

**Surely All This Is Not Without Meaning:
A Pragmatic Re-Reading of *Moby Dick***
Rachel Gerry

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is an experiment in meaningful reading. In asking how we ought read the world, it really, most immediately asks how we ought to read the book itself. Melville constructs an experience of reading equal to life, one that demands navigation through conflicting logic, empty signifiers, and our own intellectual and emotional interests. We are in a position where we must moderate between ideological and structural contradictions, between Ahab and Ishmael, rationalism and empiricism. It is an experience where, without authorial guidance, we are bound to read pragmatically, choosing what is meaningful, most useful in understanding the text and in reflecting the specific world brought to light in Melville's writing. Reflecting on the experience of reading *Moby Dick*, we learn that it must be read pragmatically. As we return to the text for a second time we discover a similarity between Ishmael and ourselves: he too has been an unknowing pragmatist.

William James' pragmatic theory will guide my analysis of *Moby Dick*. While James wrote nearly a decade after Melville published, his terms serve as useful tools for making meaning out of a book that lacks resolve. I will defend the retroactive application of James' theories by arguing that pragmatic-style thought has been well established in the American tradition since the time of Ralph Waldo Emerson. To prove this, I will outline the ways in which Emerson's writings, like James', are characterized by subjectivity, individualism, the one and the many, and engagement with tradition and metaphor. I will proceed with a Jamesian interpretation of *Moby Dick*, to make sense of contradictions and highlight expressions of proto-pragmatism.

Jamesian pragmatism centres on the pragmatic method, a “method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable” where we must ask ourselves “what difference it would practically make” if any one notion were true (James 28). What results is the transformation of epistemology into ethics, as something becomes true if its truth is beneficial to the individual in question. James harmonizes the empirical recognition of material diversity with the rationalist impulse to see and feel logic in the world from time to time, recognizing possible benefits in both conceptions of reality (James 39). A truth is valid if the individual is inclined to incorporate it into his vision of reality, previously upheld by beliefs in stock (James 36). It evolves with experience, with new events that test prior conceptions and provide new contexts, and therefore dignifies the individual and that “rich and active commerce” held between her and the world of experiences and collective discursive structures (James 39).

James’ lectures on *Pragmatism* are a concise expression of pragmatic-style thought, though this intellectual mode has beginnings well before James in the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The pragmatic genealogy traces back to Emerson, a true proto-pragmatist, whose intellectual contributions to American philosophy have often been “scandalously neglected” (Poirier 6). In both form and content, Emerson’s essays express the key tenets of pragmatism. By matching various elements of Emerson’s work with those of James, I hope to illustrate the connection between these two thinkers and to reveal continuity in American thought across time, that is, to acknowledge a distinct tradition out of which James and Melville emerge.

On the whole, Emerson’s essay “Experience” is a close forebear to pragmatism. It argues that, though humans have a limited capacity to know, the best one can do is to trust experience; the “chief good” is to “enjoy what [you] find without question” (“Experience”,

Emerson 236). As “we live amid surfaces... the true art of life is to skate well on them” (“Experience”, Emerson 236). It matches James’ rejection of absolute knowledge and elevation of experience as herald of action and truth. Such close parallels are to be expected; there is substantial evidence that James engaged closely with Emerson’s work. Emerson was a good friend of his father, Henry James Sr., and James owned a number of Emerson’s books, with margins well marked and journals filled with quotes (Albrecht 31). In a letter to Henry, William once wrote that “reading the divine Emerson, volume after volume, ha[d] done [him] a lot of good” (James in Albrecht 31).

