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MOBY-DICK AS PROTO-MODERNIST PROPHECY

by

RANDALL W. HARRELL

Under the Direction of Mark D. Noble, PhD

ABSTRACT

This project relies on two main bodies of work: the text and reception history of *Moby-Dick*. I argue that the novel's prophetic insights unfold in its failure and resurrection. The reception history consists of early reviewers, biographers, and critics both hailing and discounting *Moby-Dick*'s literary value. The first section, "Proto-Modernist Melville: Specific Difficulty in *Moby-Dick*," explores the peculiar difficulty inherent in the text of *Moby-Dick*, namely its divergent, evasive, and hieroglyphic properties. Chapter 2, "Reception: Nineteenth-Century Failure and Modernist Success," chronicles the novel's reception history, focusing largely on the critics of twentieth-century modernism. In "*Moby-Dick* as Prophetic Anticipation and Fulfillment," I examine the link between the inherent difficulty found within *Moby-Dick* and its reception history. I propose that Melville's novel theorizes its prophetic anticipation of literary modernism as well as Melville's own authorial failure and redemption narrative.

INDEX WORDS: *Moby-Dick*, Melville, Difficulty, Failure, Reception History, Prophecy

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by

RANDALL W. HARRELL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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2015

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DEDICATION

Though my personal interests fuel my academic work, my wife provides the emotional, physical, and financial infrastructure for me to pursue what I love. She reads drafts of essays about writing she's never heard of and listens to me talk about concepts that she doesn't understand—only because she hasn't read what I've read. Talented and brilliant in her own right, she's incredibly supportive of my endeavors. This thesis is dedicated to you, Kendra. Thank you for understanding when you don't agree, believing when you don't understand, and agreeing when you don't believe. You make me better.

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When I first applied to Georgia State University, I read about its distinguished professors on the GSU website. In my personal statement, I wrote about the work of faculty I would likely study under. Since then, I've engaged in multiple seminars, a directed reading, and meetings that spanned beginning conversations about Melville and the completion of this thesis. On this side of that process, the sentiments in my personal statement pale in comparison to actually studying under Dr. Mark Noble. He has helped me put words around my ideas, and I am grateful for his hard work and patience. As much as he encouraged me when I had good ideas, he demanded clarity and development when I proposed lesser notions. Dr. Noble, thank you for pushing my ideas further while reigning in others when necessary.

I've had the pleasure of working with both of my readers on extended off-site studies of literature in culture. I travelled to Ireland with Dr. Tanya Caldwell to study the writings of Swift, Joyce, and Wilde—an experience I'll never forget. Dr. Caldwell, you're so passionate about literature, and you obviously care about your students. Thank you for encouraging the development of my own interests and always reading my work meticulously. I joined Dr. Gina Caison on a domestic field study at New Echota, Georgia—the nineteenth-century capital of the Cherokee Nation. The experience has sparked within me a deep interest and compassion for Native communities. Dr. Caison, thank you for always asking for more from my work and offering valuable insight. You're so sharp and well-read.

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INTRODUCTION—"SOME YEARS AGO"

When Herman Melville died in 1891, his work had been largely forgotten, thanks to a warehouse fire and poor public reception. His recent attempts at poetry had seen little acclaim, and the once great travel-writer lived in obscurity just blocks away from some of New York City's most prominent authors. A *New York Times* article entitled "Herman Melville" reported in October of that same year that there has "been buried in this city ... a man who is so little known, even by name, to the generation now in the vigor of life that only one newspaper contained an obituary account of him, and this was but of three or four lines." One biographer claims that "few noticed and fewer cared" about his withered life and legacy as an author (*Melville* 6–7). His passing was the poor death of a man who had spent himself into a work that included a prophecy of his own failure.

Melville spent much of his artistically formative years aboard ships sailing from New England, searching for adventure and prosperity in the form of whale pods and merchant exchange. While many of his peers sought an academic life for their initiation into adulthood, young Melville identified more with his famed narrator, Ishmael, for whom "a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard" (101). Though Melville educated himself in various fields (i.e. biblical, classical, scientific), the education for his most famous work was found in his studies at sea. When Melville gifted *Moby-Dick* to the world, he did so with a peculiar but confident apprehension. He admits to Hawthorne in 1851 that "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb" (*Letters* 142). Soon, what moderate acclaim he received from his earlier travel narratives had faded with his new work that resists categorization.

Melville introduced his most ambitious book to a reading public unready for its wicked contents. Eventually, after attempts at other forms of writing (including poetry and a series of lectures), he withdrew from the public eye (*Melville* 7). His relative seclusion lasted for the rest of his life, passing forty years after most of the reading public thought him dead. Andrew Delbanco claims that “even people who had known him were surprised” at his death (*Melville* 4). But the narrative of Melville’s life and work did not end with his death. In fact, much of what becomes of Melville’s story happened at the advent of the next century. The rise of literary modernism led to changing sensibilities among twentieth-century readers and a new kind of literature interested in interpretive resistance. These sensibilities paved the way for the resurgence of Melville’s work. By the end of the 1920s, scholars and critics placed his name alongside already established writers such as Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe.

Though much scholarship focusses on the biographical elements of *Moby-Dick*, I advance this scholarship through considering its prophetic elements. I argue that the novel anticipates, somewhat uncannily, the story of its own obscurity and recovery. What I call prophecy is neither a crystal ball vision nor a divine dream sort of seeing into the future. Rather, *Moby-Dick*’s prophetic prowess relies on its ability to anticipate a literary moment not yet come. While anticipating and establishing its future value to modernist readers, it also creates the grounds for its contemporary failure due to its inaccessibility. *Moby-Dick* uncannily anticipates and documents its own impending failure, as well as its Ishmaelian story-telling counterparts of the twentieth-century.

If Ishmael tells the story of Ahab, literary scholars of the twentieth-century recount the story of Melville. From this vantage, *Moby-Dick* arrives in literary history before its time and,

because of its unusual difficulty, fails commercially when exposed to a reading public unprepared for avant-garde techniques that would define later generations. In the third section of this thesis, I leverage writings from E.M. Forster, Nick Selby, and Gavin Jones to illuminate connections between prophetic implications and difficulty-induced failure in *Moby-Dick*. In *Poetry and Prophecy*, a collection of essays discussing the tradition and literary criticism concerning Classical and Christian prophecy (both of which Melville was well-read), Alan Cooper claims that “the test of the true prophet is that his or her ‘word’ must come to pass” (34–5). As will be demonstrated, much of Melville’s “word”—his modernist anticipation and variable authorial success—comes to pass.

Because Melville professes the autobiographical impulse within an author’s work, we can acknowledge the prophetic implications interlaced between Melville’s biography and Ishmael’s account of Ahab’s journey and demise. Melville writes the following in “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Mosses from an Old Manse”:

And if you rightly look for it, you will almost always find that the author himself has somewhere furnished you with his own picture. For poets (whether in prose or verse), being painters of Nature, are like their brethren of the pencil, the true portrait-painters, who, in the multitude of likenesses to be sketched, do not invariably omit their own; and in all high instances, they paint them without any vanity, though, at times, with a lurking something, that would take several pages to properly define. (528)

Also, considering that Melville’s initial writings (*Typee* and *Omoo*) were loosely autobiographical, personal experience comprises much of the raw material drawn upon for *Moby-Dick*. However, this relationship between Captain Ahab and his creator presents more than

exaggerated regurgitations of a sailor's experience in the South Seas, like Melville's travel narratives mentioned above. I argue that a prophetic intertextuality links Ahab's bout with the Whale and Melville's struggle navigating the industry of authorship in an oftentimes tumultuous culture akin to nautical endeavors. Both Melville and Ahab see the difficult future associated with their actions, but they both feel the inescapable draw to follow through with their own doomed end.

One can liken Ishmael's communication of Ahab's legacy to Melville's narrative told by early Melville scholars. Melville becomes like Captain Ahab. As Ahab secludes himself on the Pequod and falls prey to the sea, Melville retreats from public life in New York City and becomes engulfed in his own failure as an author, eventually dying with little notice from his contemporaries. While writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville senses the looming of something dire. He writes in "The Line" that "All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, everpresent perils of life" (229). Later, Ishmael recounts the captain's death: "Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck ... he was shot out of the boat ... So dies Captain Ahab—killed by a hemp rope" (426). Ahab and Melville feel the perils of life close-by, but they pursue their monomaniac obsessions nevertheless, soon falling prey to their inescapably sealed fates. Both become victims of the object that tethers each to his obsession—Ahab through whale lines and Melville through lines about whales.

Failure and Redemption—The Crux of the Argument

The immortality of Melville and Ahab relies on the preservation and articulation of their stories, whether from a floating coffin or an American literary culture in search of an elusive,

past identity. By viewing the novel's reception history—the details of its life and afterlife—and the events of *Moby-Dick* as interrelated texts, this project exposes the novel's prophetic circle of failure and redemption. The Ishmaelian story-telling of scholars entrenched in the Melville revival of the 1920s and 30s fulfill the novel's anticipation of its own resurrection. While composing *Moby-Dick*, Melville feared the failure of his new work, and the failed novel ironically fantasizes its redemption. Melville saw the impending demise of his career as a novelist and his eventual failure among his readers and critics, and he frames his great work in a way that yields itself to redemptive story-telling. In this reading, *Moby-Dick* becomes Melville's Pequod, plunging to the depths of failure and rejection, and Ishmael stands in as his fantasized redeemer, his hope for authorial resurrection.

The integral link between Ishmael's telling of Ahab's story and the recounting of Melville's story emerges from the wreckage thirty years after his death, carried by readers, critics, professors, and biographers. The publication of *Moby-Dick* situates Melville as a deranged and washed-up writer. *Moby-Dick* resists readers because of its inherent difficulty, calculated and grounded in a hermeneutic dilemma. *Moby-Dick* thus not only recounts the fate of its insular characters, it also comments in advance on its own textual history. The text anticipates its own complex reception history—failure and eventual resurrection—and its creator's proto-modernist participation in the literary tradition to come.

