

Spring 5-9-2016

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“THE PONDERING REPOSE OF IF”: HERMAN MELVILLE’S LITERARY EXEGESIS

by

DAMIEN BRIAN KARL-HEINZ SCHLARB

Under the Direction of Professor Reiner Smolinski (Ph.D.)

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Herman Melville’s oeuvre interacts with Old Testament (OT) wisdom literature (the Books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes). Using recent historical findings on the rise of religious skepticism and the erosion of Biblical authority in both Europe and the United States, I read Melville as an author steeped in the theological controversies of the eighteenth-century. Specifically, I am interested in teasing out the surprising disavowals of overt religious skepticism in Melville’s writing. By tracing the so-called Solomonic wisdom tradition throughout Melville’s oeuvre, I argue that Melville had developed an epistemology of contemplation towards that body of Biblical texts. Scholarship has traditionally painted Melville as a subversive if not downright skeptical religious thinker. Most studies have produced authorial readings, using texts as forensic evidence to make assertions about the author’s psychology.

Incidentally, such assessments have confirmed the narrative of Herman Melville as a grand failed author of the nineteenth century, while ignoring the ambivalent attitudes toward Biblical authority, textual history, and skepticism that emerge in Melville's writing. The present study intervenes by re-addressing several procedural questions about Melville's literary dealings with the Bible: How does Melville deal with the distinct topics of religion, theology, religious skepticism, and doubt? How does he think through the relationship between science and religion as well as that of personal religion and theology? I claim that Melville's work can be read as a continuous contemplation of Biblical wisdom. His writing, I argue, deals productively rather than destructively with the Bible, its textual history, and authority. Melville's thinking on theological and religious subjects was not merely subversive but constructive. In mounting this argument, I contradict current scholarship that reads Melville as trying to invent a new American Bible. In contrast, I show how Melville's philosophical forays, even when critical, are dependent on the ethics, language, and thinking of the OT.

INDEX WORDS: Herman Melville, Religion, Theology, Bible, Wisdom Literature, Solomonic Wisdom, Moby-Dick, The Confidence-Man, Redburn, The Encantadas, Billy Budd, Orme, Bartleby, Epistemology

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

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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May 2016

DEDICATION

For Svenja

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisors, Reiner Smolinski and Oliver Scheiding, for their guidance and feedback over the years. This dissertation would not have been possible without their help. I also thank my committee, Mark Noble and Paul Schmidt, for their instruction and advice, not just on this document but through countless papers, assignments, and conversations that helped me conceptualize this project and ultimately learn the academic trade. I am also immensely grateful to Pearl McHaney and Chris Kocela, who have been invaluable in helping me navigate the administrative clefts one faces as an international student. In the same vein, I thank the faculty and staff of the Georgia State University English department with whom I had the pleasure of working from 2005-11. The research and writing of this project was planned and realized at Georgia State University and Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz with the express intention of furthering cooperation between both institutions. I thank both institutions for giving me the opportunity to study and live in the U.S. and pursue a career in academia. Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my family and friends who have been patient and generous beyond measure and who always helped me stay the course.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following is a list of abbreviated titles referring to Herman Melville's novels as well as to the most common collections of his short fiction and poetry. While I will usually refer to the complete titles or shortened versions in my discussions of the texts, I will resort to the acronyms listed below for the parenthetical information provided with in-text citations. In the case of the New and Old Testaments, I use the acronyms throughout the text.

KJB = King James Bible

OT = Old Testament

NT = New Testament

BB = Billy Budd

BC = Benito Cereno

C = Clarel

CM = The Confidence-Man

I = Israel Potter

JM = John Marr and other Sailors

M = Mardi

MD = Moby-Dick

PP = Published Poems

PT = The Piazza Tales and other Stories

R = Redburn

T = Timoleon

TP = Typee

WJ = White-Jacket

“ATT” = “The Apple-Tree Table”

“LRM” = “The Lightning-Rod Man”

1 INTRODUCTION

“I need not therefore use much flattery to persuade you of your being a relation for it is not brightness of parts, nor extent of learning, but an honest industrious temper, a cautious freedom of inquiry, and sobriety of understanding, that characterize our line.” (256)

—Abraham Tucker, *The Light of Nature Pursued* (1807)

This book articulates the relationship between Herman Melville’s literary oeuvre and what is today known as the philosophy of religion. More specifically, I want to put into a systematic framework some of the questions Melville scholars have been asking since Melville’s revival as a subject of scholarly inquiry in the early twentieth century: How does Melville deal with religion, theology, religious skepticism, and doubt? How does he think through the relationship between science and religion as well as that of personal religion and theology? If we can read Melville’s writing as a kind of commentary on the Biblical text, what is the added value that the literary form brings to such commentary? Since the inception of Melville studies, critics have been sounding the depth of religious skepticism in his writing. Melville, the canonized author and institutional persona, has drawn some of the finest academic minds to his texts. However, a considerable number of these scholarly forays have exhausted their inquiries with authorial readings, which view his texts exclusively in terms of Melville’s supposedly tragic biography and personal crises of faith.

The majority of these critics devote a paragraph or so to articulating the hermeneutic connection between ‘religion’—a term with widely ambiguous usage between all studies I reference here—and Melville’s writing. Regarding the literary engagements of the Bible in American romanticism, Lawrence Buell asserts that “Bible-based literature cannot go beyond quotation, paraphrase, and translation [. . .] without putting the writer [. . .] in the position of rewriting Scripture and thus setting up the individual imagination in a sort of rivalry” (185). In

Buell's mind, any literary author's critical examination of the Bible necessarily produces an antagonism between that author's product and the Biblical source text. Literary scripturism—Buell's designation for this process—acknowledges that all writers who engage the Bible eventually come to “assert the priority of their own imagining over the original, either in frustration (as they recognize the possibility of solipsism) or in affirmation (as they assert the possibility of original relation to the universe)” (185). In either case, he concludes, “faith in the authority of the original text, assuming that it existed to start with, is transferred to faith in the literary process and piety merges with aestheticism” (185). Buell's proposed binary opposition presupposes the author's infatuation with his own aesthetic vision and the consequential rejection of other (authoritative) texts. He thus dismisses alternative forms of intertextual referentiality, such as remembrance, contemplation, and elaboration.

Buell presupposes an inevitable antagonism between literary invention and Biblical authority as well as between authors and religion. Specifically, he misconceives the use of the Bible in nineteenth-century literature by assuming that Biblical texts existed in opposition to aesthetics for authors of the American Renaissance. In fact, Buell's model stands in opposition to recent historical findings about the history of religion and the reception of the Bible since the middle of the eighteenth century as a cultural and literary text. In the introductory pages of his history, *Theology in America* (2003), E. Brooks Holifield is much closer to the point. He suggests that secular literature did not struggle against Biblical texts but against their exegesis in its various permutations:

Poets and novelists—including Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Emily Dickinson, and Ralph Waldo Emerson—struggled with, and often against the pronouncements of the theologians to such an extent that one can hardly hope to understand the nineteenth-century literary renaissance without knowing something about the theological ideas current in the culture. (2)

Contrary to Buell, Holifield does not conceive of the author-Bible relationship as inherently antagonistic. He rather allows authors creative license in their reception of theological ideas. Nineteenth-century literary authors, the present study assumes, craft their own aesthetic responses to the Bible. These responses, while frequently written from a lay perspective, are by no means dilettantish. On the contrary, virtually all the authors Holifield cites had formal or autodidactic knowledge of the history of religion, and all of them were sensitive to the tectonic shifts American religion was facing throughout the century.

Accordingly, my goal here is to extrapolate the productive interaction Melville's writing has with the Bible, particularly with the Old Testament (OT). I lean on the significant yet frequently undervalued scholarly work that asserts Melville's intimate knowledge of the Biblical texts, its language and form, as well as prominent nineteenth-century theological debates. Recent studies concerned with the history of literary genre, such as Dawn Coleman's *Preaching and the Rise of the Novel* (2013), have demonstrated the symbiotic and sometimes parasitic relationship fiction and religious oratory in their published forms.¹ In disagreeing with Buell and others who share his point of view, I am not disavowing the subversive, skeptical moments in Melville's prose and poetry. Rather I am interested in the way the critical positions presented in his fiction and poetry link up to the skepticism already present in the Bible's core moral writings. Hence, I assume a symbiotic and constructive relationship between Melville's texts and Scripture in order to assess the way in which Melville conceives of the Bible as a cultural document in his writing. Despite my criticism of Buell, his paradigm contributes to the discourse I am exploring by stating unequivocally the paramount significance of literature's interaction with theology in the period we call the American Renaissance.

¹ For instance, Coleman argues that the novel actually borrowed from homiletics to overcome the stern religious prejudice against, and sometimes censorship of, the emergent novel form (4).

Herman Melville's engagement with the Bible was based on the assumption that Scripture was a text first, before it ever imparted mystical knowledge. He annotated both Testaments and treated them not as verbal icons but as source texts to be read, contemplated, interrogated, and responded to through the medium of literary fiction. In his analysis of Melville's notes on the OT, Mark Heidman demonstrates the sophistication and quasi-scholarly quality of Melville research and thinking on the Biblical text. For instance, Heidman detects Melville's familiarity with higher critical techniques and historical analysis in his marginalia on Jeremiah 25 and Job 19; Melville comments on Job's change of tone after having encountered God and glosses on the historical context and the authorship of the Wisdom of Solomon (348). Melville makes his most extensive annotations on what is called the wisdom literature of the OT.²

When commenting on Melville's marginalia to the New Testament (NT), Brian Yothers observes that,

Ultimately, Melville's marking of these [NT] passages seems to point not to a definitive choice of one of these theological and philosophical options, but rather to Melville's ability to manipulate contradictory understandings of Christianity as part of the spiritual 'cunning alphabet' that he uses in crafting his fiction and poetry. ("One's Own" 59)

While this statement illustrates a general tendency in scholarship to assert a priori a stance of detachment, characterized by ambiguity and subversive humor, Yothers's assessment is useful

² Next to the title of the Book of Job, Melville wrote, "About a century before Christ this book was writ by some Alexandrian Jews, who combined Platonism with their Judaism." And at the end of the book, keyed to 19:22, he wrote, "This admirable book seems partly mosaic and partly platonic in its tone. Who wrote it? I know not. Some one to whom both Plato and Moses stood for godfather"" (Heidman 348). Heidman also notes that Melville's well documented use of John Kitto's *Cyclopedia* shows the seriousness of his engagement. Kitto, he adds, exposed Melville to "much of the best German and British scholarship of its time without requiring doctrinal uniformity among its essays" (349). However, despite Melville's critical comments in his Journals, Heidman believes that "we must be very careful not to overstate Melville's displeasure with higher criticism, for he himself adopted many of its perspectives" (349).

for characterizing Melville's dealings with the Bible. Melville reads the Bible as a primer to craft a spiritual alphabet of his own.

In my own argument, I want to go beyond merely asserting Melville's ambivalence concerning matters of religion and theology. My objective is first to identify the means by which Melville borrows from Biblical language, style, and themes. Second, to consider in each of the following chapters is the ways in which Melville's texts modify and talk back to the Biblical proof-text in the context of nineteenth-century theological debates. In sounding Melville's Biblical hermeneutics, I read him as a commentator who is sensitive to the legacy of the Calvinist hermeneutical tradition but also to the decentralized skepticism that significantly influenced religious discourse from the Revolutionary Era to the Early Republic. As such, I will consider Melville's hermeneutics in the context of eighteenth-century philosophy of religion as it gives way to the American denominational age in the 1850s.

Furthermore, my argument is deliberately not situated in an understanding of history as the record of political and military events but rather as the shifting religious sensibilities of nineteenth-century Americans. Melville's texts reflect on the implications of these phenomena and in doing so cover a wide spectrum of intellectual responses that range from the polemic to the philosophical. My analysis builds on the quantitative work done by Nathalia Wright in *Melville's Use of the Bible* (1949), yet I add to her data both a historicizing and philological analytical component. Moreover, to talk sensibly about Melville's dealings with scripture, it is crucial to review his work across the various literary genres he seeks out. On the flip side, the Bible presents arguably one of the most complex textual amalgamations in Western (and Eastern) thought, and bringing to bear the full bulk of its textual history would threaten to crush Melville's work and with it my primarily literary agenda. Hence, I have limited my analysis to

Melville's textual exchanges with the Bible under the auspices of morality. Ethics is the primary topic of one of the most heavily marked sections in Melville's Bible, the so-called wisdom books of the OT. The books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, with Solomon, their ostensible author, reflect critically on the human condition. Formally, these texts are part of a group of texts that in the Hebrew Bible are called the Ketuvim or Writings. The writings encompass a variety of textual genres—including, poetry, aphorisms, riddles, parables, narrative—and contain complex meditations on morality, community, and intellectual integrity. Wisdom literature is pragmatic in that it deals with moral behavior in the world. The wisdom books do not present special prophetic revelation about the future history of salvation. They contemplate life in the world (Gable & Wheeler 116). Neither do they deal in revealed, prophetic knowledge but in moral generalizations (Eaton 102). And yet, their explicitly literary form makes them particularly receptive to intertextual borrowings and interlocution.³

Melville's thinking, as evinced by his writing, is eclectic and erudite in terms of its literary borrowings, yet it achieves a pithy, humorous earthiness through its grounding in practical experience. Biblical wisdom operates under a similarly pragmatic epistemology, which may explain Melville's well-documented fondness of this group of Biblical texts. OT wisdom literature, I suggest, does not merely provide a fanciful depot of stock imagery and moral aphorisms for Melville's fiction and poetry, but constitutes a distinct mode of thinking. Its themes, language, meta-referentiality, textual history, and literary style set up a nexus of ideas, a spiritual alphabet that provides Melville with a rich, pre-established metalanguage to bestow complexity and plasticity to his own literary imagery. His discussions of moral and social issues

³ I will not attempt a full consideration of the interrelated issues of doctrine and translation of the Bible here. For my purposes, I will reference the King James version of the Bible and include asides about the Bible's textual history where appropriate. On the issues of translation and canonization, see Gabel and Wheeler 123. For a summary of the OT anthological character and the genres it contains, see Coogan 5.

are steeped in what is called the Solomonic, or sapiential, tradition. Melville talks back to and reflects on that wisdom tradition. In so doing, he comes to reckon with the Bible's eighteenth-century transformation from authoritative historical record to cultural document. Melville does not rewrite the Bible but crafts an original literary exegesis.⁴

As such, Melville's literary work may be able to tell us something about the germination of religious philosophy in nineteenth-century America. The Bible does not merely supply a doctrinal foil to an inert diffuse skepticism in Melville's thinking. Rather, it provides him with a vocabulary with which Melville negotiates the moral conundrums of his time. His literary dealings with the Bible, and the Old Testament in particular, are not exclusively personal oscillations between faith and skepticism but constitute a heuristic process of examining Biblical authority, as source of morality, as historical record, and as cultural touchstone for myths. Most importantly, I propose that Melville actually salvages parts of that authority by reconstituting the Bible's literary value as a cultural document, a repository of stock images and narratives, in opposition to the emergent discourses of science, social reform, and contingency.

Considering the working knowledge of Biblical imagery in the nineteenth-century American reading public, I argue that Biblical references are not decorative allusions but textually constitutive gestures, like letters in an alphabet, that create a vibrant textual space between the Bible and Melville's texts. The way these two textual bodies connect—for the Bible is not a unified text but an anthology—can only be described as complex: Melville simultaneously defies naive religious sentiment based on ignorance and oppressive doctrine. At the same time, his texts lament the waning of free inquiry and intellectual earnestness, both

⁴ As Alter points out, wisdom literature is “as close as the ancient Near East came to Greek philosophy, which was nearly contemporaneous with the latest Wisdom texts of the Hebrew Bible [. . .] Near Eastern Wisdom is pragmatic and even explicitly didactic.” Alter goes on to foreground the pragmatist aim of this group of texts: “[. . .] Job, for all its profundity, is a theological rather than a philosophical text” (*Wisdom* xvi).

qualities injected to the theological discussion through deism; Melville references—often approvingly—discussions in the theological seminaries of New England and Europe, while mourning the undeceiving properties of historical—or higher—criticism of the Bible, and the consequential loss of the spiritual comfort afforded by simplistic religious mysticism and Biblical literalism. In doing so, Melville makes transparent the manifold struggles in which discerning individuals in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century America engaged.⁵

Characterizing these dynamic interconnections between literary works and various religious and theological discourses as ‘ambivalent’ or ‘complex,’ merely indicates that Melville, in his writing, chronicles a shifting of intellectual categories that define standards of proof and authenticity. The presence of Biblical text in his works therefore exceeds mere parody, echoing, or crowd rousing. In order to map the productive quality of Melville engagement with Biblical wisdom, I propose reading Melville’s works through the lens of what D. Z. Phillips has called a hermeneutics of contemplation. It is a type of textual comprehension, Phillips notes, to be not only critical towards institutionalized religion and doctrine but is also suspicious of its own suspicion and nostalgic for the mystical quality that it deems lost in the wake of the scientific rigor of historical analysis (23). I hasten to add that I expressly am not interested in speculating about Melville’s personal religion. While my inclinations towards New Critical close reading do not lead me to completely dismiss Melville’s authorial presence in the text, there is, I believe, a distinct difference between private contemplation of faith, such as is to be found in his journals and correspondence, and a more public performance of published literary texts. It is precisely because of their public reach that these texts have to acknowledge and engage contemporary

⁵ Sean Ford similarly observes how this referentiality can be observed especially in Melville’s poetry collections: “The pieces in *John Marr* are integrated by topical and thematic recurrences and variations presented from an array of perspectives and multiplied by resonances of other authors and works. These interoperating features indeed provide a wonderful expression of Melville’s art, a key part of which is that they constitute a rhetorical project that invites reader interaction” (235).

religious and theological sensibilities and traditions. Hence, aside from some marginalia, I will only consider Melville's published works here.

The intervention that I am staging here in the field of Melville studies consequently has four goals: First, I want to reinvigorate the discussion about Melville's perspective on religion and theology as communicated in his writing because I believe their full hermeneutical complexity as texts reflecting on the moral wisdom of the OT has not been adequately explored. Candy Gunther Brown observes that romantic authors posed a particular challenge to the Bible by considering it symbolically rather than in a merely grammatical or historical sense (5). And while Brown only lists authors of the idealist persuasion, her selection, however, reifies the narrative of nineteenth-century religious literature as segregated along the lines of infidelity and piety. I want to dispute this binary by proposing that Melville posed a more complex challenge to American religion in general and the Bible in particular than either category allows. His responses to the realities of his time skillfully mediate various opposing hermeneutical strategies. Literalism is blended with an awareness of the historical, exegetical practice as well as an intricate understanding of contemporary hermeneutical challenges to that practice. And all are held up against a backdrop of strengthened rationalism in the public mind and the coeval emergence of powerful religio-commercial hybrid institutions, such as the corporation or the religious press. Examining how Melville mediates these seemingly discrete aspects of American religious life will reveal to us the ways in which his *oeuvre* makes transparent the contingencies and continuities of what it meant to be a discerning yet spiritual person in nineteenth-century America.

Secondly, I want to tease out and systematize a tendency within Melville's works to criticize Christology. This project, I will argue, is underwritten by the juxtaposition of NT and

OT theology, specifically the moral philosophy presented in OT wisdom literature. Thirdly, I oppose what I will call the narrative of resignation that has been put forth in studies on Melville since the 1940s. According to this narrative, Melville, having failed as a novelist, ceases all serious literary activity and becomes embittered, and eventually ceases creative production altogether.⁶ Besides its obvious bias towards the novel genre, this narrative is based on the assumption that Melville's poetry and short fiction have little literary merit and that poetry in general did not constitute serious literary work. Beyond that, such dismissive attitudes on the part of critics are problematic because they expose the alluring danger of scholars falling prey to academic fashion and basing their argument on popular short-hand rather than rigorous thinking.⁷ Precluding such biases necessitates a reevaluation of how the switch between genres has influenced Melville's use of Biblical language and themes.⁸ As I situate my project within existing discourses within Bible and literary studies, these four points should be kept in mind for a moment.

1.1 Methodology

I begin with what may appear a surprising statement: issues of religion and theology are not very popular objects of academic inquiry within literary studies. Outside of Early American Studies, they are, in fact, often relegated to the hermetically sealed off sub-genre of literature and

⁶ Lawrence Buell speaks of the "drift" of Melville's career. This comment as well as the assertion that Melville somehow became a victim of his own mind is typical for this strain within Melville's scholarship. The cliché that Melville's turn to poetry constitutes some kind of 'break' or creative hiatus persists in recent studies (see Spanos 3, 165). For a contrasting view of Melville's engagement with the frustrating epistemological consequences of the human condition that is not altogether biographical, see Sedgwick's *Herman Melville; The Tragedy of Mind* (1962), 18.

⁷ Scofield ends his selected review of Melville's short fiction with the observation that with "the shorter pieces often capturing the essence of the vision in a finished and concentrated form"; Melville's short fiction displayed the craftsmanship and stylistic control many critics have found lacking in his longer works (52).

⁸ For studies on the significance of poetry, specifically that written and collected by women, as widely circulating cultural objects with political implications, see Paula Bennet's *Poets in the Public Sphere* (2003), 10. In Melville's case, Hershel Parker's *Melville, the Making of a Poet* (2007) and Sanford Marovitz's collection *Melville as Poet* (2013) attests to the fact that scholarship has begun revising this trend. John Seeyle's *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* (1970) and William Shurr's *The Mystery of Iniquity* (1972), with its focus on Melville's poetry, are two early examples of studies that examine Melville's poetry to question his alleged waning creative powers.

theology or literature and religion. In their introduction to a recent special issue of *American Literary History* on religion in American studies, Jonathan Ebel and Justine S. Murison have made the case that literary studies have taken a reductive view on issues of religion and theology as merely another ideology (3). With the exception of Early American Studies, the field had felt the need to exorcise the study of religion from pertinent discussions of modernity, thereby foregoing the challenge of assessing the ongoing concern of literary works with meaning-making through religiosity (Ebel and Murison 5). In the same context, Michael W. Kaufman identifies academic bias in what he calls the “narrative of secularization,” i.e., the idea that Western civilization becomes increasingly secular over time (“Theology” 255). Kaufman subsequently marshals an argument for the affiliation of aesthetic and theological objects as cognitive modes: “By claiming that the formal properties of literature have their own unique cognitive value, and by arguing further that this cognitive value may effect ethical transformation, the new proponents of the aesthetic suggest that we view literature as a means to a means: a way of learning about ways of learning” (247).

Both claims must be seen in the context of a wider search for viable alternatives to the hermeneutics of suspicion within literary studies. Frances Ferguson has recently argued for a re-strengthening and recasting of philology as a practice that makes texts visible as the composite work of multiple authors and cultural entanglements through the unifying impulses of speculation and the search for historical facts in texts’ backgrounds (329). Ferguson reacts against what she describes as a tendency in modern criticism, under the aegis of the hermeneutics of suspicion, to treat literature “like a kind of fossil that needed both acknowledgment of its silence and interpretation of it” (325).

The platform on which these arguments are mounted is, of course, a much older challenge laid down by Paul de Man, among others, who called upon literary theory to reconcile the opposing traditions of linguistic and aesthetic criticism within literary studies (“Return” 25). While I do concur with this impulse of productive reconciliation, I am not subscribing to de Man’s argument from linguistic system, which he voices in “The Resistance to Theory.” According to de Man, wherever the “autonomous potential of language can be revealed by analysis, we are dealing with literariness and, in fact, with literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available” (“Resistance” 10). I am interested in this idea only insofar as it coincides with the content of the literature under review. De Man’s charge against aesthetic readings as ignorant of their own linguistic and ideological basis is well taken. Nevertheless, I will strive to counteract this tendency by considering the possible aesthetic effects of the linguistic entities I review in the historical context of possible theological meanings to which I will devote an initial historiographical chapter.

For the field of theology within literary studies, I find two of the aforementioned responses particularly useful in theorizing my approach to Melville’s dealing with the subject. One is D.Z. Phillips’s *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (2003), which tries to conceptualize a via media between the oppositional hermeneutics of recollection and suspicion in order to analyze religious experiences. Phillips refers to recollection as a kind of appreciative and potentially apologetic reading, while suspicion tends to dismiss religious experience a priori as “necessarily illusory” (orig. emphasis, 14). William Wainwright, in *Reason and the Heart* (1995), laments the false opposition of reason and sentiment in scholarly discourses about religion. Wainwright argues from John Locke’s model of rational assent to criticize the, “current tendency

to downplay the importance of evidence in the formation and retention of religious beliefs” (3). Wainwright’s hermeneutics of passionate assent approximates Phillips’s concept of a hermeneutics of contemplation. Both are useful for literary studies because they chart the effects of religion from the outside within a deliberate analytical framework. Still, Melville at no point establishes a theory of Biblical hermeneutics. It is rather the continuous nature of his engagement with Biblical text that necessitates a more serious theorization of his methodology as it appears in his writing. Displacing the continuous quality of Melville’s engagement to psychological problems, as authorial readers have done, defers the question after the shape and size of Melville’s engagement with the Bible to conceptual issues that lie outside the compass of his works. Phillips’s concern with “perspicuous representations” of religion interests me because it reacts against precisely this kind of evasive rhetorical maneuvering that ultimately gets in the way of a diachronic analysis of Melville’s representation of religion and theology (16).

In response to Buell’s aforementioned antagonism paradigm, the second major conceptual source I will draw upon is Paul Ricoeur’s series of essays on Biblical interpretation (collected 1980). Like Phillips, Ricoeur points out that the mark of modernity is its realization of the hermeneutical distance from the ancient texts (35). He underscores the pragmatic dimension in any interpretation of religious text by arguing that, “Hermeneutics is the very deciphering of life in the mirror of the text” (34). Christian hermeneutics, therefore, traditionally stands under the influence of NT announcement (kerygma). Hermeneutics, according to Ricoeur, is “the circle constituted by the object that regulates faith and the method that regulates understanding” (37). Because the Biblical text itself is a demythologizing of older myths that it sublates, it is also part of that circle (40). Ricoeur still remains orthodox in his approach to the text in that he advocates the significance of the final text. He distinguishes between two thresholds of understanding when

encountering texts: that of meaning, which resides with the author and is transported by the text, and that of signification, which is the moment when “the meaning is actualized in existence” (43). The task of any theory of interpretation, Ricoeur argues, is to “combine in a single process two moments of comprehension” while recognizing the objective nature of the text as the bearer of meaning (44). Both Phillips and Ricoeur provide critical theories that are text-centered, rather than contextual. And even if my own analysis of Melville’s writing will not subside without references to context, my analysis of his unpacking of Biblical text will operate on the hermeneutics outlined by both thinkers.

As I mentioned earlier, my own approach will be philological in the sense that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht defines as facilitating contextual “information to help bridge the gap between the knowledge a text presupposes among its historical readers and the knowledge typical for readers of a later age” (4). Gumbrecht is critical towards scholars’ desire to create such presence as he finds it often leads to them instrumentalizing the objects of their analyses to satisfy that desire. Such analytical bias may be unavoidable in the work I am trying to do here. I acknowledge, for instance, the fact that, apart from the archive of editorial responses and reviews, the socio-economic and educational background of Melville’s readership has not been ascertained. Hence any story we may tell about his success or failure as an author depends largely on the publisher’s economic parameters; i.e., the absolute number sold over a period of time. What is left out of these accounts is the profound way Melville must have spoken to a select—and, as I show in my historical background chapter, perhaps not so small—circle of readers that had as diverse an education as he did and thus were able to move vertically through the intellectual strata of nineteenth-century life in America.⁹ Such readers of an imagined

⁹ Dillingham argues that Melville, in terms of his philosophical development, formed an imaginary circle, an intellectual community or club of the mind that was scattered over several continents and decades (*Circle* 12).

community would take note, for example, of Michael Faraday's papers on bioluminescence of Pacific sea algae yet, at the same time, be familiar with sailor's yarn about mermaids causing the phenomenon (*M* 123).

In this book, then, I try to take seriously the presence of the Biblical text in Melville's works by considering it not a mere foil for his emotional states, but a site of knowledge that gives Melville access to a historical backlog of skeptical engagements with the moral tenets of Christianity. This engagement requires Melville to comment on and moderate biblical wisdom as he commandeers it for his own narrative and lyrical ends, but also prompts him to historicize the religious sensibilities of his time in the context of the theological discussions of the eighteenth century. It is this method, I wish to show, that bestows an exegetical quality to Melville's writing. Given the premium I place on the operations performed by text, my own approach is philological in that I focus on the historical context Melville's texts engage, and it will be historiographical insofar as I will sketch relevant religious and theological debates that inform Melville's writing in order to illustrate in what way he reacts to these conflicts.

1.2 Literature Review

My project is situated at the intersection of religion and literature. This rather broad categorical umbrella is subdivided into three tiers of research: research concerned with the interplay of theology and aesthetics, literary studies on Melville and the American Renaissance, and histories of theology and religious practice in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. I draw upon these sources in order to recontextualize Melville's writing within a vibrant and important, yet ultimately short-lived tradition of American religious skepticism. Most of the studies referenced here are historical, some are philosophical, and many are literary in their approach. Because intersectional work always runs the risk of appearing unfocused, I reiterate

that my own approach is literary. I am interested in the way Melville mediates various intellectual and exegetical traditions. In the following paragraphs, I will introduce some of the key sources that populate the categories I have just now set up.

1.2.1 Theology and Literature

Individual efforts to heed the call articulated by Ebel, Murison, and Kaufmann over the past decade have been multifarious, yet religion has not seen a great renaissance in literary studies outside its existence as a sequestered field. One reason may be that the subject tends to inspire personal reflections and appreciations rather than literary criticism.¹⁰ Since part of my argument will be that Melville develops a mode of theological contemplation in his writing, my first interest is in theorizing the relationship between literary and theological modes of thinking. Studies operating at this intersection are usually authored by scholars trained in theological and archival research. Stephen Prickett, the editor of the Oxford edition of the King James Bible, has written several books on the historical indebtedness of European (particularly Anglo-Saxon and German) romantic literature to the Biblical text. Prickett's *Romanticism and Religion* (1976) forms an important basis for my own argument because it contradicts the simplistic binary opposition of theology and literature in both theological and literary criticism on the grounds that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers, particularly his two main characters, Wordsworth and Coleridge, did not define their work along those lines. Prickett notes that "The influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge on their successors is neither simply theological, nor simply

¹⁰ An example is Harold Bloom's *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (2005), a review of literary works Bloom deems inspired by Old Testament wisdom literature. To be fair, Bloom notes right off the bat that his intentions behind writing the book are motivated by a need for personal philosophical reflection rather than academic rigor. The book is a witty romp through literary history that traces somewhat loosely literary adaptations of Biblical wisdom literature. In contrast, Bloom's thematically broader *The Shadow of a Great Rock* (2012) attempts a critical reading of the Bible as literature and is sensitive to most of the phobias and paranoias Western scholars face when dealing with this task (5). Studies of the former category often err on the side of literary analysis, which is where I will stake my claim in this study.

aesthetic, but in their sense of the word ‘poetic’—in other words, an indivisible union of the two” (*Romanticism* 6). Prickett usefully exposes the purely literary or purely theological view academics have taken on literary romanticism by sketching a minority tradition of authors following in Wordsworth and Coleridge’s footsteps. Their idea of “poetic ‘creativity,’” Prickett argues, “[. . .] was in fact a re-discovery and a re-application of a much older Judeo-Christian way of thinking about religious experience” (*Romanticism* 7). Specifically, he shows how literary language vociferates the ambiguity of human experience, a process which Prickett defines as the “continuing co-existence and conflict of the natural and secular ‘outer’ world with the ‘inner’ world of religious experience, sacred and felt as supernatural” (*Romanticism* 7). In *Words and the Word* (1988) Prickett expounds upon the idea that language, and Biblical language in particular, is a heuristic process rather than a rigid methodology. “[L]anguage,” he notes, “is not seen as something that can be created *ab initio*, or even defined *a priori* or as an essentialist methodology; it constitutes rather a collective and cultural context within which human beings *come to consciousness and self-discovery*” (emphasis added, *Words* 34). By proposing the existence of a hermeneutical tradition of poetic theological contemplation, Prickett, it seems to me, provides precisely the kind of methodology recent proponents of the resurgent debate about the interplay of theology and aesthetics demand.

