

A Sordid God: Melville, Dante, and the Voyage to Hell

Honors Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
“with honors research distinction in English Literature” in the
undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

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May 2014

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ABSTRACT

In my thesis I will examine the relationship between Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Dante's *Inferno*, suggesting the latter as a possible inspiration for the format of *Moby-Dick*. I will begin by discussing the influence of Greek mythology and the reemergence of Dante in nineteenth-century America. Once the historical scene is set, I will detail the similarities between the structure and characters of the two texts. I will suggest that Ishmael plays a role similar to that of Dante in the *Inferno*. I will also present Queequeg as a possible Virgil, the virtuous pagan who has led Ishmael through his katabasis but cannot follow him in the journey out of hell.

I will then proceed to illustrate the ways in which Ahab embodies the descent into the underworld by committing each of the sins described in the *Inferno* and figuratively crossing each of the rivers that separate it from the world of the living—the rivers of woe, lamentation, fire, forgetfulness, and hate. After each section, I will present a character who, when faced with the same choices as Ahab, has taken the opposite course. Ahab believes that it is his fate to destroy the White Whale. I will argue that the characters whose actions stand in opposition to his own are using the Christian idea of free will to take charge of their lives and responsibility for their actions, counteracting the pagan belief in fate. By showing each of these characters in opposition to Ahab, I wish to suggest the role of free will over blind fate in the novel. I will also argue that Dante, through his incorporation of pagan characters into his Christian hell, has made a similar statement about free will vs. fate, which we can use to help better understand the consequences of Ahab's sins.

Scholars have identified structural similarities between Melville's works and Dante's *Inferno*, most notably in *Pierre*, "The Tartarus of Maids," and "The Encantadas." I have not, on the other hand, found much scholarship connecting the *Inferno* with *Moby-Dick*. I believe there

is much to be learned about the characters, the structure of the novel, and the role of free will vs. fate from such an analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

“A Miser being dead and fairly interred, came to the banks of the river Styx, desiring to be ferried over, along with other ghosts. Charon demands his fare, and is surprised to see the miser, rather than pay it, throw himself into the river, and swim over to the other side...” Thus begins a joke titled “The Miser” that appeared in at least five American newspapers in 1825 (“The Miser”). Another article, published in 1821, uses a dead man’s plea from the banks of the Styx in order to make a political statement about paper money and the unreliability of American banks (“Nonumque” 2). Yet another, which appeared in 1841, uses the same setting to relate a story in which a customer is unable to pay the “obolus”—an ancient Greek coin—required for a newspaper subscription (“The River” 2). The interest in Greek myth was as equally widespread across the pond. A list of steamers in the British Navy, published in 1849 by the *Daily National Intelligencer*, included names such as the Acheron, Gorgon, Harpy, Fury, Erebus, Hecate, Pluto, and Styx—all taken from Greek myth and relating in one way or another to the underworld (“Appropriate Names” 2). Although I have chosen articles from the nineteenth-century, such references were hardly a new phenomenon. They were quite popular in the preceding century as well, as the United States sought to align its fight for independence with the democratic ideals of antiquity (Mullet, 92-104).

In a review of *Pierre*, published in 1852 in the *Albion*, Herman Melville was criticized for his inauthentic dialogue which, the critic noted, “reminds you of the chorus of the old Greek tragedies” (qtd. Higgins, Parker 428). Although the critique may sound damning to a realist, one could argue that Melville was merely a product of his environment. Certainly Melville’s proclivity for referencing the classical world in his writing (as evidenced by such collections as Gail Coffler’s *Melville’s Classical Allusions*) was not without precedent. Transcendental

philosophers such as Thoreau and Emerson drew heavily upon Greek and Roman classics for inspiration (Goodman). Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose writing Melville greatly admired, published a series of retellings of the most famous Greek myths in his *Wonder Book* (1852) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853). When Melville wrote of Queequeg's "Cretan labyrinth" (24; ch. 4) of a body in *Moby-Dick* or of "Jove and gods/ In synod" (2.1.112-13) in *Clarel*, he was simply adding to the long history of America's love affair with the Greeks. Yet while Greek mythology had long since taken hold of the collective imagination of the United States, there were other avenues of Mediterranean influence that had yet to be explored. In fact, one of Melville's most noted influences was an Italian writer whose translation into English and subsequent revival gave way to what Dennis Berthold described as the "American Risorgimento." That writer was Dante Alighieri who, after the resurgence of his work in Europe and the United States, became a symbol of solidarity between Italy and the United States as both struggled for or to maintain national unity. Berthold's "American Risorgimento" is a two part story, for just as new translations of *The Divine Comedy* led to a resurgence of Dante's readership, so too did that result in a resurgence of the Italian influence on American art, politics, and literature (29-35).

In a review of Melville's poem "The Victor of Antietam" published in the *New York Independent* in 1867, a critic stated that Melville wrote more like a medium than an author, who is "alternately influenced by the overmastering personalities of Walt. Whitman, Dante, Emerson, Brownell, and Mother Goose" (Higgins, Parker 525). Whitman, Emerson, and Brownell (referring to Henry Howard Brownell, author of "The River Fight" and "The Bay Fight") were all popularly read contemporaries of Melville and as such can be expected to have carried a certain weight with the nineteenth-century American literary mind. Mother Goose had made her first appearance in the New World in 1786 with Isaiah Thomas' reprinting of Robert Samber's

Histories (a collections of fairy tales) and so was also, in a sense, a contemporary (Potter 751). Dante, then, dead for nearly five and a half centuries by the time of the critique's publication, might, at first glance, seem the odd man out.

Unlike the characters of Greek myth previously discussed, Dante was not in any way a household name in early American history. To test this, consider conducting a search for the poet through the online archive, American Historical Newspapers. It is not until 1793 that anything of use shows up.¹ But when it does, it does so with a vengeance: a single article reprinted again and again, it gives a critique of the poem "Proposal of Young and Etheridge" by William Hayley esq. The introduction to this article identifies a "sublime painting of Dante" as one of the author's inspirations for the piece and claims to be written "in six cantos" (Hayley 4), an apparent nod to Dante's poetic form. Further investigation revealed numerous reprints of the article as well as a slew of other references that begin to pop up around that time. Although this is hardly definitive proof of his inconsequence in the United States prior to 1793, it does seem to suggest a growing public awareness of the poet and his works.

2. THE RESURGENCE

Let us back up for a minute to look at the larger picture. We have focused so far on Dante's apparent obscurity in the United States, but according to Kathleen Verduin, "Dante was scarcely known in English-speaking countries at all." The question to be asked, then, is what changed, not just in America but in the Western world at large. The answer seems to come in two parts. The first is simple: almost no one could read it. Although popular in his own time, Dante had not fared well enough with the wider European audience to warrant translation. Verduin

¹ My own search, conducted on April 2, 2014 yielded many thousands of results. Nearly all, unfortunately, were false matches. In place of "Dante" the search yields "dance," "dame," "Daniel," and countless other words that just are not "Dante," until I got to the year 1793.

writes that “to eighteenth-century taste the *Commedia* had epitomized medieval barbarity” (17), causing the work to come under sharp critique from the intellectuals of the day. In other words, those who could read it did not like it, and those who might have liked it could not read it. The first step toward the mass revival of Dante’s work came in 1782. Eleven years before our discussed “Proposal of Young and Etheridge” was published, its author, William Hayley, and Charles Roger published the first English translations of portions of Dante’s *Commedia*. Changing attitudes toward the end of the century may have been what sparked Dante’s resurgence among the educated elites, but it was the sudden access to the work in translation that made it a success. Soon after the publication, Dante fever began to take hold of England. By 1802, Henry Boyd had released a translated version of the work in its entirety, and Dante took his place among the literary greats of Europe (Verduin 18).

The American public was not so quick to accept the Italian poet as were their European counterparts. Newspapers of the period did begin to contain more and more references to the poet, suggesting a heightened public awareness of his works, but these references appear most often to have been either Euro-centric or technical in nature. One short piece, which circulated in 1805, tells of a European nobleman who “fought duels to prove that Dante was a greater poet than Aristo [sic]. At his death bed...[he confesses] ‘I have never read either Dante or Aristo [sic]’” (“Neopolitan; Nobleman; Dante” 4). Despite the apparent misspelling of Ariosto, I would argue that this piece could not have been published if the public were not aware of the growing European adoration of the two poets. Such a joke, relying upon the acknowledgement that this is a hotly debated topic in some circles, seems to suggest that Dante was at least on his way to becoming commonly known in the United States. Another article, published in 1810, is nothing more than a brief introduction followed by an excerpt from the *Inferno* describing Dante’s

descent into hell, as translated by Henry Boyd in 1785 (“Boyd; Dante; Inferno”). Such articles demonstrate the ways in which the public view of Dante’s work was shifting away from that of the previous century. From accusation of medieval barbarity, he had become the delight of the educated nobleman. From a name virtually unknown to the middle classes, he was suddenly making the front page.

But it was not until 1814, with the publication of Henry Cary’s translation of the *Commedia*, that Dante found and secured his place as one of America’s favorite European authors. He had undertaken the task as an experiment, a drill in Italian translation. Previously Dante had always belonged to the educated elites, accessible only to those with the time and ability to read the text in its original Italian form. Cary sought to create a simple, straight forward translation that was accessible to all. He wrote extensive footnotes, ensuring that even the least educated readers would be able to understand the numerous references to thirteenth-century Italian politics and classical mythology. As discussed above, there were translations available before Cary’s but they had been unable to generate much interest in the States, and so becoming fairly contained within the European continent. Yet Cary’s translation may also have gone unnoticed, and did for some years, had it not been for a lecture given by Samuel Taylor Coleridge a full four years after the initial publication of Cary’s work (Berthold 70-72).

In his lecture, given in 1818, Coleridge made a point of commending Cary’s translation. His opinion was soon cited in and adopted by various newspapers and before long Cary’s little experiment had become the definitive translation of Dante in the United States (Verduin 19). Where readers had found Boyd’s rhymed sestets trying, they praised Cary’s translation for the clarity of its blank verse (Berthold 66-67). Many readers found themselves devoting as much time to studying Cary’s notes as to the actual poem, and it became common practice to keep

extensive notes in the margins. Within three months of Coleridge's speech, there was a new edition, and competition among publishers to create the best layout and the newest design, to offer long texts including the Italian and short ones without, ensured that the market had a continual stream of new additions of Dante when for so long there had been none (Matthews 70-73).

Of course, Coleridge's approval cannot be held entirely responsible for Dante's sudden and meteoric success in the United States. Numerous authors lent their authoritative voice to the cause. Emerson wrote of Dante's great influence upon the American youth, declaring that "all studious youth and maidens [had] been reading the *Inferno*" (qtd. Verduin 21). Herman Melville praised Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" by declaring it to be as "deep as Dante" (*Hawthorne and His Mosses*). In 1839, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published the first fragments of what came to be the first American translation of the *Commedia*. His translation met with massive success, and is considered by some scholars, such as Werner Friedrich, to have brought the American appreciation of Dante to its peak (542-50). Poe expressed his adoration of the 1845 Appleton edition of the *Commedia*, referring to it as "one of the most beautiful volumes ever issued from the press of Appleton" (qtd. Verduin 21). By 1867, Harvard University Press met the demands for the first American edition of the text in its original Italian. In 1880, Longfellow transformed his private organization, the Dante Club, into a national organization that still exists today: the Dante Society of America (Friedrich 550).

