

“ONCE GONE THROUGH, WE TRACE ROUND AGAIN”:
THE CYCLICAL JOURNEY OF BELIEF AND UNBELIEF
IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S LATER WORKS

by

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“Once Gone Through, We Trace Round Again”: The Cyclical Journey of Belief and Unbelief in the Herman Melville's Later Works

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This thesis explores Herman Melville's struggling relationship between belief and unbelief in *Moby-Dick*, “Benito Cereno” and his long poem, *Clarel*. Melville’s travel to the Marquesas gave him a sense of cultural relativity which prompted questions about his faith that continually remerged even as he found answers for them. In spite of overwhelming skepticism, Melville was unwilling to fully relinquish his faith because his belief offered him a sense of comfort and sincerity. Being trapped in a space where he could not fully believe in Christianity but was equally unable to detach himself from his faith, Melville discovered Ralph Waldo Emerson’s concept of double consciousness which served as a theoretical framework for his feelings of internal liminality. Melville drew on Emerson’s ideas about the union of oppositions, and his representation of double consciousness as a circle to propose a struggling, wrestling form of belief. The Melvillean believer discovers questions which produce doubt and then seeks answers to these questions. These answered questions produce a brief sense of peace before further questions assert themselves and the struggling believer must begin his journey once more. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville acknowledges the circles that make up life and faith as well as the way that it is still possible to progress in belief even when the individual is trapped in a circular pattern. Melville continues these ideas in “Benito Cereno” where he attempts to bring readers into a lived experience of his own struggle with faith and doubt so that they can empathize with his struggle

and perhaps adopt a similarly courageous form of faith. Finally, in *Clarel*, Melville shows the equal pull of both belief and unbelief, the way that questions will continue to emerge after others are answered. Through these works, Melville ultimately resolves that he will continue both to question and to believe eternally.

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CHAPTER I

“THE PONDERING REPOSE OF IF”: MELVILLE, DOUBT, AND THE INFLUENCE OF EMERSON AND COLERIDGE

In the ebb and flow of an individual's faith, the word “If” can take on a powerful and haunting duality. An “If” can reflect both the painful realities of misplaced faith and the hope that despite of all the questions and concerns, there is a small spark of truth and sincerity contained within this belief. The indeterminacy of “If” as a statement allows both the positive and negative implications of the statement to carry their own separate forms of power. Given the great power of “If” as a statement, it isn't too surprising that Herman Melville was a man who was haunted by and obsessed with the nature of “If,” particularly in terms of his Christian beliefs. His travels to Polynesia caused him to wonder if what he believed was genuine given that the islanders he met were equally confident that their indigenous religion was true. His mind was also talented at posing difficult questions that challenged the integrity of this belief. In this torn, conflicted state of mind, Melville found solace and expression in Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of double consciousness and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's notion of Bi-Polar unity. In both Emerson's double consciousness and Coleridge's Bi-Polar Unity one of the central ideas is that the individual must struggle to bring together opposing states of being in order to arrive at a sense of personal and aesthetic completeness, even if they are only successful in this endeavor briefly and infrequently. Melville's resulting image of the process of belief is the image of a circle where the individual believes, finds questions that compromise this belief and then seeks answers that will resolve these questions. Melville presents the cyclical movement and wrestling that takes place in the mind of the skeptic who cannot quite believe/believer who cannot fully

eliminate skepticism as the most courageous form of faith because it acknowledges the deepest forms of doubt and yet still struggles to believe regardless of personal pain and loss.

Melville's struggle between belief and his own ever-encroaching doubts is a theme that appears in several of his works throughout his career and one that is perhaps best exemplified by Starbuck in his reading of the doubloon that Ahab has nailed to the main mast. While Starbuck is not generally seen as a mouthpiece for Melville's thoughts in the same way that characters such as Ishmael and occasionally Ahab are, his attempt to derive meaning from the coin reveals a man who desperately wishes to believe but who also struggles with doubts that assert themselves just beneath the surface of his consciousness. Starbuck begins his reflection with positivity that the image on the coin illustrates the ongoing hope of God's presence in his life: "So in this vale of Death, God girds us round; and over all our gloom, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon and a hope. If we bend down our eyes, the dark vale shows her mouldy soil; but if we lift them, the bright sun meets our glance half way, to cheer" (*Moby-Dick* 333). Starbuck's expression of faith is remarkably hopeful in the beginning of his observation as he expresses his trust that God will always shine into an individual's darkest moments. However, because Starbuck bases his image of God on the metaphor of the sun, he realizes that the image isn't as steadfast or secure as he expects God to be due to the sun's rotation: "Yet, oh, the great sun is no fixture; and if, at midnight, we would fain snatch some sweet solace from him, we gaze for him in vain!" (333). As Starbuck begins to probe into the metaphor more deeply, he realizes that the image of God as the sun would also mean that God is absent during the darkest moments in his life, otherwise they wouldn't be dark in the first place. Starbuck's musings about whether God is present during times of profound suffering creates a moment of doubt for him that threatens to dismantle the faith that he had expressed at the beginning of his reflection.

Like Starbuck who goes from an innocent reading of a doubloon to a state of crippling doubt, Melville also faced questions about his deepest beliefs. In Melville's case, these questions combined with a desire to pursue theological truths that prevented him from fully embracing Christianity. Nathaniel Hawthorne's wife Sophia provides a compelling description of Melville's beliefs in an 1851 letter to her sister where she notes that Melville was constantly reflecting on and reaching for truth:

[Melville's] fresh, sincere, glowing mind ... is in a state of 'fluid consciousness,' & to Mr. Hawthorne [he] speaks his innermost about GOD, the Devil & Life if so be he can get at the *Truth-for he is a boy in opinion-having settled nothing as yet* . . . & it would betray him to make public his confessions & efforts to grasp- because they would be considered perhaps impious, if one did not take in the whole scope of the case (Melville *Correspondence* 184).

Mrs. Hawthorne notes here that Melville is still developing and solidifying his beliefs and as a result, they shouldn't be dismissed as heretical. Melville is a seeker who wanders into potentially sacrilegious territory in pursuit of answers, but he is also committed to discovering the truth about God and existence. Sophia Hawthorne's comparison of Melville to a "boy in opinion" is equally telling because it highlights Melville's spiritual curiosity, not unlike the young child who responds to answered questions with still further questions. Melville is continually searching for answers to his questions about God and the universe and he is unwilling to rest in easy, unearned answers to these queries, but he is also does not intend to surrender his faith without compelling evidence of its falsity.

Melville's drive to pursue the answers to his doubts even if it pushes him beyond the bounds of his own faith distinguishes his response to doubt from that of Starbuck. In Starbuck's case, the moment that he recognizes the skeptical train of his thoughts, he immediately decides to surrender his attempts to interpret the doubloon and instead moves on to other tasks that are less

perilous for his faith: “This coin speaks wisely, mildly, truly, but still sadly to me. I will quit it, lest Truth shake me falsely” (*Moby-Dick* 333). Starbuck recognizes that his analysis of the coin is causing him to notice valid questions about Christianity and how it works, he even notes that there is a truth to his questioning. At the same time, Starbuck worries that this line of questioning will “shake him falsely” or cause him to be disingenuous to his Christian ideals which make up a significant portion of his identity. Melville, in contrast, felt a deep need to pursue spiritual lines of questioning even if they caused him to reject portions of his faith and the security that might come from unquestioningly embracing Christian tenants. In a letter to Sophia Hawthorne where he thanks her for her praise of *Moby-Dick*, Melville discusses how individuals know who they ought to be, but that they are unable to reach the ideals that they strive for and instead remain adrift, hoping to find solid ground:

For tho' we know what we ought to be; & what it would be very sweet & beautiful to be; yet we can't be it. That is most sad, too. Life is a long Dardenelles, My Dear Madam, the shores whereof are bright with flowers, which we want to pluck, but the bank is too high; & so we float on & on, hoping to come to a landing-place at last -- but swoop! we launch into the great sea! Yet the geographers say, even then we must not despair, because across the great sea, however desolate & vacant it may look, lie all Persia & the delicious lands roundabout Damascus. (“Melville’s Letters at the Time” 548)

Melville’s exploration of his distance from being the person he wishes that he could be also serves as an excellent metaphor for the way that Melville’s inquisitive personality distanced him from Christianity. Melville discusses his attempt to grasp the shores, or faith but observes that it remains out of reach and becomes further distanced as he heads out to open water where the bank is no longer in sight. But, while Melville is separated from a sense of being a devout believer, he is also not fully severed from his faith nor is he beyond the possibility of locating a sense of definite belief. As Melville observes, across the sea there is a vast amount of land and

security for the drifting soul. Melville's doubts make it difficult for him to be a devout believer while his faith prevented him from fully embracing skepticism either. Instead, Melville's faith remained in a fraught liminality between these two poles.

While some of Melville's doubt may have come from his naturally inquisitive nature, a significant source of both his skepticism and his inclination towards embracing multiple perspectives in order to attempt to answer these questions comes from the time that he spent in the Marquesas, an experience that was the inspiration for his first book, *Typee*. After encountering Polynesian inhabitants with a distinct culture who sincerely embraced a religion drastically different from Melville's own native Christianity, Melville returned to the states with the sense that his faith was not a final or authoritative truth. As Hershel Parker observes: "No other important American writer lived for weeks anywhere with a primitive tribe almost untouched by Western civilization, as Melville did in the Marquesas. From that experience Melville gained a permanent, instinctive sense of cultural relativity" (xxiii). Melville saw Americans who were confident that their faith was correct and their values were an authoritative moral standard while across the ocean, Polynesians shared the same confidence as they held drastically different beliefs. This sense of multicultural encounter had a profound impact on displacing the centrality of Melville's own belief system as Jenny Franchot observes that travel can alienate the Christian traveler from God: "[A]nthropological encounter and the ethnography it generates dislodge the discursive Christian God from his primacy, not only silencing him but reproducing him as illegitimate, silenced other to the disenchanting Western traveler" (167). This othering of God altered Melville's relationship with him from that point onward and impacted the way that he saw the church and organized religion in a larger sense. Hilton Obenzinger notes that Melville's sense of cultural relativism makes its way into *Typee* where Melville's promotion

of the Typee and criticism of missionary efforts challenges the presumed certainty and superior knowledge of Western culture: “[*Typee*] proposes that all of our categories may be inadequate, our knowledge starkly limited, our absolutes less certain than we presume. Melville returned neither a Christian nor a Pagan missionary, but he did come back with the invisible tattoo of cultural ambivalence and doubt” (185). Melville’s travels served to expand his mind as well as give him an abiding love for other cultures, but this time spent living in a different culture also caused him to question his commitment to his faith and cultural values.

Melville addresses the potential for travel to expand, rewrite, or even compromise an individual’s worldview in a lecture that he gave on the benefits of travel. In this lecture, Melville explains that travel provides the benefit of dispelling an individual’s prejudice and ingrained stereotypes by expanding his social and intellectual sphere: “The sight of novel objects, the acquirement of novel ideas, the breaking up of old prejudices, the enlargement of heart and mind,—are the proper fruit of rightly undertaken travel.” (“Travel”). As individuals travel, they, like Melville, come to see the world in new ways and gather an experiential firsthand knowledge of other cultures beyond the stories and stereotypes that color each location. Melville also notes that travel gives individuals a greater sense of participation in humanity and a sense of personal rebirth: “Travel to a large and generous nature is as a new birth. Its legitimate tendency is to teach profound personal humility, while it enlarges the sphere of comprehensive benevolence till it includes the whole human race.” (“Travel”) Individuals who travel in an open and welcoming manner to other cultures are given a sense of rebirth and an ability to embrace multiple cultural ideals simultaneously. In this sense, Melville’s understanding of other cultures and his ability to see the world in multiple perspectives made his own viewpoint very similar to Du Bois’ concept of Double-Consciousness that comes decades later. Craig Svonkin argues that “Melville, given

his outsider status and openness to a myriad of cultures encountered in his world travels, may have been that unusual white American who could view the world from a “double consciousness.” (85). Melville’s cultural relativism and his lack of confidence that any of his cherished beliefs are certain or steadfast gave him more than enough cause to question his own perspective and seek to expand his view with other narratives. The cultural liminality or proto-Du Boisian Double-Consciousness that Melville discovered through his multicultural experiences served to initiate Melville’s religious conflictedness and internal wrestling, a state of mind that would leave him open to consider Emerson’s double consciousness and seek to bring together the oppositions of faith and doubt.

Melville explores the way a close connection with other cultures can cause the mind to embrace a sense of dualism in his depiction of Ishmael and Queequeg’s budding relationship in the early chapters of *Moby-Dick*. When Ishmael first arrives at the Spouter Inn, he is told that there are no available beds other than a bed that he must share with Queequeg. Ishmael is initially opposed to the idea because he is used to holding one perspective and one vision: “No man prefers to sleep two in a bed...people like to be private when they are sleeping. And when it comes to sleeping with an unknown stranger, in a strange inn, in a strange town, and that stranger a harpooner, then your objections indefinitely multiply.” (*Moby-Dick* 29-30). Ishmael is so opposed to the prospect of sharing a bed with a foreign harpooner in a strange place that he initially attempts to sleep on a cold bench in the common area. As Ishmael attempts to sleep in these frigid conditions, he realizes that he should reject his solitary, prejudiced and exclusive existence in favor of a shared bed with Queequeg: “[S]eeing no possible chance of spending a sufferable night unless in some other person's bed, I began to think that after all I might be cherishing unwarrantable prejudices against this unknown harpooner.” (31). Ishmael’s ensuing

decision to sleep in Queequeg's bed is more than a charge of sleeping accommodations or even a declaration of friendship as it becomes the first stepping stone in Ishmael's rebirth through his multicultural contact with Queequeg. A few chapters later as their companionship grows, Ishmael mentions that Queequeg has provided him with a sense of redemption: "I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it" (56). Queequeg's redemptive presence serves a similar role to Melville's discussion of travel that can dismantle different forms of prejudice as Ishmael remarks that his friendship with Queequeg has served to soften his own biases and intolerance: "[S]ee how elastic our stiff prejudices grow when love once comes to bend them" (58). Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg allows him to reject his initial prejudice and see the world in a more expanded sense as he transitions from a man with a solitary worldview to a man who embraces Queequeg's conflicting worldview in addition to his own.