Another prominent name in the research about the connection between literary studies and Biblical hermeneutics is Robert Alter, who has produced a compendious work on the Hebrew Bible and its translations, as well as some well-read analyses of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Alter’s expertise as a scholar of Hebrew is what he calls literary style; i.e., its formal linguistic features and their interplay. His companion pieces *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981) and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985) continue to be standard texts for all who are interested in the

aesthetic and historical contextual analysis of the Bible. Alter systemizes Biblical language (tone, puns, translation) as well as thematics. More recently, he has produced his own annotated translations of OT wisdom in *The Wisdom Books* (2011), upon which I rely for a critical evaluation of each book's role within this sub-category of Christian and Hebrew text. Alter has also incrementally ventured into literary studies, most recently delivering a passionate plea for a refocusing on what he calls style in American literary studies: *Pen of Iron* (2010) represents one conceivable reaction to the aforementioned ongoing controversy about how to invent alternative modes to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Alter replies, in a tepid if somewhat antiquated argument, that

What has happened too often, however, in American literary studies is that the focus on ideological considerations has tended to reduce the literary work to its *inferable propositional content*, the analysis, bent on 'unmasking' the text, looking past the articulations of style that are compellingly interesting in their own right and that might in fact complicate the understanding of the propositional content. (emphasis added, 22)

Across these studies, Alter—while not deploying the parlance of high literary theory—has made the compelling case that language, as aesthetic effect, cannot be dismissed from human communication. The Bible makes a strong case that whatever is to be worked out about human reality must ultimately occur in language. Melville therefore is part of a larger, literary project that seeks not merely to diagnose the fundamental failure and futility of human reason and perception in humanity's linguistic production, but rather conceives of failure and deadlock in communication within language as part of a system of perpetual learning. Language is not an inescapable trap but an unwieldy medium of heuristic character, the mastery of which requires patience, intelligence, and courage. Negotiation and exploration are practical realities of engaging this medium.

1.2.2 *Classic Melville Studies*

Literary research that links Melville's writing with theology is rich and varied. William Braswell's *Melville's Religious Thought* (1943) was one of the first monographs to tackle the issue of religion in Melville's writing. Proposing to extract that eponymous religious thought without overtly referencing context, Braswell, however, cannot avoid such speculative contextualizing in his analysis (9). Citing Friedrich Schlegel and Arthur Schopenhauer as major influences, he foregrounds the influence Melville's extensive reading during the 1840s may have had on his thinking (54). Braswell in many respects creates a template on how to discuss religion and theology within Melville studies in that he attempts to reconcile the differentiated and sometimes contradictory statements from the novels with Melville's upbringing, reading, as well as a biographical narrative of early promise and ultimate professional failure. Braswell conscientiously points out that there are simply not enough records to chronicle and identify Melville's reading—a sentiment that would later be echoed by Merton Sealts Jr., following years of archival work—much less enough material to even venture informed guesses as to which of these readings impacted his authorial thinking (10). The obvious danger of this approach lies in reducing Melville's thought to the sum of items on a more or less complete reading list—a hazard that scores of researchers blatantly ignored (10). When discussing the narrative tone of *White-Jacket*, for instance, Braswell acknowledges a “subtle problem” the authorial reader faces when attempting to draw conclusions about Melville's personal attitudes based on any one of his characters:

If at this time Melville believed in Christ as his redeemer, as various passages might be interpreted to show, he had much stronger conviction of doctrinal truth of Christianity than he gave evidence of in *Mardi* [. . .]. If as an unbeliever he used evangelical terms only to gain the favor of his orthodox public, he was not so honorable a man as all the biographical evidence testifies he was.

The truth of the matter, however, appears to be that in *White-Jacket* Melville frankly assumed the role of the Christian reformer; for, with all its artistic excellence, the book is somewhat propagandist. By the adaption of Christian phraseology, he made his appeal immensely more effective. Though he did not accept the teachings of Christianity in their literalness, he was a sincere believer in the truth and the virtue of Christian ideals. (50, 51)

I cite this argument at length because it illustrates some of the issues I seek to address here. For one thing, forming moral judgments about Melville as a person based on his writing is not useful because it does not enable assertions about the effectiveness of the writing. A positive outlook on Christian ideals and moral principles as opposed to doctrine, however, is something that is corroborated by the content of most of his work.

What makes Braswell relevant for my purpose is his early acknowledgement that the Bible plays a key role in the way Melville articulates his thoughts. He is also one of the first to point out Melville's research into different versions of the Bible as well as exegetical works (11). Nathalia Wright's seminal *Melville's Use of the Bible* (1949) marks the first quantitative study of Melville's Biblical references. Wright finds out that two-thirds of Melville's direct references are to the Old Testament, and of that, an overwhelming part to the Biblical wisdom books (10). Of course, Wright cannot account for all implicit references and allusions, nor does she consider the short stories and poetry as much as the novels. Wright corroborates Braswell's verdict that Melville read specifically and widely in exegetical studies (14). However, her final verdict is ambivalent in the sense that she does not credit Melville with great seriousness in these scholastic efforts, ironically because he often seemed to sacrifice accuracy for stylistic effect:

The truth is, of course, that Melville's use of Biblical aids, of whatever school, was neither sustained nor systemic. He did have an interest in texts and translations, evidenced both seriously and humorously in his books and marginalia, but it was not altogether an intrinsic interest. He did not fill his pages with citations to chapters and verses, or rest on the authority of words. He even chose an early rather than a late reading if artistry dictated: the leviathan of Job he referred to constantly as a whale, despite its having been considered a crocodile

for two hundred years. [. . .] For the Bible was literature to Melville as well as scripture. (13-14)

While acknowledging that wisdom literature has been a touchstone for all quality arguments about the presence of religion in Melville's oeuvre, Wright insists that Melville's engagement with that particular Biblical tradition, like all his religious borrowings, were unfocused and at times clumsy and amateurish, arguing in effect that Melville reads wisdom books as inapplicable to practical life (111). This verdict, I believe, is misplaced because it ignores the exegetical nature of many of his moderations between the Bible, folklore, and science that appear through all phases of his writing career, notably in *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Clarel*. Wright considers Melville a writer of realist satires who at times simply misrepresents OT wisdom literature by leaving out its "lyrical consolation" (111). I will argue in the following that Melville's writing does in fact carry precisely that quality and a minutely attuned consideration for Biblical language.¹¹

Wright ultimately admits in a byline that Melville's thinking always circled back to the program of wisdom cosmology, not least because of its acknowledgment of both contingency and exigency:

The invisible sphere is absolute, as the themes of the Old Testament prophecy and of the New Testament ethics and theology insist. But the vast scene which meets the eye, as the Hebrew sages also knew, is ambiguous, equivocal, disguised, relative, masked, multiple. [. . .] Time, as Melville and as the author of Ecclesiastes saw it, was the great exigency, bending both good and evil, both idea and reality.¹² (*Use* 135)

¹¹ The fact that White Jacket critiques Christian praxis for celebrating Jesus's example while lacking in "the practical wisdom of earth" contradicts Wright's point here, and corroborate a point I will content later, namely that Melville subjected NT theology to a rigorous evaluation based on the practical moral standards of OT wisdom literature (*WJ* 324). See also Holstein, "Melville's Ironic" 15.

¹² While Wright acknowledges Melville's inclination to view the mystical in terms of the historical, the conclusion she draws is again geared towards integrating him into a twentieth-century literary canon concerned with late Romanticism insofar as it presages the arrival of literary modernism and postmodernism: "[t]he figure [i.e., the instances in which Melville's characters happen upon the incompatibility of ideal and praxis], essentially the Preacher's [the persona speaking in Ecclesiastes] conception of moral times and season, approaches the next century's vision of the dynamic fourth dimension" (*Use* 136).

In *Melville's Quarrel with God* (1952), Lawrence Thompson contests that Melville is “being driven to utter [. . .] dark truths through crafty insinuations” and what he calls hoodwinking (137). Thompson’s is one of the first studies to engage the shape of skepticism in Melville’s work, even if he seems overzealous in characterizing Melville as a bitter religious pessimist. Like many critics would do after, Thompson’s authorial approach limits the usefulness of his project, confining it to speculation about Melville using writing to work through personal crisis. While nominally the focus of such studies, the texts in question often get reduced to forensic data, which is to be decoded to get at the author’s psychological state. Contrary to the way Thompson phrases it, Melville’s “pushing words around,” I propose, must be considered not as a strategy of personal revenge against God but as a productive means of theological exploration through text (423).

In this productive vein, Merlin Bowen’s *The Long Encounter* (1960) argues that Melville fashions a mode of inquiry Bowen terms “armed neutrality,” an attitude of “resistance without defiance and acceptance without surrender of an indifference that is not apathy and an affirmation free of all illusion” (235). Bowen’s verdict has merit; also because it is one of the few early studies that take into account Melville’s poetry and short fiction. It is uniquely suited to describe the epistemological modus operandi behind the machinations of the confidence man in Melville’s last novel. However, his dialectical description seems not very serviceable and it has little to say about the essential part Biblical language and thematics play in crafting this epistemology.

H. Bruce Franklin, in his still frequently cited *The Wake of the Gods* (1966), reads Melville as a cultural-anthropological theorist by arguing that he “uses the language, the theories, the knowledge, and the techniques of both the Christian and the skeptical mythologists to explore

the relations between man and his gods,” conducting simultaneously “the first great modern psychological analysis of mythology and the last major Christian defense against psychological theories of mythology” (8). Franklin’s readings, especially on “Bartleby,” have become authoritative, and his utilitarian view on Melville’s body of work as an analytical project is similar to my own argument. However, his objective focus is much broader than the type of referentiality I want to consider. Another problem is his occasional terminological vagueness; for instance, he equivocates myth, dogma, and rite and does not distinguish between comparative religion and comparative mythology (ix).

More specifically grounded in Christian typology is Ursula Brumm’s magisterial *American Thought and Religious Typology* (1970), which operates under the assumption that German literary and philosophical influences exerted a “creatively stimulating influence at the very birth of American literature,” yet were predicated on a deeply ingrained Puritan textual hermeneutics (5). She sees Melville as “a rebellious prisoner of his taste,” who casts the dispute between free will and fatedness in the format of the romance. Brumm’s contribution to Melville studies is her assessment of Melville’s reconceptualizing of Protestant typology for his own literary work. She casts Melville’s uses of typology in the mold of rather traditional notions of American literary romanticism as assertions of the special power of the individual. Brumm argues that Melville conceives of characters as model templates. However, she realizes that,

[. . .] the models themselves may well be enigmatic at their very core, and here Melville’s insight is romantic and modern. [. . .] That interpretation states that the individual is something unique and incomparable, something made inimitable by particular talents and the special constellation of his historical situation. Melville regards ‘phenomenal men’ [. . .] as new fulfillments of prefigurations and types, not in mere imitation but in various transformations and combinations. (167)

In a similar vein, T. Walter Herbert's *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* (1977) makes a case for Melville's drawing on the Bible not just as a stylistic but also as a conceptual source by arguing that "the presumption that moral standards had to be grounded in divine principles was innate to Melville's thought" (175). Herbert argues that Melville works through the perplexities of cultural heritage of Calvinist religious traditions but also the possibility of "final unmeaning" (4); yet Melville's "exceptional tolerance for ambiguity" is ultimately seen as a personal quality rather than an aesthetic accomplishment (172). Along the same argumentative lines that Prickett sets up for Wordsworth, Herbert contests usefully that Melville achieves in *Moby-Dick* a "heightened sense of reality" in that his literary invention makes accessible the religious sensibilities towards Biblical text (174). Herbert unfortunately uses this insight to circle back to the argument from biography and argue the personal tragedy of Melville's mental instability as evinced by the supposed madness of *Moby-Dick*.

1.2.3 Contemporary Studies

With the advent of the New American Studies, Lawrence Buell's aforementioned concept of literary scripturism became the new paradigm for studies dealing with literary depictions of all forms of religion and arguably jump-started the secularization narrative. Years before Buell, David Reynolds had drafted an alternative model of varying levels of literary engagement with the Bible and religion in *Faith in Fiction* (1983). Reynolds teases out the animosity between traditionally restrictive Puritan standards of taste, but he also unearths the productive engagements with Scripture that cleverly subverted religious orthodoxy and doctrinism to salvage the moral utility of religion (*Faith* 4). Unfortunately, Reynolds does not count Melville amongst the authors in this category. On the flip side, chroniclers of American literary history often dismissed Melville's poetic exploits on formal grounds. For instance, Hyatt Waggoner

considers Melville an inferior poet but relegates him to the category of religious poets, such as Taylor, and compares his best poetry with Puritan anagrams (*American Poets* 233).

Stan Goldman's *Melville's Protest Theism* (1993) and Christopher Sten's *The Weaver-God; He Weaves* (1996) attest to the continued interest in Melville's religious thinking, yet combine that topic with critical investigations of Melville's compositional method. Goldman reads *Clarel* as the work in which Melville offers a "Biblical way to God" via an epistemological stance Goldman terms protest theism (4):

Protest theism explains what kind of biblical protester (Protestant) Melville was and represents an attempt at finding or establishing the limits within which faith is possible and life endures and has meaning. The theological reflection represented in *Clarel* is not atheistic, nihilistic, nor agnostic, but a biblically rooted, nonsectarian, non-dogmatic faith that empowers human beings to protest and to lament human fate but nevertheless to give the human heart in love to God. [. . .] Although the theology offered in the poem [*Clarel*] is enhanced by and unfolded within the context of the Bible, it is not a normative biblical faith, but a distinctive theological reflection. (4)

Goldman fails to contextualize why such a position may not have boded well with the contemporary reading public. This may be because it could not be defined positively in any of the major popular sources of theology for most Americans; i.e. the congregation or the pulpit. Still, his analysis is text-based and lucid. Goldman is also the first to systematically characterize Melville's overall theological project by recognizing how the Bible becomes a way of unlocking Melville's writing aesthetically as well as thematically. While I do not fully accept his final verdict on Melville's supposed theism, I am extending Goldman's succinct OT-based approach to Melville's whole oeuvre. In the same decade, William Dillingham continues Thompson's work and reconstructs Melville's European Romantic intellectual influences during his last years with *Melville and His Circle* (1996). Generally, Dillingham provides what I consider the best close reading of Melville's texts, and I will rely on him throughout my analysis.

Hawthorne expert Michael Colacurcio sets a critical impulse in his article “Excessive and Organic III” (2002) by calling for a fundamental reexamination of Melville’s alleged skepticism and by demanding that more attention be paid to the underlying idealist potential in his writings (22). A number of scholars have responded to Colacurcio’s call. Many built their arguments on both Nathalia Wright’s work as well as to Jenny Franchot’s superb essay “Melville’s Traveling God” (1998), the first in-depth investigation of Melville’s oscillating cosmology. Ilana Pardes discusses Melville’s use of OT motives and themes in several essays as well as in her monograph *Melville’s Bibles* (2008). Pardes suggests along the lines of Buell’s argument about literary scripturism that Melville not only performs original exegesis in *Moby-Dick* but attempts to create a new American Bible. While Pardes’s analysis of the Joban DNA in *Moby-Dick* is compelling, her thesis is problematic insofar as it postulates a radically dismissive attitude towards the Biblical text that I do not find supported by the literature. In *Faith in Fiction* (1983), Reynolds had observed that much of early nineteenth-century anti-Calvinist and liberal fiction—such as Lyman Beecher and Susanna Rowson’s—presented as “a prolonged effort at improving the Bible—improving it by mixing sacred and profane” elements, yet Reynolds does not include Melville in his observations (130). In a recent essay, Zachary Hutchins argues more productively concerning *Moby-Dick* that

Modern readers break up the Bible into Old and New Testaments, but each section contains multiple genres. The Old Testament is composed of the Torah, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*—the law, the prophets, and the writings—and the New Testament includes the gospels, the acts, and epistles of the apostles. At different points in the narrative of *Moby-Dick*, Melville adopts the conventions associated with each of these biblical divisions, bringing to life the literary modes of the Old and New Testaments. (26)

Hutchins’s approach is the only study to my knowledge that takes seriously Melville’s engagement with OT theology; however, as with most studies, Hutchins limits his scope to

Moby-Dick. The idea of reading Melville in the tradition of wisdom writers is also advanced by Hilton Obenzinger who considers Melville “a wisdom writer, in the tradition of Solomon’s *Ecclesiastes* [. . .] Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*, Chuang Tzu’s *Writings*, and other classical wisdom texts” (181). Pardes, Obenzinger, and Hutchins all assemble part of the puzzle, yet none is able to produce a cohesive and in-depth analysis of Melville’s interaction with Biblical wisdom. So far, responses by literary scholars have been scarce: Robert Milder’s *Exiled Royalties* (2006) is widely considered the most fruitful analysis of Melville’s unique intellectual engagement with both philosophy and Biblical exegesis. With emphasis placed on *Pierre* and Melville’s turn to melancholy, Milder attempts a diachronic, exploratory review of Melville’s later thoughts on society and theology. However, his analysis retains the traditional method of authorial readings. Recently, Bradley Johnson has furthered David Reynolds’s observations about masquerade—which Reynolds articulated in *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1986)—in his own study *The Characteristic Theology of Herman Melville* (2011). Johnson theorizes Melville through the lens of French poststructuralism and argues that between his composition of *Typee* and *The Confidence-Man*, Melville turns to a cosmology of manipulating and producing appearances, which he positions as defensive armaments against a cynical God. Johnson’s analysis ends rather abruptly, leaving his readers wondering about the implications of his compelling thesis for Melville’s poetry. Johnson’s book thus is another example of the restrictive effect of genre segregation in Melville studies. In contrast, Maurice S. Lee’s *Uncertain Chances* (2012) comprehends the skepticism in Melville’s major novels as a response to the advent of a stochastic model of reality. According to Lee, Melville registers how public theological sensibility veers towards notions of contingency. However, Lee does not investigate how

Melville attempts to depict this phenomenon within the confines of Romantic theological language.

Another scholar who traces Melville's engagement with the Bible is Jonathan Cook, who has two studies, on *The Confidence-Man* and *Moby-Dick* respectively, in which he considers more seriously Melville's critical reflection of theological principles and exegetical context. In his latest book, *Inscrutable Malice* (2013) Cook argues somewhat broadly that "the biblical themes of theodicy and eschatology give distinctive shape and meaning to *Moby-Dick*" (6). Yet Cook frequently seems too concerned with context in his studies, delivering a mosaic of very useful information that often does not quite connect with his readings of the primary texts.

As far as Melville's poetry is concerned, the debate has become livelier in the last decade: between late 1999 and early 2000, *American Literary History* has housed a controversial debate between Elizabeth Renker und William Spengemann. Beyond that, Hershel Parker has been a proponent for integrating Melville's poetry into analyses of his works. Parker has been a vocal advocate against what he calls the creation of verbal icons in literary scholarship, which are erected at the cost of historical and archival research. He has long advocated that Melville became a poet as early as the late 1850s, and republished his notes on the subject from his two-volume biography, *Herman Melville* (Vol. I, 2005 and Vol. II, 2002), in *Melville: The Making of a Poet* (2007).

1.3 Oversights in Existing Scholarship

In what follows, I will treat the term "religion" as that which refers to the realm of personal faith, religious ritual, and moral judgment as informed by theological doctrine, whereas the term "theology" will denote the theoretical system that organized religion puts forth to rationalize its paradigms. As Holifield demonstrates in his circumspect study on American

theology, it is inaccurate to conceive of the relationship of science and religion as antithetical. As a matter of fact, what Holifield calls the evidentialist streak in theology informs much of early modern thinking. Hence, many dramatic sea-changes in American religious life that occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century are less the result of a spontaneous social revolution but rather the logical consequence of a century-long combative debate between religion and the forces of deism (Holifield, *Theology* 5).

Why is this important for my considerations? For starters, taking the historical view on significant changes such as the emergence of Evangelicalism and the concomitant rise of the religious press can help us see the religious ideas Melville puts forth in much of his writing as less a product of an alienated genius and more as the result of an astute observation and historical sensibility for theological debates. Many scholars thus look past Melville's close reading of theological debates to his biography. In addition, few have considered in detail his ambivalence toward the contentious atmosphere surrounding the adoption of higher criticism of the Bible at American theology (Holifield 3, Browne 8).

Studies that operate at the intersections of literature, history, and theology frequently feature terminological inconsistencies and confusions, which can then lead to rather sweeping generalizations. In the religious discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, terms such as 'infidel,' 'skeptic,' and 'atheist' are often used interchangeably and without regard for their historical permutations. (In chapter 1, I will show how recent scholarship has emphasized their ambivalent and political, context-sensitive usage in late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.) For the moment suffice it to say that any informed discussion of the way Melville engages the Bible requires a careful engagement of the hermeneutical positions that were in circulation at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The body of scholarship I have outlined thus far requires, I believe, that I clarify some of my initial claims. In its broadest extension, the present study wishes to develop a more differentiated approach to Melville and the conjoint topics of theology and religion. I will argue that Melville moderates Biblical exegesis in his literary works from 1849 onward and contributes to the historical debates surrounding the Old Testament (OT). First, asserting this point requires a precise articulation of Melville's literary exegetical method; i.e., a record of the way by which he holds conflicting Biblical, exegetical, scientific and literary traditions against one another in order to communicate a state of fundamental instability. Thus the first question this study asks is whether Melville's dealings with the OT can be regularized into a cohesive hermeneutic system.

Given the wide archive of textual sources and influences he consults, irregularities are bound to emerge. Merton Sealts Jr.'s *Melville's Reading* (1988) and its emendations have been useful tools in reconstructing Melville's reading habits. However, as Sealts himself points out, the record remains incomplete (ix). Furthermore, there is simply no accounting for indirect influences, ideas conveyed in conversation, and original thinking. The danger of following any forensic account of an author's reading too closely lies in the double jeopardy of either considering literary works as the sum of the external influences on their authors or as isolated artifacts that exist hermetically sealed in their own individual logic. These considerations eventually dovetail into larger queries about the significance of the literary form in which Melville engages the objects of Biblical hermeneutics. How do ideas develop over time and across the various literary genres Melville traverses throughout his literary career? Does genre change the way Melville writes about and conceives of, for example, the individual's suffering in a world in which, as per the Book of Job, God lords it over man with unassailable power? And

why does he choose the literary market place, a place of commerce, of all things, to work through these problems?

Of course, with Melville, context is something of a special issue, because he is an author who failed at writing for the market, arguably because he wrote specifically against the tastes of his critics and audience. In that respect, contextual data can only illuminate the ways in which his writing did not conform to contemporary tastes. And while I do not wish to merely propagate the special individual genius of the author—admittedly a paradox sentiment for a single-author study—I do think there is merit in tracing diachronically one author’s persistent engagement with a fixed set of questions over the course of his career. Reviewing Melville’s engagement with theology in this manner enables us to ask questions about the interplay of literary form, topic, and context. How do the attitudes expressed by the characters change over time and with the shifting religious landscape? How does literary form influence the critical discussion of theology and vice versa?

The cosmology that emerges from the *Moby-Dick* and/or *Pierre*-centered reading of Melville’s works casts the individual as questing for absolute and stable truth and continuously facing unadulterated potential and choice. However, there is evidence in Melville’s writing that such uncertainty, while potentially debilitating, can be turned to productive ends. I argue that reviewing Melville’s aesthetic treatment of Biblical exegesis enables a circumspect contemplation of this productive potential in the medium of literature. To encapsulate this dynamic in serviceable terminology, I will use the phrase “pondering repose,” taken from *Moby-Dick*’s reverential chapter “The Gilder,” cited above (*MD* 492). The term indicates precisely the state of mind resulting from the individual’s debilitating dilemma when considering the Bible. It is a contemplative mode that acknowledges the circular logic to which all human reason

inevitably leads; still, it acknowledges the consequential need for supra-human epistemologies. These, in turn, function to at least grant the possibility of an absolute purchase on reality. In arguing this, I also built on Jonathan Bryant's magisterial study *Melville and Repose* (1993). Bryant notes that, "For Melville and his contemporaries, 'repose' implied a range of mental states: a sensual indolence and sleep of reason, but also a wakeful balance of awareness and calm" (4). And while Bryant's study is focused on the rhetoric of humor, his characterization of the mode of inquiry Melville depicts in his novels is useful for my purposes. The phrase 'pondering repose,' lifted from an introspective moment in *Moby-Dick* about the circular and contingent structure of human existence, will not only serve as a metaphor for my own conception of Melville's Biblical hermeneutics but it shall also serve as a point of entry to Melville's theological aesthetics.

Melville develops his literary exegesis heuristically, through a form of pondering, as well as through the literary forms of prose and poetry. In doing so, however, he must not be read as a systematic philosopher. His prose and poetry produce a decentralizing hermeneutics, yet that hermeneutics does not so much constitute a proto-postmodernist vantage point as it does bespeak Melville's firm grounding in historical, open-ended exegetical inquiry. My argument opposes the canonizing tendencies of earlier studies that have segregated, and in some cases purged, Melville's poetry and short prose from their readings. By reconsidering Melville's *oeuvre* holistically, across genre thresholds, and in terms of its moderation of Biblical exegetical themes, we can draw new conclusions about Melville's aesthetic cosmology as well as his differentiated engagement with the American theological mind of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As I mentioned earlier, one problem that Melville studies have faced over the years is their tendency to pose self-fulfilling assumptions about Melville's psyche and creativity in

relation to his writing career. This school of thought works backwards from the assumption that Melville's creative capacity and literary quality assume the shape of a parabolic curve.

Problematically, this curve editorializes the narrative of Melville's life as thinker, writer, and family man. Studies considering his works dark and subversive have them coincide with the decline of American literary Romanticism (e.g., Matthiessen and Reynolds). Others, such as Milton Stern, see "suggestions of rationalism, empiricism, objectivity, and relativism are the fundament of Melville's [pre-literary Naturalist] naturalism. He takes his place at the head of a tradition that extends (with basic modifications) through Twain, Dreiser, Hemingway, and Faulkner, in distinction to the transcendental continuum" (9). Curiously, it seems that the duty of sounding Romanticism's dark swan song seems to override the need to present Melville's skepticism as the complex, historical, and differentiated thought process that his works (including the poetry) show it to be.

Stan Goldman eloquently states the case of early scholarship pigeonholing Melville as a negative skeptic or atheist. In his study on Melville's long poetic allegory of spiritual pilgrimage, *Clarel*, Goldman postulates,

[o]ne reason *Clarel* and other major works by Melville are often misread is that, like Pierre Bayle and Montaigne, Melville comes to an indirect, qualified faith only after wrestling with skeptical disillusionment in both the fulfillment of God's promises and the limits of human knowledge. Melville is often read as anti-God or anti-faith because the coalescence of two contraries--doubt and faith--is incompatible for some thinkers. (*Protest* 81)

This determinism even infects otherwise sound historical readings of nineteenth-century literary conventions. In doing so, however, these studies often ignore the expressly utilitarian terms in which R.W.B. Lewis classifies the attitudes of American Romantic writers in his "schools" in *The American Adam*. These considerations illustrate the systemic need for a re-reading of Melville's works. Studies dealing with fiction more overtly labeled "religious," such as

Reynolds's *Faith in Fiction*, only consider novels and authors that work under expressly theological ambitions or have received special training (ministers turned novelists). The remedy I propose complicates the hermetic image of Melville as ironic novelist by constructively integrating him as an author and exegetist into a community of thinkers, rather than enforcing the image of a misanthropic recluse on the basis of biographical readings and genre segregation. By considering Melville's use of the Bible, more specifically, I will examine the ways Melville utilizes Old Testament (OT) wisdom literature productively as a tool to interrogate the prevalent and emerging categories of truth (be they moral, epistemological, or ideological). I am particularly interested in the way Melville negotiates and responds to some of the more pressing theological controversies of his time while harnessing the epistemological strategies prescribed in OT wisdom literature; i.e. the Books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, respectively.

1.4 Structure and Rationale

The following chapters are arranged around the thematic focus points of the three wisdom books that most overtly address religious skepticism: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Far from authoritatively positivist, all three books contemplate the human condition as an experience of suffering, frustration, and ambivalence. In doing so, they deploy an abundance of literary forms which are interconnected through their content. Although I am explicitly not offering an authorial reading here, it is worth noting that Melville's annotations to the OT suggest that he recognized the wisdom books' literary character and identified them as a unique entity within the Bible's spiritual anthology. The appeal of Solomonic wisdom lies in its blending of ethical meditations and literary form. The thematic focus of the following chapters frames my investigation of how Melville reflects the content and form of these texts. His

dealings with the wisdom books impact his literary poesis. His responses to the Bible evolve over time and even influence the way he conceives of literary genres as fluent.

Building my analysis around wisdom themes rather than Melville's texts, however, does not mean that I emphasize one over the other. My interest is primarily in Melville's literary response to OT wisdom. This text-centered approach requires that I not hamstring my readings by forcing them into generic categories but rather follow Melville's formal experiments beyond the categorical lines of literary criticism. For example, one suspicion I harbored from early on in this project was that Melville's experimentation with literary form was rooted in his interaction with wisdom literature. Apothegms, riddles, prose frames and poetic dialogs constitute the formal vocabulary of OT wisdom. Melville's gradual turn from prose to poetry, I suspect, correlates with his continuous engagement with this literary and moral tradition.

Each chapter begins by explicating what I consider the themes and questions that each of the wisdom books authorizes. Subsequently, my analysis will investigate the ways in which Melville mediates the Biblical text in his writing in order to characterize his literary exegesis. Direct and indirect references, explicit and implicit allusions, thematic borrowings, typology, and stylistic and linguistic parody, and inversion form the literary vocabulary Melville brings to bear on these texts. Moreover, by historicizing Melville's literary dealings with the OT, I characterize the theological points he makes in his writing. Frequently, these assertions appear theologically archaic, nostalgic, or even melancholic. Specifically, Melville references many of the major tenets of free-inquiry discourse associated with late eighteenth century deism. And while scholarship has long documented his irreverence toward any form of authoritarian doctrinism, many of the spiritual frustrations that his fiction and poetry address seem to emerge from a place of nostalgic longing towards a Biblical text that provided a moral center for a universe that

increasingly appears to be defined by contingency and a social space dominated by market economy.

In essence, I deviate from the conventional one-book-per-chapter structure in favor of a theme-centered approach. The obvious advantage of this strategy is that it allows for a truly diachronic view of a predefined group of thematic literary elements in Melville's literary thought. Beyond that, this approach helps tease out the productive ways in which Melville navigates intertextuality and genre lines. For example, the somewhat opaque observation that Melville's "experimentation with the magazine pieces contributed formatively to the rhetorical control" of his later novels may be embellished by considering the ways in which Melville considered OT Biblical language a formal repository that could help him express fundamental truths about the human condition (Milder *Billy*, vii).

Not taking thematic consistency for granted each chapter investigates anew the overt and covert ways in which Melville connects the Bible to other intellectual phenomena. Scientific empiricism, folklore, and subversive humor influence public sensibilities toward the value of Solomonic moral axioms. Melville essentially contemplates the Bible's metamorphosis from authoritative historical record and moral standard to cultural document. While Melville is an astute observer of these trends, he is also a lonely voice in the wilderness. His characters often expresses displeasure over the irreverence, superficiality, insidious hypocrisy, and, at times, willful ignorance towards Biblical wisdom as they lament the loss of mythical relation to life that has been diminished by the erosion of Biblical authority.

Chapter 1 constructs a historiographical platform on which I will confront Melville's texts. My technique of display here is necessarily that of assemblage as I am interested in the connections between several scientific, philological, sociological, and historical discourses.

These conversations would normally be considered discrete, yet they are connected by their reciprocal relationship to theology. In a sense, I suggest that the intellectual history of the nineteenth-century is characterized by the interplay of two diametrical disciplinary tendencies: on the one hand, fields formerly considered part of natural theology become secularized and evolve into autonomous institutions. On the other hand, religious institutions try to tighten their grip on these fields by adapting their disciplinary rhetoric and utilizing their respective expertise to spread their theological message. However in doing so, religion and theology inevitably surrender intellectual turf to these other discourses and thus contribute to the erosion of Biblical authority. In assembling these discourses in sketch form, I try to map the spectrum of theological and religious sensibilities in America between 1750 and 1850. For instance, English deism's challenge to the Bible's textual authority had rattled Biblical hermeneutics since the early 1700s and even led to the formation of several free-inquiry societies in the American territories. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, the decline of Calvinism fostered denominational proliferation. This great spiritual unrest was compounded by the influx of German neology into Biblical hermeneutics. The lack of autochthonous institutions of higher learning equipped to deal with these methodological controversies created several rifts among the American intelligentsia. Yet this is not to say that religious sensibilities before 1800 were ever unified or homogenous to begin with. In fact up to the 1830s, religion and theology had been rather multifarious affairs that evinced regional differences. Still, religious affiliations and communities were not exclusively determined by geography but also existed virtually through written correspondence. Denominational proliferation and advancements in printing technology caused these communal structures to congeal. And yet the trend was not exclusively to denominational fragmentation either. Religious orthodoxy recognized the danger of atomizing communities of faith and

mounted efforts to regularize not only what people read but rather how they read. In a transnational and cross-denominational venture, printing technology prospered and helped consolidate communal membership. And by 1850, a vast distribution network had been created by several cross-denominational societies that sought to bring Bibles, pamphlets, and books to every home in the U.S. At the same time, innovations in empirical science—specifically, geology, and biology—further destabilized the Bible’s clout as the authoritative record of natural history. This turn in the valuation of empirical rhetoric proved devastating to the clergy who had long since adopted said rhetoric to formally shape religious truth to contemporary intellectual tastes. All of these developments impact literary forms and foster literary responses.