In “Experience” Emerson establishes a firm sense of subjectivity essential to pragmatic thought; he champions the personal bias that steers us away from absolutes and towards momentary truths and actions. “I am, so I see,” says Emerson, and “use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are” (“Experience”, Emerson 249). Moods and temperaments “prove to be many coloured lenses which paint the world their own hue” as emotions infect our vision and prevent us from seeing objectively, from recognizing the ultimate reality that surrounds us (“Experience”, Emerson 231). In a world of limited vision all ideas are commensurable. Emerson writes: “nature and literature are subjective phenomena” and “God is but one...idea” (“Experience”, Emerson 246). In reducing the material world, the intellectual world and the religious world to equal facets of the human mind, Emerson anticipates James’ marriage of science and metaphysics. Emerson supports the notion of subjectivity stylistically by introducing elements of personal experience into his writing (Hansen 103). In “Experience” he reflects upon the death of his young son, a calamity that threw him into grief and a stylistic element that asserts his status as subjective viewer, and lends his essay the flavor of distinct individuality (“Experience”, Emerson 230). From

Emerson to James runs a conceptualization of subjective experience, humans as partisans of truth.

Yet for Emerson, and James to follow, the reduction to subjectivity is not a reduction of dignity. A strong individualist tradition carries through American thought from the 1800s onward (Albrecht 8). Emerson's ethics forge maximum power within the limits of personhood (Albrecht 43), as essays like "Self Reliance" advocate for the inherent worthiness of any individual. "Trust thyself," says Emerson for "nothing is at last sacred except the integrity of [your] own mind" ("Self Reliance", Emerson 550, 551). Transcendental notions of the self as part and reflection of Nature suggest that each person has access to its unity, such that knowing oneself, and trusting oneself, is the only way to access higher reality. While James abstains from ideals of divine unity, he takes Emerson's emphasis on self-trust and self-culture. James benefits from Emerson's establishment of profound individualism; Jamesian pragmatism embodies radical self-trust, that individuals recognize the possibilities immanent in a particular scenario and act based upon their needs and perceptions (Albrecht 54). As we pursue a vision of truth, we must have confidence in our idea of good, that a certain belief will serve our needs.

Emerson's attention to custom and history prefigures James' notion that new ideas heed old beliefs. For Emerson "the new statement will comprise the skepticisms, as well as the faiths of society" though it must also "make affirmations outside of them, just as it must include the oldest beliefs" ("Experience", Emerson 245-246). This comment directly parallels James' notion of evolving truth, new truths "graft[ing]... upon ancient truths" growing "much as a tree grows by the activity of a new layer of cambium" (James 40). New ideas inherit the forms and fictions of ideas past to reshape them in light of the day. Emerson warns against the dangers of conformity; while society values custom, he writes, its greatest qualities grow

through the pioneering brilliance of individuals; he argues against restrictions imposed by societal institutions and instead promotes their use for the development of personal potential (Albrecht 102). For both Emerson and James, we do not begin with a blank slate, we live in communities; we are born into history. All the same, we must be free enough from custom that we may add to it constructively, to form new realities that suit us best. Emerson performs this sense of ideological growth in his own writing, with reference to Pythagoras, Socrates and Jesus. He asks his reader to consider the value of these men despite being libeled in their time (Emerson 554). Though Emerson is apt to reject the past, he makes lighthearted reference to these cultural pillars. Such references remind the reader that the past is always there, that it cannot be dismissed as these names are staples of collective consciousness, all the same, the casual treatment of these figures makes a mockery of their authority, and shows that one can recognize the past without granting absolute ascendancy.

Emerson's combination of the material and the transcendental forecast James' attempts to harmonize monism and pluralism. Emerson is locked in an interpretive paradigm that views his thought as pure idealism, optimistic spirituality, and for this he is widely criticized (Albrecht 28). There is an element of his thought that fixes on divine unity, man and nature as part of one system, inextricably linked, a link that makes possible the comprehension of certain absolutes; for Emerson thinks that "to believe that what is true in your private heart, is true for all men, — that is genius," all of us constituted within nature's unity ("Self Reliance", Emerson 529). Yet these thoughts are not to be read as proof of rigorous metaphysics, but rather a kind of spirituality that falls within the material conditions of life. Most often, for Emerson, "temperament puts divinity to rout," as we fail to see the connectedness of which we are a part ("Experience", Emerson 233). "Though our love of the real draws us to