Ishmael's embrace of multicultural friendship is also initiates his growing love for dualities, binaries and opposing states of being that can come from the merged embrace of his own values and those held by Queequeg. In bed with Queequeg, Ishmael remarks that the warmth of his bed can only truly be treasured because of its contrast with the coldness of the room: "[T]o enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself" (58). Ishmael's observation that objects are defined through their conflict and coexistence with oppositions suggests a shift in his worldview from before as he initially had no interest in placing two opposing items, namely himself and Queequeg, in the same limited space. This embrace of oppositions is further highlighted in Ishmael's response when he is presented with an either/or choice between clam and cod chowder and elects to consume both: "'Both,' says I; 'and let's

have a couple of smoked herring by way of variety.” (68). In addition to suggesting that Ishmael has moved beyond simple either/or choices in favor of a complex embrace of contradiction, Ishmael’s declaration that he wishes to eat both chowders along with some herring suggests that he has reached the state where he gladly embraces opposing perspectives and even attempts to add further viewpoints to his own consciousness. While Melville frames Ishmael’s relationship with Queequeg and his character transformation in a positive light, it is worth noting that Ishmael’s new consciousness poses a challenge to his existing worldview as his desire to show love to Queequeg and honor his religious practices also means that Ishmael must “turn idolater” and join Queequeg in worshipping his god, Yojo. Ishmael’s rationale for engaging in this idolatry to his Christian beliefs is ironically based on the Bible as he decides that worshipping Queequeg’s god is the best way for him to respond to the Golden Rule to “do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man do to me” (57). Ishmael’s relationship with Queequeg introduces him to a new state of mind that melds opposing and contradictory views but it also has the effect of placing him in liminal position with his faith as he attempts to acknowledge the validity of Queequeg’s faith without fully surrendering his own sense of belief. In this sense, Melville and Ishmael are similar as they have both experienced a sudden connection with multiculturalism that changes their confidence in the relative truth of their faith as well as the best way to practice this faith in light of other compelling alternatives for belief.

Instead of feeling lost in the liminality between faith and doubt, Melville’s simultaneous embodiment of both belief and unbelief may have caused him to gravitate toward the theoretical ideas of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson and then repurpose their ideas to express his own spiritual wrestling. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s work on the union of opposites and the way that this applies to the poetic imagination is a particularly significant influence

because his ideas affected both Melville himself and Emerson who would use these ideas to develop the concept of double consciousness. In Melville's case, he purchased a copy of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* in 1848 and would have read it before he began writing *Moby-Dick* (Sealts *Reading* 168). John Williams explains that Coleridge's exploration of poetic imagination was "[a]n important source of Emerson's ideas on polarity and also Melville's on paradox" (38). For Coleridge, the unification of oppositional forces was an essential part of artistic creation and one of the central obligations of the poet. The poet created a vibrant artistic work by joining things together that were directly oppositional and engaged the entirety of his soul in the attempt to do so: [The Poet] diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination" (174). Coleridge adds that the power of the poet's imagination "reveals itself in the balance or reconcilment of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects" (174). Coleridge believed that imagination produces an almost magical aesthetic that binds together contrary things, allowing the artistic creation to take on a vibrant, multivalent air that can reach the reader in several distinct ways simultaneously. This unification of opposites was also an important means of arriving at basic truths about existence as Mary Anne Perkins notes when she explains that part of Coleridge's philosophy of life included the idea that "the truth of Ideas" could only be found in binaries that appear to be contradictory (101). The contrasting duality produced a cohesive written work while also presenting the reader with the truth by presenting opposing forces and allowing the reader to merge them into a unified worldview. This philosophy of merging oppositional forces as part of the poetic process is a

theme throughout *Biographia Literaria*, and one that Melville seems to have taken to heart in his composition of *Moby-Dick*.

Coleridge's notion of a union of opposites is evident at a few different points in the text with one particularly poignant example of the power to merge oppositions being Melville's depiction of the sperm whale's eyes. Unlike other creatures who are able to see a uniform image with their eyes, Melville explains that the sperm whale has one eye on each side of his body and must therefore combine the contrasting images into one coherent vision:

[W]hile in most other animals that I can now think of, the eyes are so planted as imperceptibly to blend their visual power, so as to produce one picture and not two to the brain; the peculiar position of the whale's eyes...must wholly separate the impressions which each independent organ imparts. The whale, therefore, must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him (262-263).

The whale's vision consists of two distinct images on either side that are separated by a solid wall of darkness directly in front of him. As a result, any forward movement on the whale's part requires him to take in each opposing image and then merge them in order to extrapolate a safe path forward. Melville posits that because of this unique mode of vision, the whale's mind is "much more comprehensive, combining, and subtle than man's" because he is able to "at the same moment of time attentively examine two distinct prospects, one on one side of him, and the other in an exactly opposite direction" (263). In addition to Coleridge's concept of Bi-Polar unity, the whale's ability to properly balance two separate modes of vision is highly reminiscent of John Keats' notion of Negative Capability. As Keats explains in a letter to George and Tom Keats, Negative Capability is the ability to comfortably exist in a state of ambiguity and skepticism: "I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" ("Letters"). Those who are

able to live in the state of uncertainty are given a sense of balance and are freed from an obsessively inquisitive mind much like the whale is able to be content with the blindness and uncertainty that lies ahead of him. William Potter observes that the image of the whale's combining brain is also a good metaphor for Melville's fiction in a larger sense because it too attempts to hold contrasting states of mind: "Like the sperm whale's brain described in *Moby-Dick*...Melville's fictive landscape holds many different perspectives in view simultaneously" (15). Instead of presenting one vision, genre, or perspective, Melville uses the structure and imagery of *Moby-Dick* to present a merger of opposing states that brings the whole mind of the reader into activity, much like the way Coleridge's poetry is designed to operate.

Melville further solidifies his understanding of the unity of oppositions in his discussion of the underlying difference between a Fast-Fish and a Loose-Fish. Melville defines these concepts as two mutually exclusive states of whale ownership explaining that "a Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it"—in other words, a whale that has been securely fastened to that particular vessel. In contrast, a Loose-Fish is not yet possessed by any ship which means that it is "fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it" (308). In his definition of these two divergent states, Melville explores the way that these categories can apply to a multitude of larger fiscal and philosophical concepts. For a Fast-Fish, Melville observes how this applies to subjects and properties that are owned by a larger power: "What are the sinews and souls of Russian serfs and Republican slaves but Fast-Fish, whereof possession is the whole of the law? What to the rapacious landlord is the widow's last mite but a Fast-Fish?" (309-310). While the widow, slaves, and serfs all have their own sense of agency, they are also controlled by larger interests and therefore not entirely free. In contrast, Melville uses Loose-Fish to discuss those ideas that many seek to possess but which still lack any one definitive grasp: "What all men's minds and opinions

but Loose-Fish? What is the principle of religious belief in them but a Loose-Fish? What to the ostentatious smuggling verbalists are the thoughts of thinkers but Loose-Fish? What is the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish?" (310). By asking these questions Melville illustrates how religious beliefs, philosophical concepts, and even many parts of the globe are still in the process of being defined and grasped. In the midst of these categories separating that which is claimed and that which is currently beyond anyone's grasp, Melville notes that the reader simultaneously possesses both of these opposing qualities at once: "And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?" (310). Melville's observation here is that his readers are, to some extent, in the possession of someone else as the reader is at the mercy of the author for what they read. Conversely, readers are also free agents who need additional persuasion in order to continue reading the text and even with all the responsibilities and obligations that readers are held to, there is a part of the mind that is still free from control. By depicting human beings as both constrained and free, Melville exposes a site in the mind where opposites meet and coexist.

While Coleridge's Bi-Polar unity in *Biographia Literaria* had an impact on Melville's depiction of co-habituating opposites, his depiction of the opposition between Reason and Understanding in *Aids to Reflection* had an impact on Emerson and what eventually became his depiction of double consciousness, a concept which also impacted Melville's depiction of divided internal states. Robert Milder explains that Emerson was searching for "an epistemology that would allow him to conceptualize the mind's relationship to the world" and he ultimately rediscovered the writings of Coleridge as a source that would help him to describe conflicted internal processes: "[H]e pored over Coleridge, and in May 1834, synthesizing the new influences upon him, he warmly lectured his brother Edward on 'the distinction . . . between Reason & Understanding'" ("Emerson to Edwards" 103). Reason and Understanding were two

divergent impulses in the human mind. As Samantha Harvey explains, Coleridge's distinction between Reason and Understanding was that Reason was engaged in larger processes of knowledge that could be located within itself through contemplation while understanding came from the knowledge that individuals gained from the physical world: "Reason was *a priori*, unconditional, grounded only in itself, and capable of perceiving divine law, whereas the understanding was limited to knowledge gained from the world of sense" (59). This separation between reason and understanding became the basis of double-consciousness as the mind attempted to reconcile these two conflicting forces: Reason's desire to transcend the physical world and Understanding's opposing impulse to gather data through sense experience. Emerson's specific reference to double consciousness in his lecture "The Transcendentalist" builds on the division that he placed between Reason and Understanding and exposes the extreme difficulty that these two mental states face in actually coming together for any significant amount of time: "The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other, never meet and measure each other; one prevails now, all buzz and din; the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise" (206). While Emerson thought that internal peace and increasing levels of knowledge came through the unification of these opposing forms of consciousness, his description of the way that understanding and Reason (here labelled as "the soul") frequently wrest control away from one another illustrates the fact that the ability to meld these two opposing states was an ongoing struggle and one that didn't frequently find success. In his essay "Montaigne; Or, The Skeptic," Emerson observes that those moments of cohesive blending between Reason and Understanding were rare and woefully fleeting:

The astonishment of life is the absence of any appearance of reconciliation between the theory and practice of life. Reason, the prized reality, the Law, is apprehended, now and then, for a serene and profound moment amidst the hubbub of cares and works which have no direct bearing on it;- is then lost for months or years, and again found for an interval, to be lost again. If we compute it in time, we may, in fifty years, have half a dozen reasonable hours (705).

Emerson places the difficulty of joining Reason and Understanding on the nature of Reason because Reason flees in the presence of the everyday cares and concerns of the physical world. In the struggle to join these two states of mind, Emerson notes that the moments of euphoria are brief and a considerable amount of time can elapse before these blissful moments of transcendence will return once more. As Harvey observes: “Polar opposites were never permanently resolved for Coleridge and Emerson. Instead polarity served as a philosophical and a literary method, through which the reader could be ushered to ever higher vantage points. Moving through polar opposites was a way of measuring intellectual progress” (51). Instead of expecting to permanently rest in the times when Reason and Understanding perfectly come together, Emerson used these fleeting moments as stepping stones that could help reach a higher level of knowledge while seeking to bring about the unity of oppositions once more.

Melville’s embrace of Emerson’s double consciousness is somewhat complicated by other scholars who have noted Melville’s ambivalence or irritation with Emerson’s writing as well as by Melville’s own claim in a letter to Evert Duyckinck that he does not “oscillate in Emerson’s rainbow” (Leyda 292). However, I think Melville’s comment within the same letter where he writes that “Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow” as well as his extensive exposure to Emerson’s work both illustrate Melville’s willingness to utilize Emerson’s ideas as long as he isn’t labelled as an acolyte or disciple of Emerson. Merton Sealts points out in his study of Melville’s reading that Melville was a “devoted reader” of Emerson (*Reading* 79). Sealts argues

that Melville borrowed a copy of Emerson's essays in 1849 before he wrote *Moby-Dick* and that the essays that Melville read at this time were the ones that he did not annotate in his later copies of Emerson, including "Circles" ("Rainbow" 264). Perry Miller observes the vital role of Emerson's ideas on Melville's writing when he writes that without Emerson's presence "both to stimulate and exasperate Herman Melville," *Moby-Dick* would not have possessed the same philosophical depth that it did and would have been simply "another sea story" (146). While Miller makes a bold claim about the influence of Emersonian ideas on Melville's composition process, Emerson's ideas exposed Melville to the division between Reason and Understanding which likely resonated with him and gave him a theoretical framework for his feelings of religious liminality. John Williams notes that Melville's interaction with Emerson's work after attending Emerson's lecture series and reading his essays had a profound impact in the way that Melville decided to work with polarity in his works: "Although Melville's interest in polarity is evident as early as *Typee*...the contrasts are not so sharply drawn, nor the mixtures of traits as complex, as we find in Melville's writing following Emerson's lecture series" (63). As Melville grew more familiar with Emerson's writing, he also recognized that the Emerson's ideas about double consciousness connected well with his own internally divided state and allowed him to create an aesthetic that brought his readers and his characters into an encounter with polarity.

Melville's interest in playing with the underlying concept of double consciousness manifests itself quite prominently in the "A Squeeze of the Hands" chapter where Ishmael experiences a sense of brief transcendence not unlike Emerson's description of the attempt to merge Reason and Understanding. As Ishmael first begins to describe the spermaceti, he describes both the texture of the substance and the way that it changes his relationship to his own body: "It was our business to squeeze these lumps back into fluid. A sweet and unctuous

duty!...Such a clearer! such a sweetener! such a softener! such a delicious molifier! After having my hands in it for only a few minutes, my fingers felt like eels, and began, as it were, to serpentine and spiralise” (*Moby-Dick* 322). Ishmael’s description of the way that his hands “serpentine and spiralise” connects his experience of transcendence squeezing spermaceti to the nature of ascending, progressive spirals which indicates a sense of progression to these transcendent feelings. As Ishmael continues to describe his experience of working with his fellow crewmembers to squeeze the lumps of spermaceti back into fluid, he mentions that he feels a sense of unity and transcendence that overshadows the violence and oppression of Ahab’s destructive quest for the whale: “I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it [...] while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice of any sort whatsoever” (322). Ishmael’s moment of bliss comes not from the spermaceti itself, but rather from the joining together of unique and diverse crewmembers. Ishmael recalls that this action produced a “loving feeling” in his heart and causes him, in a moment of euphoria, to propose that the boundaries between their respective identities should dissolve, allowing their identities to interpenetrate: “[L]et us squeeze hands all around; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” (323). As Ishmael squeezes the sperm with his crewmembers, he envisions a moment when their identities can not only be squeezed into one another, but they can also be taken together to form the essence of kindness through the melding of these diverging consciousnesses.