In his book *American Risorgimento*, Dennis Berthold argues that Americans found Dante appealing because his political message seemed so perfectly suited to the political struggles of their own time. Berthold discusses the political similarities between the Italian Risorgimento and the pre-Civil War United States that he believes laid the foundation for the Italian poet's

adoption by the American public. He argues that Dante was seen as a unifying voice between cultures as Italy struggled to unite and the United States struggled to stay together. His work was both political and poetic, a critique of the partisan ideologies that surrounded him, but also an attempt to create unity (Berthold 57-80). In his own time, Dante's decision to write in the vernacular was partially motivated by a desire to make the *Commedia* accessible to the general public. This proved highly effective, earning Dante a large contemporary readership and stimulating a gradual increase in public literacy. But it was also an attempt at furthering Italian unity by subsuming regional differences into "a grand inclusive national vernacular designed to speak to the disparate cultures of early Renaissance Italy" (Berthold 76). It was this, in particular, that seems to have appealed to the American public, and perhaps to Melville himself.

American writers of the nineteenth-century were also working to establish their own, distinctively American idiom at a time when they too were facing national disunity. The northern States, in particular, gravitated toward Dante as a cultural inspiration, and re-appropriated his message to support their own, anti-separatist agenda. Had Americans not seen their own struggles reflected in those of their Italian counterparts, Berthold argues, they would never have embraced a poet whose world was so far removed from their own (ch 1-2). Thomas Carlyle captured this sentiment when he wrote, "Italy, for example, poor Italy lies dismembered, scattered asunder, not appearing in any protocol or treaty as a unity at all; yet noble Italy is actually *one*: Italy produced its Dante; Italy can speak" (qtd. Berthold 60)! And just as Italy produced its Dante, so too did the Northern states of America re-appropriate his message to booster their own desire for a continued national unity.

And so, from a state of near universal anonymity, Dante rose to celebrity status nearly over-night. In their introduction to *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in*

America, Michelle Moylan and Lane Stiles refer to the creation of what they call an “American Dante—one expressive of our own sense of American cultural and literary identity” (6). Just as the United States remodeled Dante after its own image, so too did Melville, through the structure of *Moby-Dick*, create his own American Inferno. Ishmael, as our Dante, leads the reader through Captain Ahab’s infernal descent, describing every level of depravity to which he must sink before he is ready to face the demoniac White Whale. Through Lust, Gluttony, and Greed, Wrath, Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery, we watch as Ahab blackens his soul past redemption, urging his crew onward, through rivers of woe, lamentation, hate, and oblivion. Yet for every violence Ahab inflicts upon his soul, there exists a man in opposition to his depravity, a blessed soul whose actions serve as an example of how he might change his fate before he is buried forever in the pit of hell.

3. CHARACTERS

Both tales begin with a wanderer, a man in search of meaning, whose encounter with a pagan guide sets his journey in motion. Before he begins his quest, he must be judged, and once that judgment is passed there is no turning back. From there he must pass through the nine circles of hell and cross the five rivers of the underworld, encountering many familiar faces along the way. In the end, he faces his greatest evil and emerges, unharmed but alone, from the inferno.

When Dante first began his journey, he awoke lost and confused within a dark forest. He “went astray / from the straight road” (Alighieri, *The Inferno* 1-2; Canto I), falling into sin and despair. Once he and Virgil reach the seventh circle of hell, they find another such forest, home to the suicides. Dante is so moved by their suffering that he is unable to speak with them, declaring “I could not, such compassion chokes my heart” (84; Canto XIII). Although the

connection between the two scenes is never definitively made in the text, my own interpretation is that the forest from the first Canto of the poem may have been meant to symbolize Dante's own contemplation of suicide. Ishmael, too, begins his story with thoughts of suicide. But unlike Dante, whose dreary thoughts lead him to the mouth of hell, whenever he finds himself "involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral [he] meet[s]" he just goes sailing. It is his "substitute for pistol and ball" (21; ch. 3), his escape from the misery of life.

Both Ishmael and Dante serve as the narrators of their respective tales. Their stories begin in spiritual isolation from the world, and by their conclusion, they might both say "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (qtd. Melville, *Moby-Dick* 552; epilogue), for those they met along the way must leave them once the story is told. Ishmael must watch his crew members sink and Dante must bid farewell to his guide, whose pagan soul cannot pass from the gates of hell until the Day of Judgment. They are, in a sense, bonded with one another right from the beginning through their isolation and the structural similarities of their narrative arcs, and Ishmael even numbers Dante among the world's "ponderous profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, Dante" (362; ch. 85). The opening lines of the *Inferno* tell us of Dante's isolation and loneliness, but these same feelings are what lead him to his friend and guide, Virgil, without whom Dante never would have survived his journey (Kirkpatrick, Canto I). Virgil saves him from his loneliness and leads him to new life and a better understanding of his faith. The name Ishmael was, during Melville's day, used to describe a wanderer or outcast (Bryant and Haskell 501). Like Dante, Ishmael wanders lonely and alone until he meets a man whose feet have already tread the path before him, a man who can offer him guidance in navigating his future, nautical hell.

Queequeg is Ishmael's Virgil, guiding him from darkness even as they journey together into the heart of Hades. Queequeg, like Virgil, is a type of virtuous pagan. He is a guide and friend to Ishmael, a man whose fortitude comes not from his exposure to Christian philosophy, but from an inherent, unconscious goodness within him. Since neither Queequeg nor Virgil has lived in the light of Christ, neither one is permitted to accompany his friend on the journey to safety and new life. But just as Virgil's guidance has given Dante the strength to reject sin and ascend into purgatory and eventually paradise, so too does Queequeg give Ishmael a second chance at life, for Ishmael escapes the wreck and floats to safety on Queequeg's own coffin. Without Queequeg's final gift, Ishmael would have drowned in the ocean, just as Dante would have drowned in his despair without Virgil's guiding hand. Then, after their journey is at its end, they are both compelled to look back on what has passed and guide us, their readers, through the same journey. In Dante's words, each is like a man "laboring for breath / who, safely reaching shore from open sea, still turns / and stares across those perilous waves" (*The Inferno*, 22-24; Canto I). And so both stories end with salvation. Their heroes have braved hell and returned to tell the tale. The sinful have been punished, and God's order has been restored.

But let us not brush past the sinful quite yet. After all, there would be no journey to hell without them. Someone must instigate our protagonists' descent into the abyss. Someone must determine the heading and direct the sails, full speed ahead. Someone must take our heroes to hell. And thus we meet with Captain Ahab. Although not generally associated with *The Divine Comedy*, Captain Ahab's own journey to the underworld seems in many ways to parallel those described in Dante and classical myth. The Greek underworld, as well as Dante's, is home to five rivers: the Acheron, Styx, Phlegethon, Cocytus, and Lethe (which Dante has placed in Purgatory), representing woe, hate, fire, lamentation, and forgetfulness respectively.

Through his hatred for Moby Dick, Ahab passes through woe and hate and flame. He must forget all that he holds dear and bury the sorrow in his heart. In the end, his reckless commitment to revenge costs him his life. But Ahab's real sin and punishment is that he will not and does not die alone; his "topmost greatness lies in [his] topmost grief" (550; ch. 135) as he watches his ship, the Pequod, capsize and sink into the depths as a result of his hate. By never wavering in his pursuit of Moby Dick, he has driven himself and his crew, like the infernal ferryman, Charon, into the pit of hell.

Melville had many opportunities to come across the ancient psychopomp, Charon, even beyond the newspapers and Dante's *Inferno*. During his teens, Melville studied classical history and literature at the Albany Academy (Sealts 13). He owned copies of Seneca's *Works*, John Dryden's translation of *The Aeneid*, and the tragedies of Euripides—each of which features a journey to the underworld and an encounter with its ferryman (*Melville's Marginalia Online*; Sealts 11-16). When we consider this demonic psychopomp, as represented through these works, we see that he bears a striking resemblance to the character of Ahab, both psychically and occupationally. The name Charon is believed to stem from the Greek *charapos*, meaning fiery or flashing eyes (Inwood 359). Indeed, Charon is often described in such terms. John Dryden's translation of *The Aeneid* describes Charon's eyes as "hollow furnaces on fire" (416; book 6). For Dante, his "eyes like burning coals" are rimmed with a "wheel of flame" (45; Canto III). Similarly, Melville describes Ahab's eyes "glowing like coals" (518; ch. 132), his "fiery eyes" (498; ch. 125), and his "eyes of red murder" (216; ch. 48). Characters repeatedly call them "old man," and both authors pay particular attention to their gnarled, unkempt beards. Charon charges an obol, an ancient Greek form of currency, to ferry the souls of the dead across the Acheron ("Encyclopedia Mythica"). Ahab offers a doubloon to the first man to spot the White Whale.

Charon is Dante's first demon and Virgil's "sordid god" (413; book 6), just as Ahab, "more a demon than a man" (520; ch. 132), is possessed of a demoniac madness and a monomaniacal desire for dominion over the natural world regardless of the outcome. Ahab, the "grand, ungodly, god-like man" (77; ch. 16), leads his crew on a voyage of the damned, ferrying them ever closer to the mouth of hell from which there is no return. He is the sordid god, the bringer of judgment upon his crew, and the reason why they all must, in the end, "sink to hell" (551; ch. 135) where at last their journey is complete.

In addition to Charon, Ahab shares traits with a number of the characters one encounters in Dante's hell. In the eighth circle we find Ulysses and Jason, leader of the Argonauts. Relating Dante's interpretation of Ulysses to Ahab, Thomas Werge writes "Ulysses leads his crew to shipwreck and destruction by seeking to know and conquer all the phenomena of experience while repudiating the literal world, finiteness, and any guide except his autonomous self" (141). Werge claims that they are both guilty of "fatal pride" (Werge 143; Melville 498), refusing to deviate from their mission regardless of any obstacle they may encounter. But he points out that the Dantean reading of Ulysses' journey is not the only one—that in some Christian traditions Ulysses has been viewed as a Christ figure and his voyage as an example of spiritual growth through experience. That Melville models Ahab after the former interpretation, that of the "solipsistic voyager who seeks to usurp God's place through the autonomous power of a deified self," shows Melville's desire to imagine, for Ahab, a psychological world in which God acts as "a principle of limitation and intercession rather than a wholly transcendent source of infinite plentitude" (142). Ahab's world is one in which love and forgiveness have no place in God's sphere. Having convinced himself thus, he, like Ulysses before him, is able to wilfully sacrifice

the lives of his men to satisfy his own vanity. But in doing so, both sailors have ensured themselves a place in hell.