This project thus relies on two main bodies of work. The first seems obvious: the text of *Moby-Dick*. I examine the ways that the text constructs hermeneutic hurdles in layered interpretive difficulty. Melville's biographers often help demonstrate how the composition of *Moby-Dick* arrived at this approach. But I also rely on the reception history of *Moby-Dick*. The novel's prophetic insights unfold in its failure and resurrection. This reception history consists of

early reviewers, biographers, and critics both hailing and discounting *Moby-Dick*'s literary value. The first section of this thesis, "Proto-Modernist Melville: Specific Difficulty in *Moby-Dick*," explores the peculiar difficulty inherent in the text of *Moby-Dick*, namely its divergent, evasive, and hieroglyphic properties. Chapter 2, "*Moby-Dick*'s Reception: Nineteenth-Century Failure and Modernist Success," chronicles the novel's reception history, focusing largely on the critics of the modernist movement of the early twentieth-century. In "*Moby-Dick* as Prophetic Anticipation and Fulfillment," I examine the link between the inherent difficulty found within *Moby-Dick* and its reception history by suggesting parallels between the text of Melville's life and the text of *Moby-Dick*. I propose that Melville's novel theorizes its prophetic anticipation of literary modernism as well as Melville's own authorial failure and redemption narrative.

1 PROTO-MODERNIST MELVILLE: SPECIFIC DIFFICULTY IN *MOBY-DICK*

Reading generally attempts to make the initially unfamiliar familiar. But attempts to read in *Moby-Dick* often fails at this—instead of making familiar, reading renders the subject unfamiliar. Ishmael reads Queequeg’s body in “The Spouter Inn” in an effort to familiarize, thus drawing near to meaning. Ishmael claims there is something “inexplicable in him,” and through this reading, the inexplicable is explained (34). Before Ishmael’s reading of Queequeg’s body in “The Spouter Inn,” he reads a painting near its entrance. In reading the painting, he intends to “any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose” (26). Ishmael maintains this intention throughout the text. The reading of this object leads him to great observational and inquisitive lengths. Eventually, he concludes that the painting is a depiction of “a gigantic fish . . . the great leviathan himself” (26). In this early depiction of Ishmaelian reading, he arrives at a definitive answer. However, this answer eventually becomes troubling for Ishmael and the reader. The conclusive object in the painting becomes the object that resists reading throughout the rest of the text, a resistance also found in modernist writings of the twentieth-century.

Moby-Dick is a difficult text, both for Ishmael as reader and for readers of Ishmael’s narration. Ishmael consistently finds reading the whale difficult, and as one begins the interpretive work of *Moby-Dick*, the whale consistently resists interpretation. *The Whale* eludes the reader as he does Ishmael. The difficulty of reading *Moby-Dick* thus rests in this tension between the limits of human understanding and the iterated limitlessness of the White Whale. Melville confounds through the text’s constant resistance of interpretation. The difficulty of *Moby-Dick* confounds the reader in at least three different ways: *divergence* (creating contradictory perspectives between Ishmael and Ahab and offering diametrically opposed conclusions to the reading of the world); *evasion* (arriving at beginnings, often ending in

flippancy or humor); and *hieroglyphic* (resulting in more questions and no definitive answers). The text frustrates with these opposing perspectives and often confounds its own interpretive ends. As I discuss further in chapter 2, this frustration leads to poor reception among its nineteenth-century reading public, but it becomes a point of interest to twentieth-century critics.

1.1 Divergent Narrative Perspectives

If Ishmael's project is one that merges, Ahab's is one that destroys. In the central instance of what I call divergence, *Moby-Dick* sets these two powerful perspectives in opposition to one another. While both Ahab and Ishmael desire Ahab's "little lower layer" (140), the avenues they initially envision to arrive there are at odds. However, as the novel progresses, Melville's favor of one perspective over the other begins to exert itself. The perspectives of Melville's foremost forces of narration blend into Ishmael's merging—or reading—to make sense of reality or coming close to truth. The means through which Ishmael sees the world are slowly uncovered through his reading of his surroundings.

Ahab's perspective is not as gradual or implicit. Once Melville establishes the character of Captain Ahab in Chapter 28, the reader begins to get a sense of the opposing perspectives between Ahab and Ishmael. Ishmael, who displays such verbosity throughout the narrative thus far, runs short of words when Ahab finally appears: "Reality outran apprehension; Captain Ahab stood upon his quarter-deck" (108). This entrance marks the first of many moments of insufficient narration about the violent Ahab by the amiable Ishmael. Instead, Melville resorts to soliloquy to display the opposing and powerful perspective of Ahab. Their perspectives compete for the spotlight in *Moby-Dick*. The constant opposition of these perspectives frustrates the reader's interpretation of the text, thus contributing to its difficulty. As the narrative progresses,

perspectives become even more convoluted when the bodies of Ahab and the crew of the Pequod begin to participate in a sort of Ishmaelian merging, thus furthering the difficulty of the text and anticipating sentiments of construction from the deconstructed found in T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (discussed further in chapter 3).

Ishmael's perspective is established early in the text. He asserts his motives for taking to sea in "Loomings," where he announces his attempts to elude suicide: "With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me" (18). Melville establishes Ishmael from the outset as a peculiarly introspective narrator. Ishmael perpetually desires to read all that he encounters, always in an attempt to merge himself with the objects that surround him. As a reminder of Ishmael's "growing grim about the mouth" (18), and as a read of the blacksmith in Chapter 112, Ishmael claims that all men have a similar experience:

to the death-longing eyes of such men, who still have left in them some interior compunctions against suicide, does the all-contributed and all-receptive ocean alluringly spread forth his whole plain of unimaginable, taking terrors, and wonderful, new-life adventures; and from the hearts of infinite Pacifics, the thousand mermaids sing to them [...] (369)

The story Ishmael tells of Perth, the old blacksmith of the Pequod is one about the merging of what one does and how one lives. Ishmael describes Perth and the reduction of his life to his labor: "Silent, slow, and solemn; bowing over still further his chronically broken back, he toiled away, as if toil were life itself, and the heavy beating of his hammer the heavy beating of his heart. And so it was.—Most miserable!" (368). The action and object with which he makes his

living merge into being the source through which he lives, his heart and its beating. This becomes true for Ishmael as well. Ishmael's inclination to observe and merge become the operation of his life and the value of his life.

Lewis Mumford, one of Melville's earliest biographers, paints a picture of Ishmael's desire to merge at the Spouter Inn: "His companion and bedfellow in the crowded inn is another Ishmael, a cannibal named Queequeg" (158). As the reader soon discovers, Ishmael and Queequeg become inseparable. In reading the body of Queequeg, Ishmael attempts to make the unfamiliar familiar. He states that "At first I knew not what to make of this; but soon an inkling of the truth occurred to me. I remembered a story of a white man—a whaleman too—who falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them. I concluded that this harpooneer, in the course of his distant voyages, must have met with a similar adventure" (34). He attempts to understand the other by placing him among his recent memories, merging him into his own experience. Ishmael narrates further this merging between familiar and other or the civilized and the brute through his account in "The Counterpane":

The counterpane was of patchwork, full of odd little parti-colored squares and triangles; and this arm of his tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure, no two parts of which were of one precise shade—owing I suppose to his keeping his arm at sea unmethodically in sun and shade, his shirt sleeves irregularly rolled up at various times—this same arm of his, I say, looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt. Indeed, partly lying on it as the arm did when I first awoke, I could hardly tell it from the quilt, they so blended their hues together; and it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me. (36–7)

Melville writes of the penultimate merging (the ultimate shall be discussed in a following section) of Ishmael and Queequeg just paragraphs later in nuptial terms saying, “For though I tried to move his arm—unlock his bridegroom clasp—yet, sleeping as he was, he still hugged me tightly, as though naught but death should part us twain” (38).

Not only does Ishmael imagine himself merging with the body of Queequeg through reading, he also imagines merging with the body of the whale. In chapter 32, “Cetology,” Ishmael classifies whales as one would organize books in a library—“I. The Folio Whale; II. the Octavo Whale; III. the Duodecimo Whale” (118)—and organizes them in size from greatest to least. Within each book (folio, octavo, duodecimo), Ishmael assigns chapters to different species of the whale. As Ishmael experiences bodies through reading, he persuades his readers to engage in the same way. Mumford explains this means of making the unfamiliar familiar by asserting that this sort of classification “is an excellent example of Melville’s way of assimilating and reevaluating knowledge, so that what was extraneous becomes intrinsic, and what was a fact in the history of the whale becomes an element in the myth that he is weaving” (162). Ishmael’s project of reading, not only the body of whale but the whole of experience, conveys his desire to merge with all that surrounds him, whether that be himself with Queequeg, himself with his work, or himself with the whale.

If Ishmael’s desire is to merge, then Ahab’s is to destroy. Captain Ahab announces his perspective in “The Quarter-Deck.” Ahab gathers the crew of the Pequod to rally them in his monomaniac goal of raising and killing the White Whale. He makes explicit his philosophical perspective of attaining truth saying that all things are “pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the moldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the

mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall?" (140). Ahab continues his monomania exclaiming that "the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me," and it is the "inscrutable thing" that he "chiefly" hates (140). Instead of the whale representing something that can and should be read (as it does to Ishmael), it represents something that must be destroyed in order to find the "Truth [that] hath no confines" (140). As Ishmael approaches his own subjectivity benevolently, Ahab does the same violently. These opposing perspectives elicit frustration from the reader, thus leading to *Moby-Dick's* complex reception history. However, as Captain Ahab comes near to punching through his pasteboard mask, a new merging begins to take place between Melville's two narrative perspectives.