permanence,” the “sanity of the mind” is in “variety” (“Experience”, Emerson 234). After all, “life is a series of surprises,” determined by spontaneity and diversity with “results...incalculable” (“Experience”, Emerson 241-242). Emerson’s sense of unity within overriding diversity anticipates James’ sense that “it is not a universe pure and simple or a multiverse pure and simple” (James 73). We practically experience the world in both unity and variety. “Oneness and...manyness are coordinate...neither is...more essential or excellent” (James 68). We might see the world as One Emersonian Nature, “everything...influenced in *some* way by something else,” allowing us to trace lines and unities, but we might also see a plentitude of systems and objects, a variety of combinations that point toward the manyness within these lines of influence (James 67-68). Emerson dissolves these strict dichotomies and leaves the pragmatists with the distinct impression that the world can be both legitimately One and Many.

What follows is the conviction that belief must lead to action. We do not languish in metaphysical realms of interconnection but apply ourselves to diverse reality. Despite common judgment of Emerson as a transcendentalist, he maintains, “life is not dialectics,” that “intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity” (“Experience”, Emerson 236). Absolute knowledge is not ours to have, and so we must not waste time in the realm of the hypothetical. This assertion is the very basis of pragmatism which promises a philosophy “that will not only exercise...powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will make some positive connection with this actual world of finite human lives” (James 17). Once again, Emerson seeks to express himself formally; his essays make frequent use of industrial metaphors, forcing the reader to interpret his theories through the aesthetic of practical production and material action.

One cannot make a study of Emerson's proto-pragmatism without acknowledging his style of contradictions, a method of performing pragmatism through rhetoric. As previously noted, Emerson makes claims regarding divine unity and divine access, only to contradict them by insisting upon a limited field of perception. Albrecht suggests that these contradictions grow from a time of social change; they are the nominal remnants of a society moving away from religion and toward secular values. Emerson maintains terms like "God" or "Providence" but uses them in discussion of humanist philosophy and ethics, therefore altering or undermining their traditional meaning (Albrecht 34). These verbal contradictions have the effect of performing pragmatism, as Emerson "play[s] with the tension between opposing tendencies or poles of human thought," he toys with the power of contrasting analytical perspectives (Albrecht 33). Like a pragmatist, he makes use of different theoretical systems, different conceptions of truth in his project of outlining and describing, guiding himself towards some form of analysis too complex to conform to a single rule. He makes practical use of the vestiges of language and reinvents them in light of new experience. While James states his pragmatic values clearly, Emerson often enacts them with words.

Both thinkers make use of metaphor in their writing. Emerson begins "Experience" with a series of metaphors, describing the human condition as the mid-point on a staircase, or a "ghostlike" movement through nature; he makes use of abstract terms that force the reader towards interpretation ("Experience", Emerson 228). James makes similar figural moves, for example he tells us that words ought to have "cash value" that that they should be "set at work within the stream of...experience" (James 32). Poirier points out the difficulties in this passage of James, as his use of metaphor elicits a series of questions. For example, where is this stream? Do we share it with other people or is the stream within? How do we identify the

stream as our own in a world of shared language (Poirier 135)? These writers use metaphors to remind us that there is no single way to ‘read’ philosophical systems, and that we cannot be absolutely certain of the author’s intention or the way our own contexts colour our reading. In fact, Olaf Hansen believes that this kind of allegorical thinking is a definitive strain in American thought (Hansen 191). Use of metaphor supports an ethos of choice and possibility, while insisting that no choice is necessarily correct or absolute (Hansen 99). Allegory is not a symptom of an obsolete style of writing, but tells us something essential, that the making of meaning is necessarily provisional (Hansen 10). Richard Poirier agrees emphatically, arguing that Emerson and James need remain poetic because strict conceptual terminologies would be “no less abstract and potentially oppressive” as those social and cultural dogmas that they advise us to abandon (Poirier 135).

