

MELVILLE'S ORIENTAL PARSEE: REIMAGINING FEDALLAH AS READER AND  
SIGN IN *MOBY-DICK*

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2 IMAGINING FEDALLAH: MELVILLE’S PARSEE AND THE ORIENT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA.....	4
CHAPTER 3 THE INTERPRETIVE IMPULSE: THE ACT OF READING AND THE ROLE OF THE PROPHET IN <i>MOBY-DICK</i> .....	29
CHAPTER 4 THE INTERPRETIVE PULL OF THE “INCOMMUNICABLE RIDDLE”: THE PARSEE AS READER AND SIGN IN <i>MOBY-DICK</i> .....	66
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION.....	92
REFERENCES.....	96

## ABSTRACT

Published in 1851, *Moby-Dick* is audaciously experimental and defiantly unique for its time. Many scholars attribute problematic aspects of the book to this authorial ambition, and for the Melville critic, the figure of Fedallah is one of those problems. This study aims to explore how the Oriental character, Fedallah, operates within the larger world of reading and interpretation in *Moby-Dick*. Major critics of the past have struggled to reconcile the Parsee's shadowy essence with the materiality of the whale ship, and have interpreted this figure as an evil force, or often bluntly, a devil. However, like many other subjects in the book, Fedallah evades definition. This thesis explores the idea that Fedallah is not an inconsequential bystander to the action, but a character of significant depth and feeling, and an active participant in the interpolated questing and prophetic narratives that lie at the heart of *Moby-Dick*.

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## Chapter 1

## Introduction

When the whaling ship, *Pequod*, departs from the American shores of Nantucket, it sails off without a visible captain. Although the narrator, Ishmael, has been assured that the famously “moody” Captain Ahab is on board, he takes his orders from the first, second and third mates who “seemed to be the only commanders of the ship” (*MD*, 107). Then, as the weather begins to warm, Ahab appears on the quarter-deck. For a number of days he is seen standing with one wooden leg “in his pivot hole, or seated on an ivory stool he had; or heavily walking the deck” (*MD*, 109). In time, the captain makes his first address to the crew, and his formal speech soon gives way to a vehement cry for the death of his nemesis, Moby Dick: “And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out” (*MD*, 139). When the good mate Starbuck objects to taking personal vengeance on a “dumb brute” that attacked “from blindest instinct,” Ahab discloses the mystic purpose behind his hunt (*MD*, 139): “Hark ye yet again, — the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event — the living act, the undoubted deed — there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask” (*MD*, 140). In this way, Ahab’s quest is not framed by the material world of the whale or the whaling business, but by the mystic desire to move beyond the boundaries of human experience and come face to face with a universal truth.

Despite the initial enthusiasm of the crew, Ahab seems to think that the average sailor from the *Pequod* cannot fight on the front lines of this particular battle. Before

embarking, Ishmael thinks that he sees a group of men stealing on board the *Pequod* in the early morning. These strange figures do not appear until 27 chapters later, when the first sperm whale is spotted, and Ahab is suddenly surrounded by “five dusky phantoms,” each with a “vivid, tiger-yellow complexion” who are ready to man his personal boat with the direct purpose of killing the white whale (*MD*, 180, 181). At the head of the group of Oriental boatmen is Fedallah, a dark skinned turbaned man with an especially supernatural aura. While the physical appearance of the Parsee confirms Ishmael’s first ghostly sighting, the solution of that puzzle hardly begins to prepare the reader for the greater mystery of Fedallah himself. Indeed, the aura of the Parsee is not only strange, but also disconcerting, and Ishmael assures us that the ambiguity is permanent: “that hair-turbaned Fedallah remained a muffled mystery to the last” (*MD*, 191). Ultimately, the reader is cut off from this figure and in addition to an almost negligible amount of dialogue, Melville offers no moments of thought or interiority. And yet, Fedallah’s role in the main plot is undeniably important. Often lurking mutely in the shadow of Captain Ahab, the Parsee not only correctly prophesizes Ahab’s death, but he also states that his own death must precede it: “Though it come to the last, I shall still go before thee thy pilot” (*MD*, 377). In the wider questing narrative of *Moby-Dick*, these two characters are bound together, and surely Melville is encouraging the reader to link them thematically. But why, then, does he make a point of creating a figure who is essentially inaccessible?

This thesis will take up the question of Fedallah’s inexplicable role on board the *Pequod*, starting in chapter 2 with a complete review of the way that critics have reacted to this figure in the past. A discussion of nineteenth-century Orientalism in the same chapter will help to locate the Parsee in a specific historical context, and will seek to

establish a wider understanding of the role that the Oriental world played in the American imagination. After establishing this foundation, chapter 3, “The Interpretive Impulse: The Act of Reading and the Role of the Prophet in *Moby-Dick*,” will explore the world of reading and interpretation in the book, focusing specifically on the way that the prophet figure functions as an exegetical guide. This analysis of hermeunetics in *Moby-Dick* will then be applied to a discussion of Fedallah in chapter 4, which will aim to redirect and redefine the existing critical approach to Melville’s Oriental figure by proving the Parsee’s active participation within this significant thematic framework.

## Chapter 2

### Imagining Fedallah: Melville's Parsee and the Orient in Nineteenth-Century America

It is most often the unexplained, or seemingly vacant aspects of Fedallah that puzzle the critics of *Moby-Dick*. Just as scholars ponder and speculate as to Fedallah's purpose on board, his history, or his motivation, so do the characters of the *Pequod*. His presence is unearthly but persistent, and the crew restlessly wonders at the nature of his being: "the men looked dubious at him; half uncertain, as it seemed, whether indeed he were a mortal substance, or else a tremulous shadow cast upon the deck by some unseen being's body. And that shadow was always hovering there" (*MD*, 401). Over the years, many Melville critics have had the same reaction to Fedallah, questioning the hollowness of a figure that stands apart from the kind of intricate characterization that accompanies the other personalities on board the *Pequod*. In addition to this, the blunt materiality of the whale ship and the force of the whaling industry can work to set the already "thin Fedallah" and his unaccountable presence further away from the significant aspects of the narrative (*MD*, 401). For these reasons, most of the criticism surrounding Fedallah focuses on reconciling this incomplete or disappointing characterization with the significant role that the Parsee plays in the main action of the book: that he is tied inextricably to Ahab's spiritual quest and acts as his "pilot" or partner in the hunt. But because Fedallah is so difficult to place, most critics estrange him further, pushing the Parsee and his enigmatic purpose to the margins of the text. In 1951, Henry Murray writes, "I think Fedallah's role is superfluous and I regret that Melville made room for him and his unbelievable boat-crew on the ship *Pequod*" (Murray, 443). In 1944, Charles Child Walcott makes a similar gesture of defeat when he describes Fedallah as having the

lifelessness of a theatrical prop: “Fedallah is not a personality, has no revealed consciousness or point of view; he merely serves as part of the stage-setting in the drama of Ahab’s quest” (310). In an effort to account for Fedallah’s role on board the *Pequod* while diverting the pressure of his significance, Paul W. Miller claims that Melville brings the Parsee into the story “[i]n order to justify his inclusion of this near-eastern symbolism” so that “the fire and sun symbols of the novel might not seem out of place” (142). Miller’s approach allows him to deal with the problem of Fedallah’s Zoroastrian “trappings” without diving into the meaning or purpose behind his presence (Miller, 142). While the issues raised by these critics are understandable reactions to Fedallah’s supposed vacancy, they only work to discredit the importance of the Parsee by wishing him away or relocating his individual purpose to a larger, more substantial aspect of the book.

While some critics are so nonplussed with Fedallah that they openly condemn him as a thematic and aesthetic failure of the text, most are willing to accept the persistent presence of Melville’s Parsee as an indication of his importance. These critics then approach the problem of Fedallah by slipping him into the costume of a devil, bent on seducing Ahab to his doom. These arguments are differentiated by the degree of archetypal devilry with which the critic approaches the idea of an evil force, and theories can range from the abstract to the literal. In 1950, Newton Arvin makes a case for Fedallah as an embodiment of the concept of evil in the universe: “Evil exists, it is true; essential evil...the one who does embody it is Ahab’s own harpooner, the diabolic Fedallah, to whom Ahab has surrendered his moral freedom, and whom Stubb quite properly identifies as the devil in disguise” (191-2). While some like to think of Fedallah

as an emblematic or derivative kind of malevolent power, there have been a number of critics who have unabashedly denounced the Parsee as the devil himself. For example, Arvin's idea of Fedallah as an abstract "principal of pure negation" (192) is in contrast to William Heffernan's later claim that Fedallah "is literally a devil, Mephistopheles, Ahab's tempter" (50). Likewise, in 1971 Dorothee Finkelstein provides a more elaborate revision of Heffernan's claim by assigning Fedallah a specific demonic title, calling him a "'destroying angel' sent by God to bring about the 'assassination' of Ahab...through the deep damnation of his spirit and soul by the satanic intoxication of hatred and pride" (238). Despite the conviction of Heffernan and Finkelstein, the inaccessible interiority of the Parsee leads most scholars onto a broader plain, steering the discussion away from the idea that the devil is actually on board the *Pequod*, into territory which associates the Oriental figure with a general sense of evil.

Along with the Mephistophelean persona comes the idea that Fedallah possesses an especially potent trickery, and many critics latch on to this characteristic as a way to give the Parsee a personality. This conventional idea of the devil as a trickster not only works to fill Fedallah with a purpose that is recognizable and navigable for the reader, but it also finds a place for the Parsee within a larger literary tradition. In *A Reading of Moby-Dick*, M.O. Percival identifies Fedallah as the "agent of the plan" to capture Moby Dick, supporting his claim that "[t]here is something tricky, something Mephistophelean about Fedallah" (39, 80). In the explanatory notes to a 1962 edition of *Moby-Dick*, Luther Mansfield and Howard Vincent trace Melville's conception of Fedallah through a long line of demonic tricksters from Genesis and *Paradise Lost* to Marlowe and Goethe. Although they admit that the "relation of Fedallah to Ahab was somewhat more subtle

than any of its prototypes,” the gesture nonetheless ropes Fedallah into the age-old role of the demonic deceiver (729). This approach solves the problem of the Parsee’s role on board the *Pequod*, and many literary critics enthusiastically link Melville’s Oriental figure to this tradition. For Percival, Fedallah is cut from a familiar literary mold, coming into *Moby-Dick* as “a Mephistopheles *returned* to seduce another Faust” (39, my emphasis). Having fixed Fedallah firmly within a pre existing literary framework, many Melville scholars are unwilling to relinquish the idea of the Parsee as anything but a manipulative force that “inevitably leads Ahab to annihilation” (Evans, 77).

It is true that one does not have to search the text too deeply to assume that Fedallah is in a position to play the Mephistopheles to Ahab’s Faust, and to a certain extent, this tradition influences our understanding of the Parsee’s role in *Moby-Dick*. There is no question of Melville’s familiarity with the English canon, and the influence of Marlowe’s Mephistopheles would not have been absent in the creation of a figure like Fedallah. However, I am convinced that Melville’s self-conscious relationship to his source material could never allow for such an unironic replication, and that any literary influence in *Moby-Dick* is accompanied by an intense authorial awareness that often finds relief in comedy. Edward Said describes this particular aspect of Melville’s fiction as a product of the author’s “comic self-consciousness,” in which his understanding of the rare potential of language is coupled with the fact that he can never completely take himself seriously as an author (*Introduction*, 361). The same impulse surfaces in Melville’s relationship to literary tradition. Because of this, his most lyrical prose is often accompanied by a humorous descent from the high to the low, as an awareness of the act that produces the art inevitably creeps in. If the characterization of Fedallah is

approached with this in mind, it is clear that Melville anticipates the reader's willingness to attach an Oriental image to a demonic purpose, and he knowingly encourages the perpetuation of this popular stereotype. On one level, Melville provides the reader with an overtly evil portrait of Fedallah that is intensely conscious of the wider cultural narrative that it is following, to the point of humor. However, critics of the past have missed the comedic elements of Melville's flagrantly stereotypical descriptions, and have blindly continued to read Fedallah as "literally a devil" (Heffernan, 50). This approach is not only narrow and incorrect, but it is also driven by an additional motivation. Those critics who view Fedallah as the evil mastermind behind the destruction of the *Pequod* also use the Parsee as a convenient scapegoat, and seek to deflect blame away from Ahab in order to preserve the captain as a symbol of American ambition. However, once we recognize Melville's "comic self-consciousness" regarding the Parsee and the Oriental trope, we can begin to shift the discussion of this figure away from the stiff constraints of the "devil in disguise" argument, and broaden our idea of the Fedallah's purpose in *Moby-Dick* (Arvin, 192).

When analyzing the role that Fedallah plays in *Moby-Dick*, most critics diminish what exists of the Parsee's personal narrative, and read him not as an individual character, but rather as a prop for one of the larger, dominant narratives in the book. This is the approach of another critical camp that addresses Fedallah's presence on the *Pequod* as a manifestation of the underbelly of Ahab's blackened consciousness, or his "Asiatic alter-ego" (Luther and Mansfield, 734). In "The Shadow in *Moby-Dick*," John Halverston turns an eye towards the deep psychological pits of the book, and interprets Fedallah as a walking manifestation of the sinister side of Ahab's mind: "Few question that Fedallah is

evil, yet he does nothing remotely wicked. He is recognized as little more than Ahab's own demonic dark side embodied and externalized" (443). Halverston may be one of the few critics to note that Fedallah cannot be linked to any definite act of evil or malice, an observation that says more about the collective willingness to ascribe a demonic purpose to this figure, than it does about the characterization of Fedallah himself. A year later, William Heffernan picks up on Halverston's psychological argument claiming, "Melville wished to use Fedallah as Ahab's alter-ego, giving a visible representation to what was happening inside the soul of Ahab" (50). By incorporating Fedallah so deeply into Ahab's story, these critics are stifling the potential for the Parsee's own narrative, and only rehashing Walcutt's idea of Fedallah as a secondary actor in Ahab's dominant storyline.

While the application of a traditional Mephistophelean persona works to simplify and contain the mystery of Fedallah, a number of critics have embraced the aura of the unknown in the Parsee by identifying Fedallah directly with the ancient Oriental, a quality that is essential to the Eastern stereotype of Melville's time. In *Ishmael*, James Baird imagines that "Fedallah is Ahab's guide into the depths of Oriental time, into the aboriginalness of God," and that he possesses an ancient form of knowledge that extends well beyond the mortal world (282). Baird calls this the "immeasurable" in Fedallah, and suggests that his role is that of the "explorer wandering among incomprehensible mysteries of God which the Orient *feels* in its vast age" (281, 282). Percival goes so far as to inscribe this cultural antiquity directly onto Fedallah as an indication of his immortality: "he's no mortal, certainly—he's ageless" (43). In suggesting that the Parsee possesses an ancient kind of wisdom, these readings enrich the portrait of Fedallah and

imply that there is the potential for some kind of emotional or psychological depth in his character. However, this particular Oriental stereotype — the East as ancient and aboriginal — is a double-edged sword that has also been used to diminish Fedallah as a “primal mind” (Percival, 45). In *Mariners Renegades and Castaways*, C.L.R. James makes use of this stereotype in order to characterize Fedallah as “a primitive aboriginal,” and a “specter of barbarianism” come to seduce the modern man in Ahab (55, 56): “in Fedallah, Melville has dramatized the extreme form of the return to barbarism that is dragging Ahab down” (56). Although Melville certainly uses the vast and mysterious associations of the Orient to enrich and widen the reader’s perception of Fedallah, this concept of the East as a backward primitive culture only perpetuates the marginalization of this figure.

Jean Leroux’s 2009 article, “Wars for Oil: *Moby-Dick*, Orientalism, and Cold-War Criticism,” provides a unique analysis of the Fedallah-as-devil argument. Focusing on criticism from the Cold War period, Leroux considers the critics who use Fedallah to view the whale ship in terms of polar opposition. Leroux sees a correlation between the political rhetoric of the Cold War period that sought to polarize ideas of East and West, or good and evil, in popular American thought, and the consistently evil interpretations of Fedallah’s role in *Moby-Dick* that were authored during this period. Leroux focuses on the work of Finkelstein, Baird and Olson in order to expose a pattern of moral scapegoating that positions Fedallah as an “agent or medium ensuring [Ahab’s] moral damnation,” by thinking of the Parsee exclusively in terms of the “East-West dichotomy” that was being propagated at the time (426, 426-7). Leroux argues that the constraints of this dichotomy unnecessarily narrow and even obscure readings of both Ahab and

Fedallah, and that these limitations need to be addressed and then eliminated. At the end of his article, Leroux suggests that Fedallah is not simply a walking antithesis on board the *Pequod*, but that he is potentially “motivated by a woe and even a wisdom similar to Ishmael’s and Ahab’s” (436). By positioning Fedallah alongside the other rich, questing narratives in the book, Leroux not only upsets the Fedallah-as-devil stance, but he also implies that the Parsee has an untold story of his own. It is at this point that I wish to intercede with my own work by picking up on the idea that Fedallah is not an inconsequential bystander to the action, but a participant in the interpolated questing and prophetic narratives that characterize *Moby-Dick*.