But whereas Ulysses' determination to complete his quest was driven by the desire to return to his wife and child, Ahab's existed in spite of his family. In this aspect he is like Jason, found not far from Ulysses, who "with his honeyed tongue and his dishonest / lover's wiles, he gulled Hypsipyle...and there he left her, pregnant and forsaken" (Alighieri, *The Inferno* 91-94; canto XVIII). By his own admission, Ahab "widowed that poor girl when [he] married her" (520; ch. 132), leaving her pregnant and alone the day after their wedding. Even for her he will not give up his mad chase. In the seventh circle, up to their necks in the boiling blood waters of the Phlegethon, stand Attila the Hun and Alexander the Great, men who caused their enemies' blood to flow in life, and so are punished by drowning in it in death. After forty years hunting the Sperm Whale, Ahab too could be said to have an excess of blood on his hands. In truth, Ahab might be associated with any number of the characters we find populating the many layers of Dante's hell. He is sullen one moment and wrathful the next. He is in turns violent, mystic, greedy and heretical, and therein lies the basis of my argument surrounding him. I liken him to Charon because of their striking physical resemblance and because of their psychopompic roles, each sailing men, both literally and figuratively, straight into hell. I liken him to Ulysses because of his hubris. I liken him to Jason for the lonely fate of his poor young widow. But unlike Ishmael or Queequeg, I would not tie Ahab to any one figure or interpretation. His misdeeds go beyond the confines of any one circle, for just as he has spent his life sailing the world round, never settling in one place or staying too long ashore, so too has he sailed from one sin to the next. From the first time we see him to the last, he is wrapped in the self-absorbed mess of his own depravity, and even his final speech is a flood of hatred, violence, and treachery. I would

never tie Ahab to one circle of sin because his level of moral corruption is far too complex, too nuanced. He would go mad with the boredom.

4. STRUCTURE

Before I begin illustrating the ways in which Ahab has crossed through each circle of Dante's hell, there is still one major aspect of each tale that has yet to be considered. Dante's *Inferno*, like Melville's *Moby-Dick*, operates under the structural assumption that its characters are moving closer and closer toward a source of evil. In Dante's case it is the devil himself, in Melville's the White Whale. Dante created a world of circles, each one giving way to an evil more deplorable than the last. The circle is, of course, a traditional symbol of perfection and the infinite. The damned of Dante's hell are eternally caught in one of these concentric circles, their punishments designed to complete their crime through symbolic retribution, just as in *Moby-Dick* "concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight" (550; ch. 135). Dante's sinners are tortured by the very sins they most loved to commit; the Pequod and her crew are sunk by the very creature they had sought to destroy.

Circles are, indeed, a common image in *Moby-Dick*. In "The Grand Armada" Starbuck and his boat find themselves at the center of "circle upon circle" (376; ch. 87) of whale pods, when suddenly "in more and more contracting orbits the whales in the more central circles began to swim in thickening clusters" (377; ch. 87). The crew must then fight for their lives to escape into the "outer circles," as all the whales begin "violently making for one centre" (378; ch. 87). If death lies at the center of this tightening vortex, and life and liberty may only exist outside of its

perimeters, then it does not seem so dissimilar to Dante's description of hell, at the center of which waits the devil, calling souls in from the world beyond his borders. And on the first day of the crew's final chase, Moby Dick not only destroys Ahab's boat, but taunts its floundering crew, moving about them in "ever-contracting circles" (528; ch. 133) until the Pequod drives him off. The Grand Armada is like the devils of the *Inferno*, the harpies and furies, torturing the souls in their charge, but still mere agents in service of the one, principal demon. Moby Dick is that principal, the creature who does, indeed, "sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool" (550; ch. 135).

Yet at the center of that pool of death, there is a glimmer of hope. When Queequeg looks into the water, he spies a baby whale, entangled in the hemp line of the harpoon, and below that a number of young whales in the act of mating. "And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments." First we see a harpooner, a man who has killed countless whales, showing such concern over the safety of one, then we see an entire boat of hunters gazing in awe at the beauty of their prey as it "reveled in dalliance and delight" (376; ch. 87). This calm at the center of such a violent fray is reminiscent Dante's path from hell into purgatory. He must head to the center of the darkness before he may escape into the sun, proof that in the midst of sin there is the hope of redemption. Ishmael, Queequeg, and the other sailors are granted a glimpse of this redemption. Queequeg even seems ready to embrace it through his concern for the calf, but once the calm is broken they move back into the violence of their lives, and only Ishmael lives to see the light of Purgatory.

That pool, for Ahab, is the Pacific Ocean, where the Pequod and its crew at last meet, battle, and succumb to the wrath of the white whale. For Dante, it is the frozen pool of the

Cocytus, in which the three-headed devil sits, affixed by ice. All the rivers of guilt stem from this one common pool. From our brief glimpse of the devil, we see that “in every mouth he worked a broken sinner / between his rake-like teeth” (55-6; canto XXXIV), just as one of our first glimpses of Moby Dick reveals “some tatters of Radney's red woollen shirt, caught in the teeth that had destroyed him” (251-52; ch. 54). But perhaps the most convincing link between Dante’s “King of Hell” (1; canto XXXIV) and Melville’s *White Whale* is one that Melville drew himself. In “The Tail,” Ishmael praises the “celestial” tail of the sperm whale, comparing it to the grasping claw of Satan:

Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven. So in dreams, have I seen majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell. But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels (365-366; ch. 86).

In some ways, this quote lies at the heart of it all. Ahab has given himself over to hatred, misery, and sin because he views the whale and the world from a Dantean frame of mind. He could see heaven in the vast, inscrutable depths, but he chooses to see hell. He surrounds himself with images of the demoniac where another might see the divine. Over the course of the novel, we rarely see through the eyes of Isaiah, for Melville and certainly Ahab both seem to favor exploration in the Dantean. Instead, we see the ways in which this Dantean approach to the world can blacken one’s perception and lead one to a disastrous end.

Still, Isaiah’s frame of mind is something that warrants consideration. In this essay, I discuss the ways in which Ahab has given himself over to sin as well as the characters and moments who have shown him and the reader that there was another path. To see devils in one

frame of mind and angels in another is not just a way of viewing the world, but a way of responding to it as well. Ahab, it would seem, is a man who lives almost entirely in the Dantean frame of mind. In the tail of the whale he sees a monster to be conquered, a malevolent principal who lives not by instinct but by malicious intent. Had he been capable or desirous of maintaining an Isaiahic frame of mind, he would have seen the white whale as merely a mindless brute looking to survive, as does every other sane character in the novel. And so, it would seem, this is what it all boils down to. The Dantean vs the Isaiahic frame of mind. The latter can lead to a content and happy life, as we see in the character of Captain Boomer. The former leads to nothing but destruction.²

5. IMPLICATIONS OF COMPARISON

Before we delve any deeper into the cause of this destruction and the descent into our pagan hell, it is important to consider the role such a comparison with Dante's *Inferno* might play in interpreting a book so saturated with biblical references. To begin to answer this question, let us start by taking a deeper look at Dante's *Inferno*. I focus on the *Inferno* in particular, because it was the most widely read of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, because it influenced Melville's other novels more so than *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso*, and because it is the most relevant in relation to *Moby-Dick*. Dante's hell is a world in which characters from classical myth coexist with biblical and historical figures, from Charon, to Cleopatra, to the Devil himself. In many traditions of classical mythology, the fate of a mortal was determined at birth. The three Fates assign one man to good and another to evil. They draw out the thread of long life for one, then cut short that of another ("Encyclopedia Mythica," "Moirae"). Upon their death, nearly all

² For more on Melville's "skeptical and unfixed spiritual state" (3), see: Brian Martin's "Water, Fire, and Stone: Images and Meaning in Melville" (Oregon State, 2008).

mortals make their way to the Meadows of Asphodel for an eternity of mindless indifference—such is the result of a world determined by Fate. In Dante’s *Inferno*, mortals “suffer the like penalty for the like sin” (56; canto XI). Where Dante first felt pity for those suffering in hell (140-142; canto V), he soon comes to see that each is merely continuing to live in the state they chose while on earth (Sayers, Canto VIII). By placing mythological figures in his Christian hell, Dante seems to emphasize the role of free will as opposed to blind fate, the triumph of the Christian faith over pagan superstition. Characters like Ulysses and Jason believed in the gods of Olympus and, by extension, in the immutable fate determined for them at birth, much like the Calvinists of Melville’s time. Such a belief effectively frees them from any sense of responsibility for their actions. By placing mythical and pagan men and women in hell alongside of Christians, Dante seems to be emphasizing the triumph of Christianity and the existence of free will. Dante’s sinners, no matter what their faith, have chosen both hell and their punishment through their actions while on earth. Fate is no excuse.

This message can then be carried into our reading of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Ahab feels the hand of fate at work in his life, referring to the “nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing...[that] commands me” (521; ch. 132). He claims that men are spun round by heaven like a windlass and that “Fate is the handspike” (522; ch. 132). He feels helpless against the cruel hand of fate, driven on against all natural instinct and emotion. “This whole act’s immutably decreed,” he cries. “’Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates’ lieutenant; I act under orders. Look thou, underling! that thou obeyest mine” (499; ch. 134). Just as the ancient Greeks (as perceived by the nineteenth-century American public) believed their lives to be determined by the Fates, so too do we see Ahab separating himself from his actions in the name of Fate. But as we see in the *Inferno*, this separation is but a false

construct of the sinful mind. Time and again, one of the other characters proves to Ahab that there is another path. He sees numerous instances in which men choose good over evil, love over hate, but he refuses to change his course. Like the pagans in Dante's hell, "fate" is just an excuse. At times he struggles, yes. At times his grief overwhelms him. But who decided that chasing the white whale was to be his fate? None other than Ahab himself.

Like Ahab, Starbuck believes himself to be driven on by fate, stating "I think I see his impious end; but feel that I must help him to it. Will I, nill I, the ineffable thing has tied me to him; tows me with a cable I have no knife to cut" (164; ch. 38). Yet Starbuck fights against his fate, refusing, up to the last, to fully give in. When overcome with woe, Ahab gives in to madness, but Pip, when presented with the same, turns instead to wisdom. Ahab refuses to give in to grief, though his heart yearns for an end to his violent existence. He gives himself over to fire, when he could soar like the Catskill eagle, which "even in his lowest swoop...is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar" (411; ch. 96). He forces himself to forget, even when Starbuck shows him the power of memory. And finally, he gives himself over to hate, even when he sees the healing power of indifference in the figure of Captain Boomer. According to the Bible, Ahab "sold himself" to the practice of evil by choosing to worship idols, just as Ahab chooses to believe in fate rather than the Christian concept of free will (1 Kings 21:25). The biblical King Ahab was not born to evil—he chose it. And so too does Melville's Ahab choose to continue in the darkness when he could easily seek the light of day.