As the reader is forced to interpret metaphor she realizes that meaning making is active, that it is impossible to passively consume a text. Often when she reads philosophy, she forgets her role as the mediator of meaning. Likewise, the author of systems who evades the use of metaphor shies away from the reality that his thought cannot be accurately transmitted but only approximated, translated from one mind to the next. These philosophers pretend a world where interpretation is not entire; they act as though words may be absolute. But of course words are not absolute, “our language is full of essentially poetic associations, and anyone who uses it is therefore to some degree a poet” (Poirier 103). We are always already making practical assumptions out of words putting them to work in light of our knowledge, our emotions, and our experience. When faced with a metaphor, our active, pragmatic role is explicit; we ask ourselves: how best can I interpret this? With active self-awareness we make analysis and derive meaning. Emerson’s style sets the stage for this pragmatic form of writing,

using metaphor to declare awareness of demonstrative limits, and the reader's active role, and encourages the reader to recognize her active role. Latent is a deep respect for readers and the act of reading, that each individual has a right to use words as tools with which to make practical truth.

Emerson initiated a pragmatic tradition in American thought, a tradition to which both James and Melville are indebted. He expresses subjectivity, individualism, engagement with tradition, pluralism, an emphasis on the necessity of action, and poetic style that define American pragmatism. James mirrors Emerson in the key tenets of his philosophy, taking what Emerson says and restating it in a style often "deceptively simple" (Hansen 190). Using terms like "rationalist" and "empiricist", "one" and "many" he translates elusive Emersonian notions expressed in a tangled, contradictory mode into clear-cut pragmatic methodology.

Moby Dick falls neatly in line with this tradition. Written after Emerson's main works and before James' lectures, *Moby Dick* is an expression of these same pragmatic notions, a literary battle with perception, truth, and the right of the individual to see. It elevates the essential poetics of pragmatism to the status of pure art, expressing key principles in the fictional form. My use of James in my analysis of *Moby Dick* is not anachronistic, for Melville and James fall neatly along the same line of thought that began with Emerson. Like James, Melville was familiar with Emerson's work. In 1844, when Melville returned from a four-year sea voyage, Emerson was recognized as an essential spokesman of ideas pertaining to the meaning of life and art in America (Williams 45). Melville was known to attend one of Emerson's lectures in 1849, two years before *Moby Dick* was published (Williams 45). *Moby Dick* is a product of pragmatic thought and the often contradictory poetic form that Emerson

used to properly express it; James' terms will help to make sense of the novel's many twists and turns.

For Melville, the world is filled with symbolic content. The whale is a symbol, though not in the traditional sense; he is no "hideous allegory," no image placeholder for authorial intent (Melville 172). The world presents in symbols and surfaces, and we are tasked to interpret them for ourselves. "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" cries Pip at the doubloon; he speaks for all characters (Melville 335). As "a work of perception about perception," *Moby Dick* sheds light on the act of finding meaning (Schultz 52).

On the ocean, the question of meaning is elevated to the question of truth. The sea, "irreducibly other," is an ultimate "unsignifying strangeness"; fundamentally "in-between" and apart from land and culture it resists easy identification (de Villiers 73). Its sheer indifference illuminates and intensifies the frail search for meaning, spurning all vain projections (de Villiers 74). And so the sea sets the stage for an epistemological battle, challenging characters not only to read signs but also to know them. In pursuit of the whale, Ahab's rationalism is pitted against Ishmael's empiricism. Both structures of comprehending reality are passionately argued for and against as Melville places them in the same boat.

Ahab is the rationalist, the solipsist, "devotee to abstract and eternal principles" (James 12). For him the true thing is "inscrutable," all visible objects are but "pasteboard mask[s]" (Melville 140). The whale is the embodiment of the great, cruel principle and he will pursue it monomaniacally. Ahab embodies all abstract monism of the rational perspective, "start[ing] from wholes and universals and mak[ing] much a unity of things" (James 13), as his universe works by a single principle: the force that exists behind the whale exists within; he is enlivened and enraged by this "queenly personality" (Melville 382). *Moby Dick* is "ubiquitous" and

“immortal” as the principle is everywhere and always (Melville 155). Ahab’s rational vision is a solipsistic one. If there are “no real things” but “imponderable thoughts,” then it is he who grasps the thought that sees truth (Melville 396). But the thought is unthinkable, “great pains, small gains” for those who try (Melville 332). All things are shot through with high reality but the logic is beyond human conception. As a result, “every man...mirrors back his own mysterious self,” viewing things in light of his own logical misapprehension (Melville 332).