In order to relocate the Parsee from the margins into the heart of the text, Fedallah’s roles as both a prophet and a questing figure need to be reimagined alongside like characters in *Moby-Dick*. For Melville, the quest and the prophet are linked, as major characters such as Ahab, Ishmael and Queequeg struggle to understand the way that the individual journey fits within an overarching historical narrative. These men seek out their own destinies, by continuously reading the signs and symbols that they believe to be implicit in the world as a text. For Melville, the vast and timeless expanse of the ocean awakens this impulse in the human soul, and the desire to read the world as a meaningful text drives Ahab to the white whale just as persistently as it drives Ishmael to the *Pequod* (192). This restless instinct propels the mind to seek out and interpret any signs that may point to a wider narrative, and in *Moby-Dick*, this purpose is given its most direct embodiment in the prophet figure. Melville’s preoccupation with the extent of human knowledge has long been recognized as an essential aspect of the book, and in claiming

to hold knowledge beyond the limits of the human experience, the prophet figures that continuously appear throughout the narrative speak to this preoccupation. While the majority of the characters on board the *Pequod* unconsciously perform this function, there are a number of official seers who emerge to stake an interpretive claim on the past, present and future action of the ship. Despite having been denied a credible position among them by critics and readers, Fedallah is one of these men, and his story, although inaccessible, can be seen as corresponding to those of the other prophet figures in the book.

While Melville's idea of the exegetical is invested with a deep respect for the interpretive impulse, his representation of the prophet figure is often accompanied by an irrepressible irony, one that may in part be a response to the embarrassing and outlandish work of the religious interpreters of his time. The spiritual climate of the mid nineteenth century was characterized by the tendency to draw wild and radical conclusions from the detailed study and meticulous interpretation of scriptural signs. This kind of eschatological work was performed by popular millennial movements and led by men like William Miller, who predicted the exact date of the apocalypse a number of times during his career. This brand of hermeneutics inevitably makes its way into *Moby-Dick*, and many characters on and off the *Pequod* use this well known interpretive strategy to cultivate and support their own reading of the strange and inexplicable aspects of their environment. Unimpressed with the exegetic performances of his time, Melville often uses the crazed prophet figure to criticize excessive symbolical reading. However, an instinctive understanding of the motivation behind these preposterous readings often finds Melville's criticism hand in hand with tolerance, as though a knowing, but sad kind

of kinship keeps him from unleashing an absolute condemnation of the prophetic act.

Although Fedallah is often unnoticeable aboard the *Pequod*, and culturally estranged from the other characters, he is nonetheless an active participant in the larger process of reading and interpretation that extends throughout *Moby-Dick*. While Fedallah acts as a reader alongside his shipmates, he is also the subject of numerous readings that are imposed upon him from the outside perspective of both characters and critics. As we have seen, the mysterious associations of Fedallah's Oriental character often motivate these critics to inscribe a cultural, religious or literary narrative onto the Parsee in order to frame his enigmatic presence within navigable territory. However, in anticipating the effect of the Oriental stereotype, Melville exposes the mechanism behind the reading, and calls into question the authority of the master narrative that informs it. Ultimately, the specific readings imposed upon Fedallah fail to capture the unaccountable depth that Melville imagined his Parsee to possess. Within the many interpolated narratives that enrich the main action, Fedallah is not at large, but entwined, and his presence persistently reminds the reader of the indefinable and unknowable aspects of the world. And while Melville plays with the validity of the Oriental stereotype and designs Fedallah to fit the narratives imposed by both critics and characters alike, he also makes a point of keeping his Parsee ambiguous to the end, a "muffled mystery to the last," and like Moby Dick himself, an inexplicable facet of the human experience (*MD*, 191). What Ishmael says of the sea in the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, "It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all," also holds true for Fedallah (*MD*, 20). The Parsee is, like the brow of the sperm whale, an "incommunicable riddle" that both elicits and frustrates the interpretive act (*MD*, 383). But in *Moby-Dick*, the pull

of the unknown is an essential part of the human experience, and when Melville calls the “nobler, sadder souls” down into the depths of the Hotel de Cluny to see how the “captive king” sits “upholding on his frozen brow the piled entablatures of ages,” the text before them is as enigmatic as the white whale himself (*MD*, 157); yet, it is the passage “far beneath the fantastic towers of man’s upper earth” that is important, and it is the act of reading the brow, and engaging in this world of interpretation that defines this quest (*MD*, 157). As both a sign and a reader of signs, Fedallah is at the heart of this journey towards the unknown.

In order to understand the extent of Melville’s fascination with the Orient, it is necessary to take a wider view of the way that the East functioned in popular American thought in the nineteenth century. Melville’s characterization of Fedallah rests heavily on both the contemporary trends and the well-established traditions of a nation that had been cultivating the idea of an Oriental antithesis for generations. Timothy Marr provides the most recent and thorough study of nineteenth-century American attitudes towards the East in his book *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*, and I will rely principally on this source for historical background. Marr’s work is especially helpful because he focuses on the popular elements of nineteenth-century America, with an eye towards national and cultural trends. Having never attended university, Melville spent the majority of his youth as a sailor, and it is from popular culture, maritime folklore and biblical narrative that Melville gleaned his education. Because of this, Marr’s focus on the cultural, religious, and social aspects of the American vision of the Orient is useful to determine not only the influences that Melville drew upon to create Fedallah, but also to

imagine the effect that this character would have had on the nineteenth-century reader. In other words, what was Melville knowingly conjuring in the mind of his contemporary audience when Fedallah appears on deck, and how can these details bring us closer to understanding the presence and purpose of this figure?

There is an unmistakable theatricality to the Oriental images and ideas that dominated the American imagination in the nineteenth century. Whether the image of the Orient was propagated by exotic romanticism, republican politics, or ambitious religiosity, Americans have always maintained strong feelings about the non-Christian civilizations of the East. From a political standpoint, the infamously despotic Ottoman Empire provided a fitting antithesis for a young America determined to broadcast a message of democratic superiority throughout the world. European nations already nurtured an established tradition of Orientalism that fed the development of the American consciousness and national identity. In France, artist Jean-Leon Gerome led a strong movement of Orientalist painting that eroticized the region by concentrating mostly on “naked Harem girls and tyrannical despots” as subjects “which served to fascinate, titillate, and ultimately flatter the nineteenth-century French viewer” (Edwards, 12). While Americans adopted these prejudices from their European relatives, they also developed their own brand of Orientalism that worked to distinguish the new republic from their old monarchical rulers: “this focus on a distant empire projected an exotic stage at once older and beyond the Europe from which the United States had declared its independence” (Marr, 9). Although early America had “no sustained relationship with the Orient...and its imperialist activities were largely confined to the North American continent,” the Ottoman Empire was a major power in the late eighteenth century and it

provided the American imagination with a foreign enemy that emboldened the patriotism of the emerging government in the United States (Edwards, 12). In the June 1853 edition of the *Knickerbocker Magazine*, an anonymous article entitled “Orientalism” comically describes the difference between Western and Eastern forms of governance in both the domestic and the political arena:

The Turk, in his family, is despotic, and he knows no other mode of government. Orientals never separate the idea of ruler and monarch, and invariably ascribe to fear or weakness all concessions to violence or clamor. When informed that in America the nation was governed without a king, it is said that an Oriental emperor laughed so *immoderately* that he died. If he had been told that the *people* here govern themselves, and if he could have entered our Congress, with its hubbub so un-Oriental, we cannot imagine the consequence to His Majesty. (488, my emphasis)

The exaggerated language and content of this article clarifies the extent of the divide that Americans envisioned between themselves and the Orient. While Americans could imagine the world of the Turk, according to this author, the backwards Oriental figure could never imagine America: the change was too radical and the result too progressive. While the majority of domestic colonial efforts were concentrated on subduing the American west, the Orient “provided a diverse Eastern frontier that served as a vibrant field of transnational definition for a variety of early Americans seeking destinies less manifest and more global” (Marr, 17). And although America was geographically isolated from the East, Americans longed to be significant on a world stage, and their disdain for the Turk was linked with the determination to be recognized for the

revolutionary system of governance they had developed. Antagonism towards the Eastern system of governance was so great that many Americans “feared that if they allowed themselves to be seduced by the privileges of luxury they would fall into a despotism maintained not by the fearful dictates of a sultan or king but rather one propagated by their own immoderate desires and devotion to idols of fashion” (Marr, 25). In this way, the symbol of the despotic Islamic empire was not only an opposing style of government, but it was emblematic of a wider cultural myth of national identity that sought to define itself aggressively against any patterns of old world extravagance.

The already polarized conflict between the East and the West was further strengthened on religious grounds, and all international conflicts between Americans and Ottomans became a battle between “the Cross and the Crescent” (Marr, 70). In reaction to Eastern power, American Protestants of the nineteenth century worked to establish a position of religious superiority on the world stage. Luckily for them, the campaign was easily bolstered by the established anti-Islamic sentiment that had been a mainstay in the development of a national identity since Thomas Jefferson claimed that King George III was “scheming to reduce Americans ‘under absolute Despotism’” in the Declaration of Independence (Marr, 20). Well before Melville was born, the political and religious rhetoric of the Oriental adversary was interchangeable in America, and the East became the distant enemy against which Americans worked to define themselves in all aspects of life.

With a strong national narrative behind them and an evil enemy projected in front of them, the evangelical movement in the United States was determined to spread the message worldwide. In 1810 the American Board of Commission for Foreign Missions

(ABCFM), was founded by a group of zealots in Massachusetts. The members of the Board were united in a collective wish to eliminate the practice of Islam in order to ensure the Second Coming of Christ: “the central reason for the interest of many early Americans in the fate of the Ottoman Empire was that its removal or destruction stood as an essential prerequisite to the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem, signaling that the second advent of Christ was imminent” (Marr, 83). For the members of the ABCFM, the success of Islam was a punishment from God, and its elimination was both a duty and a test of faith. Prominent American missionaries like Pliny Fisk believed that “the new American nation had a providential mission to help redeem the world and bring about the millennium” (Marr, 84-5). This idea of America as an exceptional model is one of the fundamental beliefs that drove missionaries into the Near East in the nineteenth century: “An intimate and ordained connection between the Promised Land of the Bible and the Promised Land of the New World was widely assumed, and the missionary network in the Near East sought to make this manifest” (Edwards, 20). However, the prophesized return of Christ was not thought to be possible until the people of the Ottoman Empire, or the “living embodiments of the ancient peoples of Judea” were either converted to Christianity or destroyed (Marr, 85). In fact, the existence of such a strong, stable Islamic power posed a number of specific problems for Christian ideology. Muslims claimed that the message that informed their faith came directly from God *after* Christ walked the earth, making the rise of Islam directly opposed to the Christian worldview: “Islam’s very existence shook the foundations of Christian belief, spelling spiritual ruin and a return to moral chaos, and therefore requiring a religious response” (Marr, 91). Unlike the Jews, who had a firm place in the religious history of American Protestants as the predecessors

of the Christian faith, the power and influence of the Islamic empire was inexplicable. It is in this way that national and religious narratives were born out of a sense of opposition, and the future of America as the chosen land was rooted firmly in the image of an antagonistic Orient.

In order to explain this imbalance of power, and maintain the dignity of God's chosen people, religious leaders engineered answers to these paralyzing questions through the careful study of biblical prophecy surrounding the apocalypse and the return of Christ. Marr argues that eschatology gained such significant momentum in America because it "empowered them to identify with a global drama that addressed anxieties about their worldly isolation in the Western hemisphere" (88). The determination to engage with history on a global scale was also thought of "as a redemptive opportunity in which the vitalities of American intelligence and commitment could compete with Protestant Europe" (Marr, 88). Many American Protestants did not want to see themselves as simply surpassing European traditions; the American Revolution had already proved that. Instead, the ambitious Protestant eschatologists viewed themselves as the specific protector or parent of the "promised New Jerusalem" that was to be established before the coming of Christ (Marr, 89). Only the strength of the Ottoman Empire stood in the way, and American eschatologists quickly got to work striving to predict the end of the Islamic empire according to their detailed study of the Bible. Eschatology, then, became a way of reconfiguring and reclaiming the political and religious power of the Ottomans. Not surprisingly, the act of writing Islam into Christian history was empowering for American Protestants: "This process... contained the transgressive threat of Islam within the Bible itself and subordinated it into a

confirmation of Christian victory” (Marr, 89). Frightened of their potential insignificance as a newly formed nation, Americans used eschatology to rewrite themselves into global history, and their decision to adopt Islam as an opponent helped them to claim ascendancy over the Orient, an older and even more established civilization than Europe.

Although anti-Islamicist sentiment was commonplace for the American citizen in the early 1800s, the development of the steamship in the 1830s resulted in an increase in tourism to the Near East, and many wealthy and middle class Americans began to venture East in search of the dreamy and exotic land featured in the popular collection of stories, *One Thousand and One Nights*. However, this increase in tourism did not signal a spontaneous collective desire to learn more about the mysterious people of the East; instead, there were a number of political events which contributed to the increase of American travellers. First, the Greek uprising against the Turks in 1821 gave Americans the feeling that they had an unofficial Democratic ally in the Mediterranean. Second, the French colonization of Algeria in 1830 gave a safe, European feel to the once threatening sphere of the Barbary States. Third, an aggressive and decisive American naval attack on Malaysia in 1831 provided US citizens with a comfortable feeling of dominance and control in an area of the world that had once overtly challenged their position on the international stage. With these changes in the political arena of the Mediterranean and Far East, Americans began to flock to the Orient, often recording their adventures in diaries, photographs and sketchbooks. In *Melville's Bibles*, Ilana Pardes says, “Holy Land travel narratives flooded the American literary market” in the middle of the nineteenth century because “for many Americans...the only way to capture the ‘true’ Oriental significance of biblical figures and biblical scenes was to tour the Holy Land and observe the customs

of the contemporary Easterners” (75). While many tourists were able to fit their vision of the Orient into the framework provided by the romanticized stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*, it is not surprising that some travelers noticed that the people of the Near East did not correspond to the stock characters that they had imagined. With the advent of civilian travel to the East, the xenophobia of the first half of the century was gradually called into question.

As the definition of the Orient grew increasingly hazy, many American thinkers reverted heavily to a stable, romanticized ideal popularized in *One Thousand and One Nights*. In the *Knickerbocker* article “Orientalism,” an anonymous author expresses his deep concern that an increasing exposure to the Orient would shatter the romantic ideal. Holly Edwards describes this anxiety as an “underlying convictio[n] about the somnolent and retrograde Orient and the inevitable conquest of tourism” (21):

The exclusive repose of the Orient is retreating before the advance of travel...Miss Laura Lisper, of the Fifth Avenue of New York, may be found upon a camel, sketching the ‘dear delightful’ pyramids...The commerce of the caravan, which carries the Koran and its religion throughout the Orient, will give way before the genius of steam. (489)

In this article, the romanticization of the East is in full force, and the author is particularly struck by the dreamy, mysterious aspect of the Orient that is in such strong opposition to the restlessness of American life. However, this article is also particular because it engages in the romantic vision of the Orient with a deliberate consciousness. After a long, utopian description of an Oriental scene, the author claims, “[t]his is Orientalism, not as it is, but as it swims before the sensuous imagination. It is too unreal to be defined. The

idea partakes of the extravagance of the Oriental mind, and would fain be invested with poetic imagery. To analyze it is to dissolve the charm” (480). Written in 1853, this article is participating in an established tradition of romanticizing the East that had been developing since *One Thousand and One Nights* was first published in America in the 1790s. However, the conscious adoption of the romantic lens in this article indicates that this approach was often accompanied by some authorial anxiety. This anxiety surely arises out of the understanding that a romantic vision of the East can only be maintained by the unrealistic propagation of well-worn stereotypes. By the middle of the century, the American fascination with the Oriental stereotype was established to the point of cliché, and although this author seems to bemoan the destruction of the myth, it was exactly this ideal of the Orient that was continually attracting American tourists. Timothy Marr relates the escalation in “perfunctory visits to Muslim cultures” directly to the increasingly popular ideals of a romantic Orient:

*Romantic Islamicism* figured Islamic lands as one of the world’s more desirably exotic locals by drawing upon a mélange of images arising from biblical notions of European opulence, the fantastic supernaturalism of oriental tales, legends of Muslim chivalry, and images of indolent patriarchs enjoying captivating harems. (13, emphasis original)

The romantic vision of the Orient was desirable in the American consciousness not only because it worked to “other” the Near East, but because it simultaneously helped to maintain a standard of American superiority. Ideally, tourists sought an exotic experience that would not transform their values, but would allow for a temporary retreat from the intense national narrative they had been born into. In the introduction to *Noble Dreams*,

*Wicked Pleasures*, Oleg Grabar describes the American attachment to the Orient as a game of alternate reality: “the Orient was the maker of a game to play, of ways in which one could acquire, for however short a time, another personality or another experience, both personality and experience being primarily sensuous and, at some extreme, desirable but forbidden” (9). The American traveler to the East could be freed from republican idealism and the stiff Protestant ethic of early America; however, the escape, like any other exotic destination, was always temporary. While some writers in Melville’s circle continued to romanticize and profit from the Orient as a popular genre, the *Knickerbocker* article demonstrates that the days of free and easy stereotype were steadily slipping away.

The wide reaching success of *One Thousand and One Nights* demonstrates how popular the romanticized vision of the Orient had become, and many young ambitious authors journeyed East in the 1830s and 1840s to capitalize on the trend. Marr argues that the escapades of notable travel writers like George William Curtis and Bayard Taylor “offered an alternative global stage for performing romantic power, one based upon an aristocratic fantasy of independent leisure” (Marr, 267). The men often adopted loose-fitting Eastern clothing, acquired a servant, and painted languid, lyrical pictures of blue skies, public baths and Oriental pipes. When Bayard Taylor returned to America to cash in on his adventures, he “reinhabited his islamicist persona by donning his oriental clothes again when lecturing on his travels on the lyceum circuit” (Marr, 270). Taylor’s decision to revive his Oriental persona while on the American lecture circuit not only demonstrates the way that performance enriched a romanticized vision of the East in America, but it also shows how willing the American population was to receive such an unrealistic version of the Oriental experience.