We can trace Melville's opposition to such determinist beliefs to his Calvinist upbringing (Herbert, "Moby-Dick" 134-36). According to T. Walter Herbert, Melville's portrayal of Ahab is part of a widespread attack which accused Calvin of "having envisioned a God who is a brutal monster" ("Calvinism" 1613). Furthermore, he argues that Starbuck, standing in for Father

Mapple, becomes the voice of anti-Calvinist teachings, reminding Ahab that neither the whale, nor by extension God, is a dispenser of some cosmic evil against the predetermined sinner. The “immutable decrees” (qtd Herbert, “Calvinism” 1614) of Calvin’s God are no different from the Parsee’s prophecy, which helps bring about the fate it predicted, for if a man believes himself to have his destiny fixed from birth, there is no incentive or reason for man to take responsibility for or control of his actions. Ahab lives under a God who has created mankind for misery, and so his “conviction of God’s hatred and his response to it become the regnant factors in his being” (1616).

By choosing to blame his sins on fate, Ahab not only chooses death over life, but, in effect, paganism over Christianity. Though he never specifically renounces his native religion, his actions show that he prefers the “pagan” view of the world to the Christian one. The Christian god only bestows justice after death. Ahab wishes to live in a world where justice is instantaneous. When Ulysses killed the Cyclops, it was seen as just. When Theseus killed the Minotaur, that too was seen as just. Ahab believes the white whale to be some malevolent spirit, and so wishes to see it punished accordingly. Some promised punishment in an incorporeal afterlife is not enough to satiate his lust for revenge. He seeks to bring the punishment of hell to the reality of earth. Just as Queequeg is the virtuous pagan, so too is Ahab the cannibalistically formed Christian. And so, with Ahab as our psychopomp, our cannibal guide, it is time to take the first step into hell—to begin the maddening descent through woe and wailing, fire and forgetfulness and hate, and then, at last, to find a final hope of redemption.

6. THE DESCENT

Our journey begins in the vestibule of hell, home to Dante's Opportunists, those who deserve neither hell nor heaven. They live in a field on the banks of the Acheron, forever chasing a banner which cannot be caught, a symbol of devotion to their own self-interest (Alighieri, Canto III). They can neither live nor die, neither enter hell nor leave it. For Melville, this midway point is the coast, places like New Bedford where the story begins and Nantucket, a place that is not quite land, but not quite sea, "all beach, without a background" (60; ch. 14) where people live on "the extremest limit of the land." The inhabitants "must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in" (2; ch. 1). These are the places through which all whalers must pass before beginning their journey, just as the souls of the damned must pass through hell's vestibule to receive their punishment. The inhabitants make their living from the sea but do not partake in its dangers. Places like the Spouter Inn cater to the constant stream of sailors who pass through. Many of the inhabitants have served their time as whalers and retired in peace, to continue profiting from the business at a safe distance. The "Whaleman's Chapel" is led by an ex-whaler, Father Mapple, who preaches about Jonah and man's inability to escape God, even at sea. The owners of the Pequod, Captains Bildad and Peleg are themselves both retired whalers. Neither is a bad man, but Bildad "had the reputation of being an incorrigible old hunk" (72; ch. 16). Peleg knew that on his last voyage Ahab "was a little out of his mind for a spell" and that ever since he has been "desperate moody, and savage sometimes" (78; ch. 16) but in spite of this knowledge he did nothing to protect the crew against the future tragedy. The people of New Bedford and Nantucket deserve neither wrath nor compassion. They carry out their business doing little to harm or help those about them and are quickly forgotten as we drive deeper into the abyss.

These men and women who live on the precipice are our Narcissus. In “Commodore Perry as White Phantom: *Moby-Dick* in the Context of the Modern Age,” Arimichi Makino equates Melville’s use of the Narcissus myth to the Western, Christian habit of loving one’s neighbor while hypocritically oppressing others abroad. Read in this context, the men and women of Nantucket, like Captain Bildad, preach their Quaker ideals but then deal harshly in business and show little tolerance for and at times openly disrespect their “cannibal” brethren. Like Narcissus, they see an idealized image of themselves reflected in the form of their Christian ideals, but if they dared to reach for that image, to truly live up to their own standards, their world would crumble. Or, if one put them to the test, made them prove their Christian goodness once and for all, they would surely fail, shattering their self-image and drowning in their own hypocrisy. According to Peleg, Bildad has been “studying those Scriptures, now, for the last thirty years” (73; ch. 16) but when deciding Ishmael’s pay he initially attempts him no more than the “seven hundred and seventy-seventh” (75; ch. 16) share of the profits, claiming he would save him from corruption. They also agree to let Ishmael bring Queequeg aboard, but upon seeing him declare they “let no cannibals on board” (84; ch. 18). Bildad then demands the he “show that he’s converted” and addresses him as “son of darkness” (85; ch. 18). Of course, upon seeing Queequeg’s skill as a harpooneer, Bildad quickly puts aside his moral qualms and signs him on board. As is the case with most Opportunists, Bildad is not an inherently bad man. He just lacks true conviction. Like Narcissus, he yearns to become one with the image he sees of himself, to be and to be seen as a God-fearing, holy man. Unfortunately for Bildad, a strict adherence to the teachings of Christ is not exactly conducive to the running of a successful business.

Although it may seem strange to suggest that Ahab would benefit from imitating a group of sinners, the fate of the Opportunists is far superior to that of any who lie within the confines of hell proper (with the possible exception of the Virtuous Pagans). Ahab began his career as a “boy-harpooneer of eighteen! Forty—forty—forty years ago!—ago!” He has lived a hard life, experiencing “Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep! Aye and yes, Starbuck, out of those forty years I have not spent three ashore” (519-520; ch. 132). He could have taken the easy way out, but something drives him on, denying him any peace until he at last gives up his final spear and he is pulled to the depths of the White Whale’s watery hell. If Ahab had taken his cue from the Opportunists, if he had put in his forty years or so and then retired, giving himself the luxury of rest and a chance for a happy life on land, he would have prospered. He could have become a consumer, rather than a procurer, of oil, profiting from the deaths of other sailors and captains. His soul may have withered, becoming weak and lazy and indulgent, but he would have caused no harm to his fellow men. Had Ahab simply given in to some small degree luxury, he could have saved himself from hell.

But before anyone can officially enter hell, they must enlist the help of Charon to ferry them across the Acheron, the river of woe. After crossing the river, both Dante and Virgil have turned pale, Dante from fear and Virgil from pity for “the pain of these below us here” (19; canto IV). These below are the righteous unbaptized, the Virtuous Pagans whose only punishment is their separation from God and the resultant eternal lack of hope. For our purposes, it is Ahab’s woe that has procured Ishmael’s passage into the inferno. When Ahab, like Pip, found his soul floundering, when he too was “carried down alive to wondrous depths” (401; ch. 93), he chose

for himself the dismal fate of the Virtuous Pagans, and separating himself from God, gave his mind up to despair and woe.

Time and again we hear of Ahab's woe: the "lurid woe" (162; ch. 38) in his eyes, his "close coiled" (519; ch. 132) and "mighty woe" (118; ch. 28). When Ahab lost his leg to Moby Dick, he was forced to face his own mortality in the depths of the ocean. He looked into eternity and returned altered, considered mad. This woe has been a constant companion and reminder of his loss. It drives him forward and will not let him forget his pain. After losing his leg he was overcome with first pain, then woe, and then madness as his "torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad" (177; ch. 41). It is this woe-driven madness that leads him onward in his monomaniacal quest for revenge, and thus allows him and his crew to cross the first river in his journey to the underworld.

Yet his perpetual woe need not have led to madness. Pip, too, faced death at sea—an experience that, though it left his body unharmed, "drowned the infinite of his soul." According to Ishmael, Pip "saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad" (402; ch. 93). Still, there is a difference between the two, for "there is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness" (411; ch. 96). The woe within both the boy and the man is evident, but whereas Ahab has succumb to the madness, Pip becomes the voice of wisdom—"a living and ever accompanying prophecy" (398; ch. 93). As Stubb states, "if it be really wise it has a foolish look to it; yet, if it be really foolish, then has it a sort of wiseish look to it." His fellow crewmen believe Pip to be a fool, a boy who has lost his mind, good for nothing but rambling insanities, yet in regarding the doubloon he proves the most insightful. "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (420; ch. 99). While most focus on the object itself, he considers the effect it has had upon the crew, for they are, indeed, all looking.

And so, through Pip's woe-ridden mind comes "heaven's sense." Pip could, like Ahab, have given himself over to insanity. He could have sought revenge upon Stubb, the man who left him at the mercy of "the miser-merman, Wisdom" (402; ch. 93). Instead, he became one with both the wisdom and the woe. Had Ahab followed suit, he might never have considered taking "vengeance on a dumb brute" (157; ch. 36). He might have considered the fates of the others who had chased the whale before him, and listened to Gabriel's demand that he "Think, think of the blasphemer—dead, and down there!—beware of the blasphemer's end" (308; ch. 71). But his heart is closed to wisdom and his ears are dead to the prophets' call.

Once the journey has begun there is no turning back. They sail out into a stormy, unforgiving sea which quickly swallows one of the sailors, Bulkington. Although his death is hardly more than a side note, he serves as a figure of strength and near god-like perfection as he stares out into the stormy sea. Perhaps, as Richard Chase suggests, Bulkington was merely the remnant of an early draft, a prototypic Ahab before Melville saw fit to take his leg and age his body (*Herman Melville* 58-59). If so, his death takes on a somewhat tragic tint, for we shall never know his full potential. In this way, he is like the Virtuous Pagans who inhabit the first circle of hell. The Virtuous Pagans live with no other torment than the knowledge that they must spend eternity away from the light of God. Bulkington is sentenced to a meaningless death by an author who discovered he had no further need of him, entirely missing out on one of the greatest quests in literary canon. Both stood in sight of greatness, yet now both exist without hope: the Virtuous Pagans because they will never be united with God, and Bulkington because he will never fulfill Melville's original plans for him.

Of his death, Ishmael writes "it fared with him as with the storm-tossed ship, that miserably drives along the leeward land" (102; ch. 23). Like the first circle of hell, a ship driving

toward the leeward shore finds that what had once been its greatest comfort may soon bring about its destruction. So it fared for the Virtuous Pagans who, through the study of reason, have come as close to God's grace as any man can, in Dante's world, without knowing Christ. Yet through no fault of their own, their reason, formerly their greatest comfort, becomes their torment, for reason cannot replace God. Similarly, sailors who drive along the leeward land find that the port, once a place of "safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities," quickly transforms into "that ship's direst jeopardy" (102; ch. 23). The port no longer represents home and hope, but rather certain death should the two meet. Yet both places, the leeward port and the first circle of hell, can bring out the very best of humanity.