In spite of Ishmael’s own wish that his moment of unity and freedom from Ahabic domination could last forever, his experience is broken up, both by Melville’s use of a page break immediately after the experience, and, more dramatically by the violent description of the

slicing room that occurs in the very same chapter. Ishmael concludes the chapter with a description of “the blubber room” where crewmembers stand on the strips of blubber in order to slice them into smaller pieces. This process is extremely harmful to the crewmen working there as Melville mentions that the movements of the ship would often cause crewmembers working in the blubber room to slice off their own toes or the toes of their assistants and that “toes are scarce among the blubber room men” (324). Melville’s placement of a jarring scene of amputation immediately after Ishmael’s own short-lived unity is itself an example of bipolar unity as the oppositions are contained within the same chapter. At the same time this amputation scene is also an example of Emerson’s observation of how temporary a moment of transcendent, enlightening unity can be. Ishmael is given the opportunity to forget Ahab’s quest and discover a deep, anti-hierarchical form of community; but the interruptions of reality (or understanding, as Emerson would call it) force their way into this serenity and suggest that the very person who enjoys a cohesive moment could find himself losing one of his toes shortly thereafter due to the perilous realities of his career. Ishmael experiences a moment of unity that affects his consciousness and exposes him to higher truths, but the moment is a temporary one and Ishmael finds himself reverting to the state he was in before: engaged in a physically hazardous line of work and committed to helping Ahab’ disastrous quest.

Melville’s presentation of a brief state of unity that is disrupted by the everyday world but comes with the potential to return in the future creates a cyclical process, one which can also be credited to Emerson’s depiction of double consciousness in his aptly named essay “Circles.” As John Williams observes, the circle itself is an ideal image of double consciousness because it is formed of the union between one idea combined with the contrasting idea expressed by its opposite: “The rotation of [Emerson’s] circle requires forces at each end of a diameter to thrust

in opposing directions. This contrast is part of Emerson's theory of polarity" (135). The oppositional and continual thrusting of thesis and antithesis creates the form of a circle where ideas clash, but remain conjoined into one figure. Instead of representing this circular path from duality to transcendence as a constant loop that individuals are trapped in as they endeavor to meld and remeld Reason and Understanding, Emerson explains that the circular movement and progression of life is instead an ongoing upward movement: "For ever it labors to create a life and thought as large and excellent as itself; but in vain; for that which is made instructs how to make a better" ("Circles" 412). Emerson adds immediately after his idea of nature gaining the knowledge to construct a superior model of itself improvement and developing circles is an unending movement: "Thus there is no sleep, no pause, no preservation, but all things renew, germinate, and spring" ("Circles" 412). In an epistemological sense, the potential for every thought and action to be outdone by what follows it and the unending stream of discovery can make the any established knowledge seem sketchy and unstable. As R.A. Yoder points out: "The action and reaction of compensation are represented here by the two 180-degree arcs of a circle, this 'first of forms' that returns upon itself. But...it also symbolizes the deeper fact that no action is ever fixed or completed, that no single viewpoint or summary of events is ever final" (322). While this instability suggests a platform for ongoing skepticism, the ascending nature of Emerson's spirals also offers individuals new forms of knowledge to replace those that are lost, progressively introducing readers to truths through the continual joining and separation of opposites. At the beginning of "Circles" Emerson states his understanding of upwardly mobile circles within other circles, starting immediately when one circle comes to an end: "[E]very action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle, another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that

there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens (“Circles” 403). Emerson’s depiction of circles that rise out of circles and an ongoing state of regeneration that follows closure strikes a balance between the reader’s pursuit of narrative conclusion and the added layers of indeterminacy and irresolution that make successive circles both possible and necessary. Martin Bickman makes a similar observation as he notes that Emerson’s construction of *Essays: First Series* allows him to make definitive claims and later turn and invalidate them only to stress their veracity once more later in the text, as a result Emerson’s “Circles” successfully contains both satisfaction and the endless search for new truth: “The form of *Essays: First Series* is Emerson’s most self-conscious and successful solution to a set of problems that pervade his writing career: how to reconcile inspired vision with crafted structure, the perpetual open-endedness of truth with the satisfactions of temporary stays against confusion” (71). Emerson’s depiction of the brief transcendence that comes from balancing Reason and Understanding and the way that the end of this euphoria sparks the quest to regain transcendence once more is also a circular pattern, and one that is fundamental to negotiating Melville’s own understanding of belief and doubt.

Melville’s depiction of circularity in *Moby-Dick* is very much connected to the imagery of sailing and circumnavigation which is also an apt metaphor for the journey from doubt to belief back to doubt again. Early in the novel, Melville describes the beginnings of several whaling voyages as the vessels take their leave of shore as well as the endless series of voyages that make up an individual whaler’s career, where the end of one voyage is simply the beginning of the next voyage that launches the ship out again once more: “[N]ew cruises were on the start; that one most perilous and long voyage ended, only begins a second; and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, for ever and for aye. Such is the endlessness, yea the intolerableness of

all earthly effort” (62). The brief moment of success that a returning whaleship may experience, is ultimately cut short by the need for the whaleship to depart once more and repeat the process in exactly the same manner as before. The cycle of departure and return evinced by the whaling vessel is disheartening on the home front because it suggests a deliberate absence, much like the doubts that detach individuals from their religious communities. At the same time, the outward-bound whaling vessel is constantly on a return voyage home attempting to overcome the obstacles and rejoin the community once more. Melville further emphasizes the cyclical nature of departure and return by reflecting on the circular nature of the globe, Ishmael observes in later passage: “Round the world! There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings; but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through numberless perils to the very point whence we started, where those that we left behind secure, were all the time before us” (195-196). The outward departure from home, is at the same time, a return home where departure and return are both antithetical while also coming together to form a circle. The circular voyage repeats itself as the hope of return and the successful voyage home transition into another sorrowful departure and the hope of returning begins once again. The circular double consciousness that Melville describes may result in a moment of peace or serenity, but any moment of insight must necessarily be brief because the labor and lingering questions reassert themselves. Just as the success of one whaling voyage must give way to a new quest, the insight gained in one moment is interrupted by the mundane experiences of everyday life and the need to fight for the insight to return once more.

Melville’s representation of the circular journey of belief and unbelief comes together in a profound soliloquy by Ahab in “The Gilder” chapter where he explores the stages of belief that human beings progress and cycle through over the course of their lives. Ahab begins by noting

that while moments of calm and progress are desirable, they are intertwined with opposing moments of storms and regress:

[M]en yet may roll, like young horses in new morning clover; and for some few fleeting moments, feel the cool dew of the life immortal on them. Would to God these blessed calms would last. But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms. A storm for every calm. There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations (373).

Melville suggests here that the “blessed calms” of internal peace and resolved questions cannot linger for long. This feeling of being connected and at peace closely resembles what Melville describes in a letter to Hawthorne as “living in the all” (Melville’s *Letters at the Time* 541). But these feelings of bliss cannot last forever as we have already seen in Emerson’s description of double consciousness, which means that a moment of “blessed calm” also signals a storm on the horizon. While the departure of bliss and the storms faced by the individual would suggest that he has lost all of the previous progress that he attained, Melville points out that there is no “unretracing progress in life” and that the individual can still advance in his knowledge even if he must repeat some things again.

After expressing the individual struggle between storms and moments of clarity, Ahab goes on to describe the individual stages of belief that individuals move through over the course of their lives. Mankind moves “through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’ doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of If” (373). While the human stages which progress from ignorance regarding religion, to blind faith, followed by increasing levels of doubt and skepticism seems to suggest that mankind is advancing toward a state where all faith is lost, Melville undercuts this by describing the final stage as the “pondering repose of If,” a description

which offers the possibility that “If” is an embrace of human skepticism and disbelief as well as the opposing possibility that the “If” is designed to challenge the doubt the preceded it and return to the individual to faith once more. By making this the final stage, the individual is left without a sense of finality and certainty. An image of linear “unretracing” progress would place the “pondering repose of If” as the ultimate goal that individuals should strive to achieve because this is the last stage that Melville mentions. Rather than offering a sloped ascent, Melville instead offers the image of a circle where “infancy’s unconscious spell” and the “pondering repose of If” are not the beginning and end of humanity’s progress in terms of belief but instead two poles of an eternally moving circle: “But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally” (373). As long as individuals live, they are part of a journey through faith and doubt that is continually ending and restarting itself. Jenny Franchot makes a similar observation when she notes that the spiritual journey between the poles of faith and doubt is ongoing and without the resolution of certainty in either direction: “There is no endpoint of spiritual conviction or final disillusionment reached through this travel, but rather a recurrent movement between opposed possibilities of belief and unbelief” (158). The individual who arrives at a sense of faith must undertake a new journey to answer further doubts and the individual who has located grounds for sustained skepticism finds cause for faith once again.

Although Melville’s writing throughout *Moby-Dick* reflects his own process of working through belief, doubt, and the peace brought about by unifying oppositions, Melville also structured *Moby-Dick* and his other texts in a manner that provides his readers with their own experiences of doubt and indeterminacy. John Bryant points out that the conflicting ideologies and narrative styles in the text place the reader in a state of skeptical thinking: “In *Moby-Dick*, not only do characters demonstrate these instabilities, but the narrative itself destabilizes readers;

it puts us in a revolutionary condition of doubt. As revolution, it makes us inhabit the passions of conflicting ideologies. And this explains the strategy behind the novel's double form" (71). As readers attempt to glean meaning from Melville's use of multiple genres or even come to understand the oppositional states described within the text itself such as the Fast-Fish/Loose-Fish distinction, they encounter a sense of doubt and recognize their inability to fully uncover the meaning in the text. Hilton Obenzinger adds that Melville was deliberately ambiguous in all his works so as to provide the reader with an opportunity to join him in his circular journey:

The novel can be seen as a literary star pulsating with inherently multiple, ambiguous, ambivalent, haunting, troubling meanings – with the narrative's inscrutability, the tale's paradoxical unresolved elusiveness (and allusiveness), the poem's simplicity and complexity, all provoking the reader to even deeper meditations. Once again, the reader is asked to join Melville in the great "to-and-fro" of spiritual mysteries (196)

The structure of all of these texts is partial and incomplete to a certain extent in order to help the reader to discover what Melville himself found while he was in the Marquesas: That individuals should not be too confident that the narrative they possess is complete and should instead endeavor to fill in the gaps with other narratives and perspectives until they understand the world slightly better than they did before. Melville did not want to take this journey through doubt and faith alone, so he designed his texts as vehicles that could take readers on a similar journey and perhaps come to understand the doubter in society and not simply shun him for his lack of faith.

Melville's curious disposition as well as his experience of other cultures and religions in his travels gave him a restless mind that would not be satisfied with the directive to "just believe" when faced with significant questions or doubts. Because he lacked the ability to embrace blind faith and the desire to fully relinquish his Christian beliefs, Melville chose one of the few remaining alternatives: to struggle to locate reasons for belief and answers for spiritual

questions. Sometimes he would find satisfaction and hope and other times he would find only despair, but after every quest for answers, Melville soon found the need to begin the circular journey once more. Melville's efforts to join his sense of faith with his significant doubts and the rarity of finding moments of peace where these two states would correspond perfectly likely caused Coleridge's exploration of the value of bringing oppositions together and Emerson's description of the fraught challenges of double consciousness to resonate with Melville on a deep spiritual level. Using double consciousness as a conceptual framework in the same way that Emerson utilized Coleridge's distinction between Reason and Understanding, Melville finally had a means of expressing the fluctuation and fluidity that individuals can experience in their faith as they struggle to find someone and something to believe in. Through the imagery of the circular journey, the incomplete text, and the union of oppositions, Melville continued to strive and wrestle while also offering the potential for his readers to join him in the effort.

CHAPTER II

“IF THE DEPOSITION HAS SERVED AS THE KEY”: NARRATIVE INDETERMINACY,
 DIVIDED ACCOUNTS, AND READERLY SKEPTICISM IN “BENITO CERENO” AND
 “THE TWO TEMPLES”

Melville’s interest in bringing together opposing forms of narrative/genre in a single work and his concerns with locating religious or epistemological truth come together in a variety of different ways in the period following *Moby-Dick*. The doubled, bifurcated nature to Melville’s fiction was certainly a part of the structure of *Moby-Dick* itself, but it became even more significant as Melville turned to writing his diptychs and other narratively divided stories such as “Benito Cereno.” Melville’s friend, Evert Duyckinck noted this doubled element in his review of *Moby-Dick* where he observes that Melville’s works take on a fictional or fantastic element while at the same time being works that express deeper, sincere truths about the world:

A difficulty of in the estimate of this, in common with one or two other of Mr. Melville’s books, occurs from the double character under which they present themselves. In one light they are romantic fictions, in another statements of absolute fact. When to this is added that the romance is made a vehicle of opinion and satire through a more or less opaque allegorical veil...It becomes quite impossible to submit such books to a distinct classification (403).

Duyckinck offers an excellent appraisal of Melville’s narrative approach here both in *Moby-Dick* as well as in some of his later, more overtly bifurcated works such as “Benito Cereno” and the diptychs. He draws attention the way that Melville’s books incorporate two oppositional states that seem to be mutually exclusive, namely “romantic fiction” and “absolute fact” and how the

attempt to join the two complicates the true/false binary. Melville's depiction of events follows a fictional format, but there is also another layer of truthfulness about Melville's own opinions and experiences. There is an allegorical element to Melville's works that seems to present readers with the possibility of reaching deeper meaning, and yet there are so many possible meanings for the imagery that he uses that the reader cannot easily "solve" Melville's narrative mysteries either. Hilton Obenzinger observes that *Melville's* narratives

set up speculative situations...that cannot easily be digested or explained or contained. The reader then contemplates the possibilities and impossibilities of these situations, and the inadequacies of all perception and representation, while the narrative pushes the reader to dive even deeper into self-reflexive thought despite constant uncertainty and doubt (181).

Melville's presentation of situations that are outside of the reader's initial understanding also exposes them to the ultimate unknowability of the world and their position in it which makes his narratology a readerly exercise in epistemology and the nature of belief.

The skepticism caused by the presence of unknown and unknowable narratives has profound implications for understanding the nature of reality as well as the validity of faith. Duyckinck's review also touches on the sense of religious wandering in a passage following his analysis of Melville's narrative technique where Duyckinck critiques Ishmael as a character. Duyckinck criticizes Ishmael as a conflicted mind who is constantly drawn two and fro by opposing beliefs: "[I]f it is the author's object to exhibit the painful contradictions of this self-dependent, self-torturing agency of a mind driven hither and thither as a flame in a whirlwind, is, in a degree, a successful embodiment of opinions, without securing from us, however, much admiration for the result" (404). Duyckinck's description of Ishmael as a man who is painfully conflicted, "driven hither and thither" to the point where he is bringing pain upon himself in his efforts to understand the world around him could just as easily describe Melville's own religious

liminality as he struggled to negotiate truth and falsehood in his world. Duyckinck's frustration with Ishmael's religious wandering and his expression that this meandering does not offer anything worthy of the readers' admiration shows a larger lack of empathy and understanding for the lived experience of doubt in general and Melville's struggle with faith in particular. If Duyckinck, a man who personally knew Melville, was unable to empathize with his friend's conflict of faith, it is likely that Melville found that many of his readers were similarly apathetic to the struggle with doubt and that Melville may have attempted to create a narrative experience that will allow readers to experience his own internal conflict and anguish. The opportunity for readers to share in Melville's mental suffering and tearing is also part of the source of his inspiration in colliding different opposing narratives because these texts attempt to capture the movement of Melville's mind—at times questioning, at other points confirmed, and his efforts to expose the limitations of certain narrative depictions.