1.2 Divergence in the Merging of Perspectives

While Ahab's position starkly contrasts to Ishmael's, he is not in static opposition. Instead, his perspective also diverges from itself, becoming indistinct among others aboard the Pequod and eventually merging with the crew collectively. Although Ahab cannot forsake his monomaniac quest to slay the White Whale, he begins to show remorse for how he has allowed this desire to control his life. Ahab first shows this remorse in chapter 37, "Sunset," when he says, "I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks where'er I sail" (142). He begins to see the effects of his decisions, not only on the lives of others but on his own life. He claims that he is "demoniac ... madness maddened!" (143). However, Ahab holds close to his intent to "dismember [his] dismemberer," while claiming that he will "be the prophet and the fulfiller one" (143). Melville weaves trappings of prophesy throughout his narrative—chilling words when anticipating the prophetic implications discussed in subsequent chapters of this thesis. The reader can see Ahab's remorse more clearly in "The Symphony." Ishmael conveys

Ahab's state in a moment of isolated narration—a sentence that stands as its own paragraph:

“Ahab's glance was averted; like a blighted fruit tree he shook, and cast his last, cindered apple to the soil” (406). All of Ahab's understanding of his own subjectivity begins to fall apart. Ahab defines his own remorse:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? (406)

In the same monologue, Ahab begins to question whether his agency is agency at all: “Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?” (406). As Ahab continues in his distaste for his own intentions, but also his inevitability of fulfilling them, his first mate, Starbuck, leaves his presence, defeated, hopeless, and “blanched to a corpse's hue with despair” (407). The reader witnesses Ahab's release from his perspective, at least ideologically, just as Starbuck slips away, and the presence of the devilish Fedallah slinks into view.

From the outset of the narrative, the descriptions of Ahab's relationship with Fedallah raises many questions. Here, and at other instances in the story, the reader can see the merging of Ahab with the character of Fedallah. Ishmael states this congruence in the concluding paragraph of “The Symphony”: “Ahab crossed the deck to gaze over on the other side; but started at two reflected, fixed eyes in the water there. Fedallah was motionlessly leaning over the same rail” (407). Ahab, instead of seeing his own appearance in the water below, sees the haunting visage of Fedallah. In earlier chapters, these two characters begin their gradual merge. In chapter 117, “The Whale Watch,” Ahab and Fedallah discuss the prophesy of Ahab's fall. At the end of their

conversation, the narrator states, “Both were silent again, as one man” (377). They begin to function as one entity. In the follow chapter, “The Quadrant,” Fedallah is depicted as “kneeling beneath [Ahab] on the ship’s deck, and with face thrown up like Ahab’s, was eyeing the same sun with him” (378). Here, the reader can see that, in some way, the eyes of Ahab and Fedallah become one. Their movements become as mirrored as their motive to slay the White Whale.

The oneness of Ahab and Fedallah is seen clearest in chapter 130—“The Hat.” As the Pequod approaches the raising of the White Whale and the inevitable chase that follows, Ahab and Fedallah are always seen on deck, their eyes constantly awing the crew, again, as if they are the same set of eyes. The narrator doubts the material existence of Fedallah and brings this notion into question saying, “that the men looked dubious at him; half uncertain, as it seemed, whether indeed he were a mortal substance, or else a tremulous shadow cast upon the deck by some unseen being’s body. And that shadow was always hovering there” (401). Fedallah’s presence is constant upon the deck, and he is not “known to slumber, or go below” (401). Similarly, Ahab’s presence is constant upon the deck: “at any time, by night or day could the mariners now step upon the deck, unless Ahab was before them” (401). Their existence becomes so intertwined that even words between them are unnecessary. They occupy the same space but “never seemed to speak—one man to the other” (401). Ahab and Fedallah become yoked together as if two units of the same being: the substance and the shadow—“in the Parsee Ahab saw his forethrown shadow, in Ahab the Parsee his abandoned substance”; the master and the slave—“Ahab seemed an independent lord; the Parsee but his slave”; and “the lean shade” and “the solid rib” (401).

Ahab also attempts to meld into the same existence as the Almighty. In “The Candles” during a violent and impressive lightning storm at sea, Ahab becomes irreverent and angry with

God. He speaks to the Almighty as if in prayer: “Thou canst blind; but I can then grope. Thou canst consume; but I can then be ashes” (383). Ahab desires to become like God—or a part of God—and claims that he has the capacity to be at least a lesser form of the Almighty. He begs to exist as just the residual product of God’s consumption—the ash that manifests from lightning. Ahab states, “Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee!” (383). Ahab claims to constantly be born out of the Almighty and expresses his desire of oneness saying, “I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would fain be welded with thee; defyingly I worship thee!” (383). Ahab’s existence becomes so tied with the power of the one who creates the lightning that he claims that it is through that violent heat that he is made one—“welded with thee.”

Through tragic and unlikely circumstances, the great Captain Ahab is soon likened to the lowly Pip. After the “sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul,” Pip becomes one of the only crewmen, besides Ahab, who had been “carried down alive to the wondrous depths” and witnessed “the multitudinous, God-Omnipresent, coral insects” (321). So, in some ways, Pip and Ahab have experienced the same thing: Ahab’s dismemberment by the whale and Pip’s dismemberment by way of the sea—both essentially dismembered by Nature. But in another light, one can see that Pip is not only made mad or monomaniac. Instead, he is given an “insanity [that] is heaven’s sense” (322). Nevertheless, the two maddened characters begin to form a strange union.

In “The Log and Line,” an argument ensues between Ahab and the Manxman over old, spoiled ropes. After the Manxman’s suspicions of faulty lines come to pass, the character of Pip enters muttering non-sense, seemingly having lost the truth of his own identity. While the Manxman calls Pip a “crazy loon” (391), Ahab turns and addresses Pip: “Thou touches my

inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings” (392). Pip responds, “let old Perth [the Pequod’s blacksmith] now come and rivet these two hands together; the black one with the white, for I will not let this go” (392). Pip and Ahab both feel the same connection. The old Manxman comments on the odd couple as they retreat to Ahab’s cabin: “There go two daft ones now . . . One daft with strength, the other daft with weakness” (392). Considering Pip’s small stature but divine vision at sea and Ahab’s fall from sanity but commanding position on the Pequod, this passage refuses a definitive reading of their relationship—who is the weaker and who is the stronger? Instead, the reader assumes both and yes. Just four chapters later in “The Cabin,” Pip affirms their riveted relationship again saying, “ye have not a whole body, sir; do ye but use poor me for your one lost leg; only tread upon me, sir; I ask no more, so I remain a part of ye” (399). However, Captain Ahab’s mode of Ishmaelian merging is not isolated to Fedallah, Pip, and the Almighty.

Moby-Dick thus confounds its readers by Ahab’s merging with all of the crew of the Pequod. Mumford claims that “there is an Ahab in every man, and the meanest member of the crew can be awakened to the values that Ahab prizes” (189). Starbuck claims in “The Musket” during his passion and near murder of Ahab that “all of us are Ahab’s” (387). As all of the ship merges into one, the Pequod becomes the body through which the sum of Ahab’s crew exerts its agency:

They were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things—oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp—yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull, which shot on its way, both balanced and directed by the long central keel; even so, all the individualities of the crew, this man’s valor, that man’s fear; guilt and

guiltlessness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to. (415)

Though the ship is made of many parts, they all meld together with Ahab as the head or “long central keel,”—the whole of the Pequod’s existence being pointed in its captain’s monomaniac pursuit. With Ahab as the head, all the other members of the crew become the instruments through which the quest of the Pequod is satisfied.

Through the shifts in narrative perspective, Melville illuminates his preference for merging over piercing. The final moments of Ahab and the Pequod’s bout with the White Whale exemplifies the favored perspective of Melville. As the ship sinks to depths of the sea, all the crew of the Pequod are dragged down with it. Not until the waters settle and “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” does Ishmael, the faithful narrator, emerge to tell of his survival (427). As Ishmael reaches “the closing vortex,” “a creamy pool” and “slowly wheeling circle,” he floats in the vastness of the ocean. All that he has known of this voyage descends below, and nothing above the surface offers hope of survival. Then the empty, air-tight coffin of his dear friend Queequeg shoots straight-way out of the water, a life-buoy—hope of Ishmael’s survival and the ensuing story of Ahab and his great bout with the White Whale. Chapter 110, “Queequeg in his Coffin,” explains the significance of this moment. Upon suddenly getting well and regaining strength, the savage transfers his likeness onto what has become his “sea-chest.” Melville writes this chilling and telling description of the scene:

Many spare hours he spent, in carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body. And this tattooing, had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had

written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; [...] (367)

This—“a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth”—is the life-buoy Ishmael floats atop to salvation, the body of Queequeg. Through Ishmael’s ultimate merging with Queequeg, he has life.

Throughout the text, Ishmael conveys his perspective by demonstrating his interpretive process. Melville communicates Ishmael’s desire to merge through his reading and assimilating of bodies with his own; readers are only able to interpret the intentions of Ishmael through a similar assimilation. The early cryptic perspective of *Moby-Dick* (that of Ishmael) becomes more obvious as the epic approaches its tragic end. Eventually, all characters begin to find themselves in some state of merging. Ahab’s original and dogmatic intention to pierce or punch through (which “The Quarter-Deck” clearly outlines) thus begins to diverge from itself, as Melville shifts the focus of all characters from many perspectives into one. As the novel refuses fixed positions or stable identities for its characters, Melville’s reader contends with this difficulty. The interpretive demand associated with following this sort of undulating narrative perspectives poses problems for readers disinterested in such hermeneutic dilemmas. *Moby-Dick*, even in its narrative style, retreats from engagement with its contemporary reading public. Thus, the novel fails among the critical and popular audience of the nineteenth-century. Instead of success in its day, the novel accepts failure and anticipates its resurrection among modernist aesthetics.

1.3 Divergent Interpretive Ends

Similarly, the novel's interpretive ends often depart from one another in moments of divergent complication. The text offers diametrically opposing conclusions, for instance, to Ishmael's reading of the whale. In Chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael explains what the White Whale represents to him. He states that "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled" him (159). Ishmael proceeds to pontificate about whiteness, its presence in different cultures and in nature, its reception and non-reception (as in the Albino man who "peculiarly repels and shocks the eye"), and eventually surrenders "a white flag hung out from a craven soul" (159–64). He appears to surrender his reading of the whale's whiteness after pages of assigning so much significance to the depth of it. However, Ishmael then poses two divergent questions:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (165)

The whiteness of the whale represents one of two things: the veil that covers the god who desires to undercut creation "with the thought of annihilation," or the "dumb blankness" that indicates an absence of such a god. Behind the veil, we find either an unjust god or the fact that there simply is no veil, no wall, nothing behind anything.