Just as Dante stands before the Citadel of Human Reason, in awe of those "whose merit lights their way / even in hell (74-75; canto IV)," so too does Ishmael stand in awe of Bulkington, declaring: "up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!" The Virtuous Pagans have achieved the highest state possible to man without the light of God in the same way that Bulkington has reached his apotheosis through what appears to have been a brave but untimely death at sea. The fate of both Bulkington and the Virtuous Pagans is tragic, but "better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety" (102; ch. 23). Perhaps this is Melville's way of saying that he would prefer to see his Bulkington killed in one spectacular instant than to erase him entirely or to leave him, where he was first sighted, on the land. Dante certainly seems to have had a similar idea in mind when he found himself forced to place his beloved Virgil within the bounds of hell. Better, it would seem, to be remembered and appreciated for some measure of greatness than discarded entirely. And so both serve as symbols of a level of human perfection to which few may dare to aspire.

Nevertheless, his moment is brief and he is soon forgotten. It is a curious fate in literature for one who shines so brightly one moment to be utterly forgotten the next. And it seems most unfair to condemn him to the outer realms of hell, just as it seems unfair for Dante to send the Virtuous Pagans there just because they were born before Christ. I turn to Harold Kaplan's analysis of Ahab for reinforcement. Though at first glance Ahab and Bulkington may appear to have little in common, I would ascribe to Bulkington the same fatal flaw Kaplan associates with Ahab. His greatest failure, Kaplan argues, is in his dealings with Pip, for "Ahab has built too much on the self-affirmations of courage to know how to deal with weakness." He goes on to state that "courage is almost everything, but it is not enough to make man human...cowardice is human" (179). And that is why Bulkington, and the Virtuous Pagans, must spend eternity in the pit. Their search for courage and reason, respectively, has elevated them above Lucifer's collection of lowly sinners, but it has not led them to a better understanding of their humanity. Cowardice is human. Letting go of one's mad quest for revenge in order to spare the lives of one's crew is human. Walking into death, whether at the hands of the White Whale or in the waters of the Lee Shore, is nothing but insanity. Bulkington may have become a god that night of the storm, but what good will it do him as his corpse rots in the ocean's depths? For bravery alone cannot save man's soul.

Before entering the second circle of hell, the poets must pass by Minos, the judge of the underworld, who assigns each soul to its eternal punishment. Like a prophet, Minos "examines each lost soul as it arrives / and delivers his verdict with his coiling tail" (5-6; canto V). He knows the sins of all who come before him and oversees the distribution of the future suffering. When the poets first approach Minos, he tries to warn them off, saying "O you who come into this camp of woe...watch where you go once you have entered here, and to whom you turn! Do

not be misled by that wide and easy passage” (58; ch. 13). But Virgil dismisses the warning and the two men continue. Ishmael and Queequeg meet their own judgment, while still in Nantucket, through the figure of Elijah. “Anything down there about your souls” (89; ch. 19)? Elijah asks, when he learns that they have joined the crew of the *Pequod*. Like Minos, he tells them to be wary of whom they trust, but they dismiss his warnings about Ahab. Seeing that they are committed to their fate, Elijah lets them carry on, declaring “what's signed, is signed; and what's to be, will be; and then again, perhaps it won't be, after all. Anyhow, it's all fixed and arranged a'ready; and some sailors or other must go with him, I suppose; as well these as any other men, God pity 'em” (90; ch. 19)!

Melville's prophet was named for the biblical prophet Elijah, who lived during the reign of King Ahab. Elijah preached against the worship of idols, warning King Ahab that his blatant rejection of the Christian God will lead to many years of famine and drought. Ahab ignores the warning, and Elijah flees the kingdom. After several years, Elijah returns to find that the kingdom has, indeed, suffered as he predicted. Once again he warns King Ahab and his people to turn their backs on idols and worship Yahweh, the one true God. Eventually they are converted, and the drought comes to an end (1 Kings: 17-18). The association between Melville's Elijah and the biblical prophet suggests that Elijah speaks with the voice of prophetic truth when he warns against Captain Ahab's quest. He does not speak in misleading riddles, like Fedallah, but rather tells them straight out that “when Captain Ahab is all right, then this left arm of mine will be all right; not before.” There is also the curious mention of how Ahab lost “his leg last voyage, according to the prophecy” (89; ch. 19). In the Biblical story, Elijah encounters Ahab twice: first to warn him against his initial sin, then to prevent him from sinning further. In *Moby-Dick* the reader sees him only once, but this past prophecy seems to hint that he and Ahab have crossed

paths before, at which point Ahab appears to have ignored his warning. Could this failed attempt to sway Ishmael and Queequeg from their course be the after-math of yet another failed attempt to redirect Captain Ahab? In the Bible, Elijah eventually meets with success and saves a kingdom from self-destruction. Perhaps Melville's story is that of a King, a Captain who simply refuses to be saved.

Yet even if this is the case, and Ahab has rejected Elijah's warnings a second time, the fact that he returned at all shows that there is still hope. Elijah's parting words are a reminder of the strange balance between fate and free will. He does not claim to know the future, like some false prophet, but rather accepts that everything may be averted thanks to the God-given grace of man's free will. Ahab's ship will sink. It doesn't have to, but it does and it will. Unless it doesn't. The same is true of the souls in Dante's hell. Minos assigns them a fate dictated from the beginning of time, just as Elijah consigns Ahab and his crew to a violent death and destruction that we all know must come to pass. Unless it doesn't.

The poets then move into the second circle of hell, home to those condemned for carnal lust. They are caught in an unending tempest, "whirling and battering it drives them on...and this, I learned, was the never ending flight / of those who sinned in the flesh, the carnal and lusty / who betrayed reason to their appetite" (33-39; canto V). Dante's pity for the lovers is so great that he is overcome and falls to the ground in a swoon. Ahab's lust, though far from sexual in nature, is just as unrelenting. He lusts for revenge, for the satisfaction he will find in committing violence against Moby Dick. For Ahab, this desire is just as physical, just as maddening and consuming as any form of sexual yearning. He, too, is caught in the stream of a current against which he feels he cannot fight:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? (521; ch. 132)

This speech comes after our first glimpse of real, human emotion in Captain Ahab. We have spied him drop a single tear into the sea “from beneath his slouched hat” and let forth a sob (519; ch. 132). Like the lovers in hell, he is caught by a passion he cannot understand or control, driven on by what he feels to be a “cozening, hidden lord and master.” For the first time the reader, like Dante, is inclined to feel compassion for the old, broken man. Then we see Starbuck, the voice of reason, the one man who never succumbed to Ahab’s lust for revenge, come forward and try to coax him from his mad quest. Starbuck is driven by love, not lust, for “wife and child, too, are Starbuck’s—wife and child of his brotherly, sisterly, play-fellow youth; even as thine, Sir, are the wife and child of thy loving, longing, paternal old age” (521; ch. 132)! His one wish is to return to his family and live out his life in peace, but Ahab will not listen to his coaxing. That inscrutable thing that drives Ahab onward defies reason. He cannot break from the fate Elijah prescribed to him because to that hunt “heart, soul, and body, lungs and life, old Ahab is bound” (488; ch. 119). He is aware of the choices that face him, but when the ship is struck by lightning and “the lofty tri-pointed trinity of flames” begin to consume it, he stares into the blaze and declares: “defyingly I worship thee” (487; ch. 119)! Yet even in his defiance there is uncertainty:

Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think

thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike. (152-3; ch. 132)

In this one, single speech he moves from timid uncertainty to a blunt declaration of the unbeatable power of fate. He is carried on in the whirlwind of his hate because even when he begins to question fate, he is quick to reassure himself of his own inefficacy. Shortly before his death he reassures us once more of his own, determined lack of control. "Ahab is for ever Ahab," he says, answering his own question from before. "This whole act's immutably decreed." (539; ch. 134). He is who he is and nothing will ever change that. In this moment it seems that fate does not matter. Ahab does not matter. They both simply are. Whether Ahab is directing Ahab, or whether it is fate, the end result will be the same. And so towards thee we roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale.

The third circle belongs to the gluttons who lie in a pit of filth. In life they produced nothing of worth, choosing instead to consume endlessly. In death they lie buried in the very matter they sought to amass. Stubb is, perhaps, the obvious example of the crew's gluttony. He is a man whose greatest pleasure lies in a meal; he is a man who is not content with merely consuming the flesh of his prey, but also "eats the whale by its own light" (292; ch. 65). Like the gluttons in the inferno, his final resting place is somewhere in the depths of the ocean, no doubt buried amidst the bones of the very creatures he once so ravenously consumed. He is a gluttonous man aboard a gluttonous ship led by a gluttonous captain.

Ahab's gluttony, though, is of a different kind. It would be hard to imagine him yearning for anything so trivial as a steak. His hunger for the White Whale comes from a place of hate and a desire for vengeance. He was given a wife and child in his old age, wealth enough to support

him, a home to which he could retire, and a crew that would follow him to their deaths, but it was not enough. His greatest sin lies not in the wasted passage of his own life, but in his careless consumption of the lives of others. For what gluttony can be greater than the cannibalistic destruction of one's own kind? Ahab marries a young girl and then leaves her pregnant and alone, and even his own longing for her is not enough to make him return. He wistfully imagines his wife telling their son stories of him, "how [he is] abroad upon the deep, but will yet come back to dance him again" (521; ch. 132). His gluttony is not just that he married a young girl in his old age. Nor is it that he left her, for that was the sad life of all who made their livings at sea. Rather, it was that his over consumption of his life at sea left no room on his plate for other pursuits. Even if he had returned to his wife at the end of their three year voyage, he would not have allowed them any time together. He would have headed straight back out to sea as he as done for the last forty years. Lastly, he requires that his crew give him everything they have to offer and more until their very lives are not enough. He widows their wives and orphans their children, all so that he may have that which he desires. In the end, his crew is lost not to the White Whale, but to his ravenous hunger for revenge.

Yet Ahab is not the only bringer of such violence against his own kind. The Pequod is no better. She is described as a "cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies" (67; ch. 16). She hunts the very creatures whose corpses have given her life. Their deaths give her renewed vitality, and it is only through her destruction that they will be free of her. She is a creature made for consumption, created in the very image of those she seeks to destroy. Without their death she would cease to have purpose. Her relevance would be negated.

Ishmael speaks of "the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began" (268; ch. 58). He would have us ask,

“who is not a cannibal” (292; ch. 65)? And by extension, I would suggest, who is not a glutton? Just as every man takes advantage of his fellows, so too will he, having sampled their help, look for more and more. Mankind always wants more than what has been given him, and his gain must always be another’s loss. The world itself is, by nature, gluttonous. If not kept in check, a species will reproduce until it causes its own extinction. Polar Bears, in search of food, have been known to cannibalize their own young. And to return to Ishmael’s own idea, has the passage of time ever prevented the creatures of this earth from preying upon each other?