While Melville engages in a practice of drawing conflicting narratives together in many of his stories, "Benito Cereno" is one of his narratives that most directly engages with the nature of double consciousness and belief. Melville's focus throughout "Benito Cereno" is on the nature of epistemology as well as on the way that narrative construction and combination can highlight certain truths and obscure or erase others. This focus on narratology and truth comes to the forefront in Delano's musing about whether Benito is giving him a true account of the calamity faced by the San Dominick: "There was a gloomy hesitancy and subterfuge about [Benito's account]. It was just the manner of one making up his tale for evil purposes, as he goes. But if that story was not true, what was the truth?" (699). As Delano muses about the true history of the San Dominick, his larger question echoed by Melville throughout the text is "what is the truth?" in terms of narrative reliability and the larger question of truth as it applies to an individual's

interpretation of the world around him. Towards the end of "Benito Cereno," Melville combines his initial narrative with a deposition that offers the potential to enhance the reader's understanding of the novel and fill in the gaps of his knowledge. Instead of providing these answers, the deposition further highlights the unknowability of what has truly taken place on the San Dominick by showing additional gaps created simply through the existence of this narrative. As Laura Barrett observes: "[T]he novella's reliance on multiple genres invites a debate about the representation of truth. The deposition, the text seems to posit, is no more accurate than the narrative that precedes and succeeds it" (423). Melville's deposition raises questions about the nature of truth because it seems to have as many omissions and evasions as the initial narrative which exposes the way that this text fails to present a final authoritative truth. At the same time, the inclusion of the deposition also shows readers that the initial narrative is not trustworthy either, which leaves the reader without a firmly established source of authenticity, but also dismantles misplaced trust in faulty narratives. Because the oppositional, supposedly authoritative deposition does not explain all of the mysteries evident in the rest of the text and draws more attention to these mysteries than there was in the first place, the reader becomes a skeptic at the end of his/her reading and is forced to look once more at the earlier narrative and perhaps even outside the text in order to find personal resolution. Melville provides no guarantee that personal redemption will take place every time the reader incorporates additional narratives; there is also the possibility that the reader's increase in knowledge will only serve to expose the fact that additional knowledge is needed. In presenting the narrative in the manner that he does, Melville exposes the possibility that those narratives that seem to have the greatest potential for personal resolution can also be the greatest source of doubt.

While Melville's ultimate argument is that multiple forms of narrative truth cannot fully eliminate the questions posed by the text, Melville also exposes the problem of complacency presented by those individuals who believe that their own limited perspective contains all the answers to life's questions and refuse to seek out additional explanations that conflict with their own biases. One of the main reasons that Babo is able to maintain his fictional performance of conditions on the San Dominick is because Delano directs all of his attention to a single "authoritative" source of knowledge—Benito, and he refuses to acknowledge other sources of knowledge from the slaves and crewmembers that can enhance his understanding of the situation. Delano is so desperate to see a sense of unified narrative that he is blind to distinctions amid the larger crew of the San Dominick that would offer him more access to truth: "But, in one language, and as with one voice, all poured out a common tale of suffering; in which the Negresses, of whom there were not a few, exceeded the others in their dolorous vehemence" (676). Delano shuts out the plethora of explanations that he could potentially receive upon boarding the San Dominick and instead limits the alternate perspectives to a single barely intelligible voice. Christopher Freeburg suggests that some truths are never going to be revealed no matter how forcefully someone searches for them because there are existential, "ungovernable aspects" of history "that subjects often exclude and cannot see due to their ideological and epistemological limitations" (119). Due to these limitations and the way that Delano ignores the plurality of voices, he finds himself perspectively blind in the midst of a critical situation.

In addition to his efforts to see multiplicity as one entity, Delano seeks out one authoritative voice in order to understand what has happened on the San Dominick. While Melville uses Delano's initial arrival on the ship to describe the look of the ship and passengers, Melville notes that Delano himself is almost immediately impatient with this reception and seeks

out an explanation from the captain: “But the first comprehensive glance which took in those ten figures, with scores less conspicuous, rested but an instant upon them, as, impatient of the hubbub of voices, the visitor turned in quest of whomsoever it might be that commanded the ship” (678). This continues for Delano past his initial meeting with those onboard the *San Dominick* and is part of the reason why he is not as suspicious as he should be. Delano dismisses suspicions that he should rightly have because he does not think that everyone on board the ship can be actively involved in what he thinks is Benito's plot: “If Don Benito's story was throughout an invention, then every soul on board, down to the youngest Negress, was his carefully drilled recruit in the plot: an incredible inference” (699). While Delano first thinks that he can consider this possibility, he quickly dismisses large-scale collaboration as unlikely. In this case he is once again dismissing the multitude because it does not fit with his understanding of the hierarchal structure of the world. As Craig Svonkin observes, Melville constructs his texts so that only a hybridized, combining mind can offer an adequate reading of the situation. In contrast, characters such as Ahab or Delano who refuse to open themselves to other narratives of truth will find themselves woefully misguided:

Melville seems to be slyly arguing that deep knowledge or wisdom is only for those self-otherers or hybridized, multicultural subjects who can view the world from multiple perspectives, and that the unicultural Ahabs of the world are bound, due to their dependence on or need for a single truth, to miss the clues to the puzzle and thus to misread the world (39-40).

This inability to access some forms of truth comes from an individual's own worldview which has the potential to prevent him from seeing what is directly in front of him but is only perceivable through a multiplicity of perspectives. As such, people who willfully ignore the opportunity to experience other worldviews, as Delano discovers, are woefully unprepared to

survive in a world where doubts are crippling regardless of your awareness of them and the answers to life's mysteries seem just out of reach.

Melville continues to show the importance of embracing multiple perspectives through his juxtaposition of third-person narration and dialog. During the first 11 pages of "Benito Cereno," dialog is conspicuously absent and instead substituted with authoritative narration. This avoidance of dialog becomes particularly evident once Delano has boarded the ship and attempts to discover what disasters Benito's vessel has experienced:

The best account would, doubtless, be given by the captain. Yet at first [Delano] was loth to ask it, unwilling to provoke some distant rebuff. But plucking up courage, he at last accosted Don Benito, renewing the expression of his benevolent interest, adding, that did he (Captain Delano) but know the particulars of the ship's misfortunes, he would, perhaps, be better able in the end to relieve them. Would Don Benito favor him with the whole story? (682)

The narration here that describes rather than presents Delano's question to Benito displays Delano's focus on answers that fit with his existing worldview and the vacuum that is created when individuals are unable to detach themselves from their own worldview in their search for answers. While Delano's desire for Benito to share the "whole story" of the San Dominick's misfortunes opens the first dialog in the story and results in some brief discussion between the two men about the tragedies that have taken place, the narrator soon steps in to paraphrase Benito's words once again. The narrator claims that this commandeering of Benito's narrative is done in the interest of making the story clearer amid Benito's faltering, traumatized state of mind: "Don Benito reviving, went on; but as this portion of the story was very brokenly delivered, the substance only will here be set down" (684). The fact that the narrator decides to explain Benito's story instead of allowing dialog to serve this role for the entire duration seems to echo Delano's mindset that Benito does not have the strength to command authority or trust.

Delano even considers seizing control of the ship from Benito just as the narrator has taken control of the account at this point. Melville's description of Delano's limited perspective and the domineering narrative voice shows that the truth is obscured in monologic versus dialogic texts and that individuals cannot hope to find answers to their spiritual questions if they are unwilling to question their own beliefs and acknowledge the perspective offered by other worldviews—to have a true dialog as opposed to dismissively resting in the supposed superiority of their own worldview.

Although Delano's reliance on his considerably limited worldview is a significant factor in his inability to see the truth of the concealed mutiny, Melville also uses the deposition to expose the way that combining of two versions of "truth" can expose the gaps and limitations in both accounts rather than providing answers to the limitations and doubts of a solitary perspective. While the deposition claims to be the "true history of the San Dominick's voyage," the document itself is filled with omission and paraphrase that sheds serious doubt on the text's veracity especially when placed against the initial narrative (738). One of the first problems that compromises the veracity of the narrative is Benito's promise to "tell the whole truth of whatever he should know and should be asked" which means that some truths regarding the mutiny could be excluded if Benito does not happen to know them or if those who are questioning him do not ask the right questions (739). Melville also draws attention to places where the deposition withholds information. For instance, there are times when an italicized aside mentions that certain details and names were given during the hearing but does not specifically state what these names and details were, the asides serving to summarize portions that were excluded. Melville further highlights the sense of absence and selectiveness within the deposition by providing a visual symbol of gaps in the text that are not summarized at all. There are roughly 38 instances in

the 14-page deposition where Melville uses these asterisks “****” in various sizes to indicate further exclusions to this already selectively recounted narrative. By highlighting the deposition’s tenuous relationship with truth, Melville is able to present the limitations of this official narrative. As Brian Yothers observes, Melville’s attempts to cast doubt on the official narrative exposes the ways that “official” documents may repurpose narratives for ulterior motives: “A formal device that would reappear in *Billy Budd* was Melville’s use of official documents associated with Babo’s trial as a means of illustrating the vexed relationship of the official accounts to the truth” (111). Readers are encouraged to question the deposition because it is withholding access to a complete understanding of the mutiny, much like the limiting perspective that the reader has already experienced in Delano’s mind.

Melville presents his deposition as a supposedly authoritative summary of the mutiny and its aftermath which makes this text a mirror to the initial experiences of Delano as well as an account that is somewhat dependent on the narrative that preceded it. In this way, the deposition transforms the text of “Benito Cereno” into a diptych of sorts, where both the deposition and the initial narrative complement each other. The story is not an official diptych in the way that stories such as “The Two Temples” and “The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids” are, but it follows a similar structure by creating a merger of opposing narratives. As Helen Lock points out: “The text of this deposition, placed almost at the end of the story, itself acts as a mirror image of all that has gone before... This is a complementary version of the story as seen from behind Don Benito’s mask, an ‘official’ narrative of the events of the mutiny, seemingly revealing the reality behind the subsequent imposture” (60) As Lock observes, the deposition is designed to complement the initial narrative while also taking on an air of added authenticity, one that seems to offer illumination for the preceding narrative even though it has accuracy

problems of its own. The deposition attempts to deliver a genuine description of the events that took place during the mutiny which places it at odds with the fictive account that Benito initially gave Delano, but the deposition is also designed in such a way that familiarity with the initial narrative is required in order to fully understand the deposition. In one of the italicized portions of the deposition that paraphrase parts of the larger hearing, Melville offers a brief summary of the false story that Benito gave to Delano instead of retelling the account of this event from Benito's perspective: "*And so the deposition goes on, circumstantially recounting the fictitious story dictated to the deponent by Babo, and through the deponent imposed upon Captain Delano; and also recounting the friendly offer of Captain Delano with other things, but all of which is here omitted*" (747, Italics Melville's). The italicized omissions seem to come from the part of the narrator who feels that it isn't necessary for the reader to read unimportant details such as a full crew manifest or details that the reader is already familiar with after reading the first portion of the story. While this editorial move may allow a reading of the story that avoids tedious repetition, it also suggests that the former narrative is required so that the deposition can actually make sense as a cohesive account and that the deposition itself is incomplete. As a result, Melville's narrative structure creates a union of opposing accounts of the mutiny on the San Dominick and tempts the reader with the prospect of possessing greater understanding through an amassed knowledge of different variations of the story.

While the contrasting narratives present the promise and potentially the trap of gaining greater insight about events on the San Dominick, the addition of the deposition raises rather than resolves questions about the mutiny. While introducing the deposition, Melville suggests that the reader will be faced with a highly mediated text and that any one of these intervening forces could compromise the veracity of the narrative. As Melville points out, the reader is only

given relevant extracts of the full document, as we have already observed. There is also an added layer of mediation because the “original text” was written in Spanish and then translated: “The following extracts, translated from one of the official Spanish documents, will it is hoped, shed light on the preceding narrative” (738). Melville’s addition of “it is hoped” is yet another addition that undercuts any sense of narrative certainty that the deposition will actually illuminate the mysteries posed by the initial narrative. Melville introduces further doubts on the veracity of the deposition by casting doubt on Benito’s reliability as a witness:

The document selected, from among many others, for partial translation, contains the deposition of Benito Cereno; the first taken in the case. Some disclosures therein were, at the time, held dubious for both learned and natural reasons. The tribunal inclined to the opinion that the deponent, not undisturbed in his mind by recent events, raved of some things which could never have happened (739).

While it is certainly understandable that Benito’s trauma would have an adverse influence on his mental state, this revelation immediately causes the reader to question whether Benito can truthfully relate the circumstances of the revolt. The narrator quickly adds that Benito’s testimony was verified by other crewmembers who can confirm many of the more absurd-sounding events: “bearing out the revelations of their captain in several of the strangest particulars, gave credence to the rest” (739). But the damage to Benito’s credibility as a witness has already been done by the implication that he not entirely of sound mind. Melville adds to this shaken, untrustworthy image of Benito in the text of the deposition itself when the narrator directly questions Benito’s ability to recall events accurately: “[I]n some things his memory is confused, he cannot distinctly recall every event” (748). Through the accumulation of these references, Melville presents the deposition itself as fragmented, potentially mistranslated (Because the translation process immediately begs the question of relative textual accuracy), and relayed through a fragile, all but shattered, mind. As William Dillingham notes: “Introducing the

deposition, Melville hints that the testimony of Benito Cereno is no more the final truth than the account he was earlier forced to give Delano aboard the *San Dominick*” (236-237). The existence of the deposition, along with the details about Benito’s mental wellbeing and mediated nature of the deposition’s narrative all come together to expose the fact that the deposition is just as limited and short-sighted as Delano’s own biases in the first portion of the narrative.