Ishmael spends most of the chapter explaining the importance of whiteness. In this way, Ishmael invests more time building the logic of the first question. However, Ishmael appears to favor the truth of the second when he states, “these are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without” (165). Ishmael proposes that such deceits, with which nature “paints like the harlot,” mean that the adornments of a prostitute cannot be distinguished from the natural color on the “butterfly cheeks of young girls” (165). He appears to believe that nothing hides behind the appearance of things. Should the reader trust in the thoroughness or the succinctness of Ishmael? These divergent answers to his question about the significance of whiteness confound the stated goals of the chapter. Ishmael’s beliefs are convoluted by the way the opposing principles and their respective explanations (the breadth of the importance of whiteness and the succinctness of the nihilistic stance of nothingness) refuse the reader’s definitive interpretation.

1.4 Evasion

Ishmael further complicates his divergent narration through evading the clarification of objects that should be simply defined. In “The Blanket,” Ishmael discusses the skin of the whale. He poses a question: “what and where is the skin of the whale?” (245). Though he claims there could be “no arguments against such a presumption,” he explains that to consider the blubber the skin would be “preposterous” solely because of its depth and denseness; adversely, he refuses to believe that the outermost layer of the “infinitely thin” substance could be “the proper skin of the tremendous whale” because of its tenderness and diminutiveness (245). Though the substance is the outermost layer, Ishmael refuses to refer to it as the skin. But this also evades the question.

Instead of definitively answering this question, Ishmael diverts the focus to how he reads—an element of interest for modernist audiences.

As *Moby-Dick* materially predates its participation in modernism, Ishmael forecasts the figurative with the physical: “I have several such dried bits [of whale skin], which I use for marks in my whale-books. It is transparent... and being laid upon the printed page, I have sometimes pleased myself with fancying it exerted a magnifying influence” (245). The narrator comments that he reads about the whale through the body of the whale. He states, “it is pleasant to read about whales through their own spectacles” (245). This is a sort of heuristic project. By touching the body of the whale while reading about its form, Ishmael invites his audience to learn how to read through the very act of reading. For Ishmael, everything needs to be read. “The Blanket” proposes the interpretive need and bodily resistance imposed by the whale, thus evading understanding. In the same way that the dried bits of whale skin both cover and magnify Ishmael’s text about whales, the skin of the whale both covers its body from view but also displays the complexity of reading—specifically, the whale.

Complicating the narration even further, Ishmael refers to the blubber and the “isinglass substance” as both a kind of skin and also something that is unable to be skin. Both substances require interpretation for their definition. The blubber can be interpreted as skin or too vast to be skin, just as the substance through which Ishmael fancies himself to read can be interpreted as the outermost layer of the body or the “skin of the skin” (246). Ishmael complicates the properties and delineation of skin, evading the chapter’s controlling question. Ishmael’s elusive discourse again confounds the reader. Modernist theorist Astradur Eysteinnsson describes one of modernism’s main qualities as being the negation of the material—more of this in chapter 3 (37). Similarly, “The Blanket” sets out to define the boundaries of the skin of the whale, but instead

refuses to offer a clear delineation. Instead, Ishmael drags the reader through tangents about the complexity of identifying the whale's skin. He then discounts the discursive statements flippantly stating, "But no more of this" (246). There is more to Ishmael's narration than the aloof flippancy suggested here. What proceeds is how Ishmael further reads the markings on the skin as hieroglyphics and states, "the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable" (246). Just as the whale is increasingly undecipherable to Ishmael, the determinate meaning of any particularly object in Melville's textual anatomy of the whale becomes increasingly undecipherable.

1.5 Hieroglyphic

In Chapter 99, "The Doubloon," the role of narrator passes between characters. Each character attempts to decipher or, as Starbuck states, "read" the coin (333). Melville employs an especially confounding hieroglyphic. Delbanco, a twenty-first century Melville biographer, claims that "In his fever of creation, Melville became Emerson's proverbial poet" (*Melville* 138). Glimpses of Emerson can be seen when Ahab, shaking his fist at the sky in "The Candles," insists upon the priority of the self: "In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here" (382). The crew believes that significant meaning lies within the hieroglyphic markings of the doubloon, such embedded meanings also discussed later in reference to the writings Hart Crane.

The characters read the doubloon with certain personal slants that reflect their own individuality. Ahab reads first, and in his egotistical monomania, he sees only himself: "all are Ahab" (332). Through the lens of himself, Ahab decodes the design of the doubloon to mean "that man should live in pains and die in pangs!" (333). Because of his woeful life, Ahab projects

onto the coin that life and death are both painful. Next, Starbuck soliloquizes a similar experience as he attempts to mold the coin into the creed in which he believes. This is done to no avail, and he refuses to continue in his translation for fear that the “Truth [may] shake [him] falsely” (333). From there, the role of narrator transfers to Stubb, who approaches the coin and reads a sort of zodiac interpretation from it. He continues to narrate through the different readings: Flask, through that “ignorant, unconscious fearlessness of his” (105), translates the coin into its monetary value and, rather incorrectly, determines what it could purchase; the old Manxman, as he often does when he speaks, offers a prophecy of when the White Whale would be raised; Queequeg reads the markings on the coin as it relates to the markings on his own body; and Fedallah only “makes a sign to the sign and bows himself,” supposedly in an act of worship to the sun god (335). Pip approaches, and Stubb seems to slowly leave the vicinity of the mast.

Pip’s reading of the coin, though the account that at first seems furthest from lucid, explains the scene. He starts by muttering, “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look” (335). He repeats this conjugation and asserts that all of the crew are crazy, and he is a crow. The implication of him being a crow is that he brings an omen. Jacqueline Simpson and Stephen Roud state in *A Dictionary of English Folklore* that crows are “regarded as unlucky, and as omens of death, especially if they croak persistently.” Pip continues: “Caw! caw! caw! caw! caw! caw!” (335). Pip’s interpretation of the doubloon not only yields an unlucky omen, it also becomes the one that helps decode the rest. Pip states, “Here’s the ship’s navel, this doubloon here, and they are all on fire to unscrew it. But, unscrew your navel, and what’s the consequence? Then again, if it stays here, that is ugly, too, for when aught’s nailed to the mast it’s a sign that things grow desperate. Ha, ha! old Ahab! the White Whale; he’ll nail ye!” (335).

Pip reads the doubloon as being part of the body of the Pequod, namely its navel. This is similar to how Ishmael has invested so much effort into finding meaning through reading the body of the whale. Through Pip's reading of the body of the Pequod, he concludes that if one raises the White Whale, the ship will sink. However, Pip identifies a hermeneutic dilemma. Instead of reading the doubloon, Pip reads the entirety of the circumstance, specifically the fact that the doubloon is screwed into the mast. Furthermore, both of Pip's interpretations trouble him. His quandary seems to question the validity of interpretation. Can objects be read in the sense that Ishmael attempts? Pip's reading appears to cut through the indecipherability of the doubloon and instead focuses on reading the ship and her crew. He concludes that the doubloon (and all that it represents) will plunge the Pequod to the depths of the sea:

This is a pine tree. My father, in old Tolland county, cut down a pine tree once, and found a silver ring grown over in it; some old darkey's wedding ring. How did it get there? And so they'll say in the resurrection, when they come to fish up this old mast, and find a doubloon lodged in it, with bedded oysters for the shaggy bark. Oh, the gold! the precious, precious, gold! (335)

Pip's prophetic reading of the doubloon and the body that surrounds it predicts the eventual outcome of the Pequod's quest to slay the White Whale. He resists any particular reading of the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the doubloon, instead emphasizing the interpretive paradox comprising the full body of the text, and provides the truest depiction of *Moby-Dick's* difficulty.

1.6 Hermeneutic Difficulty

The difficulty in *Moby-Dick* demands diligent interpretation and often yields little results. *Moby-Dick* exists more as a progressive pursuit (much like the White Whale) than static

direction. Unlike many of its contemporaries, the novel requires an astute sort of investigative work that often refuses to arrive at meaning. Melville's contradictory and merging perspectives of his primary narrators, and the confounding aspects of near-impossible interpretive ends, comprise a strategic difficulty. This difficulty confounds, frustrates, and complicates the reader's interpretation and reception of the text. But for many readers in the early twentieth-century, these hermeneutic difficulties often seemed navigable and even desirable, as discussed in the next chapter.

2 *MOBY-DICK'S RECEPTION: NINETEENTH-CENTURY FAILURE AND MODERNIST SUCCESS*

The critical analysis of *Moby-Dick's* reception history, particularly the work of his early proponents, lacks attention. However, many critics elucidate why Melville's work experienced little success among his contemporaries. The difficulty found in *Moby-Dick* aggravates the connection between Melville and his contemporaries, leading to negative early reception and eventual post-mortem acclaim in the early twentieth-century. This disconnect between Melville's supposed genius and his reading public suggests a sort of prophecy of failure and resurrection inherent in *Moby-Dick*. Melville seemed to know this, as he suggested to Hawthorne in 1851: "Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter" (*Letters* 129). *Moby-Dick* both posits and creates a framework for questions surrounding an artist's failed reception. This great American novel creates a condition of failure for its creator while providing commentary on that failure, as well as commentary on the novel's rebirth from artistic failure into post-mortem fame.

