, not all men have the courage to follow their instincts to become as independent as the sea, especially since it means surrendering the kind of life they have come to know on land. In "The Castaway," Ishmael muses on why such independence is so appalling to the majority of men: "Mark, how when sailors in a dead calm bathe in the open sea — mark how closely they hug their ship and only coast along her sides" (453). It is not that the men are afraid of drowning, since "to swim in the open ocean is as easy to the practiced swimmer as to ride in a spring-carriage ashore." The main fear that men feel at the prospect of the open sea is the converse of independence: "the awful lonesomeness is intolerable" (453). Pip, however, proves to be an exception to this rule.

The others call him a coward for not staying in the whaling boat, but not even he realizes the uncommon courage he shows by choosing to jump out of the boat on two occasions, entrusting himself to the sea and the “hands of God” (452). The sea claims him for its own, transforming him into a prophet of its coming doom for the *Pequod*, a collective of men who follow their captain’s wild intent to overthrow its power. Despite Pip’s cryptic warnings, Ahab continues to exercise his increasing hubris. He repeatedly boasts that he is “immortal on land and on sea!” (542). He paradoxically remains a slave to his own inflexible quest, and in doing so, dooms the ship and its entire crew to the ocean’s chastisement. As Tally explains, “At sea, nature cannot be conquered or tamed, but must be treated with the utmost respect if man is to survive the encounter” (72). Instead of treating the ocean with due respect, Ahab relies on his own inflated sense of knowledge and power. Despite all of his years at sea, his attitude towards nature remains that of a colonizing land-lubber in that he thinks he can easily chart, divide, and overthrow this space along with its most powerful inhabitants. He is, of course, completely mistaken.

Full integration into the wild space of the sea calls for an acceptance of one’s inevitable death. Heterotopias “presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable,” Foucault explains. “Either the entry is compulsory [. . .] or the individual has to submit to rites and purifications” (26). Bulkington is the first and most extreme example of such an absolute submission to the heterotopia of the sea. He renounces the comfortable oppression of life on land for a chance to enter into what he trusts is the ultimate space of truth, “the open independence of [the] sea” (117). Bulkington’s giving up of the ship, of its intermediate position between land and sea, means immediate death, but as Ishmael later muses, “Death is only



a launching into the region of the strange Untried; it is the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored” (529). Ishmael himself tells us at the beginning of “Loomings” that his venture out to sea is his “substitute for pistol and ball” (3). In the chapter “The Blacksmith,” he tells the story of a man who, having made a ruin of his life, literally has nothing left to lose; so like Ishmael, he signs on to the whaling voyage as an alternative to killing himself:

[T]herefore, to the death-longing eyes of such men, who still have left in them some interior compunctions against suicide, does the all-contributed and all-receptive ocean alluringly spread forth his whole plain of unimaginable, taking terrors, and wonderful, new-life adventures; and from the hearts of infinite Pacifics, the thousand mermaids sing to them — “Come hither, broken-hearted; here is another life without the guilt of intermediate death; here are wonders supernatural without dying for them.” (529)

This conflation and juxtaposition of two incompatible states of being, life and death, in the space of the sea, is yet another way that qualifies it as a heterotopia.

The fourth principle of Foucault’s heterotopia applies to Melville’s ocean – one that, while it may be perceived as morbid, is one that leaves us with a fitting sense of finality. Foucault explains that

Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time. This

situation shows us that the cemetery is indeed a highly heterotopic place since, for the individual, the cemetery begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance. (26)

*Moby-Dick* is replete with comparisons of the sea to the grave, and consequently, the space and time of eternity. Beginning in "The Chapel," Ishmael ponders the seemingly preferable burial on land as opposed to one at sea, yet ends up concluding that he is happy at the prospect of "a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity" should he die in a whaling accident (41-2). In "The Town-Ho's Story" he describes the sea as "the grave already ready dug to the seaman's hand" as Steelkilt plots Radney's murder (280). When Queequeg dives into the ocean to rescue Tashtego, who has fallen head first into the whale's head, the crew sees him finally surface, "an arm thrust upright from the blue waves; a sight strange to see, as an arm thrust forth from the grass over a grave" (375). Later, when Queequeg thinks he is going to die of a fever, he requests a sort of coffin-canoe be built for his burial at sea. His people "believe that the stars are isles, but that far beyond all visible horizons, their own mild, uncontinented seas, interflow with the blue heavens; and so form the white breakers of the milky way" (521). Here, Queequeg's notion of death is that he will travel over the sea forever, extending into limitless space. Just a few pages later in the novel, the mermaids who beckon Perth the blacksmith to sea urge him, "bury thyself in a life which, to your now equally abhorred and abhorring, landed world, is more oblivious than death" (529). The sea as a kind of universal, eternal cemetery is a space that at once fulfills and transcends Foucault's idea of heterotopia.