In chapter Chapter 2, I turn toward Melville’s interactions with the Book of Job, the central themes of which include the causality of suffering and the limits of human understanding of said suffering. As theological text, “Job” investigates God’s character and the moral dimension of His role as the author of creation. Equally, the Biblical book frames Job as a moral exemplar of unshakable integrity. In front of this thematic backdrop, I argue that Melville conceives several central characters in *Moby-Dick* according to a typological template of the eponymous Biblical sufferer: Ishmael, Ahab, and Pip must be read as mutually constitutive parts in Melville’s examination of Job’s attributes of patience, defiance, and victimization. Under the latter rubric, I also consider “Bartleby” as an anti-Christian text that juxtaposes the discourses of charity and empathy as being based respectively on NT and OT theology. In an argumentative feat that will recur in the subsequent chapters, Melville conceives these two discourses as diametrically opposed. Accordingly, I show that he uses OT wisdom literature to mount a critique of the corruption of NT theology by market rhetoric. The chapter concludes by

contemplating some of Melville's latter poetry as exploring what scholars identify as the Joban call to establish an equilibrium with the ontological fact of moral evil as part of the world.

Proverbs is a collection of wisdom aphorisms, and it is equally the most prolific and the hardest to trace influence on Melville's writing. Formal and semantic variety make this one of the most prolific source texts for Melville. His mediation of that source material is simultaneously more overt and virtuoso. Chapter 3 examines a selection of texts in which Melville develops these aphorisms in his fiction and poetry. *Mardi* features many explicit references to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; however, I focus on a less conspicuous scene between Taji and King Media in which they debate divine sovereignty as it pertains to the related acts of jurisprudence and punishment. Taji reads symbolically the scene of Media on his throne of judgment and in doing so subverts the Proverbial wisdom about royal jurisprudence. In a larger sense, Proverbs is an anthology of aphorisms that deal with ethical and aesthetic judgment as they are grounded in an epistemology underwritten by Biblical lore. Proverbs, then, meditates on epistemology as such. It ponders the categories of knowledge, experience, understanding, prudence, and trust, and its aphorisms reflect upon the contingency inherent in all the ways human beings make sense of the world. In the second half of the chapter, I expand this theme of epistemological uncertainty by turning it towards the Bible and its textual authority. Specifically, I will be interested in the way Melville conceives of the erosion of Biblical authority by alternative epistemological models, such as critical historicism and scientism. It is here that I will draw particularly on some of the earlier points I raised in chapter 1. The former, I find most prevalently exemplified in Melville's short fiction, particularly in "The Apple-Tree Table" and "The Lightning-Rod Man." Meanwhile, the issue of contingency as played out in interpersonal communication is most elaborately examined in *The Confidence-Man*. I read the novel's

concluding scenes as keyed towards Proverbial and Apocryphal Solomonic wisdom to propose that the novel depicts the struggle of the confidence man to overcome and eventually subvert wisdom morality.

Finally, Chapter 4 deals with Melville's use of Ecclesiastes, which is often polemicized as being the most skeptical of the wisdom books. The book's speaker, simply named the Preacher, outlines a number of aphorisms designed to help believers differentiate between moral life in the world and a life that is preoccupied with base, meaningless materialism. The Preacher ultimately advocates for moderation between the two lifestyles and proposes a *via media* between secular and spiritual life that allows believers to enjoy worldly existence without taking such joys at face value. Melville, I argue, explores the need for such moderation in his earlier educational novels, particularly in *Redburn*. Yet, in a curious twist, he also turns these OT axioms against American Protestant institutions in "The Two Temples," a short-fiction diptych that was barred from publication during his lifetime. Ecclesiastes was famously one of Melville's favorite books, arguably because it addresses explicitly the frustrations that arise from observing evil—manifested in individuals as wickedness—in the world. Based on the Preacher's open acknowledgement of this fact, Ishmael performs the most explicit exegetical reading of Biblical text when he examines the Ecclesiastical axiom 'all is vanity.' Besides *Moby-Dick*, with Ahab as his most visible tragic hero/villain, Melville performs an intriguing examination of inherent wickedness over several decades in his writing. *Redburn*'s Jackson, "The Encantadas"'s Obelus, and *Billy Budd*'s Claggart all must be grouped into a typological category of characters who are victimized by their own evil. In depicting evil thus as instrumental to some overarching—not to say providential—plot Melville conceives these character as Satans, based on the depiction of the character in the Book of Job as an agent of divine justice. In constructing these characters,

Melville combines OT definitions of wickedness with modern clinical pathology about mental and physical afflictions. I conclude with a series of epitaphs that represent Melville's echoes and parodies of wisdom aphorism. In *Battle Pieces*, for instance, the poem "The Conflict of Convictions" contemplates the Civil War as a spiritual crisis as well as a military one. The poem deploys the rhetoric of demonizing the military opponent as satanic, based on NT conceptions of the character. At the same time, it closes by affirming the ultimate human ignorance of the inner workings of providential history and bleakly paraphrases the Preacher's assertions about universal vanity as factual. Meanwhile the Story of China Aster, embedded within the pages of *The Confidence-Man* contemplates Solomonic wisdom in the form of a fable. The story of the unfortunate candlemaker combines various aspects of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes to assert, as Melville also does in *Billy Budd*, that OT wisdom conveys timeless truths through mythical language and meanings that no longer resonate with contemporary audiences.

As I explained earlier, secularization was a narrative applied retroactively to the nineteenth century, one that was neither linear nor universal. Reconsidering his dealings with theology and religion reveals a critical vista onto nineteenth-century intellectual and spiritual sensibilities. Incidentally, this vista also allows us to confront some of the prejudices that twentieth-century scholarship brought to bear on these topics in regards to their presence in Melville's texts. If anything, Melville sought to express not only his own spiritual discontent, as so many scholars have claimed over the years, but rather a much more profound and systemic issue: he contemplated the contingencies resulting from the rapid rise of new categories of knowledge and truth. And while he respected the intellectual rigor of many of these methods, to the point where he could not help but study up on them despite his apprehensions, Melville also

consistently contemplates what is lost by America's increasing dismissal of the Bible as a source for truth told emphatically through the medium's artful language.

2 AMERICAN THEOLOGY & MELVILLE'S AUTHORIAL JOURNEY

2.1 Historical Context and Religious Thinking

My objective in this preliminary chapter will be to survey religious and theological sentiments within various social strata between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in both Europe, the American colonies, as well as the United States. In order to make any substantial claim about the way Melville responds to the Bible in literary form, I first ask at what point the Bible becomes susceptible to these kinds of textual interrogations. When does the Bible become a literary document? What are the reasons and consequences for this development? And how do they impact other intertextual dealings with the Old and New Testament? In answering these questions, it is imperative to look beyond the edges of the nineteenth century, and occasionally even beyond the eighteenth century, to track intellectual currents and make visible the germination of ideas regarding the authority of the Bible. Doing so enables me to trace the various intellectual traditions in which Melville's texts inhabit and to sketch out a genealogy of literary approaches to the Bible. This revised genealogy not only records the Bible's shifting cultural currency in the wake skeptical challenges but also considers how its authority is often effectively undermined by those in charge of formulating exegetical practice. The way Melville mediates this process and discerns the multifarious forces behind it is more complex than has heretofore been stated. His mediation certainly consists of more than a mere osmotic assimilation of German higher criticism. In fact, the dynamism of many of his texts stems from their oscillating between deism, skepticism, Baconian empiricism and religious nostalgia.¹³ Finally, mapping the American intellectual landscape in this way enables me to address two of my

¹³ As my analysis will show, the utility of Melville's work as a window on these manifold discussions concerning the Bible lies in the fact that his form never completely congeals so as to restrict his ability to react to new ideas and discourses. Until the end of his career, he continuously experiments with new voices, types, and established literary formats, for instance, the dialog.

main complaints with existing author-centered scholarship on Melville: one, the claim that Melville displays unorthodox and radically skeptical views in his writing that alienated contemporary readers; and two, the related biographical claim that his wide reading was a unique phenomenon that presaged high modernist sensibilities.

Historical contextualization is not its own boon, however. Historiography, rather, allows me to put in relief the licensed and unlicensed textual dealings with the Bible at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Jonathan Sheehan identifies one possible starting point for this investigation when he places the origin of what he calls the “cultural Bible” in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Up to this point, biblical scholarship had posited theological truth as the authorizing mechanism behind Biblical authority. However, Enlightenment continental theologians inadvertently unleashed a veritable avalanche of methodologies upon Scripture in order to reassert its authority. As Sheehan notes, scholars in Germany and England in particular sought to

build a Bible whose authority was distributed across a variety of disciplinary domains. Moving beyond the King James and Luther Bibles [. . .] scholars and literati dedicated themselves to the production of new translations that collectively reshaped the authority of Scripture. The Enlightenment Bible was [. . .] never singular, always plural. (xiii)

Translation, for one, had been the primary mode of scholarship up until the seventeenth century, with Luther’s translation as well as the Geneva and the King James Bible standing as paragons of the political character of this practice. For translators, the issue of the inspired interpreters of the Bible was key: earlier translators had claimed inspiration when translating the text and sourced their claim back to the supposed inspiration of the original authors of the Testaments. In fact, the King James Bible which Melville and his contemporaries still used, was amongst the most inaccurate translations. Textual authority derived from translation and consequently appeared

¹⁴ Sheehan discusses different reconceptions of the Bible within cultural consciousness to characterize his concept of an Enlightenment Bible that is both composite and multiple.

more and more dependent on political impetus rather than authentic inspiration. Biblical authority began to seem arbitrary even to lay observers, for if the contents of the Bible could be falsified, such consistency would imply that the Bible did not contain immutably divine truth after all. Similarly, the new historicist methodology revealed the Bible's anthological structure. Canonization in the OT, for instance, depended on consensus among different, first-century Jewish groups, as well as the manifold translations and revisions from Aramaic to Hebrew and Greek. Given the political nature of translations in European early modernism, these early translations, too, were all but politically disinterested. Beyond that, translation and interpretation required both technical skill as well as divine inspiration. For the Protestants in particular, translation was an instrument for cleansing the Bible from the misconceptions and corruptions of human accretions. Thus exegesis, especially in eighteenth-century England, was very much political. And in the wake of the Enlightenment, the fight over the singular soul of Scripture arguably ended only when the Bible became multiple.

Seen in conjunction, the very multiplicity of the enterprises launched to restore the Bible's authority during the Enlightenment, ironically eroded its authority by turning Scripture into a "project" rather than an object (Sheehan 91). The Bible, in Sheehan's words, spoke with multiple voices, and "Its authority had no essential center, but instead coalesced around four fundamental nuclei. Philology, pedagogy, poetry, and history" all of which began to be seen as giving distinct answers to religious questions (91). As the means of exegetical legitimization of Biblical authority became fragmented, the Bible's authority came to be rooted not in theology, but in what Sheehan calls "the complex of literature, teaching, scholarship, and history that came to be called culture" (Sheehan 91).¹⁵

¹⁵ Sheehan defines the Enlightenment by its desire to solve the theological problems of the past as well as by the multiplication of "scholarship and scholarly techniques, translations, book reviews, salons, academies, new

One of my underlying agendas in the subsequent chapters is reading Melville in the context of this shift from a theological to a cultural Bible. By contextualizing Melville's texts within the findings of Sheehan and others, I follow Christopher Grasso's and Rita Felski's respective arguments that literature is sensitive to the intricate fault lines in grand social phenomena and can therefore function as an access point to the complex shifts in exegetical technique and religious sentiments of the nineteenth century (Felski, *Uses* 16). As such, I will consider the state of American theological and religious thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from two categorical angles: that of clerical specialist institutions, which includes debates on theology, exegetical technique and institutional politics, and that of lay culture, which encompasses the various means by which lay audiences engaged scripture and how those encounters reciprocally shaped the discourses of Scripture, nationalism, foreign politics, and empirical science.

My narrative takes its cues from historical studies that consider phenomena such as the scientific revolution and its effects on religious thought as gradual transformative processes rather than hereditary, mythical conflicts. Unfortunately, quantitative studies on religious thinking and the knowledge base of lower- and middle-class citizens remain scarce, as they depend on church attendance records and membership ledgers—data that is often incomplete or unreliable. By the same token, sweeping statements about the state of American religion in the nineteenth century frequently amount to little more than inaccurate generalizations; one example is the radical character historians have traditionally attributed to the so-called Darwinian revolution and the significance of the conflict between science and religion. By the same token, the proliferation of sectarianism—especially evangelicalism and its mission of communal

communication tools, and new or revived techniques of data organization and storage—that the eighteenth century used to address the host of religious, historical, and philosophical questions inherited from the Renaissance” (xi-xii).

transformation—as well as the many symbiotic relationships between spiritualism and economic enterprise (e.g., print-distribution networks, lecturing circuits) make it impossible to dismiss religion as merely another monolithic ideology.

With this historical survey, I begin to partially answer Ebel and Murison’s call for a reconsideration of the object of religion in literary studies beyond the simply binary of ‘good/bad’ (3). Albeit that my overall argument aims specifically at Biblical exegesis, the perception of the Bible and its theological contents in any epoch are obviously tied up with contemporary religious sentiments. Thus, I will begin with rather broad strokes to talk about the ideas that informed religious life from the middle of the eighteenth-century onwards and supplement my narrative with details illustrating particular facets of communal transformation as I go along.¹⁶

Seeing that the wisdom books are part and parcel of my primary object of this study, my survey will be biased insofar as I focus on the cultural afterlives of the OT in America and Europe. A case in point is Eran Shalev’s *American Zion* (2013), a study of political thought in the Early Republic as impacted by OT theology. Shalev contests that “[. . .] American national culture was carved out in a deeply Hebraic setting” (14). There is a marked difference between late eighteenth-century Europe and the early United States in terms of their respective cultural sensibilities towards the Bible in general and the OT in particular. This difference becomes discernible in the different velocities with which both cultures detached themselves from OT-centered theologies. In Europe, as Sheehan observes, “[t]he shift from a biblical to a neo-

¹⁶ Historians who challenge this narrative advocate for a more thoroughgoing examination of the complicity of science and religion for much of the period I reference here. Michael Ruse, whose *Darwinian Revolution* remains current on the topic, is sensitive to the fact that any serious discussion of scientific revolution in the nineteenth century must acknowledge various strands that weave through the narrative of empirical discovery (xiii). Similarly, Peter J. Bowler notes that the foregrounding of the bitter rivalry between science and religion in the nineteenth century is, to a large extent, a twentieth-century fabrication. Darwin’s theories in particular were subsumed under the umbrella concept of progress and therefore initially remained compatible with the design argument (Bowler 5). Hence the revolutionizing character of what Darwin and others produced only unfolded gradually.

humanist paradigm was profound [. . .] and required a total realignment of values away from Hebraic norms and toward classical or nationally normative ones” (xiv). In contrast, Shalev stresses that while “By the late eighteenth century the moment of Hebraic introspection was long over in Europe,” political rhetoric usurped the emphasis on OT theology that Calvinist exegesis had ingrained in its congregants prior to its demise (3). In the wake of the Revolution, American political discourse fervently latched on to this rich and specifically defined cultural reservoir:

The Old Testament biblicism, the identification of the United States as a God-chosen Israel, provided a language to conciliate a modern republican experiment with the desire for biblical sanction; it could thus help alleviate anxieties related to the limits of human authority and legitimize the unprecedented American federal and republican endeavor. Tense and contradictory, republican and biblical, the early United States was forward looking and, [. . .] ‘primitivist,’ or deeply attracted to the narratives, language, and ordinances of biblical times. (2)

The American republican experiment therefore hinged upon its identification with political Israel, a rhetorical move that has its roots in Calvinist exegesis and the hermeneutics of typology (Shalev 4). As such, the United States preserved the reverence for OT theology, among other arenas, in its political discourse. And while Shalev’s point deserves more attention, I will first turn to the demise of Calvinism and its consequences for Biblical hermeneutics.

2.2 The Spirit of the Age: A Topography of Nineteenth-Century Religious Sentiments

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Calvinist Protestantism, frequently deemed the root of intellectual life in Anglo-America, began to bear various strange fruit that would fall quite distantly from the ideological tree of orthodox Christianity over the course of the following century. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, several culturally and communally transformative processes came to a head in the newly minted United States: Enlightenment philosophy had fermented in virtually all socio-economical strata. In *The Erosion of Biblical*

Certainty (2013), Michael J. Lee reminds us that, “[John] Locke was writing for a broad Protestant audience rather than for scholars” (146). Hence limiting the debate about Biblical authority to one communal sphere would, at the very least, distort the way in which such debates evolved and took on different meanings in different class contexts. Political leaders writing in the orbit of Lockean social theory, such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin, inscribed rationalism and Enlightenment humanism into the United States’ foundational documents and thus made these concepts inalienable parts of the emergent civic rhetoric and self-identification of citizens. Yet these same values also formed the basis of what would become nineteenth-century social-reform and charity culture. Needless to say that some of these ideas—and the new epistemologies and Biblical hermeneutics they fostered—publicly challenged religious orthodoxy. More importantly, the religious spectrum became more differentiated as liberals sought to emancipate themselves from the old intellectual elites by adopting German neologism, the historical critique of the Bible, as well as other avant-garde ideas into their exegetical methodology.

New forms of communal organization also necessitated alternative media of communication and discourse: In the wake of sectarian wars and with the rise of evangelical heart religion, vast and increasingly professional distribution networks for print productions, including Bibles, pamphlets, tracts, sermons, and periodicals, sprang up and expanded at a rapid rate in the early 1800s.¹⁷ Public lectures and debates between clergymen, professional philosophers, literati, and scientists emerged alongside the established sermon format and became recreational events, making religious controversy at once public business and a pastime.

¹⁷ Notably, several cross-denominational business partnerships under the umbrella of missionizing America in these early decades, prominent among which were the American Bible Society (1816), the American Sunday School Union (1824), and the American Tract Society (1825). Despite significant theological differences, such cooperatives were bound together by their members’ struggle against common enemies: Roman Catholics, liberal Protestants, and other “unevangelical” groups (Gunther Brown 40).

As such, skeptical inquiry began to permeate both the ivory tower of academia in the university divinity schools as well as the meetinghouses. Free inquiry even had its own, “irreligious” press; although much less prolific, well organized, and efficient than its religious counterpart, publishers of skeptical tracts flourished for a while in organizational umbrellas such as the Free Press Association (until 1829). In the secular realm, newspapers, such as the *New York Herald*, created a sensationalist journalistic climate that in turn stimulated public taste for oppositional views on orthodox teachings. This was especially true for the big cultural centers, such as New York and Boston with their direct line to the Atlantic world of ideas. In the same atmosphere, newspapers, another novel medium, competed for the role of major informational organs of public life against established outlets, such as theaters, books, and the pulpit (Bergman 24). Such new outlets of disposable print products, particularly the often short-lived literary journals, competed for audiences with a mixture of morally didactic and edifying biographies, pirated reprints from Europe, as well as curious and sensational pieces. As Oliver Scheiding and Martin Seidl recently showed, short literary forms had existed long before the nineteenth century, particularly in transatlantic religious print (3). Yet the increasing professionalization of literary outlets, especially evidenced in their selection of exemplary autobiographies, forced editors to select content based on subscribers’ demands and market logic (Lanzendörfer 305). For the religious press, this newfound emphasis on readers’ taste turned out to be a double-edged sword. As Candy Gunther Brown demonstrates in *The Word and the World* (2004), “Despite efforts to embrace refined literary sensibilities, denominational periodicals often failed when they attempted head-to-head competition with more market-oriented religious or secular papers”; what is more, expansionist schemes frequently revealed the contradictions between market-logic and missionizing zeal at work within religious print ventures, as “Efforts to extend this

readership did not always result in new subscribers but rather discouraged those who wanted a denominational paper instead of less religious market options” (164). In light of these issues, it is all the more significant that private religious sentiment did not fall into neatly predefined ideological categories. Frequently, many arguments between orthodox and liberal proponents occurred within the same denomination, and there is no reason to believe that individual religious sentiments among the faithful laymen and –women were any less varied and, occasionally, paradoxical.

This impression is corroborated when we consider that, even before the 1800s, the American religious landscape did not break down in a binary opposition between infidels and believers. Calvinism, from the very beginning, had made doubt (in the form of self-examination) an integral part of its conception of the *ordo salutis*, and consequentially of New England’s communal organization. In *The Protestant Ethic* (first publ. 1904), Max Weber implies that the Protestant agenda of providing a practical doctrine of salvation necessarily carries with it the hazard of producing results “unforeseen and unwished-for” by its practitioners (48). Weber articulates a truism about Calvinist doctrine: its programmatic insistence on salvation *sola fide*—on the condition of belief in Christ—and its subsequent emphasis on the future divine state of the soul necessarily clashes with the individual’s need to be certain of its election in this life (*certitudo salutis*). This conflict is resolved through the believer’s works in the world. Through ethical behavior in the community, believers can experience unity with the deity. However, such works do not guarantee personal election but rather illustrate God’s glory as manifested through the behavior of his elect (Weber 68). Weber cautions that, “Once and for all it must be remembered that programs of ethical reform never were at the center of interest for any of the religious reformers” (48). The fact that social reform began to take center stage among

Protestants in the nineteenth century can be seen as a natural result of the residual conditioning about social organization promoted by Calvinist doctrine and the gradual abolishing of that doctrine. The need to codify communal life in the absence of a universal doctrine gave rise to organizations such as the religious press, temperance societies, and other social clubs that grew from Protestant roots. But this new emphasis on reforming the worldly community had another effect: it gave American clerics a reason to willfully ignore, quite successfully, the implications of German Higher Criticism of the Bible—a historicist method that read the Biblical text in its historical context and correlated it to its contemporary and earlier sources, as it had been done to classical literature—well into the 1850s (Clark 4).

In his discussion of the writings of Orestes Brownson, a nineteenth-century protestant turned Catholic late in his life, Grasso illustrates that sectarian labels—a means by which scholars have traditionally simplified narratives of belief by reducing them to accounts of affiliation—are often too restrictive and potentially detrimental to understanding the more complex religious positions that became possible in the nineteenth century. Faced with this dilemma, Grasso calls for greater attention to be paid to the ways in which both fiction and non-fiction narratives allow scholars to access particularly complicated struggles with faith:

The combination of biographical narrative, social commentary, and epistemological reflection can help uncover the doubts and difficulties of experience that religious histories so often miss. This approach reveals more complicated lives than the labels that let us place individuals in neat denominational boxes – Baptist, Presbyterian, Adventist, Universalist, Unitarian, Catholic. (“Skepticism” 469)

Grasso’s claims, I propose, may be useful for beginning to answer Ebel and Murison’s challenge to literary studies, because they consider fiction as a way of accessing the intellectual and moral complexity of this historical moment, rather than a mere depiction of those arguments. Still, I

wish to linger with the historical context for a moment longer in order to draw attention to the scope on which communal life is permeated with epistemological ground shifts in the nineteenth century.

Given these contingencies of individual belief, phenomena such as the religious press may be viewed more fruitfully as primarily psychologically motivated reactions to the perceived threats of mass infidelity, atheism, and moral backsliding. Of course, such chimerae had reared their heads many times prior to the nineteenth century, for instance during the Great Awakening in New England. Certainly, sheer attendance numbers gave religious leaders no reason to fret in the decades of the nineteenth century. In *An Age of Infidels* (2013), Eric Schlereth observes that, “By the 1830s levels of church adherence had increased from those of the late eighteenth century to include approximately one-third of the population” (204). And yet, dismissing such fears as fantasies by powerful elites would be to disregard a driving factor behind the reorganization of religious life in America during that time. This is especially true if we consider the fact that agnosticism, a term coined by Thomas Huxley in 1868, became a viable philosophical position in the nineteenth century (Turner 171). Although “Devoutness defies measurement,” Turner puts religious dread of infidelity in perspective by noting that, “by observable standards[,] the American people were likely at their most religious in the second half of the nineteenth century” (131). These fears certainly contributed to an increased concern with morality as the century progresses. The loosening of the purchase religious language had on believers, as I show below, did not occur over night. It was a gradual process, one that slowly placed what previously had been “unthinking reaction [religious doctrinal belief], a step closer to conscious reflection, and a step further from everyday reality” (Turner 119). The fact that there was no tangible evidence of

an imminent threat of widespread unbelief belies the substantial transformative effects of the countermeasures wrought.

What is at stake in conceptually grasping this moment in the history of American belief, then, is nothing less than a fundamental reconceptualization of the individual's role within the community. Furthermore, considering historically religious life, be it congregational or theological, allows us to observe a fundamental reevaluation of epistemic categories and their validity. This new conceptual thinking assumed the individual's radical capabilities rather than postulating its fundamental fallenness, a circumstance also reflected in what we deem romantic literature of the antebellum period. Perhaps the most notable difference to the eighteenth-century was the scale upon which religious controversy touched the American populous: Grasso observes that,

By mid-century the proliferation of schisms and sects and the political deification of the democratic individual transformed the lives of even simple farm folk as much as canals and the coming of the railroad. Thoughtful people [. . .] struggled with religious doubt not because they were naturally exercising their reflective reason [. . .] but because they had imbibed styles of Protestant philosophical and scientific thought without understanding their limitation. ("Skepticism" 503)

This statement illustrates that access to theological controversies was no longer limited to the learned. Other evidence comes from eighteenth-century religious journals: "When [Robert] Lowth was rumored to have died in 1774," Lee notes, "the *Boston Post Boy* called him 'the finest scholar in Europe.' Even ordinary presses in the United States found the English biblical scholar worthy of note. This suggests that Americans were at least aware of European learning" (*Erosion* 150). However, accessibility does not imply conscious engagement. Lee observes further that even though, "By no later than 1773, Harvard College's library owned works by Michaelis and Lowth," no critical reception ensued, and, "If the Dudleian Lectures delivered in

the late eighteenth century are any indication, most did not drink deeply (or even sip) at the well of historical consciousness” (150). While it is true that the audience for theological debates was no longer restricted to clerics and those theologians residing in divinity schools, the critical reception of new ideas, ironically, happened in fits and starts and often, as in the case with Melville, away from centers of expert authority. Corroborating Grasso’s aforementioned point is Holifield’s observation that public theological debates were increasingly considered entertainment and executed in the spirit of “public oral contests” (“Theology” 500). I will address this issue in more detail momentarily. For the case of Melville, this point is significant because it reframes the persistent complaint by Melville’s authorial readers about the inaccessibility of the record of his readings. Insofar as I am concerned with historical context in my analysis, I will assume that Melville, like many other denizens of urban spaces in the middle of the century, had access to these debates.

2.3 Action and Reaction: The Impact of Challenges to Biblical Authority on Exegetical Practice in Early America

As I mentioned in my general introduction, one crucial categorical delineation I will adopt here is the distinction between religion, a term designating private and congregational practice as well as personal faith, and theology, by which I mean the conceptual unity of a belief system. Technically, the genesis of Protestant Biblical exegesis in America coincides with the beginnings of Anglo-Colonialism. Early farewell sermons by John Cotton and John Winthrop constitute early pieces of America-inspired exegesis. For example, the idea behind *sola scriptura*, a core tenet of Calvinism, was that the individual must engage with his natural faith by accessing revealed knowledge through the study of Scripture. Both Luther and Calvin, as Jerry Wayne Brown notes in *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America* (1969), had held that exegesis

was the office of the interpreter who would be moved by the Holy Spirit in the process of interpretation to reveal eternal truths; in contrast, seventeenth-century Protestantism invested the Bible with special authority by equating it to the Word of God and deeming its composition divinely inspired (5). As trained practitioners of hermeneutics, ministers would stand ready to help their congregants ‘open’ the literal truth of the inspired text. Compounding this qualification of human agency in the exegetical process was an increasing tendency to downplay the intellectual labor of exegesis in homiletics. Lisa Gordis develops this point by observing that “In opening the text to their congregations, ministers were to stress the assistance of the Spirit, not the scholarly labor involved in producing their readings” (31). Diminishing the visibility of homiletic technique in order to foreground immediacy of experience ultimately served ministers to emphasize literariness. This strategy, in turn, created a “complex and fertile literary culture” but it also led to potentially unruly congregants who were self-reliant in their personal interpretations of the scriptures (Gordis 35). Consequently, colonial New England Protestant theological practice, ironically, bore many of the intellectual markers that would give rise to its greatest challenges in the nineteenth century.¹⁸

Since the English Civil War of 1642-51, the American Colonies had also been the site of European political and doctrinal conflicts. The recent transnational turn in American studies has produced some compelling schemes for situating Early American clerical publications in the larger, intercontinental conversation that did not accede to territorial (or national) boundaries. With the touchstone of non-separatist Puritanism represented by Winthrop and others, the story of Biblical hermeneutics in America is necessarily one of transatlantic connections, specifically

¹⁸ Puritan ministers in their sermons aspired to the practice of “prophecy” or opening the Biblical text through exegesis, as William Perkins’s *The Arte of Prophecy*, a popular handbook on homiletics, calls it (qtd. in Gordis 20). Such books were sensitive to the complex interrelations between text, exegete, and methodology. With contextualization and collation as primary exegetical means, the ideal was for ministers to let the text interpret itself and thus limit their presence in the process (25). See also my discussion of Oral Forms further below.

of ideas traveling between Germany, England, and New England. A prominent example for this phenomenon is, of course, Cotton Mather, whose transatlantic correspondence with clerical colleagues and self-promotion is well documented.¹⁹ That being said, scholarship on various fronts has shown that the geographical remoteness from the (European) centers of theological discourse as well as the distance between congregations in the more remote territories affected the dissemination and assimilation of new practices by laypeople as well as specialists.

Geographical distance did not produce a mere temporal lag but had significant intellectual and material consequences: it produced distinct conceptions of spiritual communities and fostered the innovation of new means of dissemination information. Shelby Balik purports that remoteness in some cases actually facilitated the ascension of layman interpretations as well as the creation of supra-denominational virtual religious spaces by means of religious journals and prolific letter correspondence at the Northern Frontier (609). Layman interpreters, she adds, took a rather pragmatic approach to Biblical hermeneutics, as “individuals constructed personal piety from the threads of doctrine, theology, and practice they encountered” thus creating a spiritual virtual space that emerged from the geographical space believers may occupy (639). Balik thus extends Gordis’s point about confident readerships becoming problematic to the hermeneutic authority of ministers by illustrating how a laity taking seriously the commandment of *sola scriptura* as self-study may engender clerical authority. At the very least, these historical studies suggest that early American exegetic practice, when subjected to a synchronic examination, was a rather heterogeneous affair.

¹⁹ Reiner Smolinski’s recent publication of Mather’s heretofore unpublished, compendious *Biblia Americana* has enlivened scholarly debate about the dialogical nature of Biblical scholarship in Early America. Mather’s case is useful in this context, because his work so clearly displays the impulse to contribute to a larger expert discourse and inserting a specifically colonial American viewpoint. Admittedly, those efforts were not altogether disinterested or consistently successful. Wolfgang Splitter recently argued, based on Mather’s failed attempt to establish correspondence with the pietist August Herman Francke, that Mather “yearned to be publicly recognized as a scholar of international stature. Moreover, as an American, he was also striving to confound Europeans’ traditional conception of the Western hemisphere as a refuge for Old World outcasts” (113).

American colleges were presented with the task of preserving and streamlining (at least in theory) theological methodology for new generations of ministers. These institutions initially were no ivory towers of higher learning but were invested in ministerial training. At the same time, institutions such as Harvard College preserved the intellectual ideal cultivated by their seventeenth-century predecessors to remain an active part in the transatlantic discussions about theology. Nevertheless, the academic atmosphere at divinity schools, especially in the post-revolutionary Early Republic, was distinct from the methodologically contentious air at the institutions of Europe in the sense that piety featured largely as the underlying concept of American curricula. And this atmosphere became compounded even further, once these moral values bled into the emergent discussion about national citizenship. In the early nineteenth century, then, American liberal theologians interested in Biblical criticism found themselves fighting a two-front battle: on the one hand, they tried to keep up with European, particularly German and French, innovations in historical Biblical scholarship. On the other hand, these new methodologies forced them to modify gradually if not their positions then at least the reasoning behind them and seek new, ultimately self-destructive, argumentative foundations for their hermeneutics. The issue of the gradual division of natural theology and history I described earlier marks only one instance of this phenomenon. It is vital to note that at no time did religious rhetoric ever fully depart from those discourses. What most studies I have referenced described is rather a gradual and persistent hollowing out of the convictions that prop up the rhetoric.