Lewis Mumford situates *Moby-Dick* as the catalyst that sank Melville's publishing career:

his later books, obscure books, crossed books, books that could be called neither fiction nor poetry nor philosophy nor downright useful information, forfeited the interest of a public that liked to take its pleasures methodically. Both the fame and the later absence of recognition, Mr. Melville's commentators agreed, were deserved. By his interest in Sir Thomas Browne and metaphysics, Mr. Melville had carried his readers into a realm much too remote, and an air too rarefied: a flirtation with a South Sea maiden, warm, brown, palpable, was one thing; but the shark that glides white through the sulphurous sea was quite another. In *Moby-*

Dick, so criticism went, Melville had become obscure: and this literary failure condemned him to personal obscurity. (3)

Mumford reveals the dilemma that Melville experienced as an author unable to practice his art in a way that satisfied. He claims that Melville's writing saw most success when it "revealed [the] least of the author and his deepest thoughts" (110). Other scholars offer explanations as to how the work of Melville eventually became canonized. The reception history of *Moby-Dick* illustrates the story about the difficulty of the text and what that means for the response of its readers. *Moby-Dick*'s contradictory and merging perspectives of his primary narrators, and the confounding aspects of near-impossible interpretive ends, comprise a peculiar difficulty. As I have argued, this difficulty complicates the nineteenth-century reception of the text.

But for many readers in the early twentieth-century, these hermeneutic difficulties become navigable and even desirable. Janet Reno claims that Melville's narrator is "like the shattered poet in Eliot's *The Waste Land*" (50). Delbanco states that Melville "anticipated James Joyce's literary innovations" and "emerged in the twentieth century as the American Dostoevsky—a writer who, with terrible clairvoyance, had been waiting for the world to catch up with him" (*Melville* 11, 13). Gavin Jones posits that "Melville approaches the kind of self-divestiture we associate with postmodernism, or the aesthetic autonomy sought by the modernist avant-garde" (58). Modernism thus meets Melville with enthusiastic acceptance, as critics and scholars unearth Melville from obscurity. Specific early champions of Melville's work, such as D.H. Lawrence and F.O. Matthiessen, wade through the hellish waters of *Moby-Dick* and find its difficulty not only a cause for zeal but necessary to its narrative structure.

In his 1929 publication of *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Lawrence discusses the beauty of Melville's language, decoding specific moments of difficulty implemented by the text,

while Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* displays the work of a critic with the interpretive aptitude needed to surmount that which confounds in *Moby-Dick*. In his foundational work of American literary criticism, originally published in 1941, Matthiessen offers close-readings of Melville's work and displays a new sense of interpretive prowess necessary to match Melville's "symbol-making prowess," a sensibility more common to the modernist era ("Sacramental" 21). Nick Selby claims that Lawrence "listens intently to Melville, and to his struggle with language, with truth, and with America. At times mystified by *Moby-Dick*, at others startlingly perceptive toward it, Lawrence gives us a modernist rollercoaster version of the book. In reviving *Moby-Dick* for the modern world, he turns it into a book of the modern world" (Selby 35).

Lawrence and Matthiessen address three of Melville's interpretive barriers through sophisticated hermeneutics: *interwoven experience* (by understanding how the narration and interpretation become co-dependent pieces of the same narrative); *discursive symbolism* (by unlocking the elusive hijinks of Melville's narrator); and *metaphysical unfamiliarity* (by applying Modernist sensibilities to pre-modern Melville). Through close-reading of Melville's work by Matthiessen and Lawrence, modernist interpretive insights succeed where nineteenth-century readers failed.

2.1 Interwoven Experience

Lawrence posits a sure connection between the text of *Moby-Dick* and its reader. A sort of literary agency reaches through the text and interacts directly with the reader. Lawrence claims an initial confusion comes over the reader that "seems spurious." Thus, the reader feels that "Melville is trying to put something over" her (153). This sense of eluding the reader predicates

itself on the idea of a shared experience between the text and its audience. Lawrence complicates his assertion, claiming that Melville remains “aware of himself, self-conscious, putting something over even himself” (153). Early in his career, Melville enjoyed significant fame, publishing travel narratives that appealed to an audience hungry for adventure stories. But soon, Melville pursues prose that becomes more taxing for its reader. Delbanco claims that Melville “writes with great tactility: the geography of the ship [for instance] requires the reader’s shut-eyed concentration if it is to be accurately envisioned” (“Sacramental” 10).

After declined popularity due to stylistic departures from his early successes, Melville becomes more and more disillusioned with his reading public. Lawrence writes that Melville “always felt his audience in front of him” (154). Melville’s awareness of his audience serves as both a mode of creation and a point of contention. On the one hand, he writes to actively engage with his audience, and on the other hand, his audience’s lack of engagement leads to his own self-doubt and eventual literary obscurity. Delbanco claims that Melville attempts to engage with his reader through moments of “submerged metaphors that the reader must tease to the surface” (“Sacramental” 7). As Matthiessen unravels “The Mat-Maker,” he discusses the connection between Melville’s narration and the reader’s interpretation: “To describe it thus makes Melville’s process sound far too studied, as though he were about to manufacture a mechanical allegory instead of creating a parable in which the narrative and its interpretation are as densely interwoven as the threads of the mat” (129). Matthiessen’s close-reading and interpretation bring into focus what appeared so blurry to Melville’s contemporaries.

Though the interwoven experience becomes more difficult for the reader to surmount, Melville still writes in a way that requires interdependency in order for the text to achieve positive reception. While composing *Moby-Dick* in 1851, Melville explains to Hawthorne that

“[d]ollars damn” him, and his honest writing “will not pay” (*Letters* 128). Here, we see Melville in the tension between public expectation and authorial conviction. Lawrence argues that in this moment (the composition of *Moby-Dick*) “he forgets all audience, and gives us his sheer apprehension of the world, then he is wonderful, his books commands a stillness in the soul, and awe” (154). Through Melville’s deferred hope of the interwoven experience of reader engagement, he lost the attention of his contemporaries while gaining that of the generations to come. Because of Melville’s refusal to “write the *other* way” (the lucrative way that gains approval of his contemporaries), twentieth-century readers respond to Melville’s commands of stillness and awe (*Letters* 128; emphasis Melville’s).

Melville experienced the world differently than other American writers of his day. Matthiessen claims that “Melville’s reading came in the reverse sequence from that of most writers: it followed rather than preceded his experience of the world” (121). This “reverse sequence” surely informed Melville’s construction of his narrative. He created a narrative of experience meant to be experienced, a narrative that relies on the reader’s engagement with the text. Matthiessen mirrors these sentiments by claiming that “Some of Melville’s most memorable passages are those in which you feel that you are sharing in the very process of his developing consciousness” (129). The “developing consciousness” found throughout *Moby-Dick* requires that the consciousness of the reader must keep with that same development.

2.2 Discursive Symbolism

Melville implements discursive symbolism throughout *Moby-Dick*. His descriptions of the whale’s skin and shocking whiteness, as well as the crew’s interpretation of the doubloon, represent these moments well. Lawrence’s writings suggest that *Moby-Dick*’s “greatness lies in

the mysterious depths sounded by its symbolism” (Selby 41). Lawrence even goes so far as to close-read the crew of the Pequod, claiming it to be “the ship of the soul of an American.” He reduces the characters of the three mates of the Pequod to a symbolic representation of America, labelling them as “eminently practical”: Starbuck—“a good responsible man of reason”; Stubb—reckless, jolly, and afraid; and Flask—“Stubborn, obstinate, without imagination” (158).

Lawrence writes that “Many races, many peoples, many nations, under the Stars and Stripes ... And in a mad ship, under a mad captain, in a mad fanatic’s hunt” (159). Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the eclectic and discursive characters, Lawrence interprets the crew of the Pequod as one unit comprising the symbolic representation of the American people fanatically establishing their own Americanness.

More than the pursuit of being American, Lawrence claims *Moby-Dick* is filled with “mystery” and “tortured symbolism,” as well as “esoteric symbolism of profound significance, and considerable tiresomeness” (168). Even here, he recognizes the reason for *Moby-Dick*’s narrow audience. Delbanco claims that Melville “continually [generates] new symbols. Under the pressure of his imagination... the monkey rope becomes a metaphor for the ‘Siamese connexion’ between mutually dependent men; the tryworks furnish a smoking vision of hell” (“Sacramental” 18). Through the continuous generation of symbols, Melville ostracizes himself from the nineteenth-century reading public, leaving only those willing to undertake interpretive complexity and discursive symbolism as his audience. In each of these discursive moments, Melville drops symbol after symbol demanding recognition and interpretation from the reader.

Matthiessen also unlocks the symbolism conveyed through Melville’s discursive narrator. One of the main symbolic representations Matthiessen negotiates is the contrast between the land and the sea. He explains this contrast: “Melville developed his basic contrasts between land and

sea, and between calm and storm, both for their own dramatic force, and as his most powerful means of projecting man's inner struggle" (287). Matthiessen analyzes other contrasting ideas that lead back to these binaries, while adding an interpretation that speaks to the "inner struggle" of man. He asserts that "the account of New Bedford and Nantucket, the meeting between Ishmael and Queequeg, and the departure from shore, which, as we have found, provided Melville with one of his key-symbols, the contrast between land and sea, between a life of safety and the search for truth" (417). The interpretation leads a reader of Matthiessen to understand a major theme woven throughout Melville's *Moby-Dick*—the tension between safety and truth.

Matthiessen also offers interpretations of famed chapters such as "The Doubloon" and "The Whiteness of the Whale." He boils down Ishmael's hieroglyphic narration concerning the doubloon nailed to the masthead concisely: "The doubloon, which Ahab had nailed to the mast as a reward for the first man to sight the White Whale, was used by Melville as a device for mirroring each of his chief characters through their varied reactions to it" (285). He claims that "The Whiteness of the Whale" reveals "another of the central themes, that despite the conventional pure and mild connotations of heavenly radiance, there is terror at the heart of worship—a theme which is underscored by his continual contrast between calm and storm" (290). Again, he untangles Melville's interlacing symbolism that blurs dualities—the calm and the storm.