Several other similar comparisons between the grave and the sea occur towards the final chapters of the novel, especially as Ahab contemplates his own foretold death, but the images in the final chapter (not including the epilogue) are among the most memorable and significant: “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (*Moby-Dick* 624). These sights and sounds remind us of a funeral: the screaming birds overlooking the place where the ship has disappeared; the “sullen” or mournful waves closing in over it; and the word “shroud,” which incorporates so many meanings here, but one most prevalent in this reading: the death shroud, the clothes or the covering of the grave. Perhaps it is the perpetual motion and enduring age of the sea that lingers in our imagination most of all. The abiding cycle of rolling waves, that never-ending, circular motion, reminds us of the hope for an eternity unknown to us in this life – it is a space that people across time and culture have kept alive through the act of storytelling.

## CHAPTER V

### ALL ROLLED INTO ONE: A CONCLUSION

*Water is also a vast unity.*

-- Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams* 194

*As when the golden sun salutes the morn,  
And, having gilt the ocean with his beams,  
Gallops the zodiac in his glistering coach,  
And overlooks the highest-peering hills;*

-- William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*: II, i

As its title implies, the chapter “The Gilder” testifies to the work of an artist who reveals the beauty of his subject with the application of an outer layer of gold. This polished surface unifies all of the elements that might otherwise appear to be hopelessly divergent, eliciting a universal understanding and appreciation in the eyes of the viewer. Melville’s golden gild is his exquisite language. His skills as a wordsmith enable him to unite all the horror and the hope of the world into a singular vision of truth. The oceanic language and themes he develops in *Moby-Dick* are key to Melville’s creation of a work of the human imagination that comes together as “one seamless whole” (535).

Melville knows the value a single word can carry across time, culture, and even different languages. Early in the novel, even before Ishmael introduces himself, Melville emphasizes the importance of the word *whale* in “Etymology.” As per the dictionaries he cites in this section, *whale* stems from several of the parent languages of English (Swedish, Danish, Dutch, and German) for “roundness or rolling” and “to roll, to

wallow” (*Moby-Dick* xxxvii). Tally argues that “[t]he etymological origins of the whale, *roundness* and *rolling*, radiate throughout the novel, as descriptions not only of whales in *Moby-Dick*, but also of the world of *Moby-Dick*” (58). He cites the closing lines of the final chapter, drawing attention to the words Melville uses to describe how the ocean swallows the *Pequod*:

And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, *all round and round* in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the *Pequod* out of sight [. . .] Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea *rolled on as it rolled* five thousand years ago. (*Moby-Dick* 623-4, Tally’s emphasis)

At the novel’s close, Melville uses “linguistic circularity,” the “roundness and rolling” established in “Etymology,” to underscore the “overwhelming nature of the whale” in a way that extends outward to encompass the “unrepresentable totality” of the entire world (Tally 59). Melville employs his ocean as the medium through which to illustrate the idea of these interconnected “concentric circles” and cycles of life.

This eternally rolling sea both overwhelms and coalesces all of the elements of the world of *Moby-Dick*. In terms of geography, the ocean occupies the largest part of the surface of the globe, a fact Ishmael refers to in “Brit,” describing the ocean as “Noah’s flood [. . .] not yet subsided; two thirds of the fair world it yet covers” (299). He explains, “The first boat we read of, floated on an ocean, that with Portuguese vengeance had whelmed the whole world without leaving so much as a widow. That same ocean

*rolls* now” (298, emphasis added). As Ishmael point out in “The Pacific,” all oceans are connected into what he describes as one body: The Pacific “*rolls* the midmost waters of the world, the Indian and Atlantic being but its arms” (*Moby-Dick* 525, emphasis added). The sea incorporates both space and time: “The same waves wash the moles of the new-built Californian towns, but yesterday planted by the recentest race of men, and lave the faded but still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham.” It “makes all coasts one bay to it” (525). In “The Gilder,” the land of the sailor’s imagination merges with the sea: “he regards it as so much flowery earth; and the distant ship revealing only the tops of her masts, seems struggling forward, not through high *rolling* waves, but through the tall grass of a *rolling* prairie [. . .] so that fact and fancy, half-way meeting, interpenetrate, and form one seamless whole” (*Moby-Dick* 535, emphasis added). Here we see the explicit rolling together of ocean and land into one common vision in the minds of the men at sea. Even Ahab is moved to contemplation by the influence of the golden sea. He ponders the circular nature of life in a Shakespearean soliloquy:

Oh, grassy glades! oh, ever vernal endless landscapes in the soul; in ye, — though long parched by the dead drought of the earthy life, — in ye, men yet may *roll*, like young horses in new morning clover; and for some few fleeting moments, feel the cool dew of the life immortal on them. Would to God these blessed calms would last. But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm. There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause: — through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’

doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, *we trace the round again*; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. (*Moby-Dick* 535, emphasis added)

Melville once again circles back to the etymology of the whale, roundness and rolling, using it to tie together all of the phases of human life. Contemplation of the connective, all-encompassing quality of the water leads to these realizations, lending credence to Bachelard's assertion that "Meditation on matter creates an open imagination" (2), which in turn, enriches poetic language and themes.