Melville justifies Ahab’s rationalism by making it the very anchor that unifies the book. Ahab’s idea of *Moby Dick* establishes the ship’s route and the novel’s narrative (Shultz 52) and his sense of purpose saves *Moby Dick* from being a book of “higgledy, piggledy whale statements” (Melville 8). We are never made to deny the enduring possibility of the rational principle. Ahab cries out: “How...can this one small heart beat...unless God does that beating” (Melville 407)? Melville never answers. We linger in universal possibility.

Still, Ishmael’s empiricism is highly compelling. Ishmael is the collective viewer, the “lover of facts in all their crude variety” (James 12). He rejects Ahab’s rational convictions, claiming his earthly shadow to be the “true substance” (Melville 45). He will approach the whale empirically as he approaches objects in the Spouter Inn; he will “[take] it up, and [hold] it close to the light, and [feel] it, and [smell] it, and [try] every way possible to arrive at some satisfactory conclusion concerning it” (Melville 33). The whale is an artwork, a business, a food dish, a head, a tale, a skeleton, and the list goes on. It will be known in all of its visible and material parts. Ishmael collects knowledge from past sources and varied disciplines and applies them to his own understanding of the whale.

Melville argues equally for Ishmael’s empiricist perspective. As we move through Ishmael’s endless representations we cannot deny the world’s abundance. Ahab’s plot is

subsumed in Ishmael's varied musings, and we get the sense that "whenever life is considered in its particulars, from its midst, the idea of all governing plot (metaphysically or narratively speaking) erodes" (de Villiers 70). It is difficult to say which perspective rules, the narrative-making or the narrative-destroying.

The narrative grows ever more complex as characters fail to abide by set precepts. Neither Ahab nor Ishmael is simply a mouthpiece for a logical ideal. Both of them are human, both prone to undermine their own logical structures, evidencing "the contradictions of real life" (James 18). Ahab would like to abide by the rational principle, but he lives in a material world: "all [his] means are sane" even if his "motive" and "object" are "mad" (Melville 157). Hatred takes on a material character, as "all the subtle demonisms of life...[are] visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*" (Melville 156), tainting the spiritual and removing it from the realm of pure abstraction. Nor is Ahab immune to a desire to escape solipsism. Although the rational ideal severs him from others, he finds likeness in Pip's disturbance, saying: "Thou shalt sit here in my own screwed chair; another screw to it thou must be" (Melville 399). He affirms his own reality with recourse to another, defying the conviction that vision is utterly solitary. At last, despite all reason, Ahab is emotional. "Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels," knowing emotion, and not reason, to be the true force behind all of his purposeful direction (Melville 419).

Ishmael is equally guilty of self-contradiction. His tendency to stray into poetics and to consider larger and more mystical meanings distracts him from purely scientific aims. "His discussion of the whale's head, tail, spout, skin, skeleton... evolves into a discussion of divinity, truth, faith, time, eternity, chaos" (Shultz 53). Chapter 102, "A Bower in the Arsicades", exemplifies the way in which material thoughts lead to ethereal ones. He speaks

dissection in literary metaphor, “unbutton[ing] the whale further” (Melville 344). He encounters a supposedly “unconditional” skeleton in religious condition, where it has been propped up as the walls of a temple, where “amid the green life-restless Arsicadian wood” it is “worshipped” (Melville 345). He cannot help but feel the figurative weight of the skeleton, because, covered in foliage it is the place where “Life folded Death” and “Death trellised life” (Melville 345). Ishmael cannot overcome poetry.

