

THE BINDING OF ISHMAEL: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND
TRAGEDY IN *MOBY-DICK*

by

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ABSTRACT

Since its publication in 1851, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* has been difficult to pin down in any formal sense. The book's experimental style, which seems to violate literary conventions through Ishmael's immediate presence and subsequent "disappearance" in the Ahab drama, constitutes a significant problem for generic classification. While many critics have noted that the dual-structure of the work is divided largely between personal narration and tragedy, little has been said of their interaction. This dissertation attempts to elucidate the narrative's continuity, and understand the effect achieved through the interaction of the novel's primary generic forms: autobiography and tragedy. Ishmael's recreation of Ahab's quest through the conventions of tragedy helps to clarify his peculiar relationship to Ahab. Though not at all a mere "narrative device," Ishmael is also not to be understood as a "narrator hero" either. The interaction between autobiography and tragedy illuminates Ishmael's function as a choric witness to Ahab above all.

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I would like to thank several friends for conversations along the way, especially Mark Dance, Tristan Gray, and Mark Burke (who had the questionable fortune of sharing an office with me). Mark Dance helped me to realize how important Gadamer was to what I was trying to articulate, and also the continuity between this current study and my earlier graduate work. A conversation we had at the end of one summer helped me immeasurably—and not just in an academic sense. Tristan Gray and I have thought together now for over a decade; he made me reflect more on Nietzsche's view of tragedy, a project that still requires more thinking. Mark Burke and I co-taught a class on "Kant and Radical Evil" in the fall of 2013, boldly (or foolishly) including *Moby-Dick* on the syllabus; the conversations and questions that emerged from this class were of great significance to me personally.

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Chapter One: Introduction

If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what then would life be but despair? If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim, if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches—how empty and devoid of comfort would life be! But for that reason it is not so, and as God created man and woman, so too he shaped the hero and the poet or speech-maker.
—Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (49)

At times, Herman Melville's lively and contemplative whaling voyage, *Moby-Dick*, can be a rough ride. Since its publication in 1851, certain readers have attested to a kind of sea-sickness experienced over the course of the narrative. Most of these complaints find their source in Ishmael's voice and how it operates within the text. It is nothing new to note that Ishmael's voice is at once wandering, fluid, analytical, and poetic, or to point out the way in which the story it relates seems to be interrupted with everything from stage directions to cetology, drama and action. One early anonymous review finds the narrative an "ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact" ("An Ill-Compounded Mixture" 597); another remarks that the author "spreads his subject out beyond all reasonable bounds" ("Too Much for Our Money" 613). More recently, Glauco Cambon has phrased the problem in terms of "repeated modal shifts [that] make for an instability of point of view which prompts some critics to discount Ishmael as a realized and consistent actor-spectator, and to

consider him as a mere narrative device Melville feels free to discard when he sees fit" (517). In this way, interpretations of Ishmael, and ultimately his significance in the story of the White Whale, may have suffered from the demand of a specific kind of coherence. While some have argued that so-called "formal discontinuities" (516) in the narrative are the necessary result of a disjointed writing process on Melville's part, I will show that if properly attended to we can see these shifts as part of Ishmael's act of recollection and coping, and ultimately his attempt to understand Ahab's tragic action. Witnessing this almost incomprehensible act disrupts his very sense of identity and changes him profoundly. Ishmael cannot reconcile his captain's dark vision to his own rational optimism or American worldview. His attempt to interpret himself in the wake of this act is what unities the narrative.

There is general consent in Melville scholarship that *Moby-Dick* consists of two main parts, centered around Ishmael and Ahab respectively. In a way, such an observation is simply one aspect of the larger experience of "discontinuity" in the novel's narration. Yet even from a purely compositional perspective, George Stewart's infamous article "The Two Moby-Dicks" highlights the shifting intentions within the evolution of Melville's whaling book (418). Charles Olson goes so far as to claim that *Moby-Dick* "was two books," that "the first book did not contain Ahab," and that "it may not, except incidentally, have contained Moby-Dick" (34). Implicit in Olson's claim is that *Moby-Dick* began as a travel narrative which drew upon Melville's own experience in the way that his *Typee* and *Omoo* did. Yet for both Olson and Stewart, this initial whaling story was interrupted; and what it was interrupted by was nothing less than Melville's own deep encounter with

Shakespeare during the so-called “pivotal summer of 1850” (McSweeney 15). As F.O. Matthiessen contends, Melville “had just begun to meditate on Shakespeare more creatively than any other American writer ever has. This meditation brought him to his first profound comprehension of the nature of tragedy. This was the charge that released *Moby-Dick*” (17). All of these critics suggest that Melville’s encounter with Shakespearian tragedy resulted in the second part of *Moby-Dick*: the tragedy of Ahab. Such an encounter “raise[d] *Moby-Dick* from a straightforward whaling narrative into an epic tragedy” (16). There are powerful textual reasons, and compelling biographical evidence, for thinking about Melville’s act of composition as being divided between autobiographical narrative and tragedy in this way, but understanding what holds these two sides together is another matter. It is my contention that the combination of these two modes is what in large part makes Melville’s whaling voyage such a compelling work of literature.

While many have noticed that the narrative consists of two parts, and that the second part involved a formal shift towards tragedy, perhaps surprisingly, little has been said regarding the interaction of the genres of autobiography and tragedy as a means of explaining the extraordinary effect of Melville’s magnum opus. There are many reasons for this. First, it is no easy matter to establish what I deem “the predominant genres” of the novel, and many regard the work as heterogeneous at best (or a clumsy hodge-podge or “chowder” at worst). Almost all of the early reviews of *Moby-Dick* “grappled with the problem of generic classification” (McSweeney 17). It is certainly not my intention to deny the multiplicity of genres which Melville draws upon, yet in my estimation, larger generic currents can and

should be discerned. I do not propose tackling the question of generic classification for its own sake, however, but rather because obtaining clarity on how the two predominant genres interact proves crucial to situating both Ishmael and Ahab in relation to the whole work. Glauco Cambon captures the rationale for this kind of investigation by pointing out that puzzlement surrounding the novel's classification was actually provoked by Melville in that

he allowed himself the modal discontinuities which seem to crack the unifying frame of first-person narration in the past tense. We can therefore assume that he was deliberately experimenting with his favorite fictional form, and if so, a closer look at the much-discussed masterpiece should yield some clue to the peculiar design he was thus striving to achieve. The imaginative contract he initially undertook to fulfill with his reader might then prove to have been honored in a subtler way than was expected. (517)

Perhaps the most striking moment of the kind of modal discontinuity Cambon describes is when Ahab first truly appears at center stage: *Enter Ahab*. The weathered sea-captain's action is given life through the language of stage directions. This is a moment which "breaks the unifying frame of first person narration," and which, in effect, divides the book two between Ishmael's voyage and Ahab's tragedy.

Thus, analyses that have focused solely on Ishmael's narration or Ahab's tragedy, in my view, fail to do justice to *at least* half the work. For instance, while it is true that a great deal of attention has been given over to the "tragic" in *Moby-Dick* since its publication, even here, "many have labeled *Moby-Dick* as tragedy and as conceived in basically dramatic form. Few [...] have adequately explained what they believe tragedy

to be, particularly Shakespearean tragedy” (Rice 444). On the other hand, a more recent tradition of commentary following Walter Bezanson’s influential essay of 1953, in which he identifies Ishmael as the “real center of meaning and the defining force of the novel” (644), has tended to shift the emphasis away from Ahab's tragedy towards the significance of Ishmael and his function in the work. While there is real value in this critical development, prioritizing Ishmael’s narration to the point where the tragic core of the work is lost is a significant danger. For example, the current tendency to designate Ishmael as the “hero” of the work (which often depends on delineating certain “crucial differences” between Ishmael and Ahab) is just one way in which these sorts of interpretations overlook the sense in which Ishmael’s narrative revolves around tragedy.

A curious footnote in Beongcheon Yu's influential article "Ishmael's Equal Eye" reveals that "Melville jotted 'Goethe's Autobiography' and 'Eschylus Tragedies' on the flyleaf of his Shakespeare volume" (111). Yu draws a great deal of significance from this inscription—perhaps more than is warranted for what could only be called a scrawling—nevertheless, this odd note merits consideration if simply because of how crucial Shakespeare was to Melville's revision and re-writing of *Moby-Dick*. Yu asserts, "It is more than probable that in *Moby-Dick* Melville attempted a concoction of Goethe's Autobiography (Ishmael's whaling voyage) and Aeschylus' Prometheus (the Ahab tragedy)" (111). Perhaps more important to notice here is the convergence of autobiography and tragedy than the specifics of Goethe and Aeschylus. For his part, Yu supposes that Prometheus Bound is specifically what Melville has in mind when he writes "Eschylus Tragedies," but while there are certain strong sympathies between the figure of Ahab and Prometheus, it is far from clear that this type of specificity is what

Melville had in mind. More productive perhaps would be to note that, according to Aristotle, Aeschylus is primarily credited for bringing "the number of actors from one to two" (Aristotle 1449a) thereby allowing for conflict between them and transforming the nature of tragedy (before the character interacted only with the chorus). Similarly, Yu draws on the first words of Goethe's autobiography, saying that Goethe's allusion to astrology and the planets finds a correlate in "Ishmael's penchant towards symbolism" (112). Yet this remark is both puzzling and restrictive when the opening of Goethe's autobiography seems so clearly concerned with the endeavor of autobiography itself. Goethe relates the position of the stars on the day of his birth not because of any particular belief in astrological omens, but to bring out the manner in which the individual is brought into a world where much greater forces are at play. This is a world where influences far beyond our control actively shape us from the moment of birth. While I want to make these more specific remarks in a tentative manner, it is intriguing that in this integration of forms we have Melville perhaps thinking of a sense of autobiography that acknowledges the deeper currents and shaping forces outside of the self, while also thinking of a sense of tragedy that possesses multiple perspectives.

This exploration will argue that *Moby-Dick* is best understood as a synthesis of tragedy and autobiographical narrative. Again, certainly it is the case that Melville mixes many literary forms in his whaling book, yet tragedy and autobiography not only correspond to the fundamental representations of Ahab and Ishmael, but also account for the decisive shift in the narrative's focus (which moves from Ishmael to Ahab). It will be my claim that Ishmael's autobiography becomes the tragic chorus of Ahab, and that Ishmael's role as witness is essential to understanding the effect of Ahab's singular

action. Melville prepares the reader to witness Ahab's tragedy by acquainting us first with Ishmael and his peculiar openness and receptivity of the world. This open comportment, which is manifest in Ishmael's scrutinizing inner-dialogue, is the condition for his deep engagement with Ahab's inner-life and his implacable mission.

Understanding why Ishmael recreates his encounter with Ahab through the conventions of tragedy helps to illuminate both what is great in Ahab, and also his inevitable fall; it is a key to explaining Ishmael's bizarre fixation with his captain's quest and its questions.

The early chapters relate Ishmael's character and *his* journey above all. In "Loomings" we find an Ishmael not only in the act of recollection, but attempting to re-live his experience through vividly picturing the world around him. This is indeed the "whaling voyage by one Ishmael" (22) that he imagines in between headlines transmitting war, politics, and much larger currents and forces at work in his world. We embark, then, anchored in the personal with Ishmael's autobiographical recollection, which fuses memory and self-interpretation as Ishmael ties his voyage to his own motives and desires. Ahab, on the other hand, does not begin with this immediacy of presence at all. He creeps slowly into the narrative, first by hints, omens and glimpses, and then by utterings, dreams and drama. The crescendo into the vortex that is "Old Thunder" comes to us through the eyes of Ishmael. And "vortex" does seem to be the right word in this instance, as Ahab's own story contains a center of gravity that pulls Ishmael deeper and deeper into it. Yet through all this, it is only through Ishmael's vision that we witness the Ahab tragedy, which is undoubtedly the "story" of *Moby-Dick*. Thus, Melville acquaints us with the eyes through which we will see the tragic action unfold. In this way, *Moby-Dick* attempts to be both autobiography and tragedy simultaneously. It is through Ishmael's

sensitivity and open comportment that Ahab's greatness finds resonance. Here, Melville gives the hero and the poet to one another. Ishmael cries, "Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must need be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air!" (127). Ishmael's autobiography becomes the tragic chorus of Ahab.

Ishmael experiences both pity and terror in Ahab, and he portrays his captain in precisely these terms. The condition of Ishmael's pity lies in the fact that the questions which Ahab shouts into the storm in some sense seem justified. Ishmael too has a dark inkling that nature might constitute an "inscrutable malice" (140). While he may not be able to understand his captain's identification of all earthly abandonment with the white whale, he cannot shake the sense in which Ahab may have come into contact with vital truth: "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught" (159). Ishmael cannot simply dismiss the questions that Ahab's act has generated or release himself from their obsessive demands. The events of the journey seem both willed and fated, and Ishmael neither wholly justifies nor condemns his captain. Thus, Ishmael understands Ahab's fall as tragic, and is left in a state of wonderment.

The first notable critic to link Ishmael with the tragic chorus was Charles Olson in his poetic commentary *Call me Ishmael* (1947). Here he writes, "[Ishmael] is a chorus through whom Ahab's tragedy is seen" (57). Olson's precise meaning can be difficult to ascertain given the many interpretations of the chorus's significance in Greek tragedy, but his account seems to link Ishmael to a certain notion of catharsis: "Ishmael has that cleansing ubiquity of the chorus in all drama, back to the Greeks" (58). On the most basic

level, the chorus sings the suffering of the tragic hero; it witnesses the arc of a tragic action and responds to it. The only specific thing Aristotle has to say about the chorus in his *Poetics* is that “it should be considered as one of the actors, [as] an [integral] part of the whole [action]” (1456a).¹ In other words, the chorus' speeches should be essentially connected to the tragic action. And while Ishmael begins his story with a focus on his own internal motivations, and by regaling us with his on-shore wanderings, this autobiographical narrative is interrupted by Ahab and transformed in the process. The reason that the narrative's focus shifts so drastically towards Ahab is that *Ishmael now revolves around him*; he has become a witness, and his function as choric spectator has become a fundamental part of his being.

Olson's portrayal of Ishmael as choric voice is challenged by Beongcheon Yu, who groups Olson's reading together with other "disembodied" interpretations of Ishmael in his account of the dual-structure of *Moby-Dick* (110). Yu's interpretation is, to my knowledge, the first definitive attempt to point out how autobiography and tragedy together form the fundamental structure of the work. Having said this, Yu emphasizes the significance of the autobiographical component of Melville's novel mainly to salvage an understanding of Ishmael as a concrete “flesh and blood” agent (110). His conclusion that we should interpret Ishmael above all as a “narrator-hero” (111), however, seems ill-suited to the movement of the narrative itself and depends on a notion of poetic justice that is hard to attribute to Ishmael in the wider context of the work. Thus, I want to build on Yu's initial framing of *Moby-Dick*, but in such a way as to *retrieve* a notion of

¹ Please note that I have elected to use George Whalley's translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, or what Whalley renders "The Poietic Art"; all square brackets in these translations belong to him—and are not my own. However cumbersome his translation may be, it is also rigorous in its attempt to stay as close to the Greek as possible, and thus is vital to my own attempt to articulate the peculiar effect of the Aristotelian sense of tragedy in Melville's work.

Ishmael's choric being through an understanding of his recreation of Ahab's action. The real power of the book stems from its ability to give voice to the power of an individual's subjective encounter with the force of tragedy. It is perhaps in this light that we can understand Ishmael's self-identification as a witness and an orphan—and understand why the story of his life, in its fundamental sense, becomes the story of another's.

I will begin my discussion by reviewing Melville's early writing before *Moby-Dick* and also his reading around the time of its composition. Melville was absorbed with both autobiographical and tragic works, and I suggest that the concerns of these two modes were vividly present to him as he wrote his whaling book. I also consider what Melville might have thought about the intersections between tragedy and "life-as-lived" in an attempt to prepare for an examination of Ishmael's use of personal narration and the tragic form. Next, I interrogate Ishmael's autobiographical consciousness, arguing that Ishmael shows how his finite experience impinges on his own self-understanding. In establishing this movement, the chapter on Ishmael's autobiographical consciousness prompts another that considers the development of a particular pattern of vision by which Ishmael draws attention to his meaningful encounters on shore and establishes the basis for his formal shift towards tragedy. By attending to Ishmael's reconciliation with certain critical experiences, I venture to show how Ahab's tragedy remains irreconcilable to the certainties of the shore from which Ishmael once drew his identity. Ahab's tragedy has serious implications for Ishmael's self-understanding, and the tragedy must be understood to take place within his own act of self-understanding. Thus, Ahab becomes the primary source of "adventure" in Ishmael's life-narrative, and Ishmael represents himself in the end as a witness to Ahab's act.

Chapter Two: Melville's Background: Reading and Writing Experience

"—But I don't know but a book in a man's brain is better off than a book bound in calf—at any rate it is safer from criticism. And taking a book off the brain, is akin to the ticklish and dangerous business of taking an old painting off a panel—you have to scrape off the whole brain in order to get at it with due safety—& even then, the painting may not be worth the trouble"
—Melville, "Letter to Duyckinck 13th December 1850" (117).

While I suspect few would likely ignore Melville's use of the tragic mode to disclose Ahab's action and character, some might feel uneasy regarding my use of "autobiographical" as it relates to Ishmael. After all, Ishmael is not Melville, despite the propensity of many scholars to use the two interchangeably or employ eccentric hyphenated terms like "Melville/Ishmael" in analyses of *Moby-Dick* with little to no explanation. For my part, I agree wholeheartedly with Walter Bezanson's suggestion "that we resist any one-to-one equation of Melville and Ishmael" (647). When I speak of "autobiographical narrative" I mean that *Ishmael* above all endeavors to tell *his* story—and that this story is primarily an act of self-interpretation. That being said, part of my purpose in this commentary is to explain the apparent temptation towards modes of expression that blur the boundaries between Melville and Ishmael. Such an equation of author and narrator is one of the preferred cardinal sins punished in literature departments far and wide, yet there is a peculiar quality to Melville's writing that makes this temptation especially endemic among his commentators. To explain in detail why this is the case will require further comment as I proceed, but to offer one initial clue, we need only turn to Melville's previous work. As Glauco Cambon notes, "Melville had consistently used the autobiographical convention in the five novels that preceded *Moby-*

Dick" (517). Admittedly, Cambon does not clearly define what he means by "autobiographical convention," but it would seem that he is thinking particularly of Melville's consistent use of the first-person past tense as well as his direct use of personal experience in previous sea-stories.

In *Typee*, Melville's protagonist, Tommo, recounts abandoning ship with a comrade and living amongst the Polynesian natives. Here Melville insists in the preface that his story was formed of "events recorded" (xiii), and elaborates:

There are some things related in the narrative which will be sure to appear strange, or perhaps entirely incomprehensible, to the reader; but they cannot appear more so to him than they did to the author at the time. He has stated such matters just as they occurred, and leaves every one to form his own opinion concerning them; trusting that his anxious desire to speak the unvarnished truth will gain for him the confidence of his readers. (xiv)

While it is not at all evident that Melville spoke "the unvarnished truth" in *Typee*—and many of his contemporaries were rather incredulous concerning this point—it is certainly interesting that Melville frames his account as personal reportage with fiction appearing only in a substitution of names. For him, "*Typee* was 'simply a record' [...]. And in the preface to *Omoo*, Melville even more strongly insisted that his book was strictly reportorial: 'if reflections are occasionally indulged in, they are spontaneous, and such as world, very probably, suggest themselves to the most casual observer'" (McSweeney 14). Melville begins his writing career explicitly drawing on personal experience of the exotic and unknown, and affirming that these experiences were recorded in a faithful and trustworthy manner. As will be seen, Ishmael also stresses that he is a witness to "true

events," but while accurate reportage is itself of great import to Ishmael, he also considers the events to be true in a deeper sense.

Where does *Moby-Dick* fit relative to these earlier stories? In a way, Ishmael's loomings sound very similar to the beginning of *Typee*; Melville captures an American coming-of-age in the adventure of going-to-sea, an experience which obviously had left its impact on him as a young man. But as Edward Rosenberry remarks, "*Moby-Dick* was the result of the most productive tension in Melville's artistic career—the tension between the subjective orientation of *Mardi* and the objective orientation of his other four books" (Rosenberry 103). By this Rosenberry means that whereas *Typee* and *Omoo* attempted to transcribe life through the reportage of facts and events, *Mardi* indulged thoughts and reflections which might *not* "suggest themselves to the most casual observer." Or in other words, *Mardi* attempted to explore psychological and philosophical dimensions not ventured (or only implicit) in Melville's earlier work. In this sense, *Mardi* represented a different point of departure, which Melville hints at in his somewhat caustic preface to the book:

Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such; to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity: in some degree the reverse of my previous experience.

(*Mardi* xvii)

Mardi explored a world of concern foreign to *Typee* or *Omoo*, or even Melville's subsequent *Reburn* or *White-Jacket*. *Mardi*, however, was emphatically *not* a critical

success (in no small part due to its subjective orientation and high degree of self-reflexivity); one early commentator captures its singularity in contradistinction to *White-Jacket*, praising the vivid realism of the latter while scorning the abstraction of *Mardi*: “In one he painted visions, in the other he engraves still life. The first is all broad, vague dashes—the second all carefully finished lines. You look at one book, as it were, through a hazy telescope with many colored glasses—at the other, through a carefully cleaned microscope” (“Pristine Powers and Old Extravagance” 621).