Historical opinions on the subject have converged on the idea that, ultimately, the erosion of Biblical authority in expert and laypeople discourses in America came not so much from direct skeptical challenges but rather as a result of the argumentative shifts defenders of the Bible

felt they needed to make.²⁰ I will address the deist tradition in greater detail below. For the moment, it is sufficient to begin thinking about the shifts in theological argument in the early Republic as derived from early eighteenth-century English deism. The writings of John Toland and others mapped out the conceptual challenges to Biblical certainty American ministers engaged in the early 1800s. Jonathan Edwards and Jonathan Dickinson had also engaged the problem but always with the conviction that allowing empirical rationalism into Biblical hermeneutics would ultimately reveal the truth of doctrine. Lee notes that Edwards in particular insisted that any insights gained from rationalist analysis were merely probabilistic; hence believers required “spiritual sense” in addition to natural religion; i.e., reason, to fully bring to consciousness true religion (84). While this may seem a mere nuance in argument for twenty-first century readers, differences over the epistemological hierarchy of spiritual sense and reason would cause a major rift within American Protestantism in the nineteenth-century that would eventually give rise to groups foregrounding sentiment and privileging intuition among Evangelicals and Unitarians (with their philosophical-esoteric branch, the Transcendentalists). This rift also catalyzed the aforementioned coalescing of empirical science and natural theology into discrete epistemologies.

Although eighteenth-century engagements with skepticism gained little traction with the colonial public, Edwards’s and Dickinson’s bout with deism pulled Biblical criticism into the methodological orbit of American theologians and thus paved the way for transforming the Bible from an historical record to a cultural text. Lee summarizes what would transpire between 1790 and 1830 as follows,

²⁰ There is, of course, no one factor that exclusively determines this development. For instance, the development of the evangelical press and its subsequent adoption of commercial business practices equally transformed the whole venture and modified its original agenda. Introducing a different ethical culture into the religious missionary project created an identity crisis for these presses.

When critics began to assault the supernatural status of the Bible, American Protestant intellectuals were forced to find new ways to defend their sacred text. They domesticated and adopted the hermeneutical tools of one generation of heretics and incorporated them into a new, broadly accepted Protestant conception of revelation. In doing so, they transformed their own standards, altering their own notion that the Bible was a timeless and unchanging revelation. (7)

The reasons for this transformation are multifarious and complex. All I can do here is enumerate a couple of decisive factors: In seventeenth-century England, the formation of the intellectual category of probability (versus the binary of truth and opinion) had emerged (Lee 53). This shift was a direct result of the critical work begun by Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) and Baruch de Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Tractates* (1677), both of which deployed a hermeneutics that privileged assent to rational argument as a way of determining truth. Schlereth notes that in the wake of the Revolution, the United States morphed from a culture of religious toleration, "a legal indulgence for dissenting beliefs," to one of religious liberty, an ideal under which religious expression was legally protected rather than tolerated (19). Hence Federalists, favoring a national constitution, began to outlaw religious radicalism so as to avoid the charge of such a document being a pretense for harboring 'infidels' in the new nation. Incidental confrontations between deists and believers illustrated an atmosphere of "popular aversion to religious strife" in the 1780s and 90s (Schlereth 33). Similarly, in *Conceived in Doubt* (2012), Amanda Porterfield asserts that the distinction between "popular" and "lived" religion is an *a posteriori* imposition by modern scholars, as the category of religion pervaded virtually all political discourses in colonial and revolutionary America (7). Hence debates about theology, Porterfield claims, remained an insider affair, while "a more generic, political debate about religion moved forward focused on religion's relationship to state authority" (8). Both Porterfield and Schlereth argue that due to religion's entanglement with politics, and with the formation of cohesive national

identity being the pressing issue of the day, radical skepticism and methodological debate were reigned in during the late 1700s to allow stable civil identities to coalesce.

With the beginning of the nineteenth century, the injection of critical ideas and books from Europe, initiated by exceptionally inquisitive, liberal-minded individuals such as Joseph Stevens Buckminster, nourished the fertile ground Edwards and Dickinson's arguments had produced.²¹ Finally, Jerry Wayne Brown, whose *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America* (1969) is one of the earliest studies on the dissemination of Biblical higher criticism in the American theological seminaries of the nineteenth century, certainly overstates the case when he says that "it was only in New England that critical biblical studies made a considerable impact during the period" (8). This impact, however, occurs in the context of Calvinism having lost much of its visible purchase on the population and, at that point, predominantly existing as a rigorous theological program in intellectual institutions. Following several reform efforts and modifications to congregational practice—for instance, the halfway covenant—traditional Calvinism was very much on the wane by the middle of the nineteenth century (Holifield, *Theology* 10). Schlereth further contextualizes these statements by demonstrating the ubiquitous presence of deist societies in American culture and its activist approach to resisting Protestant influence on social reform and national political structures (8).

Following attempts at revival and gradual reform, made by Jonathan Edwards and his successors, Calvinism was in decline, not in terms of absolute membership but in terms of its intellectual currency. In the late 1700s, the United States was developing a national identity, but

²¹ From the beginning, the idea of religious liberty in the emerging discourse about civil society was tainted with the fear of an (fictitious) infidel threat. The label immediately assumed political connotations. As Schlereth points out, "Within constitutional discourse, infidelity meant seditious disbelief [. . .] Undesirable religious opinions were less open to challenge on theological or intellectual grounds in the new United States, but individuals who held such opinions could be denied the privileges of full civil membership if their opinions seemingly had seditious implications. Writers could deny infidels civil power while upholding their belief in religious liberty" (29).

portions of its emergent civic public as well as most of its clergy shied away from taking the debates surrounding religious skepticism from the meetinghouses to the colleges. All these factors arguably created an atmosphere unfavorable to rigorous discussion about the genealogy of seminal moral values. Religious liberalism was interpreted as non-engagement and thus became a more flexible and serviceable strategy in dealing with skepticism. The new nation subsequently lacked a vigorous autochthonous scholarly approach to the Bible that could connect Christianity's foundational text to the new civic realities of newly minted American citizens. One consequence of this intellectual tepidness was that infidelity—a fuzzy term that included all forms of religious criticism and skepticism—became the specter that, in the minds of those stigmatizing Biblical criticism, threatened both national unity and religious orthodoxy. And without academic institutions of higher learning prior to 1813, codifying these shifts within theological systems was a difficult affair. The resulting conceptual vacuum was filled by liberal intellectuals attracted by the innovations in European Biblical scholarship that had emerged since the 1750s. An intellectual climate so charged with anxiety would seem to naturally produce a culture of stern sentiments towards free inquiry and subversive thinking the kind of which Melville articulates in his writings beginning with *Mardi*. As I show in the following chapters, Melville makes transparent many of these fears in his fiction and poetry.

2.4 Deism and Free Thinking

Within the broader rubric of religious skepticism, deism, specifically British deism, functioned as a catalyst to many of the debates and intellectual shifts which changed the intellectual landscape of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. In pre- and post-Revolutionary America, deist challenges to the moral fabric of Christianity were folded into the citizenship discourse. However, historians have yet to fully assess the implications of deism to

the sea changes within religious thinking in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Beyond that, historical studies group deism within larger conceptual influxes on American thinking, such as Enlightenment philosophy, particularly Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and often consider it a marginal occurrence. Yet deism is distinct, for instance in the way it transmits impulses such as Enlightenment humanism into mainline religious and theological discourses. Historians have since begun addressing this gap. In *Scripture and Deism* (2007), Diego Lucci requests that, “British deism should be considered in future studies relating to early modern European intellectual and cultural history, and the contribution of the deists to the development of Western civilization should continue to be examined and emphasized” (218). Eric Schlereth follows suit by proposing that deism be regarded not as “a minor exception to larger religious trends, but as constitutive of these developments in key ways. Specifically, the actions of early national deists and the larger discourse surrounding infidelity helped create a sturdy cultural boundary between acceptable and unacceptable religious expression in a largely Protestant culture” (10). In literary studies, deism has equally been ignored as a relevant motivating factor for nineteenth-century intellectualism. And while there is no room in the present study to fully integrate the deist legacy with what we call the American Renaissance, one of my secondary claims will be that Herman Melville’s emphasis on intellectual honesty in his writing, a free-inquiry ideal, rests on the deist legacy.

Deism began its life as a diffuse movement among a group of British thinkers calling themselves free inquirers in seventeenth-century England. Such inquiries marked not so much an open challenge to but the growing pains of the Christian faith adapting to the evidentialist mindset. Deism was the sound of intellectual culture settling into modernist thought categories. From the perspective of orthodoxy, deism had metastasized within religious discourse since the

Reformation. Originally, it had been a movement for placing Christianity upon a rationalist foundation and eliminating its mystic and superstitious elements. In so far as it required access to learning and the means to read in unorthodox circles, deism was usually an intellectual endeavor reserved for men of means and, in some cases, with clerical training. Hence its lethality came from the fact that it argued within the arena of exegesis drawing on cutting-edge sources that their orthodox opponents were hesitant to use and thereby dictating the terms of engagement. Anthony Collins, the leader of the British freethinkers, had been a disciple of John Locke; however, Collins as well as John Toland, the other prominent first-wave deist, denied that the faculty of truth could extend beyond reason (Lucci 136). Collins asserts in *A Discourse on Free Thinking* (1713) that,

[. . .] if the Knowledge of some Truths be requir'd of us by God; if the Knowledge of others be useful to Society; if the Knowledge of no Truth be forbidden us by God, or hurtful to us; then we have a right to know, or may lawfully know any Truth. And if we have a right to know any Truth, we have then a right to think freely. (qtd. in Lucci, 139)

While this stance does not effectively deny the truthfulness of divine revelation its calls for latitudinarian attitude to learning and reading presented a challenge to the Bible's claim to absolute Truth. Moreover, rational interpretations of the Bible were a slippery slope to skepticism. And Free Thinkers' use of biblical hermeneutics effectively forced their clergy counterparts to adopt the very methodologies that ultimately eroded the Bible's status as containing revealed truth.

While deism, like Protestantism, was not a cohesive movement, several characteristics united deists across continents and between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. For one thing, they were not, at least not initially, bent on the complete destruction of Christianity, as the charge of their opponents often ran. Rather, most deists began as seekers, free thinkers, or

enquirers—the terms are usually self-assigned and used synonymously—striving to root out personal flights of skepticism and spiritual crises by critically examining their personal beliefs as well as the Christian exegetical traditions. Under the rubric of rationalism they would engage in wide and esoteric regiments of reading. Most free thinkers thought their struggles ennobled their personal faith and thus conducted their research and arguments with the full intention of placing true religion on a firmer basis. However, its central argument for placing the faculty of reason over that of scriptural revelation threatened organized Christianity and the political power of the clergy. This challenge was especially tricky in the context of Protestant hermeneutics, which, as I showed earlier, had always encouraged studying the Bible on one's own terms. Now, privileging human reason as the ultimate tool to understanding existence and nature effectively turned the mantra of *sola scriptura* into *sine scriptura*. If natural reason was sufficient to gain access to the full spectrum of religious truth, revelation, exegesis, and those who trafficked in them became meaningless.

These fears may have motivated eighteenth-century British as well as colonial American religious leaders to conflate deism with the label 'atheism' as well as the broader 'infidelity,' both catch-all terms connoting any number of spiritual and moral offenses. Turner notes that true atheism probably did not exist until the eighteenth century, even though it was used as a charge long before that point (26). Neither atheism nor agnosticism was a viable worldview before the nineteenth century, and deism as well as atheism became interchangeable derogatory monikers for various forms of benign skepticism. Religious leaders engaged in hyperbole, warning of the moral decay and an impending deluge of immoral atheists destroying the colonies and accelerating the general religious backsliding of the population.

What made deists the object of orthodox ire was their rejection of Biblical authority. And yet, much of what deists claimed was merely an extension of the kind of thinking that Protestantism had harbored since the Reformation: an insistence on the standard of evidence expressed in arguments from rational assent. Anthony Collins's "atheism," for instance, was merely a stricter interpretation of the terminology designating categories of thought and judgment. He advocated a probabilistic thinking "a markedly rational and basically skeptical methodology, which prevents men from asserting 'final truths,' especially in terms of religion; and Collins expresses his 'atheism' in his unprejudiced criticism of tradition" (Lucci 147). This kind of productive skepticism did not deny religion altogether, but it did take to task unquestioning, doctrinal belief.

In America, deism spread on two fronts: conceptual and communal. Conceptually, the movement was indebted to the British deism of Collins and Toland, but found its strongest advocate in Thomas Paine and his political pamphlets. Paine, arguably the most famous proponent of Enlightenment values and, incidentally, deism in the United States, is exemplary of the transformative character of deism because he inspired many post-Revolutionary Americans to rethink personal freedom and political consent. He radicalized Enlightenment rationalism and detached the evidentialist intellectual style from Biblical hermeneutics. Regarding the Bible, he argued that, "Americans in 1794, were free of biblical commands because no one alive could attest to their historical accuracy. Contemporary understandings of history cautioned that Paine's larger point might have merit" (Schlereth 59).²² Elihu Palmer, author of *The Temple of Reason* (1800), argued equally for the "belief in one perfect God who is known by means of his

²² Although Paine's *Age of Reason* went through twenty-one editions by 1800, yet it was only available in ten percent of the libraries in the 1790s (Schlereth 51). Hence the number of people having actually read his argument may well be lower than that of those having been exposed to it by word of mouth and other forms of secondary delivery.

immutable natural laws and honored through ‘the practice of a pure, natural and uncorrupted virtue’” (qtd. in Holifield, 162). Such assertions, combined with deists’ proximity to political activism and nationalism, increasingly threatened clerical authority. In part, the religious liberalism debate mentioned above centered on intertwining the fates of state and church inextricably in order to insulate clerical authority from deist attacks.

The second, communally slanted foreign influence on American deism came from France. On the far end of the radical spectrum, Paul Henri Thiry Baron d’Holbach had produced a materialist program grounded in philosophical monism in his *System of Nature* (1770). In it, he deconstructs the illusions propagated by religion and myths, such as the self-indulgent idea of the soul’s immortality. Metaphysicians, he argues, have forgotten the referents of the visual auxiliary models they have created for themselves; they therefore have tricked themselves and others into believing in the literal truth of such auxiliary constructs (I., 50). Thus, d’Holbach advocates causality as the one supreme law of nature that structures the universe and causes all material objects and creatures to ‘move’ according to their properties and what he calls internal necessity (I., 39). According to him, “[. . .] by the necessity of her own particular essence. She [nature] makes them [humans] concur by various modes to the general plan: this plan appears to be nothing more than the life, action, and maintenance of the whole, by the continual change of its parts” (I., 32). d’Holbach sees human beings as quasi-automatons whose highest intellectual achievement consists of realizing not a unified collective purpose but its individual purpose in the scheme of nature and its underlying, self-governing principles (I.,102). d’Holbach was popular in certain circles and probably more widely received than we know. The appeal of his program lay in the depersonalized cosmology; his was a universe ruled by laws instead of an increasingly humanized God who came to have sentiments and attitudes to the minutia of human

existence. This issue would only come to a head roughly one-hundred years later after the Civil War.

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, the French Revolution produced a wide array of alternative ideas and books besides d'Holbach's *System*; for instance, Constantin de Volney's *Ruins; or Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires* (1791), which Thomas Jefferson translated into English. These works were steeped in the ethics of free inquiry and democratic rhetoric. In America, deist societies were, "modeled on state attempts in France to redefine public life and individual belief along deistic lines" (Schlereth 65). Like Paine, Volney denied the Bible's authority as a historical record. However, the French thinkers went even further by predicting the eventual demise of Christianity as the exclusive source of ethics in European life. According to this new civil ethics: Theophilanthropy, "a movement that combined deism with the ceremony and fraternity of organized religion" (Schlereth 67). Meanwhile, American deists in Pennsylvania and other colonies circulated their own translations of French texts and, inspired by radical French urban Republicanism, eventually assumed a hostile attitude, not just towards the Bible but towards Christianity in general: "Developments within France's public culture under the Directory thus inspired American deists in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore to organize in pursuit of ending Christianity's influence in the United States" (Schlereth 72).²³

Nineteenth-century deists were rabid learners and savvy activist in their approach to communal life. By the early 1800s, they had elevated free inquiry from an epistemology to a

²³ Skeptics argued that their efforts were protected by the constitution and this argument presented an imbroglio that ultimately had to be resolved within the citizenship discourse: "a disbelieving citizenry was tolerable, but a constitutional framework that provided disbelievers a conduit through which personal opinions could be translated into electoral decisions was altogether unacceptable [. . .] [H]owever, these debates addressed infidelity as an abstract political agency and infidels as a potential rather than an actual presence in American life" (Schlereth 30).

creed and invoked Constitutional protection to their endeavors. Politicizing disbelief, seemed inevitable, as

Free enquiry was disbelief as it emerged and operated in the world. Free enquiry during the 1820s and the 1830s was a twofold term, epistemological and ontological. First, it described a set of intellectual procedures to develop sentiments, theories, and opinions verifiable by reason and nature alone. Free enquiry constituted an individual's epistemic position. Second, free enquiry assumed the existence of specific social and political conditions necessary for carrying out these intellectual procedures. The two facets of free enquiry were mutually reinforcing. Free enquirers argued that as more people jettisoned belief in Christianity, the social and political benefits of disbelief would accrue and new social space would develop for people to become disbelievers. (Schlereth 174)

Still, scholarship paints a picture of inconsistent reactions towards skepticism on the part of religious orthodoxy and political decision makers alike. While clerics had already “howled in the 1790s about the contagion of infidel philosophy,” Grasso observes that

What was new was that rapid social change encouraged more people to question what had once passed for common sense, that alternate ways of thinking were disseminated broadly with the spread of cheap print, and that in urban areas in particular opportunities arose for self-proclaimed free-thinkers to form communities and institutions of their own. (480)

Free-inquiry journals, such as *The Correspondent*, *The Free Enquirer*, and *The Western Examiner* (most of them based in New York City), though short lived, would feature accounts of “infidel conversions,” a formal parody of the evangelical conversion testimony (Schlereth 175). They formed organizational structures to counteract the increasingly professional output of the ruling Protestant denominations. “From the late 1700s onward,” Schlereth explains, “American deists formed voluntary associations and debate clubs, and they issued a flow of orations, pamphlets, and periodicals. The advent of institutions to support deist circles—the infrastructure of lived deism—thus marked a shifting center of acceptable belief and expression in American public life” (8). Deism thus exerted mass appeal through virtually all social strata and forced the religious orthodoxy and reformers to devise new ways to get their message out. Despite this

dynamism, Christianity did not fall to the wayside as easily as Volney and others had prophesied. Religion's defensive tactic, and a stroke of genius at that, consisted in connecting rhetorically religious sentiment with civil stability and morality. New denominations, most importantly evangelicalism, mobilized to occupy the moral center in social-reform discourses. They prudently pooled their resources and their organizational structures grew at an accelerated pace under the particular blend of business acumen, technological advancement, and missionizing zeal. In the following section, I will use the phenomenon of the religious press as a case in point for these developments.

Inconsistent attempts by religious advocates to deploy the rhetoric of empiricism and empathy respectively would strengthen infidelity in the nineteenth century. At the end of the century, a home-made crisis was on the horizon: Empiricism had not only helped connect religion to the new (urban, technical) culture of rational assent, but, in its naturalist permutation, had validated the human condition and its epistemology over against Calvinist claims of inherent corruption. Moral and social reform called attention to suffering as something alien to the communal order, a condition to be alleviated through communal action rather than to be tolerated as divine decree. Moreover, evangelicals deemed these reforms a sacred obligation. With this increased focus on human suffering, conceptions of the deity were modified accordingly and began to stress God's humanitarian character. But Charles Darwin's findings revealed natural history to be not the carefully planned mechanical clockwork that had been dreamt up by an all-good, benevolent architect, but a random, organic concoction, filled with violence and even malice. Consequently, rather than having to assent to the arguments of the skeptics, unbelief would now be founded on ethical objections. "Moral revulsion," Turner observes, "appears often to have been a greater spur to unbelief than intellectual skepticism" (203). As such, "Belief in

God seemed not merely implausible but blasphemous. In a world of pain, no humanitarian could with entire comfort worship its Creator”; ultimately, “God became the victim of those who insisted on his human tenderness,” as reformers replaced the wrathful Jehovah with the loving, merciful, all-accepting Jesus Christ (Turner 207).

2.5 The American Seminary

In *Founding the Fathers* (2011), Elizabeth A. Clark states that academic institution-building in the United States actually coincided with “The creation of early Christian history as a scholarly discipline” (2). She argues that scholars of early Christianity at Princeton Theological Seminary, Harvard Divinity School, Yale Divinity School, and Union Theological Seminary took their cues from historical rather than from theological interests. “For these professors,” Clark notes, “the Church Fathers stood on the far side of a great divide that separated ‘inspired’ from ‘uninspired’ books. European scholarship, insofar as it ignored that divide, must be refuted or at least be rendered palatable for American evangelical Protestants” (4). The aim to connect nineteenth-century Christianity in America to its earliest forms through the study of patristics (the writings of the Church Fathers), therefore, must be seen as part of what Schlereth identifies as the telos of the American intelligentsia to construct a unified national past and with it an equally coherent vision of the future (60). The shifting intellectual sensibilities as well as the increasing influx of immigrants in and around the 1830s made achieving such continuity while clinging to exegetical literalism increasingly difficult for Biblical historians. In many ways, these professors sought to derive an original, American Protestant hermeneutic of the Bible from their historical study of patristic literature (meaning the writings of the church fathers).

Initially postulating the New Testament as unaltered and unalterable,²⁴

[. . .] professors—gradually and often reluctantly—came to concede that as historians, they could not privilege the New Testament as a static and untouchable divine revelation, exempt from scrutiny by the historical-critical methods applied to other ancient literatures. Only then could New Testament and patristic literature be linked as sources for the development of early Christianity. Second, the traditional Protestant assumption that the early church had suffered grievous decline between the apostolic and the Reformation eras collided with theories of historical development that encouraged a more sympathetic assessment of early and medieval Christianity and a cautious celebration of difference among ethnic groups. (Clark 5)

Clark's assessment invokes issues of textual fluidity that I will address in a moment. The professors' agenda was anything but disinterested, as they assumed, *a priori*, a corruption narrative, beginning with an "early decline" after the second century that had been the genesis for Protestantism and its valiant struggle against deviant version of Christianity (Clark 343).

Another insight to be gained from this passage is that we must not restrict our gaze to the fledgling universities when trying to answer the question who was engaging with higher Biblical criticism in early nineteenth-century America. These institutions by no means represented the full spectrum of methodological opinions, nor did they house all public intellectuals of repute. Answering the 'European challenge' was a decidedly decentralized affair. What is more, many orthodox commentators understood all too well that engaging these challenges on the basis of evidentialism could yield unforeseen results and potential threaten established doctrines.

In his holy-land journal, Melville himself pondered the potentially detrimental effects the new technique can have on personal faith and even curses Reinhold Niebuhr and David Friedrich Strauß for having "robbed us of the bloom" (*Journals* 97). While no friend of dogmatism, he

²⁴ This project of constructing a distinct, non-European past finds its echoes in other cultural arenas as well. It is reinforced in the politics behind Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830. In literature, William Cullen Bryant's poem "The Prairies" (1832), in which the speaker contemplates the sense of historical implications invoked by the vistas of the American landscape, is a prominent example of the a growing trend among Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent to construct a mythical American antiquity that predated the American Indian nation tribes.

equally resents the disillusioning properties of unfettered critical analysis in this moment of spiritual crisis: “The deuce take their penetration and acumen. [. . .] If they have undeceived any one—no thanks to them” (*Journals* 97). The note allows some insight into how Melville thought about the utility of Biblical fiction and its comforting ability to connect the individual with a sacred history. At the same time, intellectual earnestness, a strong Victorian value and a pervasive theme in his writing, does not allow the individual seeking the moral good of truth to forego the evidence presented by the historical criticism of the Bible. Henry Adams recalls the atmosphere at Harvard College in Cambridge, with learned Unitarian professors advocating virtue as a quality sufficient for salvation (Turner 85). I will elaborate on how he copes with this dilemma in my analysis chapters.²⁵

Meanwhile, Brown has the conflict between liberal and orthodox theologians in the early nineteenth-century United States play out predominantly between Andover Seminary on the conservative side and Harvard Divinity School on the side of the (Unitarian) progressives (8). Of course, this delineation of camps is reductive in the sense that many American theologians that did not openly participate in these discussions may have struggled privately with some of the questions I outline in the following; yet Brown’s scheme is a useful baseline for getting a sense of the methodological landscape of American Biblical scholarship in the early nineteenth century, when Melville was to begin his literary career.

One of the most energetic young preachers and a liberal theologian in early nineteenth-century Boston, Joseph Stevens Buckminster, addressed the omnipresent specter of backsliding

²⁵ At this point in his career, Melville had suffered a nervous breakdown, allegedly as a result of his unsuccessful attempts at literary fame as a novelist. This dynamic becomes a crucial trope in most of his fiction and poetry, specifically in *Clarel*, as I will show below. As a point of comparison, Melville’s most well-known use of the word “undeceive,” designating an ideology unraveled, occurs in the poem “Shilo” in *Battle-Pieces*. Here, the speaker reflects on the demystifying effect of death as an egalitarian force in warfare that obliterates ideological glorification: “what like a bullet can undeceive” (*PP* 46). Melville’s usage of the verb in both instances connotes a forceful stripping away of the individual’s ideological insulation and a subsequent violent exposure to an unpleasant truth.

and ‘atheism’ when he remarked to his congregation that deism and skepticism had arisen partially because serious historical scholarship on the Bible had been neglected in America for too long (Brown 18). In his sermon on the source of infidelity (1829), Buckminster sketched out the slippery slope that led believers reared on dogma alone from Calvinism to doubt to atheism. Such backsliding, he argued, could only be counteracted through a native form of historical study of Scripture. Buckminster sought to disprove the orthodox dogmatism and place NT Christianity on a firmer foundation, and he labored under the conviction that pursuing Biblical criticism would ultimately produce a “purer and more defensible faith” (Brown 25). “To a great extent,” Brown notes, “the development of biblical studies in America may be traced by following those who had come into Buckminster’s sphere of influence, either personally or through the scattered treasures of his library” (29).

Ministerial training constituted the main focus of the first American colleges and was arguably the reason why they never produced the same scientific atmosphere found at European centers of learning at the time. The first graduate program was only to be initiated at Johns Hopkins University in 1876. Hence methodological training in advanced critical techniques was reserved for those young men of means to travel and often proceeded to European institutions, which took a decidedly less reverent approach to the Biblical text: “Nineteenth-century German scholarship in the universities had been freed from church control. Indebted to Immanuel Kant’s philosophical distinction between the real and phenomenal worlds, German scholars in many fields were dedicated to understanding the real world through rigorous logical analysis of observed phenomena” (Brown 38). George Bancroft, who received a stipend from Harvard to study in Germany in 1813, wrote to his mentors that the higher criticism could not deter his piety: “I never heard anything like moral or religious feeling manifested in their theological

lectures. They neither begin with God or go on with him [. . .]” (qtd. in Brown 43). The cultivation of personal piety and religious sentiment entered into a much greater degree into the American ministerial education. After all, the training was much more practically minded as young ministers, following their training at the seminary, often had to venture to remote congregations where they competed for the moral constituency of their flock against (illiterate) itinerant preachers of the George Whitefield type and against a confident attitude of their flock towards their own exegetical capabilities. Thus the emphasis on pulpit performance in order to ‘win over’ audiences contrasted the detached academic air of intellectual theological debate found in Germany. True, Europe too had its fair share of charismatic preachers, but the crystallization of higher criticism as a distinct discourse had progressed farther than in America. As Brown notes, “American biblical studies had never been firmly established as an independent intellectual tradition. The methods, techniques, and problems of biblical study were derived from the German academic community and placed in the context of American church life” (180-81). Hence there was virtually no equivalent to this kind of critical discourse; rather, skeptics came under attack in the debates about morality and the implication of religion as a moralizing agent for citizenship in the United States.

On the conservative end of the spectrum, Moses Stuart, the head of Andover seminary, loomed large. Conservative scholars—the label is somewhat misleading here, since Stuart did critically engage the new teachings as opposed to many of his colleagues who outright dismissed them—of Stuart’s stripe took a philological approach to Biblical interpretation, which Brown calls a “grammatico-historical interpretation,” that relied on a contextual, grammatical analysis of the extant Biblical text (52). Stuart was one of the few conservatives who took seriously the challenge of higher criticism, yet he saw it as a potentially unifying agent that could alleviate

sectarian divisions and unify American Christians (Brown 49, 51). This hope was based on the assumption that the Bible was an inspired text that revealed the Word of God. Given these preliminaries, Stuart naturally expected any rigorous analysis to ultimately demonstrate the unity of truth revealed in the text. This view increasingly seemed anachronistic at a time in which the various editorial processes behind the Bible's composition became better understood. These findings revealed the Biblical text not only to be man-made but also as more of an anthology than a cohesive narrative. Furthermore, inquiry was always to be tempered by piety. As Brown notes, Stuart never reconciled the problematic contradiction between his belief in Biblical textual unity, derived from New England Protestant theology, and the concept of progressive revelation. From German neology, Stuart adopted the idea that God revealed Himself to humankind through history (58). Another major difference between German and American, or rather American liberal and orthodox, scholarship was that German neology investigated the historical life of the whole biblical text, while American orthodox scholars largely ignored the OT because they saw it authorized only by its foreshadowing and confirming the events and doctrines relayed in the NT. In fact this was true for many believers at the time. Turner reminds us that, "most Americans appear to have remained unshaken in their conviction of the Bible's historical veracity. Even theologians and Biblical scholars did not attend much to higher criticism until late in the century" (150).²⁶

Again, it would be wrong to see this avoidance as simple ignorance or intellectual cowardice on the part of the orthodox. On the contrary, conservative commentators may have realized that their disagreements with their liberal brethren as well as with the more radical branches of the religious spectrum would ultimately be leveled. In 1824 conservative Edward

²⁶ Coogan summarizes that the wisdom books, the Ketuvim (writings), in the Hebrew Bible were "a collection of works in several different genres, a kind of anthology" (5).

Robinson looked back over the controversy about textual criticism with amusement. His reaction indicates that the religious orthodoxy had silently acceded to the argument from history over time. Lee speculates that, “Repeated exposure blunted the radical edge of claims that were once considered heretical” and subsumes that “In the nineteenth century, conservative Christians were making concessions regarding the status of Holy Writ that their parents could never have imagined” (138). Besides gradual erosion of the opposition, Michael Lee also cites the changed status of history and historical techniques:

One reason the orthodox conceded the argument was that for decades, history had been one of the strongest weapons in the arsenal of the Christians against the deists and skeptics. In eighteenth-century America, liberals, Calvinists, and skeptics all grew to trust history as an independent arbiter of truth. All sides often turned to the evidence of history to assert their points. Skeptics believed that history could reveal the contradictions and flaws of the Bible. Christians, in turn, defended revelation using history. (138)

Ultimately, however, Brown subsumes, there was no open rigorous conflict on methodological practice. A willful lack of interest in the new developments within the scholarly discipline of theology combined with an a priori privileging of the accessibility of Christianity by common sense created an atmosphere in the American academy and beyond in which methodological debate about exegesis seemed moot:

[. . .] German neology failed in America not because of brilliant orthodox defense, but rather because of lack of interest; the great battle among American religious parties was waged in the pulpit rather than in the classroom. The mass of Americans were more readily led to accept the authority of the Bible by rhetoric than by logic. Time and again Stuart stated that the truths of the Bible were so explicit that any man of common sense could understand them and grasp the principles of interpretation which would authenticate them. Since the truths of the Bible were so obvious, it could easily seem a work of supererogation to master biblical languages and read extensively the arid productions of continental scholars. (Brown 110)

As the liberal movement thus flamed out, George R. Noyse tried to mediate between two approaches that distinguished layperson from expert readers. For one thing, he rejected the

notion of progressive revelation that Stuart's camp promoted. While natural reason was God's greatest gift to humankind, revealed religion must be added to those natural faculties in order to find true religion (Brown 135). Both revelations, natural and direct (supernatural) had always been clear and consistent. Over time, however, human beings had conflated the products of natural reason and revealed truth in their study of the Bible; hence for Noyse, "The problem for the nineteenth-century Christian was to separate the unchangeable truths of revelation from the human accretions in which they were embodied" (Brown 135). Despite Noyse's best efforts, liberal interest in the historical method of Biblical analysis was already declining by the 1850s.