Traditional empiricism functions on the assertion that empirical truth is purely objective, unguided by personal belief, but as Ishmael makes links between himself and the things he sees, he fails to consider reality with passive disinterest (McDermid 6). He declares: “O Nature, and O soul of man! How far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies!” (Melville 250). In “The Fountain” when examining the whale’s spout he states that, “like a human being” it inhales air through the lungs (Melville 291). Eventually he falls into wild analogy, stating that the “canopy of vapor, engendered by [the whale’s] incommunicable contemplations” is like the “undulation in the atmosphere over [his] head...while plunged deep in thought” (Melville 293). He takes this outlandish, personal conjecture as “an additional argument” to support his claim (Melville 293). Ishmael’s personifications reveal that he sees things in terms of how they relate to humanity, to himself, rather than tending to them with objective observation.

We arrive at the end of *Moby Dick* to find that both epistemologies compete to the last. We are left alone to face these irreconcilable perspectives. Melville has fashioned an experience of reading equal to life itself, wrought with all worldly confusion, emotion and the overriding belief that “surely all this is not without meaning” (Melville 20). Melville offers Ahab’s rationalism, and we see its truth; he provides Ishmael’s empirical pluralism, and we

cannot escape it. It seems “the world is indubitably one if you look at it in one way, but as indubitably is it many, if you look at it in another way” (James 14). Then he denies us certainty of both, as neither structure of comprehension is followed to its logical end, but interrupted by worldly life and tendencies towards the social and the poetic. In short, we notice our own emotional engagement with the text and despite its chaos we care. We sympathize with Ahab; we “recognize [a] kinship with him in [our] own need for moral absolutes, for definitive answers, and for certain goals” (Shultz 56), and we spend pages and pages indulging Ishmael, identifying the need to communicate a diverse vision of life and to make it all seem a great good (Shultz 54). Amidst all contradiction, we find that the book itself is a sign much like any other. It will not solve itself, and meaning cannot be taken directly from Melville. On our own, we must make a meaningful interpretation.

But how do we interpret? How do we mediate between Ahab and Ishmael? In order to make meaning out of a book that defies conclusion, we are required to read *pragmatically*. We ask ourselves what practical difference it makes whether Ahab or Ishmael is right. We use pragmatism as a tool for finding practical value in both. Reading *Moby Dick* we live in the literary moment, allowing “science and metaphysics” to work hand in hand (James 31), conceiving of some things physically others metaphysically depending on what makes sense according to chapter, character and our own thoughtful engagement. We find that we have been pragmatists all along. We have moved along with the book, through its many contradictions, allowed it to assure and elude us for the purpose of our learning, our sympathy, our criticism and our desire to take something, anything, that resonates. We are fundamental readers in literature as well as in life. We must learn to exist fluidly, to find what meaning

works within the given physical or metaphysical context and to trust that in the moment of seeing the thing itself we will know where to look.

The experience of reading is a fitting analogy for pragmatism. The reader exists in the space between the fictive and the real and therefore has it both ways, “exercise[ing]...powers of intellectual abstraction,” while “mak[ing] some positive connexion with [the] actual world” (James 17). He indulges in imagination with a physical book his hand, yielding to its absolute universe. It is an act simultaneously physical and metaphysical. He allows fictive characters and scenarios to offer him moral insights for life in the world. Melville uses this in-between space, the experience of reading, to suggest that reading itself is a pragmatic act, following Emerson’s notion that “an imaginative book renders us much more service...*by stimulating us through its tropes*, than afterwards, when we arrive at the precise sense of its author” (Emerson in Poirier 98). Poirier builds on this argument, making the case that reading is a powerful mode for expressing pragmatism. Because it occurs in time, “sentence by sentence” readers are “responsive to opportunities as they open up, to resistances when they are encountered, to entrapments that must be dodged” (Poirier 176). Reading mirrors life’s temporality, the way we experience time as succession, and events as the unexpected points of chance along that succession, that require thoughtful reaction.