Still, it was clear in the years following *Mardi* that despite sharp reviews and flat sales of the book, Melville desperately wished to return to its register. He refers to his *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* as “two jobs [...] done for money—being forced to it as other men are to sawing wood” (*Letters of Herman Melville* 91). And in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne in the spring of 1851, Melville offers a more painful admission: “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches” (128). Melville’s initial impulse in *Typee* was to communicate his own lived experiences and adventures in a direct manner; in *Mardi*, he wanted to do more than record (or even dramatize) such events, and thus attempted his first plunge into a subjective and interior dimension; in *Moby-Dick*, he attempted to do both by pushing beyond the solipsism of earlier protagonists into the soul of *another*. While this sketch of Melville’s early writing unquestionably over-generalizes his development as a writer, it is helpful to see the general bent of this development alongside Melville’s fascination with the foreign and unfamiliar. One can say with some confidence that much of the interest in Melville’s first two works stemmed from the nature of the “events recorded”: a journey traced into a

strange and exotic world. The movement from the familiar and known towards the unknown and unfamiliar occurs in *Moby-Dick* as well, and not simply as a journey to exotic places, but into the thoughts and strange possibilities of other individuals. As one commentator remarks, Ishmael can look similar to Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" in his burning compulsion to relate his story, which in its telling seems to function as a strange sort of exorcism:

[Ishmael writes] to anatomize his own career and exorcise his own peculiar demons. Melville had had plenty of experience with the first-person narrator before *Moby-Dick*; in fact, he had written in no other style; but never before had his self-projecting story-teller relinquished the center of the stage to another personage, real or imagined, and retreated so modestly to the role of observer. (Rosenberry, "Epic Romance" 162)

Thus, if *Moby-Dick* attempted to both record the "facts" and experience of whaling life while exploring the possibilities of the human psyche, there is a different sense in which Melville was attempting to be more "objective":

[He was] grop[ing] for a medium in which to tell the story of another, for he now had in mind an objective rather than a subjective picture of life. The result was partly still the autobiographical and romantic manner familiar to the readers of his earlier tales, but partly also in the manner of great drama. (Myers 21)

Ishmael, unlike his predecessors, is concerned not just to tell his own story, but that of another, a story that lies outside of his initial subjective concern and understanding. Ishmael is concerned not just to recount the events of the Pequod, or even express his

own impressions regarding these events; he is equally fixated on the inner-life of Ahab and particularly the sea-captain's attempts to understand the primordial conditions of existence. In this sense, there is something quite appropriate in the two different uses of "objective" and "subjective" above as it relates to Melville's early writing; together, they capture a conversion in Melville's own understanding of truth. Melville's earlier understanding of the "unvarnished truth" in *Typee* is superseded by his later reflections on truth and Shakespeare in his essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses," which he published during the initial stages of his work on *Moby-Dick*. Melville was now attempting to be faithful to what he called "those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth [...]" those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality" (522). Truth, in this context, is far from a "faithful account of the facts"; truth is dived for, elusive, and only disclosed in glimpses. In the spring of 1849, Melville reveals just how captivating Shakespeare was to him in transmitting these "sermons on the mount" (*Letters* 77), complaining that "every copy [of Shakespeare] that was come-atable to me, happened to be in a vile small print unendurable to my eyes which are tender as young sparrows. But chancing to fall in with this glorious edition, I now exult in it, page after page" (77). Melville was discovering in himself a deep resonance with the Truth that the "Divine William" had to offer, and in turn was feeling that he himself had something to offer. Moreover, judging by the dates of his literary purchases, it is not at all implausible to suggest that Melville "perhaps was reading the Greek dramatists simultaneously with his intensive study of Shakespeare during the winter of 1849" (Robertson 61-2).

From his study of Shakespeare, Parker tells us in his biography of Melville, that "Macbeth and King Lear had been strongly in his mind [by] mid 1851, when he was

completing his whaling book" (2:56). Encountering Shakespeare fundamentally changed the direction of Melville's book. Charles Olson rather bluntly insists that "above all, in the ferment [of its creation], Shakespeare, the cause" (39). Andrew Delbanco explains that "the book had its own plans. It slowed down. Or, rather, it paused before taking off in a new direction" (124). It does seem that Melville is thinking particularly of himself when he asserts in "Hawthorne's Mosses" that "there are minds that have gone as far as Shakespeare into the universe" (523). What is more interesting, however, is that Melville seems to understand himself as engaged in a shared endeavor with Shakespeare—one that evidently involved profound reflection and bottomless depths. He writes, "In Shakespeare's tomb lies infinitely more than Shakespeare ever wrote [...] I magnify Shakespeare [...] not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands" (523). Similarly, he writes to Hawthorne in the spring of 1851: "I read Solomon more and more, and every time see deeper and deeper and unspeakable meanings in him" (*Letters* 130). Melville's engagement with Shakespeare was profound in its intensity and pivotal in that it drastically altered the course of his thinking and work. In this sense, Ishmael's encounter with Ahab can be seen as mirroring a more primordial encounter between Melville and Shakespeare. Melville's task now was to determine "how an American writer could write of real American life with a Shakespearean intensity" (Parker 1:739). Yet book sales had been losing traction since *Typee*, and so far Melville's attempts to fix this had only resulted in "botches." If Melville began *Moby-Dick* in the same manner as *Redburn* or *White-Jacket*, Shakespeare ensured that Truth would trump sales in the end. Melville had to find a way to bear "witness to the

vitality of the tragic vision, which pierces beneath the 'official view' of any culture [...] in what would seem an unlikely time, on unlikely soil, and without benefit of tragic theater or tragic audience" (Sewall 92). Thus, Melville's earlier autobiographical mode, which in a certain sense is the American style par excellence—for is this creative act not the very culmination of the "self-made man"?—was interrupted, or perhaps haunted, by a tragic truth that he had uncovered from the Old World.

Yet while Melville's intense engagement with Shakespeare is commonly cited as decisive in the creation of *Moby-Dick*, some of his other reading during this period is also important, if not documented as well. Melville was not just pouring over Elizabethan drama during the gestation of his whaling book; he seems to have been also fascinated with certain introspective autobiographical works (or works which problematized accounts of self-writing). In 1848, Melville read Montaigne's *Essays*, and not too long after, in 1849, he consumed *Tristram Shandy*, "reveling in its gamesomeness toward the lofty task of bookmaking" (Hayford and Parker 434). After Sterne it was only a matter of days before he read Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, and thereafter Goethe's masterful autobiography, *Poetry and Truth*. This constellation of works features some of the more innovative approaches to autobiography or "self-life-writing"—precisely the kind of writing that Melville himself had been exploring and attempting up to this point. It is important to see that Melville's exploration of this new dimension remained firmly anchored in a first-person account of experience. Ishmael, like his many predecessors begins recounting a sea-voyage. And *Moby-Dick*, for all of its philosophical intricacy, complex allusions and improbable characters, depends significantly on Melville's first-hand whaling experience, cetological studies, and other

“factual” accounts of whaling. In the early stages of composition, Melville first describes the work as “a romance of wild adventure, founded upon certain wild legends of the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries, and illustrated by the author’s own experience, of two years & more, as a harpooner” (*Letters* 109). Additionally J.N Reynolds’ “Mocha Dick” and Owen Chase’s *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex* represent two of the more obvious examples of “true accounts” which Melville employed in forming what might otherwise be deemed an improbable tale.

Both Reynolds and Chase recall encounters with the terrible ferocity of the whale—the very stuff of these wild legends. Chase describes his whale as full of “resentment and fury,” and is adamant that its actions were “calculated to do [...] the most injury” (Chase 570). When Melville finally got his hands on the rare Essex Narrative, he claims that it “had a surprising effect” (“Manuscript Notes on Owen Chase” 572) on him. What fascinated Melville was not simply the malicious agency of the whale, but the aftermath of the shipwreck in which the seamen were forced to resort to cannibalism to survive. Melville was also exceedingly interested in following up on this account; he notes that shortly after the Essex disaster, Captain Pollard experienced another when his next ship “went ashore on unknown rocks, & was dashed to pieces [...] Pollard, it seems, now took the hint, & after reaching home from his second shipwreck, vowed to abide ashore” (573). Melville appears to have reflected deeply on how all of this affected Pollard, later describing him in his notes as “a night-watchman” (573), which he underlined several times. The very mystery and silence of Pollard’s resignation may have been what Melville found so thought provoking. It also seems to be what Melville felt fit to dramatize.

As Ishmael reminds us, “wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories yield no epitaphs” (96). It should strike us as intriguing that Melville’s interest in Pollard seems to accord with his thoughts on Shakespeare’s dramatic genius. Pollard’s silent resignation perhaps marked a mute encounter with what Shakespeare had articulated through the “dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago,” who said things “which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them” (“Mosses” 522). Ishmael uses the conventions of drama to bring Ahab to life, and one of the first things we should notice is that he believes drama is *appropriate* in this context. Indeed, ordinary and everyday waking life furnishes individuals worthy of high drama:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman's arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just spirit of equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God! (103-4)

Here, Melville reveals the more ordinary tragic source upon which everyday life constructs its edifice. Ishmael pleads his case—and invokes his muse—above all suggesting that *this* great task is one for which he requires assistance. The “democratic God” is a peculiar muse, however, and it seems that the tragic vision being painted refers not simply to Ahab, but to the crew as well. Melville, in his attempt to express an

American tragedy, finds deeper possibilities in its democratic spirit: "For I hold it a verity that even Shakespeare, was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant Universe is, or can be? But the Declaration of Independence makes a difference" (*Letters* 80).

Indeed, the Declaration of Independence might make a *number* of differences, but in particular Melville seems to mean that it affords a freedom of expression in the face of prevailing ideology, or what he refers to as "[the] muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethan day" (80). It is interesting that Melville refers to the *soul* as being muzzled, and not simply the voice, perhaps signaling that truth could not only be more fully expressed, but even more fully experienced through the Declaration of Independence. Here, he connects the concerns of tragedy and autobiography in a profound way by linking the legal source of everyday American life with the profundities of Shakespearian tragedy. For Melville, the possibilities of American freedom became attached to a notion of tragic truth that lurks beneath the surface of every human life. He seems adamant that the truths which Shakespeare was permitted to utter were "terrifically true" ("Mosses" 522)—shades of darkness from which ordinary consciousness takes flight. Melville's marginal notes in his Shakespeare indicate such a fixation on the prohibition of truth, for instance, in the overstepping of silence by Enobarbus or the fool's contention in *Lear* that "Truth's a dog that must to kennel!" (1.4.102). Why is truth cast out or made silent? Melville thought that in general our shared human world does not abide in truth, but finds different ways to shelter itself from it. Aristotle suggested that tragedy illuminates certain emotional possibilities that are ignored in everyday life which "lead to the end of recognising at least something about the nature of man, the values that

are paramount, the vulnerable centers that we must at all costs preserve" (Whalley 25). Yet unlike Aristotle, Melville attempted to interrogate the way in which chaos or nothingness might lay at the core of experience through the lives of many different individuals; this truth, as Melville understood it, illuminated a tragic reality above all.

It is perhaps in such a light that D.H. Lawrence wrote of Melville in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*:

Nobody can be more clownish, more clumsy and sentimentously in bad taste, than Herman Melville, even in a great book like *Moby Dick*. [...]The artist was so *much* greater than the man. The man is rather a tiresome New Englander of the ethical mystical-transcendentalist sort: Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, etc. So unrelieved, the solemn ass even in humour. So hopelessly *au grand sérieux*, you feel like saying: Good God, what does it matter? If life is a tragedy, or a farce, or a disaster, or any-thing else, what do I care! Let life be what it likes. Give me a drink, that's what I want just now. (Lawrence 145-6)

Lawrence humorously identifies the grand and tragic design that Melville had imagined for his work. Here, in his high aspirations, Melville seems to be in agreement with what George Whalley would say about the power of tragedy. Whalley claims that what tragedy relates is an action in moral space: "a moral action so subtle, powerful and important that it is almost impossible to delineate [...]; an action self-generated that has as its end a recognition of the nature and destiny of man" (28). Indeed, Melville attempts nothing less than to bring himself before the nature and destiny of man—something which he attempted to do both in his intensive reading of 1850 and in his subsequent writing. In

this way, *Moby-Dick* began "first of all, [as] Ishmael's cultural autobiography, and the Ahab tragedy was added onto this matrix, perhaps consciously at first, and in time grew organically into it" (Yu 111). Thus, thinking about *Moby-Dick* as a cross-pollination between the concerns of autobiography and tragedy is not such a far-fetched suggestion; in fact, it would seem that these two modes were precisely the focus of Melville's reading and writing during the novel's composition. Through Ishmael's subjective consciousness, Melville guides his readers towards a tragic vision: one that he had encountered principally in Shakespeare. Thus, Melville could warn his friend Sarah Morewood, "Don't you buy it—don't you read it [...] A Polar wind blows through it, & birds of prey hover over it" (*Letters* 138). Understanding how the tragic core of the work emerged within the frame of autobiographical narration is crucial to articulating the larger effect of the work. Yet to answer this question we must first endeavor to think through the autobiographical aspect of Ishmael's voice.

Chapter Three: Ishmael's Autobiographical Consciousness

"The power of memory is great, very great, my God. It is a vast and infinite profundity. Who has plumbed its bottom? This power is that of my mind and is a natural endowment, but I myself cannot grasp the totality of what I am."
—Augustine, *Confessions* (10.8.15).

Insofar as the Ahab tragedy is contained within Ishmael's autobiographical recollection, the tragedy remains fundamentally related to Ishmael's experience. Ishmael marks the beginning and the end of the whaling voyage, and all of its events are brought to life through his imaginative recreation. Thus, *Moby-Dick* is not an autobiography in any common sense of the term; indeed, Ishmael is the first-person narrator of a fictional novel. It should be clear that in referring to Ishmael's autobiographical endeavor, any autobiographical theory which insists on an avowedly "real person," or which has reference to an existent author "outside of the text" is not immediately relevant here (however many similarities between Ishmael and Melville there may be). Thus, I certainly do not suggest that we approach Ishmael's story as autobiographical in these narrow terms. Having said all this, Ishmael presents himself as absorbed in the very task of "bookmaking." The manner in which he re-examines his "real-life" events embodies what I would call an autobiographical consciousness. He continually shows himself to be engaged in an act of self-interpretation that is deeply dependent on the development of the experience he recalls. Moreover, Ishmael points towards the multiplicity and contingency of his experience in a way that stresses its "lived" character, and which eventually contrasts the singularity of his focus on Ahab's tragedy. Ishmael develops a pattern of vision by which he hovers over and interrogates his more meaningful past

encounters as he draws them out of the flux of becoming. Thus, he vindicates Gadamer's understanding that "what can be called an experience constitutes itself in memory. By calling it such, we are referring to the lasting meaning that an experience has for the person who has it" (Gadamer 58). It is my view that Ahab constitutes the most powerful of these encounters, and that Ishmael's attempt to understand Ahab's mad quest radically disrupts his own sense of identity. This brings me to the final sense in which I would want to insist on "autobiographical" to describe Ishmael's narration: his insistence on the truth of his account. In this context, it is quite amusing to see certain academics attempt to dance around his assertion that "So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts [...] they might scout at *Moby Dick* as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory" (172). But of course the white whale is symbolic, and any reading of *Moby-Dick* that does not attend this symbolic dimension cannot hope to say much about the book. Ishmael's point is simply that *Moby Dick* is a fact. The white whale is not a made-up story with an implicit ethical lesson about how one should live; the white whale is a reality that must be reckoned with. It is a reality that almost destroys Ishmael, and one which he returns to and revisits in his imagination.

Still, is "autobiographical" really the best term to describe Ishmael's story? Could this not be better described as the narrative of a whaling voyage? Admittedly, there are times when "autobiographical" can feel like a blunt instrument, and it is usually in these moments when "epic" can feel more descriptive. Yet of those who consider *Moby-Dick* to be an epic, most would want to call it a "spiritual epic," as in Christopher Sten's recent exegesis, *Sounding the Whale* (2). This fact in itself points towards the significance of

Ishmael's inward adventure. It is also worth noting that the tradition of "spiritual epic" is deeply tangled up with autobiography: Dante's *Divine Comedy* can certainly be read as a spiritual epic, but it is also the story of his own life understood as an internal pilgrimage—something closer to Augustine's *Confessions*. And like Augustine's autobiography, Ishmael's narrative is often desperate in its searching act of self-interpretation. Yet unlike Augustine, Ishmael, while certainly recognizing the limitations of his younger self, does not write from an attained standpoint of knowledge as such. However it might be, the "spiritual epic" reading is at best strained. It generally requires, rather awkwardly, seeing Ishmael's early reception of Father Mapple as his decisive encounter, and in some sense the "The Chapel" must become the center of the story (when Ahab clearly seems to occupy this position). The "epic" reading of the novel can also point towards a spiritual development in Ishmael that is either too prominent or too neat and linear. Thus, Sten contends that the narrative's "emphasis on transformation and the turning toward spiritual self-knowledge, naturally points to Ishmael as the true hero of the book; he alone completes an initiatory test and returns to tell about it" (3). But it is actually extremely difficult to single out a clear spiritual development in Ishmael, such that Hubert Dreyfus dedicates a tremendous amount of attention to Ishmael's "moodiness" (154). Ishmael can say that Queequeg "redeemed" the "wolfish world" (56) only to later take up a "desperado philosophy" (188). Moreover, Ishmael highlights the contingency of his finite human experience. He does not, for instance, begin by placing himself within an objective framework or on the "path" to any particular destination; his story commences "some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money [...] and nothing in particular to interest me on shore" (18). The free-flowing and

meandering quality of this opening alerts us to the sense in which his story is a reflection on his own real-life experience.

It must be conceded, however, that Ishmael does not aim to give us a factual account that captures the entirety of his life. In fact, there are few narrators in American literature that are more mysterious about their origins or past life-story. While immediately intimate with his reader, Ishmael reveals almost nothing of his own personal history (so much so that one recent interpretation goes so far as to argue that "Ishmael" is really the orphan Pip's pseudonym!) (Dunn 413). A better model of autobiographical writing to look towards when thinking about *Moby-Dick* would be Montaigne's *Essays* or even Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. These works, as mentioned above, were both recent in Melville's imagination, and provide a better exemplar from which to understand the basis of Ishmael's voice in its subjective and self-conscious endeavor to represent life through experience. Ishmael does not attempt to produce the totality of facts which comprise his life-story, but attempts to reveal himself in a rather different manner. Ishmael's account is attentive to how his finite experience impinges on his own self-understanding, a process that can be understood to operate on two levels: the immediacy of the each meaningful experience on shore, and the way in which the entire narrative is inflected by Ishmael's encounter with Ahab.

Thus, when I refer to the novel's autobiographical narration, I mean particularly the autobiographical consciousness which comprises the shore chapters, and the later chapters that weave Ishmael's speculative voice around the dramatic action of Ahab's tragedy. Here, what Merleau-Ponty said of Montaigne could equally be said of Ishmael: they each place a "consciousness astonished at itself at the core of human existence"

(203). It is this interrogative consciousness which unites the shore chapters with the speculative chapters which often attempt to look at the whale from every possible vantage point. These speculative chapters are quite evidently searching in character, but the shore chapters establish the beginnings of this seeking in Ishmael. Montaigne sums up the quality of this form of consciousness quite succinctly:

When the mind is satisfied, that is a sign of diminished faculties or weariness. No powerful mind stops within itself: it is always stretching out and exceeding its capacities. It makes sorties which go beyond what it can achieve: it is only half-alive if it is not advancing, pressing forward, getting driven into a corner and coming to blows; its inquiries are shapeless and without limits; its nourishment consists in amazement, the hunt, and uncertainty. (368)

While this description applies to Ishmael's speculative chapters more generally, it also corresponds to the direction of his soul from the moment we meet him. *Moby-Dick* begins anchored in the personal, yet simultaneously eyes the distant and unknown. When Ishmael says he "love[s] to sail forbidden seas" (22), he captures something of his very consciousness. Ishmael attempts to read himself through his personal experience, and thus his own being is portrayed more properly as a becoming.

Perhaps the most fundamental paradox of an autobiographical endeavor is the question of closure. In purporting to give an account of one's life, even as that life is still necessarily being lived, it would seem that a true autobiography could only end at the moment of death. Thus, the great conceit of most autobiography is that it attempts to capture the wholeness of a life even as this is never possible strictly speaking. Of course,

not all autobiography is naive in this sense. Here, Sterne and Montaigne are helpful to bear in mind. Certainly the influence of Tristram Shandy can be seen in Ishmael's propensity toward long-windedness, which often suggests the impossibility of closure (whether the subject be freewill or whaling knots): "God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught" (125). Similarly, in Bezanson's distinction between what he calls the "dramatic chapters" of *Moby-Dick* and those which employ "the sermon form" (652), one can discern an attempt to articulate part of Ishmael's peculiar voice. Bezanson claims that Ishmael's "loosely ordered speculative chapters" (653) draw on "the essay tradition from Montaigne to Hazlitt" (653). Certainly, the sense of speculation in Montaigne's *Essays*, as in Sterne, conveys a sense of the limitlessness of any attempt to capture a life. He declares, "I myself am the subject of my book: it is not reasonable that you should employ your leisure on a topic so frivolous and so vain" (3). *The Essays* might be taken as "frivolous" not simply because of their subject, but also because of the project's apparent endlessness. Yet insofar as Montaigne and his book are of one substance—"touch one and you touch the other" (234)—its form and content cannot be so easily divided. Montaigne saw what the depths of subjectivity implied for self-articulation.

Like Ishmael's vivid consciousness, *The Essays* take up an incredibly diverse range of subjects furnished from experience, and through them Montaigne intends to show something of himself and his own distinctive way of being. This task is complex, however; it requires the presentation of a self in motion, rather than a posed portrait: "I am unable to stabilize my subject: it staggers confusedly along with a natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, at this moment when I am lingering over it. I am not

portraying being but becoming” (232). Quite clearly, Montaigne's form of autobiographical writing is one that is conscious of its own difficult endeavor to represent life. Melville himself reflects such an attitude in a letter to Hawthorne late in 1851 concerning the completion of *Moby-Dick*. He allows that Hawthorne is not bound to reply to his "long letter," but adds, "if you do answer it, and direct it to Herman Melville, you will missend it—for the very fingers that now guide this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper. Lord, when shall we be done changing?" (546). When attempting to capture the life within ourselves, we find motion, change, and becoming. Consider Ishmael's own account of

that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (20)

This peculiar reading of the Narcissus myth diminishes the role of seductive beauty or vain self-obsession, which is sometimes the defining focus. Ishmael's emphasis on an apparently universal desire to grasp the self denotes a concern with truth, while the mild but torturous denial of any full grasp suggests that self-knowledge is always incomplete—that we remain unknown to ourselves.

In *The Essays*, Montaigne characterizes his autobiographical desire as both honest and intimate, maintaining that only "social convention" prevents him from representing himself "wholly naked" (3). Thus, in a voice that combines honest intimacy with the breadth and multiplicity of human experience, he attempts to disclose something of himself, while acknowledging the impossibility of closure. In much the same way

Ishmael's "speculative chapters" find their source in an intimate attempt to tell us about himself. He beckons us to make his acquaintance: "Call me Ishmael" (18). These words of reciprocity are some of the most discussed in American literature. Ishmael's openness and invitation to friendship goes directly to the heart of things and he speaks in such a way as to assume a rapport or bond with the reader. While we do not get a great deal of information about our narrator's origins— his story beginning "some years ago, never mind how many precisely" (18)—he is entirely forthcoming with what shows up as significant to him: his perceptions of the world, and his own profound and often humorous reflections on it. In other words, Ishmael tells us about himself by telling us about his way of seeing the world. You might say that it is not of particular concern for him to delineate the precise year or exact sum of money in his pocket; this kind of account will not tell us who he is. Thus, it is worth thinking about what Ishmael does *not* tell us. He does not provide the full story of his life in terms of atomic facts or in a thorough series of events. Yet Ishmael himself is certainly the focus from the first sentence of these early shore chapters. He begins by relating the state of his soul as he attempts to explain the motivations that led him to his fateful voyage on the Pequod. His description, "*it is a way I have of driving off the spleen*" (18, my emphasis) concentrates on the peculiar manner of his own impulse to go to sea. This initial focus on the shape of his own being finds elaboration in the shore chapters which follow. Although the experience on land in contrast to sea has a kind of finite and contingent quality to it, the main movement traces the deepest currents of human experience—friendship, death and fate—all of which prove to be highly revelatory of Ishmael's inner nature.