Subsequent liberal scholars, such as Theodore Parker, tried to integrate humankind's rational faculties with their conception of religion by characterizing such faculties as means to certify intuitive religion through a rational vocabulary (Brown 170). But these voices lacked the radical edge of, say, the deist insurgents to incite actual meaningful debate on the point. Still, the nineteenth-century controversies, limited as their scope had been, influenced Biblical exegesis. They therefore were part of a larger shift in religious thinking. Ultimately, as Lee shows, these debates made it so that appeals to supernatural inspiration in interpreting the Bible waned among ministers towards the end of the nineteenth century (*Erosion* 88).²⁷

2.6 Pressing Issues in Nineteenth-Century Biblical Scholarship

Thus far, I have attempted to record broader intellectual shifts that create the climate for Melville's literary intervention into Biblical hermeneutics to become productive. The problem

²⁷ Lee also cites a declining interest in Biblical languages as part of this phenomenon (87). Shalom Goldman argues that Biblical scholars on both sides of the Atlantic were interested in Hebrew as long as it served to illustrate the truth of the Bible and especially the NT; meanwhile they often harbored little sympathies for Jewish people (*God's Sacred* 3). At the turn of the century, Ezra Stiles, who was president of Yale College from 1778-95 and whom Goldman considers New England's most prominent intellectual at the time, established Hebrew as discipline at NYU (*God's Sacred* 183). Moses Stuart and Edward Robinson also were advocates of keeping the subject on the curriculum. As an academic subject, Hebrew, therefore, had a strong, political dimension, as it was used in the seminaries to block progressive ideas (*God's Sacred* 129) and strategically tie scholarship on the newly accessible Holy Land to orthodox ideas (*God's Sacred* 131).

with this form of holistic inquiry is that such shifts pertain to empirical methodology, personal belief, and semantics alike. Each of these three dimensions of the change in thinking that I am concerned with here influences the other two, and all occur simultaneously, gradually, and in virtually all social strata. Biblical certainty had long depended on the “truth” of its literal textual meaning. According to the now archaic notion of truthfulness as statements of fact (rather than opinion or probability), Scripture gave social cohesion by providing authoritative answers to pressing moral, historical, and genealogical questions. But the gap between revealed Biblical truth and the increasingly oppositional notion of empirically demonstrable fact undermined the Bible’s relevance to communal reality.

For example, Biblical timelines, specifically the Mosaic creation account and the dates and ages of other central figures and events, came under attack by studies that examined ancient societies outside the confines of Biblical doctrine. Histories such as Karl Richard Lepsius’s *Chronologie der Aegypter* [Chronology of the Egyptians] (1849) severely discredited Biblical history writing. Yet the most devastating account was Strauß’s *Das Leben Jesu* [The Life of Jesus] (1835-6), which radically reevaluated the term “mythology” by demonstrating that the Biblical authors did not share the same conception of factual accounts with contemporary, nineteenth-century, scholars (Lee, *Erosion* 170). Up to this point, theologians like Andrews Norton had assumed that the patrician writers “shared his nineteenth-century epistemology” (Lee 170). Strauß had unintentionally opened the door to dismissing Biblical accounts of, for instance, miracles, as the work of primitive minds trying to make sense of natural events—a gap David Hume had exploited as well. Regarding Strauß’s methodology, Lee comments that, “like Spinoza, [Strauß] worked on the a priori assumption that the laws of nature could not be broken and therefore any record of a miracle could have been the result of a primitive mythological

mind interpreting the life of Jesus” (*Erosion* 171). With history being one of the main authenticating arguments in the nineteenth-century, Strauß and others deflated the authority of the NT, which came as a harsh blow to Protestant certainty.

An example for the shift in moral certainty of the Biblical account is the problem of theodicy; i.e., that God is ultimately the author of evil in the world. This idea, prominently if ambiguously addressed in the OT Book of Job, had long been suspended within Calvinism as existing beyond the circumference of human understanding. The notion that God cannot be all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful, without being the author of evil. Immanuel Kant, in *On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials at Theodicy* (1791), concludes concerning Job’s assertion of moral integrity in the face of all temptations of impiety toward God, “For with this disposition [Job’s insistence on his integrity] he proved that he did not found his morality on faith, but his faith on morality: in such a case, however weak this faith might be, yet it alone is of a pure and true kind; i.e. the kind of faith that founds not a religion of supplication, but a religion of good life conduct” (“Miscarriage” 33). Kant argues further that, ultimately, “the authentic theodicy we saw that in these matters, less depends on subtle reasoning than on sincerity in taking notice of the impotence of our reason, and on honesty in not distorting our thoughts in what we say, however pious our intention” (“Miscarriage” 34). Following this line of reasoning, Kant transforms the question after the intelligibility of God’s moral properties and actions into one about human rationalist faculties and the categories of reason. It is equally an assertion of human agency, “for through our reason God then becomes himself the interpreter of his will as announced through creation; and we can call this interpretation an authentic theodicy” (“Miscarriage” 31). One may still not be able to fathom God’s moral mind, but the categories for personal belief are clearly intelligible. In the nineteenth century, Kant’s move from sounding the

godhead to illuminating the operations of human understanding would help turn the “problem of evil” into a metaphor for human suffering and the need for communal intervention (Turner 204).

American theologians had dismissed the OT as an antique document that could not stand up to the modern investigative techniques. Higher criticism, however, began its life as the study of the OT. This dismissal and the resulting gap in scholarship had a symbolic dimension as well. It opened a niche to foreign methodological imports in that area. Privileging the NT over the OT opened the gates to an alternative line of analytical reasoning in America, one that focused on the literary character of the Biblical text. Jonathan Sheehan notes in *The Enlightenment Bible* (2007) that

[...] there was a virtual renaissance of the Old Testament in later eighteenth-century Germany. This renaissance made the Old Testament into the gravitational center for the poetic Bible. [...] in Germany after 1750, literature (and poetry specifically) became a tool for reinventing the old Testament by scholars committed to overcoming archaism, and to preserving a relationship between the increasingly distant biblical world and late eighteenth-century Germany. (152)

While the Bible thus fared poorly when held up to the newly conceived, modernist concept of the historical record, theologians strengthened its status as a cultural document. “The symbolic strain in the Bible,” Turner opines, “came to seem, not a historical excrescence incidental to the central message, but the quintessential voice of Scripture” (149). In the nineteenth century, the literary quality of Scripture was emphasized among scholars of all stripes, if only because such emphasis preserved the Bible’s ability to speak moral truth. In an often-cited comment, Matthew Arnold summarizes the new distinction between historical and literary exegesis in *Literature and Dogma* (1873): “the language of the Bible is fluid, passing, and literary, not rigid, fixed, and scientific, is the first step towards a right understanding of the Bible” (qtd. in Turner 149). This trend towards flexibility indicates what Sheehan terms the rise of the cultural or literary Bible. In fact,

he argues that the very multiplicity of scholarly methods and extant textual objects characterizes what he calls the Enlightenment Bible (xiii).

Commentators on both sides of the Atlantic began to distinguish between the OT's affective and the NT's didactic qualities. Until the nineteenth century, "universal edification and sublimity" had been separate markers attributed to the Bible; in contrast, "the story of the Enlightenment Bible was in nuce a story of the separation of these qualities, as moral-pedagogical virtues were invested in the New Testament, and the Old was given affective power by its sublime style" (Sheehan 178). For this reason, authors, such as Melville, who turn to the OT as interlocutor for their own works are interested in the depiction of moral truth as sentiment. Melville's textual interactions with the OT therefore are informed by this thematic segregation that emerged in his lifetime. Of course, I am not suggesting that Melville did not comment on the NT's moralism. In fact he did so quite extensively. However, under the auspices of Sheehan's dualist paradigm, I do want to propose that Melville performed a critique of one part of the Bible by means of the other. As I show in Chapter 2, this idea becomes especially vivid pieces such as "Bartleby" and, most importantly, in *The Confidence-Man*.

2.7 The Legacy of Sola Scriptura: Religious Reading and Publishing

To be sure, the controversies higher criticism produced among theological experts at American universities did not occur as a relatively secluded discourse among specialists. Yet Protestantism's maxim of the independent study of text, *sola scriptura*, from its beginning, conceived salvation as tied to hermeneutics. Recognizing free grace was an intellectual process in which literate audiences had to rise to the argument from reason. This scenario begs the question of how a lay audience responded to challenges to orthodoxy posed by skepticism, deism, and higher criticism. Were they even exposed to such arguments? Did they have

exegetical responses that differed from those of the elite clergy at Harvard and other places of learning? In one particular instance, through the publications of deist societies, the answer to the latter question has to be affirmative. However, I wish to table addressing this group for a moment. The following three sections will address these questions on the premise that Melville was himself never privy to college let alone graduate education. His writing undeniably is the result of his thinking through the immense amounts of readings he did in the 1840s; yet it equally is the expression of the communal environments he traversed: mercantile Dutch Reformed Calvinist domesticity, sailors' yarns and superstitions, and European cosmopolitanism all informed his reading of the Bible. As such understanding the history of popular religion in America is useful, I argue, because it allows us to contextualize his reactions to the aforementioned issues of skepticism as a lay man and simultaneously enables us to reassess the label of radical subversiveness usually attached to his work. Those who would charge me with inconsistency for already abandoning my initial assertion to consider only Melville's extant texts, I say that I deem this biographical tangent necessary to establish his authorial milieu. Because he is a self-educated, independent reader who deigns an antiauthoritarian perspective, it seems crucial to ask what, if any, kinds of personal Biblical hermeneutics American Protestantism condoned.

Clerical exegesis and communal organization, as David Hall reminds us, had never been the undisputed prerogative of intellectual elites in seventeenth-century New England. In *Worlds of Wonder* (1989) Hall illustrates that literacy was disproportionately high to begin with in American Protestant congregations because virtually none of its members were peasants but educated yeomen, farmers, merchants, and the like (7). Hall denies that the clergy dominated people's thinking. Rather than dictating to their congregations, ministers used persuasion

because they began from the premise that congregational membership was optional. In Hall's words, ministers' power was, "too mediated to make them really dominant and 'domination' is a word that simply doesn't fit the pluralistic structure of New England towns and churches" (*Worlds* 11). The intellectual fabric of seventeenth-century New England according to Hall was a "tale of consensus and resistance" marked by a "dialectic of resistance and cooperation" between lay people and the clergy (*Worlds* 12). Hall's central argumentative thrust is the assumption that the "church attracts most people intermittently" within their annual communal and life cycles; those whom Hall calls "horse-shed Christians," because they spend the Sabbath debating politics between sermons rather than attending Sunday School, approach theology pragmatically, and their daily practice of those beliefs, like Melville's stories and novels would two-hundred years later, often interlaces superstition and doctrine (Hall, *Worlds* 15).

Regarding supposedly isolated frontier communities in early America, Shelby M. Balik demonstrates that geographical distance inspired great ingenuity and networking rather than being detrimental to communal structures. Balik argues that religion becomes a supra-denominational virtual space at the Northern frontier as "Print and correspondence networks inspired reflection and lifted the spirits; they also strengthened northern New England's social and religious foundations as the region's peripatetic laity expanded webs of friendship and kinship through writing and reading" (608). Religious publications helped maintain those virtual "spiritual communities" over great distances, as "Lay writers made distant events in unknown places immediate and concrete, thereby supporting a communications network [. . .] and providing a venue for public religious discourse. This open forum came to encompass a complicated tangle of beliefs, behaviors, and practices" (639). Geographical expansion, then, combined with the decentralized congregation model of communal organization, seems to have

encouraged rather than deterred the dissemination of religious discourse. As I show below, religious skeptics would try to duplicate this model of decentralized intellectual networks in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The essential point of these social historians make is that the argument that controversial issues were inaccessible to lay people because of class or geographical isolation seems unconvincing. At the same time, it would be myopic to assume that both religious and irreligious organizations did not actively attempt to shape discourses for theological and political ends. As with Hall's Puritan congregants, nineteenth-century lay people are appealed to rather than instructed by religious organizations; one, because religious confession was still technically a private affair—even though civil religion had begun to codify religiosity via the newly emerging discourse of citizenship—and, secondly, because religious reformers had to assume that private reading responses to the Bible ranged from haphazard or critical, and that either practice yielded unexpected results.

To the first point, the fledgling citizenship discourse highlighted the increasing contradiction between personal religious inquiry and citizenship.²⁸ The political and civic landscape therefore changed significantly in the time between 1790 and 1840. Schlereth cautions that moral and communal reform under the evangelical banner was by no means universally embraced: “conflicts between free enquiry and moral reform highlight how new forms of religiosity shaping American culture during the 1820s and 1830s demanded further efforts to reconcile the vexing relationship between personal beliefs and political obligations” (236). These conflicts transformed the visibility of religion in the public sphere by raising fundamental questions about the permeability of citizenship and private moral and religious sentiment, as this relationship was reflected in state institutions. “In debates over infidelity,” he continues,

²⁸ Schlereth also notes how the project of building national identity was riddled with attempts to infuse the American Revolution and its framers retroactively with orthodox Christian religious sentiments (194).

“Americans thus pursued competing religious beliefs in the public sphere by wedding religious opinion to political power in altogether new ways. As a result, by the 1830s Americans had thoroughly constructed American civil society and politics on religious terms” (238). Ironically, this symbiosis dulled the blade of theological controversy.

Partisan conflicts during the early 1800s demonstrated that Americans could safely engage in religious controversy without inciting religious violence. As a result, however, religious beliefs maintained political power only as competing opinions, open to debate in the public sphere. Theology no longer provided political traction. The Whigs and Democrats thus brought changed notions of religious knowledge into the mainstream of American politics. (Schlereth 239)

Free-enquiry societies invariably helped transform matters of religious praxis into differences of political opinion. Schlereth’s final assessment of religion’s dealings with politics in the Early Republic curiously echoes the dynamic I have sketched out above concerning religion’s ambivalent relationship with science and the culture of evidentialism:

Deeply held religious beliefs are nonetheless modified by the political practices necessary to ensure religion’s continued purchase in public life. The political and cultural history of infidelity demonstrates how ‘religious truths’ were invented and redefined through religious controversies in the public sphere. (241)

As such, religious advocats won a Pyrrhic victory by fortifying their interpretation of truth in the political categories of civil religion. Their dabbling in social engineering, it seems, inevitably hollowed out not just their specific interpretation of truth but the category of revealed truth itself.

2.8 A New Medium for a New Message: The Religious Press and the Proliferation of Print Media

The second point about the uncontrollable quality of private reading is even more complex as it is tied inextricably to the larger issue of religious publishing in America. The Protestant clergy generally had to assume that believers deviated from their intended reading practices. In *Faith in Reading* (2004), David Paul Nord examines the reports about reading habits

of laity compiled by colporteurs, traveling professors of faith peddling Bibles and other publications in the name of the great mission of morally reforming America. These reports illustrate the discrepancies between prescribed and practiced reading habits amongst America's faithful. Organizations such as the American Tract Society advocated "intensity" as the only reading style for their materials; as such, careful reading came to be equated with virtue while cursory reading was associated with vice (Nord 148). However, the clergy was very specific as to what kind of intense reading efforts they condoned: "Religious tracts often dismissed skeptical arguments out of hand and considered freethinking a shallow attempt to rationalize vice" (Grasso 485). For instance, in his *Lectures on Skepticism* (1839), Lyman Beecher argued that skeptics overestimate their own reason in following misguided German critics (Grasso 486). These reactions show that fear that the reach of irreligious ideas would reach and corrupt the American people *en masse* was real, even if the actual numbers of infidel conversions were limited. What is beyond question is the fact that skeptical works were broadly accessible and could potentially be digested by a rather broad audience literate in a variety of rather specialized religious discourses. Commenting on reading habits in the nineteenth-century as promoted by the evangelical press, Gunther Brown stresses the ability of mid-century religious readers to move "between older and newer genres, steady sellers and recently popular titles, intensive and extensive reading styles, and evangelical and nonevangelical textual communities" while maintaining a sense of writing and reading as sacred processes (138).²⁹ Hall, Nord, and Gunther Brown all emphasize that the clergy's control over reading habits was never absolute and at best embattled even if readers did not always confront them face on like the deists.

²⁹ The arguments for eclectic readings by non-expert audiences I assemble, ultimately, serve to disprove Wright's hypothesis that Natalia Wright cautions that when considering Melville's use of the Bible, one should assume "[. . .] a background of middle-class morality rather than of religion, and to disengage the elements of the Biblical, the Calvinistic, and the socially conventional which composed it would hardly be possible" (5).

Despite the orthodox lamentations, the kind of skepticism American Christianity faced down in the first half of the nineteenth century was not the result of a political cabal or natural depravity but rather grew from the seed of Protestant thinking. Programmatic versions of skepticism, such as deism, were symptoms of a fever that Protestantism had contracted from its proclivity to tap into new intellectual currents in discourses it no longer fully controlled. Intellectuals, Grasso explains, “struggled with religious doubt not because they were naturally exercising their reflective reason [. . .], but because they had imbibed styles of Protestant philosophical and scientific thought without understanding their limitation” (503). Sanctifying reason had been part of the Protestant rhetoric in one form or another since the Reformation, and marking rational faculties as inherent became part of the Protestant program in the eighteenth century in an effort to modernize the foundations of faith. What skeptics lacked, from the perspective of orthodox theologians, was a sense of propriety as to how far they could push their investigations. As such, charges of infidelity or atheism frequently were misnomers for the qualitatively different charges of impropriety and academic zeal. The problem was that using reason for exegetical purposes became increasingly difficult to distinguish from the impulse of free inquiry, an impulse that was galvanized by the atmosphere of the American Revolution and its rhetoric of personal freedom.³⁰

Particularly liberal brands of Protestantism, such as Unitarianism, picked up the gauntlet thrown down by deists and higher critics to developed original theologies of their own. Cities were not only centers of technology and industry but also presented spaces in which religious debates were at their most direct and volatile. It is therefore unsurprising that ventures such as the evangelical religious press launched from places such as New York City. Here,

³⁰ Orestes Brownson, indeed, is quite consistent here: after his conversion to Catholicism he traced back the genealogy of spiritual discontent to the Reformation (Grasso 506).

confrontations with so-called infidels were magnified. To religious organizations like the religious press, the city functioned as an echo chamber whose resonances fed the narrative of fears about the state of American faith. This fear galvanized the missionizing effort because, in the ongoing march towards the millennium, every soul counted. Groups such as the American Tract Society, the Bible Society and the Sunday School Union still worked towards the Protestant ideal of a “universal priesthood,” as both clergy and laity “mediate between the sacred Word and the profane world” (Gunther Brown 169). Unlike the old New England Calvinists, evangelicals, Gunther Brown cautions, were not concerned with consolidating political power (19). Paul Gutjahr emphasizes the centrality of this development for how the Bible was perceived in the minds of Americans by arguing that “With the emergence of the American Bible Society in 1816, the United States had come into its own in the area of bible production, making it for more difficult for foreign publishers to make a profit by importing and selling their bibles in America” (7). American publishers began to push back against foreign control, particularly British, of its literary market place and simultaneously began to cultivate its own printing technologies and logistical structures. Yet publishers’ decision to proselytize by means of new technological and commercial tools created a particular conundrum within the movement: “Evangelicals anxiously acknowledged that their project of going into the world to preach the gospel could be derailed in either of two directions: if they withdrew from the world to maintain purity or if, in their zeal to transform the world, they diluted their distinctive message” (Gunther Brown 20). Earlier, I talked about how the discourse of science and reason, which religious leaders utilized to reconnected Christianity to the changed intellectual sensibilities of their audience, both turned out to be detrimental to precisely these efforts because it could not function within the religious framework without challenging absolutist notions of truth. At the

same time, these influences went both ways, as organizations such as the aforementioned American Tract Society and its partners incidentally also drove technological and logistical progress. Most importantly, however, the studies I mentioned all seem to suggest that Protestantism's inclination to appropriate other discourses in order to unify seemingly disparate and fragmented congregation almost consistently compromises Christianity's textual foundation. With evangelicals, for instance, the publication of hymns was seen as such a unifying agent. Hymns aimed at creating a sense of "unity as members of a timeless placeless church universal" (Gunther Brown 242). To this end, editors freely mutilated and altered hymns, which in turn created controversies.

One little-mentioned fact in the discussion on the spectrum of nineteenth-century religious publishing is that while metropolitan centers such as New York and Boston were headquarters to the religious press, they also housed a variety critical and skeptical organizations and publishers. What is noteworthy in this context is that religious leaders perceived the spheres of influence of both religious and irreligious presses to be equal, despite the obvious advantages of the religious press in the areas of funding, organizational structure, and professionalization:

Antebellum urban spaces were particularly conducive for efforts by infidels and partisans of political religion to print, organize, and ultimately mobilize constituencies that would translate their ideas and beliefs into public action. *Evangelical reformers surpassed free enquirers on all of these fronts, but such success did little to alter an asymmetry of perception that endowed political religion and political irreligion with nearly limitless reach in the imagination of their opponents.* (Schlereth 236, emphasis added)

A paranoid fear of infidel corruption seemingly offset the structural advantages religious institutions had in the arena of publishing and distribution; although evangelicals plainly outspent skeptical counter-offers, they consistently feared annihilation from an impossibly powerful enemy. This paradoxical scenario illustrates just how much Calvinism's reliance on

rationalism had damaged Protestantism's reliance in its own argumentative methodology. Hence evangelicalism's turn to a discourse of the heart must be seen as the attempt to tapping into an uncontaminated argumentative mode. Unitarianism in particular functioned as a theological catalyst for new literary modes, particularly in the urban spaces of Boston and New York. In his account of Melville's connection to the New York Unitarians, Donald Kring traces Melville's first exposure to heterodox religious thinking to Ellery Channing's time as a minister in New York during Melville's youth (8). "It is perhaps portentous to the fate of American literature," Kring speculates, "that Unitarianism gained its roots in New York City the very year that Herman Melville was born" (9). In 1819, the year of Melville's birth, Channing had taken a stand for the liberal faction within American religion by delivering his sermon on "Unitarian Christianity." In it, he laid out, among other things, the view that "First and foremost, the Bible was rightly to be seen as a record of 'God's successive revelations to man'; each successive revelation marked a new stage of progress from the "childhood of the human race"" (qtd. in Brown 62). Following his encounter with higher criticism, Channing did not see the Bible as supernaturally inspired and thus came to the position skeptics had occupied for over a hundred years, namely that it could be interpreted by the same methods applicable to any ancient text.

Like evangelical publishing, free thinkers and skeptics also ran their own irreligious presses and thus circulated dissenting ideas. These latter publishers injected into the market a variety of controversial European theological tractates and pamphlets. One such publisher was George Washington Matsell of Chatham St., New York (in close proximity to Melville's friend and patron Evert Duyckinck's offices). True to the deist method of challenging religion on its own formal terms, Matsell took a page out of the playbook of evangelical publishers and printed a series called the *Free Enquirer's Family Library*—a nod to Harper Brothers' famous *Family*

Library series (Gunther Brown 75). Matsell's line-up featured prominent European skeptics, deists, and materialists such as Thomas Paine, Robert Dale Owen, Ethan Allen, and Baron Thiry d'Holbach, but also poets and writers of fiction such as Percy Shelley. Among his publications were Thomas Paine's famous and influential *Age of Reason*, Thiry d'Holbach's *System of Nature* (1835), and Ethan Allen's *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (1836). These texts crystallized eighteenth-century continental skeptical philosophy. While little research has been done on Matsell in particular and the irreligious press in general, Matsell's *New York Times* obituary acknowledges the publisher's controversial catalog and thus evinces the impact of his productions on the New York intellectual scene. The editor notes that Matsell "gained considerable notoriety from the peculiar character of the books and periodicals which he exposed for sale, being chiefly works considered at that time infidel productions [. . .] his store naturally became the rendezvous of the advanced philosophers and free thinkers of the day" ("Death"). Thus Matsell's offices functioned as a meeting place for that particular segment of New York's literary scene that existed separately from the national political (like Lewis Clark's *Knickerbocker* or Evert Duyckinck's numerous *Young America* magazines) or orthodox religious players. Such comments speak to the figurative and literal role publishing houses played as facilitators of intellectual exchange and shapers of cultural discourses.

2.9 Oral Forms: Sermon Culture and Public Debates

As early as the eighteenth century, "Evangelical leaders used the printed and the preached word to set themselves apart from other Protestants and to cultivate in their followers a sense of membership in a transatlantic evangelical community" (Gunther Brown 34). By 1833, virtually all states had abandoned state-supported religion and thereby opened the floodgates of denominational competition. The contest between the Protestant creeds was primarily fought

with the weapons of the pulpit and the press and the evangelical denominations emerged victorious in terms of sheer membership numbers (Gunther Brown 36). Print outlets such as journals, pamphlets, public debates, and most importantly, sermons.

Earlier I mentioned that the goal of creating a self-reliant, congregational readership for ministers resulted in downplaying their exegetical intellectualism. Arguably, the premium so placed on the individual reading experience usefully contextualizes the conditions under which evangelical culture formed around the unique quality of individual inspiration and sentiment through homiletics, the art of sermonizing. In the preaching profession, this downplaying of scholarly method manifested itself in the ongoing discussion about extemporaneous preaching. As Dawn Coleman observes, congregants more and more preferred to hear oratory arguments, uttered from the heart, rather than following complex academic argumentation read from script (39). Nineteenth-century homiletic advice literature, for instance, Henry Ware, Jr.'s *Hints at Extemporaneous Preaching* (1824), increasingly diminished the need for ministers to reflect upon topics through their own meditative writing prior to sermonizing and thereby emphasized performativity in the sermon format (Coleman 39). The efficacy of sermonizing therefore shifted from systemic comprehension to emotional acquiescence (Coleman 30). A byproduct of this development was an increasing harshness of tone and regular moral reproof from the pulpit as the century progressed (Coleman 41). Of course, this style had existed in sermons prior to this point with in the homiletic subgenre of the jeremiad. Accordingly, expectations toward the audience's participation and understanding were high:

No other mode of public speech made larger claims for its own importance or insisted that hearers heed it more carefully. Yet if moral authority seemed the ministers' too loose, it was also now a privilege to be earned, since in a democratic society under religious voluntarism, preachers had to turn their theological convictions and biblical learning into compelling, pew-filling performances. (Coleman 45)

While asserting the potency of their system of delivery, those in the preaching profession made the same demands of earnest intellectual engagement of their audiences as did advocates of the religious press. To be sure, this was not a new strategy on the part of Protestant ministers. As Abram Van Engen recently showed, seventeenth-century communal life under New England Protestantism turned significantly on the Biblical principle of “fellow-feeling”:

Using scripture, they [Puritan ministers and writers] called on readers and listeners to sympathize with the joys and sorrows of citizens and saints—fellow countrymen and fellow converts. In the process, they turned sympathy into a sign of membership: the experience and expression of mutual affections helped determine who belonged with whom. Sympathy thus became both an obligation and a mark of identity, an emotional duty to be performed and an irregular, ever-shifting experience identifying who was in and who was out. (3)³¹

Seventeenth-century Calvinist ministers already required audiences to enter into a reciprocal, intellectual, and emotional bond with them. Listeners were not merely to follow in their arguments but their conviction was to assume the quality of an emotional response to being in the divine presence. Coleman’s rendering of the state of sermonizing as competing with sentimental novels must be contextualized in Van Engen’s comments. To enliven the technical process of exegesis, nineteenth-century homiletics emphasized accessibility over assent from argument; however, the emphasis of broad appeal and the shift from homiletics to extemporaneous sermonizing had consequences: “Abandoning sermon-writing,” as Coleman comments, “meant losing the intellectuality and erudition that had long been a cornerstone of ministerial identity” (Coleman 40). As the intellectual engagement with the spiritual texts became less prominent, emotion eventually became the primary means of accessing true religion.

³¹ The ability to ‘fellow-feel,’ as Van Engen notes further, also played a significant role in critically evaluating conversion testimony: “[. . .] the operations of sympathy—the emotional exchange between narrator and listener—enabled an authoritative member of the church to judge a conversion true” (6). Hence sympathy was a the loadstone of assessing community, and preaching provided positive examples of lived sympathy as derived from the Biblical text.

Taken together, Van Engen's and Coleman's studies enable a diachronic view on the relationship between sermonizing and the valuation of sympathy within religious thinking. Emphasizing sentiment was not an invention of nineteenth-century homiletics. While the nominal demands of earnestness and attentiveness toward audiences remained consistent, emotion came to be connoted differently within the context of sermons. Sympathy went from being a communal ideal that demanded the personal effort of each congregant to being a stylistic element in the minister's oral performance. The latter required merely identification with a charismatic speaker and therefore represented a version of religious communitarianism that tolerated more superficial forms of engagement. Those ministers who could tap into this religious emotional reservoir commanded respect. But this subtle shift also had further consequences: Ministers' ability to persuade further blurred the lines of religious sentiment and political interest. Nineteenth-century authors reflected these dynamics more discerningly than they are often given credit for. For instance, Harriet Beecher Stowe, in her novel *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), depicts the economic struggles of Samuel Hopkins as resulting directly from his decision to alienate audiences by preaching against slavery and contextualizing his abolitionism in his cosmology of disinterested benevolence (55).

Besides internal shifts in homiletic practice, the context of public oratory also changed significantly in the nineteenth century. Holifield comments that, "through the popular institution of oral debate, nineteenth-century Americans treated theology as a form of popular entertainment, and celebrated debaters attracted large audiences to contests that extended over days" (*Theology* 3). New York City in particular was home to a variety of denominational church services on any given holiday, but it also housed several counter movements. The aforementioned deist and free-thinker societies regularly held public speeches and debates which

accentuated the changed ethics of sermonizing by emphasizing reason above all other faculties. These events also saw a great variety of attendees, including women and even children that normally weren't given a voice in orthodox services, a fact that fanned the flames of moral outrage on the part of theologians (Schlereth 187).

On April 16, 1851, Melville famously relays to Hawthorne his frustrations concerning the impossibility of making a living as an author by advocating such absolute integrity. Melville equivocates the pulpit with the writing desk in his letter and implies that any author or minister worth their salt should use their public forum to express uncomfortable truths: "Let any clergyman try to preach the Truth from its very stronghold, the pulpit, and they would ride him out of his church on his own pulpit bannister. It can hardly be doubted that all Reformers are bottomed upon the truth, more or less; and to the world at large are not reformers almost universally laughing-stocks?" (*Correspondence* 191). One cannot make a living trying to fulfill the clerical office, so one inevitably becomes a hypocrite.

Melville's literary rendering of the sermon form is equally ambivalent. Father Mapple's famous sermon in *Moby-Dick* is a meditation on that form. Mapple ends the sermon by not only explicating the meaning of the Jonah story, but by drawing from it a meta-commentary about the office of the sermonizer:

And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth in the face of Falsehood! That was it! [. . .] this is that other lesson; and woe to that pilot of the living God [the minister] who slights it. Woe to him whom this world charms from Gospel duty! Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the waters when God has brewed them into a gale! Woe to him who seeks to please rather than to appal! Woe to him whose good name is more to him than goodness! Woe to him who, in this world, courts not dishonor! Woe to him who would not be true, even though to be false were salvation! (*MD* 48)

Lawrance Thompson reads Mapple as imparting the "wisdom of religious acceptance, based on right reason" (163), yet the lesson to those holding clerical office seems to be quite the opposite:

to unsettle those comfortable in their ways even if doing so requires a course of action that is irrational or even sinful. Mapple's hyperbolic assertion of absolute integrity answers Melville's dogged lament.