In engaging the text the reader accesses truth, neither rationally nor empirically, but pragmatically. “A new opinion counts as true...as it gratifies the individual’s desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock” (James 36). In the act of pragmatic reading we enact pragmatic truth making. We derive new knowledge from a text according to what resonates with us personally and integrate it with our own past knowledge to form new understandings, arriving at a truth that is the product of “new experiences and... old

truths combined and mutually modifying one another” (James 83). This process is enacted within the text itself as Melville’s countless allusions place him in conversation with past texts, allowing him to form his own pragmatic truths in modification of past insights. Indeed, his constructive position is outlined at the start of the text. Prior to the first chapter, Melville’s *Extracts* note “whatever random allusions to whales he could anyways find in any book whatsoever” (Melville 8). With reference to the Bible, Rabelais, Shakespeare, King Henry, Edmund Burke, traditional whale songs and many more sources, Melville begins his novel by reminding us that much has been “promiscuously said, thought, fancied, and sung of Leviathan,” that our perceptions are always predicated on an entire history of ideas, on a universe of many things having already been said (Melville 8). Pragmatic truth is collectively formed and far from solipsistic. In our reading, we build on conceptions of truth already built upon by Melville; we enact pragmatism in mediation between Ahab and Ishmael, in our free interpretation of the text and in the act of reading itself.

Through thoughtful reflection on the experience of reading *Moby Dick*, we are taught how to read *Moby Dick* (and all reality for that matter), and that is pragmatically. It is essential to return to the text with pragmatic awareness. In looking back we find that Ishmael too has been a pragmatist all along. Surely in the act of mediating between Ahab and Ishmael, of straddling fiction and reality, we have not been like Ahab, lost inside an “incurable idea,” but have mimicked Ishmael’s discursive approach to reality (Melville 158). We make meaning with *Moby Dick* just as Ishmael makes meaning with the sources of available whale knowledge. For both of us, knowledge is socially constructed, built through “exchange” (James 102). Ishmael knows his “Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals,” that he

himself only “manages...one end” of the interpretive scheme (Melville 255-256) and he is wise to the fact that a functional conception of truth involves other human beings (James 102).

Though Ishmael is a pragmatist, he certainly performs empiricism for the benefit of the reader. At the very beginning of the book he reflects: “I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which... induced me to set about performing the part I did” (Melville 22). He acknowledges his role as Melville’s empirical puppet, used to teach the reader a lesson through verbal performance rather than authorial didactics. Though in very subtle way, Melville does not completely abandon the reader to fraught interpretation, but guides her towards a pragmatic analysis. Becker argues that the use of second person voice in “The Spouter Inn” invites the reader to experience pragmatic interpretation along with Ishmael (Becker 51-52). The painting had a purpose that could only be understood by “diligent study and a series of systematic visits” and so, in a pragmatic way, Ishmael approaches it and tries to experience it. He invites us to join him, placing us in the scene: “you find yourself in a wide, low, straggling entry” and looking at the painting “what most puzzled and confounded you was a long... black mass hovering at the centre of the picture” (Melville 26). While you try to understand it, the painting maintains “indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity” (Melville 26). Like life, the painting eludes us and we feel its mystic grace, its spiritual implication. Ishmael makes allusions to *Paradise Lost*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, building a pragmatic understanding of the painting replete with previously established concepts (Becker 52). When he reaches a conclusion about the painting, “a final theory of [his] own, partly based on the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom [he] conversed upon the subject,” he switches back to the first person. Switching narrative modes indicates that he has come to a personal conclusion; it is a conclusion unique to him that might differ from the reader’s (Becker 53).

Enlightened by close reading we recognize that Ishmael's empiricism has truly been an empirical pragmatism, one that we might adopt. We may interpret his empirical shortcomings as indications of a knowing pragmatism.

Ishmael's empirical categories are pragmatically conceived, for he recognizes that we cannot doubt all things at once and makes useful categories and divisions out of facts handed down (McDermid 5, 6). All the while he recognizes that these categories are limited, "conceptual-shorthand" (James 33), and that they must therefore remain incomplete. Though he might "dissect" the whale he goes "but skin deep" (Melville 296), "the whole book...but a draught," an unfinished product, open for the reader's interpretation (Melville 125). That being said, Ishmael's unempirical slip into the poetic, the recognition that things abound in "aesthetically noble associations," has not been simply bad science. Poetics have been a useful way for him to consider a world that he might only faintly grasp with empirical tools (Melville 100).