A cursory view of the shore chapters conveys the immediate personal concern of

Ishmael's whaling voyage. The main events taken in sequence trace Ishmael's attempt to articulate his motivations for going to sea; finding lodgings at the Spouter-Inn for the cold night; meeting Queequeg and later an account of their intimate friendship; Ishmael's deeply personal and only recollection of his childhood in *Moby-Dick*; a religious encounter in "The Chapel" (which finds an analogue in Queequeg's "Ramadan"); shipping with the Pequod; and finally, an ominous face-to-face encounter with the "prophet" Elijah, which disturbs Ishmael to his core. Ishmael's intensely personal focus ranging from his deepest motivations, friendship, religion, and death seems to be conversation befitting a lifelong friend. Ishmael, like Montaigne, is concerned to portray himself sincerely by attending to these intimate and revelatory questions in the pages of his book. In this way, Ishmael shows himself to be preoccupied with the quest for self-knowledge. Melville once described Emerson as a "thought-diver" (*Letters* 79). Ishmael has often been referred to as a thought-diver as well. He is a seeker, not just at the objective level of events, but in the more primary adventure of the soul. Moreover, it is not only the content of Ishmael's early focus, but the manner of relating this content that gives Ishmael such a personal tone. His invitation to friendship with the reader persists well beyond "Call me Ishmael," and is invoked particularly when he is given pause, or when attempting to think through difficult problems: "Here, now, are two great whales, laying their heads together; let us join them, and lay together our own" (262). Ishmael is often at his most autobiographical when he is at his most speculative; sometimes there is a tone of desperateness in his searching. It is this speculative voice and Ishmael's search for self-knowledge that provide the ground for the conjured tragedy that unfolds in

Ishmael's mind. Yet it is also this penetrating act of self-interpretation—Ishmael's vivid autobiographical consciousness—that marks his identity more than any other trait.

This autobiographical consciousness, or "consciousness astonished at itself" is thus the basis of both the shore chapters, and the later speculative chapters where he engages in self-interpretation through cetology and even whaling equipment. Here, Ishmael breaks from relating Ahab's tragedy and considers the whale in a philosophical mode, or provides necessary background for scenes in his drama. Thus, this "section of *Moby Dick* does not move the story forward much, but rather marks time by deepening the symbolism of the white whale" (Vogel 244). One side of his voice deals with the particulars of concrete experience whereby he conveys the history of the voyage itself; the other side relates a spiritual voyage that runs alongside in pursuit of the ineffable. Ishmael attends to both the mundane and the unspeakable as he discovers them to be intimately bound up with one another: "My dear sir, in this world it is not so easy to settle these plain things. I have ever found your plain things the knottiest of all" (292). Even the most ordinary objects and routine matters on the Pequod are placed in a cosmic key and imbued with a spiritual substance occasioned by the tragic action which is the center of his story. Thus, in describing the whale-line, Ishmael concludes, "all men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks" (229). Or when reflecting on the whale's skeleton and fossil Ishmael imagines a time when the whole world belonged to the whale: "Here Saturn's grey chaos rolls over me, and I obtain dim, shuddering glimpses into those Polar eternities" (350). Ishmael's entire narrative shows traces of his obsessive fixation on Ahab's vision and the whale itself. This, in part at least, explains

Bezanson's contention that "even in the rhetorically duller chapters of exposition it is a rare paragraph over which heat lightening does not flicker" (648).

The immediacy of the dramatic chapters themselves also comes to light through Ishmael's immersion in a project of self-understanding. Thus, this underlying continuity in Ishmael's autobiographical consciousness is significant in that it helps us to understand the pervading consciousness which grounds *Moby-Dick*. It also avoids certain pitfalls, like Stewart's rigid dichotomization which figures the Ishmael of the shore chapters as:

altogether of flesh-and-blood, seeing things from his own point of view, and knowing only those things that an ordinary person may be expected to know. He here seems to be acting the part of confidant and secondary hero. [... Later he] ceases to be a character at all, becoming merely the device by which the story is told. He is at times the author's all-seeing eye and all-hearing ear. He records what Ahab mutters, and even what Ahab and others think. (423)

Stewart loses sight of Ishmael in the drama of Ahab. In some ways this might be rather appropriate to the movement of *Moby-Dick* (in that Ishmael loses *himself* in Ahab), but to claim that Ishmael becomes only a "device" is misleading, and in it Stewart fails to do justice to the continuity of Ishmael's voice. Nevertheless, there is something quite different in the "flesh-and-blood" Ishmael of the shore chapters, which Stewart alerts us to in his account. The shore chapters possess a robust, grounded realism that permeates Ishmael's narration and which, as will be seen, highly contrasts his eventual adoption of dramatic tragedy as a means to convey Ahab's action.

As part of the ever-present metaphor of land and sea, Ishmael's consciousness on land tends to highlight the multiplicity of experience, even as he orders it. Harrison

Hayford, in his archeological reading of *Moby-Dick's* composition, points to the existence of so-called "unnecessary duplicates" which seem to predominate particularly in the shore chapters: "[Ishmael] won't sail from that first port [New Bedford], but from a second, Nantucket. [...] Why need we be shown the whaleman's shore life via two inns, one at New Bedford run by an officious humorous landlord, and a second at Nantucket run by an officious humourless landlady?" (675). Hayford claims that these "duplicates breed duplicates" (675), and provides examples from these early chapters, mentioning the two ship owners Peleg and Bildad, as well as the two prominent sailors Ishmael meets in the Spouter-Inn: Queequeg and Bulkington. Hayford's ultimate conclusion concerning duplicates, and what he ultimately calls "reassignments" in *Moby-Dick*, seems to be that "Melville, like lesser writers, found it hard to throw away good words he had written" (688), yet many of the duplicates Hayford points to can be read as part of a larger characterization of the land itself. The narration of experience on shore feels "journalistic in its realism" (Arvin 153). Certainly, the plot is looser on land; its events are more episodic, sometimes almost extraneous, in nature. The shore chapters demonstrate a more explicit and pervasive concern with the multiplicity of experience itself, even as Ishmael implies that he is recounting the more significant events of this pre-voyage: "nothing more happened on the passage worthy the mentioning" (64). However, such a remark must be taken with a grain of salt—or at least the notion of "significance" should be sufficiently broad—as subsequently Ishmael offers a detailed, chapter-length reflection on "Chowder": "Oh, sweet friends! hearken to me. It was made of small juicy clams, scarcely bigger than hazel nuts, mixed with pounded ship biscuit, and salted pork cut up into little flakes; the whole enriched with butter, and plentifully seasoned with pepper and

salt" (67). Interestingly enough, Ishmael and Queequeg try *both* kinds of chowder. The chapter—like chowder itself—is not only consistent with Hayford's description of the contingent character of experience on land, but even serves to highlight the wealth or comfort to be found therein. The chowder Ishmael and Queequeg enjoy on land is very different from the fare offered on the Pequod, or the carnivorous case of "Stubb's Supper," which seems to feast not only on raw whale flesh, but somehow on the spirit and dynamism of Ahab's demonic quest.

Even though the land brings to light the multiplicity and flux of "life-as-lived," Ishmael's perception of experience entails more than just recording "everything" that happens. Such a claim may seem too obvious for words, or even pedantic at this point. Yet it is helpful nonetheless to be clear about just this point to understand the movement of Ishmael's voice. As Jerome Bruner remarks, "there is no such thing as a 'life as lived' to be referred to. In this view, a life is created or constructed by the act of autobiography. It is a way of construing experience—and of reconstruing and reconstruing it until our breath or our pen fails us" (38). Bruner contends that life is always experienced in narrative terms, although for many this "narrative about life [...] is largely implicit" (38-9). The difference in autobiography seems to be that one makes one's narrative explicit, which usually involves a deeper reflection into "not only the nature of one's commitments but the value presuppositions on which they are based" (42). He borrows a term for this from Charles Taylor by calling such evaluation "radical reflection" (42). Like Bruner, Taylor's position is that human agents understand themselves in narrative terms and are thereby oriented to both past and future. The narrative of autobiography, then, shows its primary concerns through its affirmation of certain ends; it deals with desire, ideals and

meaning as well as “facts.” The desire to structure life through articulation determines just what “facts” appear in the first place and how they relate to the life that is being given shape. Bruner's deeper point is that the act of autobiography actually creates life through its reflective attempt to revisit experience. Ishmael's project of self-understanding takes just this shape.

In the case of Ishmael's recollection, it would seem that his "radical reflection" takes place particularly from a vantage point he has *attained*. Consider Roy Pascal's description of autobiography:

An autobiography is written by a man who has a certain position, a given reality, usually known to us in advance; he writes about his life with the consciousness of having reached his present position and attitude; over the description of his early life there hovers the knowledge of what he is to become—his motto might be the Pindaric "Become what you are." (Pascal 136)

Pascal's account might emphasize the fixed nature of a self that is arrived at in a way that seems at odds with Ishmael's fluid self-understanding. Nevertheless, it is important to grasp how Ishmael's recollection revisits his whaling voyage after its completion. While restless and mercurial, Ishmael's writing structures life according to a state of being that has been arrived at. Admittedly, the temporality of Ishmael's narrative is difficult to pin down in any definite sense. For instance, Bezanson takes it as fundamental that “there are two Ishmaels, not one” (644). By this he means that "the enfolding sensibility of the novel [... and] the imagination through which all matters of the book pass" (644) is an older Ishmael and the voice of narration. The younger Ishmael is understood as a

character (although a significant one) within that narration; the older narrator “has a more restless and wide-ranging speculative intelligence and a much darker vision of human life” (28). I generally follow Bezanson's position in this regard, but as will be seen, there are problems in distinguishing between these two consciousnesses as Ishmael actively recreates his voyage.

Michael Broek, for instance, has claimed that Bezanson's "two Ishmaels" is an “artificial distinction” (517) in his exploration of the consciousness and multiple perspectives that Ishmael comes to embody. Broek argues, "Ishmael never stresses that his tale is a reminiscence or, more importantly, that he is layering metaphor and imagery on top of what were once simple observations [... by] imbu[ing them] with great metaphysical import as a consequence of his accumulated wisdom" (517). While it may be true that Ishmael does not explicitly *stress* his story as a reminiscence, it seems to be thoroughly implied by his immediate framing of the story as occurring "some years ago" (18); his evident engagement in the process of book-making which is revealed in the "Cetology" chapter; the standpoint adopted in "The Town-Ho's Story," which is told at the "Golden Inn" (199); or even the prefatory whale etymology and extracts understood as a product of Ishmael's obsessive collecting. Especially in the case of the tragedy Ishmael imagines himself as relating do we have a clear sense of Ishmael's recollection from an endpoint: "But were the coming narrative to reveal, in any instance, the complete abasement of poor Starbuck's fortitude, scarce might I have the heart to write it; for it is a thing most sorrowful, nay shocking, to expose the fall of valor in the soul" (103). Broek's second suggestion, however, may be a little easier to fathom: is it true that only an older, experienced Ishmael layers metaphor and metaphysics onto earlier observations? Perhaps

Ishmael was perfectly capable of deep metaphysical speculation, and the "experienced Ishmael" does nothing but record his younger self's thoughts. One reason to entertain such a hypothesis is that Ishmael suggests his profession on land consisted in "lording it as a country schoolmaster, making the tallest boys stand in awe [...] The transition is a keen one, I assure you, from the schoolmaster to a sailor, and requires a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable you to grin and bear it" (20-1). Thus, young Ishmael would have possessed more than enough book-learning to provide the layers of metaphor and metaphysical reflection which comprise what Bezanson suggests is only added subsequently. Still, insofar as the reconstruction of events comes first through a reminiscing voice, these metaphysical speculations should be understood *first* as the product of the narrator in the act of recollection, and only pertaining specifically to the character of "young Ishmael" if the context strongly suggests it.

Yet the matter is not so cut and dried. What is most valuable in Broek's suggestion is his complication of any easily discernible break between a young and old Ishmael. Indeed, one could move through *Moby-Dick* chapter by chapter attempting to discern oscillations between an older and younger Ishmael. Sometimes these differentiations are both possible and useful; other times they remain out of reach. A good example of the difficulty Broek highlights confronts us early on in the cold outside the Spouter-Inn. Ishmael reflects on the power of wind, recalling the words of an old author: "True enough, thought I, as this passage occurred to my mind—old black-letter, thou reasonest well. Yes, these eyes are windows, and this body of mine is the house. What a pity they didn't stop up the chinks, and the crannies though" (25). This expansive thought is first attributed to young Ishmael, and is grounded in its immediate context of

the cold and wind, as he searches for lodgings. But the reflection expands further into the New Testament story of Lazarus and Dives:

But what thinks Lazarus? Can he warm his blue hands by holding them up to the grand northern lights? [...] Would he not far rather lay him down lengthwise along the line of the equator; yea, ye gods! go down to the fiery pit itself, in order to keep out this frost? (25)

Is this second passage still directly attributable to young Ishmael? As his reflection grows and develops into a rich allegory, it becomes harder to see it as the product of a younger man. For one thing, the imagery becomes unusually dark, and has a concern with willful damnation. Is this fiery hell or the "ice palace of frozen sighs" (25) the result of Ishmael's fateful encounter with Ahab? Of course, it may well be that the narrator is attempting to capture the thoughts of his younger self outside the Spouter-Inn. But such an extended reflection at least suggests that he has perhaps added some of his own thoughts in the process. Moreover, the conclusion of this chapter is peculiar with respect to temporality: "But no more of this blubbering now, we are going a-whaling, and there is plenty of that yet to come. Let us scrape the ice from our frosted feet and see what sort of a place this 'Spouter' may be" (25). Who has stopped to think this thought? Young Ishmael out in the cold? Or the narrator who has lost himself in attempting to imagine the scene again?

Another instructive example of this sort of ambiguity can be found in "The Mast-Head." At first, it may look like this dreamy chapter supports a reading which sees the reflective meditations in *Moby-Dick* as primarily the product of a speculative young Ishmael lost in a reveries. But while Ishmael admits that he "kept but sorry guard" (59), and seems to confess his membership in what he calls the whaling "asylum for romantic,

melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the carking cares of earth" (135), his voice then transforms into a warning:

Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditateness [...] Beware of such an one, I say; your whales must be seen before they can be killed; and this sunken-eyed young Platonist will tow you ten wakes round the world, and never make you one pint of sperm the richer [...] perhaps there might have been shoals of [whales] in the far horizon; but lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature. (135-6)

This warning might be construed as playful at first, perhaps only meant as a personal confession with a healthy dose of self-deprecation. But the warning takes on a much more perilous and serious tone: "while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover [...] Heed it well, ye Pantheists!" (136). Ishmael's reflection moves from describing his first mast-head watch, to self-description, finally resolving in a warning that certainly suggests an experienced voice that has attained a different perspective through that experience; as one commentator suggests, Ishmael's language throughout "communicates a sense of memory haunted by knowledge gained since the events occurred" (Fee 142).

Hans-Georg Gadamer's penetrating account of memory and experience in *Truth and Method* offers a helpful way of thinking about experience and Ishmael's recollection in this regard. Gadamer writes,

An experience is no longer just something that flows past quickly in the stream of conscious life; it is meant as a unity and thus attains a new mode of being one. Thus it is quite understandable that the word emerges in biographical literature and ultimately stems from its use in autobiography. What can be called an experience constitutes itself in memory. By calling it such, we are referring to the lasting meaning that an experience has for the person who has it. (58)

Ishmael revisits certain moments—particularly what might be called "arresting moments"—and attempts to draw out their significance. These personal experiences *are* experiences to him not simply because they happened, but because they have a "lasting meaning" or have become fused with his memory and identity. Even as Ishmael tries to revisit his past as meaningful and formative, it provides a seemingly inexhaustible source of thought. Gadamer, qualifying his claim, notes that "experience has a definite immediacy which eludes every opinion about its meaning" (58). Because experience becomes attached to the totality or unity of self-understanding, "essential to an experience is that it cannot be exhausted in what can be said of it or grasped as its meaning. As determined through autobiographical or biographical reflection, its meaning remains fused with the whole movement of life and constantly accompanies it" (58). Ishmael re-enacts his whaling journey, and presents us with a moving picture of memory as it stretches forward and back. The experiences he draws out are re-lived and re-engaged in

his search for self-knowledge. In general, the more meaningful the experience, the more Ishmael seems to intently hover over it.

This pattern of the narrator-Ishmael locating a moment or thought in the past and subsequently losing himself in a sort of endless speculation seems to be one that informs Ishmael's more general approach with respect to the Ahab tragedy itself. The whole book—understood as "the draught of a draught" (125)—is Ishmael's attempt to reconstruct his fateful experience on the Pequod. As he makes that tragic encounter present to himself he becomes lost in it. Cambon has observed that the transition from narrative to the dramatic seems to "embody the natural movement of memory striving to recapture lost actuality" (522). This claim will become more important as I proceed, but for the time being it is worth noting that Cambon's insight seems to be true on a different scale than perhaps originally intended: Ishmael tries to "recapture lost actuality" in his obsessive relationship to the voyage, which often entails attempting to recapture himself and his own thoughts. Insofar as Ishmael recreates his journey, he seems to attempt to get inside his own head—to reconstruct his motivations and thoughts. Thus, in this sense there is a continuity that is grounded in Ishmael's autobiographical consciousness, which bridges his act of self-interpretation with his recreation of Ahab's tragedy.

Ahab's presence, like the White Whale, makes itself felt long before he appears in the narrative. Hayford points to Ishmael's attempt to reconstruct his earlier mindset in an extensive analysis of the first chapter, which argues convincingly that "why he went to sea has become, in the telling, a problem to Ishmael" (Hayford 659). Hayford reads "Loomings" as Ishmael's attempt to explain his initial motivations in venturing out to sea. At first, this manifests itself in Ishmael's description of the peculiar draw of the ocean

itself, which he sees as affecting all landsmen: "tell me, does the magnetic virtue of the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them thither?" (19). As Ishmael eventually musters reasons, "the reasons themselves [...] come to require explanation" (Hayford 659). He asks, "why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity and make him the own brother of Jove? Surely all of this is not without meaning" (20). The questioning culminates in his invoking "the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all" (20). Hayford contends that "Loomings" ably captures "a basic motif of the book: that of confronting an insoluble problem" (659); and perhaps in this sense especially, we can say that the "book's early chapters are [a] preparation for Ahab" (658). In trying to understand himself, the narrator cannot fully explain his desire to "sail forbidden seas" (22). Ishmael's attempt to understand his past identity or subjective motivations fails; all he can say is that for some reason he was drawn out to sea, towards the unknown, and that in some way we are all drawn towards the unknown. Here we meet the White Whale for the first time, far before we know anything about him. The end of "Loomings" marks a mute encounter with Ahab's quest, and its first appearance functions as both an interruption in Ishmael's self-understanding, and the beginning of a "radical reflection" that takes the form of self-writing.

Ishmael's attempt to articulate his own motivations repeatedly falters; he cannot seem to explain his initial decision without recourse to mystical, or fatalist terms. The question turns from the immediate "little or no money in [his] purse, and nothing particular to interest [him] on shore," to the deeper but still self-reflexive "damp drizzly November in [his] soul" (18), finally extending outwards to the unconscious magnetism of the sea, which Ishmael suggests exerts an almost universal pull on the human soul.

Ishmael's attempt to order his life in narrative terms is thus constantly searching; it sometimes seems to be held in a perpetual check by an as yet unseen force. His ultimate answer concerning his motivations, however, is the most mystical of all. Something which Hayford fails to mention, and which is surprisingly seldom discussed in Melville scholarship, is just how odd the conclusion of "Loomings" is:

Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity [...] and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air.
(22)

Here, Ishmael is speaking about what motivated him to go to sea; what he implicitly declares is that Moby Dick, the great white whale itself, dwells at the innermost core of what sent him there. In looking back at his younger self, Ishmael foreshadows what is to come, but claims that somehow the white whale was always present. Not only does this not seem possible temporally, but it is quite difficult to comprehend what exactly he could mean by it.

At least partly, Ishmael suggests that the mysterious nature of the whale, and whaling life out beyond the pale of the safe and civilized Manhattoes, is what drove him to escape the "insular" city. But the further identification of this "one grand hooded phantom" denotes a deeper level of mystery than the wonder of whales or the excitement of the sea alone. The language employed here is almost religious, and indeed, the ethereal procession of whales is reminiscent of Neoplatonic and mystical Christian thought.

Ishmael describes a procession in a way that is typical of angels, but not whales; the white whale is positioned as the central unity in the procession, functioning analogously to the Neoplatonic "One," or the "source of Being and knowing" which is beyond both. At the center of this procession is a dark hooded phantom, which is not only an ominous warning of what is to come, but figures the white whale, in a vein consistent with negative theology, as unknowable and esoteric. The echo of "phantom" from his earlier account of the "ungraspable phantom of life" hints that this whale may somehow be "the key to it all," or at least that such a portentous whale manifests most fundamentally as an existential question. The hooded phantom is a symbol for all of Ishmael's unanswered questions about the magnetism of the sea; it embodies the radically other or unknown to him. This "key to it all," however, is understood as forever ungraspable. In this context, it is curious to note that Ishmael describes himself at the end of the narrative as an orphan; the Neoplatonists understood the soul's turning away from the divine as a condition of spiritual alienation. The remoteness of the whale, "like a snow hill in the air," marks a barren precipice foreign to the insular city.

So what would it mean to say that the white whale lurked at the heart of what sent Ishmael to sea? Such a question even Ishmael recoils from, yet on one level at least he seems compelled towards the view that he was unconsciously moved to his voyage by unseen forces. In looking back at his embarking, Ishmael sees himself playing a role handed down to him:

Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in

genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces—though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment. (22)

Here, one can discern a clear break between a mistaken view Ishmael attributes to his younger self (that the voyage sprang primarily from his own freewill), and the later view, which shifts the active initiative away from Ishmael himself and towards the overriding and mysterious force of fate. Still, this does not amount to a position of nuanced knowledge, but rather amounts only to an acknowledgement of the limitation of human willing and knowing. It is a revelation attained only by embarking from the land and its modern, enlightened culture. The white whale, like the sea itself, has always been present, but seldom turned towards: "however baby man may brag of his science and skill [...] yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make" (224). The sea is forgotten or subsumed under an overconfident human mastery, such that Ishmael insists and maintains that it remains "an everlasting terra incognita, [and] that Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his one superficial western one" (224).