2.3 Metaphysical Unfamiliarity

Lawrence refers to *Moby-Dick* as "a piece of deep mysticism" and rightly so (153). It tests the reader's limits of contentment, the extremes of comfortable compliance and welcomed bewilderment. When encountering the unfamiliar, readers must take one of two steps: bring the

unfamiliar into a realm of understanding or set parameters that limit their degree of exposure to the unfamiliar. *Moby-Dick* is a book that, when pursued diligently, requires deep consideration of shoving near to the unknown and often resignation to its formidable grandeur. Lawrence wrote a striking passage in 1929 that remains relevant today:

Melville manages to keep it a real whaling ship, on a real cruise, in spite of all fanatics. A wonderful, wonderful voyage. And a beauty that is so surpassing only because of the author's awful floundering in mystical waters. He wanted to get metaphysically deep. And he got deeper than metaphysics. It is a surpassingly beautiful book, with an awful meaning, and bad jolts. (159)

Where does one go that is deeper than metaphysics? Melville's mode of metaphysical prose verging on the incomprehensible troubled his readers in the nineteenth-century. Mumford claims that "the beauty of *Moby-Dick* can be known only to those who will make a pilgrimage to it, and stay within its dark confines until what is darkness has become light" (177). He also writes in 1929 that the "conventional critic has dismissed *Moby-Dick* because it is 'not a novel,' or if it is a novel, its story is marred by all sort of extraneous material" (177). Hetherington discusses the disturbance of early reviewers' claims that *Moby-Dick* fails "to conform to any recognized literary category" (194). Nineteenth-century readers resisted *Moby-Dick*, because it failed to fall "within its own prudently circumscribed perspective" (Hetherington 226).

Through his interest in metaphysics, Melville "carried his readers into a realm much too remote, and an air too rarefied" (Mumford 3). For numerous possible reasons, readers in the early twentieth-century had either developed ways of bringing the unfamiliar into understanding or grown accustomed to reveling in the unknown. According to Delbanco, Melville conveys a desire "to represent in words the unconscious as well as conscious processes of the human mind

itself” (*Melville* 148). As Lawrence and Matthiessen demonstrate, this dealing in both the unconscious and conscious leans heavily towards the Modernist sensibilities of twentieth-century readers and away from accepted conventions of the nineteenth-century.

Matthiessen also works to make familiar the metaphysically unfamiliar. He claims “Melville’s mastery of the metaphysical style” and writes that it “extends beyond single passages to the construction of such a sustained unit as Father Mapple’s Sermon. There, by the continuous interweaving of doctrine with illustration ... Melville has broken down the arid divisions between learning and ordinary existence” (126). Matthiessen harks back to the idea of developed consciousness and how Melville’s narration only becomes familiar through the experience of learning. He analyzes Father Mapple’s sermon further claiming that “Such sermons were not to be heard in Melville’s day from the thinly cultivated ministers of upper-class Broadway or Tremont street” (127). Just as a sermon this robust and interpretively elusive was uncommon in his day, a novel dealing with such demand for reader engagement, symbolic interpretation, and metaphysical understanding was equally resisted. Early reviewers claimed the book was mad and “wished away” its metaphysics (Hetherington 223). Hetherington claims that the disconnect between Melville and his audience results from “nineteenth-century timidity and blindness” and asserts that *Moby-Dick* “was not for that century but for another” (224-5).

2.4 Fifty Years Too Soon

Matthiessen and Lawrence work their way through the maze of close-reading and interpretation demanded by the text of *Moby-Dick*. Matthiessen even makes the claim of pre-modernist Melville’s modernist aesthetics: “it seems that ... we must look forward rather than back, to the extensions of the symbolical novel, particularly those made by Joyce, and to Mann’s

use of snow in *The Magic Mountain*” (291). Similarly, Lawrence figures Melville a “futurist long before futurism found paint” and his work “strangely fantastic, phantasmagoric” (154, 156-7).

Delbanco also comments on proto-modernist qualities of Melville’s work and the reception history of *Moby-Dick* and his other writings:

... the book, rejected in its own day, was so warmly embraced in the twentieth century as a protomodernist work. To nineteenth-century readers with a fast for unified narrative... these kinds of decisions made no sense. They make for a messy and lumpy book...and to twentieth-century readers Melville’s book fit the mode of Joyce or Woolf, in which superseded stages of development express the author’s evolving state of mind. (*Melville* 148)

In “Melville’s Sacramental Style,” Delbanco even goes so far as to say that Melville “discovered modernity” (17). His contemporary readership dismissed the work that would be hailed and resurrected among twentieth-century modernists on the grounds of their current sensibilities.

Delbanco claims that language and its relationship with culture presents both pleasures and problems: “It [language] is always slipping back into convention or evaporating into abstraction. In trying to rescue it from the deadening weight of culture, Melville tries to convert it from an inheritance into an invention” (“Sacramental” 9). As Melville faced commercial failure, he likely knew that he wrote his masterpiece fifty years too soon.

3 *MOBY-DICK* AS PROPHETIC ANTICIPATION AND FULFILLMENT

The artistic ground changes with each coming generation. For the reception of *Moby-Dick* in the early twentieth-century, the soil was fertile. The progress of modernity brought about global cultural change that led to the birth of literary modernism as an artistic movement. Because of the advent of new industry and the destruction associated with war, modernists, as Astradur Eysteinnsson states, desire “salvation from the shattered order of modern reality” (9). He claims that the “unity of art” offered modernists this sort of salvation. Even to avid readers and Melville scholars, *Moby-Dick* tests the limits of understanding. Nineteenth-century readers likely experienced it similarly. Eysteinnsson connects these limits of understanding with modernist sensibilities by claiming that modernism attacks and undermines “our social order and our habitual way of perceiving and communicating reality” (Eysteinnsson 26). Modernist writers and *Moby-Dick* both require “a break with tradition” (Eysteinnsson 49). Modernist writers such as Ezra Pound often “saw the new order exerting its power in the very structures of language” (Knapp 19). The text of *Moby-Dick* concerns itself with a meticulous structuring of language.

These breaks from tradition, the emphasis on structures of language, and tolerance of hermeneutic difficulty contribute to *Moby-Dick*'s poor reception during Melville's lifetime and its resurrection during the twentieth-century. More than just establishing himself as a pre-cursor to modernism, Melville participates in the modernist movement of the twentieth-century. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot describes this sort of extra-temporal participation of the writer:

the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of

Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (4)

In Melville's case, this contemporaneity pushes forward to the future instead of looking back to the past. *Moby-Dick* exhibits a temporally unstable narrative, recounting an American tale grounded in historical accuracy while being told in a mode unrecognizable in its day.

Eysteinsson claims that a modernist work is one "whose unity is based on internal tensions that perhaps remain unresolved but nonetheless do not disturb the autonomy of the work" (11). Difficulty constructs the internal tension found in *Moby-Dick*, and the aesthetics of modernism welcome these tensions. Melville's modernist audience accepts the aesthetics of *Moby-Dick*, but these internal tensions lead to relational tension between Melville and his contemporaries. As *Moby-Dick* begins finding readership concerned with how we come to understandings of meaning, Melville arises as an important figure in American literary history. The text of *Moby-Dick* prophetically displays this undulation of reception—first as the failure of Captain Ahab's pursuit of the White Whale and second as his story of immortality told through the powerful narration of Ishmael.

Moby-Dick thus resembles a prophetic account of the emergence of literary modernism, told as a story about the life, death, and resurrection of its avant-garde perspective. Melville and Ahab begin their respective pursuits of *The Whale* (the novel's original title) from a wounded place: Ahab's first physical altercation with the unconquerable and Melville's philosophical

flourishing of his writing between his early travel narratives and *Moby-Dick*. As Melville composed his most ambitious text, he “came to care less and less whether or not he was shaping a production which would please his public” (Hetherington 189-90). The discussion of literary prophecy inherent in *Moby-Dick* must be situated among discussions of failure, genius, and prophecy made by other scholars. Gavin Jones and E.M. Forster discuss failure and prophecy, respectively, while Nick Selby inadvertently connects these ideas through his collection of essays entitled *Herman Melville: Moby-Dick*. By situating these writers and analyzing the text of *Moby-Dick* and the biographical accounts of Melville’s life, I posit the underpinning prophetic principles within *Moby-Dick* in two ways: first, the prophetic anticipation of literary modernism, which draws parallels between Melville’s proto-modernist text and tenets of modernist writing; and second, the prophetic anticipation and fulfillment exerted on Melville’s life by his most renowned text.

3.1 Failure, Genius, Difficulty, and Prophecy

Gavin Jones discusses failure and theorizes its connection to genius, and I merge my descriptions of difficulty into these theories. The specific difficulty I described in my first chapter leads to what Jones claims is the systematic failure of Melville. In his introduction, Jones discusses the failure of Henry Adams and events that precipitated the tradition of failure among American writers in the nineteenth-century. Jones situates his chapter dedicated to Melville largely around *Pierre* and Melville’s essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” although his framework applies to *Moby-Dick* as well. Jones claims that Melville designed *Pierre* to fail and posits that “Melville’s novel [*Pierre*] is a study in failure” (36-7). This work directly follows

Moby-Dick, suggesting it also amounts to Melville's record of his own authorial failure. Jones further explains Melville's understanding of failure:

Melville in his essay describes failure not as a consequence of poor public taste but as a causal force that determines literary production and the conditions of its consumption. Melville's idea of failure emerges from his comparison of Hawthorne's reputation with that of Shakespeare. Both Hawthorne and Shakespeare are literary geniuses who speak beyond the bounds of conventional expression. (39)

The difficulty found in *Moby-Dick* speaks beyond these same boundaries. Jones illuminates a theory of failure and what that means for the American literary tradition as he juxtaposes the ideas of genius and failure in a way that creates a co-dependency between the two: "Rather than studying the way to success, however, Melville's essay offers an explicit theory of failure in a culture whose faltering standards of taste made failure seem a necessity, if not a condition of genius itself" (38). Boldly, Jones claims that "Difficulty becomes failure's cure" (39).