Yet if everyone and everything is a cannibal, then there would seem to be no hope of salvation. Conversely, if everyone is damned (or saved) by nature, in accordance with the Calvinist belief system, how can they be held accountable for their sins? Thankfully, Melville seems to provide an answer before we can ask the question. I refer, of course, to Queequeg, our “George Washington cannibalistically developed” (48; ch. 10). He is a memorable if rather unusual figure, this peaceful cannibal surrounded by the violent Christians. Through their cannibalistic existence, Ahab and his “fire-ship” (409; ch. 96)—both figures of the white, “civilized” world—seem born and bred for nothing but their cannibalistic existence. How strange, then, that in so violently cannibalistic a setting, the only true cannibal is the most peaceful man among them.

We know that Queequeg has killed many a whale in his day, yet when confronted with a school of them in “The Grand Armada,” he pats their foreheads and shows concern for a baby that has become entangled in the line. He is a truly gentle soul, managing to maintain his goodness and temperance in spite of the cannibalistic nature of the life he has chosen. A gluttonous man would have considered killing the baby whale when he realized it was caught, without regard for the consequences. To Queequeg it is a creature in need, to be pitied and

helped. He may kill it one day, but there is a time and a place for such actions and he is not one for needless consumption. Queequeg, in the true spirit of Dante's virtuous pagans, has chosen to live his life according to the Christian ideal out of the goodness of his soul, not the prompting of religion. What's more, he does not claim any standards to which he does not hold himself, unlike our hypocritical, narcissistic Captain Bildad. Dante may damn him, but Queequeg has remained pure in spite of the violent images and figures of Christianity that surround him. If such a man—a cannibal and harpooner—can reject the downward pull of consumption, then surely Ahab, too, could have chosen such a path.

In the fourth circle, our heroes encounter the “tonsured wraiths of greed,” the souls of those who hoarded their money in constant battle with those who wasted it. The battle symbolizes their unending struggle to increase their wealth, a pursuit in which they became so engrossed while alive that now, in death, “their souls have dimmed past recognition” (54; canto VII). Their jousts resemble those of Ahab's crew, man against whale. In one instance, “Stubb answered Flask with lance for lance; and thus round and round the Pequod the battle went” (314-315; ch. 73). This particular incident was a peculiar case for the crew of the Pequod. Ahab had demanded they kill a Right Whale rather than their usual prey, the Sperm Whale, so that he could put a charm on the ship. The right whale is, for Ishmael, both “the most venerable of the leviathans, being the one first regularly hunted by man” (130; ch. 74) and an “ignoble Leviathan” (404; ch. 94) due to its low caliber of oil and the ease with which it is killed. By this account, it is the first creature of its kind to tempt man's greed enough for him to venture into battle. But when called to the next level of this “daring warfare,” when called to pursue a still more terrifying beast, they declared that “to chase and point lance at such an apparition as the Sperm Whale was

not for mortal man” (174; ch. 41). That is, their greed could only drive them so far. It took a different caliber of men, braver or perhaps just greedier, to accept that challenge.

D.H. Lawrence descried the Pequod’s crew as “a collection of maniacs hunting down a lonely, harmless white whale” (122). Their actions are rather maniacal, perhaps, but they are not without purpose. All men and women experience greed. Who has not wished for a better life, more money, nicer clothes? But the desire for money is not enough to drive every man into such extremes of peril as attempting to kill a creature once considered “so incredibly ferocious as continually to be athirst for human blood” (174; ch. 41). The crew of the Pequod is guilty of the sin of greed not simply because they wish to turn a profit, but because that desire, as Lawrence points out, has driven them near to mad. They too, have “dimmed past recognition” when, on the quarter deck, we hear them cry out in “a score of clubbed voices.” They begin to speak as one, responding to Ahab’s call in a chorus of shared greed as they pledge themselves to “A dead whale or a stove boat!” (154; ch. 36). One has to imagine there is an easier way. Certainly we cannot blame the crew of the Pequod for succumbing to the draw of a shiny new coin, as we see in “The Quarter-Deck,” but their greed has reached beyond the acceptable limit. And so it can be said of both the Pequod’s crew and the souls in Dante’s seventh circle, that “in the first life beneath the sun / they were so skewed and squinteyed in their minds / their misering or extravagance mocked all reason” (40-42; canto VII).

Ishmael speaks often in terms of nobility: the “noble profession of whaling” (255; ch. 55), the “noble dish” (290; ch. 65) that is sperm whale meat, the “noble craft” (429; ch. 101) that helps procure that meat, and of course the “noble sperm whale” itself (323; ch. 75). When Ishmael describes an engraving in which “a noble Sperm Whale is depicted in full majesty of might” (260; ch. 56). Their prey is not the Right Whale, that “ignoble monster” (173; ch. 41) but

the Sperm Whale, whose majesty “not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass” (181; ch. 42). The Right Whale lacks the symmetry of the Sperm Whale. The Right Whale’s head resembles a “gigantic galliot-toed shoe,” a shape far inferior to the “Roman war-chariot” (323; ch. 75) head of a Sperm Whale. Given Ishmael’s own apparent love affair with the majestic figure of the Sperm whale, one can image the draw of such a profession for other such young men. Although Ishmael did not initially go to sea in search of glory, we see, through his language, how he has come to revere both his prey and his profession. There is a sense of glory in the kill, power in the conquering of a beast before which most men would crumble. Although most men initially come to the profession for the money, they soon develop a greedy desire for glory. Why else would they pursue the white whale? Why else do we hear of countless ships (the *Jeroboam*, the *Rachel*, the *Samuel Enderby*) that have pursued Moby Dick knowing full well the stories of destruction that surround him? Money, certainly, but, I would argue, some more. Whatever one may say about the *Pequod* and its crew, they do seem to respect their prey. And, whether it is a virtue or a fault, they almost all seem driven on by a greedy desire to conquer the unconquerable.

They hunt a noble creature and as a result perceive themselves to be noble in their greedy pursuit of glory and adventure. But there is one more force driving their greed. When they gather round to hear Ahab’s declaration of war against the White Whale, they are inspired by the promise of gold should they succeed. But the men have joined his cause even before Ahab offers the doubloon as incentive for finding Moby Dick, causing him to grow “more and more strangely and fiercely glad and approving” (154; ch. 36). Although they do not yet know of their task, they are eager to please their captain. They are greedy for his approval and so fail to see the folly of his course. Just like the souls in the fourth circle of hell, the crew has blended into one entity as

they join themselves to Ahab's hate. Starbuck alone has the fortitude to withstand their enthusiasm, warning Ahab against the blasphemous nature of his plan.

The next phase of the poets' descent brings them to the fifth circle of hell, home to the Wrathful and Sullen. Much like the greedy before them, the Wrathful are trapped in an unending battle. Ahab's wrath is not something that requires much explanation, but the fate of the sullen is worth examining. The Sullen lie drowning forever in the muddy waters of the marsh. "Fixed in the slime they speak their piece, end it, and start again: 'Sullen were we in the air made sweet by the Sun; in the glory of his shining our hearts poured a bitter smoke. Sullen were we begun; / sullen we lie forever in this ditch'" (123-24; canto VIII). Ahab, too, has known such anguish, his "soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen paws of its gloom" (146; ch. 34)! In his last moments he declares "I turn my body from the sun" (550; ch. 135), before he is pulled into the ocean's depth, making good that promise. He had much to celebrate, much to live for, but in his sullen and wrathful state, he could think of nothing but revenge.

Before the travelers may leave the fifth circle, they must cross the Styx, the river of hate. In Greek mythology, the Styx is the last thing that separates the land of the living from that of the dead. Both men and gods swear upon its sacred waters, for an oath upon the Styx is unbreakable. It is here, on the banks of the Styx, watching the wrathful bludgeon one another, that Dante fully rejects both sin and sinners, and it is here that Ahab embraces them. Where once Dante had shown pity for the souls of the damned, he now rejoices in God's righteous punishment, saying "In weeping and in grieving, accursed spirit, may you long remain" (37-38; canto VIII). But Ahab has made his oath of hatred against the White Whale, and for him there is no going back: "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" (157; ch. 36). He passes his hatred to his crew

so that “at times his hate seemed almost theirs” (180; ch. 41), and so damns them along with himself. Not love of family, nor God, nor sanity can overcome his oppressive hate. It consumes him, burying him alive in its wrath. “For hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee” (550; ch. 135), he cries, acknowledging that which has led him on his damned voyage. Hatred has turned his ship into a hearse, and so they are doomed to perish, in a vortex of woe and wrath and fire.

But in the end, we must remember what Ahab has forgotten: that Moby Dick is just a whale—a dumb brute who desires no more than to live. Ahab has heretically come to ascribe near God-like qualities to the whale, waging war against both it and God. He baptizes his newly forged harpoon with the words “ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli” (471; ch. 113) or “I do not baptize thee in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil” (Sloan). Ahab has been warned multiple times against blasphemy, “Shall we be towed by him to the infernal world?” Starbuck demands, “Impiety and blasphemy to hunt him more” (539; ch. 134), but he dismisses all warnings.

His hatred is directed at a creature who could not understand or reciprocate his emotion, and so he is nothing but a crazy old man driving his crew ever closer to the pit. Like the pond in the Narcissus myth, Ahab’s violent hatred of Moby Dick has led him to perceive the whale as something other than it is. He sees intent where there is mere instinct and hatred where in reality lies only fear. This deception is both vital and deadly. If Ahab did not ascribe a malicious sentience to Moby Dick, then his desire for revenge upon the creature would be meaningless. It is Ahab’s perception of the White Whale’s conscious violence that gives him his drive and determination. Yet it is this determination that results in the final tragedy of the novel. Ahab has projected his own mental state onto Moby Dick, seeing evil where there is really nothing but a dumb brute. He cannibalistically hunts a personification of the evil that is really within his own

soul. The battle he would fight against God is no more than a battle against “the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room.” That thing that “seemed Ahab” was in fact “his one supreme purpose; [which] by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own.” As a man, Ahab is repelled by this unwanted formation within him, and his spirit “fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth,” leaving but the image of the man, empty, “a blackness in itself” (195; ch. 44). And so, unable to bear the darkness stemming from his own soul, he forced its image onto the white whale.

By bestowing the image of his hatred upon the whale, Ahab seeks to justify that hatred, imagining that he is pitted against a powerful, god-like being rather than an unconscious animal. But Melville, like Emerson, believed that “the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind” (qtd. Kelley. 413). If Ahab sees evil in the natural figure of the whale, then it is because he is projecting the evil within himself upon it. He deludes himself with ideas of reciprocity and marked intent, saying “I’d strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other” (157; ch. 36). If Ahab, like the whale, could focus his energies on living, rather than vengeance, there would be no tragedy.