This vision of the ocean is not attained solely through Ishmael's experience on a whaling craft, but is the direct product of his encounter with Ahab. I have said earlier that insofar as the Ahab tragedy is contained within Ishmael's autobiographical recollection, the tragedy remains fundamentally related to Ishmael's *experience*. We are now in a

position to unpack this in greater detail. In his account of how memory and experience function with respect to autobiography, Gadamer writes that “every experience has something of an adventure about it” (60). Qualifying this claim, he continues:

An adventure is by no means just an episode. Episodes are a succession of details which have no inner coherence and for that very reason have no permanent significance. An adventure, however, interrupts the customary course of events, but is positively and significantly related to the context which it interrupts. Thus an adventure lets life be felt as a whole, in its breadth and strength. Here lies the fascination of an adventure. It removes the conditions and obligations of everyday life. It ventures out into the uncertain.
(60)

It is hard to imagine a better description of Ishmael venturing out from his land-dwelling existence into the mysterious and awe-inspiring ocean. He concludes "Loomings" as “the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open” (22), and what he encounters there will have tremendous implications for his own sense of identity or "the context which it interrupts." It is in Gadamer’s sense of adventure that we can understand the two-sidedness of experience which appears in Ishmael’s account. Accounting for himself becomes precisely a matter of attempting to account for Ahab as well. It is because Ishmael finds something so incomprehensible and unaccountable in Ahab that his captain becomes the primary source of “adventure” in this sense. As an account of experience, one could argue that *Moby-Dick* is more of an adventure than even *Typee*; yet this adventure is crucially an inner-adventure that happens within Ishmael’s own transformative act of memory.

In this chapter I have attempted to articulate some of the complexities of Ishmael's autobiographical endeavor. Ishmael does not attempt to render his complete life story in any formalist sense; it is better to think of his work as actively engaged in the pursuit of self-knowledge, and as a project that is painfully aware of its own limitations in this regard. His autobiographical consciousness revisits the past, and attempts to relive particular meaningful experiences from a vantage point of awe. Ishmael's focus is intensely personal; its endless, speculative character is first concerned with the peculiar shape of his soul on land, and ponders questions of death, fate, and friendship. An older voice of experience grounds these original experiences in a larger act of self-interpretation. Thus, his greeting, "Call me Ishmael," is in one way an introduction to two people, or better: we are introduced to a memory actively engaged in bringing experiences to the surface which are fused to the unity of life that they concern. Ishmael also suggests that his reader is a part of this recreation and necessarily involved in bringing his experience to life. This pervasive act of self-interpretation is the primary sense in which Ishmael's project is autobiographical, and it is just this vivid consciousness which underlies the later chapters where some have said that Ishmael "disappears." As will be seen, Ishmael's project of self-writing (which in its own way is a perpetual reading of past experience) is one that is awakened by Ahab's action.

Chapter Four: Subjectivity on Land; Recollection and Vision

*"Happy are they who still hope this is so,
While ignorance surrounds us like an ocean!
The very thing one needs one does not know,
And what one knows is needless information.
But let us put these gloomy thoughts away
And let the precious present hour confound them!
Look how they gleam in the last light of day,
Those little huts with green all round them!"*
—Goethe, *Faust* (1064-71).

I would now like to investigate the specific path that Ishmael's autobiographical consciousness traces through the narrative. It is predominantly on shore that we get glimpses of Ishmael's younger identity and how this younger self interprets experience. Ishmael represents his own movement away from the concerns of the shore by bringing himself continually before strange and arresting experiences that complicate his earlier sense of identity. And yet, with most of these youthful encounters, Ishmael is able to accommodate himself to what was previously foreign and unknown. Still, these experiences meaningfully impact his own sense of identity all the same. The "pattern of vision" which he develops through these experiences prepares the reader for Ishmael's more intensive encounter with Ahab, an encounter which Cambon describes thus: "Ishmael is the artist in the act of telling us, and struggling to understand, *his crucial experience*" (523, my emphasis). Thus, Ahab's tragic act both disrupts Ishmael's tacit sense of identity, and prompts Ishmael's quest for self-understanding through writing.

The land, for Ishmael, comes to represent a form of "sheltering" from what he understands to be the "true" reality; it consists primarily in the stability afforded by the official view of culture and its institutions. The landsman is variously described by

Ishmael as possessing a "timid eye" (229), dietary codes (242), and a general incredulity concerning the ocean and whaling life. His claim that portraits of the whale, "even down to the present day confidently challenge the faith of the landsman" (215), is a fact that inflects his own peculiar narrative challenge: "Think you not then that brains, like yoked cattle, should be put to this leviathan, to make him at all budge to any landsman's imagination?" (347). The land is insular, and has a sleepy, stunting effect, such that Ishmael explains his going to sea as a means of "regulating the circulation" (18).

Consider the way in which he sets his time for departure by the frequency of finding himself "involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral [he] meet[s]" (18). Land life becomes grim for Ishmael; it lacks contact with any real source of vitality, culminating in the "November [of his] soul" (18). These early thoughts are continually punctuated with "whenever," insinuating that this condition is not simply the arrogance of a young man, but a relationship to the land that Ishmael returns to repeatedly. His disdain is especially palpable in the admission that in such a state of affairs "it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off" (18). Ishmael's implication is that the land's ordinary structures of concern seem to shelter its inhabitants not only from the ocean, but themselves. Its unreflective enclosure provides comfort, but the call of the ocean beyond makes the land's sanctuary ring hollow.

Ishmael's relationship to the certainties of the shore is primarily one of critique. Such a critique generally concerns the presumption of "Enlightenment," and is quite similar to others that appear around the same time in Dostoyevsky or Kierkegaard. "The Crystal Palace," which appears as a symbol of rational optimism in Dostoyevsky's *The*

Underground Man, or Johannes de Silentio's treatment of the Hegelian System, which presumes to go further than the faith of Abraham, each point to the limitations of the modern, civilized standpoint—and in particular, its blindness with respect to the human existential situation. In a similar vein, Ishmael asks us to consider the vast and uncaring expanse of the sea relative to the land, arguing that we have "lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it" (224). Such an exercise is perhaps more appealing to our own modern imagination if we substitute the sea with the boundlessness of dark space surrounding the totality of existence on the globe. Yet even in our own time, the presumption that the sea has been "conquered" implicit in the largely tacit background of modern human mastery conceals the awesomeness of the ocean.

Thus, Ishmael's speaks to us as well, when he asks his reader to:

Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return! (225)

Ishmael knows how insular and sheltered the land is from the "horrors of the half known life." The strange analogy he refers to points to the soul's refuge in stable human community from the boundless "eternal war" which surrounds it. Whether knowingly or

not, the land stands in relation to the immense ocean, which is the condition of its fruitfulness and very existence. The sea is deified as a kind of cannibalistic mother, not unlike Tiamat in the ancient creation epic of the Mesopotamians. Ishmael comes to see that land relies on the sea and is eclipsed by it. While this was always present to him, in another sense, it was always turned away from and unseen.

Ishmael sees his embarking as a response to the mysterious call of the unknown, and an important step away from the world of life on land. It marks the beginning of a profound transformation, yet the motivations described are still latent and seen in the light of an older Ishmael who knows and has experienced the true wonder of the sea. Bruner points to the great significance often attributed to conversion in autobiographical literature, claiming, "It is usually the case that conversions and turning points in literary autobiography are dramatically about [...] 'awakenings' from self-sealing autobiographical periods" (39). Such an awakening announces itself in "Loomings," both in its latent beginnings within young Ishmael, and in its completion through the voice of the older narrator. The definitive moment of this awakening or "turning-point," however, is silent, and to be found primarily in the narrative shift towards the tragedy of Ahab. Bruner explains that whether implicit or explicit, our narratives are subject to "the interpretive conventions available to us, and to the meanings imposed upon us by the usages of our culture and language" (38). "Loomings" depicts a young man moving away from the self-sealing narrative of the land. Yet Ishmael, even turned towards the sea, manifests a still naive and landlike disposition.

This landlike disposition reveals itself in the short-sightedness of his "civilized" reactions, and in many of his conversations that take place while on land. Just as the

complex crew of the Pequod prompted D.H. Lawrence to christen it the "ship of the American soul" (149), it is evident that Ishmael himself is a representative of American life. His American viewpoint is illustrated not only in his great admiration and pride in the pre-eminence of American whalers, but more particularly in the way his disposition and background understanding is brought to bear on situations that arise in New Bedford. For instance, though Ishmael describes himself as a "good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" (57), he seems to provide a rather reductive history of early "primitive religions," concluding that "hell is an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling" (82). In general, Ishmael seems far more attuned to the "obvious laws of Hygiene and common sense" (82) than any particular religious code. The practical "common sense" at the heart of his reprimanding of Queequeg's "Ramadan" could (as Lawrence has pointed out) just as easily come from the lips of Benjamin Franklin:

I have no objection to any person's religion, be it what it may, so long as that person does not kill or insult any other person, because that other person don't believe it also. But when a man's religion becomes really frantic; when it is a positive torment to him; and, in fine, makes this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in; then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him. (82)

This pragmatic liberalism is happily matched with an attitude that largely consists of a buoyant optimism in the shore chapters. This is a rather general account of Ishmael's voice, but Bezanson agrees that the "point of view of the younger Ishmael is in the main positive and upbeat" (27). For instance, when Ishmael encounters the possibility of his

own death in "The Chapel" as he examines the memorial plaques of sea sailors, he somehow comes to an accommodation with that possibility:

It needs scarcely to be told, with what feelings, on the eve of a Nantucket voyage, I regarded those marble tablets, and by the murky light of that darkened, doleful day read the fate of the whalemens who had gone before me. Yes, Ishmael, the same fate may be thine. But somehow I grew merry again. Delightful inducements to embark, fine chance for promotion, it seems [...] Yes, there is death in this business of whaling—a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity. But what then? Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. (45)

Sewall has claimed that "all the little horrors of [Ishmael's] adventures are accommodated to his hearty, comic vision" (95), and that "the rest of his story shows how shallow his optimism was, as Melville leads him (and the untragic American audience) by slow degrees, but remorselessly, toward tragic truth" (Sewall 93). The "shallow optimism" that Sewall refers to here, describes not simply some personal defect in Ishmael, but shallower waters, and the general disposition of the land itself. We move from autobiography towards tragedy, and the narrative traces the receding of Ishmael's identity as it becomes encompassed by the sea.

So how does this happen? We need to look again at Ishmael's vision and how it functions in the early chapters. The richness of the land is recalled in Ishmael's

imagination, but the particular experiences which are drawn out of this multiplicity tell us something about how he orders it in his mind. Thus, in these early chapters we are introduced to the eyes through which we will perceive Ahab. Ishmael's narration of his experience on land establishes the beginnings of what I refer to as an "immediacy of presence." In this, Ishmael assumes a shared vision with the reader. Take, for instance, his initial description—or better, recreation—of Manhattoes: "There now is your insular city of Manhattoes" (18). The language of "there now" gives the impression that Ishmael simply gestures towards the whole of the city as it is summoned up in his mind. This assumption of shared vision is echoed in the first few steps he takes: "But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water" (19). Thus, he both shares and directs our vision as well—a process that becomes more focused or concentrated as the narrative progresses. It is this shared vision that is the basis for later chapters where Ishmael "disappears" or where the story is rendered in drama. Cambon observes that these dramatic chapters "embody the natural movement of memory striving to recapture lost actuality" (522). Connecting this literary process to a vast array of historical antecedents, he continues, "the author who is telling his story of past events suddenly adopts the present tense to bring home to his audience the poignancy of some particular experience relived now" (522). I see my understanding of Ishmael's vision—especially in the shore chapters—as an extension of Cambon's theory regarding the generic shift towards tragedy. Ishmael's early language of interrogation and engagement with the world prepares the reader for his more intensive encounter with Ahab.

Again, the process that Cambon describes here is predicated on an understanding of Ishmael's vision that is also at work in earlier chapters where such drastic changes in

narrative form are not evident. One way to think about this is through Robert Lamb's citing of "Ishmael's attempts to 'read texts' (e.g., the painting at the Spouter Inn, New Bedford, the Pequod, characters like Queequeg, Father Mapple, Peleg and Bildad, Elijah)" (48). I think there is something quite appropriate in this analogy of reading. Perpetually, we find Ishmael engaging intensely with the object or being encountered, attempting to come to grips with it in some way. This concentrated (and sometimes playful) interrogation parallels the act of reading, establishing a mood of intimacy with the reader. We might say in Melville's language that Ishmael "dives" and that he aims at erasing boundaries—both with his reader and the world. In Cambon's words, "the poignancy of some particular experience" is brought to the fore and thoroughly interrogated. The guiding spirit of this interrogation on land, however, is perhaps articulated best in Ishmael's own self-description: "I am quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it—would they let me—since it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in" (22). This is certainly what Sewall refers to when he speaks of "all the little horrors" that are eventually "accommodated to [Ishmael's] hearty, comic vision" (95). Ishmael's memory fixates particularly on the foreign and unfamiliar; he shows us his various attempts to reconcile himself to certain "objects of reading."

As Ishmael recreates his past, we share in his vision; we see what his active memory discerns and lingers over. Perhaps the most obvious instance of Ishmael's endeavor to "read texts" comes early in his attempt to interpret the Spouter-Inn painting, where Rosenberry claims "Melville hid his description of *Moby-Dick* itself" (*Comic Spirit* 135). Whether or not this is the case, it is clear that Ishmael finds something

unsettling about the painting, and the earnestness with which he approaches the artwork demonstrates how deeply invested he is in it. He describes the canvas as possessing "a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant" (26). The painting presents a challenge to Ishmael, such that he describes his interaction with it as involuntary. Part of the painting's challenge lies in its sublimity and the dark, uncertain nature of its meaning:

Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through.—
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. But at last all these
fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture's midst. That
once found out, and all the rest were plain. But stop; does it not bear a faint
resemblance to a gigantic fish? even the great Leviathan himself? (26)

Later, as we have seen, Ishmael claims that portraits of the whale "challenge the faith" of landsmen—and partly what the painting challenges in Ishmael is precisely his land-like sensibility. Although he eventually comes to "a final theory of [his] own" (26) regarding the painting's significance, it remains a confounding moment in his memory. The painting's indeterminate nature pulls him into an aesthetic experience of the sublime that becomes fixed in his remembrance. This focusing or narrowing of Ishmael's vision when turning towards the foreign or indeterminate is a pattern that only intensifies as the narrative proceeds.

In this analogy of reading, one misinterpretation I want to avoid is a sense that Ishmael is somehow disconnected from the world or coldly separated from his various "figures of reading." In fact, much of this chapter is devoted to arguing precisely the opposite. Thus, to say that Ishmael engages in a process of "reading" is to say that he reads poetry, and not just the newspaper. In bringing these challenging experiences to light again, Ishmael shows the striking effect they had on him. In opposition to such a view, D.H. Lawrence interprets Ishmael as embodying a disengaged sort of analysis or lifeless curiosity. Lawrence bases this characterization particularly on Ishmael's relationship to Queequeg, claiming that, for Ishmael, "Queequeg must be just 'KNOWN', and dropped into oblivion [...] Elsewhere Ishmael says he loved Queequeg's eyes: 'large, deep eyes, fiery black and bold'. No doubt like Poe, he wanted to get the 'clue' to them. That was all" (148). Lawrence's remarks are difficult to square with the way Ishmael's voice functions; his position also seems to covertly rely on the assumptions of those who would protest that Ishmael "disappears" in the face of the Ahab tragedy. Although difficult to diagnose exactly, his complaint seems to be that "Queequeg is forgotten like yesterday's newspaper" (148). Does the fact that Queequeg largely disappears as a figure in Ishmael's story mean that he does not matter to him?

Lawrence sees the "cozy loving pair's" beginnings, but contends that in the face of this, Queequeg, at bottom, simply does not *mean* anything to Ishmael. To my mind, we should take Ishmael's reference to Queequeg as "my own inseparable twin brother" (255) quite seriously, and not only as a claim of fraternity, but something more. Both Ishmael and Queequeg are orphans in the world, and each finds a point of departure in his desire to experience it in all of its magnitude. While Lawrence pays particular attention to the

ritual whereby Queequeg and Ishmael become bosom-friends, he is silent on Ishmael's uncanny feelings and recollection that marks the inauguration of their friendship. Ishmael awakes from the most peaceful sleep to find "Queequeg's arm thrown over [him] in the most loving and affectionate manner" (36). The tattooed arm blends into a blanket covering them, and Ishmael explains, "this same arm of his, I say, looked for all the world like a strip of that patchwork quilt [...] My sensations were strange. Let me try to explain them" (37). What follows is an intensely personal memory of the most uncanny mood. He recounts being punished as a child by being sent to bed in the early afternoon (on the summer solstice no less!) for what seemed an unendurable amount of time:

I opened my eyes, and the before sun-lit room was now wrapped in outer darkness. Instantly I felt a shock running through all my frame; nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine. My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bed-side. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken. I knew not how this consciousness at last glided away from me; but waking in the morning, I shudderingly remembered it all, and for days and weeks and months afterwards I lost myself in confounding attempts to explain the mystery. Nay, to this very hour, I often puzzle myself with it. (37-8)

There is much that can be said of this, but for our purposes it must suffice to point out the way in which Queequeg is associated with the core of Ishmael's awakened consciousness. This memory, the only thing we hear of Ishmael's childhood, perhaps articulates a movement *away* from childhood, as time itself and darkness press in upon him. Time bleeds into eternity in the same way that Queequeg bleeds into the blanket and Ishmael. Minus the terror, this uncanny feeling of "a supernatural hand placed in mine" is given over to his immediate bond with Queequeg. "The Monkey-Rope" specifically endeavors to press upon us once more the way in which Ishmael is bound to Queequeg. Attached by a line and hovering over death, Ishmael calls it a "humorously perilous business for the both of us," musing, "my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two" (256). So though one may desire to hear more of Queequeg in the narrative, to what extent does he truly disappear? To say that Ishmael only engages in an abstract and disengaged form of reading does not do justice to his friendship or the way in which he is open to the world in all its fullness.

It is important to be clear about just this point before approaching Queequeg as a figure of reading. The pattern of Ishmael's intensifying focus when encountering the unfamiliar is bound up and invested in the very core of his identity. Building on Gadamer's crucial point about memory and experience, Charles Taylor explains, "Experience is that wherein our previous sense of reality is undone, refuted, and shows itself as needing to be reconstituted" (128). It is exactly this kind of breakdown and reconstitution that Ishmael embodies. Ishmael's initial apprehensiveness about his mysterious bedfellow rises to a fever pitch, and reaches its climax with his hiding in terror as Queequeg enters the room and sets about performing his evening rituals:

I am no coward, but what to make of this head-peddling purple rascal altogether passed my comprehension. Ignorance is the parent of fear, and being completely nonplussed and confounded about the stranger, I confess I was now as much afraid of him as if it was the devil himself who had thus broken into my room at the dead of night. In fact, I was so afraid of him that I was not game enough just then to address him, and demand a satisfactory answer concerning what seemed inexplicable in him. (34)

Ishmael cannot make sense of Queequeg and his bizarre behavior. The situation looks impossible: he must spend the night, sharing his bed with a cannibal. He brings certain taken for granted assumptions to bear on the situation, which make Queequeg appear all the more hostile and foreign. But after the initial terror, some coaxing, and a kindly gesture from Queequeg, Ishmael asks: "What's all this fuss I have been making about [...] the man's a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" (36). Ishmael turns in and claims that he "never slept better in [his] life" (36).

The comedic grace of these unfolding events can make it easy to lose sight of the serious sense in which Ishmael's background understanding is dismembered and reconstituted. His previous disposition no longer makes sense in the light of his experience with Queequeg, and with Queequeg's arm around him, "all the past night's events soberly recurred, one by one, in fixed reality, and then I lay only alive to the comical predicament" (38). When Ishmael says that as he recalled all the events he was only alive to the comedy of them, he shows how he has attained a new standpoint. All of the fuss he had made about his exotic bunkmate, and the prejudices that informed it,

shows itself as having no rational basis. In this respect, Ishmael's friendship with Queequeg is formative. The effect of becoming "bosom friends" is not at all inconsequential:

I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it.

There he sat, his very indifference speaking a nature in which there lurked no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits [...] I'll try a pagan friend, thought I, since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy. (56)

Ishmael's new friendship marks a movement away from the social niceties of the shore, and a deeper valuation of what real friendship might entail. Rosenberry alludes to a similar possibility in a more limited scope when he remarks, "The very New England reserve that gave [the humor] its dryness is repeatedly victimized by it" (*Comic Spirit* 103). This may be true, yet it is not only because Ishmael "takes no prisoners" with his humor; Ishmael uses humor especially to bring out the limitations of his own viewpoint—and the prevailing view of the land itself. When setting out for a walk with Queequeg down to the wharf, Ishmael notes how the "landlord, as well as the boarders, seemed amazingly tickled at the sudden friendship which had spring up between me and Queequeg—especially as Peter Coffin's cock and bull stories had previously so much alarmed me" (60-1). He also claims "the people stared; not at Queequeg so much—for they were used to seeing cannibals like him in their streets,—but at seeing him and me upon such confidential terms" (61). It is as if Ishmael now stands on the outside looking in. What is strange to him now is the narrow-mindedness of those gawking at them. During this walk, Queequeg tells Ishmael a story of how he first thought to use a

wheelbarrow by carrying it on his shoulders. When Ishmael asks "Didn't the people laugh?" it prompts a second story from Queequeg concerning a naval captain who presumptuously washed his hands in a ceremonial punch bowl during his sister's wedding feast: "what you tink now?—Didn't our people laugh?" (62). Ishmael persistently undermines the certainties of the shore through humor.

Thus, another way of thinking about the formative effect Queequeg has on Ishmael is to attend to the importance of self-ridicule in Ishmael's voice. Rosenberry says that Ishmael takes up the roles of both goat and trickster, and points to his comic graciousness in spending and being spent (*Comic Spirit* 94-5). Even as Ishmael sets up the comedic farce with Queequeg he seems to make fun of himself by exaggerating his own sententious and grandiose civility:

"Landlord," said I, going up to him as cool as Mt. Hecla in a snow storm,—
"landlord, stop whittling. You and I must understand one another, and that too without delay. I come to your house and want a bed; you tell me you can only give me half a one; that the other half belongs to a certain harpooneer. And about this harpooneer, whom I have not yet seen, you persist in telling me the most mystifying and exasperating stories, tending to beget in me an uncomfortable feeling towards the man whom you design for my bedfellow—a sort of connexion, landlord, which is an intimate and confidential one in the highest degree. I now demand of you to speak out and tell me who and what this harpooneer is, and whether I shall be in all respects safe to spend the night with him. And in the first place, you will be so good as to unsay that story about selling his head, which if true I take to be good evidence that this

harpooneer is stark mad, and I've no idea of sleeping with a madman; and you, sir, *you* I mean, landlord, *you*, sir, by trying to induce me to do so knowingly, would thereby render yourself liable to a criminal prosecution."