Although the two men shared the same social circle, Melville's disdain for Bayard Taylor is obvious. In an 1849 entry in his journal, Melville caustically refers to Taylor as "the pedestrian traveler," a pun that pokes fun at Taylor's authority as a travel writer while also mocking the title of his first guidebook, "Views A-foot" (Leyda, 319). In addition to this, Melville may have been making fun of Taylor and other Oriental travel writers when he decided to dress up as a Turk for a masquerade party, and to "playfully...abduct a young wife from a local railroad station in what her husband thought was a 'Berber fashion'" (Marr, 219). Melville and Taylor also differed drastically in their ideological conception of the Holy Land. Like the American eschatologists, Taylor saw "the Western colonialization of the Holy Land" as a specifically Christian project: "Give Palestine into Christian hands, and it will again flow with milk and honey" (52, qtd. Yothers, 71). In contrast, Melville denied the validity of a glorious Christian campaign stating, "the conversion of the East to Christianity is against the will of God" (94, qtd. Yothers, 71). As we have seen, the subject of the Holy Land was a touchy one for American eschatologists, and while Melville was consistently aware of these cultural narratives, his opinion regarding the conversion of the East indicates that he did not often share the accepted national vision of his peers.

However much Melville disliked Taylor's religious politics, or his popular success as an exotic travel writer, a young Melville participated in the Oriental romanticism of his contemporaries, practicing what Finkelstein calls "a fashionable literary exercise" in his first publication, "Fragments From a Writing Desk" (*Orienda*, 8). In part one of "Fragments," the speaker describes a number of luxuriously beautiful women, or what he calls a "catalogue of the Graces [a] chapter of Beauties" (192). The

second of the three beauties is a mysterious dark eyed woman, who has hair that is “black as the wing of the raven,” and eyes that are “dark, rich orbs” (195). While these qualities are only suggestive of an Oriental woman, the speaker confirms her origin when he reveals the kind of man that she is associated with:

If the devout and exemplary Mussulman who dying fast in the faith of his Prophet, anticipates reclining on beds of roses, gloriously drunk through all the ages of eternity, is to be waited on by Houris such as these: waft me ye gentle gales beyond this lower world and,

“Lap me in soft Lydian airs”! (195)

This passage contains all of the hallmarks of Oriental stereotype: the timelessness of the Mussulman, the excess of sensual pleasure and religious devotion, the richness of the roses upon which he lies, and the obedience of the woman that serves him. In part two of “Fragments,” the narrator, lolling on the bank of a river “and up to the lips in sentiment” encounters another fantastically beautiful Oriental woman who beckons him forward with a handwritten note: “Is it possible, thought I, that the days of romance are revived?—‘No, the days of chivalry are over!’ says Burke” (197). As the chase proceeds, the speaker’s surroundings become increasingly exotic, and the corridor that they pass through “disclose[s] a spectacle as beautiful and enchanting as any described in Arabian Nights” (202). It is clear that this speaker, although young and quixotic, is intensely conscious of the literary tradition that frames his romantic perspective. Finkelstein calls attention to the density of Melville’s allusion to Scott, Byron and Moore in “Fragments,” and it is certain that the massive popularity of these authors would have elicited an immediate reaction from a nineteenth-century reader. The final exotic description of this rich

Oriental beauty is contrasted by a strangely truncated ending: the woman cannot reciprocate his love because she is deaf and dumb, and the lover flees in hysterics: “with a wild cry of agony I burst from the apartment! — She was dumb! Great God, she was dumb! DUMB AND DEAF!” (204). What is Melville attempting to address with this strange ending? Is there recognition, in this fragment, of the impenetrability or inaccessibility of the stereotype? Does the speaker’s romanticized ecstasy ultimately hamper the potential for dialogue between the idealizer and the idealized? At first, Finkelstein explains this ending away as a product of the accuracy of Melville’s imitation: “But like many a tale in *Arabian Nights*, Melville’s idyl has an unhappy ending. In Arabian romances, lovers are usually separated by the lady’s father, husband, or the khalif in person, if the lady happens to be the khalif’s concubine, and the lover has to flee for his life” (*Orienda*, 31). However, Finkelstein then goes on to consider Melville’s tone, and his tendency to “prick the rosy bubble of romance and to reveal its terrible core of tragic reality” (*Orienda*, 31).

Melville is clearly up to his neck in the romantic Orientalism of his time, but as Finkelstein’s warring comments indicate, it is difficult to measure the sincerity of his tone. On one hand, his language is as consciously extravagant as the portrayal of his subject, but on the other hand, Melville was only twenty years old when he wrote this, and many critics interpret the hyperbole of “Fragments” as a youthful tendency towards exaggeration. Marr adopts the latter interpretation, attributing Melville’s enthusiasm to a “juvenile education in classical and romantic literature [that] had equipped him to project his longings onto visions of orientalized women” (238). In contrast, Finkelstein seems to be torn between an idea of a naïve Melville striving for literary popularity, and a critical

Melville, who is constantly questioning the larger systems of his time, no matter what age. While she notes, “It was only natural that a young man aspiring to authorship should use [Oriental images] profusely,” Finkelstein also suggests that Melville is making fun of this tradition, not engaging with it: “But Melville’s tale is clearly a parody of sentimental ‘romantic’ feeling” (*Orienda*, 33, 32). Although Melville wrote “Fragments” at the inexperienced age of twenty, I am more inclined to think of the piece as the beginning of Melville’s tongue in cheek relationship with any romantic subject, the Orient being the most popular model of the time. If anything, Melville’s unfriendly feelings towards Bayard Taylor indicate that he was not convinced by the image of the Orient that was propagated by the style of writing and performance exhibited in “Fragments”. Just as the strange reality of the woman’s deaf and dumb condition invades the opulent romance in part two of “Fragments,” so Melville’s own criticism of the excess of the Oriental stereotype seeps in to the short prose piece that proves to be more subversive than a youthful turn at a “fashionable literary exercise” (Finkelstein, 8).

By the time he turns to *Moby-Dick* in 1851, Melville’s relationship to the Oriental stereotype is anything but casual. Melville grew up with a well-established caricature of the Eastern opponent in view, and came of age in a time when the validity of this type was being called into question. Melville’s relationship to the popular manifestations of the Orient in literature, exemplified by men like Bayard Taylor, is essential to our understanding of the Parsee’s role in *Moby-Dick*. In this context, Fedallah’s presence on board *Pequod* is not extraordinary or unbecoming; rather, it is the result of an American culture saturated by a dramatic obsession with the East. Whether idealized or demonized, Melville could not possibly ignore the influence of the Orient in his writing, and

Fedallah's persistence in *Moby-Dick* reflects the inescapable pull that these narratives had on the American imagination.

### Chapter 3

### The Interpretive Impulse: The Act of Reading and the Role of the Prophet in *Moby-Dick*

The desire to discover a greater sense of meaning beyond the self lies at the heart of symbolical reading in *Moby-Dick*, and when Ishmael identifies the blank white hump of Moby Dick with the human fear of spiritual annihilation, he captures the essence of the force that propels Ahab and the *Pequod* forward: “And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?” (*MD*, 165). This impulse to find a meaningful narrative in a potentially arbitrary and capricious world is not only central to the plot of *Moby-Dick*, but it is also a sentiment that is alive in each character, albeit to different degrees. One of the ways that Melville explores this impulse is through a variety of prophet figures that appear throughout the book. Although prophetic characters such as Mapple, Elijah and Gabriel enter the action only once, the impact of their presence resonates throughout the text, and the message of their prophecy can be used as an interpretive framework to accompany the main action. In nineteenth-century America, the imaginative interpretation of biblical symbolism was a long-standing tradition, and religious leaders were unbridled in their efforts to uncover apocalyptic secrets by engaging in elaborate and extensive readings of the Bible. These exegetical performances are not left out of Melville’s exploration of the prophet figure, and he often invokes the interpretive methods of his time in order to criticize and demystify excessive symbolical reading, especially where it pertains to religion.

However, Melville’s relationship to the symbolic and the prophetic is not decidedly atheist, and consequently, the visionary figures in *Moby-Dick* range from the noble to the absurd. While the degree of criticism shifts depending on the figure, Melville

maintains an almost intuitive respect for the act of symbolic interpretation. Although many fall laughably short of the mark, each prophetic character is approached with a kind of familial understanding, as though the reading of signs is connected to a collective human longing for a meaningful narrative outside of the self. In drawing these prophet figures together, we can gain an understanding of Melville's often subtle and complicated relationship to meaning and the act of interpretation, and it is within this context that the discussion of Fedallah can take shape. Although past critics have not connected the Parsee with this essential theme, I argue that Fedallah exists naturally within this world of sign and interpretation, both as a prophet figure, or reader of signs, and as a sign himself. Like Ahab, Ishmael, and Queequeg, the Parsee reads and is read by those around him, and although his story remains untold, he is nonetheless engaged in an exegetical environment that is fed by a shared and distinctly human impulse to know.

By the time he came of age as a writer, Americans had established a rich hermeneutical tradition that provided Melville with an extensive prophetic discourse with which to furnish the pages of *Moby-Dick*. In nineteenth-century America, the majority of prominent religious figures did not read the Bible as a book of general spiritual guidance, but as a text containing various signs and symbols that were thought to encode a prophetic picture of Christian history. Originally adopted from Europe, this kind of focused close reading "seemed the most rigorist view of scripture," a quality that appealed to the emerging national character of American Christians (Bebbington, 89). This style of biblical interpretation was especially useful when making dramatic apocalyptic predictions. However, as I established in the previous chapter, the Ottoman

occupation of the Holy Land stood as a serious impediment to the apocalyptic forecasts that were coming from American Protestants in the nineteenth century. Because of this hurdle, religious leaders had to work even harder to prove the validity of the biblical word, and the reading and interpretation of signs became an essential element of the prophetic vision that was presented to the American public in the nineteenth century. However, this style of reading the Bible was not revolutionary, or particular to America. In his discussion of the “typological or figural method” of reading scripture, William Spanos points back even further to the fathers of the Christian church “whose purpose was to justify the permanent historical authority of the contemporary Church by reconciling...past historical events represented in the Old Testament with the privileged Event (or Incarnate Word) represented in the New, by interpreting the former as prefigurations in temporal history of the latter” (96). In other words, interpreters of the Bible have always been driven by the need to fill in the gaps of a meta-narrative of Christian history, and American methods of interpretation were derived from this same system of argumentation. Marr describes the American style of Bible reading as an “ingenious artistic act” that involves “an arcane process of harmonizing the symbols and sequences” of stories and messages throughout scripture within the “chronology of secular events” (Marr, 88). The religious thinkers of America adopted this heavy emphasis on the direct interpretation of biblical symbolism as early as the first generation of Puritan settlers. In Europe, the principles of apocalyptic prediction were originally derived from the imagery found in the Book of Revelations, and when they arrived in America, settlers brought this vision and interpretative style with them:

According to these interpreters, the fifth and sixth trumpets... whose blasts were called the first two trumpets of woe, described the history of Islam. The great importance of these trumpets lay in the fact that... when the second woe corresponding to the Turks was passed, the third and final woe would “come quickly” — an advent heralding the Day of Judgment that would destroy all manner of infidelity and cleanse the earth for the kingdom of Christ. (Marr, 95)

In this way, the end of the Turkish Empire was not only connected explicitly to the Second Coming, but Americans were extracting symbols and events from scripture in order to legitimize a social and cultural agenda that existed mostly outside of the Bible: fear of the Oriental adversary.

While this doctrine worked to demonize an Islamic force to the East, the symbolic interpretation of the Bible also established a way of reading in the American imagination that put a heavy emphasis on discovering and decoding signs. Prominent American preachers like Increase and Cotton Mather worked diligently to decipher the messages implicit in the Book of Revelations, interpreting the “angel of the bottomless pit” as a force “commissioned to take vengeance on a corrupt Christianity,” and seeing the “locusts with tails like scorpions” that are said to emerge from the pit, as symbols of the “Muslims (or Saracens) who, while spreading their religion from France to the Far East, tormented Christian lands” (Marr, 95). Throughout his life, Increase Mather waited expectantly for “every piece of news of successful evangelism from overseas,” and interpreted each event “as a sign of the approaching last days” (Kidd, 8). The apocalyptic imagery propagated by Mather is intricate and extensive, but it may be the actual

numerical calculations and dating predictions that represent the most extreme development in American biblical interpretation. Once the Turks were identified as the biggest impediment to the Second Coming, readers of the Bible wanted to know exactly when they could expect to be relieved of this bothersome obstruction. While debates among interpreters regarding the inception of the Ottoman Empire resulted in a variety of possible dates, the majority of influential American preachers were at least convinced that “Christ had foretold both the rise of Islam and its destruction in the very near future” (Marr, 103). If anything, the diligent work of these pious men indicates that the American desire to read world history as a religious text, and to interpret the signs therein, was alive in the earliest years of the country.

In Melville’s time, this style of imaginative biblical interpretation continued to hold great influence among religious leaders, and the development of the Adventist Movement in the 1830s brought William Miller to the forefront of this tradition. Miller’s claim to fame involved a reworking of the start date of the Ottoman Empire, a development that radically altered previous calculations. To a certain extent, Miller’s new theory kept the tradition of symbolical reading alive by forecasting well into the future, and labeling previously prophesized dates as mistakes or miscalculations. In an 1828 lecture, Miller preached his new theory by reassessing the imagery in the Book of Revelations and applying “both woe trumpets only to the rise of the Turkish empire and not to the earlier Saracen incursions” (Marr, 114). These adjustments bought Miller some time, allowing him to determine that the end of the Ottoman Empire had not passed, but was to come with the pouring of the sixth vial, which Miller predicted would occur sometime in 1839, the year the Melville turned twenty. The pouring of the sixth vial was

considered to be a crucial precursor to the apocalypse because it would be followed by the pouring of the seventh vial, “during which the wrath of God would destroy all antichristian forces in the battle of Armageddon, an event heralding the return of the Savior” (Marr, 106). Since prophets frequently outlived the predicted year of doom without any sign of disturbance, a wild adjustment like Miller’s allowed for the continuation of the millennial tradition. Although he radically altered the calculations of his forefathers, Miller’s style of argument, Marr notes, is “remarkably similar to how the Mathers imagined the same results almost a century and a half earlier, despite the historical changes in the Ottoman power and the increased Western access to Turkey” (116). Although visionaries like William Miller and Increase Mather often had to work around the fact that the events of the world were not consistent with their predictions, the tradition survived, and prophetic voices throughout American history continued to rely heavily on this symbolic style of scriptural interpretation.

It is easy to imagine Melville as having a less than enthusiastic reaction to the eschatologists or Millerites of his time. Miller’s visit to New York State was followed by extreme public anxiety, and his prediction that the world would end in October of 1843 “touched off an epidemic of suicides and murders” among the general public (Robertson-Lorant, 133). In her biography, *Melville*, Laurie Robertson-Lorant reports that the “Melville women were not impressed” by these “‘enthusiastic’ movements that raged like wildfire while Melville was at sea” (133). Indeed, Melville’s tolerance for high-minded religious men like Jonathan Edwards must have hit a breaking point by the time he wrote “Bartleby the Scrivener” in 1853. When the well-intentioned, but often inept lawyer consults “Edwards on the Will,” he immediately falls back on the comforting thought that

“these troubles...touching the scrivener, had been all predestinated from eternity,” and the knowledge of this fact, bolstered by his reading, brings the lawyer “a salutary feeling” (*Bartleby*, 37). For the lawyer, this religious rhetoric not only brings comfort and security, but it also relieves the burden of individual responsibility. In the larger context of the story, the reader can see that the lawyer’s decision to consult Edwards is a daft and ultimately insensitive reaction to the exceptional problem that *Bartleby* poses. In using Edwards to make this point, Melville demonstrates his distaste for a symbolical style of reading that consistently sees events in relation to a divine master plan, and he openly pokes fun at an American figure that exudes this kind of excessive religiosity. While this moment from “*Bartleby*” demonstrates Melville’s skeptical view of Christian eschatology, especially when it comes to predestination, he was nonetheless conscious of the spiritual security that such an overarching narrative would allow.

Melville’s relationship to the all-encompassing master narrative was a cautious one; yet, this awareness did not lead to outright skepticism, and while Melville maintained a certain fondness for the symbolic on a large scale, any expression of this sort was always accompanied by an intense awareness of the act itself. When writing a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck in December of 1849, Melville consciously indulges in the allegory of the world-as-text:

But we that write & print have all our books predestinated—& for me, I shall write such things as the Great Publisher of Mankind ordained ages before he published “The World”—this planet, I mean. (*Correspondence*, 149)

While Melville is certainly aware that he is participating in a symbolical reading to a degree worthy of Jonathan Edwards, he nonetheless engages with it, in a way that is both playful and sincere. This is a space that we often inhabit with Melville, oscillating between believer and skeptic, and in this case, although the tone is consciously hyperbolic, the allegory is not entirely satirical either. Growing up in a Calvinist household, the reading practices of Reformed Christianity were familiar to Melville, and from these traditions he inherited “a strong sense of ulterior meaning in all its forms (symbol, allegory, analogy and so forth)” (Cosgrove, 75).