If difficulty cures failure and Melville weaves such a complex web of difficulty throughout *Moby-Dick*, then he inadvertently (or perhaps consciously) develops his own cure for his failed condition. Whether Melville himself sensed the potential resurrection that would follow from his authorial failure, and which the text of *Moby-Dick* uncannily captures, one cannot be certain. Jones claims that "Melville develops a theory of failure as both a formal and moral force that helps us to understand the path of his career around the time of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*." He also posits that "Failure takes shape in Melville's mind as a force necessary to the kind of aesthetic achievement for which he was self-consciously striving" (40). Jones thus connects the failure of the American author with a sense of forward-thinking or the anticipation

of coming cultural and artistic modes. As genius necessitates failure, failure provides the space for critical and popular resurgence while anticipating prophetic fulfillment. Critics have interpreted the difficulty of *Moby-Dick* as either “the work of a genius or the incoherent rantings of a madman. Melville himself was troubled by the apparently inextricable link between genius and madness that his book exposed” (Selby 18). This link between genius and madness discussed by Selby comes into focus when Jones theorizes the “causal force” of failure, and thus perpetuates a story of literary prophecy.

Forster responds to the difficulty inherent in *Moby-Dick* with a bizarre theory of prophecy. He defines prophecy, most certainly in a literary sense, as “an accent in the novelist’s voice” (125). He claims the writer’s “theme is the universe, or something universal, but he is not necessarily going to ‘say’ anything about the universe; he proposes to sing, and the strangeness of song arising in the halls of fiction is bound to give us a shock” (125). His understanding of prophecy in literature includes an aloof idea of how the commonalities of the universal amount to a sort of accent that humanity perceives as strange or shocking. Nick Selby claims that Forster answers a difficult and baffling text with a difficult and baffling text, a common response to *Moby-Dick*. He claims that Forster explains *Moby-Dick* “only by saying that it cannot be explained. And we witness Forster’s major analytic terms—prophecy and song, symbolism and contest—collapse in front of us, and spin off into abstraction” (44).

Forster claims that *Moby-Dick* reads as “an account of whaling interspersed with snatches of poetry,” but the novel “grows difficult and immensely important” when the reader catches the accent or song it contains (138). Forster’s idea of song is as confounding as Melville’s text. His understanding of prophecy, though it communicates rightful elusive qualities, lacks the textual and biographic grounding needed to support such a claim. He admits this distance in his analysis:

The essential in *Moby Dick*, its prophetic song, flows athwart the action and the surface morality like an undercurrent. It lies outside words. Even at the end, when the ship has gone down with the bird of heaven pinned to its mast, and the empty coffin, bouncing up from the vortex, has carried Ishmael back to the world—even then we cannot catch the words of the song. (138)

Forster's analysis, though useful, confirms his "initial bafflement, by restating that which was already known: *Moby-Dick* is 'difficult and immensely important'" (Selby 44). *Moby-Dick*'s internal difficulty and reception history remains at odds with one another even when scholars employ sophisticated interpretive means. Selby claims that readers praise and condemn *Moby-Dick* "for its inventiveness," and that Melville's reading public saw it as "either the work of a genius or the incoherent rantings of a madman." He claims that even "Melville himself was troubled by the apparently inextricable link between genius and madness that his book exposed" (Selby 18). In this reading, *Moby-Dick* becomes more than a precursor to the next literary movement; it becomes a framework on which to build literary modernism. Eventually, *Moby-Dick* "was to seem not merely baffling and confused—but complexly profound—a work which would scarcely yield even part of its capacious store of King's treasures except after some such careful probing," sentiments dead to nineteenth-century readers but alive in modernist aesthetics (Hetherington 226). Instead of merely anticipating and participating in modernism, *Moby-Dick* contributes to the foundation on which that era stands.

3.2 Prophetic Implications

The prophetic elements of *Moby-Dick* have multiple implications. Here, I discuss two of those implications: the prophetic undercurrents that facilitate its anticipation of literary

modernism and the text's prophetic anticipation of Melville's own authorial failure and resurrection. In his "Introduction to *Moby-Dick*," Edward Said states that "Melville went where very few others would have dared" and that "the very existence of an Ahab and a Moby Dick furnish a proper occasion for prophesy, world-historical vision, genius and madness close allied" (369). These daring places and occasions for the interplay of prophecy, genius, and madness apply to both textual history and Melville's biography. Eliot's commentary of the poets of his generation was already implemented by Melville in his: "it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult* ... The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning" ("The Metaphysical Poets" 248). As I have argued, the proto-modernist elements of Melville's *Moby-Dick* implement and anticipate a specific difficulty found later in Modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot and Hart Crane. Again, these confounding aspects are divergence, evasion, and hieroglyphic.

3.3 Modernist Prophecy

Eliot's most famous work responds to the spatial narration of Ishmael. While Melville's use of divergent perspectives deconstructs narration, Eliot explores the aftermath of such divergence. Eliot's work necessitates the application of what Lawrence rightly understood about Melville's work. Lawrence interprets the work of Melville as a work that demands an interwoven experience. Eliot's *The Waste Land* describes a deconstructed world in need of construction: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" (361). For Ishmael, everything is in ruin. He must construct his experience through reading the objects around him. This involves reconstructing the ruin through reading everything—the whale's body, the bodies of Ahab and

Queequeg, physical acts (“The Squeeze of the Hand”), the doubloon, the ship, concepts such as color, the crew’s experience when meeting other ships, etc. *Moby-Dick* requires an active pursuit of recognizing the ruin and rubbish and constructing meaning from that rubbish. Janet Reno compares Melville’s narrator to Eliot’s narrator claiming that he gathers “fragments against his ruin yet [is] unable to show connections among them” (50).

Both narrators attempt to find meaning through divergence and then reconstruction of that which diverges. Eliot’s narrator describes broken images as roots and branches, natural material which exists in divergence. Eliot writes, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images” (*The Waste Land* 352). This brokenness is one that has diverged from cohesive meaning. Melville and Eliot ask questions about how meaning is made and where it comes from. Melville anticipates the branches and roots of divergence found among modernist sensibility.

Admittedly, such divergence might be categorized as a sort of evasion. But the evasion mentioned above describes a specific evasive difficulty found within Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Eysteinnsson claims that Modernism materializes “through negation [rather] than affirmation” (37). Eliot’s specific form of evasion presents itself through a specific iteration of negation, which mimics the sort of evasion enacted by Ishmael. Ishmael attempts to delineate the skin of the whale by identifying what it is not. Instead of arriving at definitive meaning, Ishmael offers up various possible ends while evading through digressive comments about his own confusion. Eliot composes a similar sort of evasion in “The Hollow Men,” which attempts to describe “Shape without form, shade without colour, / Paralysed force, gesture without motion” (365). This evasion forfeits the digressive mode of Ishmael’s reflections, but it employs a similar

confusion of like terms. Eliot introduces distance between shape and form and shade and color, evading readers' understanding of the narrator's meaning.

Hart Crane died an early death and wrote in a way often criticized for its elusive and cryptic characteristics. Publishers often returned Crane's submissions with questions about his poetry's meaning. His poetry is encrypted with meaning hidden behind such moments as Ishmael's recounting of Captain Ahab's doubloon nailed to the masthead. Crane refers to livid hieroglyphs and a "portent wound in corridors of shells" (430). His hallways constructed of shell-like objects recall the multivalent meanings of Ahab's doubloon. Melville's construction of the doubloon provides a multiplicity of meaning while favoring Pip's final reading as the key to understanding the others. Since no particular reading satisfies, Melville introduces a reading of the readers. Crane also describes the impossibility of making sense out of everyday particulars—such as Ishmael's illustrations of the Spouter Inn painting and the delineation of the whale's skin from its body—in "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen":

The mind has shown itself at times
 Too much the baked and labeled dough
 Divided by accepted multitudes.
 Across the stacked partitions of the day —
 Across the memoranda, baseball scores,
 The stenographic smiles and stock quotations
 Smutty wings flash out equivocations. (431)

Crane describes a moment outside of conventional understanding. He references finance, sports, science, and existential moments such as those flashed out by equivocations. Much of the meaning of his poetry lies inside convoluted and encrypted meaning of hieroglyphic extremes.

While nineteenth-century readers tended to reduce *Moby-Dick* to undecipherable moments of hieroglyphic, the modernist mode of twentieth-century writers rely largely on these moments of hieroglyph.

3.4 *Moby-Dick's Prophecy of Melville's Failure and Resurrection*

As Pip decodes the hieroglyph, Melville decodes his relation to literary and cultural temporality accordingly. Melville writes these words to his editor and confidant:

If you overhaul your old diaries you will see that a long period ago you were acquainted with one Herman Melvill[e]; that he then resided in New York; but removing after a time into a remote region called Berkshire, and failing to answer what letters you sent him, you but reasonably supposed him dead; ...

I now write to inform you that this man has turned up—in short, My Dear Fellow in spite of my incivility I am alive & well, & would fain be remembered. (*Letters* 115)

In this, one last thread of prophecy remains untouched. When recounting the episode in which Pip, after leaping from a whale boat, is briefly abandoned at sea, Ishmael remembers that the ocean “jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes” (321). Pip’s “shipmates called him mad,” but Ishmael states that “man’s insanity is heaven’s sense” (322).

Pip’s understanding of his place in space and time becomes skewed by his isolation at sea. His description of his existence among the Pequod after his experience of the vast ocean anticipates Melville’s lostness in the above passage: “Pip? whom call ye Pip? Pip jumped from


the whale-boat. Pip's missing. Let's see now if ye haven't fished him up here, fisherman. It drags hard; I guess he's holding on" (391). Melville sees himself as the one who has been separated from sanity to experience that which is true in the world. As Pip interprets the existence of the crew aboard the *Pequod*, Melville interprets the existence of mankind upon the earth. He writes of his "reasonably supposed" death and his turning up alive. Thus, *Moby-Dick* prophetically represents his own failure and resurrection. In his authorial career, Melville feels tormented by his own narrative inclination and temporal restrictions. Reno claims that a "prophet seems much like an artist, both cursed and blessed by his gift" (61). The curse of Melville's gift separates him from the world, while the blessing of his gift allows him to see the truth of his relation to the critical reading public around him.