In addition to showing the limitations of the deposition as an official account of the events that have transpired, Melville also uses the combination of the deposition and the initial narrative to expose those narratives that are deliberately absent, the most notable example being the complete lack of Babo’s perspective on the mutiny. To some extent, this silence in the narrative is unavoidable because Babo willfully imposes it on himself as a means of retaining some form of narrative power: “Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words...On the testimony of the soldiers alone rested the legal identity of Babo” (755). Babo maintains this silence from the moment of his capture all the way up until the moment that he meets his “voiceless end,” which allows him to withhold some of the truth regarding what has taken place on the *San Dominick*, thereby making it so that some truths are completely irrecoverable (755). Babo’s silence ultimately allows him to control the amount of truth that readers are given access to and shifts the blame away from the slave population as a whole so that it solely rests on himself. The deposition clearly presents Babo as the sole mastermind behind the revolt: “Babo was the plotter from the first to the last; he ordered every murder, and was the helm and keel of the revolt” (749-750). This focus on Babo alone makes it so that there is only one man is executed while his companions are alive, albeit, in chains once more. As Maurice Lee observes, there is a certain level of injustice in placing full responsibility for the mutiny on Babo and this

causes Babo to be the scapegoat for the actions of an entire vessel: “We also assent to an unjust verdict by placing Babo in utter command...the more Babo is held responsible, the more of his cohorts survive to be sold” (502). The absence of Babo’s testimony becomes more apparent through the combination of the narrative account and the deposition because readers are not given insight into his actions and this silence places Babo in a position of complete culpability for the mutiny. Thus, the reader is brought to a general “solution” for the revolt that is unsatisfying because there is a lack of knowledge regarding how Babo conducted the revolt and the assigned blame obscures other responsible parties such as Atufal, the Ashantee warriors, and the entire population of slaves to some extent.

The absence of Babo’s narration makes it impossible for the reader to discover how Babo initiated and led the mutiny as well as his ultimate motivation for doing so. While his motivation for seeking freedom from a life in slavery may seem somewhat self-evident, the lack of interiority regarding Babo’s thinking process leaves the reader in the dark regarding how Babo found the strength and determination to lead the revolt considering the story he provides Delano about being a slave while he was in Africa as well: “[T]hose slits in Atufal's ears once held wedges of gold; but poor Babo here, in his own land, was only a poor slave; a black man's slave was Babo, who now is the white's” (692). This is not to say that a man who was enslaved all his life is incapable of leading a revolt, this clearly isn’t the case given that Babo is successful in his revolution; but rather that Babo is not the most obvious suspect for a revolt of this sort. Babo is a profoundly strategic figure, but Atufal seems like the more obvious suspect due to his royal background and imposing figure and the reader is given no information on how Babo, rather than Atufal takes the lead in this case. As Lee observes: “[A] suspicious reader can well imagine that a lone, diminutive slave from Senegal might struggle to convince Ashantees, ex-kings, and a

“restless,” “mutinous,” perishing populace that he is, in fact, the leader to follow” (501). The reader is not given access to the account of how Babo took charge of his fellow slaves or the narrative that he gives them so that they will unanimously risk everything to follow him.

Melville introduces just enough information about Babo in the narrative and the deposition to make the reader question how Babo took command of the ship, but answers to these specific questions are forever out of the reader’s reach. As Laura Barrett observes, the combination of Delano’s experience on the ship and the deposition that claims to be authoritative truth even while excluding Babo’s testimony does not resolve the text’s uncertainties but rather highlights them: “[T]he increasing information offered to the reader does not provide closure so much as exhaustion and incoherence” (406). Melville’s text resists closure because the merger of texts emphasizes further questions and doubts that can come out of both portions of the narrative, leaving the reader lost and unfulfilled.

The very presence of the deposition introduces a sense of anticlimax and lost resolution to the story, much like the Gordian knot that Delano is given only for it to be taken from him and tossed overboard before he has the opportunity to untie it (708). Like the knot, the deposition introduces further quandaries and problems and leaves the reader somewhat puzzled about why the document was introduced into the text in the first place if it fails to resolve the initial questions of the text itself. Melville’s early critics noted that the deposition’s existence served to undermine a sense of narrative resolution as a whole, among these critics was George William Curtis, who read the manuscript of “Benito Cereno” for *Putnam’s Magazine* (Lee 497). Curtis wrote: “Melville’s story is very good. It is a great pity he did not work it up as a connected tale instead of putting in the dreary documents at the end.—They should have been made part of the substance of the story. It is a little spun out,—but it is very striking and well done” (*Melville Log*

500-501). Curtis suggests here that the deposition or “dreary documents” contained within the story stand noticeably apart from the rest of the narrative and drags the story out instead of neatly resolving plot issues. Maurice Lee reflects on Curtis’ reading of the story, noting that Melville could have easily written the text so that it had answers and resolution: “Indeed, with just a few editorial touches, the tale might end with the defeat of the revolt—no tonal shifts or intrusive insertions, no repetitions or chronological leaps, all mysteries explained, all conflicts resolved, everything over except the interpreting” (497). In spite of negative critical response and the ease with which Melville could have removed the deposition and answered the looming questions about the text, Melville deliberately kept these mysteries and anticlimactic deposition in his narrative. This decision to retain the deposition despite the narrative problems that it poses suggests that the experience of doubt and irresolution was one of the desired feelings Melville wanted his readers to experience as they were reading his story.

Melville further accentuates the indeterminacy posed by the deposition in the manner that he addresses the deposition after recounting it. Instead of stating that the deposition has removed the doubts that it was supposedly placed there to eliminate and “shed light on the preceding narrative,” Melville describes what it would mean if the deposition unlocked the truth rather than stating that it was successful in doing so: “If the deposition of Benito Cereno has served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which preceded it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the San Dominick's hull lies open today” (752-753). In this quote, Melville’s use of “if” as a condition for unearthing the truth undercuts and casts doubt on the effectiveness of the entire deposition. The “If” that Melville uses here is reminiscent of the faith/doubt cycle that Melville mentions in *Moby-Dick* where “If” is a significant part of the individual’s journey through “infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’ doubt...then

skepticism, then disbelief” and lastly, “the pondering repose of If.” While “If” would be the final position if Melville is describing a linear journey, the “If” ultimately launches a whole new cycle through these stages: “But once gone through, we trace the round again” (373). The “If” in “Benito Cereno” serves the same purpose of initiating a circle because readers who possessed any confidence about the deposition as they were reading it are immediately given cause to doubt what they have read and reread both the narrative and the deposition once again with a more skeptical mind. This reading will bring to the surface many of the omissions and biases that I have previously noted. While I have primarily focused on the conditional “If,” that Melville uses when discussing the possibility of resolution, Melville further highlights the emptiness of believing in the deposition by describing it as “the key to fit into the lock of the complications which preceded it” (752-753). William Dillingham notes that Melville’s use of key as a metaphor in this sentence immediately reminds the reader of Benito’s ineffective key from earlier in the text: “[T]he reader grows suspicious when he remembers that the ‘key’ Benito Cereno earlier possessed to unlock Atufal was an ineffectual key in an unreal situation” (238). In calling the deposition the key to understanding what happened, it brings the reader back to the key to Atufal’s chains that Benito possesses. This correspondence would suggest that the deposition, like Benito’s key, is a symbol that promises authority but utterly lacks the authority it is attempting to claim. Both the “If” and the callback to Benito’s key challenge the authority of the deposition in the narrative as well as challenging the ultimate belief in uncovering all of the mysteries evident in the text. As James Lilley observes, the underlying strangeness of “Benito Cereno” is not that Delano cannot unravel the deeper significance of events on the San Dominick but rather that “even when this mystery has always been unlocked from its very beginnings-- there remain forms of movement, gesture, and knowledge that persist in the afterlife of such a

resolution” (206). Melville creates a text that lacks a definitive resolution because there are mysteries and pieces of information that transform the supposed finality of the conclusion into merely a temporary resting point for the endlessly searching reader.

Melville’s reader is not given a satisfying resolution to the story, and as a result, he is placed in a position where he must circle around to more than one reading of the story as he attempts to discern which portions of the narrative are accurate and which parts are missing or false. Melville seems to have designed his texts with circularity in mind, where desired answers that the readers seek such as a narrative that explains the mysterious circumstances on the San Dominick is only the launching point for a new series of questions regarding Babo’s version of the story or the method he used to gain control. As Dillingham points out: “[C]ircularity proves to be the essence of [Melville’s] vision. In human experience the point of departure is the ultimate destination, and the first point of destination becomes in turn a starting place” (235). One of the ways that Melville designs his story for readers to circle through the text multiple times is in his use of irony and doublespeak where quotations may mean one thing during the first reading and take on a completely different meaning on following readings. For example, when Benito is retelling his false story on the San Dominick, Melville includes these lines: “‘But throughout these calamities,’ huskily continued Don Benito, painfully turning in the half embrace of his servant” (685). A reader who trusts Benito’s narrative and doesn’t have sufficient reason to suspect Babo at this point may read Benito’s “painful turning” as his physical frailty after the various storms and illnesses. Upon a second reading when the reader is aware of Babo’s role as the mastermind behind the revolt, they may read the same phrase about “painful turning” as Benito’s labored attempt to resist Babo's control and alert Delano. Phrases throughout the story shift their meanings from benign expressions into overt declarations of the mutiny once the

reader is aware of how the story ends. As Helen Lock observes: “[A] second reading becomes a mirror of the first, and the doubling in the story extends to the reader’s experience of it” (61).

While the first-time reader trusts the narrative only to fall into Delano’s gradual questioning and the final skepticism posed by the questionable veracity of the deposition, the second-time reader enters with a questioning distrust of the narrative he is presented with and gains added insight into the ironic phrases littered throughout the text. Melville structured his text in a manner that creates an actively circling reader who resolves ambiguities only to discover other, deeper enigmas, some of which are impossible to solve with the limited information that this reader is given. As a result, the questioning, puzzling reader is presented with the opportunity to experience a milder variant of Melville’s own spiritual struggle with faith and doubt.

In “Benito Cereno,” Melville offers his readers skepticism as a narrative experience divorced from its religious implications, but story itself ends on the comparatively disheartening note that the addition of multiple narrative perspectives or “truths” creates as many doubts as it resolves. Because the narrative concludes with the reader in essentially the same position that he was in before with the only difference being that he has to puzzle over a different set of questions, it can be easy to wonder why the reader should make the effort to unlock the narrative mysteries at all. The narrative places the reader in the position to attempt to unmask larger truths in the text, but the overall impossibility of gathering all the answers may lead one to ask what the benefit of searching even is and why the ignorance of Delano is treated so harshly in the text. In response, I would argue that Melville presents a potential answer to the value of bringing conflicting narratives together in both the structure and plot of his diptych story: “The Two Temples.” In this story, Melville presents an unnamed narrator who struggles through his exclusion from a prestigious cathedral and discovers a moment of spiritual illumination in a

British theater which provides an oppositional experience of community. Like the conclusion to “Benito Cereno,” both the narrator and the reader are returned to more-or-less the same position that they started in at the beginning of the story, but Melville seems to suggest that the euphoria and sincerity the narrator experiences in the theater is worth seeking even though it is brief.

The first segment of “The Two Temples” presents a narrator who attempts to enter an elegant new cathedral but is rebuffed due to his impoverished appearance and forced to view the service from the Bell Tower. In being prevented from entering the church, the narrator is also excluded from access to his faith and to religious truth which transforms him into a literal outsider seeking access to truth. Immediately after discovering that he won’t be allowed to enter the church, the narrator finds an alternate way to access the service by climbing into the Bell Tower and viewing the service through a vent. In this position, the narrator remarks that he is both part of and separate from the church proceedings: “Though an insider in one respect, yet I am but an outsider in another” (1244). Taken in a larger sense, this state of liminality in connection to the church seems to echo Melville’s own sense of faith as both a believer or “insider in one respect” while also being a skeptic or “outsider” at the same time. The narrator’s position in, but not part of, the church leads to skeptical thoughts that the narrator likely would not have otherwise: “I could not rid my soul of the intrusive thought, that, through some necromancer’s glass, I looked down on some sly enchanter’s show” (1245). The narrator’s elevated position and the various vents and walls that separate him from the rest of the congregation produces doubt for the narrator as he sees the theatricality of the service and potentially its superficiality. The narrator’s persistent efforts to hear the sermon being presented to him in spite of his detachment in the Bell Tower suggests that he is a man committed to

finding spiritual illumination. However, his skepticism and literal detachment from the service suggests that he has faced disappointment in his efforts to gain insight.

The second half of the story continues the narrator's search for illumination with his experiences in the second "Temple," a London theater where the narrator is finally given a sublime experience of religious sincerity. As the narrator observes the show, he becomes part of a serene experience of communal bliss between himself, his fellow audience members, and the actors on the stage: "With an unhurt eye of perfect love, I sat serenely in the gallery, gazing upon the pleasing scene around me and below" ("Two Temples" 1255). The "perfect love" that the narrator experiences not only stems from what he sees onstage below him, but also from the people around him who are sharing this audience experience with him. He experiences a moment of profound love, much like Ishmael's experience of communal unity in "A Squeeze of the Hand" that we discussed in the previous chapter. While this moment highlights the narrator's communal connection, it is equally significant that the narrator charts a moment of spiritual clarity, not unlike Ishmael's observation that the transcendent moment he experiences with the other crewmembers causes him to "forget [his] horrible oath" to slay Moby Dick. The narrator of "The Two Temples" experiences a similar sense of the illumination and a grasp of "truth" when he observes the sincerity that can be caused by the artifice of the theater: "The curtain falls. Starting to their feet, the enraptured thousands sound their responses, deafeningly, unmistakably sincere....And hath mere mimicry done this? What is it then to act a part?" ("Two Temples" 1255). In this moment, the narrator experiences a sense of bliss as he sees the sincere response of audience members and his own contact with sincerity that he was previously seeking.

The story's diptych structure suggests that the narrator's experience of authentic rapture is caused by the combination of both experiences and that the theater is not the more authentic

substitute for the church, but rather an alternate perspective that can meld with the narrator's prior experience. While he is in the theater, the narrator frequently references how his current bliss invokes memories of his more disappointing experience in the church which makes his elevated feelings somewhat dependent on his prior exclusion: "Far down upon just such a packed mass of silent human beings; listening to just such grand harmonies; I stood within the topmost gallery of the temple. But hardly alone and silently as before. This time I had company" ("Two Temples" 1253). The narrator does not fully know that he has doubts and isolation until he is excluded from the church and when this experience is merged with the knowing, sincere artifice of the theater and the communal nature of being in an audience, the narrator is provided with the knowledge that artifice can still hold an authentic power which helps to temporarily relieve him of his doubts. This moment where he is free of doubts also allows him relief from his isolation and the pain of being excluded which is why he can see through an "unhurt eye of perfect love" even though he has experienced harm from the church community during the first segment.