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville’s fixation on the process of symbolical reading is important, as almost every member of the *Pequod* attempts to draw a significant message or explanation out of his surroundings. However, Melville’s relationship to the idea of the allegory is complicated by the reductive result that such a reading could have on the meaning of a narrative. In a letter to Sophia Hawthorne in 1852, Melville dismantles the idea that the whale is symbolic by partially feigning ignorance on the subject, and ultimately revealing his anxiety about allegory in general:

At any rate, your allusion for example to the “Spirit Spout” first showed to me that there was a subtile significance in that thing—but I did not, in that case, *mean* it. I had some vague idea while writing it, that the whole book was susceptible of an allegoric construction, & also that *parts* of it were—but the speciality of many of the particular subordinate allegories, were first revealed to me, after reading Mr. Hawthorne’s letter, which, without citing any particular examples, yet intimated the part-&-parcel allegoricalness of the whole. (*Correspondence*, 219)

Melville's response to Sophia Hawthorne, and by extension, much of what occurs in *Moby-Dick*, is driven by both a love of the dramatically symbolic, and an awareness of the pitfall of the allegory. This anxiety is even written into the pages of *Moby-Dick*, when Ishmael predicts that the "ignorant landsmen" will declare that Moby Dick is a "monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory" (*MD*, 172). Melville *knows* that the whale is an obvious vehicle for this kind of reading, and he is intensely conscious of the fact that the questing or pilgrimage narrative at the centre of *Moby-Dick* encourages this pursuit. Surely, when Ahab "pile[s] upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down," the reader is invited to follow his lead (*MD*, 156). Despite his coyness, Melville's conscious preoccupation with the symbolic, the portentous and the meaningful automatically invites, and practically requires, the reader to be cognizant of the act of interpretation as both participant and bystander. If anything, the sheer number of allegorical readings of *Moby-Dick* would attest to the allure of this invitation. In his "Introduction to *Moby-Dick*," Edward Said confirms the legitimacy of various critical "interpretations of Ahab's ambitions and the White Whale's significance" in the context of what he calls the "hugeness" of *Moby-Dick*: "These are all plausible, and of course encouraged in a sense by Melville, for whom the very existence of an Ahab and a Moby Dick furnish a proper occasion for prophecy, world-historical vision, genius and madness close allied" (369). Melville's prophet figures certainly range from the noble to the insane, and although some are approached with a marked skepticism, it is also followed closely by a genuine respect. This respect comes directly from Melville's attachment to the idea of symbolical reading, and his understanding of the way that the human

experience elicits the prophetic act. While the prophet figure officially fills this interpretive niche in *Moby-Dick*, almost every character engages in some hermeneutical act, giving the signs and symbols that are present throughout the book a kind of conscious significance: they are everywhere, and every man, including Fedallah, is poised to render an interpretation. It is this all-encompassing feeling of commonality among men that must be a part of the “hugeness” that Said describes (369), and it is this same feeling that must have prompted Ilana Pardes to describe Melville’s relationship to “biblical exegesis” as one of “virtuosity and openness” (2). In *Moby Dick*, the impulse towards interpretation is distinctly human, and despite showing an awareness of the pitfalls of symbolical reading, Melville empathetically embraces this facet of the human experience. Although he has been continuously estranged from any discussion of the larger thematic issues of *Moby-Dick*, Fedallah is one exegetical figure among many, and despite his silence, the Parsee proves to be an active participant in this universal quest for knowledge.

Melville’s preoccupation with the functions of reading and narrative in *Moby-Dick* begins early with the comic and meticulous interpretive skills of Ishmael. From the moment that Ishmael steps into the “Whaleman’s Chapel” in New Bedford, the scene is ripe with the apocalyptic symbolism of Melville’s age, and full of opportunities for dramatic interpretation. First, Father Mapple mirrors the individual isolation of each “silent worshipper,” when he ascends a rope ladder to his pulpit, and “deliberately drag[s] up the ladder step by step, till the whole was deposited within, leaving him impregnable

in his little Quebec” (*MD*, 43, 47). Mapple’s separation from his audience sends Ishmael into a flurry of thought as he tries to decode the meaning implicit in this action:

No, thought I, there *must* be some sober reason for this thing; furthermore, it *must* symbolize something unseen. Can it be, then, that by that act of physical isolation, he signifies his spiritual withdrawal for the time, from all outward worldly ties and connexions? Yes, for replenished with meat and wine of the word, to the faithful man of God, this pulpit, I see, is a self-containing stronghold — a lofty Ehrenbreitstein, with a perennial well of water within the walls. (*MD*, 47, my emphasis)

In his book, *Moby-Dick and Calvinism*, Walter Herbert draws Ishmael’s comment into the context of Melville’s personal experience in the church: “Melville knew from his boyhood exposure to Calvinism that orthodox pastors claimed to have unique access to God’s truth as interpreters of his sacred word,” a status that affords the pulpit an “impregnable authority” (97). While this first interpretation has Ishmael reasoning that the pulpit is necessary in order to physically indicate the spiritual elevation of this man, this simple symbolism soon develops into a wider and more elaborate explanation. In order to enhance the drama of the original act of isolation, Ishmael imagines the pulpit as a vessel from which Mapple will forecast the future of the Christian world, guiding the faithful through the destruction of the apocalypse and into salvation:

What could be more full of meaning? — for the pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world.

From thence it is the storm of God’s quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair

or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow. (*MD*, 47).

This passage provides us with one of Melville's most explicit references to the eschatological performances of his time. The captain of religious prophecy stands at the forefront of American history and from this position, is able to spot "the storm of God's quick wrath," or the signs of the apocalypse, while the microcosm of the ship operates as a convenient symbol of the spiritual progression of the world. These prophetic ambassadors are essential, Ishmael argues, because their long distance vision allows them to negotiate with God to ensure "favorable winds," or a future of salvation, for their people. As Ishmael's interpretation of the pulpit picks up speed, Melville emphasizes the dramatic development of his logic. Short affirmations build, each elaborating upon, or growing out of its predecessor: if the pulpit *must* have a meaning beyond its use as a object, then that meaning *must* be connected to the wider purpose of its owner, and the vocation of that owner *must* have a symbolic meaning for the greater fate of humanity. On one level, Melville is putting the language and logic of the Millerites of his time into the mouth of his narrator in order to remind the reader of this well-established system of interpretation, and offer it up as an example of exegesis. On another level, the comedic hyperbole of Ishmael's analysis not only indicates Melville's familiarity with the exegetical logic of his time, popularized by preachers like Miller, but also his strong disdain for that tradition.

Later on in his speech, Father Mapple provides the congregation with his interpretation of the symbolic isolation of the pulpit, and with the variety of

interpretations that have been impressed upon this object, Mapple's version is meant to be read with both of Ishmael's earlier explanations in mind. Naturally, the versions differ according to perspective, but Mapple's interpretation is closer to Ishmael's second idea of the pulpit as a soapbox of prophetic expression. For Mapple, the pulpit is a necessary burden that is tied to his role as a "speaker of true things" or "an anointed pilot-prophet": "And now how gladly would I come down from this mast-head and sit on the hatches there where you sit, and listen as you listen, while some one of you reads *me* that other and more awful lesson which Jonah teaches to *me*, as a pilot of the living God" (*MD*, 53, emphasis original). While Mapple's status as a preacher automatically legitimizes his symbolic reading, Ishmael's explanation needs to be preceded by the assumption that the action "*must* symbolize something unseen," a phrase which then gives him the license that he needs to perform his own brand of interpretive acrobatics (*MD*, 47, my emphasis). This small logical maneuver of Ishmael's brings the question of interpretive authority to the surface, and Melville calls our attention towards the ease with which any reader can make use of a master narrative; in all likelihood, Melville had the elaborate exegetics of the nineteenth century in mind here.

Not surprisingly, Ishmael also applies the tried and true apocalyptic angle in his interpretation of a painting that is hung beside the pulpit; however, this time, his method is better fitted to his object. Ishmael makes it clear that he is about to deliver a symbolic reading of the painting when he claims that it is "*representing* a gallant ship beating against a terrible storm off a lee coast of black rocks and snowy breakers" (*MD*, 47, my emphasis). However, the darkness and suffering of the pictured ship, so familiar to the whalemens present, is countered by "a little isle of sunlight, from which beamed forth an

angel's face... 'Ah, noble ship,' the angel seemed to say, 'beat on, beat on, thou noble ship, and bear a hardy helm; for lo! the sun is breaking through; the clouds are rolling off — serenest azure is at hand'" (*MD*, 47). As before, Ishmael's interpretation of the painting is drawn from an accessible biblical allegory of present suffering on earth and subsequent joy in heaven, and the angel's promise invokes this familiar narrative of spiritual redemption after the destruction of the apocalypse. As with the pulpit, this moment of apocalyptically inspired reading is performed with relative ease, and through it, Melville demonstrates the way that master narratives can shape the interpretive imagination.

The well-known narrative of apocalyptic destruction and redemption that influences Ishmael's reading of the chapel painting also begs to be read alongside his previous encounter with the "portentous, black mass" that hovers in the centre of another memorable painting in chapter 3, "The Spouter-Inn" (*MD*, 26). When he is met with the painting in the New Bedford Inn, Ishmael is not instantly able to "arrive at an understanding of its purpose" (*MD*, 26). The uneasy context of this interpretive act is in contrast to the painting in the chapel, which practically dictates the details of the correct reading to the viewer. Instead, the black mass in the Spouter-Inn painting looms "unaccountable," and carries the viewer into a "most puzzled and confounded" state that would be "enough to drive a nervous man distracted" (*MD*, 26). And still, these unknowable aspects of the painting have a gravitational pull and the "indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity" of the picture presses the viewer to seek out the meaning behind it. While Ishmael provides a number of explanations, he also illustrates the absurd variety of interpretations that the hyperbolic imagination can attach to a single

object, creating a critique of excessive symbolical reading in the process: “It’s the Black Sea in a midnight gale. — It’s the unnatural combat of the four primal elements. — It’s a blasted heath. — It’s a Hyperborean winter scene. — It’s the breaking-up of the ice-bound stream of Time” (*MD*, 26). Despite the initial sarcasm of Ishmael’s tone, and Melville’s awareness of the potentially ridiculous process of symbolic interpretation, the final account of the painting is touched with sincerity. In it, Ishmael not only sees the intense danger of whaling, but his reading also exhibits an innate sense of the dark side of the natural world:

The picture represents a Cape-Horner in a great hurricane; the half-floundered ship weltering there with its three dismantled masts alone visible; and an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads.  
  
(*MD*, 26)

On one hand, Melville is aware that the artifice of the picture inevitably removes the reader from the actual experience of whaling, and Ishmael’s first set of explanations work to expose this gap between bogus interpretation and lived experience. On the other hand, while Ishmael’s initially wry tone turns excessive symbolical reading into a farce, the sincerity of the final moment indicates that Melville’s relationship to all reading and interpretation is not exclusively sarcastic. Instead, Ishmael’s reading of the Spouter-Inn painting provides a striking contrast to the uniformity of the apocalyptic explanation, and suggests that Melville’s approach to the interpretive impulse varies depending on the reader and the object.

Ishmael's dramatic reading of the significance of the paintings and the pulpit is positioned to prepare the reader for Father Mapple's hermeneutical enhancement of the Book of Jonah in "The Sermon." Mapple begins by recognizing that the Book of Jonah is "one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures," but quickly follows that concession with a confirmation of the great significance of the story: "Yet what depths of the soul does Jonah's deep sea-line sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet!" (*MD*, 49). Indeed, Mapple's interpretation of a meager text is impressively sophisticated. While he often incorporates direct biblical quotations, it is the ingenuity of his elaboration that is fascinating, and exhibits the impressive scope of his exegetical imagination. In *Melville's Use of the Bible*, Nathalia Wright calls Mapple's "loss in literary accuracy... a spectacular artistic gain," and it is his skill as a storyteller that enriches his sermon and captivates his audience (89). Mapple's first major act of interpretation comes early, when he recounts the beginning of Jonah's journey away from God, and re-jigs the story to emphasize the distance that Jonah travelled to escape his prophetic duty:

He skulks about the wharves of Joppa, and seeks a ship that's bound for Tarshish. *There lurks, perhaps, a hitherto unheeded meaning here.* By all accounts Tarshish could have been no other city than the modern Cadiz. That's the opinion of learned men. And where is Cadiz, shipmates? Cadiz is in Spain; as far by water, from Joppa, as Jonah could possibly have sailed in those ancient days, when the Atlantic was an almost unknown sea. Because Joppa, the modern Jaffa, shipmates, is on the most easterly coast of the Mediterranean, the Syrian; and Tarshish or Cadiz more than

two thousand miles of the westward from that...See ye not then,  
shipmates, that Jonah sought to flee the world-wide from God? (*MD*, 49,  
my emphasis)

Just as Increase Mather and William Miller sought to decode the symbolism of the Bible in order to understand the historical significance of their time, so Father Mapple modernizes the story of Jonah by giving it a geographical location that is relevant to his time. Although Melville may have had men like Mather and Miller in mind during this chapter, his characterization of Father Mapple maintains a degree of artistic dignity, and as a storyteller, Mapple is given a certain amount of respect that Melville would not have extended to his exegetical contemporaries.

Using Ishmael and Mapple as exegetes, Melville offers up the eschatological approach as a familiar method of reading everything, from paintings to pulpits to the text of *Moby-Dick*. As we have seen, Ishmael's tone is often unnervingly hyperbolic, and the chapter "A Bosom Friend," has led many critics to view Ishmael as a kind of anti-Mapple figure, who presents a contrasting doctrine of universal brotherhood when he "turn[s] idolator" to participate in Queequeg's heathen rituals (*MD*, 57). In his book, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, William Spanos sees Ishmael's transition from the Christian to the Pagan as indicative of "his uneasiness about, if not outright mockery of, the theology and formal economy he has just heard" (105). In his essay, "The Book of Jonah, Mapple's Sermon, and Scapegoating," Giorgio Mariani makes it clear that Melville's target is not the specifics of the Bible, but the preacher who is misusing it: "there can be little doubt that Melville's irony is not directed so much at the Bible as at the particular reading of the book of Jonah offered by Mapple" (39). Yet, to draw such a tight, binary

between Ishmael — skeptic — and Mapple — believer — is to lose sight of the complexity of Melville's thought in exegetical matters. Although Ishmael's decision to lavish all of his interpretative skills on an inanimate object like the pulpit could appear as a comic juxtaposition to the seriousness and authority of Mapple's sermon, Ishmael never overtly mocks or discredits Father Mapple. Instead, the criticism of outlandish symbolical reading remains with Ishmael, while Mapple's impressive presence and unforgettable power as a storyteller is preserved. When Mapple and Ishmael are considered alongside the extensive array of prophet figures in *Moby-Dick*, the margins imposed on the process of biblical exegesis are considerably widened, and in turn, allow for a better understanding of the scope of Melville's idea of the interpretive imagination.

In "The Pulpit," Ishmael's elaborate exposition of the scene and his almost automatic decision to see it as a wider spiritual allegory is a critique of the kind of reading that was being practiced by religious figures in Melville's time. In addition to this, Melville's comparison of Ishmael and Mapple as two spiritual interpreters subtly brings the issue of prophetic authority to the surface. While Mapple's analysis carries a kind of professional authorization in the field, Ishmael demonstrates that anyone can participate in the symbolical reading of an object or an event, no matter how unqualified. This issue of the master narrative will appear later in the discussion of Fedallah, as characters attempt to impose a specific reading on the Parsee, and Melville uses humor to exposes this erroneous act of interpretation as it is taking place. In contrast to the easy, apocalyptic narratives propagated by Ishmael, Mapple carries the dignity of his position with a kind of seriousness that Melville clearly respects. In Ishmael, Melville's distaste for the vulgar exegetics of his time is communicated through the consciously ironic

interpretations of his narrator. In Mapple, the prophetic act finds a nobility that proves to be unmatched by any other seer or visionary in *Moby-Dick*. The discrepancy between these two interpretive figures demonstrates what Pardes identifies as Melville's experimental idea of biblical exegesis: "For Melville, the Bible is a cultural text whose interpretation is carried out in highly diverse realms" (2). The human relationship to biblical interpretation then becomes as varied as the human mind itself, and although Melville uses Ishmael to zero in on some of the more specific and popular methods of scriptural analysis, the multitude of prophetic figures that appear in *Moby-Dick* indicate that Melville's notion of interpretation is indeed as broad as Pardes imagines. As a prophet, Fedallah is integrated into this wide spectrum of exegetical figures, providing the already rich interpretive framework of *Moby-Dick* with another manifestation of the hermeneutic impulse.

Although Mariani attempts to defend the scriptures and extend his criticism directly onto Mapple as an interpreter, the book of Jonah eventually appears on the chopping block in chapter 83, "Jonah Historically Regarded." In this chapter, Ishmael resumes his humorous tone as he ironically argues against an old whaleman from Sag Harbor, who has trouble reconciling the word of the Bible with the experience that "he had picked up from the sun and the sea" (*MD*, 288). Sag-Harbor's objection to the details of the narrative are all counteracted by "continental commentators" or "learned exegetists" who go so far as to claim that "the whale mentioned in the book of Jonah merely meant a life-preserver—an inflated bag of wind—which the endangered prophet swam to" (*MD*, 287). The interpretive wriggling that Melville has these exegetical figures perform is laughable, and Ishmael pretends to carry on with them, attributing old Sag-

Harbor's objections to ignorance: "I say it only shows his foolish, impious pride, and abominable, devilish rebellion against the reverend clergy" (*MD*, 288). During this chapter, the reader may also recall Father Mapple's attempt to bring Jonah into the nineteenth century by reworking the geographical details of the original story. In fact, Ishmael recalls Mapple's interpretation of Tarshish as Cadiz in his description of Sag-Harbor's complaint that "Jonah was swallowed in the Mediterranean Sea, and after three days he was vomited up somewhere within three days' journey of Nineveh, a city of the Tigris, very much more than three days' journey" (*MD*, 287). Through Ishmael, Sag-Harbor enacts a kind of reversal of Mapple's geographical logic:

But was there no other way for the whale to land the prophet within that short distance of Nineveh? Yes. He might have carried him round by the way of the Cape of Good Hope. But not to speak of the passage through the whole length of the Mediterranean, and another passage up the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, such a supposition would involve the complete circumnavigation of all Africa in three days, not to speak of the Tigris waters, near the sight of Nineveh, being too shallow for any whale to swim in. (*MD*, 288)

In this chapter, the humorous tone of Ishmael's reaction to Mapple's sermon returns in full force, but this time Melville makes it clear that it is not just the interpretive acrobatics of the pious reader that should be questioned, but the authority of the Bible itself. While the exegetical work of the preachers in this chapter is meant to elicit a negative response from the reader, these men exist at one end of Melville's interpretive spectrum. Indeed, the sheer number of prophet figures featured in *Moby-Dick* allows for this kind of variety.