Later in the novel, when Fleece, the black cook, performs a mock sermon for the sharks at Stubb's behest, Melville even questions the validity of fellow feeling as cosmological principle:

[Fleece] 'Well, den, Belubed fellow-critters:—'Right!' exclaimed Stubb approvingly, 'coax 'em to it; try that,' and Fleece continued. 'Dough you is all sharks, and by natur wery voracious, yet I zay to you, fellow-critters, dat dat voraciousness [. . .] I don't blame ye so much for; dat is natur, and can't be helped; but to govern dat wicked natur, dat is de pint. You is sarks, sartin; but if you govern de shark in you, why den you be angel; for all angel is not'ing more dan de shark well governed.' (295)

The scene is often read as a parody of the Mapple sermon. And Fleece's sermon is critical towards sentimental sermonizing; it is, at the same time, an observant deconstruction of the Protestant homiletic genre. Melville uses parody not to denounce the practice of sermonizing but to critique the unreflected commandment to feel by the clergy. Fleece approaching his fellow-critters in the sentiment of fellow-feeling foregrounds the grotesqueness that lies in insisting on the universality of sympathy. Both Mapple and Fleece deliver parodies of sermons and yet neither can go beyond the sermon format. Sermonizing that is merely emotional and cathartic, Melville shows, moves the person delivering such sermons either in the realm of mysticism—in fact the skeptical derogatory label of 'priestcraft,' describing the office of the minister, denotes precisely this kind of superstitious mysticism—or hypocrisy. Although Thompson claims that subverting dogma gave Melville "unspeakable pleasure," I want to argue that the humor in these scenes only goes skin deep because it is offset by Ishmael's contemplative interventions (137). David Reynolds does not count Melville amongst the more overtly religious authors of the

nineteenth-century in his study on nineteenth-century religious fiction *Faith in Fiction* (1981). And yet Melville's literary project, I suggest, can easily be aligned with those of Susana Rowson and Lyman Beecher, both of whom Reynolds associates with a liberal Post-Calvinist kind of fiction that mounts "a prolonged effort at improving the Bible—improving it by mixing sacred and profane" elements (Reynolds, *Faith* 130). What is at stake for Melville, then, is not so much writing a new American Bible, but exposing the Bible and its associated oral and literary genres to new American intellectual realities. As he does, Melville remains vested in exploring the difference between an absolute and usable truth to see whether both can be reconciled. And while he thus upholds the need for an absolute moral standard, clerical truth appears hermetic and impractical.

2.10 Protestant Zionism: American Interest in the Holy Land

One area in which literary fiction visibly influenced the way Americans perceived Biblical mimesis is the genre of travel writing, which saw its first boom in the early nineteenth century. Melville himself, in fact, had been prognosticated a bright future as the author of the travel novels *Typee* and *Omoo*, both of which were essentially marketed as eye-witness accounts of disturbing and mysterious realities of life on the Pacific islands. More significantly for religious readers, however, was the emergent subgenre of journeys to the so-called Holy Land, Palestine. The Holy Land had long been occluded as a travel destination under Ottoman rule, but in the 1830s a new policy of relaxation opened the Holy Land to Western tourists, religious pilgrims and missionaries, as well as scientists commenced (Goldman, *Sacred* 151).

Technological innovation in travel through steamships and ever more organized forms of commerce. The increase in travel to Palestine by Europeans and U.S. Americans was branded a rediscovery, and Palestine, as a result, became over-determined in the minds of these travelers as

a space where Biblical history could be experienced first-hand. Importantly, responses by Western travelers were not uniform but ranged from great disappointment, over scholarly intrigue, to Zionist fundamentalist fervor. Such responses depended as much on travelers' actual encounters with the land and its people, as on their preconceptions of their pilgrimages. Literary conceptions of the Holy Land were mostly based on the OT, and thus informed subsequent political attitudes and Zionist ambitions towards Palestine.

In America, the resulting 'Holy Land mania' in travel had two distinct dimensions in terms of its implications for Biblical authority: First, Ottoman Palestine became a place in which American and European travelers hoped to experience Biblical religious history first hand and thereby wished to harmonize what Hans W. Frei calls the explicative or ostensive and applicative or religious meaning of the Bible based on the referential relationship between the two (124). Secondly, pilgrimage to the Holy Land started out as a textual hermeneutical endeavor for American travelers. Stephanie Rogers stresses the literary character of the Holy Land assumed in the mind of many Americans in *Inventing the Holy Land* (2011) when she shows that, for religiously motivated travelers such as pilgrims, theologians, and missionaries, expectations about the Holy Land were often based on a preexisting, sentimental relationship to the Bible, created, for instance, through childhood memories of illustrations in family Bibles (49). Travel writers, Rogers claims, created "a new world in print—at first existing only on the page—then quickly becoming an impetus to physically carve out a more biblical East, a new Protestant homeland with new Protestant shrines" (2). Of course, the inevitable discrepancy between ostensive meaning and material reality created all sorts of intellectual challenges for travelers. And such disappointments affected many of the discourses about Biblical authenticity mentioned above. Palestine provided a storage house of scientific evidence for many of the Bible's

pseudoscientific claims. Because their expectations had been formed by their textual comprehension of the Holy Land, experiences had to be narrativized as “Protestants had to turn to an inward interpretive and creative place to conform their pilgrimage to their beliefs and expectations. It necessitated a literary transformation of the raw personal knowledge of pilgrimage” (Rogers 144). Brian Yothers qualifies this proposition by arguing that author travelers such as Clorinda Minor, William Thomson, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain display a “resistance to ‘finding what they seek’ in any reductive sense” (2). Yothers argues that works such as Minor’s *Meshullam!*, Melville’s *Clarel*, and Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* each contain a crucial element of “obsessive analysis of prior texts as the writers constantly grapple with earlier (often Catholic) interpretations of the sacred landscape and seek to debunk what they regard as pernicious myths even as they seek to reinforce faith in the sacred event of their religion” (2). American reactions on both ends of their journey determined their literary responses. Travel accounts, therefore, did not exist in a vacuum but were inextricably tied to both religious pilgrimage reports and Biblical hermeneutics. Seen from this angle, literary Holy Land exploits were, at least initially, equally journeys into personal religious consciousness and literary archival work.

Some historians have pointed out how American responses to the Holy Land experience quickly assumed a political coloring. The reasons for this have as much to do with America’s relatively short national history as with an apparent need amongst its political and religious leaders to infuse national identity with transcendental purpose. Earlier, I outlined how civil religion essentially emerged from contentious debates about the systemic role religious freedom would play in a republic. Historical studies assert a rather latitudinarian attitude towards granting religious freedom without favoritism, while, at the same time, asserting that national discourse in

the Early Republic was mired in OT Biblicism. The function of this rhetoric, as Shalev hypothesizes, was in part to “alleviate anxieties related to the limits of human authority and legitimize the unprecedented American federal and republican endeavor” (2). While the psychology of emergent American nationalism cannot be addressed in great detail here, what seems uncontroversial is that American nationalism was determined by religious imagination, particularly the remnants of Calvinist Providentialism and errand consciousness (Shalev 190).

Beyond that, the prospect of basing Biblical revelation on scientific truth appealed to many who already felt the pangs of an increasingly rigorously evidentialist, intellectual climate or, in Rogers’s terms, a balm for the “nagging uncertainties created by Modernism” (144). From the very beginning of the travel mania, the Holy Land, therefore, shouldered a massive representational burden of connecting the Bible’s mythic artefacts of revealed truths with an archive of geographical evidence. In relation to the issue of America’s political aspirations towards the Holy Land, this backdrop is significant because it puts into focus the role millennialist religious sensibilities, which came to the fore in the mid-1800s, played in conceptualizing the present and future of Palestine. Literary representations captured the dynamic of expectation—and often disappointment—that American pilgrims felt at the sight of what they perceived as an uncivilized backwater country.³² American travelers simultaneously perceived Ottoman society as quaintly naturalistic and backwards; Arabs provided an “authentic oriental scenery for pilgrims,” yet especially their treatment of women alienated many Western travelers (Rogers 85). The common denominator between these ambivalent reactions was that

³² Many travelers rationalized this backwardness as the effects of a curse that loomed over this land for having expelled Christ. Incidentally, Rogers argues that the impression of cursedness created “a need for a prophetic and spiritual interpretation of the negative phenomena of the misery and the poverty of the area” (144). In the early phases of the Holy Land mania, Jews were considered to be a vanishing tribe in Ottoman Palestine, and Protestant missionaries asserted the need for the Jews to convert or be washed away by the incoming wave of civilization. Obenzinger argues that Melville was fascinated with the failure of the Jews as a chosen people (“Wicked” 193). The Holy Land therefore provided a chance to experience the wake of God’s wrath to believers who sought in vain for a sublime conversion experience on their pilgrimage.

travel authors inscribed onto the canvas of material reality a preconceived notion of the Holy Land as a place of dense historicity brimming with religious meaning, with denizens existing as constitutive others in a *tableau vivant* that leaves no possibility for political agency.

Because Palestinians had limited historical agency for these authors, the inscription process eventually took on a futurist tint in the form of American Zionism. In the late nineteenth century, Zionism emerged in America from evangelical premillennialism; i.e. the belief that the return of Christ would usher in a golden age in human history. (One of the frequently prophesized conditions for Christ's return was the gathering of the Jewish people in Israel.) In the 1840s, in the wake of the Second Great Awakening, many newly formed Protestant denominations, such as the followers of William Miller, or Millerites, Seventh-day Adventists, and Mormons, held premillennialist beliefs and called for the Jews to be restored to the Holy Land (Goldman *Sacred* 4). After the Civil War, the U.S. turned from an invocation of OT type of Israel to a NT theology and "discussions on 'mission' and 'holy cause' in the name of 'the banner of liberty'" (Shalev 189). From an American perspective, political Zionism thus blended with religious millennialism to create a transformative agenda upon Palestine and transform it to conform to Protestant expectations. "By the turn of the [twentieth] century," Rogers subsumes, "many Americans were ready to see Palestinians moved out of the centers and into the corners, out of the way of developments" (85). Yet the particular fervor and force of this change in attitudes must be understood in terms of a shift in what Shalev calls America's "theopolitics" as well as its initial self- conceptualization as a Second Israel (190).

Shalev's sourcing this development back to typological self-understanding of the young American nations is problematic because it threatens to falsely conflate typology with eschatological Puritan beliefs based on Biblical literalism. Hence, it is important to differentiate

between the conditions of the late nineteenth century and earlier, colonial interpretations of the Holy Land under the literalist hermeneutics of Puritan Calvinism. Reiner Smolinski demonstrates that Puritan typological self-identification as new Israel was limited by their eschatological beliefs in that they still considered the future conversion and gathering of the Jews as a precondition for the Second Coming (362). To argue differently would bring into conflict eschatological literalism and typological method. Hence, it seems more convincing that the identification of the U.S. as a Second Israel, proposed by Thomas Jefferson and others, in the nineteenth-century continued to be metaphorical rather than typological. Smolinski shows further that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentators placed the New Jerusalem not in Boston but indeed in ancient Judea (374). As Brian Yothers points out regarding the implications of Smolinski's argument for Holy Land travel writing, nineteenth-century U.S. political interest in the Holy Land was motivated precisely not by its typological identification but by Biblical literalism.

Before 1800, Jewish culture and especially Hebrew had played a role in American Bible studies as a means to demonstrate revealed Christian truth as well as soteriology, the study of spiritual salvation. In the middle of the nineteenth century, however, it seems that that interest in Jewish culture declined over the course of the nineteenth century. Hebrew, for instance, had been a staple course of study at the Divinity Schools, beginning with Yale under the stewardship of America's first prominent Hebrew scholar, Ezra Stiles, as the oldest institution to offer that course. By then, as Shalom Goldman notes in *God's Sacred Tongue* (2004), "[t]he pedigree of Divinity School Hebrew was then approximately two centuries old. Its origins lie [sic] in sixteenth-century German Humanism and the related Reformation ideal of sola scriptura" (2). This initial interest, paired with the exploration of the Holy Land under the aegis of the newly

minted empirical scientific methods of archeology, spurred Americans' imagination and introduced a growing support of Zionism (Goldman 3).³³

Publications on travels in the holy Land, and the rediscovery of Nineveh in particular, ignited Melville's interest, as it did many other intellectuals and believers.³⁴ And like many Americans of his day, Melville came to consider the contemporary Holy Land as a place in which the historical and spiritual truth of the Bible would become not only verifiable but also tangible. Both travelling scholars and laypersons felt the call of archeological adventure and followed the vision of physically interacting with the Biblical landscape. For instance, Edward Robinson, Moses Stuart's successor at Andover Theological Seminary, proposed that in order to comprehend the Biblical text, "one had to go to Palestine and identify its lost holy sites" (Goldman 131). These examples show that American theologians began emphasizing practical experience in their own curriculum. Ironically, this methodological turn coincided with Melville's own style in fiction writing in which he combined his practical experience of having gone to sea with the knowledge gained from his rabid reading in the 1840s.³⁵

³³ The Holy Land mania has received increased scholarly attention in the last decade. In literary studies, Franklin Walker first explores Melville and Mark Twain's satirical depictions of Palestine in *Irreverent Pilgrims* (1974). Considering "American culture and literature as manifestations of covenantal settler-colonial development" (*Palestine* 9), Hilton Obenzinger, in *American Palestine* (1999), examines the construction of the Holy Land under the rubric of settler colonialism. American pilgrims and natives enter into a "colonizing dialectic" (*Palestine* 95) through which authors construct both 'Palestine' and 'America' (*Palestine* 13). Brian Yothers's *The Romance of the Holy Land in American Travel Writing, 1790-1876* (2007) shows how for Melville, Palestine is "the site at which the primacy of interpretation becomes manifest" and therefore enables the "interrogation between pluralism and authority" (110). Basem Ra'ad recently argued that Melville was particularly interested in the supposedly barren landscape as the foundation of a new aesthetics of aridity that encapsulates the richness of lost potential of the failed civilization project (144). Rogers notes that the Palestinian landscape or "out-of-doors" became a "fifth gospel" to Protestant pilgrims (136).

³⁴ See, for instance, *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1849) by Austen Henry Layard. The works written on travels to Palestine eventually break down into pilgrimage travel journals, scientific topographies and geographies, as well as more secular travel accounts.

³⁵ Also in the nineteenth century, Hebraism evolves from a linguistic to a cultural a cultural category. In *Culture and Anarchy* (18) Matthew Arnold famously coined the term to mean "'a sense of duty, self-control, and work'" (qtd. in Goldman, 130).

In *Clarel*, Melville therefore contributes to one of the central intellectual projects in nineteenth-century American thinking: the reinvention of the Holy Land in terms of the Protestant history of salvation. By redeveloping Biblical historic sites into metaphorical spaces in which history and morality are negotiated. Like many pilgrims, Melville was left disappointed by the barren landscapes and ruinous architecture of the region. However, his disappointment does not diminish the significance of OT historical texture, or historicity, in his writing, which plays a key role in *Moby-Dick*, *The Encantadas*, as well as in *Billy Budd*. Most significantly, he reflects on the compound project of inner and outer pilgrimage in *Clarel*.

Like other pilgrims, Melville sought to understand America's role in the future by understanding its cultural past in the landscape that gave rise to the OT stock imagery upon which Americans had based their foundational myths. Scholars often deduce Melville's personal interest in Biblical criticism from the journal he kept while travelling to the Holy Land. His personal response is not identical to his literary one; rather, his recordings allow some insight into his reaction to encountering the historical Biblical landscape. In one entry dated Jan 3, 1857, Melville notes his dread in a moment of contemplation when facing the desert landscape: "The terrible mixture of the cunning and awful. Moses learned in all the lore of the Egyptians. The idea of Jehovah born here. – When I was at top, thought it not so high—sat down on edge, looked below—gradual nervousness & final giddiness & terror" (*Journals* 75). The gradual shift from superiority to terror credits his empathetic nature. Even though he seems to have recognized, in this moment, that religion is a human edifice, his empathy lets him experience the sense of vertical dread that inspired the OT deity.

Several commentators have argued for Melville's fascination with the OT, but the argument has never been advanced in contradiction with his concern with the NT. Goldman

acknowledges in his study on *Clarel* that, “Although Melville’s theological library is lost to us, *Clarel* demonstrates that Melville had some knowledge of rabbinic commentaries” (*Protest* 152). Goldman goes on to argue that Clarel’s quest consists of harmonizing OT and NT (*Protest* 156). Obenzinger theorizes that Melville eventually gets caught up in writing an originally American religious project to counteract the “relentless tumult, constant ferment, ebbing and flowing at various times” of the American religious landscape (“Wicked” 182). While it seems unlikely that Melville was trying to write fiction with a spiritual quality for his readers, Melville’s reading in skeptical commentators is part of a fundamental quest, as sketched out by Obenzinger, Pardes, and Gunther Brown, by writers of the American Renaissance to achieve an original authentic voice that captures America’s religious heritage as well as its neglected critical tradition.

2.11 Literary Romanticism and Biblical Hermeneutics

The literary character of the Bible inspired not only an altered theological methodology but arguably enabled literary romanticism to define its central creeds about the world-constituting power of language. In her study of the evangelical press, Candy Gunther Brown also notes that literary responses to the multifarious challenges to the Bible that had emerged since the early 1700s began to produce something resembling a unique epistemology in the nineteenth century. For the romantic writers, she observes,

the distinction between Word and words, sacred and secular, worldly and otherworldly, Holy Spirit and human spirit, broke down. Rather than understanding the Bible as a self-authenticating Word inspired by the Holy Spirit, romantics averred that the Bible and other texts were similarly authoritative to the extent that they expressed an inspired poetic vision. (44)

As I mentioned before, Stephen Pricket traces the beginnings of the romantic literary endeavor back to Biblical scholarship as well. “It is hardly surprising,” he writes, “that through [Robert] Lowth’s influence the Bible was to become for the Romantics not merely the model of sublimity,

but also a source of style and a touchstone of true feeling” (*Words* 109). Lowth animates German theologians, such as Johann David Michaelis, to pay attention to Biblical language, particularly that of the OT. Michaelis’s work, in turn, inspires Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottfried Eichhorn to develop their higher critical theories, which then feedback British Bible studies (Prickett, *Words* 115). However, higher criticism is not well received in England; in fact, it was “not only felt to be unchristian, it was un-English, unpatriotic, and politically dangerous” (Prickett, *Words* 116). This Anglo-Saxon resentment may have been the reason why Melville, while comprehending the intellectual value of higher criticism, could not consent to it emotionally. While higher criticism thus did not find firm footing in England either, Prickett also notes it transformed literary outlooks on Scripture: particularly the OT,

ceased to be read as though it spoke with a single omniscient dogmatic voice, and began instead to be read as a dialogue, with a plurality of competing voices. At the same time, what had been universally accepted as an essentially polysemous narrative, with many threads of meaning, was narrowed into a single thread of story, which was almost invariably interpreted as being ‘historical.’ (Prickett, *Origins* 108)

In the arena of literature, Blake, rather than Coleridge or Wordsworth is the first to develop Lowth’s insights into a cohesive aesthetic program. He deems the OT “The Great Code of Art” (qtd. Prickett, *Words* 116) in *The Laocoon* (1820), and “sets the primary, artistic, authority of the Bible in place of Aristotle’s secondary, critical, authority” (Prickett, *Words* 117). Moreover, “Lowth’s analysis of Hebrew poetry in terms of parallelism had [. . .] made it possible for Coleridge, like Shelley, to think of ‘poetry’ in terms of mental dialectic characterized by an intensity of thought and feeling rather than by any particular rhetorical arrangement” (Prickett, *Words* 118). Coleridge’s subsequent assessment of Biblical language, arguing that, “language is not seen as something that can be created ab initio [. . .] it constitutes rather a *collective and*

cultural context within which human beings come to consciousness and self-discovery” (Words 34, emphasis added). He asserts the inherently heuristic character of Biblical language.

Writers of the American Renaissance that read widely and curiously crafted original responses to the multifarious challenges the new age presented to religious hermeneutical traditions. Hence the cliché view that American literary romanticism as a mere rehash of European romanticist ideas is out of place here. Religious thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson had been thoroughly infected with what detractors such as Andrews Norton once diagnosed as the ‘German disease’ of higher criticism, and rabidly devoured the new historical method of reading the Bible. Moreover, the Transcendentalists in particular regarded European idealism as a means of revolting against what Perry Miller calls the “business of civilization” (670). However, historical studies that consider American religion and its literary outgrowths as merely derivative of European intellectual traditions—incidentally this was Norton’s charge against the Transcendentalists—often fail to address the more complex American engagement with European religious skepticism in the specific post-revolutionary context of United-States republicanism and economy.³⁶

Besides British literary criticism, and German neology, American Romanticism receives its intellectual grounding through Scottish Common-Sense philosophy in that it reacts against Lockean and Humean empiricism. And obviously, Herman Melville was not the only one sensitive to the epistemological shifts this genealogy carried with it: Emerson prominently lashed out against remnants of dogmatism and mysticism in Unitarian religious practice in his controversial essay on the Lord’s Supper (1832) and his more widely received Divinity School

³⁶ In the theological arena, Emerson and his Transcendentalists represented one extension of a group of liberal thinkers who borrowed freely from German neologism, which conservative leaders like Norton derided as blasphemous (Miller 672). And yet Miller sees the transcendentalists as the representatives of an “American provinciality” that saw itself at an intellectual disadvantage over against a “European sophistication with which it was not entirely competent to deal” (672).

Address (1838). Like Evangelicalism, Transcendentalism is an intellectual, if somewhat inconsistent, rejection of evidentialist principles in that it seeks an unmediated relation with divinity based on intuitive rather than rationalist faculties (Holifield 204). Primary movers of the movement, such as Emerson, William Ellery Channing, and Orestes Brownson, explicitly put their literary experimentations within the continuity of theological methodology. Those religious liberals minding social reform, like Lydia Maria Child, were sensitive to the increasing rift between science and religion and hoped for reconciliation of the two approaches within one unified epistemology. Child held out hope for “a science concerning the nature of the Divine Being, and the relations of human souls with him” throughout her career as a writer (qtd. in Turner 14). And while her supplication became a staple sentiment in the late nineteenth-century fiction, it was by no means the only literary response to the various critical attacks on the Bible.

2.12 Scientific Innovation and Revolution

As I stated earlier, the opposition of science and theology was not a natural state as much as a gradual drifting apart of formerly related epistemologies. Thomas Dixon and Margaret Osler have recently emphasized that the history of science has its very own narrative contingencies. In fact, historiographical methods of depicting conflict have been modified in the process. Simplistic representations of a conflict lead on two broad united phalanxes (science – religion) have given way to accounts that detail multiple levels of contention and collaboration between religion and science to reveal points of mutual penetration between the two. Dixon observes that the myth of the warfare of science with religion coincided with “the creation of nineteenth-century positivists and twentieth-century historians, who read their own secularist aspirations and experiences back into the history of the sciences during a period when they were, in fact, pursued in a climate of diverse, serious, and vibrant theological concern” (5). Prickett already observes

that prior to the nineteenth century, mysticism and the natural sciences were originally considered related in their role of producing clues as to the meaning of the natural world which lay as a “book written in a lost language” before humanity (*Words* 123). After 1850, scientific empiricism gradually emancipated itself from its religious institutional base: Natural theology and natural philosophy began to form an epistemological spectrum; major methodological shifts in the disciplines of geology and biology almost inadvertently came to challenge the very Biblical truths that many scholars working in these disciplines sought to fortify. As I illustrate below, this development incidentally challenged the very practice of Biblical literalism.

Holifield states that “What distinguished natural theology from ‘natural religion,’ the religious ideal of eighteenth-century deists, was the further claim that natural theology pointed toward and confirmed truths above the capacity of reason to discover—truths accessible only through special revelation” (5). As such, revelation continued to be privileged as an epistemological strategy that was distinct from intuition and reason. However, a semantic shift had begun that affected all analytical categories. Lending credence to the world-constituting power of language, Turner observes that, for instance, the connotations of the term “law” shifted significantly since the early 1700s. By the nineteenth century, the term described “empirically discovered regularities” where previously it had characterized God as the ‘grand orderer’ of the universe who legislates His will through immutable regularity, as per the argument from design (Turner 181).

Religious institutions suddenly saw themselves confronted with a proliferation of alternative means of inquiry that contrasted church dogma by their intellectual and methodological rigor and their mathematical precision. Protestantism had carried the seeds for this development since the seventeenth century by advocating the rationality of Christianity,

even if they did so in reaction to deist challenges. Consequently, by the middle of the century, “Christian scientists and clerical apologists concerned themselves not with proving God but with showing that science did not disprove Him” (Turner 187). From this would spring the narrative of the so-called *Warfare between Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896)—to cite A.D. White’s famous history of this conflict.

Empirical scientific ventures began to extrapolate the implicit epistemological requisite of evidentialism with unexpected effects. For instance, Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), advocating a system of continuous dynamic and open-ended change, marked a significant challenge to Biblical natural history as a series of cataclysmic events (often caused by divine will), the catastrophist model of geological change. Lyell contributed to the shift in exegetical practice away from literalism in many of the more intellectual and bookish denominations. His findings touched upon controversial issues, such as the age of the world and the possibility of multiple creations. By the century midpoint, Biblical literalism, which helped foster axioms such as the Mosaic history, had been discredited as serious exegetical practice and was left to the “uneducated or uneducatable” (Turner 145).³⁷

In the face of these narratives of erosion, some qualifying remarks are necessary: Historians have recently challenged the myth of native incommensurability of scientific and religious epistemologies by devoting renewed attention to their common genealogy, and, given the context of this study, my interest lies with accounts that trace the gradual shift in the relationship of these epistemologies from compatibility and complicity to partial opposition.

³⁷ Many scholars consider Lyell’s *Principles* to be the first scientific revolution in nineteenth-century thought. His contribution had a wide impact and indirectly influenced several literary genres, such as didactic and nature writing. A prominent example for the epistemological shifts occurring in this later field is Susan Fenimore Cooper’s *Rural Hours* (1850), which, in combination with her other essays, forms an alternative strand of nature writing to the well know Thoreauen idealism (Patterson 89). For a comprehensive view on women applying empirical scientific principles in the domestic sphere, see also Gianquitto 8.

When viewed in this light, the cultural secularization narrative seems equally simplistic and untrustworthy. Despite detectable secularizing motions in scientific, cultural, and political discourses, for example a tendency towards mathematical precision in language, intellectual life in nineteenth-century America did not tend universally towards worldliness. Enlightenment thinking did not eliminate God but made Him knowable as a rational mind that expressed itself in the regularity of the “clear, rational, tangible realities evident in the world as observed” (Turner 73). This mode of thinking consequently replaced the property of awfulness—in the archaic sense of the word as inspiring awe and reverence—with a quasi-human rationality that governs divine actions. And while this humanizing revision of God’s character would subsequently lead to theological problems such as theodicy to come to the fore, until the early nineteenth century, “His spiritual governance remained immediate, personal, and except in broad principles unpredictable, He managed His visible world through impersonal natural laws” (Turner 77).

Thus the empirical world initially became an important means of grounding religion and theology in ever-day experience, while some strands of Christianity, such as evangelicalism, began to place a premium on the non-intellectual ways in which God communicated with His creates. Accordingly, Turner subsumes that “secularization (whatever its ultimate effect) was not in this case at odds with religion; to the contrary, it sprang from the desire to root religious morality in the palpable realities of the physical world” (95). The tangible result of these shifts in thinking and exegetical practice was that religion and theology were discussed more widely and frequently than ever before, even as criticism and alternative ways of thinking became increasingly part of the public conversation about these topics.

The uncoupling of theology and science also challenged identities of those professing the faith. Until the middle of the century, ministers had still feigned themselves scientists or at least operating within the confines of scientific language and therefore basing their axioms on solid ground. However, once empirical methodology broke away from theological stewardship, all bets were off. Rationalist religion had painted itself into a corner because it opened the door to methods of inquiry that eventually emancipated themselves from the old regimes of church and scriptural authority. In an effort to “get right with modernity” religious leaders increasingly insisted on the rationality and evidential nature of faith, doing away with the old mysticism of the past (Turner 245). Yet in doing so, religious leaders invited their own doom because they exposed tenets of personal faith to the rigorous categories of an increasingly professionalizing scientific discourse from which they then could no longer disentangle. As Turner puts it,

People spoke of a conflict between science and religion because in that pairing the contrast of old and new was most clearly seen. Yet in fact what undermined the intellectual grounds of belief in God was not so much science as such but a set of assumptions about knowledge similar to, but broader and more amorphous than, those of science. Crudely formulated, often not articulated at all, these notions typically leaked out in dribs and drabs or in nothing more than unspoken assumptions. [. . .] American culture had not simply given over to science. Rather, there had emerged, with science as midwife, a new, more rigorous, and more confined way of understanding what constituted knowledge and how it could be got. (194)

Turner is not alone in his verdict that the intellectual atmosphere changed over the course of the century. Hence instead of presenting a new solid foundation for religion, scientific discourse became the solvent that would separate serious empirical inquiry and personal faith. For those basing their axioms on Biblical truths this meant having to make difficult decisions about the delineation of literal and symbolic language, a trend that dovetailed in the rise of the so-called cultural Bible.

Scholars seem to agree that between the 1830s and 1860s respectively two major shifts occurred in the theological landscape of the United States. These shifts do not consist of singular controversies but rather represent nodal points at which myriad debates came to a head. One such controversy contested the compatibility of faith and modern empirical methodology. The gradual division of natural theology and natural philosophy, which would evolve into what we today know as natural science, was not an incidental thunder strike sent down by Charles Darwin and his publication of the *The Origin of Species* (1859), even though the book is often held up as marking an intellectual sea change in that era. Rather, this division came at the tail end of a century-long debate about the place of rationalism within theology. The other shift consists of the emergence of heart-religion and eventually its strongest avatar: evangelicalism.

One reaction to the gradual dissolution of the ties between natural philosophy and theology was what Turner labels the emergence of a “flat-footed literalness unparalleled in the annals of Christianity” (144). This counter move came on the heels of the realization by many theologians that their forcing the scientific rhetoric had revealed many supposed truths about the natural world to be nothing more than “workable metaphors” referencing a reality that, it seemed, remained forever remote (Turner 200-1). This emergent realization about the contingency of human language compounded the erosion of the cultural hegemony that religious organizations had wielded in all areas of scientific exploration a century earlier. Ironically, the realization about the uncertain referentiality of Biblical language and the increased reliance on mathematical language and its ability to approximate reality were coeval phenomena. Both semantic shifts incidentally revealed the fault lines within established systems of belief: American religion had never been doctrinally unified. Even within the prominent New England Calvinist tradition, controversy abounded almost from the beginning. The religious turf war for

the hearts and minds of North America's faithful had been raging since the inception of the first congregation in New England. So-called Puritan Protestantism under its Calvinist hermeneutics and in its New England permutation had never been a consistent theory. This latest phase of religious discourse was exceptional primarily because it had brought into focus the potentially self-destructive prospect of a civil society functioning independently from religious moral discourse.

2.13 Conclusion: Melville's Interest in Biblical Hermeneutics

In many respects, the story of religion and theology in nineteenth-century America is one of gradual change rather than all-out revolution. Skirmishes between skeptics and believers still echoed from the eighteenth century. And the intellectual residue of these debates crystalized in the nineteenth century to a paranoid fear of conceptual challenges from theological outsiders. This fear in turn compounded the already volatile climate within intellectual circles, such as the Divinity Schools, whose survival depended on conceptual discussions within its ranks. Grasso cogently sums up the situation by noting how

Religious skepticism did not secularize America, as the free enquirers of the 1830s had hoped, or produce armies of militant atheists, as some Christians had feared. But to rest with that conclusion is to miss the more complicated effects that skepticism did have—effects best seen in the stories of individual lives and in the complex connections of ideas to social and political practices. (508)

If both expert and non-expert observers began to sense a sea change in religious thinking of the early 1800s, higher criticism had foregrounded the Bible's status as a text with a checkered history and by the 1850s many textual issues were debated: problems of textual preservation, translation, editing and canonization, the authority of so called apocryphal wisdom, as well as the problem to the transfer of divine truth from the testimony of largely illiterate primitive minds eroded Biblical certainty.

The Enlightenment, as Sheehan shows, had effectively divorced God from the Scripture and in the wake of that separation produced a multifarious document, “a Bible whose [sic] legitimacy and authenticity was embedded no longer in theology, but in the complex of literature, teaching, scholarship, and history that came to be called culture” (92). It is here, I argue, that Melville stages an intervention into the problem of Biblical textual authority. At the moment in which the Bible became literary, it was opened to interpretation that deployed original invention of its own. Melville was not the only one to produce such literary exegesis. Other prominent representatives, such as Susan Warner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps have long been recognized as having responded sensitively to this new ‘complex’—in Sheehan’s sense of the term—nature of the Biblical text. My goal is to inscribe Melville into this canon by investigating his attempts at reconnecting Scripture to the very discourses that seem to have alienated it. His literary productions extend and condense, reflect and distort, satirize and bemoan the Bible’s lost authority through their original poesis.

Michael Lee somewhat broadly contextualizes Bible scholarship in the general political atmosphere of the Early Republic when he notes that, “Biblical interpretation was following the same egalitarian trends driving American culture” (*Erosion* 182). Nord’s and Gunther Brown’s findings on the uncanny ability of nineteenth-century readers to switch between various levels of intellectual discourse paint a more pluralistic picture: Biblical hermeneutics fragmented, as multiple reading strategies existed side-by-side. Realizing that code-switching was a common occurrence among audiences of all social strata should also alter our perspective on Melville’s supposedly extraordinarily eclectic reading in the 1840s. In this context, his wide reading begins to look like a rather common occurrence among those seriously interested in matter of theology and religion. It is true, however, that the ability to vociferate his own code-switching in literary

form, however, makes Melville a useful interlocutor on the dynamics of the changing intellectual landscape. His writing may help us chart a course through what several historians have characterized as a complex, amorphous, and diffuse territory.