(31-2)

It is hard to read this passage without feeling that Ishmael is giving us something of a caricature of *himself*. Thus, the "set up" of the episode shows traces of an insight attained at the conclusion of it. Ishmael knows that he himself is the basic punchline of his joke. Still, what he ends up ridiculing more than anything is his now absurd presumption at the start of it. While many have commented on the comedic quality of Ishmael's voice, much remains to be said about how his humor and memory are related. How is it that he can seem by times so absurd—or even just plain daft—only then to utter sagacious and poetic thoughts, expressing them with the most beautiful words? Perhaps part of understanding this unevenness demands that we be attentive to the way that Ishmael pokes fun at himself and is engaged in self-caricature in his recollections.

The larger point I am making here, however, pertains to the way Ishmael shows himself as receding from the concerns of the shore by accommodating himself to what was previously foreign and unknown. He manages to make himself social with many of the "little horrors" of his early adventures. Nevertheless, he shows how these experiences initially do violence to, and then become fused with, the totality of his self-understanding. His vision narrows, intensifies, and quite often shows itself to be meaningfully altered as a result of these encounters. His dismemberment and reconstitution form a pattern relative to the foreign and the strange as they appear in the shore chapters. Of course, there are many other moments which could be examined in this regard. Father Mapple's

challenging sermon, delivered from his peculiar and isolated pulpit (which Ishmael feels warrants a chapter of its own), clearly makes a deep impression on him. Also, Ishmael's face-to-face encounter with the possibility of his own death in the chapel marks a genuine disruption of his self-understanding, however short-lived. In *all* of these encounters, however, Ishmael is able to reconcile himself to the unknown. Thus, the essential movement of the shore chapters lies in the comedic nature of the unfolding events. The comedy might even be described as "dramatic" in the sense that its recurring action is a movement from fragmentation to concordance. What looks to be impossible or irreconcilable to Ishmael is resolved in an unexpected harmony. Ishmael can make an accommodation with the foreboding painting that captures him involuntarily, the head-peddling cannibal he is to bunk with, and the possibility of his own death even! Such a pattern recurs in more trivial examples as well, such as Ishmael's "Christian idolatry" with Yojo and Queequeg; successfully passing Queequeg off as a "member of the First Congregational Church" (83) in Bildad's vetting process; even the "clammy reception" and "apparently cheerless prospect" (67) at the Try-Pots follows this movement: "when that smoking chowder came in, the mystery was delightfully explained" (67). If Ishmael shows himself by showing us the moving-picture of how he sees the world, then the comedic movement of the shore is revelatory. What someone laughs at, or what someone "can be social with" can reveal a great deal about that person; what someone "cannot be social with," or what someone *cannot* laugh at, also discloses something quite fundamental as well. The comedy of the onshore chapters leaves Ishmael reconciled with each little mystery or "horror"; what Ishmael cannot reconcile himself to, however, is Ahab's mad quest and the questions it evokes.

The first indication that there might be something to which Ishmael cannot reconcile himself comes in the figure of "the prophet." Elijah introduces an unresolved tension in Ishmael's reading process that looks towards his irreconcilable experience in Ahab. On first glance, it might appear that Elijah functions as an archetypal oracular figure: he gives warning; he foreshadows events that are yet to come. However, Elijah can also be seen to function on a deeper level in Ishmael's vision in a manner that engages some of the core questions of the voyage. Elijah's mysterious effect originates with his eerie appearance and gestures, which catch Ishmael so off-guard that he attempts to "to gain a little more time for an uninterrupted look at him" (87). Ishmael's vision instantly narrows to address the uncanny. Having shipped with the Pequod, Ishmael and Queequeg are greeted with a question: "anything down there about your souls?" (87). Elijah's appearance comes abruptly as a break in the action. Ishmael has chosen the Pequod, and he and Queequeg have bound themselves to their course; Elijah interjects as they are "sauntering away from the water, for the moment each occupied with his own thoughts" (86). Elijah's interjection also follows on the heels of an image of Bildad overlooking the workers and now and then stopping "to pick up a patch or save an end of the tarred twine, which otherwise might have been wasted" (86). The imagery moves from the everyday and the mundane to the supernatural in an instant. Bildad, whose concern with spiritual matters consists only in a stodgy parsimony, seems totally incommensurable to the world of the prophet. Far from being a prosperous Quaker, Elijah is described as "beggar-like" (88), yet his spiritual impact is overwhelming. What Ishmael particularly discerns in him is the "insane earnestness of his manner" (87).

The narrative moves from Ishmael's initial perception of Elijah to an attempt to decipher him through dialogue. As a figure of reading, Elijah is indeterminate; he embodies a persistent uncertainty or "undecidability" for Ishmael. The effect originates with Elijah's uncanny appearance and gestures, all present within his first utterance: "Aye, the Pequod—that ship there,' he said, drawing back his whole arm, and then rapidly shoving it straight out from him, with the fixed bayonet of his pointed finger" (87). In a sense, Elijah's prophetic words mimic this gesture of eerie pointing, drawing attention through emphasis more than anything else. Elijah continually plays with the things that Ishmael thinks he knows about. Every time Ishmael tries to make sense of his mysterious words, Elijah hints at the inadequacy of this process. Such an attitude is present in his "solemnly derisive sort of laugh" (87) as well as his reply to Ishmael's contention that he knows all about the loss of Ahab's leg: "All about it, eh?" (88). These utterances are like so many hints that there is more to the story—or that there are some things that only direct experience can relate. Such a disturbance or complication of the "reading process" manifest in Elijah's incomprehensibility is not without its antecedents, but Elijah's insistence on the shadowy aspect of experience, and his refusal to allow Ishmael to fully rationalize the object of his reading, culminates in Ishmael's ultimate rationalization: "finally as it seemed to me, I pronounced him in my heart, a humbug" (88). Still, despite Ishmael's attempt to be done with Elijah by conceptualizing him as a "humbug," Elijah's words do not leave him, coming back again when the Pequod is well out to sea.

It is significant that such an unresolved and disconcerting character be so intimately connected to experience. Elijah appears as an old veteran sailor, worn out from

many voyages. He is dressed in a "faded jacket and patched trowsers" (86), and Ishmael's description of his face, which small-pox had left "like the complicated ribbed bed of a torrent when the rushing waters have been dried up" (86), serves to illustrate a man who has been weathered and changed by the world. Elijah's focus remains fixed on the deepest questions, as he claims, "I know many chaps that haven't got any [souls],—good luck to 'em; and they are all the better off for it" (87). One plausible reason that a person might be better off without a soul might be that to possess one in this context could mean to suffer experience that much more keenly. It is clear that Elijah knows suffering, and he is twinned with Ahab in this way. His tone as it concerns Ahab is both knowing and obscure; his words hover around the disjunction of that which is known and that which is merely supposed. When Ishmael asks him what he knows of Ahab, Elijah replies, "what did they tell you about him? Say that!" (87). Part of Elijah's special access to Ahab is also evident in his use of the nickname, "Old Thunder," for the sea captain. That Elijah and Ahab are paired is evident not only in their Biblical etymology, but in Elijah's contention that "when captain Ahab is all right, then this left arm of mine will be all right; not before" (87). They each bear some form of physical disfigurement attesting to a kind of spiritual damage as well. Thus, the "prophet" makes his predictions based on what he knows of Ahab's soul—a soul that his own has been bound to. Perhaps the reason that he speaks so cryptically is because he found something so unaccountable there.

Ishmael is blind to Elijah's warning; the rational optimism that pervades his consciousness cannot make sense of him as anything but a "humbug." In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, the prophet Tiresias, who is said to be "versed in everything,/ things teachable and things not to be spoken, things of the heaven and earth-creeping things"

(300-2), cannot be heard precisely because he has been molded by the truth—a truth to which Oedipus is blind. Thus, Tiresias laments, "alas, how terrible wisdom when it brings no profit to the man that's wise!" (316). Elijah contends that "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; and some sailors or other must go with him, I suppose" (88). Though his words of experience signal a more limited claim to prophecy, they still hold a certain sway over Ishmael in their mystical import. Even after denouncing Elijah as mad, Elijah's words echo with Ishmael as he attempts to decipher them. Elijah tells his story—which is really Ahab's story—through fragments of experience that take the form of riddled speech. He asks Ishmael and Queequeg, who purport to know about Ahab, whether they know about "when he lay like dead for three days and nights; nothing about that deadly skrimmage with the Spaniard afore the altar in Santa?—heard nothing of that, eh? Nothing about the silver calabash he spat into? And nothing about his losing his leg last voyage, according to the prophecy?" (87). The imagery here is as fertile and imaginative as it is incomplete and nebulous, conjuring an evil ritual that perhaps finds its logical expression in the "murderous chalices" (142) the sailor's drink from when Ahab binds them to his purpose. These strange strands of experience—not fully comprehended by Ishmael or the reader—are woven into the uncertain picture of Ahab.

Ishmael's encounter with Elijah forms part of a larger pattern of experience on shore, and many of his meaningful memories seem to invoke a kind of "mystical experience." For example, consider the painting at the Spouter-Inn and its magnetic enchantment over Ishmael; the imponderable memorials in the chapel, which bring Ishmael into contact with the possibility of his own death; or the uncanny memory from

childhood that Queequeg rekindles in him. Yet, as a figure of reading, Elijah introduces a more intense and supernatural form of mystical experience. Of all the alarming divinations that Elijah imparts, Ishmael is most taken aback by the revelation of the prophet's name. Without venturing too deeply into the matter, it should be at least mentioned that the significance of scriptural names is respected throughout Melville's text. Ahab, Ishmael, Elijah and Rachel are particularly illuminated by the scriptural tradition that is so often evoked in the narrative's pondering of figures such as Job, Jonah, and Solomon. Elijah is often understood by commentators to be the prophet of Ahab's destruction. Elijah is this and more. In Jewish Mysticism he is sometimes interpreted as a figure of mystical experience, being a mortal who is granted a vision of the place of God: "there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11). Thus, Elijah is privy to the divine mysteries and also a messenger of them; he is a figure of mystical experience in that he somehow comes into contact with the unspeakable, fiery revelation of the immortal realm. And just as theologians have debated Elijah's status as angel, man or both, Elijah's mystical aura introduces a significant challenge to Ishmael's landlike "reading process" and self-understanding by investing his voyage with supernatural possibility.

When Elijah asks, "anything down there about your souls?" he envisions what appeared to be a business contract as a pact with a demonic force. It is this question that leaves him in "a troubled reverie" (88). Having been signed, what so troubles Ishmael is not just Elijah's mysterious hinting, but the possibility that he may indeed be the prophet

of a figure Ishmael cannot hope to comprehend. From this lens, Elijah's unanswered question seems to follow him:

looking back as I did so, who should be seen but Elijah following us, though at a distance. Somehow, the sight of him struck me so, that I said nothing to Queequeg of his being behind, but passed on with my comrade, anxious to see whether the stranger would turn the same corner that we did. He did; and then it seemed to me that he was dogging us, but with what intent I could not for the life of me imagine. (88)

Ishmael describes himself as isolated from Queequeg in this experience of fate closing in. He is haunted by the possibility that his own soul is already bound to its course. This is a question that is supernatural in its interest, but which inflects Ishmael's experience for the rest of his voyage. Even though Elijah is pronounced "a humbug, trying to be a bugbear" (88), Ishmael does not fully reconcile himself to the questions Elijah evokes concerning Ahab. Ishmael is not truly reconstituted into a new wholeness, and part of him remains alert to Elijah's mystery, which demands resolution.

Elijah's utterings sketch a cryptic and foreboding outline of what Ahab might be. Ishmael's attempts to make sense of the old sea captain are refused by Elijah and shown to be wanting, just as they were with Peleg: "Lost by a whale! Young man, come nearer to me: it was devoured, chewed up, crunched" (72). The indefinite sketch of Ahab that Ishmael receives arouses a peculiar sensation in him: "[it] filled me with a certain wild vagueness of painfulness concerning him. And somehow, at the time, I felt a sympathy and sorrow for him, but I don't know for what" (79). While present only indirectly, Ahab is the very source of this bizarre mixture of feelings. When Ishmael finally does glimpse

Ahab, he exclaims "reality outran apprehension" (108). Not long after, the narrative first starts shifting to drama. Here Cambon writes,

Ishmael is the artist in the act of telling us, and struggling to understand, *his crucial experience*. When his autobiography becomes the history of the *Pequod* and Ahab, he is liberated from his 'hypos' for the second time, and in a deeper sense: he attains the liberation of imaginative objectivity. Thus his vanishing from the stage after a certain point does not constitute a breach of poetical continuity, but a dialectical movement that reproduces and expands the repeated transition from narrative to drama, from memory to visionary actuality, from conjuring subjectivity to conjured objectivity. (523, emphasis added)

There is something in the Ahab encounter that is so overwhelming, and so beyond comprehension, that Ishmael needs to recreate and structure his experience through drama. Cambon's sense that Ishmael's memory is engaged in "conjuring" the tragedy of Ahab seems to capture this movement, and it is a term I will continue to employ in my analysis. Cambon insists that Ahab's story is Ishmael's "crucial experience," and makes this point mainly so as to explain the apparent formal discontinuity of the work. My argument is that this crucial experience is part of a larger continuity in the way Ishmael's vision works. Ishmael has several smaller "adventures" in Gadamer's sense, but Ahab is the ultimate source of "adventure" in the narrative. This crucial experience not only brings about Ahab's tragedy as "conjured objectivity," but it says something quite profound about Ishmael's own life. For him, Ahab's action, and the dark vision which

undergirds it, cannot be reconciled to the rational optimism of the shore; thus, this action is relived over and over again.

The conjured objectivity that Ishmael brings to life undoubtedly strays from a narrative of "true facts"; it requires Ishmael to imagine scenes or moments to which he would have no access. Yet the demand for an account of "true events" or narration of facts is one that Ishmael comes to see as suspect. Consider his remark about Kokovoko, Queequeg's native land: "It is not down in any map; true places never are" (59). Furthermore, Ishmael's relativistic humor undermines the certainties of the shore to such an extent that science itself comes to be understood as a way of "being social" with the world—a comportment which tries to render an ultimately unintelligible world intelligible. Absolutely central to his disposition of optimism is Ishmael's "rational" attitude towards the world; his attempts to be social with all the horrors of his early adventures involve precisely this sort of rational optimism. In this way, scientific rigor comes to be seen as a sheltering, and thus falls under the purview of the land itself. Ahab curses it as a "vain toy; and cursed be all the things that cast man's eyes aloft to that heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him" (378). Ishmael's own scientific exercises are rife with farce, and serve only to highlight the incomprehensibility of the whale:

Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable. If then, Sir William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant's face, in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can. (275)

Rosenberry describes what has been "called the 'ceteological logical center' of the book [as] a gigantic zoological lark in which information, poetry, and jest are almost indistinguishably mixed" (*Comic Spirit* 107). And indeed, the "Cetology" chapter is one that has puzzled (and stalled) many a reader of *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael's means of categorizing whales by their "folio size," and equation of whales with dusky books, ridicules the arbitrary schematization of scientific mastery. Human science is shown to be a significantly limited endeavor, and one that is often too pleased with its own machinations. Thus, it is rather hard to see what D.H. Lawrence had in mind when characterizing Ishmael as a kind of unfeeling, scientific automaton. Ishmael shows himself as precisely not processing the world in terms of atomic facts, but rather as a meaningful encounter. The "truth" of Ahab cannot be rendered simply in factual explanation.

Yet why was this experience so crucial for Ishmael? Sewall ascribes the shift from the narrative mode to the dramatic as Melville's confidence that: "by now [...] the bridge was whole and firm between the world of his readers and the tragic world of his imaginings" (Sewall 95). According to this interpretation, Ishmael is disposable and serves only to help lead the reader into deeper waters. Yet the shift towards the Ahab tragedy has its own logic with reference to Ishmael himself. Before the crucial scene of Ahab's declaration of his unfathomable course in "The Quarter-Deck," Ishmael ends his discussion on the mast-head, conceding, "Let me make a clean breast of it here, and frankly admit that I kept but sorry guard. With the problem of the universe revolving in me, how could I[?]" (135). Thus, Ishmael presents himself as existing fundamentally in an unbounded "space of questions" at the very juncture where Ahab becomes fully

present. Ahab fits into the pattern of Ishmael's vision by presenting him with an intractable problem. Ishmael's own individuality recedes into the drama he recreates, and when the narration resurfaces, Ishmael comes back to himself in a different light:

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. (152)

It is in Ishmael's openness where Ahab's greatness finds articulation. Here, Melville gives the hero and the poet to one another. The transition to drama marks a moment when the focus of Ishmael's attention becomes wholly determined. He relinquishes the autobiographical mode and his story becomes Ahab's. He becomes a choric witness to Ahab's action.

Chapter Five: In Awe; the Tragedy of Ahab

"But when I have to think about Abraham I am virtually annihilated" —Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling (62).

There has been much reference to the tragedy of Ahab thus far, but perhaps like the early impressions of Ahab which Ishmael receives, many of the details have been hinted at, but not fully elaborated. Thus, first I will aim to establish that Ahab's story *is* a tragedy, and in just what sense it is. Then I will move on to explain why Ahab demands tragedy, and also how the tragedy can be understood to fit into the pattern of Ishmael's vision discussed above. By following this line of argument I will attempt to illuminate Ishmael's function as a "choric witness," and why it does not make much sense to think of him as a "narrative hero" as Yu and others contend.

On some level, this whole argument stems from the effect of Melville's peculiar form, which I argue unites the concerns of tragedy and autobiography. As I have shown, the combination of these genres has a strong source in Melville's own fascination with life-writing and tragedy around the time of his whaling book's composition. It is in this light that I have addressed the supposed problem of Ishmael's presence on shore and his subsequent "disappearance" in the Ahab drama. As I have explained, Ishmael's autobiographical consciousness, and his persistent act of self-interpretation grounds the voice of narration throughout. By attending to the continuity of Ishmael's voice, I have traced a pattern of vision that is developed on land, which shows Ishmael receding from the grounded certainties of the shore. The way Ishmael interrogates his experience with the foreign and unfamiliar establishes a basis for thinking about his more intensive encounter with Ahab, which will pull Ishmael out into the depths of the ocean.

Ishmael's recreation of Ahab's quest through the conventions of tragedy helps to clarify his peculiar relationship to Ahab. For instance, he experiences pity for his captain because of a largely unconscious identification with the awful questions that Ahab raises. Ahab's challenge sets itself against the inscrutable malice of nature, questioning the possibility of relation and meaning as such. Ishmael maintains that there is something in this dark intuition that seems unspeakably true, and the power of this vision is made manifest by the spell it casts over the rest of the crew. Yet Ishmael also sees the terrible nature of Ahab's act in its tragic reversal, and thus he recognizes that however heroic Ahab's aim may be, his pursuit, instead of extinguishing the source of human abandonment, becomes a cause of it. Ishmael is struck with both the truth and mistake of Ahab's action and is unable to reconcile these two opposing sides of his tragic hero.

Thus, the many interpretations that reckon Ishmael as a hero and foil to his captain can make it sound like Melville was having a good laugh at the romantics and not much more in *Moby-Dick*. The book would be the story of that ridicule through the broken figure of Ahab. Insofar as commentators represent him in these terms they highly underestimate the force of romanticism in Melville's own writing, for as Yu remarks,

Scholars have often noted that Melville [...] reacted against the Romantic spirit in general. But the truth is that Melville was basically Romantic as much as he was counter-Romantic. And precisely because of this he was more acutely aware of inner conflicts in Romanticism and more than other Romantic[s] dived deeply in quest of survival and almost succeeded. (111-2)

Though not simply a "narrative device," Ishmael is also not to be understood as a "narrator hero" either. Ishmael is a chorus that experiences and is transformed by Ahab's

act. In its autobiographical mode, then, *Moby-Dick* traces Ishmael's inner-voyage; seen in this way, Ahab is Ishmael's most significant "adventure" in Gadamer's sense of the term. Seen in its tragic mode, *Moby-Dick* consists of a single action centered around Ahab, and Ishmael presents himself as a choric witness to that action. Ahab's tragedy brings to light the groundlessness of Ishmael's earlier identity and sets Ishmael's act of self-interpretation in motion through writing.

It is important, then, when addressing Ahab's tragedy, to remember that it appears within the context of Ishmael's subjectivity outlined above. In this sense, the novel, as Alfred Kazin writes, "is not so much a book *about* Captain Ahab's quest for the whale as it is an experience *of* that quest" (8). Ishmael's accepts his captain as a tragic hero, and his reimagining of Ahab in these terms is central to the experience of his quest; Ishmael's experience of Ahab *is* the tragedy of *Moby-Dick*, and any attempt to speak of the aesthetic effect of Ahab's tragedy "taken in itself" must be misguided in this sense. For example, Sedgwick asserts that Ahab's tragedy "inspires terror as does no work in the language outside of Shakespeare. But it fails to inspire pity" (134). Yet Ishmael experiences both pity and terror in Ahab. The condition for Ishmael's pity lies in his deep-seated intuition that the cosmic questions that his captain demands of the seemingly godless universe are in some sense justified. While Ishmael may never be able to understand why Moby Dick was the receptacle or "pasteboard mask" for all the malignancy and abandonment of the world, he cannot shake the sense in which Ahab may have come into contact with vital truth: "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught" (159). Ishmael shows himself to still be caught

up with the irreconcilable challenge Ahab invokes. In fluctuating between everyday experience and plumbing the dark depths of his existence, Ishmael reveals a state of being that is neither at home in Ahab's mad quest, nor content on land away from such cares, but stuck between two worlds. He cannot simply dismiss the questions that his captain's act has generated or release himself from their obsessive demands. His linear narrative breaks off and circles around tragic action in an attempt to come to grips with it.