While “The Sermon” presents a dignified picture of a devout man, “Jonah Historically Regarded” works to discredit and demystify the hermeneutical practices of a few crackpots.

When addressing the question of interpretation and the sincerity of Ishmael’s tone in these chapters, Cosgrove argues that it is important to recognize that his particular brand of skepticism is not absolute. In his essay, Cosgrove points out that Ishmael is not a skeptic of the post modern strain, but is rather of a pyrrhonist variety that “need not rejoice in the banishing of the metaphysical or the religious” (73). Ishmael, Cosgrove argues, harbors a “wounded” consciousness that is unable to disengage from the great problems of the universe, despite maintaining the conviction that the “world is an ironic one, alien and perhaps hostile to man” (72). Because he oscillates thoughtfully between faith and skepticism, Ishmael’s spiritual philosophy has often been linked to the struggles of Melville himself. In this famous passage from his 1856 journal, Nathaniel Hawthorne recollects the agitated spiritual state of his friend during a visit to England:

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, never will 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...He can neither believe, not be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. (Robertson-Lorant, 377)

What is important here, among other things, is the presence of a persistent, questioning mind, coupled with an intense emotional desire to maintain some semblance of faith. As Hawthorne thoughtfully observes, Melville could never be a comfortable atheist, because he is “honest and courageous” enough to recognize, and even revere, the vast, unknowable world that lies beyond the self. Robertson-Lorant writes, “Although he rejected his mother’s Calvinism and his father’s Unitarianism, [Melville] was a deeply spiritual man” (356). In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael argues that this inclination towards the spiritual is a gift that should be cherished by those that carry it: “And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions” (*MD*, 293). Although most aspects of organized religion come under fire in *Moby-Dick*, from the preacher to the Bible to the eschatological strategy, and although Ishmael reverts to a wry kind of humor at times, this genuine recognition of the otherworldly remains as a spiritual undertone, or “some unsuffusing thing beyond” that lives in the human consciousness (*MD*, 383): “Melville located in his experience moments which were, for him, unaccountable in any terms but the irreducibly spiritual...he felt...the power and mystery and demand of something ‘other than’ the human which was penetrating into the world of the human” (Sherrill, 94). It is this tug of war between the outward skeptic and the inward spirit that produces such a wide arrangement of prophet figures and religious interpreters in *Moby-Dick*. Although chapters like “Jonah Historically Regarded” indicate Melville’s distaste for the absurd and elaborate brand of hermeneutics practiced by preachers like William Miller, he nonetheless had an almost intuitive respect for the prophetic act, and it

is this sensitivity which extends onto his characterization of the wide variety of prophet figures in *Moby-Dick*.

While Father Mapple's sermon in New Bedford provides the reader with a suggestive model of symbolic interpretation for the story ahead, it also introduces the figure of the prophet and gives the reader an idea of the kind of symbolic principles that bolster the interpretive act. As we have seen, Melville's attitude towards the act of biblical interpretation is cautious, and the authority of both prophet and doctrine can come under fire. In fact, the prominence of Melville's dissent from organized religion is so well established among critics, that in 1979, Rowland Sherrill was prompted to admit that it is "practically an interpretive cliché to point out Melville's distrust of institutional Christianity" (88). And yet, the emphasis on spiritually symbolic figures and events does not diminish once Ishmael and Queequeg get away from the influence of organized religion on land. Instead, from the outset of the journey, every action seems to be shadowed by an element of predestination, and the role of the prophet quickly becomes a mainstay in *Moby-Dick*. Even before Ishmael's narrative begins, the words of an unknown prophet have accompanied the precipitating action of the book with the loss of Ahab's leg. Not surprisingly, the prophetic framework holds on until the final moments of the hunt, when the torch is passed, and Ishmael takes up the vacated role of the prophet, or the speaker of truth, after Fedallah has gone: "*It so chanced, that after the Parsee's disappearance, I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab's bowsman*" (*MD*, 427, emphasis original). In a book that is focused so intensely on the quest for meaning in a dangerous environment, the interpretive light of a prophet figure

offers a stable outlet for both the frightened sailor and the monomaniacal captain. Struck by the possibility of a cruel or arbitrary universe, Ahab's entire quest is built upon the extreme need for a meaningful interpretation of events. Melville keenly understands the desire to see events within an overarching narrative, and his recognition of this natural inclination is also coupled with an intense disdain for the kind of prophet that was associated with organized Christianity in his day. It is no wonder, then, that the seers in *Moby-Dick* are not only numerous, but are also diverse, as Melville pays homage to the individual impulse for premonition and prophecy while remaining wary of the gross elaborations and embarrassing misuses of his time.

Before the *Pequod* leaves from Nantucket, a feeling of future foreboding is sparked by a variety of prophet figures that continue to emerge out of the narrative to create a general "mood of fate" in *Moby-Dick* (Wright, 81). The first prophet to influence Ishmael's path is Yojo, a small wooden idol worshiped by Queequeg, the latter acting as a translator or interpreter for any prophetic message that is delivered. Ishmael relates that Queequeg "placed great confidence in the excellence of Yojo's judgment and surprising forecast of things" holding him as "a rather good sort of god, who perhaps meant well enough upon the whole, but in all cases did not succeed in his benevolent designs" (*MD*, 68). Ishmael's description of Yojo as an inconsistent, but munificent divinity speaks volumes when read retrospectively from the end of Ishmael's narrative. Yojo's command, after all, is that "the selection of the ship should rest wholly with [Ishmael]," despite the fact that Yojo himself had already "pitched upon a vessel" which Ishmael would otherwise come upon if left to his own devices (*MD*, 68). This vessel is the ill-fated *Pequod*, and Ishmael selects it without hesitation in the same chapter.

The ultimately damning advice of the Pagan idol is quickly brought into contrast with an ineffectual version of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. In the Book of Kings, Elijah is best known for prophesying the eventually gruesome and humiliating death of King Ahab: “This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth’s blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!” (1 Kings 22.13). While the Elijah of the Bible is accurate, forthright and clear, as one would hope an Old Testament prophet would be, Melville’s version is halting and cryptic. Stopping Ishmael and Queequeg on the wharf, Elijah hints obliquely at the state of their souls, pointing out that they do not know much about Captain Ahab. But just as he seems to be preparing to make some sort of significant announcement, Elijah seems to check his prophetic impulse, and instead falls back on the familiar principle of predestination:

With finger pointed and eye levelled at the *Pequod*, the beggar-like stranger stood for a moment, as if in a troubled reverie; then starting a little, turned and said: — “Ye’ve shipped, have ye? Names down on the papers? Well, well, what’s signed, is signed; and what’s to be, will be; and then again, perhaps it won’t be, after all. Any how, it’s all fixed and arranged a’ready; (*MD*, 88)

Although he decides not to communicate his prophetic message the first time, Elijah follows the two companions at a distance, and then returns again before they finally board the *Pequod*. However, the second visitation is as indeterminate as the first, and Elijah again concludes by beginning a prophecy, but not completing it: “Oh! I was going to warn ye against — but never mind, never mind — it’s all one, all in the family too” (*MD*, 91). Although he is named after a biblical figure of significance, Melville’s Elijah

is ultimately ineffectual, and possibly redundant. What is the purpose of a prophet of God on earth if not to warn against trespass? But as Melville's Elijah seems to know, his role is ultimately superfluous in the face of divine predestination. Not only does Melville's Elijah fail to communicate his message about the doomed ship, but he also abandons Ishmael and Queequeg, two innocent people, to struggle under the command of a dangerous man. In the end, Elijah's unhelpful arrival deflates the hope that man can communicate with, and therefore serve God on earth; instead, the only assurance comes with divine judgment, and the only consolation Elijah offers comes with the certainty of the apocalypse: "Good bye to ye. Shan't see ye again very soon, I guess; unless it's before the Grand Jury" (*MD*, 91). This rhetoric is cold comfort for Ishmael and Queequeg, and Elijah's incomplete warning raises questions about the validity of a prophet figure who cannot act as a mortal messenger of God on earth.

Before Ishmael and Queequeg walk on board the *Pequod*, a chorus of prophetic voices accompanies them. Oftentimes, the emphasis on prophetic insight is so intense that forewarnings begin to overlap in the narrative. Within his own cryptic mutterings, Elijah mentions the prophecy of Tistig, an old Gayhead woman, who predicted that Ahab would lose "his leg last voyage, according to the prophecy" (*MD*, 87). Earlier, in a conversation with Captain Peleg, Ishmael is privy to another version of the same story: "Captain Ahab did not name himself. 'Twas a foolish, ignorant whim of his crazy, widowed mother...And yet the old squaw Tistig; at Gay-head, said that the name would somehow prove prophetic" (*MD*, 78). One effect of this layering of prophecy is to generally enshroud the beginning of the voyage with foreboding. However, if the reader takes a step back, this accumulation of ominous voices can also work to diffuse the power of any

prophetic message, and deflate the impression of visionary authority. Yojo is inanimate, Tistig is absent, and, compared to his biblical version, Elijah is ineffectual. Spanos points out that this early flurry of predictions pushes Ishmael to participate in the “Calvinist providential view of history” by “reading phenomena as clues to a hidden and larger prefigurative design,” as we saw him do, with a touch of humor, before Mapple’s sermon (91). However, Spanos goes on to argue that Ishmael is able to successfully shrug off Elijah’s forebodings because he “simply refuses to give the sign as ‘presentiment’ a decisive symbolic status” (91). Instead, Spanos holds, that the “presentiments” are “ambiguous and untrustworthy,” and that they indicate Ishmael’s “essential distrust of the Symbolizing Imagination (insofar as it attempts to re-present and contain the un-imagable or in-effable)” (91, 92). Yet, as we have seen, it is unfair to think of Ishmael as an outright skeptic because, like Melville, he maintains a kind of awe for the unknown, which in turn, nourishes an inclination towards the symbolic and the prophetic. Although some of the prophetic figures featured in *Moby-Dick* work to demystify the authority of the visionary on one level, the prophetic act itself is approached with respect and Melville maintains a critical kind of affection for these figures.

In many ways, Melville’s portrait of the insane prophet of the ship *Jeroboam* corroborates Spanos’ theory, because it provides one of the most memorable critiques of the stock dooms-day figure. In his description of Gabriel, Melville invokes all of the essential markers of a phony apocalyptic prophet:

He had been originally nurtured among the crazy society of Neskyeuna Shakers, where he had been a great prophet; in their cracked, secret meetings having several times descended from heaven by the way of a

trap-door, announcing the speedy opening of the seventh vial, which he carried in his vest-pocket. (*MD*, 251)

The absurdity of this description and the accounts of Gabriel's fanatical appearance indicate that Melville is clearly having fun creating a character that embodies all things ridiculous and fraudulent in organized religion. Gabriel's uncanny control over the *Jeroboam* is also a frightening example of the human tendency to fall under the power of a man who claims to have communion with God, and so the critique extends, in some respects, to the "poor devils" that believe him (*MD*, 252). It cannot be ignored that the legitimacy of the prophet figure falls under fire here as Ishmael explains that Gabriel was often "only making a general prophecy, which any one might have done, and so have chanced to hit one of many marks in the wide margin allowed" (*MD*, 253). Ishmael makes it clear that it is the support of the "credulous disciples" that allows Gabriel to maintain his tyrannical rule over the ship, going so far as to "declar[e] that the plague, as he called it, was at his sole command; nor should it be stayed but according to his good pleasure" (*MD*, 253, 252). Gabriel's fraudulence as a prophet is enhanced by his desire to be worshipped by his shipmates who "in obedience to his instructions, sometimes render[ed] him personal homage, as to a god" (*MD*, 252). When considered alongside the other prophet figures such as Father Mapple, Gabriel's presence demonstrates the diversity of Melville's idea of the exegetical imagination. A prophet, according to Father Mapple, is a humble servant of God or a living expression of God's will on earth, but is by no means a version of God himself. In this vein, Mapple's final appeal to God is one of humility and self-abasement: "I have striven to be Thine, more than to be this world's, or mine own" (*MD*, 54). In contrast, Gabriel's self-appointed arch-angelic status, as well

as the intense guilt and power he wields over the crew, suggests that self-aggrandizement is his principal motivation. There is no doubt that Melville approaches Gabriel and Mapple as two very different people working within the same exegetical spectrum, and the discrepancy between these figures indicates Melville's understanding that the image of prophet can be as various as the whims and beliefs of an individual man.

Despite the absurdity of Gabriel's reign on board the *Jeroboam*, Melville does not discredit him as a prophet completely. In *Melville*, Robertson-Lorant explains that Melville often took his family on afternoon outings to a nearby Shaker settlement, where they admired everything from the craftsmanship to the communal worship: "Melville was charmed by their simple handcrafted inventions, their singing, their dancing, and their nondoctrinal practice of religion" (242). Although Gabriel is raised in a particularly "crazy" group of worshippers, Melville's personal experience with the Shaker community would inevitably shape his view of such a character. Although Ishmael's record of Gabriel's past is compiled from second-hand gossip, the latter half of the account is derived from first-hand experience, giving Gabriel's actual appearance some weight, and maybe even some sympathy. Even though Gabriel's look and behavior would suggest that he consistently lives up to the fanaticism of his back-story, Ishmael also notes a strange vulnerability in the man: "Meantime, the hoisted sperm whale's head jogged about very violently, and Gabriel was seen eyeing it with rather more apprehensiveness than his archangel nature seemed to warrant" (*MD*, 252). This moment is both laughable and saddening, and Ishmael solemnly implies that the "measureless self-deception of the fanatic" is a deep brand of human madness (*MD*, 252). Surprisingly, Gabriel also operates with an element of mystical power that suggests a close association

with the natural world. While Ahab attempts to speak to Captain Mayhew about the whereabouts of the white whale, the ocean waves and winds do not allow for the exchange of more than a few words between the two men. Instead, the strange movements of the ships allow for “frequent interruptions from Gabriel, whenever his name was mentioned, and the crazy sea that seemed leagued with him” (*MD*, 252). In addition to this, Gabriel also wins the final battle over the exchange of a letter, which being addressed to a man previously killed by Moby Dick, is thought to be a bad omen on both sides. Again, the natural world seems to respond to Gabriel’s wishes:

the boat drifted a little towards the ship’s stern; so that, as if by magic, the letter suddenly ranged along with Gabriel’s eager hand. He clutched it in an instant, seized the boat-knife, and impaling the letter on it, sent it thus loaded back into the ship. It fell at Ahab’s feet. (*MD*, 254)

Although Gabriel is denounced as a lunatic from the outset, there remains a sense of the unknown, or a touch of invisible power in him, that gives this prophetic portrait an element of respect, and even awe from both crew and narrator: “As, after this interlude, the seamen resumed their work upon the jacket of the whale, many strange things were hinted in reference to this wild affair” (*MD*, 254). As with Father Mapple, Gabriel’s presence is so memorable, that his antics are maintained in the minds of the men he meets, and his presence in *Moby-Dick* extends beyond his singular appearance. This staying power is not only a testament to the unforgettably dramatic quality of Gabriel’s arrival in the text, but it also demonstrates the way that the prophetic act engages the imagination and taps in to a basic element of the human experience.

Despite the humorous criticism that Melville dishes out to prophet figures like Gabriel, there is not a single premonition in *Moby-Dick* that fails to strike a deep emotional chord among the sailors present. For the noble Starbuck, this tendency towards superstition is enhanced by the danger and isolation of his profession:

Uncommonly conscious for a seaman, and endued with a deep natural reverence the wild watery loneliness of his life did therefore strongly incline him towards superstition; but to that sort of superstition, which in some organizations seems rather to spring, somehow, from intelligence than from ignorance. Outward portents and inward presentiments were his.  
(*MD*, 102)

Although Spanos and Mariani would argue that Ishmael's response to Mapple's style may indicate a "distrust" for the "Symbolizing Imagination" that accompanies the religious rhetoric displayed in "The Sermon," there is not a hint of sarcasm in this description of Starbuck's intelligent style of superstitious thought (Spanos, 92). There is also a sad level of sincerity in Ishmael's reflection on his willingness to repress his feelings of foreboding about Ahab, and to ignore the various warning signs that were presented to him before embarking:

If I had been downright honest with myself, I would have seen very plainly in my heart that I did not half fancy being committed this way to so long a voyage, without once laying my eyes on the man who was to be the absolute dictator of it...But when a man suspects any wrong, it sometimes happens that if he be already involved in the matter, he insensibly strives to cover up his suspicions even from himself. (*MD*, 90)

In addition to this, the forebodings of Elijah, Tistig and Gabriel all provide damning portraits of Ahab, which prove, in many respects, to be corroborated by the events of the text. In this way, the prophet figure is not always a laughable target used to foster an atheist commentary, but is like the whale and the sea, invested with a sort of reverence that accompanies all ideas of invisible power in *Moby-Dick*. In the memorably dramatic conclusion of chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael reminds us that while “in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright” (*MD*, 164). Melville’s fixation with the powers of the invisible world finds an outlet on the open ocean, and it is therefore not surprising that, once out of sight of land, the prophet figures become more numerous: Tashtego, Gabriel, Pip, the old Manxman, Fedallah, and even Ahab himself assume the role of prophet at some point, each attempting to read meaning into the events that shape their lives.