Melville's anticipation of his authorial career reaches through the entire narrative of *Moby-Dick*. The most convincing moments of these parallels present themselves through Melville's chronological similarities with Captain Ahab. Though many other parallels exist between Melville and the prophetic implications within *Moby-Dick*, I have opted to highlight just a few. In lieu of discussing further parallels, I include the chronological graph below, which outlines temporal and textual similarities between Herman Melville and Captain Ahab. For a more in-depth understanding of how these moments in time and text align, I will discuss a few moments of interconnectedness. Melville and Ahab share in their wounding, their seclusion, and their risen narrators:

3.5 Melville/*Moby-Dick* Chronological Comparison Chart

Melville

Moby-Dick



Melville Revival tells his story (1941)	Ishmael tells Ahab's story (18)
Melville's story hibernates—(obscurity as a writer and public figure (1861–1920s)	Ahab's story lives in hibernation—"Some years ago, never mind how long" (18)
Melville's art keeps his work alive (1923)	Queequeg's art keeps Ishmael alive (427)
Melville's failure sinks his past (1860)	Ahab's failure sinks all but Ishmael (426–7)
Melville's failed authorship (1851–1852)	Ahab fails capturing the whale (426)
Melville drafts <i>Moby-Dick</i> (1850)	Ahab chases Moby-Dick (407–26)
Melville's mentions his new book (1850)	Ahab's appearance above deck (108–9)
Melville retreats to his writing desk (1850)	Ahab retreats to the Pequod's cabin (107–8)
Melville's wound: <i>White Jacket</i> (1850)	Ahab's wound: Dismemberment (72)

3.6 Their Wounding

When Melville publishes *Mardi*, he begins a move towards his wounded state. *Mardi* was not as well-received as his previous books, so he experiences hints of authorial failure. The lukewarm reception of subsequent works, *White-Jacket* and *Redburn*, further solidify this failure, wounding Melville in a way that denigrates him into to a state of seclusion and personally-imposed exile. Robertson-Lorant claims that *Mardi* “made readers dizzy, angry, and, finally, disgusted with Melville’s incomprehensible lack of control” and that it “completely overwhelmed readers who had enjoyed *Typee* and *Omoo*, and baffled critics” (192). While writing *Moby-Dick* (clearly after his wounding), Melville claims that he is damned by dollars. He says that what he feels “most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches” (*Letters* 128).

By the time the reader meets Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, the captain has already been wounded, secluded, and has risen from his state of seclusion. Thus, Melville does not tell much of Ahab’s wounding. However, the narrator briefly glosses an incident that results in the dismembering of the great sea captain’s body. Ishmael recounts that Ahab appeared as a man “cut away from the stake” (108). He also contemplates a peculiar scar stretching the length of his body, saying that it could have been “the scar left by some desperate wound” or the result of Ahab’s “elemental strife at sea” (109). Ahab stood dismembered upon a “barbaric white leg” crafted from “the polished bone of the sperm whale’s jaw” (109). The White Whale has physically dismembered and altered Ahab through their dire encounter. A once complete captain, Ishmael describes Ahab as the diminished figure of who he once was with a mutilated and dismembered body (156).

3.7 Their Seclusion

While composing *Moby-Dick*, Melville spent much of his time locked away in a feverish frenzy. Delbanco describes the scene well:

Arrowhead—a low-ceilinged house of modest proportions inhabited by wife, baby, and, often, by mother and sisters—felt crowded and noisy; the second-floor study was Melville’s sanctuary, a bright corner room filled with morning light streaming through its eastern window and affording a view of Mount Greylock framed in a second window that looked north over an expanse of fields. Despite her best efforts, Lizzie later recalled he sometimes worked on the book ‘at his desk all day not eating any thing till four or five o clock,’ and then, according to his own account, retired for the evening ‘in a sort of mesmeric state.’

(*Melville* 140)

The seclusion Melville experienced while chasing the white whale of *Moby-Dick* affected his relationships and even his eating habits. This sort of reclusiveness can bet attributed to two things: the pursuit of his next work and the response to his past wound. Robertson-Lorant claims that “Mardi had taken Melville nearly over the edge of the literary world. The storms inside him had driven him far from civilization” (193). Melville provides us with a first-hand account of this seclusion:

I have a sort of sea-feeling here in the country, now that the ground is all covered with snow. I look out of my window in the morning when I rise as I would out of a port-hole of a ship in the Atlantic. My room seems a ship’s cabin; & at nights when I wake up & hear the wind shrieking, I almost fancy there is too much sail on the house, & I had better go on the roof & rig in the chimney. (*Letters* 117)

Melville's description of his own seclusion sounds eerily like that of a wounded and reclusive sea captain such as Ahab.

Captain Ahab spends the first twenty-seven chapters of *Moby-Dick* secluded and out-of-sight of the Pequod's crew. But the reader soon learns that Ahab's seclusion roots itself in events long before Ishmael introduces himself. On Ahab's last voyage, the voyage of his first encounter with the White Whale, he receives the "stroke that tore him" and began his seclusion of "long months of days and weeks" aboard a ship turned towards home. During this time, Ishmael recounts, "Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock," and "his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another" (156). Once Ahab sneaks aboard the Pequod, he is described as being in "the seclusion of the sea" (108). In fact, "nothing above hatches was seen of Captain Ahab" until the Pequod was far out to sea (107).

3.8 Their Risen Narrators

In this reading, Lawrence and Matthiessen perform the Ishmaelian role as narrators of Melville's recovery. The unraveling of Ahab's life, death, and narrative resurrection lays over the narrative of Melville's life displaying uncanny similarities. They tell a story of the inner turmoil and unshakeable convictions of an author tied to his pursuit. Janet Reno claims that this "Connection itself is essential," and that through this "the prophet [Melville] can deliver his vision of truth" (65). According to Reno, "It is prophetic to be concerned with a wider truth than mere prediction" (65). In the story told by these narrators (Lawrence and Matthiessen), Melville's work reaches a reading public finally prepared to receive such writing. Such art anticipates and perpetuates its own literary resurrection.

Ishmael is the only one to “survive the wreck” of the Pequod (427). Much like the modernists’ distance from the wreck of Melville’s life, Ishmael floats “on the margin of the ensuing scene” of Ahab and the Pequod’s demise (427). Lawrence and Mattheissen become the Melvillian orphans who recover and preserve *Moby-Dick* for the twentieth-century audience ready to embrace its challenges. As Ishmael’s voice gives agency to Ahab’s story, the art of Queequeg’s coffin carries the one who recounts the epic story. The arduousness of Melville’s and Ahab’s failure become the logic of their salvation from obscurity, told from the “floating coffin” of two of American literature’s most prolific sinking heroes.

The narration remains central in this endeavor. Who narrates the story becomes as important as the story itself. Each story-teller stands in with zeal and preparedness to recount the events, acknowledging the finite failure and infinite resurrection of his subject. As Ahab’s tale relies on Ishmael’s survival, the existence of Melville’s story once depended on Mattheissen and Lawrence—their stern convictions in the wake of exiled Melville. If approaching Melville studies with the same perceptiveness as these narrators, the scholar should sense the uncanny and seemingly impossible parallels between Melville’s life and his work. These consistencies raise unsettling questions that often lead to similarly unsettled conclusions. *Moby-Dick* exerts pressures on how literary and cultural movements traditionally follow a linear chronology of events—temporality compromised, understanding strategically eschewed, and materiality complicated.

EPILOGUE

Moby-Dick demands interpretive sophistication that resulted in negative contemporary reception. But these hermeneutic properties eventually lead to its anticipated revival and participation in modernist aesthetic sensibility. So, *Moby-Dick* circles the closing vortex of Melville's tormented experience with nineteenth-century authorship, awaiting the clutch of Ishmael—its famous narrator. The welcoming sea of modernism holds wide its arms to Melville. Those who found his work distasteful have faded away and only little proof of his existence remains. Queequeg's coffin bursts forth, giving opportunity for narrative resurrection—the artistic expression of his corporeal existence. The coffin carved and transposed by the story's most consistent and confident character—the Pequod's resident artist.

Melville's story of redeemed failure and recovered obscurity embodies a kind of artistic dilemma that exists cyclically. As one generation responds to its predecessor, work once deemed unimportant or inappropriate becomes revived among a new audience. The author's resistance to contemporary conventions of writers and expectations of readers eventually becomes the collective mode of a new movement, as seen in writers like Melville. Stepping back from and distancing ourselves from such modes allows us to see the layered past with more clarity. In what way does Melville's work outlive his personal obscurity? Why do artists die before their own recognition but often resurrect to eventual fame?

Renowned artists often experience a great degree of personal torment, especially those involved in stories of recovered obscurity and redeemed failure. So, what does the recovery of tormented and obscure artists say about cultural criticisms? What do critics expect from reflections on the past? What can be gained through reconsidering the makeup of canonical works from past generations? Outside of further engagement with Melville studies, I am

interested in pursuing the application of similar concepts among other authors. At this stage, I can only speculate as to what authors might engage these ideas of authorial failure, resurgence of reception, and recovery leading to canonicity. However, some now canonized figures come to mind. The work of Emily Dickinson also experienced little recognition among her contemporaries, but now the American public recognizes her as one of its greatest poets. Dylan Thomas, now widely regarded as one of Wales' greatest poets, lived a life of little means and eventually fell to an early death due to excessive alcohol consumption. He experienced the constant torment of monetary, relational, and artistic failures. Much like *Moby-Dick*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* failed commercially but found readership after his death. Also similar to *Moby-Dick*, *The Great Gatsby* chronicles a progression of failure.

In looking ahead, I continue to question the ways in which failed texts discuss failure. This project leans forward. A series of concepts fuel future work: the manifestation of difficulty, the failure of the artist, the once obscure but now celebrated writer, the conscious or unconscious forecasting displayed in moments of artistic creation, the author's participation in extra-temporal literary movements, the link between failure and genius and the avant-garde, and the causes and cures for a work's undulations in public reception.

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