Ishmael's pragmatism allows him to indulge his sympathies and to act freely. He relates to Ahab's tragic monism, he has a "wild" and "mystical" sympathy for his "quenchless feud" (Melville 152), having often found himself at "thought engendering altitude[s]" (Melville 135), but he will not "take... the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul" (Melville 136). Instead he will recognize that opposing moral and spiritual values can exist side by side (Shultz 53) and he will change his ways, "turn idolator" for Queequeg, his fellow man, and allow his spirit an evolving freedom (Melville 57). Ishmael's pragmatic approach allows for agency, flexibility and society, and with this he maintains at least some small power in a world whose rational principle may or may not exist.

Ishmael may “ply [his] own shuttle and weave [his] own destiny into [the worlds] unalterable threads” (Melville 179).

Perhaps even Ahab has been pragmatic at times. Lauren Becker argues that Ahab does in fact learn and act according to the practical implications of lived experience. The whale injures Ahab and so he adapts his view of truth accordingly. He hates the whale because it hurt him in a real way (Becker 50). While Becker believes that Ahab’s fall into absolutes reveals the difficulty in committing to the pragmatic version of truth (Becker 76), I strongly disagree. For the fact that even rational-minded Ahab cannot help but reach pragmatic understanding goes to show that pragmatism is inevitable, a way of conceiving, of dealing with reality, that is essentially human.

Moby Dick is a brilliant experiment in meaningful reading. Melville presents, defends, and undermines rationalism and empiricism with equal ardor. These two ways of knowing are irreconcilable. As readers we struggle through conflicting logic. In order to find meaning we seek an alternative logic. We need an interpretive tool to mediate between Ahab and Ishmael and we arrive at pragmatism only to realize that we have been pragmatists all along. We see that a pragmatic approach to reading, and to reality, allows us to transcend the flaws and limits of rational and empirical knowing, and opens the way to meaningful discursive truth.

Enlightened at the end of our first reading of *Moby Dick*, we know that we ought to go back and re-read it. As we approach this time, aware of our own pragmatism we find analogy between a pragmatic way of knowing and Ishmael’s empirical way of knowing. Though Ishmael performs an empirical role, his empirical shortcomings are indicative of underlying pragmatism. As we set down the book for a second time, we leave with renewed kinship to Ishmael. In the end, the best we can do is to discover these satisfying relations and “cherish”

Moby Dick's magnificent oneness, finding “pragmatic value [in] its unity,” with a thousand thoughts on one whale we trace “lines of influence” through a “network that actually and practically exist[s],” and discover something of truth (James 66-67).

Works Cited

- Albrecht, James M. *Reconstructing Individualism: A Pragmatic Tradition from Emerson to Ellison*. Fordham UP, 2012.
- Becker, Lauren. "Melville's White Whale: Pragmatism's Role in Moby Dick." Dissertation, American U, 2011, pp. 1-82. UMI No. 1491382.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Experience." *Emerson's Essays*. London: Aldine, 1967. 228-52. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self Reliance." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym. W.W. Norton, 2013. 549-66.
- Hansen, Olaf. *Aesthetic Individualism and Practical Intellect: American Allegory in Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James*. Princeton UP, 1990.
- James, William. *Pragmatism*. Harvard UP, 1975.
- McDermid, Douglas. "Pragmatism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Web. 11 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/pragmati/print>>.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. Ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford. 2nd ed. W.W. Norton, 2002.
- Poirier, Richard. *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Harvard UP, 1992.
- Shultz, Elizabeth. "Moby Dick: The Little Lower Layers." *The North American Review*, vol.2, no.4, 1988, pp.52-59.
- de Villiers, David W. "Crossing 'The Deadly Space Between': Moby-Dick and the Traversal of the Sea." *English Studies in Africa*, vol.51, no.2, 2008, pp. 69-83
- Williams, John B. *White Fire: The Influence of Emerson on Melville*: California State UP, 1991.