Like the eschatologists of Melville’s America, Ahab is initially obsessed with the analysis of minute details. When a school of small fish swim away from the *Pequod* at the mention of the white whale, Ahab’s interpretive imagination goes into overdrive: “to any monomaniac man, the veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings. ‘Swim away from me, do ye?’ murmured Ahab... There seemed but little in the words, but the tone conveyed more of deep helpless sadness than the insane old man had ever before evinced” (*MD*, 195). In this example, the feverish reading of small, and likely inconsequential signs is left open to criticism; yet, the anguish that accompanies Ahab’s frantic interpretation is also disarmingly sad. As was seen with Gabriel, this movement from the comic to the solemn indicates the consistency of Melville’s critical thought while simultaneously revealing his sympathetic feeling for these crazed, hermeneutic

figures. Ahab's longing for a meaningful narrative is central to the main action in *Moby-Dick*, and it is the act of reading signs that defines the relationship between Ahab and Fedallah. Both men attempt to read the world around them, and in the final battle with the white whale, it is the interpretive impulse that drives them both forward. In this way, Fedallah is not only an active member of the ship's interpretive community, but his presence is central to the outcome of the larger narrative, and critical to the conclusion of Ahab's story.

In "The Chart," Melville draws a parallel between Ahab and Mapple as interpreters of events, as the captain pores over his maps and records in an attempt to discover the whereabouts of the white whale through careful calculation and analysis of written material. Just as Mapple pours descriptions into the spaces between words in the Book of Jonah, so Ahab fills in the chart: "you would have seen him intently study the various lines and shadings which there met his eye; and with slow but steady pencil trace the additional courses over spaces that before were blank" (*MD*, 166). Just as the Millerites of Melville's time worked feverishly to predict the exact date of the apocalypse, so Ahab leans over his sacred text, the chart, attempting to establish "the timeliest day to be upon this or that ground in search of his prey" (*MD*, 167). Like the scriptural work of Mapple, and the eschatologists of the nineteenth century, those who track the movements of the whales begin with a single observation: "the migrations of the sperm whale would be found to correspond in invariability to those of the herring-shoals or the flights of swallows. On this hint, attempts have been made to construct elaborate migratory charts of the sperm whale" (*MD*, 167). However, Ahab's empirical analysis cannot decipher a definite pattern in the sperm whale's travel, because the routes

themselves are a product of the whale's "infallible instinct — say, rather, secret intelligence from the Deity," which holds significance beyond the scope of science and measurement, and therefore out of Ahab's reach (*MD*, 167). It is the indefiniteness of the sperm whale's existence that thwarts Ahab's chart and drives him to madness. Although these moments of excessive interpretation can be read solely as a critique of symbolical reading, the motivation behind this impulse is deeply human, and Melville makes a point of describing the sadness, and suffering behind Ahab's desperate analysis: "And have I not tallied the whale, Ahab would mutter to himself... tallied him, and shall he escape?... And here, his mad mind would run on in a breathless race; till a weariness and faintness of pondering came over him" (*MD*, 169). At its most essential level, the work of prophecy, or the reading of texts engages with this basic fear of the unknown, and works to fill in the gaps of human vision and experience with meaningful explanations of the world beyond. Ahab is obsessed with the discovery of this secret, and it is the "eternal, living principal or soul in him" which takes his mind captive and turns "all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose" (*MD*, 169, 170). This is the hermeunetic mind gone mad. "The Chart" begins by exploring Ahab's excessive reading within the larger discourse of symbolic interpretation; however, it also descends onto a darker place, where Ahab exists alone, possessed by imaginings of revenge, and unable to relinquish the one thought that is destroying him: "God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates" (*MD*, 170). Although Melville is keenly aware of Ahab's error, there is nonetheless a clear sense of tragedy in this moment, which brings the issue of symbolical reading into perspective. In

*Moby-Dick*, the role of interpreter emerges as both an outrageous and an understandable reaction to the uncertainty of the human condition. Melville was certainly not in step with the great eschatological thinkers of his time, yet, in *Moby-Dick*, it is clear that he maintains an instinctive understanding of the human impulse towards the symbolic, and that he often instills this longing into the questing characters of the *Pequod* with a tenderness that is at once mocking and heartfelt.

Even though Melville is attached to the underlying impulse that inspires symbolical reading and maintains an element of sympathy for this practice, he is critical of the elaborate exegetical work of the biblical interpreters of his time, and calls attention to the practice of symbolical reading by highlighting the instability of the signs themselves. The dominant storyline of Ahab's hunt for the white whale has often been, I think correctly, interpreted as a religious quest. As the journey grows longer and Ahab's spiritual outlook evolves, his interpretations of the signs and symbols about him change dramatically. When Queequeg volunteers his superfluous coffin as a replacement for the lost life preserver, Ahab is stunned by the easy reversal of such a universal symbol:

Here now's the very dreaded symbol of grim death, by a mere hap, made the expressive sign of the help and hope of most endangered life. A life-buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver! (*MD* 396)

At this point, the rigid interpretive mechanisms of Ahab's mind have been loosened, and the once fixed relationship between sign and meaning, or signifier and signified, dissolves. After this revelation, Ahab detests all signs or omens, seeing them as capricious in nature, and therefore entirely unreliable sources of meaning. When Starbuck

attempts to use the weight and seriousness of an “ill omen” to deter his captain after the dangerous first encounter with Moby Dick, Ahab lashes out: “Omen? Omen? — The dictionary! If the gods think to speak outright to man, they will honorably speak outright: not shake their heads, and give an old wives’ darkling hint” (*MD*, 413). After his first climactic meeting with the white whale, Ahab’s fierce individuality has led him to cast off the burden of conventional reading and interpretation, and he becomes his own author and his own prophet: “The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one” (*MD*, 413). Ahab’s defiance of, and ascension over, the established religious order is essential to this reversal, and it is the deflation of symbolic certainty that leads him to this point.

While Melville satirizes the overtly symbolic popular readings of his time, his intuitive respect for the interpretive impulse remains, and it is this amalgamation of feeling and criticism that informs the array of prophet figures featured in *Moby-Dick*. In these matters of symbolic interpretation, a reverence for the art of reading and storytelling is coupled with a critical awareness of the vulgar and self-interested exegetics of the nineteenth-century prophet. It is out of an understanding of Melville’s relationship to the popular practices of reading that the discussion of Fedallah’s role in *Moby-Dick* can be brought into consideration. Fedallah’s presence on board the *Pequod* is tied, inextricably, to these problems of reading and the Parsee repeatedly stands as a caricature of the elaborate cultural and literary Orientalism of Melville’s time. Fedallah is both mysterious and mute, making him the perfect symbolic vehicle for the interpretive imaginations of characters and critics; however, as we have seen with Ishmael, Melville revels in

exposing the mechanisms of these readings, and he consistently uses the influence of a dominant Oriental narrative to question the motivation behind these stereotypes. In addition to his prescribed role as a sign, Fedallah is also a reader who demonstrates the same interpretive impulse that lies at the heart of *Moby-Dick*. As a prophet figure, Fedallah belongs within this world of sign and interpretation, and although his involvement is largely silent, and his story is ultimately inaccessible, he is engaged in the same intuitive search for knowledge that drives Ishmael to the sea and propels Ahab after the whale. All of these men seek out a destiny on the open ocean, and it is the process of reading and interpretation that enriches and emboldens the quest.

#### Chapter 4    **The Interpretive Pull of the “incommunicable riddle”: The Parsee as Reader and Sign in *Moby-Dick***

If a single trend has emerged out of the array of critical reactions to Fedallah, it is that the Parsee has often been relegated to the margins of *Moby-Dick* because he poses an interpretive problem for the reader. Like the brow of the sperm whale, he is an “incommunicable riddle” that both elicits and frustrates the interpretive act (*MD*, 383). However, it is precisely the strange and the inexplicable in Fedallah that makes him worth our while, and as we pursue this character further, it becomes clear that Melville approached his presence on board the *Pequod* from a number of different thematic angles. On one hand, Melville uses the Parsee to engage with the Oriental stereotypes of his time and address the assumptions that inform these popular readings. On the other hand, to approach Fedallah with an exclusively Oriental gaze is to miss out on the way that the Parsee co-exists with the rest of the *Pequod*'s crew, functioning not solely as a walking emblem of a strange and mysterious East, but as a man, engaged in the same human struggle for meaning and definition that drives the major characters of the book. In this way, the Parsee serves as both a multifarious sign of the Orient — devil, shadow, wise man — and a reader of signs — prophet and questing figure. As a sign, Fedallah is alienated from the crew, and Melville consciously uses his presence to elicit, and then expose the mechanism behind the popular Oriental narrative of the nineteenth century, turning our attention towards the greater matter of reading practices in general. As a reader of signs, Fedallah slips seamlessly into the fabric of *Pequod*, and Melville uses these moments of interpretation to integrate the estranged Parsee back into the heart of the book. When Ishmael tells us “that hair-turbaned Fedallah remained a muffled mystery

to the last,” the first impulse may be to question the motivation behind including a character that will only persist in mystifying and confounding a reader (*MD*, 191). But when we consider Melville’s personal fascination with the East, and then more widely with the unknown in *Moby-Dick*, we can see that Fedallah fits easily into the wider thematic structure of the book. Like the ocean, and the whale beneath it, Fedallah is forever shrouded in mystery; yet, the pull towards the unknown remains, and the drive to “strike through the mask” persists in the “nobler sadder souls” of Melville’s world (*MD*, 140, 157). While the Parsee symbolizes this wonderful sense of the unknown, Melville is also careful not to neglect the human in Fedallah; instead, he is incorporated into the world of interpretation as both a sign and a reader of signs, and it is the Parsee’s inclusion in this tradition that moves the strange Oriental figure away from the margins, and into the heart of Melville’s American epic. I will begin my discussion of Fedallah with a brief overview of some of the more particular critical approaches to the problem that the Parsee poses for the reader of *Moby-Dick*.

While the majority of critics tend to think of the Parsee as either evil or empty, Mukhtar Ali Isani takes a rare inward angle when he disregards the devilish accounts of Fedallah and turns instead to what he sees as the profound religious devotion of a Zoroastrian fire-worshipper. Isani describes Fedallah as an “orthodox follower of an orthodox faith” who maintains his faithful service to the All-Good power of light, Ahura-Mazda (385). In Zoroastrian myth, Mazda is in a constant struggle with Ahriman, the All-Evil force in the universe represented by darkness. Isani uses Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* to form the crux of his argument regarding Fedallah’s spiritual

motive, claiming that the Zoroastrians believed that “Animals, such as Dogs, Fowls, and Urchins, belong to the Good [Principle], and Water Animals to the bad; for which reason they account him happy that kills most of them” (Bayle qtd. in Isani, 387). Isani then reasons that Fedallah “is the orthodox believer, steadfast, indeed fanatical, in his dualistic faith, intent upon the destruction of the whale as an act of religious devotion” (388). Isani also argues that Fedallah’s extreme, and even fanatical religious energy blinds him to the fact that he is assisting Ahab in a “sacrilegious hunt” that is built upon defiance of the holy, not reverence for it (390). However, Isani’s unique claim regarding the Parsee’s secret interiority turns conventional when it joins with the majority of other critics to maintain that the connection between Ahab and his Fedallah is that of tempter and tempted. While Isani does not adopt the conventional devil framework of the Christian interpretation, the message is essentially the same: “With his half-truths, Fedallah deceives and uses the rebel Ahab for his own orthodox ends” (388). Since the amount of dialogue that we get from Fedallah is scant at best, Isani is performing an unfair amount of speculation here, and is not able to elaborate on what these “half-truths” might sound like. Yet, what is exceptional about Isani’s article is that he assumes some deeper, more complex motivation behind the silence of Fedallah’s presence. Unlike the critics who have dismissed the Parsee as a hollow caricature of Oriental demonism, Isani’s article attempts to reach beyond the façade, and discover a rich spiritual narrative inside of a speechless and strange character. Although he brings a new element of depth to Fedallah’s characterization as a Zoroastrian, Isani is ultimately, like most critics on this subject, unable to relinquish the idea of the Parsee as a cunning deceiver and destructive manipulator of Ahab. Unfortunately, from this position all of the space that Isani has

visualized inside of Fedallah is flattened into the familiar storyline of a Mephistophelean villain.

The impetus behind the temptation argument, such as Isani resorts to, is often explained as a way to deflect guilt away from Captain Ahab, whom such critics attempt to preserve as a heroic model of American ambition. For example, Marr uses Fedallah as a scapegoat for Ahab when he recalls how the Parsee's haunting gaze closes chapter 132, "The Symphony" after Ahab rejects Starbuck's heartfelt appeal to abandon the hunt for Moby Dick: "Melville spares some of Ahab's "humanities" by displacing the captain's perverse destiny and haunted fatalism onto Fedallah's spectral body" (231). Here, Marr assumes that Fedallah's hollow, shadowy condition allows for this kind of moral absorbency. While Marr's comments on this subject are quite recent, Fedallah's capacity to take up blame has always been an accepted component of the temptation argument. In his 1950 biography, *Herman Melville*, Newton Arvin claims that Ahab has "surrendered his moral freedom" to his "own harpooner, the diabolic Fedallah...whom Stubb quite properly identifies as the devil in disguise" (191-92). In 1961, Dorothee Finkelstein carries the torch in *Melville's Orienda*, making elaborate use of her training as an Orientalist to prove that Fedallah symbolizes "the 'destroying angel' sent by God to bring about the 'assassination' of Ahab, the heretic...through the deep damnation of his spirit and soul by the satanic intoxication of hatred and pride" (238). In general, Finkelstein's exclusively Orientalist approach to *Moby-Dick* narrows her scope considerably, leaving no room for Fedallah to exist as a human character, but only as a prototype of a wider cultural or religious narrative. Coincidentally, Finkelstein's approach to the problem of Fedallah is not unlike the eschatologists discussed earlier, in that she works diligently

with historical facts to fill in the “hidden significances” and secret meanings of Fedallah’s participation in the story (238). For decades, critics like Finkelstein have held on to this idea of Fedallah as the morally culpable scapegoat of the *Pequod*, and in doing so, have disregarded the Parsee’s potential to hold a story of his own.

In his recent article, “Wars for Oil: *Moby-Dick*, Orientalism, and Cold-War Criticism,” Jean Leroux engages with this particular trend of Fedallah scholarship and exposes the mechanism behind the “tendency in Melville criticism of the Cold-War period to scapegoat Ahab himself” via “a long and venerable tradition of Orientalizing the Middle East in Melville criticism” (431, 425). Leroux argues that critics such as Finkelstein erect an idea of Fedallah under the category of “some despotic, irrational East” in order to absorb Ahab’s moral culpability (431). Taking his cue from Walcutt’s 1944 article, “Fire Symbolism and *Moby-Dick*,” Leroux argues that the two roles of “Parsee” and “Mephistopheles” cannot be reconciled in Fedallah’s characterization. This contradiction emerges in light of Ahab’s religious development from a Christian to a defiant Zoroastrian in the chapter “The Candles,” since this shift towards fire-worship would spiritually align the captain with his alleged Mephistophelean deceiver, Fedallah. In the end, Leroux gestures towards a dissolution of all titles and expectations surrounding Fedallah, suggesting that the mysterious Parsee may have a story of his own that deserves our attention: “If we are to give a philosophically and morally speculative reading of Ahab’s quest, it stands to reason that we should also do the same in the case of Fedallah, by reconstructing *his* journey into the nature of things” (436, emphasis original). The first step in this reconstruction is to read Fedallah as a member of the microcosm of the *Pequod*, and to recognize his presence as both a sign and a reader of

signs within that environment. Although he is predominantly voiceless, Fedallah embodies the hermeneutic impulse, and is often found performing the same interpretive gestures as the men around him at pivotal moments in the text. As a prophet, he is one of many exegetes, and eventually he pours his reading of the world into the receptive ear of Captain Ahab. In addition to his actions as a reader, Fedallah also serves as a sign, allowing Melville to bring our attention to the wider process of interpretation in *Moby-Dick* while criticizing any erroneous methods of reading that rely on a dominant narrative for authority. In becoming cognizant of the way that both the characters in the book and the literary critics outside of it typecast Fedallah, we can both explore the proper function of reading as it is understood in *Moby-Dick*, and we can also see that Melville intended Fedallah to be more complicated than past scholarship has allowed.