Ahab’s heretical brethren lie in burning tombs in the sixth circle of Dante’s hell: “Like lies with like in every heresy, / and the monuments are fired, some more, some less; / to each depravity its own degree” (127-29; canto IX). Of course, in keeping with the general theme of this paper, I would argue that Ahab’s tomb need not have been “fired” at all. Ahab cannot regain his leg, but the loss need not have driven him to heresy. When the Pequod encounters the Samuel Enderby, Ahab meets a man who lost his arm to the White Whale, but escaped with his sanity. “No more White Whales for me” (427; ch. 100), he declares, expecting Ahab to agree. Captain

Boomer is another example of the “Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again” (411; ch. 96), and this encounter shows Ahab the life he could lead if he chose to soar from the darkness into light. He could have chosen to forget hate rather than life: to forget his revenge, his pain, his deformity, and be thankful for those few good memories he has. Captain Boomer is a jovial, friendly man. He jokes with his friend, the doctor, and seems filled with the joy of life. He does not challenge God or the white whale. Rather, his encounter with death seems to have taught him the value of life, for while he acknowledges the wealth stored within the White Whale, he rejects the desire to obtain it. He seems to feel no wrath toward the creature who maimed him—merely reluctance to repeat the experience. Nor does he seek to ascribe any preternatural powers to the beast, or challenge God, or anyone, out of anger for his loss. He simply accepts what life has given him and seeks to make the most of it.

From inside the sixth circle, the poets have a view of the seventh, resting place of the violent, cut through by the river of blood and fire, the Phlegethon. Ahab seems already trapped therein as he describes “the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey” (520; ch. 132). He wishes to bring violence against the whale, and so his soul is forever wrapped in its boiling frenzy. “‘The man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain’ (i.e., even while living) ‘in the congregation of the dead.’ Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee...” (411; ch. 96). The words may well be for Ahab, but he does not heed them. “Look not too long in the face of the fire” (410; ch. 96), Ishmael warns, but his warning comes too late. The ship has already been consumed by Ahab’s flame. From the moment he raised the men to his cause they are lost to the flames. When, like a warning of the destruction to

come, the ship is lit with an electrical fire, he cries “Oh, thou clear spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee.” His hate runs from one crewman to the next as they raise cries of “Aye! Aye!...A sharp eye for the white whale; a sharp lance for Moby Dick” (156; ch. 36)! The ship is “laden with fire” (409; ch. 96) as both she and her master journey across the third river of hell.

Of course, the role of fire in the novel goes beyond mere poetics. In comparing the figure of Ahab to the perception of Prometheus from classical times, Gerard Sweeney points out that “the very business of whaling constitutes a theft of fire” (37). That is, whales are not hunted for their meat or hides, but for their oil, which will then be used mostly to fuel lamps. In this sense, Ishmael’s “fiery hunt” is nothing more than an attempt to steal that fire from the whale. And since Ahab, in his hate, has elevated Moby Dick to near godly status, his attempted theft is just as defiant as when Prometheus stole from the gods of Olympus. Sweeney goes on to point out that both Prometheus and Ahab’s greatest failing in their rebellion is their misguided attempt to understand the gods’ intent. Prometheus assumed the gods were attempting to destroy mankind by withholding fire. Ahab convinced himself of Moby Dick’s evil intent by projecting his own feelings onto the whale and so seeks to destroy evil in the world by destroying the whale. From this reading, one could say it is not their respective goals that are evil, but the hubris required for both titan and man to take such responsibility upon themselves (Sweeney 40-42). In his own quest for fire, Ahab acknowledges that he has become “proud as [a] Greek god” (455; ch. 108). But what right has he to claim such pride, and by what divine inspiration can he lay claim to such an enormous quest? Fire has consumed him and clouded his reason, and so, like Prometheus, he must in time reap his punishment.

And so, with flames in his heart and an oar in his hand, Ahab carries his crew toward the vortex of Tartarus. But as with everything, there is an alternative to the fire. For, as we have learned, “there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces.” This “eagle” seems to lie somewhere between wisdom and madness. Although it never leaves the realms of this earth, its disappearance into “the sunny spaces” are like brief glimpses into the infinite. And although his flight never reaches the heavens, he “is still higher than other birds upon the plain” (411; ch. 96). This “eagle,” I would suggest, is none other than Queequeg. And, as Ishmael said of Queequeg, “Was there ever such unconsciousness?” (59; ch. 13). The Catskill eagle exists in a state of elevated humanity—a creature given to unconscious, responsive action. It does not look for praise or reason—it simply acts when action is called for. It represents a truth that strives for neither greatness nor depravity, wisdom nor madness. It is the opposite of the young Platonist who, so absorbed in thought, “will tow you ten wakes round the world, and never make you one pint of sperm the richer” (151; ch. 35). For too much thought would drive men like Queequeg to despair. The eagle soars in the full triumph of existence, acting rather than thinking, devoting itself to an unconscious good rather than to a contemplated evil or indifference. Time and again Queequeg, like the Catskill eagle, dives into the unknown depths of existence to save his fellow sailors and rises, again, victorious into the sunlight. His actions cannot be considered wise, for he takes no time to consider the possible consequences. One might call him mad, but time and again he is successful.

Queequeg is the opposite of violence, the opposite of the Phlegethon, for when men are in danger, he invariably comes to their aid. Many a violent death at the hands of Poseidon is avoided thanks to his unconscious heroism. After catching a sailor mocking him, Queequeg

might easily have cultivated a flame of violence against the man. The situation would not have been helped by their threats to kill him and the man's cry of "devil" (58; ch. 13). His vengeance, too, would have been quickly, blamelessly had when the man was swept overboard. But Queequeg is a man whose heart soars with the Catskill eagle, and he alone, heedless of the danger, acts to save the man who mocked him. He dives into the flaming Phlegethon and steps out unharmed, dragging the rescued soul of his tormentor. He asks for nothing in return but water to wipe off the grime; he expects no gratitude or reward. He acted because action was called for, and because "we cannibals must help these Christians" (59; ch. 13).

The eighth circle of hell belongs to the fraudulent: the panderers, seducers, flatterers and countless others. This circle belongs not so much to Ahab, perhaps, as to his employee and confident, Fedallah. We might find him in the fourth bolgia of the eighth circle, where dwell the fortune tellers and diviners. In punishment each sinner "has made a breast of his back. / In life he wished to see far before him, / and now he must crab backwards" (37-39; canto XX). Fedallah's own death is not so dissimilar from their fate, for his body is "lashed round and round to the fish's back" (545; ch. 135), forever doomed to see nothing but that from which the whale retreats.

Rather than living by Fedallah's dark arts, Ahab might have employed the wisdom of Elijah, whose style of prophecy leaves room for a man's free will to alter his fate, declaring that "what's to be will be; and then again, perhaps it won't be, after all" (90; ch. 19). This is especially important if, as I have suggested, Elijah has given Ahab multiple warnings about the consequences of his chosen path, for it would show yet again that Ahab, like his biblical counterpart, has chosen to place his faith in heathen idols rather than divinely inspired prophets. Delighted by Fedallah's prediction that Ahab would meet his fate at the end of a hemp rope, he allowed himself an excess of confidence, convinced that he was invincible while at sea. After the

tradition of Greek tragedies, it was this confidence, and his decision to shun land, that ensured his death. When he let fly his harpoon “the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, ere the crew knew he was gone” (550; ch. 135), thus both fulfilling the prophecy and serving as a warning for those who would try to outwit their fate. Elijah’s prophecies are of a far gentler kind, as previously discussed. If Ahab had consulted Elijah, his fate may have turned out the same, for, as we know, “what's to be, will be; and then again, perhaps it won't be, after all” (90; ch. 19).

Next there comes the Cocytus, the river of wailing or lamentation. According to Greek mythology, it is upon these shores that the souls of the unceremoniously buried wander, unable to complete their journey (*Encyclopedia Mythica*, “Cocytus”). We learn of one such soul near the end of the novel, when the Pequod gams with a ship called the Rachel. During an encounter with Moby Dick, one of her boats had gone missing. The captain’s young son was on board the doomed vessel, and so the Rachel sails round and round, searching for her lost men. The captain is nearly mad with grief and implores Ahab for help in their search. If Ahab had offered his aid, he might never have encountered the White Whale on that fated day. He and his crew might have continued to wander fruitlessly, like those souls stranded on the shores of the Coctyus, if only he had been moved by Captain Gardiner’s lamentations. They would have been caught in a stalemate—unable to move forward, incapable of going back—but at least they would have been alive. But Ahab’s heart is stone. He is unmoved, and so their search continues, crossing the waters of the wailing river, and drawing them ever closer to death.

Although immune to the misery of others, there are moments when Ahab nearly gives in to the grief within his own soul. The most famous is the previously mentioned scene in “The Symphony,” when “Ahab dropped a tear into the sea” (519; ch. 132). Though it may betray the

turmoil within, a single tear is not enough to sway him from his goal. The scene is reminiscent of a moment in the *Inferno*, when Dante recounts the tale of “a grand old man” whose tears run together to form the Cocytus, the frozen river in which the souls of traitors lay entombed (103-119; canto XIV). For Dante, the Cocytus is the lake at the very center of hell, in which Satan sits, masticating the greatest sinners, as previously discussed. The ninth circle of hell is reserved for the treacherous, those who have turned their back not just from the sun, but from humanity itself. It is here, amidst the like of Judas Iscariot and Marcus Brutus, that Ahab would pay for his careless, callous treachery toward the Rachel.

“Ahab’s iciness” (509; ch. 128) toward the captain of the Rachel is, by Dante’s definition, the same lack of sentiment which led Cain to kill his brother Abel, Mordred to rebel against his father Arthur, and Judas to betray his savior Christ. By refusing to help his friend, Captain Gardiner, Ahab betrayed the bonds of loyalty, friendship, and fraternity. By forcing his crew ever onward, he betrays the responsibility any captain owes to his men. And finally, by withholding his tears, he betrays his own heart and resigns himself to a cold and lonely death. Dorothy Sayers identifies this circle of betrayal in the *Inferno* as man’s last concession to sin—once the silver is in hand, there is no going back (Sayers, Canto XXXII). Like everyone else in Dante’s hell, Ahab knows the path upon which his choice will lead him. He has created his own hell from which there is no return, and so his tears will mix with those of Satan in the ninth circle of Dante’s inferno.

After passing through the ninth circle of hell, our poets escape by climbing down through the center of the earth and out into the light of day. From there they climb Mount Purgatory, where eventually they must part, for Virgil, an unbaptized pagan, cannot follow Dante into Paradise. Here we too might end our journey were it not for one missing link in our portrait of

the abyss. The Greek underworld has five rivers. We have crossed but four. We are missing the Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. In Greek myth, this magical water erases all memories of one's former life and transforms one into a mindless shade. Between its banks flows a sweet nepenthe, of which every soul must drink before entering Hades. Dante uses it for a different purpose.

7. MEMORY AND THE ASCENT

In Dante's Purgatory, souls must atone for their sins in the same manner as those who suffer for theirs in hell. Dante climbs up the seven terraces, each representing one of the seven deadly sins. Before he may exit the second stage of his journey and move on to Paradise, he must be dipped into the river Lethe so that he may forget all his sins and be forgiven (Canto XXXI). Later, when Beatrice accuses the poet of having strayed from the divine path, Dante can remember nothing of his past sins. "As far as I remember I have not ever estranged myself from You, nor does my conscience prick me for it" (Canto XXXII), he swears, proving his new found purity.