To an extent, Ahab knows he is caught in the same life cycle as the whale. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write that "*Moby-Dick* in its entirety is one of the greatest masterpieces of becoming; Captain Ahab has an irresistible becoming-whale, but one that bypasses the pack or the school, operating directly through a monstrous alliance with the Unique, the Leviathan, *Moby-Dick*" (243). In her article "Deleuze and Anglo-American Literature: Water, Whales and Melville," Mary Bryden adds that "The sea is, however, the fluid medium, the agency, the culture upon and within which all these interactions take place. Moreover, it enables and hastens the process of becoming-whale which Deleuze observes in Ahab" (107). In "The Dying Whale," Ahab recognizes his relationship to the chapter's title. He resigns himself to his limited vision of the sea as death alone because he cannot fathom letting any whale, especially the White Whale, live in peace in the same space he must occupy. He dwells on what he perceives as his own unavoidable destiny:

Oh, thou dark Hindoo half of nature, who of drowned bones hast builded  
 thy separate throne somewhere in the heart of these unverdured seas; thou  
 art an infidel, thou queen, and too truly speakest to me in the wide-  
 slaughtering Typhoon, and the hushed burial of its after calm. Nor has this  
 thy whale sunwards turned his dying head, and then gone round again,  
 without a lesson to me [. . .] All thy unnamable imminglings, float beneath  
 me here; I am buoyed by breaths of once living things, exhaled as air, but  
 water now [. . .] Born of earth, yet suckled by the sea; though hill and  
 valley mothered me, ye billows are my foster-brothers! (*Moby-Dick* 540)

Ahab's vision of the unifying power of the sea is only partially correct – he sees it only as an entity that destroys and dissolves all life. He never recognizes it for the life-giving, life-affirming place that it also occupies. Ahab is not willing to see the whole truth of the world; he shuts himself off from the inner circle of the “enchanted pond” in “The Grand Armada,” where Ishmael witnesses the hope and beauty of “young Leviathan amours in the deep” (*Moby-Dick* 424).

The oceanic language and structure of *Moby-Dick* are essential to Melville's portrayal of man as an evolving, eternal piece of the whole world. Bryden also credits “Etymology” with prefacing the “one pervasive image” of the novel, “that of the circle” (113). She points to Starbuck's observation in “Dusk”: “The hated whale has the round watery world to swim in, as the small goldfish has its glassy globe” (*Moby-Dick* 184). Melville seeks to emphasize that we share this “glassy globe” with the whales and other creatures. As Ishmael advises at the end of “Loomings,” “it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in” (8). Later, in “Schools and



Schoolmasters,” when he observes that “all fish bed in common” (429), the reader must consider that Ishmael’s anthropomorphic depiction of the whales functions as a critique of human unwillingness to share our space and time.

In “The Counterpane,” even before he embarks on the whaling voyage, Ishmael literally and figuratively wakes up to discover that our life is better when we realize it is a shared one. He cannot differentiate between Queequeg’s tattooed arm and the patchwork quilt, “they so blended their hues together” (28). In Queequeg’s “most loving and affectionate” embrace, Ishmael begins to realize the inherent unity of life. He starts to see that he and this stranger from halfway around the world have everything in common in spite of their superficial differences. Master word gilder that he is, Melville develops the ocean into a macrocosm of this counterpane. In the same way the quilt covers and binds Ishmael and Queequeg together, the sea envelops the planet and serves as a reminder that the world is our community.

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## **VITA**

Sarah Elisa Youree was born in Bryan, Texas and was raised in several different parts of the United States and in Brazil, where her parents served as missionaries. She finished high school at Bolivar High School in Bolivar, Missouri and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications and Spanish from Southwest Baptist University in 2000. After briefly working in public relations for the United States Senate, Sarah moved to Austin, Texas in 2001, where she began her career as a teacher. She taught secondary Spanish, English as a Second Language, and Language Arts for seven years, during which she also studied English at the University of Texas-Austin. In 2007, Sarah enrolled at Texas State University-San Marcos, where she worked as a Teaching Assistant in the English Department and as a tutor in the Writing Center. She has presented her research at the American Studies Association of Texas Conference and the South-Central Renaissance Conference.

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