It is beyond question that *Moby-Dick* incorporates many diverse elements of tragedy. The use of soliloquy, stage directions, oracular figures, the persistent invocation of fate or destiny, the "satyr play" performed by the crew, and the plot arc tracing a doomed hero's fall—all of these contribute to the tragic aura of Melville's book. Milton Millhauser notes that "The term 'tragic' is applied to aspects of the book by many critics, but generally in a more or less metaphorical sense—attributing gravity and profundity to the manner of its telling—rather than as a definition of form" (Millhauser 528). This more or less informal use of the term in one way is not so far off the mark. As alluded to in my second chapter, Melville viewed his own work as involved in a shared enterprise with Shakespeare particularly in terms of what he understood as the "dark interiority" of tragic truth. And certainly Shakespeare's influence can be felt in the sheer verbosity, if not the penetrating insight, of numerous dark soliloquies throughout the narrative. Yet, there is a deeper and more concrete connection to tragedy that has not been discussed in Melville scholarship adequately. As Patricia Robertson rightly observes, "The profound influence of Shakespeare and of Elizabethan tragedy on the structure, language, and development of character in *Moby-Dick* has been well established by critics such as Olson, Matthiessen, Sedgwick, and Rice. But Melville's use of the chorus derived from

Greek drama” (61). Moreover, the function of the chorus which Robertson describes relies on something even more fundamental: the action itself can be understood in terms of ancient Greek tragedy. Millhauser contends that

the pattern of tragedy is realized with a curious exactness. I speak here not merely of the temper, the tone and movement characteristic of tragedy, but of the formal classic definition [...] The action of the book, for all its wandering course, is, broadly considered, single; it stems from Ahab’s character and leads to his destruction. (528-9)

Ishmael's imaginative recreation of Ahab's singular action is what constitutes the essential tragedy of *Moby-Dick*. For not only is Ahab's action single, but it is a *special* kind of action; it accords in a profound way with what Aristotle prescribes for the making and proper delineation of a tragic action in his *Poetics*. In the most basic terms, Aristotle's contention is that tragedy follows the arc of a single action stretched through time; it traces the fall of a hero that is set in motion by a tragic mistake. My claim is that Ishmael's focus centers on precisely this sort of action, and that his focus is marked by the fullness of drama: Ahab's mistake is his crucial experience—his living encounter with tragedy.

I do not claim, however, that Melville read or followed Aristotle's advice in this regard. If anything, Melville was likely more immersed in Shakespeare's tragic imagination than any theory of tragedy during *Moby-Dick's* composition. Rosenberry argues that both Shakespeare and Melville "were profoundly indifferent to the theory and practice of genres and profoundly concerned with the theory and practice of life" (*Comic Spirit* 128). This much may be true, yet while Shakespeare has sometimes been

understood to have little regard for the classical rules of drama (being one of the worst offenders of the once sacrosanct "three unities"), scholarly work has been done recently to vindicate the enduring power of Aristotle's principles *through* Shakespeare (Baxter 8-19). In other words, though Shakespeare may not have paid much attention to the questionable rules touted as Aristotelian wisdom which were floating around his England, the actual principles found in the *Poetics* can help to illustrate why some of Shakespeare's plays are so powerful. In the same way then, Aristotle proves to be quite helpful in articulating the effect of Ahab's tragedy. And the first clue is that Ahab's action, unlike the narrative that precedes it, is indeed singular.

William Faulkner, once responded to the question "what book would you like most to have written?" with *Moby-Dick*, praising its "Greek-like simplicity" (640). Now, anyone who has read Faulkner side by side with Melville, might not immediately see "simplicity" as Melville's great strength in the comparison. But what Faulkner saw in *Moby-Dick* was its fundamental action and substance, and this he rightly expressed as possessing a "Greek-like simplicity." Thus, while there are many tragic trappings to speak of in Melville's book, the primary sense in which it is a tragedy is in its tracing of a single action, which is announced by Ishmael in his role as a tragedian. It is in Ishmael's intentional sense that I speak of the tragedy of Ahab. Though he spends time raising the practice of whaling to what I would call "epic stature," this is a preliminary move in a larger plan to raise the crew of the Pequod to "tragic stature." It is as he moves to discuss the "Knights and Squires" of the crew, that is, as he introduces the major actors, that Ishmael signals his intention to speak on the nature and destiny of man through the crew itself by "weav[ing] round them tragic graces" (103). At this very juncture he reflects,

Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations; knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men may have mean and meagre faces; but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes. (103)

And though the crew is a part of Ishmael's attempt to speak on the nature of man through tragedy, it becomes clear that the focus of this tragedy is on its hero Ahab.

The transition from personal narration to the immediacy of the Ishmael's conjured tragedy is both gradual and abrupt. The dawn of Ishmael's visionary world, or his full "creative consciousness" (98), as John Young deems it, demands the question: "how does Melville prepare the reader for the narrator's shifting points of view to make them credible?" (101). My own view, like Young's, is that Ishmael's vision established in the shore chapters prepares the reader for the primal encounter with Ahab. Young helpfully describes the movement onboard as well, noting one early instance where

Ishmael conveys what Starbuck thought about courage by using the speech tag "he thought," but "thought" is immediately qualified by "perhaps." In fact, as Ishmael moves from the description of Starbuck's physical appearance to the analysis of his "inward presentiments," he uses the word "seem" seven times to signal to the reader that his analysis of the first mate's character is largely his own imaginative "construction." (101)

The gradual movement towards Ishmael's total visionary world begins subtly, and slowly drifts towards its actualization like the onset of a dream. Indeed, Ishmael warns his readers at the top of the mast-head of the "opium-like listlessness of [...] unconscious

reverie" (136). But again, Young notes we are prepared for this mystic dream, citing "Queen-Mab," as a comic interlude which not only relates Stubb's strange dream of Ahab to Flask, "But in a highly allusive way [...] also illustrates Ishmael's new role as dramatist: a dramatist who, as if induced by the fairy Queen Mab, stages a dream-like interlude in which the conversation between Stubb and Flask is related" (103). Ishmael walks down the cellar steps of his imagination to its vivid core.

Still, how could "Enter Ahab" not feel abrupt? What is most interesting about the full dramatic rendering of Ahab is that it occurs precisely with Ahab's declaration of his ill-fated course. Though Ahab appears on deck before this dramatic revelation, it serves mainly to bring out his isolated and troubled cast of mind. As Stubb remarks in the "Quarter-Deck," "the chick that's in him pecks the shell. T'will soon be out" (137). There is substantial build up to Ahab's action; he gives the unusual order to send the whole crew aft, "an order seldom or never given on ship-board except in some extraordinary case" (137). It is here where Ahab announces his intent to hunt the white whale, riling the crew up into frenzy, and initially endeavoring to persuade them to raise the whale through a Spanish ounce of gold. But Ahab's ravings soon descend into sobs of suffering, and he exclaims:

Aye, aye! and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up.

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. (139)

Ahab discloses his intent, and his suffering which leads to it, but his real declaration is of something more like a "metaphysical act"—and indeed, one commentator refers the

tragedy rather aptly as an "ontological drama" (Wenke 709). The true nature of Ahab's action is revealed as not merely a hunt for the white whale that took his leg, but an attempt to "strike through the mask" (140) at whatever thing might lurk beyond the "unreasoning" surface that the white whale embodies:

Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.
(140)

The white whale embodies the impenetrable seeming malice of nature itself, and it is in this sense that Ahab's action is cosmic in its scope. Ahab's enemy is not a whale, but the cosmos he finds himself in. This very declaration of Ahab's metaphysical act coincides with the fullness of Ishmael's visionary world, marked by the dramatic use of stage directions. Like earlier figures of experience, Ishmael is struck meaningfully by the challenge that Ahab presents, and in his memory he relives it, and rereads it. But he also transforms his encounter with Ahab into the "conjured objectivity" of the tragic form in his attempt to understand his ill-fated captain. Ahab's "metaphysical act" is harder to fathom than the sublime, the shuddering thought of cannibalism, or even the absolute unknown residing in death.

I want to claim that the "Quarter-Deck" not only declares but *constitutes* the fundamental action or "mistake" of Ahab's tragedy. This might not be readily apparent since Ahab's action can be seen as stretched over time, culminating, one would think, in his attempt to slay the white whale. However, it is with his declaration of action that

Ahab brings about his own binding to it (as well as the crew's). After delivering his metaphysical challenge to the cosmos, Ahab cries for "The measure!" (141), and the scene turns into an eerie ritual where the crew and the mates perform the binding of oaths. Ahab cries, "Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!" (142). It is here where the crew commit themselves to Ahab's quest, and it is precisely this oath he refers to much later in the narrative when he proclaims in response to a "half mutinous cry" (383): "All your oaths to hunt the White Whale are as binding as mine; and heart, soul, and body, lungs and life, old Ahab is bound" (383). An oath is a odd sort of thing, for you can freely take up an oath, but subsequently your relationship to this free choice is one which is bound. And perhaps this was the "pact of souls" that Elijah had warned Ishmael about on shore. As has been said, it is this revelation of Ahab's action, and its mystic binding, that Ishmael seems to think requires tragedy. The singularity of this action seems captured aptly in the gruesome harpoon that Ahab has forged especially for it. Ahab's impossible action—and even he on some level understood that his "object [was] mad" (157)—implies its inevitable and fateful end. Thus, Starbuck can warn his captain: "I ask thee not to beware of Starbuck; thou wouldst but laugh; but let Ahab beware of Ahab" (362). In the end, Ahab is pulled under the sea by the rope of his own harpoon. It is not simply a play on words to say that this action is a "missing of the mark," or a serious mistake. This singular action becomes the definitive focal point of Ishmael's narration.

Yet although I could not agree more with Millhauser that the essential tragedy of *Moby-Dick* consists in the singularity of its action, I am dubious of his contention that this action "stems from Ahab's character" (529). While Millhauser's claim seems to jibe

with a widespread understanding of the "fatal flaw" which is often said to preside within tragedy, George Whalley explains that, for Aristotle:

if the protagonist had by nature a "flaw" that steered him more or less inevitably into a fatal situation, he would be a mechanism and predictable to us, incapable of inducing terror or recognition; he would be repulsive or pathetic merely; he would no longer be a man-of-action in action shaping himself towards his telos in this action, but a man who—having fallen into mechanism—was no longer capable of discovering his "form" in and through action. (27)

Much of the power of Ahab's action stems from its status as a mistake, and in this sense Ahab's character should be seen to stem from his action rather than the other way around. For instance, Ishmael imagines Ahab alone in his cabin declaring, "What I've dared, I've willed, and what I've willed, I'll do!" (143). Even when Ahab's action remains hidden before the crucial "Quarter-Deck" scene, it has been well set in motion. Through Elijah's history of Ahab's suffering, and the captain's silent brooding while provisions are made for the ship's journey, the action is prepared in Ahab's mind. It is later suggested that Ahab helped to smuggle "five dusky phantoms" on board, fire-worshipping harpooners which serve his desire to personally pursue in the chase as captain; in other words, the Pequod has in a certain sense already been commandeered, and the voyage redirected. Thus, one can say that the action is both single and primary, and also that it appears near its climax. In this, the setup for the action, as Aristotle would have it, appears largely outside the tragedy itself. The action from the point of its declaration onwards only intensifies to a fever pitch. Ahab is said to sleep with "clenched hands," sometimes

"burst[ing] from his state room, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire. Yet these, perhaps, instead of being the unsuppressable symptoms of some latent weakness, or fright at his own resolve, were but the plainest tokens of its intensity" (169).

Interestingly, Ishmael depicts this tortured Ahab not as "the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale," but as an embodiment of the "eternal, living principle or soul in him," remarking that "the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul" (169). It is this determination to pursue the white whale relentlessly, which Ahab attaches himself to through oath, such that Ishmael can describe the transition thus:

"before living agent, now became the living instrument" (157). Directly following the crew's ritual oath is a soliloquy from Ahab where he reflects on the now willed character of his action. It is at this point when he can speak of it as already set in motion by the binding of oaths: "Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! [...] The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run" (143).

But this oath, or these iron rails, should not belie—rather they should emphasize!—the very real sense in which Ahab is making a moral choice. And Ahab's mistake is to be found in the action itself, rather than merely in his person. Ausband in "The Whale and the Machine" lists the many mechanical metaphors attributed to Ahab, yet the vast majority of these metaphors generally serve to highlight the coldness of his character and resolve, rather than describe anything about his agency. In this instance, the iron rails emphasize the inevitable course that Ahab steers. Yet though Ahab's rhetoric indicates the totally willed character of his action, elsewhere he describes it as "immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean

rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders" (418). Though he understands himself as committed to his action, Ahab still struggles to comprehend his decision as the narrative proceeds. He asks, "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (406). More and more Ahab comes to view fate as presiding over him, but even here his own indomitable will seems present to the very end: "to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee." (426). Ishmael, the tragedian, takes pains to demonstrate the sense in which his captain's action is "both inevitable and free" (Whalley 25). Thus, the course of the Pequod appears willed yet fated, both chosen and unavoidable. It is in this sense that I do not think it is at all an exaggeration to conceive of Ahab's tragic action along the lines of what George Whalley has called "pathos-as-praxis." In the *Poetics*, "Aristotle says that a pathos is a praxis, an 'act' [...]. The paradoxical term *pathos-as-praxis* seems to imply that the crucial event is to be seen both as suffered and as inflicted" (Whalley 90). Even Ahab's body seems to radiate with this peculiar status, for in one way or another, he seems marked by God: it remains unclear whether the "slender rod-like mark" (108), stretching his entire frame like lightning splitting down a tree, was a mark received from birth or the result of Ahab's own action. This ambiguity concerning Ahab's desperate quest, whether it should be thought of primarily as something willed or brought upon him from without, is never fully resolved. Thinking about Ahab's action in this way—as something both suffered and inflicted—helps in part to explain why Ishmael is so transfixed by it, and why he is unable to wholly justify or condemn Ahab.

Yet in what sense exactly can we say that this act possesses a "moral quality"? If we take Aristotle seriously in this context, we would first need to believe that Ahab is

capable of making a moral choice—that he is not simply demonic or mechanistic. In this context, Ishmael actually pre-empts any dismissal of Ahab's action which would see it simply the result of madness by saying quite carefully that "in that broad madness, not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished" (157). But Ishmael also wants to present his captain in such a way that prevents any simple judgement which renders him evil, and in that, invites no further reflection. In a similar context, Harold Bloom remarks that most do "not come to love Ahab, and yet there is a serious disproportion between the reader's awe of, and admiration for, Ahab, and the moral dismissal of the monomaniacal hero by many scholarly critics" (3). The tendency Bloom describes is certainly at odds with Ishmael's tragic presentation. One way to think about tragedy is to say with Joe Sachs that "it washes our pity clean of sentimentality and our fear clean of self-righteousness" (13). For Sachs, Aristotle's *Poetics* demonstrates a sense in which these conflicting emotions are held in tension and proportioned towards the tragic hero's action so that it remains balanced between excessive aversion or partiality. This process is not one that finds its source in a "fatal flaw," but is entirely dependent on a figure that is "both responsible agent and an innocent victim" (9). Thus, Aristotle remarks that disaster befalling an exceedingly virtuous or capable individual "is not terrible or pitiful but [simply] repulsive" (1453a). In the same way, "the thoroughly evil man should not fall from good fortune into bad, for such a scheme would arouse 'sympathy' [perhaps] but not pity or terror" (95). It is fairly clear in Aristotle's account that the kind of action required for tragedy to be effective depends upon it happening to the "better kind of person," and tracing an arc "from good fortune to bad, [...] not because of depravity but because of a serious mistake" (1453a). I argue that Ishmael sees Ahab's tragedy in just these terms. He

continually attempts to underscore the way in which his captain arouses both pity and terror in his heart.

Despite Ahab's sometimes fiendish aspect, or moments where he seems to resemble Milton's Satan, Ahab is not a "thoroughly evil man." And while "evil" is certainly entertained as a possibility for understanding Ahab's *action*, Ishmael refuses any attempt to render Ahab's person in such a determinate form. Rosenberry argues that

Ahab fulfills the classic role of the tragic hero as precisely as if Aristotle, substituting the ocean and the deck for his accustomed stage, had dictated the terms. By virtue of absolute authority in both his office and his person, the captain is noble, a man of highest consequence. Moreover, he is, though austere, a good rather than an evil man. ("Epic Romance" 159)

Still, it must be admitted, the problem of evil (both metaphysical and moral evil) lies at the heart of *Moby-Dick*, and it undeniably swarms about Ahab in the possibility of a demonic pact with Fedallah. What is important to see is that such a possibility does not touch his person as such, which is made evident in the way Ishmael presents the tragedy. Perhaps we should consider Ishmael's most grim account of this state of affairs:

Here, then, was this grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world, at the head of a crew, too chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals—morally enfeebled also, by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right-mindedness in Starbuck, the invulnerable jollity of indifference and recklessness in Stubb, and the pervading mediocrity in Flask. (158)

On the face of it, Ishmael has set himself a large task if he wishes to impart heroic stature to this band of bloodthirsty renegades. Nevertheless, the implicit focus on the moral universe, even as the Pequod seems on the whole to be on the wrong end of it, presents a space of moral deliberation. The situation perhaps seems more desperate when Ahab is rendered in specifically diabolical terms, as, for example, when Ishmael first responds to Ahab's Biblical name: "When that wicked king was slain, the dogs, did they not lick his blood?" (78). And yet, Ishmael is reprehended for this remark; Peleg says, "Never say [that] anywhere. Captain Ahab did not name himself. 'Twas the foolish, ignorant whim of his crazy, widowed mother, who died when he was only a twelvemonth old" (78). Peleg's contention seems to be that Ahab is not responsible for the tainted name he received. He cannot simply be understood as a wicked king: "Ahab has his humanities!" (79). Even the pious Starbuck, who describes Ahab's proposed course of action as "vengeance on a dumb brute!" (139), describes his own feelings as "hate with touch of pity! For in his eyes I read some lurid woe would shrivel me up, had I it" (144)—a proportioning of pity and fear proper to the tragic hero.

Ahab is not simply an evil man, and Ishmael complicates any rendering of him in such simple terms. Partly this is established in Ahab's pitiable aspect, but it is also to be found in his nobility of soul. Ishmael addresses the kingly eminence and rank of Ahab's office (taken within its own sphere), and the first thing Ishmael does after hitting the open ocean is make a case for the greatness and dignity of whaling. To him, its value seems evident in terms of its tremendous economic importance, and oil certainly fetched a premium then as it does now. There are many large sums thrown around to establish the strength of this economic fact. But Ishmael also wants to point towards something

strangely heroic in whaling itself—doing battle with leviathan seems the closest thing man has come to slaying dragons. Ishmael uses many kingly comparisons as a way of elevating his material, venturing so far as to claim that "we whalers supply your kings and queens with coronation stuff!" (101). All of this epic stature contributes to an understanding of Ahab's person as well as those of his "Knights and Squires," but as Rosenberry suggests further, Ahab's stature is established "less by virtue of the autocratic prerogatives of his office than by the power of his vision and the force of his will" ("Epic Romance" 161). Stubb, for instance, is so struck by the force of his captain's resolve that he imagines for some unaccountable reason he has been honored by a kick he receives from him in a dream. Likewise, when Stubb is rudely sent back below after requesting that Ahab desist or somehow muffle the sound of his pacing, he reflects, "I don't well know whether to go back and strike him, or—what's that?—down here on my knees and pray for him? Yes, that was the thought coming up in me; but it would be the first time I ever *did* pray" (111). Ahab's intensity seems to be the logical completion of Bulkington's landless stance, which Ishmael earlier admired as godlike: "in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!" (97).

It is this landlessness in particular where Ishmael locates the pitiable aspect of his captain. "The Pipe," for instance, establishes the barrenness of Ahab's plight as he tosses the last vestige of comfort into the sea: "Oh, my pipe! hard must it go with me if thy charm be gone!" (113). Later scenes between Ahab and Starbuck near the height of the action are especially revealing of Ahab's pitiable situation: "That glad, happy air, that winsome sky, did at last stroke and caress him; the step-mother world so long cruel—

forbidding—now threw affectionate arms around his stubborn neck" (405). It is here Ahab admits, "Oh, Starbuck! it is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky. On such a day—very much such a sweetness as this—I struck my first whale—a boy harpooneer of eighteen! Forty—forty—forty years ago!—ago! Forty years on the pitiless sea!" (405). The rigor and privation of Ahab's life at sea constitutes a major part of his spiritual desolation. In scriptural terms, the number forty often signifies an arduous trial or period of spiritual testing. Yet at the end of his forty years, Ahab has received no revelation, and he is willing to risk everything by challenging the very environment in which he has labored to drop its mask and reveal its meaning. In these late and honest interactions, Starbuck sees more deeply into his captain than ever before, calling him, "my Captain! my Captain! noble soul!" (406), and yet through all his protestations to turn back, Ahab's action cannot be deflected. But more than any isolated character trait, the true locus of Ahab's nobility draws its power from his action itself. As Ishmael admits, "in this episode touching Emperors and Kings, I must not conceal that I have only to do with a poor old whale-hunter like him; and, therefore, all outward majestic trappings and housings are denied me" (127). What Ishmael says here is that Ahab's greatness cannot be found on the surface of things, but must be searched for in some inward form: "Oh, Ahab! what shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies, and dived for in the deep, and featured in the unbodied air!" (127). Ahab's greatness, or tragic stature, stems ultimately from his resolute action.

For whatever might be said of Ahab's action, it is undeniably large. Ishmael calls it "an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge" (158), and yet, he does not see it

simply as a desire for *personal* revenge against a particular whale that dismasted his captain, but describes its mad object as:

the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung [...] All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain [...] He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it." (156).

This should give us pause. Ishmael describes Ahab's mission against Moby Dick as not merely a personal vendetta, but a quest to overcome (or at least face) the source of metaphysical evil in the cosmos—"that intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds" (156). Ahab attempts to confront the senseless suffering that he sees gnawing at each human heart: he tells his blacksmith, "Thou should'st go mad, blacksmith; say, why dost thou not go mad? How can'st thou endure without being mad? Do the heavens yet hate thee, that thou can'st not go mad?" (370). Thus, Ishmael presents Ahab as dealing with a problem that belongs to humanity rather than his own particular situation; as Sedgwick puts it, "Ahab is the grand human thing itself. He will not abate one inch of his whole high broad form" (103). In this way, the white whale seems to elicit the perceived failure of theodicy or the very impossibility of its project. Ahab has moved beyond attempting to justify or vindicate the perceived evil he feels and seeks rather to defy its source. His hunt, though brought about by personal contact with Moby Dick, is not

individual strictly speaking, but universal in its aim. As Richard Sewall argues, Ahab "took upon himself what he conceived to be the burden of humanity. He faced the darkness as he saw it [...] Like Job and Lear, he saw his own misfortunes as a sign of the common lot; and like them he struck back" (52). Furthermore, like Job and Lear, Ahab experiences a particular suffering that brings him into conflict with something beyond the human; like them, he shouted into the storm. Ahab's "madness" lies in his insistence to speak, fight, or face the condition of his own being. As Rice puts it, "The madness of Ahab and Lear consists of their attempt to strike a blow for human dignity in spite of the cosmic situation" (Rice 462).