Melville's representation of memory is far more nuanced, exposing both sides of maintaining one's worldly attachments. In order for Ahab to continue along his monomaniacal path, it is imperative that he forget his life on land. His wife and child are nothing but a distraction, and so he tells himself that his fate is fixed. When he claims to have widowed his wife by marrying her, he is not merely expressing his regret; he is separating himself from any present culpability for his actions. What will be will be, and he has no power to change it, for so, he feels, the "cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare" (521;

ch. 132). In moments such as these, there exists a strange balance between Ahab's sense of fate and self-determination. He acknowledges that it is his own self which drives him on, yet cannot reconcile that part of himself with the "proper, natural heart" which repels such instincts. He both accepts responsibility and rejects it. Such a delusion is vital to his goal, for he could not focus so intently upon his it, disregarding his life and duty, had he not forsaken all former attachments.

But he cannot fully forget. The times when he comes closest to foregoing his revenge are saturated with memories of his child and wife: "About this time—yes, it is his noon nap now—the boy vivaciously wakes; sits up in bed; and his mother tells him of me..." The pain and longing evident in these scenes seem wholly alien to one such as Ahab. We are accustomed to the shows of violent suffering when he curses the heavens, but his is something different, the gentle longing of a human man with a human heart. When he speaks of his child, the fire and ice and madness are gone, leaving only the woe as yet untamed by mania. In this state alone could he turn from his quest. But he feels the danger such memories present, and "like a blighted fruit tree he shook, and cast his last, cindered apple to the soil" (521; ch. 132). The last cindered apple, the last memory tying him to land and reality, is cast to the wind and the waves. Richard Chase writes that "Death—spiritual, emotional, physical—is the price of self-reliance when it is pushed to the point of solipsism, where the world has no existence apart from the all-sufficient self" (*The American Novel*, 106-7). In forcing those last memories of his family from his mind, he once and for all binds himself to himself; the next day, the hunt for Moby Dick begins, and his fate, the punishment for his solipsism, is finally sealed.

In Starbuck, we find a character who refuses to forget. He lives for his family and will do nearly anything to return to them. His wife has a name, Mary, whereas Ahab's is but a faceless

young girl. His only fault is that “he waxes brave, but nevertheless obeys” (458; ch. 109). From the moment Ahab’s true purpose is revealed to the crew, Starbuck seems to know what will come of it. But he is alone in his rebellion, and is without the strength of Ahab’s madness to support him. He has but the memories of home and family—powerful, but images of good as opposed to Ahab’s driving evil. And so his fortitude fails. When he raises the musket to put an end to Ahab’s insanity, he cannot act. “A touch, and Starbuck may survive to hug his wife and child again” (494; ch. 123), but he cannot forget his duty to his captain, his responsibility as first mate. The cold touch of the treacherous Cocytus is not for him. Ahab has forgotten all his ties to humanity. In contrast, Starbuck is unable to relinquish any ties or sense of duty. His desire to be reunited with his family pushes him to oppose Ahab, but his sense of duty toward his captain prevents him from taking the necessary measures to stop him. And so his goodness proves his downfall.

Yet even though his ties to humanity prove detrimental, it is this unity that makes him a sane, functioning human being. When the shades of the underworld drink from the Lethe, they forget their loyalties and loves, friendships and allegiances, and it is through this act that they become something less than human. In the first chapter titled “Knights and Squires,” Ishmael discusses the need for a hidden solidarity between all men. The necessity of this type of union comes from the inevitable failings in the soul of mankind. In discussing the “abasement of poor Starbuck’s fortitude,” he states that “Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations...” (110; ch. 26). Here he seems to damn the grouping of men into secular, corporate units. Such a union is directly opposite to man’s desired state. Man strives to form a union of all mankind into a single oversoul, the opposite of the soul’s communal isolation in hell. This joint isolation is naturally cannibalistic—nations compete with other nations, companies compete with

other companies. These so called “unions” thrive upon the existence of disunity in the world, feeding upon another’s weakness and looking out only for their own personal gain. In hell this is achieved by forgetting one’s connection to one’s fellow man. The souls in hell can only see their own suffering, and so often increase that of their neighbor in an attempt to relieve their own. It is only through such a disassociation from one’s fellow beings that Ahab can become “cannibal old me” (521; ch. 132), sacrificing the lives of his men so that he may find peace through the death of Moby Dick.

Yet life in true isolation is as sinful as the cannibalistic consumption of one’s fellows. Ishmael continues to say “...knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men may have mean and meager faces...” (110; ch. 26). Here he condemns man as an individual. Once more he calls attention to man’s secular failings through the roles that we impose upon our fellow human beings, styling one a “fool” and another a “knave.” As individuals, men fail. Although this form of forgetting may not directly harm others, it does no good for them either. Those who isolate themselves become weak and ugly, selfish and base. And it is only as an individual, disconnected from friends or family, that Ahab is able to forget his duty to the world and undertake his quest. If he felt himself to be part of a unit—a true father to his son or captain to his crew—he could never jeopardize their futures as fool-heartedly and selfishly as he does. Thus, Ahab falls into both of Ishmael’s “detestable” categories. He is both a member of the cannibalistic joint stock-companies, feeding upon his superiority over his men to accomplish his goal, and a member of the individual “knaves, fools, and murderers” who pretends that his actions affect him alone. He manipulates memory so that he may both tie men to his service as his subordinates and forget that he owes them any consideration. If both these forms are to be looked down upon, then one

can assume that the “ideal” man is neither man as an individual, nor man as a secular group and that Ahab is far from “ideal.”

But then what is the “ideal” man, this creature of which Ahab falls so far short, and how does memory play a role in forming him? According to Ishmael, an individual, prone to degradation and imperfection, may be a fool, “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” (110; ch. 26). At first glance, this image of “man, in the ideal” may seem to be just another form of the individual, but Ishmael makes it clear that this image is but an illusion dependent upon the unified attempts of one’s fellow men to maintain it. The ideal man, Ishmael seems to suggest, is the result of a spiritual union between men, each helping the other to forget his flaws and past failings and focus solely on their collective goodness. As suggested at the beginning of the passage, all men are united in that they are all guilty of the same imperfection, that of the abasement of fortitude. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, they are also united in the desire to overcome it, to become the “ideal man” through union with their own kind. This union can only be formed if man is able to drink from the Lethe and purge his memory of all former sins.

In “A Squeeze of the Hand,” Ishmael finds union with his shipmates in the act of squeezing the sperm when he finds himself “unwittingly squeezing [his] co-laborers’ hands in it” (Melville 368). This simple action forms a sense of loving unity between him and his fellows and he declares his wish to “keep squeezing that sperm for ever!” (403; ch. 94). Newton Arvin wrote of a similar type of unity evident in Melville’s work, saying: “On one level it is an intuition that carries us beyond morality, in the usual sense, into the realm of cosmic piety; on the usual ethical level, however, it is a strong intuition of human solidarity as a priceless good” (181). In just such

a manner as Arvin describes, all sense of envy or malice melts away, unconsciously, with each squeeze of the sperm. They become like one massive, unified machine, working together in blissful harmony. Their union goes beyond the mere physical act, becoming divine in its simplistic communion (368). They forget all that has divided them, all petty emotions and unholy tendencies in this moment of pure, simple bliss. It is as though they, as a unit, have drunk from the Lethe, and become eternally bonded as a result. But instead of the Lethe, it is the whale which functions as the unifying device. Previously, the whale has almost always exists as a cause for violence and fear, yet here, in death, it has become a symbol of peace and solidarity.

Ahab has chosen to forget this inherent unity; he has chosen to forget the dependence men have upon one another in order to survive and thrive, and therein lies the cause of his ultimate tragedy. He is, in the words of Richard Chase, “guilty of or victimized by a distorted sense of ‘self-reliance’” (*The American Novel* 105). For Ahab, a whale is nothing but a figure of violence and evil. He cannot bring himself to find goodness in the natural world, and so he cannot become one with his men in the squeezing of the sperm. By rejecting his fellow men, he rejects any chance for salvation: “Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth,” he cries, “nor gods nor men his neighbors” (530-31; ch. 133). In the *Inferno*, Dante relies upon Virgil’s guidance to bring him safely through hell and back. Those who suffer in hell, on the other hand, suffer both together and alone. They are surrounded by their fellow sinners, yet have no power or desire to help them. They must do their individual penance for their individual sin, for sin separates mankind. Starbuck offered his hand to Ahab. Under Starbuck’s guidance, they might have gone home. “Why should any one give chase to that hated fish!” Starbuck cries. “Away with me! let us fly these deadly waters! let us home” (521; ch. 132)! But Ahab has abused the magic powers of the Lethe. The Lethe is meant to purge the mind of past sins, but

Ahab uses it to forget past joys like his wife and child. Starbuck tries to correct his misuse of memory, urging him to forget, instead, the evil quest. But once the waters of the Lethe have taken hold of Ahab's mind, his wife and child are forgotten, and so there is no going back.

Ahab is not one to accept his misfortune so graciously. Like a convert to an ancient religion, he has fully initiated himself to the mysteries of the cult of the Inferno. He has drowned his spirit in maddening woe, suppressed every human tendency toward grief, allowed himself to be consumed by fire, and forgotten all that men hold dear in his quest for revenge against the hated whale. His story gives a dismal ending to miserable life. Despair seems to triumph over hope, madness over sanity, and hatred over love. But we must remember that Dante's story is not that of the convicted sinner. Rather, he tells the tale of one who has looked into the mouth of hell and returned, wiser and better than before.

Like Dante before him, Ishmael is given a new life when he is rescued by the Rachel. So then where is his paradise? The novel's parting as, as Chase points out, is one of despair—that of the Rachel “that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan” (552; epilogue). He writes,

For Melville there is little promise of renewal and reward after suffering. There is no transcendental ground where the painful contradictions of the human dilemma are reconciled. There is no life *through* death. There is only life *and* death, and for any individual a momentary choice between them. What moves Melville most powerfully is the horror that is the violent result of making the wrong choice. (*The American Novel* 107)

And in a sense, what is Dante's *Inferno* if not a description of the “violent result of making the wrong choice?” Through his theory of symbolic retribution, the poet makes it clear that each

sinner's choice, his knowing decision to live his life in sin, has shaped the manner of his punishment. By choosing his sin he chose his torment. If he does not like the consequences, then perhaps he made the wrong choice. And *this* is "the key to it all." Each sinner is, in his own way, like Narcissus, "who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned" (3; ch. 1). Each man and woman alike chooses to make themselves a sinner: one a glutton, another guilty of violence or treachery or heresy. And in the end, it is the realization of their own sinful desires that proves their downfall. Ahab's journey through the novel is no more than a series of steps in the wrong direction, carrying him deeper and deeper into hell. Only Ahab's hell isn't something that happens after he dies. Ahab was thrust into hell the moment the White Whale's teeth closed around the flesh of his leg, and he has been traveling deeper and deeper into the abyss ever since.

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