As the outlandish, wordless figure of a mysterious Orient, Fedallah invites the process of reading more than any other character on the ship. Like the imagery connected to the apocalyptic imagination, or the philosophy behind the doctrine of predestination, the Oriental storyline was an accessible interpretive framework for the nineteenth-century reader. In his first description of Fedallah, Melville uses Ishmael's narrative voice to conjure these stereotypical images in the minds of his readers in order to engage with the popular rhetoric of his time and emphasize the fact that an act of reading is taking place. Marr notes that the "composite characterization of Fedallah runs the gamut of the types of the cunning Asian" with "melodramatic" exhibition, and Ishmael certainly typecasts the Parsee with a notably theatrical flourish (230). When he first spots the foreign men on

deck, Ishmael's description is saturated with a consciously sinister array of Oriental stereotypes:

The figure that now stood by its bows was tall and swart, with one white tooth evilly protruding from its steel-like lips. A rumpled Chinese jacket of black cotton funerially invested him, with wide black trowsers of the same dark stuff. But strangely crowning this ebonness was a glistening white plaited turban, the living hair braided and coiled round and round upon his head. Less swart in aspect, the companions of this figure were of that vivid, tiger-yellow complexion peculiar to some of the aboriginal natives of the Manilas; — a race notorious for a certain diabolism of subtilty, and by some honest white mariners supposed to be the paid spies and secret confidential agents on the water of the devil, their lord, whose counting room they suppose to be elsewhere. (*MD*, 181)

In many ways, Ishmael's melodramatic description of Fedallah and the "dusky phantoms" is performed in exactly the same style as his analysis of the pulpit before Father Mapple's sermon (*MD*, 180). As with the pulpit, this performance is not entirely genuine, and Ishmael's remarkable ability to adopt an array of narrative voices and tones should be familiar to the reader at this point. One only has to recall the overtly meticulous scientific persona of the "Cetology" chapter in order to be convinced of Ishmael's talent as a narrative chameleon. However, Ishmael's ability to latch on to different tones and styles is ultimately orchestrated by an author determined to engage with the popular rhetoric of his time, and expose the artifice behind it. Indeed, Ishmael's demonic description of the Oriental whalemens plays into a wider, pre-existing narrative, which, as

we have seen, nineteenth-century readers would have been very familiar with. It is also interesting to note that Eastern garb played a part in maintaining the Oriental type in America, and the popular lecture circuit of turban-wearing American writers such as Bayard Taylor would have allowed a curious audience to observe the trappings of the Orient on home soil. In this context, Ishmael's detailed description of Fedallah's clothing takes on a new significance, as Melville has his narrator conjure a stock Oriental image in the mind of his contemporary reader. While Ishmael reduces Fedallah to a familiar symbolic status, Melville also engages us on another level as the elaborate piling on of Oriental stereotypes works to expose the mechanism behind Ishmael's reading. In bringing Fedallah on board the *Pequod*, Melville is able to engage with the Orientalism of the nineteenth century on his own terms, resulting in a portrait that is comic on one level, and critical of an entire popular discourse on another.

After Ishmael's elaborate introduction, the other characters on board the *Pequod* engage in the process of reading Fedallah as a sign, and Melville continues to explore the way that ignorant minds eagerly adopt a familiar meta-narrative in order to explain the existence of the unknown by locating it within navigable interpretive territory. With the vision of the typecast Oriental already established by Ishmael, Melville moves this discussion of Fedallah's nature into the mouths of his most comedic characters. In chapter 73, "Stubb and Flask kill a Right Whale; and Then Have a Talk over Him," the second and third mate candidly discuss the evil influence that the Parsee wields on the ship:

Flask, I take that Fedallah to be the devil in disguise. Do you believe that cock and bull story about his having been stowed away on board ship?

He's the devil, I say. The reason why you don't see his tail, is because he tucks it up out of sight; he carries it in his pocket, I guess...the old man is hard bent after that White Whale, and the devil there is trying to come round him, and get him to swap away his silver watch, or his soul.

(*MD*, 259)

In this example, Stubb derives his explanation of Fedallah from “the folk version of the devil as shape-shifting, but with a tail and cloven hooves” (Parker and Hayford, *MD*, 259n4). Stubb's interpretation of Fedallah's behavior is then adapted to fit the attributes of the familiar folklore that he adheres to. When Flask mentions that he has seen Fedallah “lay of nights in a coil of rigging,” Stubb instantly claims, “it's because of his cursed tail; he coils it down, do ye see, in the eye of the rigging” (*MD*, 259). Stubb's interpretive ingenuity may not be as sophisticated as the kind exhibited in Father Mapple's sermon, but the technique and the motivation are the same. Both readers enhance or elaborate details in order to preserve the wider narrative guideline that they are adhering to. Like Ishmael's first theatrical portrait of Fedallah, the comic conversation between Stubb and Flask is accompanied by an authorial awareness of the act of reading as it is taking place, and Melville continues to use the inexplicable figure of Fedallah to raise questions around stock narratives and the authority of the people who use them.

As long as he has a dimwitted and susceptible audience in Flask, Stubb continues his reading of Fedallah as the devil within a familiar Christian framework. Like Father Mapple's modernization of the Jonah story, Stubb presents Flask with a localized version of the Book of Job, substituting “the old governor” for God and “John” for Job (*MD*, 259). However, while Mapple's modernization of the Bible is meant to bring Jonah into

the imaginations of his listeners, Stubb's scriptural modification is only meant to expose Flask as an ignorant man. Not surprisingly, the underlying biblical allusion is lost on the third mate who claims to "remember some such story...but...can't remember where" (*MD*, 260). While Stubb teasingly suggests that Flask has learned the Old Testament narrative through the "melodramatic novel" *The Three Spaniards*, the reality of Stubb's own conviction that Fedallah has a tail should strike the reader as equally ridiculous (Parker and Hayford, *MD*, 260n6). Stubb's decision to mock Flask for being too sensational is grossly hypocritical, considering the intensity of Stubb's own interpretive investment in the melodrama of the folkloric tradition. Melville's decision to use Stubb as an ambassador of this kind of reading not only dismantles the idea that Fedallah is a demonic force of biblical proportion, but it also exposes the apparatus behind his reading for what it is: not only wrong, but ridiculous. By putting this dialogue into the mouths of two comedic characters, Melville is questioning the role that stock narratives play in our general understanding of the world, and commenting on their dangerous potential to give authority and conviction to an otherwise ignorant mind. In this world of interpretation and the master narrative, Fedallah offers Melville the opportunity not only to engineer the reading practices of his characters, but also to play with the interpretive expectations of the reader of *Moby-Dick*; with one of the largest, most established cultural narratives of the nineteenth century looming behind him, Fedallah is an interpretive catalyst, and Melville knows that his presence on board the *Pequod* will automatically spark debate.

While some recent critics have picked up on the comedic undertones of these readings, many end up arguing for a demonic interpretation of Fedallah in much the same style as Stubb or Ishmael. In his influential 1956 book, *Ishmael*, James Baird is initially

perceptive when he notices the stock quality of the Parsee's Oriental image: "The aboriginalness of Fedallah is archetypal" (281). Although he mentions this aspect of Ishmael's stylized description, Baird does not pick up on the comic absurdity of the overtly dramatic adherence to stereotype, and continues to see Fedallah as an evil "force of destruction" (280). Baird imagines the Parsee as an opponent of all good forces with the same kind of theatricality that is present in Ishmael's first portrait of Fedallah. Baird claims that the fire that Fedallah worships "is of hell itself, the fire of destruction existing in the universe of God" (280). Heavily invested in Christian symbolism, Baird assumes that the Parsee's evil tendencies are apparent enough considering he "is wont to watch by night instead of day" (Baird, 281). Baird also chooses to see Fedallah as an estranged member of the crew, and one who is forever separated from the other whalemens because of his connection to the "vast age" of the Orient, and the "deep, primal" essence of that ancient civilization: "His hostility, his darkness, and mystery, and his isolation from the crew of the ship all prefigure the dark primitive attributes of Fedallah" (282, 281). Baird's fixation with the dark and ancient aspects of Fedallah's personality suggests that he, like Ishmael, is thinking within a set of expectations about the Orient that inevitably colour his reading. The other harpooners, Queequeg, Daggoo and Tashtego all come from indigenous societies that could be viewed as springing from similarly prehistoric civilizations as compared to Fedallah; however, as we have discovered through a historical review of American Orientalism, the idea of an archaic East loomed large in the American imagination. The largely voiceless Oriental then becomes the perfect figure through which to explore the influence of the master narrative, and Baird plays directly into Melville's expectations on this point.

As an Oriental figure, Fedallah is a sitting duck for the interpretive imaginations of the men around him, many of whom, like Stubb, take a comic turn; however, readings of the Parsee take a variety of different shapes, and in chapter 51, “The Spirit Spout,” the mystical side of the Oriental stereotype is invoked when Fedallah is the first man on board to descry the “plumed and glittering” jet that is seen rising from the dark surface of the water, the symbolic mark of a “god uprising from the sea” (*MD*, 192). In *Melville’s Orienda*, Finkelstein approaches the wondrous apparition of the spout without any sense of reverence, derisively calling it “a symbol of delusion” (224). In taking this route, Finkelstein is not only erasing the magic of the moment, but she is also discrediting the importance of the mystery itself, touching both Fedallah and the spout. At the very least, Melville places Fedallah at the main mast head when the phantom spout is first seen because the two ghostly images make a wonderfully dramatic pair:

You may think with what emotions, then, the seamen beheld this old Oriental perched aloft at such unusual hours; his turban and the moon, companions in one sky...when, after all this silence, his unearthly voice was heard announcing that silvery, moon-lit jet, every reclining mariner started to his feet as if some winged spirit had lighted in the rigging, and hailed the mortal crew. “There she blows!” Had the trump of judgment blown, they could not have quivered more. (*MD*, 192)

This passage is not only one of the most beautiful examples of the lyricism of Melville’s prose, but the exegetical act is also invoked as the waves “rol[l] by like scrolls of silver,” beckoning the curious sailors to impart a reading (*MD*, 192). Pardes emphasizes the importance of the act of interpretation in “The Spirit Spout” when she calls it a “dreamy

exegetical scene” and positions Fedallah as the “privileged exegetical guid[e]” of the Orient: “True or false, there is magic in Fedallah that inspires Ishmael to merge his own gaze with that of the old Parsee” (88, 89). However, Ishmael and Fedallah are not the only ones doing the reading in this chapter. Because he is positioned at the summit of the ship, Fedallah and the spout are bound together in the interpretive imaginations of the crew, and the Parsee is automatically invested with a mysterious symbolical weight that extends well beyond the simple fact that he is often “wont to mount to the main-mast head, and stand a look-out there” at night (*MD*, 192). Not surprisingly, the process of reading is widespread where the Parsee is present, and hand in hand with the magic of the spectacle, the sailors assign Fedallah a familiar Christian role to play in *their* apocalyptic drama. For the sailors on board the *Pequod*, Fedallah and the spirit spout simultaneously invoke feelings of wonder and foreboding, and in many ways, this kind of unsettled emotion is derived directly from the paradoxical advent of the apocalypse. While Fedallah’s call is delivered with all of the fantastic mystery and beauty of the moment, it is also coupled with an equally compelling sense of disaster. In the Christian world of the sailors, “the trump of judgment” arouses fears of destruction that are wed forever to imaginings of salvation, and just as the spirit spout can signify the generosity and richness of the natural world, so it can also signify destruction (*MD*, 192). In a gesture that is part habitual, part mystical, Fedallah climbs the masthead and descends the spout. By interpreting this simple and otherwise ordinary act as an indication of an unworldly power, the crew assigns Fedallah the role of prophet on the *Pequod*; yet, this act of reading is only performed in reference to a Christian narrative, and the Zoroastrian Parsee cuts a strange figure as he heralds the apocalypse of the Western world. Considering that

the Millerites of the 1830s viewed the Orient as an impediment to the coming apocalypse, not the force ushering it in, Melville must have been aware of the irony involved in the crew's willingness to attach Fedallah to an Adventist mission. It is also essential to notice the way that the minds of the sailors fall, almost involuntarily, towards a reading of Fedallah that is drawn out of a common narrative. As we saw with Ishmael in the chapel, the apocalyptic narrative was so readily accessible that the interpretive imagination of the average nineteenth-century reader could move into it almost automatically. On one level, the sailors ironically read a Zoroastrian fire-worshipper into their Christian storyline, and on another level, we watch the sailors commit this act of interpretation with an awareness of both the narrative that they rely on — the biblical description of the apocalypse — and one that they are inverting — the Oriental figure as impediment to that apocalypse. The fact that this reading contains an ironic reversal of the familiar apocalyptic story only heightens the sense that Melville is operating on a variety of narrative levels, and that Fedallah's status as a figure of the East calls attention to the process of reading both inside and outside of the text.

The already intricate reading of Fedallah as a positive prophet of the apocalypse in "The Spirit Spout" is further complicated by the religious uncertainty of the crew. Melville calls this apprehensive tendency among the seamen the "immemorial superstition of their race," and the men on board the *Pequod* are burdened by these "temporary apprehensions, so vague but so awful" that accompany the "preternaturalness" of the lone spout (*MD*, 193). For the sailors, these doubts are encapsulated by the apocalypse, as the light and salvation of the promised Kingdom of Christ is compromised by the destruction and potential desolation that such an end might

bring. As a vessel, the *Pequod* acts as a kind of holding pen for the ill-fated sailors, and the sea-ravens that follow the ship signal its damnation: “And every morning, perched on our stays, rows of these birds were seen; and spite of our hootings, for a long time obstinately clung to the hemp, as though they deemed our ship some drifting, uninhabited craft; a thing appointed to desolation, and therefore fit roosting-place for their homeless selves” (*MD*, 193). The idea of the apocalypse straddles this space between life and death, and while watching for the spirit spout, Ahab embodies these opposing elements: “While his one live leg made lively echoes along the deck, every stroke of his dead limb sounded like a coffin-tap. On life and death this old man walked” (*MD*, 192). Everything in “The Spirit Spout” chapter balances on this precipitous edge. From the serene “blue blandness” of the ocean’s surface to the “devilish charm” that lurks beneath it, the doubts and apprehensions of the crew haunt this chapter, as assumptions of benign outward appearance are accompanied by fears of malevolent inward intent (*MD*, 193). It is no wonder then that the Parsee, like the sea and the spout, serves as another vehicle through which these apprehensions take shape.

Although many critics think of Fedallah as an essentially evil force, or as a deceiver in league with the devil, Melville may have also entertained the idea of positioning the Parsee as a false, but divinely sanctioned prophet. In the Book of Kings, a false prophet is commissioned by God to perform the deception that leads Ahab to his death: “I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left. And the LORD said, ‘Who will lure Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?’” (1Kings 22. 19). When a willing “lying spirit” steps forth, God’s sham is uncomfortably clear: “‘You will succeed in luring him,’ said the LORD.

‘Go and do it’” (1 Kings 22. 22). This story may explain the way that the sailors attach a sense of duplicity to both Fedallah and the spout: “For a time, there reigned, too, a sense of peculiar dread at this flitting apparition, as if it were treacherously beckoning us on and on, in order that the monster might turn round upon us, and rend us at last in the remotest and most savage seas” (*MD*, 193). In the end, all of these interpretive elaborations and threads of imagination are wound up in the Oriental figure of the Parsee. For the crew and the critic, Fedallah’s characterization invites the application of these different Oriental and biblical storylines: the cunning devil, the ancient spiritual guru, the supernatural shadow, and even the divinely sanctioned false prophet. Melville constructs a largely voiceless Fedallah with these stock narratives in mind, and deliberately places him in a book that constantly enacts and reflects on the process of reading. “The Spirit Spout” is a chapter about magic, interpretation, doubt and desolation, and the Parsee is there to embody, deepen and enhance the resonance of these themes. While the virtual silence of Fedallah consistently frustrates any stable interpretation of his meaning or purpose, it is clear that the Parsee is meant to catalyze and enrich the mechanism of reading in *Moby-Dick* for characters and critics alike.

While Ishmael and Stubb impose the demonic component of the Oriental stereotype onto Fedallah, “The Spirit Spout” chapter also introduces the idea of the East as an immeasurable and mysterious land, an association that was prominent in the minds of nineteenth-century Americans. If we are to understand the role that the Parsee plays in *Moby-Dick*, it is essential that we recognize the pull that the Oriental world maintained over the popular imagination. Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Melville draws connections

between the East and the unknown, and for the ambitious whalers of the nineteenth century, these distant shores symbolized a new frontier for the restless American spirit. In one example, Melville captures the persistence of this attraction towards the unknown in Captain Bildad, an old Quaker who struggles to detach himself from the *Pequod*, and the wonders of the whaling voyage: “poor old Bildad lingered long; paced the deck with anxious strides...looked towards the wide and endless waters, only bounded by the far-off unseen Eastern Continents” (*MD*, 95). Along with this sense that the East represents a new frontier for American exploration comes the idea that Oriental cultures naturally embrace the mystery that defines their land, and come to embody that mysticism as a people. When discussing the riddled and indecipherable brow of the sperm whale, Ishmael speculates, “had the great Sperm Whale been known to the young Orient World, he would have been deified by their child-magian thoughts” (*MD*, 274). Indeed, the unimaginable power of the sperm whale is often spoken of in terms of a vast and unimaginable East. Any attempt to sketch a whale “so far as picturesqueness of effect is concerned, is about tantamount to sketching the profile of a pyramid,” and such a gesture produces only a “mechanical outline of things,” or a vacant representation of the true form (*MD*, 220). Like Fedallah, the whale is invested with this sense of Oriental wonder, and although both are ultimately unreadable, Melville approaches the unknown with awe and respect. The idea of a vast and mysterious Orient is essential to Fedallah’s characterization, and a key component to the inaccessible depth that Melville imagined his Parsee to possess. In the nineteenth century, the draw of the East was a powerful one, and writers often indulged in the sense that the Orient maintained a kind of gravitational pull over the artistic imagination. Nathaniel Hawthorne expressed “a strange longing to

see the Pyramids...Persia and Arabia and all the gorgeous East,” and Melville himself must have felt that same “strange longing” when he travelled to the Holy Land in 1856, and published *Clarel* almost two decades later in 1876 (Hawthorne qtd. in Finkelstein, 16). Melville was not only cognizant of the wider cultural attraction to an unimaginable East, but he also must have felt the pull of the Orient on a personal level. In *Moby-Dick*, Fedallah embodies this enduring attraction towards the East, and although his presence on board the *Pequod* both invites and frustrates any sure interpretation, the mystery persists as consistently as the character himself.