The fusion of two perspectives on community and sincerity provides the narrator with a transcendent moment, but Melville stresses that this experience of sublimity is temporary and quickly lost. Like Ishmael, who wishes that he could eternally experience the radical community that he discovers in the act of breaking down the spermaceti globules with his fellow crewmen, the narrator from "The Two Temples" finds a source of community and sincerity (*Moby-Dick* 323). However, regardless of his wishes that this state of being will endure forever, Ishmael's radical communal experience concludes with a jarring return to the labor and violence of life on the Pequod and the narrator of "The Two Temples" also concludes his story in the "real world." As Judith Hiltner observes, regardless of the narrator's euphoric experience in the theater, the narrative does not end in the theater, but instead in a boarding house where the narrator "has no

place to go” (302). The theater does not change the narrator’s material circumstances, rather it is a temporary illumination that allows the narrator to rest from his searching and isolation. At the end of the story, the narrator describes his reflection on both temples: “I went home to my lonely lodging, and slept not much that night, for thinking of the First Temple and the Second Temple; and how that, a stranger in a strange land, I found sterling charity in the one; and at home, in my own land, was thrust out from the other” (“The Two Temples” 1256). Melville stresses the brevity of the narrator’s experience of unity by having him return to his “lonely lodging” where he is no longer in a community, but instead alone with his thoughts. Additionally, the fact that the narrator is left in introspection rather than in the previous moment of “perfect love” suggests that the moment of clarity can only last for a brief time before the individual must again ask questions and start anew. In a similar way, the reader who follows the narrator’s journey from excluding doubt to illuminating confirmation may feel some brief satisfaction in the narrator’s state and the corresponding oppositions of both parts of the story, but they will likely continue to struggle with the ambiguity of the narrator’s question during his moment of euphoria: “What is it then to act a part?” (1255). This question about sincerity will likely give rise to a new series of concepts that the reader must struggle and wrestle through. As Fredrick Asals observes: “[T]he baffling intermingling of the illusory and the real in the two performances seems to forestall final answers” (15). While both the reader and the narrator experience a sense of introspection and questioning that ends moments of clarity, this does not mean that this temporary clarity is wasted. In his writing on the nature of the carnival, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the way that even temporary, overshadowed truths can serve as the building blocks for something greater: “This truth was ephemeral; it was followed by the fears and oppressions of everyday life, but from these brief moments another unofficial truth emerged, truth about the world and man which

prepared the new Renaissance consciousness” (89). As the narrator, the reader, and characters such as Delano attempt to gain other perspectives, they do discover other questions, but they also might occasionally find moments of sincerity that confirm their deepest doubts and questions.

Melville composes many of his works so that they are a piling on of contradictory perspectives and genres. His composition of the texts in this way, particularly in the case of “Benito Cereno” and “The Two Temples” illustrates the way that contrasting perspectives both illuminate and mutually depend on each other. At the same time, the need for multiple accounts to complete the story also exposes inherent textual gaps and the need for even more perspectives than those that have been provided to the reader. As the readers build their assemblage of narrative perspectives, they may also arrive at the realization that added narratives can shatter some forms of ignorance while also raising further questions that readers will eventually need to face. Melville uses the structure of his stories, especially “Benito Cereno,” to bring his readers into a lived experience of doubt, the quest for answers, and the eventual introduction of further doubt. Because this cyclical process may seem both tedious and pointless, Melville also uses “The Two Temples” to show the value of seeking answers for skepticism because illumination can provide a euphoric moment of solace for restless souls before narrative mysteries regroup and the search must begin again. The quest to locate answers hinges on these moments of illumination because these brief glimpses at insight are satisfying enough to attempt the inclusion of more narrative perspectives. Although he is speaking about *Clarel*, a text that we will explore in more detail in the following chapter, Stan Goldman provides an observation that perfectly encapsulates Melville’s vision of narrative incongruity: “Melville’s method of narrative voices...encourages one to complete the incomplete, to gather fragmentary evidence and subjective truths into a structure of hope” (129). As readers struggle to gather meaning and truth

from incompatible accounts, they may face disappointments and discover that some knowledge is forever out of reach, but they also will discover satisfying moments where their doubts are answered for a time. Melville suggests that these moments of satisfaction can propel the reader forward through all the other moments of ambiguity and perplexity and give them strength to engage in further quests for narrative truths.

CHAPTER III

“IFS ETERNALLY”: CIRCLES AND ENDLESS SEEKING IN *CLAREL*

Melville's ongoing struggle between faith and doubt became even more prominent during his trip to Israel, Egypt, and Constantinople in 1856. This trip served as the foundation for *Clarel* even though the poem wasn't written and published until several years later. While a pilgrimage would seem like an ideal way to confirm one's faith, Melville's descriptions often seem to suggest that his experiences in Jerusalem were anticlimactic, unfulfilling and lacking in reverence overall. In his discussion of the church of the Holy Sepulchre, Melville describes the showy, theatrical nature of the tomb site by noting that all those who enter the tomb are disappointed by what they see there; that “all is glitter and nothing gold. A sickening cheat” and that the tomb itself resembles a “show-box” to trick and draw in tourists (*Journals* 88). This cynical description of what should be one of the most sacred sites in Christendom suggests some doubts about the historical validity of the site and a larger frustration with the theatrical presentation of holy sites by the church in general. The trip to Jerusalem designed to affirm Melville's faith likely destroyed his idealization of Jerusalem because a few pages later he mentions that being present in Jerusalem quickly dissolves any romanticized preconceptions. Melville observes that “Jerusalem will dissipate romantic notions of the area” and that some people find that “the disappointment is heart sickening” (91). Melville seemed to have a hope that Jerusalem would confirm his faith which was part of his motivation for coming to the city in

the first place, but he was also met with disappointment when he found that the locations within the city didn't feel as sacred as he initially expected them to be.

Melville's alienated description of his faith takes on a particularly devastating form when Melville recounts his experiences in Constantinople. In the few days that he spent as a tourist in the city, he mentions multiple times where he found himself lost and wandering in circles through the city, a condition that strongly resembles his own conflicted spiritual state: "[A]fter a terrible long walk, found myself back where I started. Just like getting lost in a wood. No plan to the streets. Pocket compass. Perfect labryth" (58). Melville attempted to go out and explore the city of Constantinople, but despite his best efforts to find his way through the city streets, he instead circled back to where he had started. Shortly after his description of being lost in the city, Melville returns to further reflect on his experience: "You lose yourself & are bewildered & confounded with the labyrinth, the din, the barbaric confusion of the whole" (60) In the midst of this experience of disorientation by being physically lost, Melville encountered an image that intensified his feelings of being spiritually lost as well. While wandering the city, Melville was haunted by the image of a woman standing over her recently deceased husband's grave and pleading with the Lord to answer her: "'Why don't you speak to me? My God!—It is I!—Ah speak—but one word!" (62). This woman's desperate search for an answer from God in the midst of her suffering had a profound impact on Melville who noted that "this woman and her cries haunt me horribly" (62). Melville found himself haunted by this spirit of desperate questioning and doubt because he too struggled with the silence of heaven and the hope that an answer would come to him. Melville sought answers to the questions that plagued him, but like his experiences of being lost, he often found moments of bewilderment and disorientation instead of satisfying answers.

Melville's faith was often challenged by questions and doubts that prevented him from fully committing to his beliefs, instead embracing a struggling mode of faith. During the same trip where he saw the grieving widow, Melville also had the opportunity to meet with Nathaniel Hawthorne who commented on Melville's conflicted relationship with belief and unbelief:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of providence and futurity and everything that lies beyond human ken...It is strange how he persists and—has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before in wandering to and fro over these deserts...He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other (*Journals* 628).

Hawthorne's often-quoted observations here describe a Melville who is persistently questioning his beliefs as he remains trapped in the liminal space between belief and doubt. This liminal space is not a stasis, but instead a fraught internal journey "to and fro" as Hawthorne mentions. Melville is too intellectually honest to commit to faith without question and yet he also cannot hold a committed skepticism because that too is a form of settled belief that would resist questioning. This fraught dynamic between Melville's own wish to believe combined with persistent questioning that challenged this belief can be seen quite clearly in Melville's marginal comments to *Paradise Lost*. In Book X, Melville questioned why God created mankind without the strength to resist temptation and suggested that God was culpable for sin because he placed man in the position to sin instead of placing Christ, who had a greater degree of strength to resist sin. Melville's annotation in *Paradise Lost* reads: "The fall of Adam did not so much prove him weak, as that God had made him so...Now, had the Son been planted in the Garden (instead of Adam), he would have withstood the temptation;—Why then he & not Adam?" (Milton 1.327). Melville's questioning here indicates a radical state of doubt as it suggests that God is responsible for introducing sin into the world and therefore is not a fully benevolent being. However, as Hawthorne's famous observation would suggest, Melville did not remain

committed to this understanding of God as at some later point, Melville added another annotation saying “Sophomoricus,” which suggests that he disagreed with his earlier comments. Judy Logan adds that some time after writing both annotations, Melville returned to his concerns about fate and God’s responsibility in *Billy Budd* which exposes “the cyclical nature of Melville’s religious thought over time” (401). As these examples suggest, Melville held a sense of belief that fluctuated between faith and doubt—his questions producing doubt and the answers offering faith which can give rise to further questions.

Melville depicts a sense of circularity and questioning in the quote that I discussed in previous chapters on the cycles of faith and doubt. As Ahab explains:

There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:—through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’ doubt (the common doom), then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in the pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. (*Moby-Dick* 373).

Melville presents faith and doubt here as a journey and, more specifically as a circle where an individual moves through stages of faith into doubt and skepticism at which point he ends in a state of questioning in the “pondering repose of If.” This hope in the possibility that Christianity/God/spirituality is true leads the individual back into faith which then brings him back into doubt once more as the circle continues. Judy Logan comments on this circular influence between faith and doubt when she observes that the If is the turning point or hinge between faith and doubt: “*If* Christianity is true, *then* [Melville] must accept it or forfeit its benefits, including eternal life. This, in turn, sends him toward faith once again-until the doubts reemerge. As a result, the whole cycle repeats itself over and over, and man never comes to a settled belief” (388). “If” is a question/musing that can result in faith, especially in cases where

Melville and others muse about the implications “If Christianity is true” however it is equally possible for the “If” to result in doubt if Melville considers what it would mean if Christianity is not true—in this case both belief and doubt can come out of a consideration of If.

Melville also represents these themes of internal struggle and oppositional beliefs in his poem “Art” which describes in somewhat Coleridgean terms the way that art is formed through a union of opposites:

In placid hours well-pleased we dream
 Of many a brave unbodied scheme.
 But form to lend, pulsed life create,
 What unlike things must meet and mate:
 A flame to melt—a wind to freeze;
 Sad patience—joyous energies;
 Humility—yet pride and scorn;
 Instinct and study; love and hate;
 Audacity—reverence. These must mate,
 And fuse with Jacob’s mystic heart,
 To wrestle with the angel—Art. (*Poems* 322)

Melville’s main thesis in this poem is that art is formed when oppositional features “meet and mate” in the same limited creational space. Melville describes this process through the collision of physical elements such as ice and fire as well as through conceptual opposites such as the division between pride and humility. These collisions, in turn, help to create a new artistic work that must attempt to contain these oppositions while also ensuring that the oppositions do not cancel each other out. This makes it particularly interesting when Melville transcends the aesthetic concerns that apply to artistic creation in order to explore larger concerns about the state of religious liminality. Melville notes in his poem that: “Instinct and study; love and hate;/ Audacity—reverence. These must mate” (8-9). In terms of faith, it is difficult to imagine a state of being that would allow for an individual to sustain study and instinct at the same time. Even more telling is Melville’s suggestion that audacity and reverence should come together into one

being as this suggests a merger of the sacred and the heretical which, under normal circumstances should not be able to come together.

While Melville suggests that it is possible to bring these two states together, he rejects any sense of stasis or stability in the last two lines of the poem which use the image of Jacob wrestling with the angel by suggesting that the unity of opposites will “fuse with Jacob’s mystic heart,/To wrestle with the angel—Art” (10-11). Melville’s image of Jacob wrestling with the angel is an interesting one because it is itself an image of reverence and audacity colliding. The act of wrestling would seem to suggest an antagonistic relationship with God, especially since Jacob is forever maimed by the encounter. At the same time, the act of wrestling is an awkward embrace of sorts and Jacob’s purpose in wrestling with the angel is to receive a blessing. Jacob is ultimately successful in this pursuit of a blessing as the angel tells him: “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome” (Gen 32.28). Jacob leaves with both lasting scars and blessings which suggests mixed results to the act of wrestling with God but also shows that the struggle and conflict with God may be rewarded even if it comes at great cost. Stan Goldman observes that the struggle or wrestling with doubt is an essential step before the individual can embrace genuine faith: “[W]restling suggests that we may come to recognize a need for faith only after a painful, but heroic, struggle with its assumed opposite—doubt. Melville’s conviction was that one can achieve faith only after wrestling with doubt and darkness and then wresting a blessing or insight from the struggle” (76). The struggle with doubt is a painful one, but it also allows for opposites such as audacity and reverence to come together for a brief moment in time and allows individuals to gain some new answers to their questions.

Melville's pursuit of answers filtered into all of his works to some extent, but this conflicted religious wrestling is particularly evident in *Clarel*, a work that his granddaughter noted Melville's "whole searching self" was engaged in writing: "Herman's whole searching self has been engaged in writing *Clarel*. The great religious problems of the century he was never to see filled his mind" (Metcalf 232). Eleanor Melville Metcalf's fittingly titled book *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle* explores Melville's efforts from a position of hindsight, but her observations about Melville's attempts to tackle some of the deepest spiritual questions shows the scope of Melville's inquisitiveness. As a seeker, Melville could not avoid asking questions that produced doubt, but the first canto of *Clarel* suggests that Melville saw these doubts as an inevitability that could not be avoided even if the individual sought to avoid spiritual questioning. Preparing to embark on his pilgrimage, Clarel describes the way that doubts accumulate in the mind until the believer faces a form of spiritual shipwreck:

These under-formings in the mind,
Banked corals which ascend from far,
But little heed men that they wind
Unseen, unheard—till lo, the reef—
The reef and breaker, wreck and grief (1.1.75-79).