Of course, there are limits to the explanatory capacities of literary fiction and poetry. And we must not overtax Melville's works by tasking them with imposing order on what is essentially a whole network of highly involved imbrolios in the American intellectual landscape. Moreover, the strong tradition of authorial readings in Melville studies suggests that, if there is an intellectual crisis to be found in his writing, it is primarily Melville's own. Nonetheless, Melville may be more representative for religious reading in the nineteenth-century than he has been given credit for. Rita Felski recently made the case for "the epistemic gains and insights into our social being" that we may derive from literature (*Uses* 16). I read her comment as a reminder to examine a text's entanglement in the ideologies of its time. At the same time, I confirm some of the tried and true paradigms of Melville studies, however. For instance, if we do view Melville's oeuvre holistically, there is definitely an appealing component of intellectual earnestness in his work, less in the sense of a dramatic male stoicism—there are instances of that too, but, I argue, these moments more often than not are easily identified as ironical—than in an obstinate resistance against what T. Walter Herbert calls the possibility of "final unmeaning" (4).

Scholars have always attempted to illuminate the germination of this highly contradictory technique. Some tentative answers may be derived from exemplary entries on Melville's reading list. Abraham Tucker, whose *An Abridgement The Light of Nature Pursued* (1807) Melville owned, for instance, differentiates between the hermeneutics of the Hebrews and early Christians and that of what he calls "moderners":

The Jews, and primitive Christians derived from them, seem to have been a serious, solemn generation; fond of extravagant metaphors, far-fetched allusion,

hard-featured images, mysteries and enigmatical allegories, requiring *painful attention* to understand them. Their tempers were soured by oppression and public contempt; for it is not in human nature to preserve an easiness and benignity of mind under continual opposition and indignities: therefore they could think no reward alluring which had not a mixture of retaliation and triumph; nor was the bliss-of heaven complete) without the satisfaction of beholding their persecutors swallowed up in the devouring flames of hell. And being accustomed to look for something of latent importance in words and syllables, they might be trusted with any figures without danger of turning them into ridicule. (emphasis added, Tucker III., 326)

For Tucker, late-eighteenth century moderners lead a hedonist existence devoted to “lively and amusing, rather than the pompous and perplexing: instead of laboring to find mysteries in every thing, we divert ourselves with turning every thing into jest: and have acquired the knack of making a trifle of whatever would naturally be most affecting to the imagination” (III., 326).

Melville’s writings, from 1849 onwards, echo Tucker’s assessment of the Hebraic painful attention and intellectual earnestness rather explicitly. *Clarel* in particular celebrates the heuristic epistemology found in Hebraic gloom, an intellectual seriousness of inquiry that must be harmonized with religious sentiment (Goldman *Protest*, 141, 155). If Melville employed Tucker as one of the pillars for his understanding of what Matthew Arnold called “hebraic sadness [sic],” he deployed a hermeneutics of seriousness based on figurative language. The idea that truth is hidden, is contained in such language, that such language may include humor and irony, and that such obscurantist language is the very tool for approximating truth may seem paradoxical.

Employing such figurative language as a method of spiritual and philosophical inquiry certainly clarifies some characteristic attributes in Melville’s writing. The attributes Matthew Arnold assigns to Heinrich Heine may as well be attached to Melville: “[. . .] by his intensity, by

his untamableness, by his ‘longing which cannot be uttered,’ he is Hebrew” (*Essays* 179).³⁸ Further, Arnold’s proposed genealogy of Hebraism as a cultural force may also help us understand the exchanges such an epistemology has with the Dutch reformed Calvinism of Melville’s youth: “Puritanism [. . .] was originally the reaction, in the seventeenth century, of the conscience and moral sense of our race, against the moral indifference and lax rule of conduct which in the sixteenth century came in with the Renaissance [sic.]. It was a reaction of Hebraism against Hellenism” (*Culture* 105). Arnold’s problematic essentializing aside, his genealogy may nevertheless help us understand the avenue by which Melville in his writing perceives OT moral sensibility as distinct from that of Protestantism.

This aesthetics of oscillation puts Melville in communication with older, productive strands of skepticism. For instance, Thiry d’Holbach prefigures Melville’s concept of oscillation and potentiality in his materialism as well as with his insistence that motion (and mutual affect of bodies in motion) is the sole principle of nature. Since the world is in motion, our intellect must be too, whereas any institutionalized belief is simply unnatural and therefore untenable (I., 170). Key moments, such as *Moby-Dick*’s “Doubloon” chapter, *Benito Cereno*, and *The Confidence-Man* centrally illustrate d’Holbach’s program (II., 254). The following chapters will argue that Melville negotiates this volatile multiplicity using the thematic alphabet of the OT. And like the eighteenth-century deists and nineteenth-century free thinkers, he did not seek to dismantle religion altogether; but insisted on intellectual integrity in his literary inquiries. Yet this insistence must not be equated to a pervasive skepticism. Like the transcendentalists, Melville conveys a belief in language as a heuristic epistemology that can convey meanings beyond the purely rational. Yet, he also seems less confident that this heuristics can produce a lasting

³⁸ In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869-70), Arnold meditates on the subject at greater length and declares that what he calls the “Greek and the Hebrew notion” of art consists in “the desire, native to man, for reason and the will of God, the feeling after the universal order,—in a word, the love of God” (*Culture* 97).

transcendental understanding of the self in the universe. Melville explored the suffering of existence and the implications of that suffering for the relationship of human beings and God. New epistemologies such as scientific empiricism merely added to the multiplicity of vision that he contrasts with a strong sense of loss and nostalgia for what he calls “the bloom” in his aforementioned journal entry. While the ideal of intellectual integrity precludes him from jettisoning the new scientific style from his writing, the language and themes of the OT provides him with an alphabet for articulating the spiritual loss these new innovations represent. In that sense, Melville presents a reaction to the clash of modernism and a more archaic form of Biblical literalism. This presentation is infused by a historical comprehension of Biblical exegesis and religious skepticism. Yet it is articulated in a nostalgic, symbolic register that references Biblical history as historical record.

3 Divine Justice and Sublime Suffering: *Moby-Dick*, *Bartleby*, *Clarel*, and the Book of Job

The Joban theme in Melville's writing, as I identify it here, explores conflicts of ontology and hermeneutics. Melville utilizes the Book of Job to comment on expectations of divine justice and the reason behind human suffering. Within the set of Biblical sources I discuss, the Book of Job occupies a unique position in that it is the most stylistically literary of the wisdom books. Job's heroic suffering held special appeal for the authors of the Enlightenment and post enlightenment era. It prefigured a Promethean symbolism of the human capacity to endure arbitrary punishment and, in doing so, critiqued the seemingly unassailable seat of power that dispensed that punishment. The Book of Job, therefore, provides a vocabulary for unsettling not only religious but communal disenfranchisement, and its protagonist became a symbol of human rational emancipation from divine bullying.³⁹ In the Biblical story, Job is a pious man and favorite in God's eyes, blessed with riches, health, and a thriving family. He undergoes several tribulations heaped upon him by the Adversary, a lesser angel, sanctioned by God to test Job's piety.⁴⁰ Having lost his material possessions, family, and health, Job is visited by four comforters who wind up challenging his complaint against the unjust treatment God bestows upon him. Eventually, Job encounters God personally in the form of a whirlwind; a debate ensues, in which God dismantles Job's demand that divine justice be underwritten by causal consistency. God ridicules the limitations of human reason while flaunting His exclusive knowledge of justice. In

³⁹ The Book of Job contains a prologue, narrative, dialogic poetry, and epilogue; some of the dialogical voices that Job encounters from his friends seem to be interpolations added to an earlier version of the story; in the Hebrew version, there are even overt stylistic contrasts between the prolog's prose and the poetic exchange between God and Job.

⁴⁰ Greenberg and others have noted that the Adversary is falsely translated as "Satan" in the *KJB*. In the Hebrew original, the Adversary, or Accuser, is "an angel whose task is to roam the earth and expose human wrong doing" as Greenberg pointedly summarizes (284). For the sake of consistency, I will refer to the Adversary as 'Satan' whenever Melville seems to draw on the Book of Job in his own texts. I have not been able to verify whether Melville was aware of this difference. Certainly, he would have noticed the distinct hierarchy and command structure involving God and Satan that the prose frame of the Book of Job communicates.

his encounter with the whirlwind (theophany), Job comes to recognize the presumptuousness of his moral complaint against divine reasoning. He realizes that his expectation of God's dispensatory justice is unfounded because Job cannot fathom the purpose of the mystery of creation. Job winds up humbly conceiving God's omnipotence and sovereignty. He evolves from a skeptical yet pious doubter into a repentant believer.⁴¹ Contrary to scholarly consensus, according to which the Bible constitutes a textual tradition against which Melville rebels, the Joban hermeneutics, I argue, helps him expound on concepts of cosmic dispensary justice, the applicability of revealed knowledge and how these clash with his observations of reality (esp. in times of crisis), as well as the compensatory value of suffering that the Book of Job both condemns and affirms.

Abigail Pelham articulates the central conflict of the book as one of ontology as well as hermeneutics: "Job insists that the world-as-it-ought-to-be has been overthrown and replaced with a kind of anti-world, in which the opposite of everything that ought to be is true. Job's friends, by contrast, perceive no disruption of this status quo" (Pelham 24). What follows in the Biblical text is a dialogical contest between Job and God, in which God rejects all versions of the reality that had been previously presented by Job and his friends (Pelham 25). Melville demonstrates surprising versatility in his literary unpacking of the Biblical text in his fiction and poetry, an awareness that, thus far, has been neglected by scholarship or depreciatingly consigned to some off-handed commentary or a mere foil for social satire. Doing justice to the breadth and depth to which Melville explores these theological issues requires tracing his engagement with the Joban source material across genre lines. The benefit of this approach is twofold: First, such an analysis demonstrates that OT hermeneutics had a sustained impression on Melville's literary work and provided him with the means to engage the metaphysical

⁴¹ Book of Job 41:1-8.

implications of man-made concepts such as justice, suffering, and theodicy. Secondly, reading Melville as a literary exegete who self-admittedly uses archaic means of textual interpretation helps us shed light on the state of Biblical hermeneutics in the mid nineteenth century. Melville's eclectic reading gave him access to historical exegesis, deist free-thinking, and scientific innovation. All three were transferred back to the Biblical text and specifically, the moral outlook imparted by the wisdom books of the OT.

As I mentioned above, his autodidactic learning made Melville increasingly sensitive to what was considered at the time an archaic exegetical methodology. His archaism, however is not limited to Protestant typology, but also includes more flexible allegorical readings in the Judaist tradition. Sources such as Sir Thomas Browne's *Works* (1835), and John Kitto's *Popular Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature* (1845), which Melville consulted during a phase of self-perceived intellectual growth, point him towards exegetical traditions that are not merely skeptical but engage the paradoxes inherent in OT theology as it embraces the fictitious and literary character of especially the five wisdom books.⁴²

Regarding Melville's use of the Book of Job, Colacurcio argues that Melville adopts as his epistemological credo, "[n]ot quite Job's 'I will love him [God] though he slay me.' Rather, Melville seems to say, 'I trust he will not destroy me for pursuing without cynicism the moral evidences that call into question our best metaphysical proofs'" ("Excessive Organic Ill," 22). Colacurcio correctly identifies Melville's indebtedness to the skeptical passages of the Book of Job, yet he overlooks the fact that Job has been widely understood as symbolizing moral integrity. In both his direct and indirect references to the Book of Job, Melville displays a previously unacknowledged sensitivity for the Book of Job's themes, historical reception, and

⁴² In his second letter to Hawthorne, from June 1, 1851, Melville compares himself to a Egyptian seed transplanted to English soil, which awakes from dormancy (*Correspondence* 193). For a list of encyclopedic works consulted by Melville, especially during the composition of *Moby-Dick*, see Sealts Jr. 70.

ambiguous genesis. Job is one of the most controversial and ambiguous texts in the OT. Consequently, it has inspired diverse philosophical, literary, and scientific responses. It is no wonder, therefore, that Melville would be drawn to a text that explores the existence of evil in the world and problematizes divine justice in an overtly literary manner. Job and Ecclesiastes are the most frequently quoted Biblical sources in Melville's writing and research. Taking this scholarly inclination seriously requires that I briefly consider the text's literary and exegetical history.⁴³

3.1 Textual History of the Book of Job

As with many OT texts, the Book of Job derives its origins from a folk tale tradition. A cursory reading reveals a rather simplistic moral outlook on the world: piety and religious commitment are ultimately rewarded while hubris and skepticism are punished. The narrator characterizes Job's aforementioned epistemological evolution and integrity as morally desirable. Still, Job's compensation for his material loss also illustrates that the logic of dispensary justice is in effect, rewarding those who keep the faith while chiding those, like Job's friends, who assume to speak for God. In fact, judging by God's speech in the poetic section of the book, the overarching didactic aim is to demonstrate the incompatibility of divine and human understanding. The book proposes that the truest faith is that which is based on direct experience with God, and it is experience, rather than dogma, that imparts piety.⁴⁴

⁴³ I use the term 'literary' in the narratological sense here: the Joban author manipulates literary mechanisms, such as narrative perspective, dialog, irony, equivocation, and intertextuality, to discuss his subject matter. For instances that conflate Promethean and Joban suffering, see Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), Act I. 210, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). For a psychoanalytical reading of God's frame of reference, see C.G. Jung's *Antwort auf Hiob* [Answer to Job] (1952).

⁴⁴ As Moshe Greenberg and others have pointed out, Job, in its original folktale form, is most likely the text praised for its didactic merit in Ezek. 14:12-20. See also, Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1990), 283, and Alter *Wisdom Books* (2011), 4.

The book's textual history is complex, and debates persist about its origination date, authorship, structure, and later emendations. In many respects, these arguments are as heated today as they were in Melville's day.⁴⁵ Its central theme is the search for an experience-based rather than a dogmatic faith.⁴⁶ Structurally, a linear prose narrative frames a rather opaque poetic center that alternatively depicts a patient and defiant Job. Moshe Greenberg marshals the theory of multiple authors that expand upon an oral folklore basis. He particularly emphasizes the encounter with God in the poetic middle part of the book as having been inserted a posteriori by a "more profound thinker" than the one committing the original tale to paper (*Literary Guide* 283).⁴⁷ Alter concurs that it takes a "bold dissenting thinker and a poet of genius" to effectively broach a topic as volatile as the ambiguity of divine justice (*Wisdom* 4). Whatever their origin, these poetic insertions effect much of the book's intellectual complexity, e.g., its minute delineation of contingent, and thus corruptible, verbal testimony versus authentic inner conviction that, in turn, constitutes a kind of pure, non-verbal testimony.⁴⁸

In the Hebrew Biblical tradition, Job and the other wisdom books of the Ketuvim, the Hebrew Book of Writings, are categorized by their literary character. By implication, Jewish and

⁴⁵ Prominent translator and Bible scholar Robert Alter refutes the widely circulated theory that the prose frame and the poetic middle of the book were created at different times, as well as the theory that the book was merely a condensed version of one of many educational texts circulated for memorization in the Wisdom Schools of ancient Israel (4 *Wisdom Books*).

⁴⁶ The theme is quite common in similar texts emanating from Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. Cf. Alter *Wisdom*, xiv-vi; Coogan 24; and Prickett *Origins*, 4.

⁴⁷ The debate about the genesis of the Joban text is multi-faceted and very much entrenched: Alter and others have noted the possibility that the Book of Job's subversive character may be consequential of numerous revisions to the text, as Greenberg indicates here. Nevertheless, Bible scholars generally seem to agree that the same author writes the prose and high-caliber poetic sections, that subsequently get interspersed with poetry of inferior quality; these latter sections, uttered by the fourth and youngest among Job's friends, Elihu, feature "bombastic, repetitious, and highly stereotypical poetry [. . .] vastly inferior to the Job poet" (Alter *Wisdom Books* 6). Although repetition per se – as Alter himself states elsewhere – constitutes a staple of Biblical poetic style, the fact that Elihu merely summarizes previous statements of Job's other friends supports this theory. For a contrasting view, see again Greenberg 284.

⁴⁸ Greenberg points out the difference but does not go into detail (285). The special authenticity of the testimony of the heart is, of course, one of Melville's central, explicitly expressed positions that identify him as a romantic author to literary critics. Even though his declaration of this fact may have been a gambit to establish common emotional ground with Hawthorne, see Melville, *Correspondence* 192.

early Christian audiences who were steeped in the exegetical practice would recognize the book's treatment of divine justice and communication as an allegory for the ambiguity of communication in general. This hermeneutics of textual opacity subsequently was replaced by more authoritarian literal interpretations. Even Calvinist Protestantism, with its typological hermeneutics reads skepticism as an indicator of the state of contrition. As with early Christian sects, controversies over literal and allegorical exegetical strategies lead to social strife. Only in the late eighteenth (Europe) and early nineteenth century (America) did interpreters begin to consider the Bible as a literary object. Yet the Book of Job would remain integral to the development of a literary hermeneutics.⁴⁹

In England, Robert Lowth systematized the interpretation of Hebrew poetry in his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1787), which centered on the Book of Job's poetry. Indeed, Lowth's was the pinnacle of a century-long line of English studies on the Book of Job's formal properties and its prophetic character (Sheehan 161). Yet it was Lowth's engagement with literary form, specifically his treatise on parallelism that introduced the Biblical text's skepticism to a wider audience of radical thinkers. In England this trend carried a political charge. In Germany, however, the "Job obsession" manifested itself in a number of new translations that accentuated an admiration for Job's ability to vociferate the human condition (Sheehan 162). Johann Gottfried Herder's *Letters on the Study of Theology* (1780) and particularly his seminal *Vom Geist der ebräischen Poesie* [*The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*] (1782) expressed the scholars' desire to reverse the OT's loss of authority and relevance by uncovering its poetics and thus depicting it as a cultural-historical artifact with moral implications that were

⁴⁹ For a condensed outline of the Hebrew Bible's thematic structure, see Coogan 5. A prominent example of American Puritan didactics is Cotton Mather's adaptation of the Westminster Confessions, "A Confession of Faith" (1702) in his *Magnali Christi Americana*. David Hall's classic study on the subject recounts Anne Hutchinson's allegation of legalism against the ministers of her community (6-7). The OT was the touchstone of a series of speculative readings that led to the emergence of what Sheehan calls the poetic Bible (151-2).

still relevant and thus worthy of continued study. Sheehan observes the paradoxical thought process behind this project:

On the one hand, the German Job revival wished to mark sharply the historical distance between the Hebrew past and the modern present; on the other, it wished to affirm their mutual translatability through the power of poetry. These two goals intersected on the theoretical plane—through the strange workings of sympathy—but diverged in practice. (168)

This divergence had formerly been reconciled by the dictates of religion, specifically the religious practice of compassion. Wherever such feelings were not part of the individual's sentimental spectrum, though, the new translations posed an epistemological challenge that would stand well into the nineteenth century (Sheehan 168). In the United States, solving this problem would eventually devolve to proliferations about civil religion.⁵⁰

Commenting on the possibility of finding a definitive proof-text for analysis, Greenberg points out that because of the numerous translations from Greek and Aramaic, any attempt at refuting extant versions of the Biblical text, for instance the KJB, must ultimately be considered as motivated by "individual predilection" (284). By dismissing questions of authoritativeness, Greenberg authorizes a text-based reading of the Book of Job that is grounded in the "conviction that the literary complexity of the book is consistent with and appropriate to the nature of the issues with which it deals" (284). For literary students of the Bible, Greenberg's approach usefully detaches the text and message from its contingent textual history. The KJB that Melville had access to is, in many respects, an imperfect translation of a Hebrew original that is itself shot through with Arabic and Aramaic loanwords and Hebraism.⁵¹ Beyond that, Greenberg's textual approach also dispenses with the book's liturgical character and thus enables literary analysis.

⁵⁰ For the American context, Schlereth follows up on this point by surveying the interplay of religion and questions of nationalism and citizenship. Political discourses of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth century (108). For an embellished version of Sheehan's argument about the political implications of a poetic Bible, see his essay "The Poetics and Politics of Theodicy" (2007).

⁵¹ Cf. Alter *Wisdom* 5.

Scholars may thus consider individual translations as discrete texts with their distinct textual histories.

Concerning the aforementioned rhetorical complexities of the text, Greenberg notes further that in order to fully appreciate passages such as the famous admonishment of Job by his friends, one must consider the contractual logic at play in the original text, a sensibility that had all but disappeared among European exegetes in the nineteenth century (289). Discerning nineteenth-century American readers like Melville arguably were especially qualified to deal with this particular strain in the Joban text because they had been reared in a Calvinist hermeneutic tradition. To be sure, Melville was no scholar of Hebrew. Yet his moral sensibility—qualities he repeatedly cites to Hawthorne as reasons for his lack of success in the contemporary literary market place—and even the remnants of Calvinist theology in his thinking drove him to regard the historical and literary dimensions of the Bible in a manner that echoed both the emergent historical criticism promoted by scholars in England and Germany and the typological historicism of his Puritan ancestry. Still, in his journals, Melville disavows either approach as a valid method of philosophical inquiry into the problems the Biblical text raises. Mainstream Calvinism's emphasis on divine sovereignty renders irrelevant the individual's wrestling with moral questions; similarly, the earnest historicism of German neology leaves no room for the individual's wrestling with the text as it renders it mere record or foil for historical contextual analysis. Given these preliminaries, situating Melville's use of Job in that strain of Biblical hermeneutics tradition which considers the literary character of the wisdom books may help illuminate the theological significance of his literary engagement with the Bible. To be clear, I do not argue that Melville's aim was to write an exegetical treatise of Job, the OT, or the Hebrew or Christian Bibles at large. Considering this connection may tell us something about the

way Melville and others of his generation navigated the rapid sea changes in nineteenth-century American and European theological thinking.

By now, several critics have pointed out the significance of Kitto's *Cyclopedia* for *Moby-Dick*. But little attention has been paid to the sources Kitto consulted in compiling his definitions, or the possibility that Melville may have accessed those sources directly after discovering them in Kitto.⁵² One prominent source of Kitto's that represents this literary hermeneutical tradition is twelfth-century Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), who addresses the Book of Job as a meta-commentary on skepticism in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. *The Guide* and other commentaries of his remained in usage well into the nineteenth century. Arranged as a series of responses to rhetorical questions, or perplexities, about the reconcilability of Scripture and experience, the *Guide* promises spiritual advice to those who feel stifled in their capacity to believe. Maimonides frequently seems to undermine this agenda by introducing controversial pluralistic readings of key Biblical passages. Moreover, he often advocates a covert technique of exegetic inquiry in keeping with the OT reverence for divine mystery and inaccessibility.⁵³

The relationship of Maimonides and Melville has not been explored in scholarship. Only Lawrance Thompson makes an off-handed connection between the two, when he inserts Maimonides's comment as a foreword to his chapter "Divine Depravity" in *Melville's Quarrel* and thus postulates the intellectual commonalities between the two authors. Maimonides cautions the reader of Genesis to "impose silence upon himself," if he, "may hit upon the meaning of it";

⁵² Sealts cautions that what we know of Melville's reading, especially about the more skeptical and unorthodox religious works he consulted, remains fragmentary that "Melville's library reportedly included many 'theological' works that were scrapped after his death as unsuitable for resale" (122).

⁵³ Mosheh Ben Maimon (Maimonides, or RaMBaM) was an influential twelfth-century Talmudist, philosopher, and physician from Córdoba, Spain. The *Guide* is widely considered his philosophical legacy (Martin "Maimonides"). Salomon Munk performed the first translation of the Arabic original (*Guide des Égarés*, Paris 1856—1866). Melville's European sources—prominently John Kitto—had access the Ibn Tibbon Hebrew translation of the Arabic original. I refer to the first English translation from the Arabic original. The textual history of *The Guide* merits its own book-length study; thus my present interest is restricted to Melville's indebtedness to Maimonides's analysis of Job.

“if he speak of it, he ought to speak obscurely, and in an enigmatic manner” (quoted in Thompson 354). Kitto, whose *Cyclopedia* Melville read and annotated thoroughly in the year leading up to the composition of *Moby-Dick*, frequently refers to Maimonides, and translations of his writings circulated among nineteenth-century Biblical scholars, even if an official English translation did not appear until 1881. As such, Melville would have been at least aware of Maimonides, and it takes little imagination to assume Melville could have done further research on a figure so central to one of his most important literary resources.⁵⁴

Maimonides prefaces his analysis of the Book of Job by declaring it basically “a fiction” geared towards, “explaining the different opinions people hold on Divine Providence” (433).⁵⁵ One strategy of explaining God’s inconsistent characterization in the story consists in qualifying the role Satan plays in Job’s suffering. Noting that “[t]he adversary has also some relation to the Universe, but it is inferior to that of the sons of God [angels],” Maimonides remains ambivalent about the direction and limits of Satan’s volition (436).⁵⁶ Satan is ultimately tasked to do God’s bidding but is granted some measure of independent agency in performing his task. Maimonides attempts to dispel this ambiguity by assuming a hierarchy within divine consciousness that renders morally corrosive influences on humanity external to God’s personhood. In this hierarchy, evil resides below good and both beneath God’s volition. All three influences are

⁵⁴ Kitto relies on Maimonides for several theological key terms. For instance, concerning the miracle of the sun’s arrested course (Josh. 10:13), Kitto praises “the learned Jew Maimonides,” whose insights on the matter had been “adopted by many divines,” over authorities such as Spinoza and Le Clerc (I:451). Kitto relies on “the great luminary Maimonides” (I:338) for a diverse selection of subjects, ranging from the pedestrian, such as bird-cages (152), to the metaphysical, as with the Moabite deity Chemosh (Vol. I, 192), and the liturgical, as with prohibition of honey as an altar offering (I:379). For Melville’s reliance on Kitto, see New “Bible Leaves!” (290), as well as Pardes “Remapping” (136).

⁵⁵ Since Job belongs to the *Ketuvim*, or writings, section of Scripture, Maimonides’s declaration seems tautological. However, the comment must be understood as underscoring the literariness of the text. It therefore validates the method of literary exegesis I propose Melville follows.

⁵⁶ The Hebrew term “Satan” is not a proper name but a title. Acting as God’s subordinate rather than antagonist, as Calvinist interpretations would have it, Satan appears in the role of accuser in the Book of Job. See Wesley Morriston, “God’s Answer to Job,” *Religious Studies* 2.3 (1996), 340-45. Thompson claims that realizing this complicity between Satan and God, “Melville came to view God as the source from whom all evils flow, in short, the ‘Original Sinner,’ divinely depraved” (6).

distinct. But the degree to which they can affect the human mind may vary: “the adversary [Satan] is far from God,” and, “whilst power has been given to him over all earthly affairs, there is a partition between him and the soul; he has not received power over the soul” (Maimonides 436, emphasis added). While Satan may operate on the material part of the universe, the human soul, “designates that element in man that survives him; it is this portion over which the adversary has no power” (Maimonides 436). Corruption of the human mind is temporarily possible, but such contamination cannot permanently take root in the deep structure of the human soul. Melville frequently negotiates this binary of base materiality and ephemeral soul in his fiction.⁵⁷

Following these preliminaries, Maimonides stresses that Job’s interlocutors allegorize rivaling exegetical traditions. While he sees Job questing for essence, Maimonides identifies Eliphaz as a Scriptural literalist who believes “in accordance with strict justice [. . .] Job was guilty of sins for which he deserved his fate” (440-41). Bildad, the Mu’tazilite, propagates “the theory of reward and compensation” and tells Job “his terrible misfortunes will be the source of great reward” should he in fact turn out to be innocent (Maimonides 440).⁵⁸ The third speaker, Zofar, voices the tradition of the Ash’arites and contests that “no further cause can be sought” beyond divine will, for God’s “essence demands that He does what He wills” (Maimonides 440).⁵⁹ Zofar advocates the unity of divine action and will, on the one hand, and the

⁵⁷ In his pamphlet “Chronometricals and Horologicals” the philosopher Plotinus Plinlimmon claims that “life on this earth is but a state of probation; which among other things implies [. . .] we mortals have only to do with things *provisional*” (emphasis mine, Melville *Pierre*, 211). See also my Chapter 4.

⁵⁸ An influential eighth-century brand of Islamic speculative theology that postulated that “[t]he principle of unity (tawhid) suggests God’s unity against any resemblance to Him. Under this principle, the Mu’tazilites deny the eternity of the Quran, God’s attributes, and any form of anthropomorphism.” Similar enough to seventeenth-century Puritanism, for the Mu’tazilites “the principle of justice (‘adl) is associated with the theory of determination (qadar), in which it is maintained that God is just and that human beings are free to choose and to act” (Kafrawi 497).

⁵⁹ Founded in the ninth century, the sect of the Ash’arites professes the concept of free will while increasingly emphasizing predestination in their teachings. They maintain the “uncreatedness” of the Qur’an because of its affiliation with God’s eternal attributes (knowledge, speech, sight). Both Mu’tazilites and Ash’arites

incompatibility of divine and human reason on the other. Although his is an argument from dogma, Zofar thus underwrites Maimonides's own cosmology of mutually dependent yet divided realms (material/spiritual).⁶⁰

Elihu, the youngest speaker, represents the most modern voice amongst the competing exegetic traditions allegorized in the Biblical text. He claims that divine and human wisdom coincide in name only and cannot be reconciled, but maintains that because humans are constantly exposed to the divine presence in Creation, they feel compelled to decipher God's hidden communication within natural phenomena. This compulsion sets up a prophetic hermeneutics in which miracles, prophets, and natural disasters figure as exegetical devices. Elihu is the first to explicate the argument about the separate spheres of human and divine wisdom. As such, his function is to summarize the arguments of his predecessors and situate the reader for God's rebuttal. This function has lead critics to consider Eliuh a late addition to the original text (Maimonides 442).

I propose linking Maimonides and Melville in two ways here: first, Melville casting of Ahab, Ishmael, and Pip as Joban sufferers who, in *Moby-Dick*, echo Maimonides's allegorical reading of Job's friends as representing exegetical traditions. Second, Maimonides explains that Elihu repeats his predecessors' arguments in order "to conceal the opinion peculiar to each speaker, and to make all appear in the eyes of the ordinary reader to utter one and the same view" (441). This statement acknowledges equivocation and structuring as narrative strategies of the

deal with controversial exegetical issues, such as the existence of attributes of God (sifat Allah), the nature of divine speech (kalam Allah), the possibility of seeing God in a future life (ru.yat Allah), the question of divine omnipotence and human free will (irada), and the fate of a believing sinner (murtakib al-kabira). By the nineteenth-century, God's sensory faculties had become exclusively attached to fallible human knowledge in Judeo-Christian tradition (Özervarli 82-84).

⁶⁰ Zofar's structural function within the Joban plot is to foreshadow the taunting rhetorical questions of the whirlwind poem when comments to Job "wisdom hath two portions I know, therefore, [sic] that God exacteth of thee less than thine iniquity deserveth. Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" (Job 11: 6,7).

Biblical text. Maimonides is theologically conservative because he sides with God in claiming that Job “merely redeems himself by his eventual concession to God’s supreme power” (439).

Maimonides ultimately affirms Job’s sinfulness. As such, God’s rebuttal of Job’s complaint is a sign of His benign character:

God ignored the sin of Job [i.e. his skepticism], because of the acuteness of his suffering. But this explanation does not agree with the object of the whole allegory. The [admonishing] words of God [in the whirlwind poem] are justified [. . .] by the fact that Job abandoned his first very erroneous opinion, and himself proved that it was an error. (Maimonides 439)

Insofar as it emphasizes God’s didactic agenda, Maimonides’s allegorical reading of Job prefigures Enlightenment humanism. Beyond that, it allows for a clearer differentiation of the seemingly incompatible figures of the moralist, skeptical Job and moral-relativist, repentant Job. Maimonides exposes a covert exegetical relativism operating in the Book of Job that Melville too exploits in his novel: The syntheses of Job’s piety, unwarranted suffering, and blasphemy, on the one hand, and God’s didacticism and violence on the other, demonstrates the semantic instability of dogmatic concepts such as truth and justice. Melville is predominantly concerned with exploring these fault lines.⁶¹

Melville is, of course, not the first author to solicit this specific Biblical text for his own thinking. Since the Reformation, exegesis of the Book of Job had emphasized the humbling experience of God’s sublime presence.⁶² And while Maimonides ultimately sanctions God’s

⁶¹ “The sole object of all the trials mentioned in Scripture is to teach man what he ought to do or believe; so that the event which forms the actual trial is not the end desired: *it is but an example for our instruction and guidance*” (Maimonides 444, emphasis added). Concerning sensible approaches to Melville’s use of religion in his writing, Jenny Franchot suggests that “rather than pondering whether Melville ultimately found answers to his religious questions,” we should consider “how his narratives and poetry construct this duality, coupling belief with unbelief” (160).