By Melville's time, the search for God had in a certain sense become more popularly a search for God's presence in nature. In 1802, William Paley spoke of the philosophical challenge posed by "*venomous* animals," or what he referred to as the unignorable reality of "the shark's mouth, of the spider's web" (572). In Paley's Deistic world-picture, it cannot be said that the creator did not intend for this reality in nature:

The only question open to us is, whether it be ultimately evil. From the confessed and felt imperfection of our knowledge, we ought to presume, that there may be consequences of this œconomy which are hidden from us; from the benevolence which pervades the general designs of nature, we ought also to presume, that these consequences, if they could enter into our calculation, would turn the balance on the favorable side. (573)

Ahab, of course, is preoccupied with the inscrutable malice to be found in nature, saying "that inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate" (140). Yet unlike Paley, Ahab does not think that we ought to presume a more perfect knowledge would "turn the balance," and he is

not content to sit in such a state of uncertainty regarding the most fundamental questions. Kant would speak of a similar situation in an essay entitled "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy." For him, the traditional project of theodicy attempted to defend the deity from charges of evil and contradiction based on an appeal to God's wisdom to which human agents have no access—thus, it cannot resolve the challenge it raises. There is an urgency in Ahab's desire to comprehend the meaning of his own existence. What does nature communicate in its inscrutable malice? Or does it communicate at all? However demonic or prideful Ahab's quest by times may seem, it is in its own way a desperate search for relation, understanding, or God, and in an important sense this quest's "mad object" must remain indeterminate.

It is difficult to find the language to speak of this, but one way to approach Ahab's object is to note the stark ambiguity of many of his speeches' intended recipients. Sometimes he address the whale directly; other times he seems to shout at God himself; and still others, he screams into an empty storm most of all—nor are these three easily distinguishable in all cases. Ishmael captures this in the "seeming malice" Ahab experienced when his leg was taken "as a mower [reaps] a blade of grass in the field" (156). Thus, Ahab's challenge is addressed either to the principle of some evil and, more pointedly, a consciousness lying behind it, or it is addressed to an evil that has "nothing" behind it at all. We might say in a loose sort of fashion that the evil Ahab seeks to extinguish is potentially "radical" (insofar as it is rooted in a consciousness—in this case, God's conscious willing of such evil), and potentially "banal" (insofar as its existence is fundamentally unreasoning). Ahab refers to exactly this ambiguity when he admits, "Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me [...]"

and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (140). Certainly, this latter "unreasoning" possibility in many ways seems more difficult to fathom. It would require an immense reordering of human understanding to see nature as a blank nothing to which purposes are only falsely attributed. Ishmael imagines this possibly, and notes its almost unthinkable character, when he affirms that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way" (331-2). Ahab's tragedy ends with a vast expanse of ocean which swallows up everything else: "all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (427). The specific figure offered seems particularly appropriate in that it evokes Biblical proportions, but also preserves a sense of "deep time" as well. Thus, Ishmael captures Ahab's abandonment whether it be from God or in nothing. The uncertainty that lingers in Ahab's object sometimes has the form of what might be called a strange sort of "theistic nihilism." Ahab describes the imposition of his own defiant will as standing "in the midst of the personified impersonal" (382), and always his defiance of this cosmic other seems to circle around the possibility of nothingness. Ahab lashes out at whatever might be the source of humanity's suffering and abandonment, even acknowledging (or perhaps being driven by) the possibility that there may be no "source" at all.

Such an encounter is hard to quantify, and admittedly the tragedy of *Moby-Dick* seems to break with Aristotle's account here most of all; Aristotle generally sees the tragic mistake as happening "within a blood relationship" (1452a), usually in the form of "murderous or cruel transactions, such as killings" (1452b) based on some mode of

ignorance. It is hard to say what Aristotle would have made of this mad act of supernatural revenge or its invocation of a cosmos without any evident teleology. Yet even if Ahab's mad object is hard to connect to *The Poetics* in this specific sense, such an object does not stray far from the concerns of ancient tragedy in terms of its direct encounter between man and the "hand of God." It has been said, for instance, that "Sophocles defined tragedy as the encounter of man with more-than-man" (Rosenberry, "Epic Romance" 161), and indeed, the conflict between human and divine law, or "between myth and self-conscious reason, between fate and freedom" (Doull 33) has often been seen as the wellspring of Greek tragedy. Whether this conflict is mostly indirect, for instance, in the violation of sacrosanct burial rites as is the case in *Antigone*, or direct, as in the encounter between god and man which is exemplified in *The Bacchae* through the relationship of Pentheus and Dionysus, it is just this conflict between the human and divine that gives life to the tragic form. Consider Cadmus' response to the destruction which Dionysius wreaks upon the rational world of men: "Gods should not resemble mortals in their anger" (Euripides 1348). This complaint in some ways echoes Job's indictment of Yahweh, which though belonging to a different tradition shares in some of tragedy's primal concerns, for as the chorus judges in *Oedipus at Colonus*, "not to be born is best" (1378). Thus, while Ahab's mad object might appear quite foreign to Aristotle's account of tragic error, the confrontation between man and "more-than-man" which lies at the heart of this mistake is not at all foreign to Greek drama.

Yet Ahab's plight is different from that of the ancients', Job's, or even Lear's, and it is significant that where Aristotle's view of tragedy flags in its descriptive power is precisely where Melville's own view of tragic truth seems to reside. Ahab's action has

been shown to have an Aristotelian "shape," particularly insofar as Ishmael understands it as a special kind of mistake, but its content draws upon the dark interiority that Melville saw animating Shakespeare's tragedies. To put this another way, it is Ahab who "speaks the sane madness of vital truth" ("Mosses" 522), and as Melville wrote to Duyckinck in 1849, "The going mad of a friend or acquaintance comes straight home to every man who feels his soul in him—which but few men do. For in all of us lodges the same fuel to light the same fire. And he who has never felt, momentarily, what madness is has but a mouthful of brains" (*Letters* 83). Here Melville speaks to madness in general, but it is the particular object of Ahab's mad quest which appears to Ishmael as something "terrifically true," something almost unspeakably true. Thus, he attests in "The Whiteness of the Whale" that there were many fearsome aspects of Moby Dick which

could not but occasionally awaken in any man's soul some alarm, [but] there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught. (159)

Certainly it is worth considering the tremendous importance that Ishmael affords the terror which the whiteness of Ahab's mad object evokes, as it is through this intuition or grim "gut-feeling" that Ishmael and others can view Ahab's act as tragic. It is also this intuition, which can never fully be rationalized by the narrative, that changes Ishmael in a

fundamental sense. Everything that follows in the tragedy is seen in the light of Ahab's cosmic challenge.

I read "The Whiteness of the Whale" as Ishmael's attempt to explain the magnetism of Ahab's mad object, and how it was that the crew and he himself were taken up into it. In fact, Ishmael asks just this question as he moves from describing what the whale may have been to his captain and embarks in an attempt to explain what the whale was to him as a crewmember:

How it was that they so aboundingly responded to the old man's ire—by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs; the White Whale as much their insufferable foe as his; how all this came to be—what the White Whale was to them, or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim, unsuspected way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life,—all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go. (158)

Little attention is given to this passage in Melville scholarship. There is an almost unspoken sense in which Ishmael's aporia here is taken to be Melville's need for a literary conceit: how could Ahab have his quest without a crew to aid him? The crew is thus usually understood to be a kind of bystander exploited for a tyrannical purpose, and, if participating at all, doing so from some base, yet ultimately comprehensible, human motive. For instance, Robert Evans describes the crew's quest as "something much simpler and less grand than it is for Ahab: It is a quest to profit financially by satisfying their captain's strange obsession" (202). Is this true? Certainly Ahab begins by offering the crew a Spanish ounce of gold, to which they respond with a hearty "Huzza!" (138),

but the crew only gains its demonic determination when Ahab reveals the deeper layers of his intended act. If Ahab does enact a kind of rough magic in this ritual chapter it must be seen to derive from these later words of power. Does the crew look to their captain with wild eyes, like the "bloodshot eyes of the prairie wolves" (141), because of a desire for gold? Or is this what Ishmael identifies when he claims: "I was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul" (152)? The "wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling" that he experiences leaves him desiring to hear the history of the white whale "with greedy ears" (152). While it is true that the crew does not experience the fullness of Ahab's mad consciousness or the relentlessness of his purpose, Ishmael certainly implies that something deep-seated and predominantly unconscious in them responds to the challenge which Ahab issues to the cosmos. As he asks, "The subterranean miner that works in us all, how can one tell whither leads his shaft by the ever shifting, muffled sound of his pick? Who does not feel the irresistible arm drag?" (158). The crewmen are not simply on their own quest for gold, but they primarily respond to Ahab's action, even if this is principally occurs on a non-rational level. The crewmen bind themselves to Ahab's quest through an ecstatic ritual in which they are brought outside of themselves and their everyday concerns; Ahab's quest plumbs the dark recesses of their collective unconscious.

One way that Ishmael tries to explain the unconscious intuition that might undergird the crew's total participation is in terms of what he deems the striking effect of the color white—or what he calls more specifically the "colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink" (165). When he begins his extensive discussion of whiteness,

Ishmael remarks that "doubtless, some at least of the imaginative impressions about to be presented may have been shared by most men, yet few perhaps were entirely conscious of them at the time" (162). And while there are many latent connotations that Ishmael draws up from this color, his main intent is to articulate the strange terror that whiteness evokes universally; he asks if the color "by its indefiniteness [...] shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?" (165). This, Ishmael protests, is not simply a personal view derived from his own circumstances or some peculiar state of gloom: "thou sayest, methinks this white-lead chapter about whiteness is but a white flag hung out from a craven soul; thou surrenderest to a hypo, Ishmael" (164). Ishmael describes his view of whiteness as something that has a kind of perpetual contact with living beings and which is experienced on some level by all (however much it may be turned away from). Such a terrible intuition is given over to the unconscious through an analogy to nature and its creatures in his example of the young colt:

Tell me, why this strong young colt, foaled in some peaceful valley of Vermont, far removed from all beasts of prey—why is it that upon the sunniest day, if you but shake a fresh buffalo robe behind him, so that he cannot even see it, but only smells its wild animal muskiness—why will he start, snort, and with bursting eyes paw the ground in phrensies of affright? There is no remembrance in him of any gorings of wild creatures in his green northern home, so that the strange muskiness he smells cannot recall to him anything associated with the experience of former perils; for what knows he, this New England colt, of the black bisons of the distant Oregon? (164)

The colt has no personal experience from which he understands what threatens him, but Ishmael contends that, like the color white strikes the soul of man, the colt has an instinctual perception of the evil and abandonment of the world. In an image that seems to invert Dante's vision of the white celestial rose and "the love that moves the sun and the other stars" (33.145), Ishmael describes his terrible suspicion that while "in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright" (164). It is this awful inkling to which Ishmael responds as a member of the crew.

After the declaration of Ahab's action and the crew's binding to it in "The Quarter-Deck," Ishmael offers a series of chapters that share a thematic function: they are all responses. This is also the beginning of a larger trajectory in which Ishmael attempts to respond to Ahab's action. But for the moment, that these four chapters form a series is evident not only in the assumed manner in which they swarm around Ahab's purpose, but in their titles as well, which move from "Sunset" to "Dusk" to "Night-Watch" to "Midnight." The first three chapters are each soliloquies which descend from the captain through his mates, each offering a "response" to the now willed purpose of the Pequod. Starbuck grieves, "My soul is more than matched; she's overmanned" (144); the scene switches to Stubb who laughs and clears his throat, saying, "I've been thinking over it ever since, and that ha, ha's the final consequence. Why so? Because a laugh's the wisest, easiest answer to all that's queer" (145). These are ways of responding to the terrible nature of Ahab's dark intuition, but as will be discussed later, in an important sense the Pequod's mates embody modes of "looking away from" Ahab's act and the dark vision that underlies it.

The descent of responses through rank arrives at midnight to the crew itself in

what Patricia Robertson describes as "a kind of satyr play" (61). This chapter features an odd, "democratic" presentation of the crew, and offers a line to almost each individual as they participate in "true choral fashion, singing and dancing, discuss[ing] girls, drink, food, and sleep" (69). The dreamlike quality of the crew's dark revelry is evinced in the words of one sailor who imagines that the waves of the coming storm dance with the crew, wishing then that "the waves were women, then I'd go drown" (148). The imagery is also Dionysian in its festive spirit and sensuous description of "ripe, bursting grapes" (148). But this satyr play, like the responses of Starbuck and Stubb, is primarily a reflection on, and digestion of, Ahab's act; as the Manxman ominously remarks, "I wonder whether those jolly lads bethink them of what they are dancing over" (148). Yet the point is that the crew is *not* consciously thinking as they dance (a poor way to dance at any rate). What their revelry is about, however, is captured in the Manxman's picturing of the coming storm: "There! the ringed horizon. In that ring Cain struck Abel. Sweet work, right work! No? Why then, God, mad'st thou the ring?" (151). This biblical rendering of Ahab's plight is the culmination of the satyr play, and the last thing said before the storm becomes too strong and breaks up the festivities. Thus, the satyr play is the least conscious, but in a way, the most fundamental response to the declaration and binding of "The Quarter-Deck"; the crew embodies what Ahab says of them himself:

Look! see yonder Turkish cheeks of spotted tawn—living, breathing pictures painted by the sun. The Pagan leopards—the unrecking and unworshipping things, that live; and seek, and give no reasons for the torrid life they feel!

The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale?

Robertson argues that "Melville uses the crew to underline the universality of the quest for the unknowable symbolized on many levels in *Moby-Dick*. The crew is the lowest layer and represents the tragedy of all men" (71). In this way, the crew is figured primarily as "suffering humanity" (63). I would contend, however, that the crew's response remains largely visceral, and is rooted in an intuition that Ahab strikes upon in his mad object.

Thus, Robertson argues that the lesser crew functions as a chorus and that Ishmael is its "coryphaeus", that is, he is the leader of, and predominantly the speaker for, his shipmates. As noted above, this interpretation has a precedent in the work of Charles Olson, who also identifies Ishmael as a chorus. But what does it mean though to speak of a choric role in this context? There are, in fact, a number of traditional functions that the chorus has been thought to serve:

as a spokesman for compromise, giving the community's view against the drastic position of the hero; they were often a lyric commentator on the action [...] giving background information [...] and giving timeless ideals and attitudes for perspective on the current action. [...] The chorus also served as a co-actor in the drama, or as an "ideal spectator." (Robertson 62)

Any number of these functions might be fruitfully applied to Ishmael in his threefold role as narrator, tragedian, and coryphaeus; simply listing them can give one some sense as to why there is a tradition of commentary which relates Ishmael to the chorus. However, I want to make a much more limited and specific claim. It is my view that Ishmael is choric insofar as he is a witness to Ahab's metaphysical act and transformed by it. This is why he recreates Ahab's singular act and tries to view it from so many different

perspectives. Here it may help to have recourse to what Nietzsche says about the chorus in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "The tradition tells us quite unequivocally, that tragedy arose from the tragic chorus, and was originally only chorus and nothing but chorus" (20). Nietzsche describes this chorus as comprised of "timeless servants" of Dionysus: "a chorus of transformed beings" (26). He goes further to say that "the chorus is the 'ideal spectator' in so far as it is the only beholder, the beholder of the visionary world of the scene" (25). By beholding the tragic action the chorus comes into contact with "true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth" (23), and in that, Nietzsche says that the tragic chorus "portrays life more truthfully, more essentially [...] than the cultured man who ordinarily considers himself as the sole reality" (24). The movement of Ishmael's narrative discussed above shows his own receding from the standpoint of the "cultured man" to another in which that identity is virtually shattered. This is the direct result of his encounter with Ahab's vision and what Nietzsche called a "glance into the secret and terrible things of nature" (29). In this way, Ishmael has indeed become a "timeless servant," and his own story becomes more fundamentally the story of another. Thus, while there might be a number of ways in which Ishmael could be called choric, this one, to my mind, must come first.

And yet, to say that Ishmael is a chorus to Ahab's vision, does not mean that he simply justifies Ahab's action: he sees it as a mistake in a crucial sense. Ahab's bleak vision of the cosmos resonates within Ishmael, and because this vision is predicated on the inscrutable malice of nature it cannot be rationalized away. However, Ahab's mistake is not located within his bleak vision of the cosmos, but in his pursuit of an impossible action (one he increasingly regards as possible). So what is Ahab's mistake? Quite simply,

it consists in pursuing the white whale as a receptacle for all the malignancy and abandonment of the world. But what does that mean? In an attempt to make his existential situation comprehensible, Ahab tries to lash out at the source of his suffering, and he locates it all within the white whale. In other words, Ahab is looking for a forum in which he can reconcile his cosmic complaint: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein" (140). Yet Ahab expressly does not abide by this "fair play," and while Ishmael does not flat out proclaim the white whale to be a scapegoat, or misattribution on Ahab's part, it is Ahab's narrow pursuit of this whale that leads to disaster. "Monomania" is always the watchword in describing the particularity of Ahab's quest. It is also worth noting that Ishmael speaks of his commitment to Ahab's hunt for Moby-Dick in the past tense, as an "abandonment of the time and the place [...in which he] could see naught in that brute but the deadliest ill" (158). When Ishmael speaks of Ahab's vision of the cosmos, however, or when he elaborates his terrible intuition concerning the whiteness of the whale, it is in the present tense, and thus he reaffirms the power of that vision. In this sense, though Ishmael pulls back from Ahab's hunt, he does not simply disregard his captain's tragic vision. Indeed, to ignore the unspeakable power of this vision would seem not only disingenuous, but dangerous. To Ishmael, Ahab has touched upon the very root of our existential predicament.

To be clear: Ahab's tragedy suggests that his mistake is not a misperception of the cosmos as such, but his impossible attempt to extinguish the source of humanity's suffering. Neither is it the case that Ahab's motivations are simply selfish as seems to be Robert Evans' position, for instance, when he describes Ahab's "selfish monomania"

(216). It is true, granted, that Ahab's metaphysical quest is inward and that its intensity renders him a lonely and brooding romantic hero, inaccessible during meals at the cabin-table. But consider his relation to the orphan boy Pip, who goes mad after being lost to the immensity of the sea. Pip becomes Ahab's closest companion, and Ahab assumes a protective role over him, as when he barks "Hands off from that holiness!" (391). When Pip speaks his madness, having lost almost any sense of identity, Ahab confesses, "Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy" (392), crying, "Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him" (392). Ahab takes Pip by the hand, treating him as an emperor, and he admonishes him to stay onboard when the final days of the chase begin. His deep connection to this orphan boy resides in the fact that Pip embodies the suffering and abandonment of humanity that has made Ahab mad:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul [...] He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (321-2)

When Ishmael tries to imagine Pip's experience, in some ways it is an extension of his earlier treatment of whiteness; he comes very close to the same terms he uses to explain Ahab's vision of the cosmos:

But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it? Mark,

how when sailors in a dead calm bathe in the open sea—mark how closely they hug their ship and only coast along her sides. (321)

Ahab's deep connection to Pip is crucial to bear in mind when considering a similar event, which occurs virtually back to back to it: Ahab's refusal of the Rachel. Indeed, it is this refusal that Evans regards as the clearest indication that Ahab's quest is fundamentally "selfish," but more needs to be said to clarify this moment. The Pequod's encounter with the Rachel is undoubtedly the most heart-wrenching gam in the narrative. The Rachel, in search of her missing children, pleads for Ahab to relent in his quest and help them with their search. There is a push and pull to the news that the Rachel brings: on the one hand, it announces that Moby Dick is extremely close by, kindling Ahab's anticipation; on the other hand, it implores him to delay his own course and help with their search. Thus when Ahab familiarly calls out, "Hast seen the White Whale?" (397), he receives a two-pronged reply: "Aye, yesterday. Have ye seen a whale-boat adrift?" (397). This response catches Ahab off guard, and "Throttling his joy, Ahab negatively answered this unexpected question" (397). Thus, it is when he is closest to his object that a sincere ethical dilemma presents itself. The captain of the Rachel desperately pleads, "Do to me as you would have me do to you in the like case. For you too have a boy, Captain Ahab [...] yes, you relent; I see it" (398). And yet, despite what Captain Gardiner sees in Ahab, "like an anvil, receiving every shock" (398) he remains steadfast to his purpose: "in a voice that prolongingly moulded every word" Ahab musters, "Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good bye, good bye. God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go" (398). Ahab's mistake draws close to its end.

The situation of Captain Gardiner's son is almost identical to Pip's, and, as Jonathan Cook has also observed, "If Ahab is so fixated on revenge that he refuses to help [...] this does not mean Ahab is absolutely bereft of compassion" (245). For even after this great refusal he implores both Pip and Starbuck to stay aboard for their safety during the hunt for Moby Dick. As we have seen, it is just this kind of abandonment in Pip and the Rachel's children that is so near to the heart of Ahab's quest. Yet in his attempt to destroy the source of this suffering, Ahab has, in fact, brought about the opposite result. In Aristotle's view of tragedy, this would be called the "peripeteia" of Ahab's action, that is, a "[sudden] change [over] of what is being done to the opposite" (1452a). The example Aristotle uses is from *Oedipus*, when the messenger "who has come to cheer Oedipus and free him of his fear about his mother, by disclosing who he is [actually] does just the opposite" (1452a). The sudden reversal in Ahab's case lies in his impossible action: instead of destroying the source of suffering and abandonment in the world, Ahab permits and even generates it. His action turns into its opposite. This reversal can be seen on other levels of the narrative as well, for instance, in Ahab's growing tyranny over the crew or in his pushing away of Pip. Consider the grim setting on deck at the height of Ahab's purpose when all spontaneity seems extinguished: "Alike, joy and sorrow, hope and fear, seemed ground to finest dust, and powdered, for the time, in the clamped mortar of Ahab's iron soul. Like machines, they dumbly moved about the deck, ever conscious that the old man's despot eye was on them" (400-1). This is the same crew that Ahab earlier identifies with his purpose, but like Creon in *Antigone*, Ahab has become the ruler of a desert. He has progressed from rebuking Stubb as dog, to holding the whole crew captive to his tyranny. Similarly, Ahab becomes worried that Pip

may have a healing effect on him, and that in soothing his madness, Pip may thereby deflect his action. He acknowledges, "for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health" (399). And when Pip assures Ahab that he will never abandon his side, Ahab implores him, "If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab's purpose keels up in him. I tell thee no; it cannot be" (399). Thus, Ahab pushes his closest companion away, even threatening to murder him if he interferes with his mission. Ahab has abandoned the Rachel's children to the ocean, as he will his entire crew (save one), in pursuing his impossible action.