Clarel's journey is designed to complete his scriptural knowledge before his spiritual questions cause him to founder, a result that seems to be the ultimate fate of those who attempt to ignore their doubts and sail carelessly over them. Melville continues to build on this theme of seafaring metaphors and doubt just a few lines later when he notes that: "To avoid the deep saves not from the storm" (1.1.99). This presence of storms that continue even if individuals avoid deeper pursuits connects to the presence of doubt and suggests that individuals should engage in deep questioning because doubts will continue to come and it is best to face them. Clarel realizes that doubts have the potential to build up over time and he elects to take a physical journey to

Jerusalem in order to fill in the gaps of his knowledge because “the books, the books not all have told” (1.1.84). While it is likely that Clarel’s doubts will build up once again because Melville describes them as an “ascending coral,” there is hope that questioning will provide some solace even if it doesn’t provide complete resolution and this small solace prompts further excursions.

The desire to pursue faith and the continual emergence of doubt creates a circular image where the completed quest offers enough answers for the venture to feel worthwhile but also necessitates another journey to answer the new doubts that spring up. In his 5th canto, Melville describes individuals on a voyaging quest who start their quest with hope and then launch out on their search yet again because of the minor resolution that they have seen:

How hopeful from their isles serene
They sailed, and on such tender quest;
Then, after toils that came between,
They reembarked; and, tho' distressed,
Grieved not, for Zion had been seen; (1.5.122-126)

If these questers had experienced Zion in a permanent way or been allowed to remain in that place/state, they wouldn’t have to set out in search of it yet again. The questers lose sight of Zion after their brief glimpse, but their experience is clearly meaningful enough for them to try and regain Zion once more. The imagery that Melville invokes here of voyagers perpetually setting out to recover Zion is reminiscent of a passage in *Mardi* where Melville discusses how the quest is worthwhile even if in some cases it is unsuccessful: “But fiery yearnings their own phantom-future make, and deem it present. So, if after all these fearful, fainting trances, the verdict be, the golden haven was not gained;—yet, in bold quest thereof, better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals; and give me, ye gods, an utter wreck, if wreck I do.” (*Mardi* 620). In this case, the speaker in *Mardi* is satisfied with the pursuit of an eternal haven even while the quest to attain this haven may result in desolation and destruction. Like the pursuit of questioning, the

quest for Zion/the golden haven is perilous and potentially damaging to the individual, but it is also what offers solace and satisfaction to some extent even if the quest must be perpetually repeated. While this cyclical faith may seem like an eternal reset with no respite or progress, Rhian Williams observes that the profound moments of spiritual illumination, the Zions and golden havens, gain their effectiveness from their contrast with mounting doubts and questions: “[T]hese moments of attunement to a non-sequential, recurring, affective engagement with the past and present of religious ritual...derive their vitality from their being interweaved with the poem’s exposure to other modes of skepticism and probing” (193). The sense that a religious experience is more powerful because the individual needs to fight through skepticism in order to reach it suggests that the doubter is not a weaker believer but rather a valiant heroic figure. Because Melville's ideal believer is in a state where he constantly needs to balance faith with doubt, there is a cyclical sense to his faith. It returns and leaves repetitively, suggesting that doubt can lead to a new connection to belief while this nascent belief can also cause new doubts.

The circularity of belief and doubt comes in a particularly prominent form in Part 2 of *Clarel*. At this point the pilgrims are in the wilderness and Nehemiah the zealot begins removing stones in order to literally “prepare the way of the Lord.” As Nehemiah begins this process with complete conviction that he will be successful, his companions observe that Nehemiah’s success uncovering one layer of rocks only serves to reveal still more rocks that need to be removed:

“Look, is he crazy? see him there!”
 The saint it was with busy care
 Flinging aside stone after stone,
 Yet feebly, nathless as he wrought
 In charge imposed though not unmoved;
 While every stone that he removed
 Laid bare but more (2.10.196-200).

Like the removal of rocks that reveals more rocks, it seems like answering questions or resolving doubts can also produce further questions and doubts which launches the circle once again. In his Holy Land Journal, Melville notes that the Bible is filled with references to stones including monuments, physical stonings, individuals with “stony hearts,” as well as “the figurative seed” that “falls in stony places.” To Melville, the frequent Biblical reference to stones isn’t surprising given the surrounding geography which is filled with stones that could never be fully cleared: “In many places laborious effort has been made, to clear the surface of these stones...But in vain; the removal of one stone only serves to reveal three stones still larger, below it. It is like mending an old barn; the more you uncover, the more it grows” (*Journals* 90). In his journal, Melville seems to be connecting these stones with the concept of mounting doubts because he links the physical stones he sees with biblical imagery of hardened hearts and seeds that cannot be planted. As Melville observes, the effort to remove these stones of doubt and “uncover” certain enigmas only reveals more doubts that still lack satisfying answers.

The image of an individual who removes a rock only to discover three larger stones beneath it seems to have negative implications because this individual is essentially in the same position he was before he moved the stone but with the added knowledge that his efforts were in vain because there are still more stones to remove. Dennis Berthold discusses circularity as a negatively repetitive movement: “The narrative’s circular structure—it begins and ends in the same place, Jerusalem—implies an endless questing in a wearisome cycle of seeking, finding, and losing” (230). Berthold adds that the various oppositional themes in the narrative “all revolve in endless cycles of discovery and loss that stunt human spiritual growth” (230). While focusing on the circular structure and the stones that multiply as you clear them can create an image suggesting that everything resets and no progress is made, I think it is equally important to

focus on the sailors who set out once again because they have caught a glimpse of Zion and want to regain this glimpse once more. Those sailors are willing to venture out again because they have gained something valuable in their voyage. The repeat voyages suggest that they still have more to gain, but the fact that they have gained even a little suggests that there is an added dimension to Melville's circles. They repeat, but they do so in a progressive manner like an ascending spiral as opposed to a simple two-dimensional circle. Martin Kevorkian shares my response to Berthold as he notes that there is a sense of progress to the circles even while there is repetition: "The cycles of isolation and community, though arduous, need not be viewed as 'wearisome' and the cycles of discovery and loss need not 'stunt' human spiritual growth, but may rather inform it" (136). As individuals uncover truths that will help answer their doubts, they may discover more doubts, but these are a different variety of doubts from the previous doubts that were alleviated which means that there has been some minor progress even as the process repeats itself.

The sole purpose of Clarel's pilgrimage is for him to discover a newfound sense of faith amid his doubts and when he is in Jerusalem, he encounters Celio, a skeptic who struggles with his turn from belief. In a way, Celio and Clarel seem to serve as opposing sides of the belief/unbelief cycle as Clarel is descending into doubt and Celio is regretting his own descent. While in Jerusalem, Melville reflects on how both the skepticism of Celio and the belief of Clarel occupy the same space, both in the sense of the physical space that they occupy on the Mount of Olives as well as the potential for doubt to bring both minds into the same terrain:

Mutual in approach may glide
Minds which from poles adverse have come,
Belief and unbelief? may doom
Of doubt make such to coincide—
Upon one frontier brought to dwell (1.15.54-58)

As Melville observes here, it is the force of doubt that causes Clarel who is identified with belief and Celio who is associated with unbelief to come together and share a single frontier. It is the doubt of God that makes an atheist or an agnostic and it is doubt that God is absent that can make a man into a believer. For a brief moment, Celio and Clarel have the opportunity to shape each other as Milder observes: “Clarel loses his grip on belief, and Celio relinquishes his determined disbelief” (150). While Celio and Clarel don’t have the opportunity to truly come together before Celio’s death, and Celio possesses a more resolute form of skepticism than Clarel does, Melville suggests that they are both brought into a similar cycle of belief and unbelief through the presence of doubt.

This critical sense of doubt doesn’t come from the absence of knowledge, but rather from knowledge and sensory experiences that seem incompatible with faith and raise questions about this faith’s legitimacy. Paul Hurh explains that in Melville’s depiction of doubt in *Clarel*: “doubt emerges from the physical nature of the world and our increasing knowledge of it” (79). Celio’s skepticism comes, in part, from his concerns that the teachings of Christ are incompatible what he currently knows about the world: “That all we else know cannot mate/ With what thou teachest? Nearing thee/ All footing fails us;” (1.14.79-81). Celio’s use of “mate” to indicate the difficulty joining his knowledge with God’s teachings calls back to Melville’s “Art” poem that describes how “unlike things must meet and mate” (5). Celio is unable to bring together these oppositions of spiritual and human knowledge which causes him to take on a more set opposition to faith in the long run and ultimately leads to his demise. However, the existence of other characters such as Clarel suggests that it is possible to bring the two oppositions of faith and secularism together.

The concept of skepticism in Melville's work connects with the circular travel between faith and doubt because Melville associates this concept with the image and narrative of The Wandering Jew. As Robert Milder observes: "The agnostic is as strenuously embattled a pilgrim as Bunyan's Christian...The difference is that the agnostic has no guidebook to direct him, no wise counselors around the way, and no assurance of a Celestial City at the end of his journey, which, like the Wandering Jew's, has no end" (*Exiled Royalties* 219). The most overt mention of the Wandering Jew comes while Celio is in the city of Jerusalem. Looking at the site where Jesus carried the cross to Golgotha, Celio considers the tale of The Wandering Jew and wonders if he is essentially engaging in the same process due to his skeptical nature:

"Thou mark'st the spot where that bad Jew
His churlish taunt at Jesus threw
Bowed under cross with stifled moan:
Caitiff, which for that cruel wrong
Thenceforth till doomsday drives along."
Starting, as here he made review,
Celio winced—Am *I* the Jew? (1.14.112-118)

It is interesting that while Celio is retelling this story as it exists in other texts, he suddenly pauses to reflect on how his own skepticism resembles the figure in this story and if his questioning will transform him into a philosophical wanderer. While it can certainly be argued that the act of skepticism fully rests on the "churlish taunt" that the Wandering Jew directs at Jesus during the crucifixion process which is the initial cause of his wandering in the narrative, I would argue that skepticism is also presented in the act of wandering itself. Wandering is essentially aimless and directionless which places it as the direct opposite of a more purposeful pilgrimage such as that of John Bunyan's Pilgrim figure. The wanderer lacks a destination and is resolute in his persistent skepticism whereas a figure such as Bunyan's pilgrim, as Milder observes has "fortified himself with scripture and an abiding faith in God" ("Avenging Dream"

254). These two figures: The Pilgrim and The Wandering Jew are on two opposing and mutually exclusive journeys, but they are both journeys nonetheless and it would be possible for the individual to switch or cycle between the two paths, much like Melville himself did as he was “wandering to and fro over these deserts” (*Journals* 628).

Melville depicts a combination of faith and skepticism as an ideal state of mind by depicting how both extremes of skepticism and belief run the risk of becoming a dangerous form of fanaticism. As Melville observes in the second Book of *Clarel*, two extremes often have the potential to come together and take on the same form: “‘Content thee: in conclusion caught/ Thou’lt find how thought’s extremes agree,--/ The forethought clinched by afterthought,/ The firstling by finality.’” (2.18.141-144). The realm of skepticism and faith is surprisingly one of the most evident places where “thought’s extremes agree” because one can become fanatically devoted to both the absence of God and the presence of God depending on the individual. But Melville seems to express concerns about fanaticism in the fate that he gives to his characters. Both Nehemiah, the fanatical believer and Celio, the steadfast skeptic, die before the end of *Clarel* which suggests that neither position is an advisable or tenable way to live one’s life. As Stan Goldman explains: “If one concentrates only on one side of the evidence for God, one becomes atheist. If one concentrates only on the other side of the evidence, one becomes an absolute believer. If, however, one accepts both sides together without any presuppositions, one becomes a Melvillean skeptic, a God-wrestler.” (86).

In suggesting his concerns with fanatical commitments to both skepticism and belief as well as the fact that it is possible to live in the doubtful space between these two extremes, Melville also draws attention to the fact that the individual is left with more options beyond these two extremes. Melville explores a spectrum between faith and skepticism in the second half of

Clarel. In Part 3 of the poem, Derwent observes that: “Betwixt rejection and belief,/ Shadings there are--degrees, in brief” (3.21.281-282). Those who believe yet continue to hold doubts need not be concerned that they are completely rejecting their faith, they can instead remain in a degree of faith that contains shadings of darker doubt. Melville picks up his idea of degrees between faith and skepticism once more in the Epilogue to *Clarel* where he notes that the contemporary situation of faith in the nineteenth century has introduced these shades of grey into the world: “Degrees we know, unknown in days before;/ The light is greater, hence the shadow more;” (4.35.18-19). In addition to suggesting that contemporary society creates the conditions and the need to recognize a spectrum between faith and skepticism, the final lines of this segment suggest a greater degree of polarization between belief and unbelief. As the lack of faith grows more intense and widespread, it is possible for those who believe to experience a stronger desire for and presence of faith in their lives.

While the initial light/dark distinction suggests a simple black and white moral separation, Melville seems to be drawing on the physicality of light which does come with degrees and increments. Milder notes that by creating this incremental spectrum, he creates a place for his ideal heroes to dwell between the two opposing poles: “Resisting the lure of belief and unbelief alike, Melville’s modern spiritual heroes live strenuously in the unending tension between them” (*Exiled Royalties* 215). It is a difficult challenge for the individual to remain balanced between these two oppositions, and maintaining the balance is essential for the individual to avoid surrendering their faith to doubt or living a dogmatic and unquestioning existence. As Melville has previously pointed out with the fate of his fanatical characters, he does not consider rigid skepticism/atheism or unquestioning faith to be ideal conditions to maintain spiritual life. Both skepticism and faith carry spiritual pain with them as Melville

describes that: “Doubt bleeds, nor Faith is free from pain!” (3.21.304). As both extremes cause suffering, it seems that Melville presents a third option: sustained doubt amid belief.