As a figure of the Orient, Fedallah is invested with a sense of wonder and awe that grows out of the inaccessible aspects of his nature, and although he is subjected to a number of readings, it is understood that these interpretive efforts only succeed in scratching the surface. From the outset, the Oriental boat crew is historically and geographically dislocated from the reader, and Ishmael traces them to “those insulated, immemorial, unalterable countries, which even in these modern days still preserve much of the ghostly aboriginalness of earth’s primal generations” (*MD*, 191). Melville makes a point of emphasizing the interpretive uncertainty around Fedallah by consistently reminding the reader that his true essence is ultimately inaccessible. While all readers, inside and outside of the book, are continually attracted to the Oriental boatman, a reminder of the weight and presence of the mystery accompanies every moment that Fedallah is mentioned:

And Ahab so chanced to stand, that the Parsee occupied his shadow;  
while, if the Parsee’s shadow was there at all it seemed only to blend with,

and lengthen Ahab's. As the crew toiled on, Laplandish speculations were bandied among them, concerning all these passing things. (*MD*, 261)

Despite Isani's attempt to think of Fedallah as the champion of a particular Zoroastrian cause, the Parsee's religious sentiments are also left unknown, and although he is often seen in a position of prayer, the motivation behind this action is ultimately ambiguous: "the Parsee passed silently, and bowing over his head towards the fire, seemed invoking some curse or some blessing on the toil" (*MD*, 371). When the narrative voice does venture to offer some interpretation of Fedallah's intentions, the conclusion is always qualified by the word "seemed": "As the frantic old man thus spoke and thus trampled with his live and dead feet, a sneering triumph that seemed meant for Ahab, and a fatalistic despair that seemed meant for himself—these passed over the mute, motionless Parsee's face" (*MD*, 378). And so, as an Oriental figure, Fedallah is a marooned man, largely inaccessible to the Western mind, but left open to the erroneous application of numerous master narratives. As a writer, Melville must have felt culturally and historically distanced from Fedallah himself, having only the popular stereotypes of his time to furnish his characterization, while maintaining an acute awareness of the limitations associated with this kind of reading. Like many of his contemporaries, Melville indulges in the magic and mystery of the Orient to a certain extent; yet, the romantic impulse is simultaneously checked by a modest recognition of the limit of human knowledge, and it is this conscious approach to the romanticism of his time that informs Fedallah's particular Oriental characterization.

As we have seen, Melville goes to great lengths to emphasize the inaccessible aspects of Fedallah; yet, despite repeated indications that Fedallah is ultimately cut off from the reader, this detachment is not absolute. In fact, there are moments throughout *Moby-Dick* in which Fedallah emerges not as a distant and mysterious figure of the Orient, but as a man. At the end of chapter 50, “Ahab’s Boat and Crew: Fedallah,” the phantom-like description of the ancient East is followed by an unexpected allusion to the Book of Genesis, which connects all men, including Fedallah, together under a shared ancestry:

when the memory of the first man was a distinct recollection, and all men descendants, unknowing whence he came, eyed each other as real phantoms, and asked of the sun and the moon why they were created and to what end; when though, according to Genesis, the angels indeed consorted with the daughters of men, the devils also, add the uncanonical Rabbins, indulged in mundane amours. (*MD*, 191)

In this context, the foreignness of Fedallah is diminished, and Melville’s decision to use Genesis to prove a common brotherhood is an interesting choice in light of the Christian effort to demonize and other the Orient in popular American thought. While Melville does not ignore the natural reaction to the unknown, and notes that the first descendants “eyed each other as real phantoms” just as the crew eyes Fedallah, this comparison only works to deepen the likeness among men. It is this common humanity that links Fedallah’s Oriental roots to the origins of the Christian world, and under which all pretense of otherness dissolves. This familial attachment to the ancient world also emerges in chapter 41, “Moby-Dick,” before Fedallah appears on deck. In one of

Melville's most poetic chapters, the narrator draws the "nobler, sadder souls" down into the depths of the Hotel de Cluny, where the ancient king sits "an antique buried beneath antiquities" with "the piled entablatures of ages" heaped upon his "frozen brow" (*MD*, 157). In the face of that king, the viewer can see a common humanity: "A family likeness! aye, he did beget ye, ye young exiled royalties; and from your grim sire only will the old state secret come" (*MD*, 157). In these moments, the great, endless mystery of mankind is not deflated or debunked; rather, the searchers are united within it. Melville traces this yearning for meaning as a kind of essential lineage that expands backwards through time, and Fedallah and his boat crew are necessarily integrated within it.

Although Fedallah impresses a sense of the unworldly upon his readers, he is nonetheless in tune with the mortal happenings of the *Pequod*, and is present on the basic level of the questing narrative. However inaccessible he may seem to the reader, in many ways, Fedallah is not estranged from the stories of the men around him, or from the larger story of *Moby-Dick*. In fact, he is often seen participating in the same quest for meaning that drives his captain and shipmates. For the majority of the characters on board the *Pequod*, the longing is the same: just as Ishmael escapes suicide on shore to find a more meaningful expression of life, so his companion, Queequeg, is physically marked with "a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" drawn by "a departed prophet and seer of his island" (*MD*, 366). Just as Queequeg attempts to read the patterns inscribed onto his own body, so the Parsee is seen "calmly eying the right whale's head, and ever and anon glancing from the deep wrinkles there to the lines in his own hand" (*MD*, 261). The brow of the sperm whale is "nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles" that cannot be

translated to bring any discernable meaning for the viewer; instead, it rests, impenetrable, in a vast “pyramidal silence” (274). Fedallah’s attempt to read the brow is just as impossible for him as it is for anyone else; however, it is the attempt to interpret, and to engage with the unknown on a personal level, which places Fedallah in step with the men around him. Ahab frequently expresses his personal frustration with the tantalizing but unreadable script of the universe, and while watching Queequeg’s attempt to carve the message of his tattoo onto the coffin lid, Ahab lashes out against the prospect of a cruel and enigmatic universe: “Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold...whose mysteries not even himself could read...And this thought it must have been which suggested to Ahab that wild exclamation of his, when one morning turning away from surveying poor Queequeg—‘Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!’” (367). Fedallah may not vocalize his efforts or his frustrations as openly as Ahab, but the fact that he is attempting to read his own palm in tandem with the brow would suggest that he is searching for some kind of interpretive key. As Ishmael tells us, the mystery of Fedallah is ultimately “muffled,” and the voice behind the figure remains unheard; yet the persistent desire to discover a meaningful explanation of human existence is woven into the hermeneutic fabric of the *Pequod*, and Fedallah, whatever his motive, shares in this pursuit.

Fedallah also contributes to the collection of interpretations that are imposed upon the doubloon in chapter 99. Spied by Stubb in a Shakespearean eavesdropping scene, Fedallah approaches the doubloon to attempt a reading: “here comes that ghost-devil, Fedallah; tail coiled out of sight as usual, oakum in the toes of his pumps as usual. What does he say, with that look of his? Ah, only makes a sign to the sign and bows himself;

there is a sun on the coin—fire worshipper, depend on it” (*MD*, 335). Not surprisingly, Stubb imposes a folkloric demonism onto Fedallah’s interaction with the coin; yet, this voiceless interchange is just as cryptic as Queequeg’s before him, who is seen “comparing notes” while he looks from his tattoos to the doubloon for some likeness (*MD*, 335). Due in large part to the influence of Stubb’s commentary, Fedallah’s interaction with the doubloon is often interpreted as a gesture of religious, or “ritualistic” significance (Isani, 392). While Fedallah’s reverence for the sun is demonstrated on a number of occasions, it is more important to note that this chapter is buzzing with interpretations, and that the Parsee is an active participant in the process. Pardes comments on the interpretive intricacy of this scene, and calls our attention to the way that Melville works on a number of narrative levels to highlight the act of reading as it is taking place:

This is one of the most palpable poetic-hermeneutic moments in *Moby-Dick*, not only because it displays the unending routes of exegesis through the rapid transitions from one beholder to another, but also because Ishmael moves from commentary on the exegetical excursions of different crew members to a reflection on Stubb’s commentary on the other commentators. (199)

As we have seen with Ishmael’s description of Fedallah, Melville is intensely conscious of the way that interpreters can attach a figurative meaning to an object. In chapters like “The Doubloon,” this process takes shape alongside Melville’s recognition that the interpretive impulse is an understandable reaction to the human experience, and that although many men, such as Stubb, err quite dramatically in this pursuit, it is nonetheless

a shared venture. Pip knowingly philosophizes on this universal, but futile search for meaning among men in his closing song: “I, you, and he; and we, ye, and they, are all bats” (*MD*, 335). Like most men who go to sea, Fedallah is keenly searching for a sign that indicates the wishes of a greater, governing power, and Melville makes a point of aligning the Parsee within the structure of this narrative.

As the principal seer and pilot of Ahab, Fedallah exists at the heart of a wide collection of prophets in *Moby-Dick*. Although some examples of prophetic insight act as outlets for religious parody, the idea of the prophet is not to be dismissed as an expression of irreverence or skepticism. However, critics have continued to think of the Parsee as estranged from the rest of the book, and not surprisingly, most have read Fedallah’s prophecy in “The Whale Watch” chapter as the most obvious indication of his Mephistophelean persona. In *A Reading of Moby-Dick*, M.O. Percival refers to Mephistopheles as the “Lying Spirit,” and uses this comparison to confirm the evil impetus behind Fedallah’s prophecies: “As doubt...it entered into Faust; and as doubt, engendering denial and deceit, it entered into the mind of Ahab. Of this seducing spirit the Parsee is the temporary vehicle” (79). The foreignness of Fedallah’s prophecy also causes Wright to dismiss him from the established group of Christian prophets that pop in and out of the larger narrative: “All but Fedallah are verbally connected with some Old Testament prophet or prophecy” (79). In fact, Wright states, “His actual prophecy...sounds less like an echo of the Bible than of *Macbeth*, with Birnam Wood moving to Dunsinane” (65). Indeed, the moment of Fedallah’s prophecy is accompanied by the same strangeness as Macbeth’s encounter with the Weird Sisters on the heath, and Ahab’s haughty reaction to the forewarnings is further evidence of Melville’s

Shakespearean inspiration. When Fedallah, Ahab, and the rest of the “dusky phantoms” are stranded overnight in a small whaleboat in order to keep a morbid watch on a dead whale, Ahab is reminded of the Parsee’s prediction in a dream. Just like Macbeth, Ahab invites these prophecies upon himself, prompting Fedallah to provide an interpretation: “Started from his slumbers, Ahab, face to face, saw the Parsee... ‘I have dreamed it again,’ said he” (*MD*, 377). When Fedallah pronounces, “Hemp only can kill thee,” the erring captain misreads the prophecy, taking it as a confirmation of his triumph over Moby Dick: “‘The gallows, ye mean. — I am immortal then, on land and on sea,’ cried Ahab, with a laugh of derision; — ‘Immortal on land and on sea!’” (*MD*, 377). Because of Ahab’s tragic misinterpretation of the prophecy, critics have wrongly deposited blame onto Fedallah in order to continue the familiar style of scapegoating that Leroux exposes in his article, “Wars for Oil.” This constant impulse to assign guilt to Fedallah should be reassessed in light of Melville’s allusion to *Macbeth*, which shifts the focus from the actual prophecy, onto Ahab’s misreading of it. In fact, these last moments of dialogue between the captain and the Parsee do not invoke feelings of malice or trickery, but rather of desperation and sadness. If the reader is willing to think of Fedallah as a character of some emotional and intellectual depth, the prediction of his own death as linked with Ahab’s appears as a kind of tragedy in and of itself. For Ahab, these final moments prove that he is not only vulnerable to the influence of a prophetic narrative that offers to map out his role in coming events, but also that he is liable to misread the signs that he is given. Here, the reality of Ahab’s longing for a meaningful narrative is at its height, and again it is the interpretive impulse that defines this moment. While many critics, along with Ahab, are convinced that the details of Fedallah’s prophecy are carried out with

perfect accuracy in the following events, it is also useful to remember that in *Moby-Dick* it is the *reader* who is at the centre of an interpretation, not the sign itself. For example, it is Stubb's deep adherence to folklore that gives him the confidence to proclaim that Fedallah has a tail, and this assumption is derived from a popular narrative that is outside of the subject and has no real resonance for Fedallah as an individual. Instead, it is the person deriving the interpretation — Stubb or Ahab — who matters, and in this context, it is inevitable that Ahab, who we know to be fond of symbolical reading, will interpret the events of the three-day chase along the lines of the prophecy that has been personally delivered to him. Although critics have often looked to this moment to confirm Fedallah's demonism, in the end, this chapter tells us more about Ahab's personal tragedy than it does about Fedallah's secret motives. In fact, Melville keeps the Parsee's intentions hidden in order to maintain the sense of mystery that accompanies his Oriental characterization. As we have seen, Fedallah's presence on board the *Pequod* serves as a constant reminder of the unknown, and Melville preserves this sense of the inscrutable in Fedallah just as consistently as he maintains a sense of reverence for the great whale. Although the mystery of Fedallah's motives must remain forever "muffled," it is clear that the Parsee is a multi-dimensional character (*MD*, 191). One aspect of this characterization is imbued with a historical and cultural depth befitting an Oriental world that Melville regarded with a mixture of modest veneration and uncontainable curiosity. The other integrates the culturally estranged Fedallah into the communal world of sign and interpretation that drives the *Pequod* onwards, ultimately incorporating the Parsee into the hermeneutic fabric that defines *Moby-Dick*.

## Chapter 5      Conclusion

In the final, momentous encounter between Ahab and the whale, Fedallah not only maintains a significant presence as Ahab's right hand man, but a battle with the white whale also brings him to his death. While Fedallah's exegetical relationship to Ahab brings him into the main action of the book, the expressive, lyrical quality of Melville's prose also lends depth and pathos to the Parsee's end, making Fedallah's final appearance in the text both horrific and distinctly human. After the first encounter of what becomes a three-day battle with the white whale, Ahab is left a broken man:

Dragged into Stubb's boat with blood-shot, blinded eyes, the white brine caking his wrinkles; the long tension of Ahab's bodily strength did crack, and helplessly he yielded to his body's doom: for a time, lying all crushed in the bottom of Stubb's boat, like one trodden under foot of herds of elephants. Far inland, nameless wails came from him, as desolate sounds from out ravines. (*MD*, 411)

The pathos in this moment is almost overwhelming, and the lyricism of Melville's prose brings the tragedy of Ahab's quest to its peak. As the most desperate and determined reader on board the *Pequod*, Ahab's relentless search for a meaningful narrative is as heart wrenching as it is terrifying. Ahab is also the only character in the book to be accompanied by a personal prophet, giving the captain's prominence as a reader in the text added significance. As we have seen, Melville links Ahab and Fedallah together as readers in order to emphasize the interpretive act up until the last disastrous moments of *Moby-Dick*; however, this crucial relationship between the two men also resonates on an

emotional level, and when Fedallah goes missing, Ahab begins to shout frantically, revisiting the details of the Parsee's prophecy out loud: "The Parsee — the Parsee! — gone, gone? And he was to go before: — but still to be seen again ere I could perish" (*MD*, 419). When Ahab finally sees Fedallah's torn body on the sea, he is struck by the dramatic realization that his own death will soon follow: "Befooled, befooled! — drawing in a long lean breath — 'Aye, Parsee! I see thee again. — Aye, and thou goest before; and this, *this* then is the second hearse that thou didst promise'" (*MD*, 423, emphasis original). Although the inaccessible interiority of the Parsee hinders the reader from drawing any specific conclusions about the emotional bond between Ahab and Fedallah, they are nonetheless tied together in life and in death, and the pathos that surrounds the demise of Ahab naturally extends to the Parsee as well. After the first day of the chase, Ahab lies in the bottom of Stubb's boat, beaten and damaged. The final description of Fedallah's broken body, after the whale has tossed it mercilessly about, is equally horrific:

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

This last glimpse of Fedallah's mutilated corpse is undoubtedly disturbing. The Parsee's death is remarkable not only for its brutality, but also for the intense, corporeal details that accompany it. The "half-torn" and "distended" remnants of the Parsee's form bring sure physicality to a man who has often been labeled as a shadowy figure of no substance

or feeling, and the striking reality of this death confirms Fedallah's position as a member of the mortal crew. While the details of the emotional relationship between Ahab and Fedallah remain murky, these two figures are undoubtedly linked, and while the pathos of Ahab's tragedy looms large, the wrecked body of the fallen Parsee is also accompanied by an acute sense of calamity that is both disastrous and distinctly human.

For many critics, an enigmatic Oriental boatman has no place in the monumental pages of *Moby-Dick*. Yet, a closer look at this figure reveals a characterization that is much more complex than previous critical work indicates. On one level, Fedallah's presence furthers a criticism of wider reading practices, as Melville uses the Oriental narrative to elicit and then expose erroneous readings that rely on a master narrative to frame an interpretation. Often, Melville communicates this criticism through humor, giving his more comedic characters like Stubb the opportunity to propose ridiculous interpretations of Fedallah, while calling attention to the act of reading as it is taking place. Although Melville criticizes the demonic strand of the Oriental stereotype, it is the mystical aspect of that same narrative that allows him to imagine a great, inaccessible depth in the Parsee that lends further magic and wonderment to the all facets of the inscrutable in *Moby-Dick*. His Oriental identity notwithstanding, Fedallah also participates in the same collective tradition of reading and interpretation that drives the rest of the characters in *Moby-Dick*. As a reader of signs, the Parsee actively engages in a tradition of prophecy and interpretation that constitutes the thematic backbone of the book. "The Whale Watch" confirms Fedallah's participation in the wider world of prophetic insight, and although the Parsee's predictions seem specific when compared to the ranging forecasts of a wild Gabriel, or the vague hints of doom from an ineffectual

Elijah, all of the prophet figures in *Moby-Dick* are approached with a degree of respect that Melville extends in a gesture of understanding for the interpretive impulse. It is this impulse that binds the men of *Moby-Dick* together, and it is within this framework of reading and interpretation that the Parsee can be reimagined and read as Melville intended.

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