Yet while this peripeteia seems so stark, there is actually very little commentary on its role in the novel, even in studies that purportedly seek to identify the "tragic" dimension of the work. If it is mentioned at all, it is usually in the most literal sense, as in T.R. Dale's assessment that though Ahab is confident that he will slay Moby Dick, "Ahab himself is destroyed" (47). This too is a significant insight into Ahab's tragic reversal, if it is phrased particularly in terms of Ahab's increasing confidence that his impossible action is possible. Accordingly, when he receives a prophecy from the Parsee that "Hemp only can kill thee" (377), Ahab rather curiously takes this to be an allusion to the gallows, and responds derisively: "Immortal on land and on sea!" (377). What is so peculiar about this reaction is that Ahab's quest is founded in many ways on a problem of human finitude. But Ahab's quest requires that he become something more than human, and to this extent, Evans is indeed correct in saying that Ahab "deliberately turns *himself* into a stranger" (204). Evans is also right to speak of the "literal inhumanity of Ahab's quest" (217), as long as one adds the crucial caveat that Ahab's action begins as an attempt to strike a blow *for* humanity.

Even with this tragic reversal, however, Ahab does not seem to experience a genuine recognition of his action's peripeteia. His "recognition" does not abandon his act, but reaffirms it:

Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. [...] Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear! (426)

The only thing that seems recognized by Ahab in the end is the impossibility of his action. If there is a deeper recognition to speak of in the narrative it would seem that it is to be found within Ishmael the tragedian. Ishmael is able to see the way in which Ahab's action is a mistake and missing of the mark; he shows how close his captain comes to a different sort of recognition when Ahab asks Starbuck: "let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God [...] I see my wife and my child in thine eye" (406). Yet when Starbuck beseeches Ahab to turn back, "Ahab's glance was averted; like a blighted fruit tree he shook" (406). By reaffirming his action, even in the face of its impossibility, Ahab does not really experience a tragic recognition in any Aristotelian sense: he does not seem to recognize any form of ignorance by which he has caused suffering. Ahab strives even harder to affirm his will in the face of his own abandonment. But Ishmael, who was once committed to his captain's hunt, comes to recognize this action as a mistake. It is in Ishmael himself where the tragedy's

"recognition" takes place. Thus, Yu can contend that because of Ishmael's intense identification with his captain his "cetological study is an unconscious attempt to exorcise Ahab's magic" (117). But what Ishmael attempts to purge cannot be understood simply as Ahab's dark vision itself, but rather its mad object. Ishmael pulls back from the fiery hunt, seeing that this pursuit consumes itself and ends in destruction, yet he retains Ahab's dark vision. It is because of this recognition, however, that Ishmael can also be seen to enact the action's catharsis, which Whalley describes as a "purification" of "the incidents within the action itself (not the emotions of the audience)" (27).

In this sense, Ahab's action has an Aristotelian "shape," yet the vision that undergirds it (which is the condition of Ishmael's pity) possesses a different sense of tragic truth—one that Melville commonly ascribed to Shakespeare. On the one hand, Ahab seems to experience a kind of "divine justice" in his attempt to extinguish the source of human abandonment by slaying the white whale. On the other hand, Ishmael deeply sympathizes with the possibility that there is no teleology to speak of in this sense; there is only Ahab's existential courage to face the godless condition of reality as it is in itself. These two conceptions of tragedy are held together in tension throughout Ishmael's account, yet usually they are held apart by scholars. For instance, they are divided when Rice discusses Kazin's interpretation that Ahab's tragedy is one that "measures human courage against an uncaring cosmos rather than a tragedy which depicts a flaw, a fall, and divine justice" (Rice 452). Yet Ahab's action is both a tragic fall and a desperate encounter with the possibility of meaninglessness. The question Ishmael is left with is how to understand himself in the light of Ahab's challenge.

For the fact that the narrative is Ishmael's active recreation of Ahab's tragedy

reveals that he is not done with it. The endlessness of Ishmael's fascination with Ahab resides in the fact that he cannot resolve the heartfelt challenge that Ahab puts to the cosmos. Just as in the shore chapters, Ishmael focuses on the unfamiliar or uncanny by a narrowing of vision. Ahab's action marks the seminal event that Ishmael recreates and relives. The difference between Ahab and these earlier figures of reading, however, is the sense in which Ishmael cannot shake what he encountered in his captain. In a profound sense, Ishmael remains unable to reconcile himself to Ahab; he is unable to rationalize or laugh off Ahab's vision because it invokes a terrible intuition within him that rings true and in which reason has no part. Ahab's act arouses pity and terror in Ishmael's heart; it seems both suffered and inflicted. Yet because this act sets itself against the unknowable as such, it cannot be reconciled to reason or the certainties of the shore—indeed, it shows the very groundlessness of these certainties. As Dreyfus observes, the tragic vision of *Moby-Dick* involves "not just the loneliness of the individual in the vast indefinite sea; it is the loneliness of our culture as we realize we are cut loose from everything that ultimately gives us ground" (178). Here Dreyfus touches on how the tragedy affects not only its hero, Ahab, but Ishmael and through him the certainties of the shore and the American worldview that he embodies.

Thus, Ahab's tragedy marks the shift in narrative I have been alluding to which in some ways moves from the linear trajectory of Ishmael's adventures on land to a circular motion revolving around Ahab's act. Still, it is simplistic to say that this transition is absolute; it is at best an image to help understand Ishmael's transformation. I have already addressed, for example, how Ishmael's early narrative is inflected by what he encounters subsequently in Ahab; on the other side of the coin, there are certain exceptions like the

Rosebud gam, which do not seem to directly advance or comment on Ahab's action—thus the "tragic hero [remains] unsullied by the crude smells and farcical pranks of the encounter" (Stone 275). However, it should strike us as significant that after the declaration of Ahab's action, Ishmael remains diligent and faithful in his role as tragedian. I would make the strong claim that from this point on, the narrative in its fundamental sense remains concerned with Ahab's tragedy, and is perhaps best understood as one large recreation and commentary on Ahab's act. There are many "breaks in the action," no doubt, but these generally take the form of interludes where Ishmael provides background information, or where he circles around Ahab's tragedy and attempts to look at it from different angles. Insofar as Ishmael relates the stories of other characters onboard the Pequod, it almost always underscores their relation to Ahab's quest. There is a strange singularity in what follows even in the face of what Ishmael himself regards as largely unmethodical or broken narrative (170). In the midst of seemingly unrelated interludes, Ahab's vision persistently lurks in the background. Consider, for instance, Stubb's oddly abrupt question after having Fleece deliver a sermon to a shiver of sharks: "Where do you expect to go [...] I mean when you die, cook. It's an awful question [...] you expect to go up into our main-top, do you, cook, when you are dead? But don't you know the higher you climb, the colder it gets?" (239). Stubb's brutal line of questioning, and Fleece's hopeless sermon to the sharks, are clearly inflected by Ahab's act and the dark vision that is its basis.

Thus, the commentary on Ahab's action happens on two levels: it pervades Ishmael's own personal inner-dialogue, particularly in the speculative chapters that weave around the drama; it is also manifest within the action of the drama itself, and through the

perspectives offered by the other characters. This is the way in which Robertson's claim that Ishmael is the "leader" of the chorus seems particularly appropriate: for Ishmael's voice actually spinsters off into many different voices, which he bestows to the various members of his crew. Ishmael, as in his chapter on "The Doubloon," provides numerous perspectives from which to understand Ahab's action, yet resists affirming any one as definitive. In this context, D.H. Lawrence has provided perhaps the most succinct statement of the alternatives presented by the Pequod's mates:

1. Starbuck: Quaker, Nantucketer, a good responsible man of reason, forethought, intrepidity, what is called a dependable man. At the bottom, *afraid*.
2. Stubb: "Fearless as fire, and as mechanical." Insists on being reckless and jolly on every occasion. Must be afraid too, really.
3. Flask: Stubborn, obstinate, without imagination. To him 'the wondrous whale was but a species of magnified mouse or water-rat—'

There you have them: a maniac captain and his three mates, three splendid seamen, admirable whalemens, first-class men at their job.

America! (149)

Lawrence tellingly situates his characterization of the mates with respect to Ahab's quest, showing each mate to be a way of looking away from Ahab's dark vision. This is appropriate inasmuch as Ishmael develops the main actors in his drama for the primary purpose of commenting on Ahab. In fact, Ahab's primal encounter with the possibility of nothingness is the condition for these various perspectives. Thus, Lawrence captures Ishmael's representation of Starbuck's pragmatic superstition, and his clinging to the

prevailing dogma of the shore. Another way of making this point is to say with Rosenberry that Stubb's "policy of determined levity" (*Comic Spirit* 118) is really a "defiance of the true state of affairs" (119)— a fact that on some level Stubb himself must contend with: "I am Stubb, and Stubb has his history; but here Stubb takes oaths that he has always been jolly!" (373). And while Ishmael seems to admire Starbuck's humanity and his care for family life, or Stubb's jovial and cheerful demeanor, which is social in its own way, Ishmael also understands the two mates' perspectives to be modes of looking away from the terrible nature of Ahab's truth. Their responses, stretched through time over the whole of the tragedy, are remarkably consistent, in some ways finding their source in their initial response to Ahab's purpose: "Stubb and Flask looked sideways from him; the honest eye of Starbuck fell downright" (142). Thus, though Ahab's action is a mistake of the greatest magnitude, the mates, for all their humanity or charm, do not seem to live authentically or in light of the tragic vision which Ishmael affirms. Even as Ishmael breaks out of Ahab's dark spell in the hunt for Moby Dick, he admits,

Nevertheless the sun hides not [...] all the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon. The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true. (328)

Can one "be true" without suffering the same fate as Ahab? Or does "being true" in this sense only lead to madness and self-destruction? Many scholars hold the position that there is in fact a balanced and true position to be found in the narrative: they find it in Ishmael himself. Those who see Ishmael as kind of "hero" in this regard include Yu (111),

Rushdie (986), Rosenberry (122), Dreyfus (148), and countless others, often by locating a source of "moderation" or "balance" in Ishmael. Thus, Rosenberry says that Ishmael is "the balanced man, the man with the catskill eagle in his soul" (117), and that "the artistic reason for his survival lies in the careful balance of his comic vision between the fatal extremes of [Ahab and Stubb]" (122). In more dramatic (but less subtle) terms, Salman Rushdie has claimed, "Ishmael, a man without strong feeling or powerful affiliations, survives. The self-interested modern man is the sole survivor; those who worship the whale—for pursuit is a form of worship—perish by the whale" (986). Finally, Yu distinguishes Ahab and Ishmael through "pursuit and quest, obsession and fascination—they make the difference" (Yu 118). All of these commentators find an "equal eye" in Ishmael, although they vary as to what is so "equal" about that eye. Yu, for example, differentiates Ishmael and Ahab through degrees of fanaticism, and yet Ishmael has experienced the entire spectrum of what he describes: both pursuit and quest, obsession and fascination. Can "fascination" alone really account for the way that Ishmael circles around Ahab's act or endlessly ponders the whale? I especially do not agree with Rushdie's contention that Ishmael is without "strong feelings," for however skeptical or disrupted Ishmael's self-understanding may be by the end of the voyage, it is not because he is abstracted or disengaged from his experience. On Rushdie's view, Flask might as well be the hero of *Moby-Dick*—the same Flask who saw nine-hundred-and-sixty cigars in Ahab's doubloon. If there is a hero in *Moby-Dick*, that hero is not a champion of dispassionate or self-interested liberalism.

What all these readings have in common is a strong sense that Ishmael's survival is predicated on a proper attunement of his soul— however they might disagree about

what exactly that is or ultimately means. Yet for one thing, this notion of poetic justice concerning Ishmael's survival raises certain questions about why other shipmates do not survive as well: Queequeg, Starbuck or Pip would all seem to be viable candidates in different ways. Moreover, the language Ishmael uses to describe his survival is profoundly ambiguous, hovering in a rather conscious way between fate and chance. In a deeper sense still, I am not convinced that Ishmael attains the kind of stability required to speak of a fixed standpoint or proper attunement for which he is saved. Thus, while some see Ishmael's "conversion" in his coming into contact with a kind of "agape love" in "A Squeeze of the Hand" (Dreyfus 167)—which itself is contentious insofar as others argue this chapter is a parody of conversion, or a "comic masturbatory vision of angels" (Shurr 33)—it is also worth pointing out that Ishmael's experience here follows on the heels of perhaps the loneliest chapter in the novel. We move from an image of Pip as the "ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably" (321), to a scene in which Ishmael cannot distinguish his own hands from his co-laborers as they squeeze the whale spermaceti. And while I would not deny that Ishmael makes a number of suggestive remarks near the end of his voyage in which he seems to find a certain solace or beauty in nature, even here we would do well to remember his own words: "these are the times of dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember, that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang" (372). To say that Ishmael has a definitive answer to Ahab's challenge in my view would ignore the increasingly dark and haunted tone of his voice; it is an attempt to turn the "fact" of *Moby Dick* into a "hideous allegory."

Perhaps then Ishmael's heroism is to be found in his explicit pulling back from Ahab's hunt— and, if he is heroic in any sense, this "pulling back" would seem to be the best candidate. He warns us, "look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm!" (328). Ishmael wakes out of a trance just as he almost destroys himself and all others on the Pequod:

Nothing seemed before me but a jet gloom, now and then made ghastly by flashes of redness. Uppermost was the impression, that whatever swift, rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern. A stark, bewildered feeling, as of death, came over me. Convulsively my hands grasped the tiller, but with the crazy conceit that the tiller was, somehow, in some enchanted way, inverted. My God! what is the matter with me? thought I. Lo! in my brief sleep I had turned myself about, and was fronting the ship's stern, with my back to her prow and the compass. In an instant I faced back, just in time to prevent the vessel from flying up into the wind, and very probably capsizing her. (327-8)

Even here, however, in Ishmael's strongest distancing from his captain, we face ambiguity. Ishmael finds himself lost in a bleak vision that has serious implications for piloting his craft—in some ways presaging his observance of Ahab's peripeteia. Thus, when Ishmael says "there is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness" (328), in what way exactly does he regard this "woe that is madness"? Does he simply discredit Ahab's vision, or is it primarily a pragmatic warning about looking too long into the terrible truth of things? Is this an attempt to reclaim action from Ahab's tragic vision?

Ishmael suggests that, like the Catskill eagle, he "can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces" (328). And indeed, there is undoubtedly a drive in him to reclaim the pleasures of everyday life in the face of Ahab's vision, finding them in "the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" (323). Most of all Ishmael seems to acknowledge the significance of authentic friendship and the need for human reciprocity—precisely because of his identification with the human being's bleak existential situation. As Ishmael says early on, "a good laugh is a mighty good thing, and rather too scarce a good thing; the more's the pity" (39). In this sense, there is a significance to be found in the strange life-boat that Ishmael survives on, but Queequeg's coffin does not make Ishmael a hero. In fact, it would be rather odd to think of Ishmael establishing his heroism in this way, when the rest of his story figures as an earnest attempt to understand his experience. Thus, while Yu emphasizes Ishmael's autobiography in an attempt to render him a concrete "flesh and blood" agent that is capable of being the book's hero, my attempt to address Ishmael's autobiographical consciousness is a reclamation of the "space of questions" in which Ahab's tragedy unfolds. I would insist that the movement of the narrative indicates Ishmael's fixation above all on the metaphysical challenge he witnesses and the way this act becomes bound up with his own self-interpretation. To speak of autobiographical consciousness in this sense is to point towards Ishmael's choric function, rather than any heroic action.

This, at any rate, is the role that Ishmael takes up in the epilogue, where he echoes the Book of Job and assumes the mantle of messenger: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (427). We discover that the Rachel, "in her retracing search after her missing

children, only found another orphan" (427). Ishmael's identification as a witness and orphan drives home his dark sense of abandonment; he is an orphan above all in a spiritual sense. Thus, his entire narrative can be seen as obsessive in its attempt to come to grips with the Pequod's journey. It is perhaps best understood as a project of endless reinterpretation of Ahab and the whale—a kind of perpetual reading in which he attempts to find himself. His attempts to come at the whale from every possible vantage point or perspective revolve around the irresolvable challenge that Ahab has left him: "O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!" (249). Ishmael finds himself lost in a very similar aporia:

Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face. (298)

Such a skeptical standpoint is not a form of ironic detachment or a state of ataraxia, but an attempt to live in the wake of Ahab's tragic act. Ishmael recreates his encounter with Ahab because it remains unfinished, and because it has proved so fundamental to his own self-understanding. His state at the end of the drama seems strikingly similar to how Hawthorne would describe his last meeting with Melville:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem

to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and [is] better worth immortality than most of us. (432-3)

Like Melville himself, Ishmael is not primarily the spokesman for a view of moderation, for he encountered a terrible truth and was changed by it. His attempt to understand himself must be seen in the light of Ahab's tragedy, which Ishmael is unable to fully reconcile to the rational optimism of the shore. He delivers his tragic message and is left in a state of wonderment, distancing himself from Ahab's act, but not his vision.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

"The sinking of the Pequod was only a metaphysical tragedy after all. The world goes on just the same. The ship of the soul is sunk. But the machine-manipulating body works just the same"
—D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (163)

The conclusion to my argument is to be found in the pages above; what remains is only speculation. I have argued that Ishmael's autobiography becomes the tragedy of Ahab; and seen in another light, one could say that Ahab's tragedy becomes Ishmael's autobiography. Some might feel that to compare Ishmael to the chorus would be to make him into an abstraction, as if the chorus were somehow cleaved off from the events that transpire. Yet this has never been the case with tragedy; the chorus is that which is profoundly moved by the hero's tragic vision. It is Ahab's profound gravity, and the sense in which the challenge that he poses is both serious and irreconcilable to reason, that leaves Ishmael in such a state of wonderment: he is pulled into Ahab's world. While I have been critical of those who would understand Ishmael as a hero, I certainly think that trying to grasp Ishmael's "response" to Ahab is a worthwhile endeavor—it is perhaps this most of all that we are left to reflect on at the end of the narrative.

Of those who argue that Ishmael survives through "crucial differences" from his captain, one of the more beautiful standpoints (though not mine) seems to be based on the premise that such a difference must consist in Ishmael coming to an accommodation with the universe, or his attainment of a kind of "cosmic piety" (Arvin 181). By this I mean something like the accommodation reached in Homer's *Odyssey* by which Odysseus is reconciled to the sea-god Poseidon—the only god who opposes him on his journey home. Though Poseidon has inflicted great suffering and virtually "spent" Odysseus' life in the

process, Odysseus is fated to have his homecoming all the same. Such a reconciliation has its price however: after so many trials, Odysseus must, upon returning home, make yet another journey to offer sacrifice to Posidon, one in which he is instructed to

Go overland on foot, and take an oar,
until one day you come where men have lived
with meat unsalted, never known the sea
nor seen seagoing ships, with crimson bows
and oars that fledge light hulls for dipping flight.
The spot will be plain to you, and I
can tell you how: some passerby will say,
"What winnowing fan is that upon your shoulder?"
Halt, and implant your smooth oar in the turf
and make fair sacrifice to Lord Poseidon
.....
Then a seaborne death
soft as this hand of mist will come upon you
when you are wearied out with rich old age (11.135-150)

In effect, to secure his homecoming, Odysseus must become a votary for Posidon; he must acknowledge and spread the power of the sea-god far inland to where his influence has not yet been felt. The question is: has Ishmael made such an accommodation with the sea? Surely his story spreads the power of the sea inland, but is his survival the result of a special kind of attunement or stance that he takes up to the challenge Ahab poses? Poseidon's rage has a limit and an end—but is this true of the sea for Ishmael?

Some of the more interesting "heroic" commentators seem to think so, and Hubert Dreyfus' response is quite striking in this regard. As he writes,

Pip and Ahab contain within them the two basic possibilities left for the West if we hang on to the Axial intuition that there is an ultimate truth behind everything that is. Either we become crazy at the recognition that there is no such truth, or we drive ourselves crazy trying to prove there is. The end of a rotten line indeed [...] Perhaps we had best have a new line altogether. (181-2)

Dreyfus thinks that Ishmael embodies this "new line," which is imagined as a return to polytheism. His contention is that Ishmael is able to live "on the surface of things" without any desire to "go beyond." Ishmael understands that "the mask—the skin, the riddled brow—is all there is" (163). This is indeed, as he notes, the kind of profound superficiality that Nietzsche ascribed to the Greeks. But does Ishmael actually possess it? I think that Dreyfus underestimates the way in which Ishmael is still attentive to Ahab's challenge through the darkness of his circling narration; I also think Dreyfus overestimates Ishmael's ability to live "on the surface of things." It may be true that the sinking of the Pequod marks the end of a tradition, and in this sense points towards a serious "historical predicament" (Parke 329). This much is more than suggested by the screeching sky-hawk that is nailed to the mainmast and tangled in the ship's flag as it gets pulled under. But again, does Ishmael have an answer to this end? In my view, Ishmael's situation is much less certain than Dreyfus contends. Ishmael at once sees the genuine need for human reciprocity and the pursuits of "ordinary life" to be found on shore, but he is unable to shake the haunting possibility of Ahab's challenge. His deliverance is bleak, and he recognizes his own spiritual abandonment as a state of orphanhood.

The existential anxiety Ishmael experiences in the face of Ahab's quest disrupts his earlier sense of identity and sets his act of self-interpretation in motion. By witnessing his captain's terrible mistake, Ishmael is left in a state of awe. He acknowledges his captain's greatness, and is left with the irreconcilable questions that his quest raises. The peculiar character of Ahab's action, for Ishmael, seems both inevitable and free, pitiable yet terrifying. Ishmael is left to understand himself (and others) in the light of Ahab's act. Thus, the question of identity is transposed into a cosmic key. "Who are you?" becomes an altogether different question—one essentially related to the human existential situation. This is why in his characterization of the various mates, Ishmael seems to draw them ultimately in terms of their stance with respect to Ahab's vision. It is this existential dilemma that results in the rather odd notion of an autobiography that becomes the story of another. It is also perhaps for this reason that Ishmael can often seem at once intimate yet estranged throughout the narrative. One commentator puts it this way: "among its many themes, *Moby-Dick* is a book about loneliness—the loneliness of Ahab, but for me, above all, the loneliness of the person, whoever he is, who says, 'Call me Ishmael'" (Dumm 399). Ishmael's desperate attempt to make sense of the events he witnessed, even as he cannot find closure on the questions raised therein, marks a transformation and movement away from his identity on shore. Yet it also begins a different act of self-interpretation—one that begins in wonder, however lonely that wonder may be.

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