Sustained doubt continues to be a possibility for characters such as Clarel because even if they gain the answers that they seek, their questioning minds will cause them to launch a new search for answers once the previous quest has been completed. Derwent suggests that this quest for answers will continue endlessly when he tells Clarel that he will continue to be lost even after he receives the answers that he is searching for: “Derwent went on: “For lamp you yearn-- /A lantern to benighted thought./ Obtain it--whither will you turn?/ Still lost you'd be in blanks of snow” (3.21.237-240). While Derwent’s tone here suggests a disheartening circularity where the light to illuminate does nothing for Clarel’s conflicted spiritual state, I think it is important to map his use of the word “lost” onto Melville’s reoccurring connection between skepticism and the figure of The Wandering Jew. With this schema in mind, it seems possible that Derwent is reminding Clarel that the answers to his queries will not necessarily “cure” his condition of wandering through skepticism and doubt. As Rhian Williams observes, Melville wrote his poem to explore a process of ongoing knowledge: “*Clarel* emerges—even reluctantly—as a poem of process rather than goal, and requires of its reader a form of empathetic engagement not with the pursuit of endings and conclusions, but with the endless round of the mechanics of learning” (185). The process of questioning, finding answers and then questioning once more resembles the form of the “Romantic Quest” where that each journey begins when the previous journey ends and the ascension or learning process continues. Milder notes that: “The difference between Melvillean and Romantic quests is that, while reproducing the pattern of the Romantic myth, Melville’s quests thematically abort it: the ascending circle on Melville’s writings is never completed” (*Exiled Royalties* 31). While the ascending process never reaches personal

completion or a final conclusion, it is still an incremental progressive ascent for the questioning individual who wishes to find answers for his spiritual doubts. Doubts can and will continue to introduce themselves and as they do, the individual will attempt to overcome them with greater knowledge and understanding.

With the ongoing source of skepticism and doubt that continually revisited Melville, one may wonder why he continued to maintain the link to his Christianity knowing that it would continually be a source of strain for him. For this, I would say that the answer—beyond Melville’s personal belief that remained with him in his doubts—was that he saw a benefit to faith in his own life as well as in society in general. Amid a defining dialog between Derwent and Clarel in the third Canto, Melville draws attention to the idea that some truths of faith will remain even if parts of that faith are apocryphal: “Have Faith, which, even from the myth,/ Draws something to be useful with:/ In any form some truths will hold” (3.21.184-186). Melville suggests here that the nature of faith taps into some core truths about the universe even if that faith is faith in a myth. It is important that Melville recognizes the significance of faith even if the object of devotion isn’t completely true, but it does not seem that Melville himself believes that Christianity falls into this category. While faith during the nineteenth century has been wounded by scientific theories and the writings of the Biblical new critics, there is still a spark of faith that remains and this is what Melville clings to as Derwent returns to the truth of genuine religion: “Christ built a hearth: the flame is dead/ We’ll say, extinct; but lingers yet” (3.21.245-246). Melville’s serious questions about Christianity as it was practiced in the nineteenth century did not prevent him from recognizing the necessity of this faith as a force that aided the human psyche and perhaps gave him some comfort as well. Jonathan Cook explains this as Melville’s “habitual skepticism punctuated by compulsive desire for faith” (21). Melville’s desire for faith

comes, in part out of a larger need for God as William Potter observes: “[T]he human need for religious belief is an ontological and indispensable imperative of the human psyche, that no degree of scientific discovery will ever succeed in eradicating it, and that religion...holds the answers to the essential moral, ethical, and political problems perpetually confronting humanity” (16). Robert Milder adds that the desire for faith and for Christianity in particular comes from “the hunger for a paternal presence more intimate than the Supreme Mechanic of deistic science” (*Exiled Royalties* 214). If Christianity held all the answers and comforts that he needed, Melville would not need to seek answers elsewhere, but his faith held enough answers that it was worth continuing to retain it even when the flame seemed like it was dead.

The closing lines of Melville’s Epilogue to *Clarel* evoke a sense of hopefulness that might seem unusual considering the deaths of several Pilgrims, the loss of Clarel’s romantic interest Ruth, and Clarel’s overall lack of definitive answers to his doubts as the text comes to a close. But Melville suggests that even as conditions revert to the same state that existed at the beginning of the poem, Clarel has gained a small sense of a faith that will continue to assert itself in spite of the conditions of doubt. Kevorkian notes that “the poem opens and closes in Jerusalem, with Clarel in his room, alone with his doubts. Leaving Clarel with the same problem with which he began, the poem’s narrator gestures once more toward the prospect of hope” (132). This spirit of possibility rising out of despondency is the final note that Melville uses to sound his poem in the closing lines:

That like the crocus budding through the snow--
 That like a swimmer rising from the deep--
 That like a burning secret which doth go
 Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep;
 Emerge thou mayst from the last whelming sea,
 And prove that death but routs life into victory (4.35.29-35).

Melville offers hope here that it is possible to overcome doubt just as a crocus can bud in the midst of snow and a swimmer can finally emerge from the depths. There is a sense of inevitability to this rejuvenating process as well when Melville compares it to a secret that bursts from the individual despite his best efforts to keep this secret concealed. This would seem to suggest that despite doubt's attempts to suppress faith, it cannot remain concealed for long. As Goldman observes, this hope, in turn, would prompt the reader to circle back and read the text over again with an eye to the moments of confirmed faith that were lost in a sea of questioning and searching that makes up the majority of the narrative: "By purposefully writing an Epilogue that generally negates the despair of the poem, Melville prompts us to return to the text and, as we reread, to listen for the fragmentary voices of hope—intimations of immortality—in the body of the poem" (129). Jenny Franchot observes that the reader's sustained hope or faith in the narrative is what sustains him during the points when the poetic form becomes tedious or challenging (182). While this sense of hope is a major element of the final canto, it is equally important that Melville prevents the reader from resting in this irrepressible faith as a final solution to the problem with doubt. Melville's assertion that the individual "mayest" emerge from the "whelming sea" is by no means a guarantee that they will do so every time or that the process of emerging from the depths is without personal cost. Faith may eventually rise to meet each doubt, but conversely, Melville also found that doubt rises to challenge faith as well. This perhaps dampens the sense of unfettered hope that initially presents itself in the Epilogue, but it also brings to light the stoic courage and loyalty that Melville found in maintaining faith when doubt obscures the possibility that belief is true or even valuable. This can be seen quite prominently in Melville's poem "The Enthusiast" where he urges readers to maintain their commitment to the faith even when it seems to have abandoned them: "Though light forsake

thee, never fall/ From fealty to light” (*Poems* 321). Melville proposes a spirit of loyalty to faith while also informing his readers that they must face times of “snow,” “whelming sea,” and darkness that will genuinely challenge their ability to hold on to this faith.

Melville paradoxically settles on an anti-resolution in *Clarel* where the struggle between faith and skepticism is ongoing and the individual must simply abide in the resulting tension. In an early portion of the Epilogue, Melville describes the way that despair introduces doubts and riddles that damage belief while faith overcomes these wounds and continues to sustain itself:

The ancient Sphinx still keeps the porch of shade;
And comes Despair, whom not her calm may cow,
And coldly on that adamantine brow
Scrawls undeterred his bitter pasquinade.
But Faith (who from the scrawl indignant turns)
With blood warm oozing from her wounded trust,
Inscribes even on her shards of broken urns
The sign o' the cross--the spirit above the dust! (4.35.4-11).

The fact that despair scrawls his “bitter pasquinade” on the Sphinx itself links these satirical challenges to the Riddle of the Sphinx and in a larger sense, to all those difficult questions that bar an individual’s access to his desires. Based on my interpretation of despair as a creator of riddles, I would argue that the embodied Despair becomes a figure that introduces skepticism to an individual’s Christian walk by posing challenging questions such as the purpose of human suffering, the conflict between biblical teachings and new scientific findings of the period, the historicity of the Bible, and other conundrums that may cause this individual to question the very foundations of his faith. Despair’s work in this case seems to severely wound Melville’s embodied Faith as Melville describes “blood warm oozing from her wounded trust” and yet rather than dying from the wounds that Despair inflicts, Faith overcomes the pain and salvages a mild form of victory for herself. Melville notes that Faith places the sign of the cross “even on

her shards of broken urns” which suggests that Faith works to piece together a hopeful narrative even when the only available space to engrave this narrative of hope is on the broken fragments of lost belief. Faith’s struggle in this passage echoes what Troy Jollimore considers Melville’s central struggle in negotiating faith in the nineteenth century: “[A]s Melville saw things, the crucial struggle was that of seeking grounds for faith in a universe that presented itself as too inherently desolate to provide such grounds in any obvious way” (5). If, as Jollimore suggests, Melville was working to introduce faith to an environment that no longer seemed hospitable to it, he was also very much aware of the limitations and challenges of this project as well as the fact that it would be a constant battle to maintain this faith. Jonathan Cook explains that the experience of faith in the nineteenth century will be a constant, fraught struggle between the additional sources of skepticism that existed in the Victorian period and the remaining inclination and need for faith: “[T]he "Epilogue" to *Clarel* also illustrates the fact that religious faith in the modern world will be a constant battle between the cumulative findings of science and the residual instinct for faith, or between the demands of the critical intellect and the needs of a believing heart” (62). In his conclusion to his epic poem, Melville acknowledges his continued desire to meet both his intellectual needs and his instinct for faith and to rest in the state of restlessness that exists in attempting to meet both impulses at once.

Melville’s journey of faith is both a circular process and a struggle at every turn and this struggle is the central concern of *Clarel*. As Melville attempted to embrace his Christian faith, he was also faced with unavoidable questions that damaged this sense of faith. Melville could never turn off this questioning spirit, and the reality of these doubts would continue to damage his faith even if he had the ability to refrain from probing. This left Melville on the path of the wandering pilgrim who believes, faces doubts that maim this belief, and then discovers a faith that salvages

his previously damaged belief—that is until a new doubt comes to wound faith once more. In overcoming his doubts, Melville discovered a brief glimpse of religious clarity and understanding; but as this glimpse slipped away, the doubts that Melville had eradicated also served to reveal still larger doubts that were previously hidden but now needed his attention. Faith's continual work to salvage and repair serves as a counterpoint to doubt's equally persistent efforts to inscribe enigmas and introduce destructive doubts. As long as these two forces work equally hard to destroy and make new, the Melvillean soul remains in a contested zone, a no man's land that is never fully repaired and yet also is never completely devastated.

CHAPTER IV

POSTSCRIPT

J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote that: “Not all those who wander are lost” (170). And while I have seen this phrase on t-shirts and bumper stickers throughout Boulder as a universal expression of wanderlust, it also applies remarkably well to Herman Melville’s internal state and his efforts to negotiate the world of faith and doubt. Throughout his life, Melville wandered from faith, to skepticism, and then back to faith once more and amid this movement, Melville attempted to balance the two opposing states that threatened to divide him in two. But he was not lost between faith and doubt. He maintained this dualistic consciousness because it was, in his perspective, the most honest and courageous mode of belief that allowed him the space to pose legitimate questions about Christianity that could be considered sacrilegious while also retaining the sense of sincerity and emotional connection that faith offers. Melville had a sense that he would forever remain in a state of conflict between belief and unbelief. In the final segment of his “Pebbles” poem, Melville reflects on the continued irresolvability of his situation which comes with both hope and sorrow: “Healed of my hurt, I laud the inhuman Sea--/ Yea, bless the Angels Four that there convene;/ For healed I am ever by their pitiless breath/ Distilled in wholesome dew named rosmarine” (“Pebbles”). As Melville observes here, he is “healed of his hurt” even though the sea continues to be heartless and inhumane and that he is healed by “pitiless breath” that should serve to harm him further. These contradictions suggest that Melville is brought both to resolution and to loss at the same time and must struggle with the continual coexistence of the two states.

Melville's ongoing struggle with faith presented some hardship as it threatened his sense of community with other believers and prevented him from having a secure epistemology to rest in during difficult moments but this mode of belief that was both "within and without" the traditional Christian community also provided Melville with the benefit of enhancing his vision with knowledge from other cultures and perspectives. This nuanced view of Melville's religious beliefs that would allow him to believe and question at the same time can also provide a more complex reading of the biblical references that Melville uses throughout his works. Instead of taking these quotes at face value or declaring that all of Melville's biblical allusions should be read subversively and ironically, scholars can entertain both readings simultaneously. We can see what the text could mean *if* Melville is being sincere as well as what the same text means when we posit that Melville is using the references subversively and somewhere in the midst of these opposing readings, we can find the Melville who struggled and fought to read the Bible both subversively and sincerely. In a larger sense, this reveals that authors who represent religion in their works do not present their views through a simple binary of belief or unbelief. By complicating the binary between faith and doubt, we have the potential to see doubt in the writing of the most fervent believer and inklings of faith in the expressions of the questioning skeptic.

Melville's depiction of moments of transcendence such as in the "Squeeze of Hands" chapter and the narrator's euphoria in the theater illustrate a brief moment of community where excluding doubts don't matter and the individual is reminded of his sincere connection to God and to others. As with Emerson's state of reason, moments of pure, unquestioning faith are brief and seldom for Melville, but they are valuable enough that it is worth repeating the search and the questioning in order to experience this state once again. The earth-shattering questions will

always return, particularly when the mind of the seeker can ponder and muse enough to form an infinite number of skeptical questions. But these moments, though few, do provide small forms of relief and clarity that make it possible to hold on to the more unwieldy and challenging state of belief. In the introduction to his poems, Robert Frost provides a great explanation of the value that can come from even the smallest experience of clarity: “The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom...It runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life-not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion” (vi). These brief moments that protect individuals from confusion can provide enough time to reinforce their beliefs and prepare for the next experience of doubt.

Beyond Melville’s own individual experience of the circular pilgrimage of faith and doubt, his works mimic this conflicted state and offer readers a lived experience of this journey. Individually, each work offers doubled narrative, plot enigmas, and other ambiguities that make it difficult for the reader to solve the narrative mysteries and places him in a role of a skeptic. This allows readers to empathize with Melville’s own doubts and, perhaps even more significantly, to realize that their own perspectives are limited and could benefit from the knowledge offered by other perspectives outside of the limited Western consciousness. Melville’s creation of various texts that repeat the themes of faith, doubt, and the benefit of additional perspectives is a representation of Melville’s own fixation on unifying oppositions of faith and doubt and achieving transcendence. Additionally, each text is, itself, a representation of the cyclical journey between faith and doubt and the next book or short story repeats the cycle. As Robert Milder observes: “It is no secret that authors repeat themselves...In this, they are instruments as much as creators of their reoccurring myths, and it would be problematic in some

cases to decide whether the author is constructing his characteristic fable or the fable constructing the author” (251). With each book, Melville had the opportunity to cycle through his experience of both faith and doubt and little by little, he grew in his understanding. Much like “the pondering repose of If” which is itself an ironic juxtaposition of terms, Melville ultimately settled in remaining unsettled. Resting in a cycle of constant movement and sustained belief amid doubt, Melville discovered that no matter how daunting the questions may seem, there will always be room for sincerity and hope.

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