⁶² Martin Luther in his *Vierzehn Tröstungen für Mühselige und Beladene* (1520) optimistically reads suffering as the moment when God lifts His protecting hand that normally shields our consciousness from the harmful effects of full knowledge of the universe and its forces: “[. . .] From this [instances of suffering] we see how

rhetorical position in his earlier interpretation, eighteenth-century European readers interpreted the Book of Job as an affirmation of autonomous human agency. Job's Promethean demand for a trial before God supported Enlightenment belief in the liberating power of human reason.

Eighteenth-century European philosophy increasingly focused on describing the psychological repercussions of subliminal experiences. This new focus also opened the door to discussions about the state of knowledge and human culpability under natural law, which were absorbed into interpretations of the Bible.⁶³

For instance, Immanuel Kant emphasizes the didactic utility of sensory failure in his discussion of the mathematical sublime. To Kant the sublime evokes a "feeling of pain arising from the want of accordance between aesthetic estimation of magnitude formed by the imagination and the estimation of the same formed by reason"; this want of accordance produces a "pleasure arising from correspondence (of this realization) with rational ideas about this judgment of inadequacy of our greatest faculty of sense" (Kant *Critique*, 267). The utility of the sublime lies in its capacity for causing sensory overload. It allows humans to experience sensory limitation as pleasurable. Despite Kant's argument that the "violence done to the subject" may be experienced as pleasure, this notion of the sublime reifies the barrier between divine and human knowledge presented in the latter part of the Joban plot (*Critique* 268). The understanding of the sublime gained from Kant's model, however, seems to merely produce knowledge of the

sweetly we ought to love our Lord, whenever any evil comes upon us. For our most loving Father would by that one evil have us see how many evils threaten us and would fall on us" (Luther 15).

⁶³ Renowned political philosopher Edmund Burke pleaded for the sublime terror conveyed by the Book of Job to be read as a warning against overt skepticism: "[. . .] wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror, and contempt the attendant on a strength that is subservient and innocuous" (Burke 115). Similarly, Johann Gottfried Herder observed in his *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* (1782/3; translated and published as *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, 1832) that within the Book of Job we find a God that seeks to assert Himself as "the [sovereign] paternal ruler of the heavens." Finally, English grammarian and Bishop Robert Lowth agreed that the object of the Book of Job was "to demonstrate the necessity of humility, of trust in God, and of the profoundest reverence for the divine decrees" rather than to emphasize Job's defense of personal integrity (all qtd. in Vogler, 28). In this sense, Melville reacts against some of the prevalent exegetes of his time. However, he does not disown the Bible as such.

epistemological barrier between the divine and the human epistemology, rather than enabling its transcendence. Friedrich Schiller extrapolates Kant's position in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) by postulating the individual's ability to harness its experience of the sublime and convert it into moral lessons. This new focus on the individual's psychological and conceptual computation of the sublime emerges in Schiller's definition of beauty. Schiller recasts Kant's theory of the sublime as productive terror: Beauty is "at once our state and our art. And exactly because it is both it serves us as a triumphant proof that suffering does not exclude activity [. . .] both natures are united, and by this is proved the capacity of the infinite to be developed in the finite" (emphasis mine, Schiller, 23). Applying Kant and Schiller's concepts of the sublime to the Book of Job converts Job's experience into a story of intellectual growth. In the nineteenth century, the most prevalent generic expression of this idea is, of course, the *Bildungsroman*. This proposed syncretic conversion of mental into phenomenological experiences by way of aesthetic expression, I propose, is the very epistemological project in which Melville engages. Ahab, for example, echoes Schiller's proposition of solving the riddle of existence through art, but misinterprets it (insofar as "art" refers to human science and scientific nautical tools such as the quadrant) as a guarantee of receiving answers suitable to one's intellectual disposition. This misreading leads to Ahab's erratic discarding of all scientific methodology and spawns his demand that the universe bend to his expectations of justice and fair play.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Melville mentions Schiller in his letter to Hawthorne from June 1 (?), 1851, calling him an advocate of the "aristocracy of the brain" programmatically opposed to his own "ruthless democracy," and yet he includes Schiller into the category of men "of superior mind" who display the "intense cultivation" that—as Melville admits—conceivably warrants such aristocracy (*Correspondence* 190). Whether Melville earnestly evaluates Schiller's faculties or merely tries to understate his own development in order to curry favor with Hawthorne is open for debate. Arguably, Melville would be earnest with Hawthorne because the admitted point of the letter is to have a sounding board for his thoughts: "Don't trouble yourself, though, about writing; [. . .] I will do all the writing and visiting and talking myself" (*Correspondence* 192).

The aforementioned John Kitto devotes an elaborate entry to the Book of Job in his *Cyclopedia* in which he not only makes transparent the lesson that God's actions cannot be subsumed under the paradigm of rationalism alone. He anatomizes Job's epistemological evolution, but also points to the text's stylistic literary merit and thus combines both aesthetic and historical textual scholarship: "Interest in the narrative is kept up with considerable skill, by progressively rising and highly passionate language" (Kitto 2:115). The book's argumentative thrust and its place within the Biblical canon remain the central issues of the discussion. Kitto observes that while the dynamic of "affliction of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked" is the central paradigm, "it should be observed that the direct problem exclusively refers to the first point, the second being only incidentally discussed on occasion of the leading theme" (2:116). The correlation between the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked can have no resolution because Job's Biblical author operates under the pre-existing moral dynamics of the unassailable Thalmudic sections of the Hebrew Bible: "the problem could be satisfactorily solved only when the doctrines of immorality and retribution had been first established which had not been done by the author of the book of Job" (Kitto 2:116). Neither Job's nor God's speech provides a solution to the text's original premise. All the while Elihu, whom some scholars have since come to construe as a post-hoc addition to the original text, as presenting the ultimate solution in form of the reassertion of the doctrine of divine retribution after death (*Cyclopedia* 2:118). Contrary to Maimonides's reading, Kitto asserts that the doctrine of dispensary justice is not overcome by Job; rather, the text proposes reconciling affliction with divine justice and thus envisions a more flexible notion of God's dispensation of it. In terms of the text's material history, he presents several contemporary theories about its authorship as well as its date of origin (2:124). Especially his argument for the book's belatedness in relation to the

Pentateuch on the grounds of intertextual references is intriguing. Kitto's privileging of reason over appeals to sense perception reveals the nineteenth-century vestiges of an Enlightenment predilection for rationalism (2:125). In sum, Kitto offered Melville a comprehensive reading that scrutinizes the Biblical text under the auspices of intertextuality, Judaic as well as Christian theology, textual history, teleology, rhetoric, and logic.

Kitto's sophisticated explication of the Book of Job and its exegetical history constructs a cross-cultural and cross-temporal continuity between exegetes of different periods, nationalities, and political stripes. This dynamic, I argue, is clearly reflected in Melville's writing. Romantic authors view Job's suffering as a Promethean effort to ascertain the truth of his innocence. Job's Promethean quality consists not only in his head-on confrontation of authority but also particularly in his moral integrity. Melville's personal attraction to this figure may be explained by the fact that Job demonstrates moral integrity beyond the restrictive dictates of dogma. In contrast, Job's integrity seems autonomous and self-motivated. Melville expounds on this notion of integrity and finds in the character Job the template of human being that holds up the integrity of self against a disjointed chaotic world. And it is this central thematic dynamic that draws Melville to the character in his various manifestations in the Biblical text. Hence, Melville's use of Job and other Biblical characters, themes, and motifs to represent American social reality can help us integrate Melville into the transatlantic history of ideas that forms around the Bible. We may gain a fuller understanding of the trends and turns that the Philosophy of Religion took in nineteenth-century America.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Job's emotional range and moral integrity are in keeping with what critics have identified as the Romanticist notion of the individual in art. Howard Mumford Jones points out that in the last part of the eighteenth century, "[t]he human being became at once more lonely and more independent, more unpredictable and more filled with emotion, more likely to look for the satisfactions of life here and now and less likely to be put off either by promises or by assurances that class and status were more blessed than self-fulfillment [. . .] Progress meant that the individual was no longer merely an integer but a total human being" (260). Leon Chai illustrates what he deems Melville's notion of the literary object into the European romantic tradition by arguing that Melville, contrary to

3.2 Melville Reading 'Job' and the American Past

Building on the previous excursions, we may begin understanding Melville's exegetical practice by considering contemporary ways in which the Biblical text has been understood prior to and during Melville's lifetime. The voices in eighteenth-century European philosophy I surveyed above seem to contrast personal experience with the divine and abstract, dogmatic religious practice. This interpretative approach touts the romantic tropes of individual genius and Promethean perseverance. The Hebrew version of the text negotiates the distinction between dogma and personal religious experience by formally splitting the text in a prose prolog and a poetic conclusion. This formal arrangement mirrors the contemporary (second century, B.C.E.) dogmatic notion of the deity: God resides outside the universe and acts independently of its causality. However, by intervening in Job's crisis and critically engaging the rivaling exegetical traditions presented by his friends, God transforms into a deity that can potentially be known by experience. The text therefore provides an occasion for Melville to break through the rigid notion of a mechanical, deterministic universe propagated in Calvinism and advocated well into the nineteenth century under the banner of natural theology.⁶⁶

As an object of literary analysis, the Book of Job exposes a rift between nineteenth-century humanist sensibilities—in regards to what Thomas Paine had polemicized as the rights of man—and God's problematic claim to universal wisdom, goodness, and justice. Stooping to conquer His creatures' inferior Cartesian rational epistemology makes God appear morally ambivalent. It is all the more surprising that Melville, the alleged dyed-in-the-wool religious

Shelley, for instance, sees the merit of literature not in its ability to represent desires in relation to objects (420) but rather in literature's capacity for representing "desires themselves through their embodiment *in* an object that is not what they seek but simply a medium for their reflection back upon the self" (421, emphasis added).

⁶⁶ Brumm postulates the presence of typological hermeneutics in Melville's writing. More importantly, however, she argues that, "even though he quarreled with the God of the Calvinists, he never doubted that the world with all its features was a divine creation. For Melville, writing did not mean to create a world but to interpret the world" (196). William Paley famously condensed the argument for a mechanical universe into the watchmaker metaphor in *Natural Theology* (1802), 7.

skeptic, augments a reading of Job as a champion of Enlightenment humanism by using him to expose intellectual hypocrisy within said humanism. Melville carries his fascination with this contentious figure through all genres of his literary work, be it in the personal form of the thundering Ahab angling for a fight with the arbitrary deity that lashes out at him from behind the pasteboard mask, or in the more detached negotiation of the dispensation of justice by the narrators of *White-Jacket* and *Billy Budd*. He repeatedly addresses the inner machinations of religious and secular dogma, as well as the epistemological mechanism through which canonical and legal texts establish their authority over a community of believers. As such, the Biblical source text makes transparent the political and literary dimensions of dogma. Taking up the mantle of the romantic humanist, Melville comments extensively on the dogmatic function of secular legal documents, such as the naval codex in *White-Jacket* and *Billy Budd*, pagan rites and tribal culture in *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, and even the Book of Nature in *Moby-Dick* and *Battle-Pieces*, and *Clarel*. He diagnoses the same mythical genealogy behind secular authority that he discerns behind religious dogma. It is thus unsurprising that Melville, like many other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentators in the transatlantic region, found in the Bible a poignant vocabulary to articulate this critique.⁶⁷

These early, nominal considerations of justice are succeeded by iconoclastic outburst, such as *Moby-Dick*, as well as subversive accounts marked by cautious legal manipulation, such as “Bartleby” and *The Confidence-Man*, the pondering of chance games and the insulating logic of technological security-thinking (“The Lightning-Rod Man”), and the linguistic emptying out of the discretionary function of verdicts in general (“The Happy Failure”). These multifarious

⁶⁷ See Percy Shelley’s dramatic poem *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) epitomizes the Romantic investment in the Prometheus figure. The widely held interpretation of Ahab as a type of Prometheus, considered exegetically, can be read as the coercion of Job into the Promethean myth. Both symbols display mutual contact points and analogies that Melville moderates in *Moby-Dick*. I will address how he goes about this in a moment.

representations of legal systems as conflicting with morality keep Melville returning to the distinctly Joban and Ecclesiastical position of stressing how a codex of laws is incompatible with contingent living reality. Trying to apply the dead letter of the law to scenes of human life always entails violent coercion, not only against the body but also against the very *telos* of law itself. This fundamental paradox in the sequence of dispensary justice—transgression, punishment, and suffering—constitutes the Joban legal compliance in Melville’s writing.⁶⁸

3.3 *Mardi* and Job: Taji as Sub-Sub Librarian

What I have thus far called Melville’s method of exegetical moderation can be observed in two related passages from *Mardi*: In the chapter “The Sea on Fire” Taji—functioning as a spiritual as well as an intellectual guide to the reader—describes his encounter with a school of whales. Melville constructs Taji’s discussion of bioluminescence on the basis of Joban reference about the whale’s hoary trail in the water. The narrator wishes to establish a solid foundation for their aesthetic judgments and both wind up with a cacophony of anaphoric verdicts about a natural phenomenon. The scene in *Mardi* initially evokes an uncanny, supernatural atmosphere and thus sets the tone for metaphysical inquiry: the sea casts a “cadaverous gleam” upon the three travelers, making them appear like “ghosts” to each other, while a curious whale seemingly threatens to sink the boat (*M* 782). Working on the premise of sense perception, Taji describes the “remarkable spectacle” of the phosphorescent sea as the travelers behold the spectacle from their small boat (*M* 782). The party notices a school of sperm whales moving through the spree

⁶⁸ I will return to this issue later in the present chapter as well as in my chapter on Ecclesiastes. Regarding Melville’s understanding of the Bible’s ability to articulate the contingencies of legal culture, Wright observes “[t]hroughout the Old Testament books of his Bible, he [Melville] noted the paradoxical observations, especially in Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes, on the one hand that the ungodly are like the chaff and on the other that the race is not to the swift” (*Use* 97). For an excellent analysis of the utility of oscillation in Melville’s thought, see Jenny Franchot’s “Melville’s Traveling God,” 158. If an authorial reading is to be performed here, I would emphasize that Melville, earnestly seeking spiritual stability, depicted its impossibility in his writing rather than celebrating it. Johnathan A. Cook in *Inscrutable Malice* (2013) points out again Ishmael’s celebration of the open-ended quest in *Moby-Dick* (69).

while spouting “fountains of fire” (*M* 782). Taji seems mesmerized by the whales’ effortless traversal through the seemingly fiery element. Consistent with the Joban Biblical text, which emphasizes the reverence-inspiring size of the animals, Taji calls the sperm whales “Leviathans” and conjectures that, had they had “vicious intention, they might have destroyed the small Chamois,” in which he and his friends had taken refuge (*M* 782). In another Joban analogy, he observes “the long strips of glossy transparent substance which thin as gossamer invests the body” of the whales as they glide through an ocean that is “white as a shroud” (*M* 783). Samoa, Taji’s indigenous compatriot, displays Joban awe and terror. And when the whales notice the travelers’ small boat, they render “the sea even more sparkling from the violent surging of their descent” (*M* 783).⁶⁹

Once “the monster at last departed,” Taji begins meditating upon the Biblical Joban premise of the hoary sea left in Leviathan’s wake. In his reverie he transitions from personal experience (as a sailor, he observes that the phenomenon of the phosphorescent sea is more common in the Pacific than the Atlantic sea) to the tall tales of sailors who “love marvels” (*M* 784). A nondescript “old shipmate”—arguably an early rendition of Sag-Harbor, the sailor who questions the topographic accuracy of the Biblical book of Jonah in *Moby-Dick*’s “Jonah Historically Regarded”—argues that the “phosphorescence of the sea is caused by a commotion among the mermaids” (*M* 784).⁷⁰ In the text, such sea-faring yarns are contrasted with Michael Faraday’s assessment of bioluminescence as the result of some “peculiarly electrical condition of the atmosphere” (*M* 784). However, Taji merely gives a superficial gloss of Faraday’s position

⁶⁹ Cf. Job 41:31-32: “He [leviathan] maketh the deep to boil like a pot [. . .] / he maketh a path to shine after him; one would think the deep to be hoary.” Humankind’s limited spacial comprehension is exceeded by the Leviathan’s unfathomable size. During their quarrel, God mockingly asks Job several questions that reveal Job’s inability to control the Leviathan’s gigantic physical force, whereas God displays his own greatness in making the monster his plaything: “Behold, he drinketh up a river and hasteth not: he trusteth / that he can draw up Jordan into his mouth” (Job 40:23); and “Wilt thou play with him as with a bird?” (41:5).

⁷⁰ Cf. *MD* 365.

here. In lieu of specific references, Faraday and the old shipmate must be considered foils. What is significant about Melville's literary technique in this scene, however, is the way Taji characterizes Faraday's answer: Evincing the stereotypical single-mindedness of the rational empiricist, Faraday's explanation, as it is referenced in the novel, allows for no disavowal or modification. It is dogmatic and unassailable. The proposed electrical principle must "solely" be responsible for the sea's illumination. Against this inflexible singular stance, Melville puts the counterpoint of a choir of "intelligent seamen" who source the ocean's eerie glow to "putrescent animal matter" (*M* 784). And Taji stands temporarily convinced by this conjecture until he explores the materialist proposition that "dead matter" alone cannot produce the "seeming ignition" of the sea (*M* 784). In an attempt at synthesizing these disparate voices, he speculates that the luminous effect must be the product of some living creature, "myriads of microscopic mullosca" even (*M* 784).⁷¹

At this point, Taji dilates on the scope of his inquiry. His discourse now encompasses the awesome size and force of the whale as well as the innumerable, concerted actions of the tiniest of sea animals. Melville makes no qualitative distinction between the modes of inquiry his narrator moderates. Yet the inevitably paralyzing effect of such leveling is that the deadlock between hearsay and empirical theory in Taji's mind cannot be broken, for both principles "are only surmises; likely but uncertain" (*M* 784). "After science comes sentiment," Taji concludes;

⁷¹ In the years prior to Melville's publication of *Mardi*, Michael Faraday, although not explicitly addressing bioluminescence, had published prolifically on the effect of magnetic waves on light and other natural phenomena. Faraday's positions were circulated in publications such as the *Philosophical Magazine*. See esp. "Thoughts on Ray-vibrations," *Philosophical Magazine* 28 (1846): 345-50; "On the Magnetic Affection of Light, and on the Distinction between the Ferromagnetic and Diamagnetic Conditions of Matter" *Philosophical Magazine* 29 (1846): 153-6, 249-58; and "On the Diamagnetic conditions of Flame and Gases," *Philosophical Magazine* 31 (1847): 401-21. Merton Sealts does not list Faraday among Melville's sources during that time; however, Sealts notes that Melville read diversely in various areas of scientific research. For instance, he purchased Charles Darwin's journal about his cruise on the *Beagle*, "which Melville was to draw upon in 1854 for Sketches First and Fourth of the "Encantadas" (32). Melville subsumes his reading as well as the experience of composing *Mardi* between 1847 and 49 in a note to Evert Duyckinck (Dec. 14, 1849), "Had I not written & published 'Mardi,' I would not be as wise as I am now, or may be" (qtd. in Sealts 41).

this epitaphesque quote presages the laments of Clarel and his fellow pilgrims in the desert; yet this verdict merely acknowledges temporal sequence, not quality of insight (*M* 785). Neither of the methods Taji lists conclusively solves the conundrum of the water's luminescence. All speakers merely acknowledge the emblematic quality of its glow as indicating the deep mystery that lurks beneath the surface of all ontological phenomena. Indeed, the matter seems to be as unintelligible as the "vivid, greenish trails," left by the sharks underneath the ocean's surface (*M* 782). Taji sublates each new perspective he takes into account. Likewise, the sharks' tracks linger in the hoary wake of the whales, "crossing and recrossing each other in every direction" (*M* 782).

Driving this comparison further, Taji combines naturalist observations on bioluminescent signaling between mating lightning bugs with the romantic idea of love in the tragedy of Hero and Leander. Again, Melville makes his point not by specific references but by thematic contrast: Only a synthesis of empiricism and sentiment may produce meaningful information about the world. In this scene, he tarries with the tension that emerges from Taji's conjectures by dialectically holding the two principles up against each other. Having reached this pondering repose—built on the foundation of Joban exegesis—Taji explodes the confines of his inquiry yet again by noting that the bioluminescent mating-call of the "poor little fire-fish of the sea" simultaneously becomes their death toll when it attracts predators instead of mates. His empathy for the "small fry" is based on the same acknowledgement of size that causes Samoa to fear the might of the Leviathan.⁷²

⁷² A likely reference for Taji's reflections here is the work of French naturalist François Péron who is generally credited with first describing *pyrosoma atlanticum* as producing the phosphorescence of the water in his *Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere* (1801-4). Covent Garden, London: McMillan, Bow Street, 1809. Merton Sealts does not list Péron's *Voyage* among the scientific books Melville owned; however, Melville could have very well learned about Péron from popular encyclopedias such as William Jardine's multi-volume *The Naturalist's Library* (1837). Tydus Hillway notes that Melville frequently did not acknowledge his primary scientific sources and "never developed a real interest in the original studies and writing of the great men of science

Even at this early point in *Mardi*, Melville had already developed a sophisticated poetic epistemology. Natural phenomena call forth a cacophony of critical voices from the camps of science, art, tradition, and common-sense pragmatism. The luminous sea acts as canvas and catalyst for Taji's moderation of these voices. And while the Joban notion of hoariness is not the controlling image of his moderation, the Biblical text defines the inquiry's epistemological frame of reference: the uncanny illumination confounds sense perception as the gradual discovery of the whales' size and might induces horror (Samoa) as well as angst (Jarl) in the travelers. Yet the Biblical context transposes the whale's physical motions to hermeneutical movements. This transformation is the reason that the ocean's depths appear heavy with mysterious meaning. And it is this meaning-laden depth Taji's soliloquy attempts to sound. Melville thus uses the Biblical text as a platform upon which he unfolds a rich spectrum of human inquisitive faculties and ingenuity. Similar moments in both *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* follow, moments in which the unfathomable mystery of God becomes manifested through natural phenomena. Melville juxtaposes the content of the description with the thick description of epistemological techniques to study them. His response to these phenomena, then, is a display of the richness of human inventiveness.

As I outlined above, OT wisdom literature is precisely concerned with explicating this causal relation. As such, Melville sought out quite expertly that part of the Bible that comments on human beings' interaction with the divine as evinced by the natural world. Passages such as this one, therefore, evince a systemic theological understanding of the Biblical text on the part of the author. The humorous tone of the passage is not contemptuous towards the OT source material, but rather considers seriously its opaque general demand to not cling too strenuously to

contemporaneous with him" (422). This verdict is grounded in Hillway's compelling assessment that "Melville was patently less interested in scientific credibility than in literary effect" (419).

any pre-formulated method of inquiry. *Mardi* would be the first incident of Melville putting into practice a method inspired by an OT hermeneutics.

3.4 *Moby-Dick: The Whale's Three Jobs*

In the chapter “Excerpts” of *Moby-Dick* (1851) Herman Melville credits “Mighty Job” as the first author of the Leviathan. Melville read Leviathan as a whale at a time in which exegetical practice commonly posited a crocodile as the referent for the term. Melville’s editorial commentary and thematic choices therefore place Job, not Jonah, at the heart of the novel’s metaphysical inquiry. And it is in the Book of Job that Melville finds an exegetical tradition that engages God’s paradox duality as both dispenser of unwarranted suffering and embodiment of theodicy. It is therefore unsurprising that readings of *Moby-Dick*’s theological commentary have received consistent attention in scholarship over the past seven decades. Moreover, recent contributions by theologians have proposed the history of the literary Bible as a viable approach to Melville’s novelist fiction.⁷³

In this latter vein, Ilana Pardes has even suggested rather bombastically that with *Moby-Dick*, Melville “ventured to fashion a grand new inverted Bible” while attempting to capture “every imaginable mode of biblical interpretation” (*Melville’s* 1). Pardes points out Melville’s “strikingly broad [read: eclectic] conception of exegesis,” yet she never defines in detail the means by which Melville accomplishes what she appealingly terms a “radical reconsideration of the politics of biblical reception” (1). On the side of literary scholarship, assessments of Melville’s dealings with the Bible have, of course, been numerous. However, most arguments

⁷³ For an abridged history of the scholarly argument about the Book of Job’s presence in *Moby-Dick*, see Wright, “Moby Dick” (195); Hoffman’s “Moby-Dick: Jonah’s or Job’s Whale” (206); and Pardes, “Job’s Leviathan” (253). For a diachronical look at studies on Melville and religion, consider the projects outlined in Braswell, *Melville’s Religious Thought* (18-22); Wright, *Melville’s Use of the Bible* (6-9); Thomsson, *Melville’s Quarrel* (6); Herbert, *Moby-Dick and Calvinism* (11); and Robert Milder *Exiled Royalties* (xiii). For recent arguments by Bible scholars and theologians working on the intersection of religion and literature, see Alter’s *The Literary Guide* (1990) and *Pen of Iron* (2010) as well as Pardes, *Melville’s Bibles* (2-5).

become equally opaque when trying to articulate how much of Melville's skepticism actually transgresses against the Bible's own skeptical capacity. Part of my argument here is that this oversight results from a bias towards Christology and NT hermeneutics and a blatant disregard for, on the one hand, the extent to which Biblical hermeneutics allowed for productive skepticism and, on the other hand, how widely skeptical yet productive reading methods—such as those promoted by deist and free-thinkers—circulated in the nineteenth century. In contrast, Wright's empirical data illustrate that two-thirds of Melville's Biblical references and allusions actually refer to the OT (*Melville's Use* 10), and out of those references, the majority is to the wisdom books (*Melville's Use* 94). The sheer number thus suggest that Melville's texts operate rather frequently under an assumed OT hermeneutics, a fact critics mostly only allude to and often ignore in favor of mounting authorial readings based on Melville's Calvinist education.⁷⁴

As a case in point, Lawrence Buell characterizes *Moby-Dick* as “a sort of modern Book of Revelation, yet also a book that casts doubt on the possibility of revelation” (“*Moby-Dick*” 55), while Hilton Obenzinger contests that “[t]he ironies, parodies, sly essays, and jokes work to undermine the seriousness of the book [. . .] yet the hodgepodge of literary styles creates a new sense of lofty, even sacred, narrative” (“Wicked” 189). Buell, too, detects that the *Moby-Dick* “remains in some measure faithful to a biblical sense of God's elusiveness of human conception,” yet he never brings the novel into communication with this methodology (“*Moby-Dick*” 55). The NT slant of his approach leads Buell to underestimate the thematic and stylistic implications the story of Job, for example, has for the novel beyond a resemblance in narrative structure (“*Moby-Dick*” 64).

⁷⁴ To be clear, I am not suggesting that considering Melville's use of Calvinism or NT theology in this way is invalid. As a matter of fact, he draws heavily on both. However, I act upon the impression that OT theology is only referenced pro forma by, when in fact it formed a major part of the cosmology Melville's texts put forth.

In order to fill this gap, I propose reconsidering key scenes in *Moby-Dick* in terms of their literary and historical exegetical character. I want to expound upon Buell's claim that Melville's works operate well within the limits of OT Biblical hermeneutics, even when they seemingly subvert scriptural dogma ("*Moby-Dick*" 55). In *Moby-Dick*, as elsewhere in his works, Melville's literary exegetic methodology includes parody, pastiche, intertextual reference, poetic and narrative insertion, ventriloquism, and the exploitation of verbal fallacy.

As I have shown in my discussion of Maimonides, such literary devices have long been deemed valid exegetical means. What seems like irreverent treatment of Biblical content on Melville's part is actually within the limits of traditional OT exegesis. In *Moby-Dick* Melville uses this aesthetic license by splitting the three primary aspects of the Joban paradigm (victimization, defiance, repentance) across three literary personae: Pip, Ahab, and Ishmael. Each Joban character performs a distinct function within the framework of Melville's aesthetic exegetic hermeneutics: Ishmael (repentant Job) engages in comparative historical readings of religious dogma; Ahab (defiant Job) undermines the notion of theophany; Pip, the hapless victimized sufferer, symbolizes the hypothetical scenario of gaining insight into God's mind.⁷⁵

The use of literary persona allows Melville to develop discrete Joban aspects in his characters; more importantly, this technique offers the unique opportunity to let Job's conflicting character traits confront each other as voices in a larger dialog. The disciplinary revision I propose consists of abandoning the stereotypical forensic characterization of Melville as a spiritually interior writer who uses his craft solely to work out his inner demons. I rather propose to read *Moby-Dick* in line with recent theological scholarship, such as Abigail Pelham's, as an exegetic commentary that moderates specific epistemological and ontological questions as they

⁷⁵ Critics have long reductively and erroneously considered Melville's engagement with Biblical themes to have been motivated by personal irreverence and even wickedness. See esp. Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel*, and Murray, "In Nomine Diaboli" (436).

are articulated in the Book of Job: Why is the world out of keeping with one's expectations? In this latter function, the novel transcends proffering skepticism and dealing metaphysical cheap shots to credulous, sheepish readers. Melville was mindful that he could never be "at all frank with his readers," yet his prose extends an open invitation to those able and willing to share in an aesthetic theological vision (*Correspondence* 149).

Following a period of rabid philosophical reading, Melville, in 1851, begins to reconcile his role as author and his moral and aesthetic capabilities. *Mardi* had served as a rough cut of this project, yet its circle of characters and voices had been heterodox and the quest for the ephemeral Yillah had been too abstract to propel the inquiry and the plot forward. Yet, *Mardi* had allowed Melville to try his hand at aesthetic engagement with the metaphysical issues and contemporary exegetical controversies. He begins gathering information by consulting several commentaries and cyclopedia that catalog exegetical tradition: John Kitto's *Cyclopedia* (1845, Gould & Lincoln ed., 1851); Pierre Bayle's *Dictionary Historical and Critical* (1826); the works of Sir Thomas Browne (1835-36); and especially Abraham Tucker's *The Light of Nature Pursued* (1807), a systematic deist treatise on nature, God, and human faculties, directed at skeptics, evince the structured approach Melville took to researching historical interpretations of the Bible.

His reading and writings indicate that he considered literary activity as a means of serious investigation of metaphysical problems, a method that could unify the various textual sources that nurtured and expanded his mind in the years prior to 1851. His methodology lead him to curious decisions, such as choosing to read leviathan as a whale when it had long been considered a crocodile. Melville's choice, while informed by Kitto's *Cyclopedia*, and his experiences at sea, was also influenced by his other readings in the OT. His initial references to

the Biblical wisdom books in the chapter “Extracts” cites Job 41:32 from the long catalog of descriptions God delivers on the animal. Melville picks a passage that addresses the the leviathan’s ability to alter sense perception: “[o]ne would think the deep to be hoary,” i.e., the whale’s movements create the illusion of temporal and spacial depth being conflated in the water and allowing the spectator a glimpse into the depth of creation. *Moby-Dick* makes much of this passage. More in fact than from the following reference to Jonah 1:17, which merely states that God made the whale to swallow up Jonah, as an instrument of His will. The passage thus points out the whale’s utility to its creator.

This selection of texts, which includes his family Bible, corroborates his serious interest in the theological controversies of the time, because it demonstrates a diversified understanding of the Biblical source text that translates, I argue, into an equally discerning exegesis of said text. Hence his reading in preparation for writing *Moby-Dick* illustrates that Melville did more than merely vent his frustration at his lot in life or mischievously goading sheepish readers with philosophical ambiguities.

3.4.1 Job on Trial: Melville’s Complaint against God’s Inconsistency

As I mentioned above, scholars have interpreted the Book of Job’s inconsistent style, tone, and structure as indicating the text’s storied editorial history. The book’s prose prolog and God’s poetic remonstrations formally support its thematic paradigm of separate epistemological spheres—those of humanity and divinity—while reinforcing its message about the heuristic nature of personal faith. Nowhere is Melville’s critique of this doctrine of separate epistemological spheres articulated more explicitly than in *Moby-Dick*. At the dawn of the numerous studies on Melville and religion Nathalia Wright argues that the Book of Job in particular fascinated Melville because of the causal argument it puts forth: the book illustrates

“certain cosmological laws and the penalties consequent on disobedience of them” (“Biblical Allusions” 196). These penalties not only signify manifestations of God’s repressive power, but also mark epistemological boundaries individuals brush up against when encountering the sublime. In *Moby-Dick*, then, Melville explores methods and instances of transgression as precedented in the Joban plot. These moments are vital because they provoke God’s presence and thus open lines of communication with the divine. To speak to God, therefore, is to transgress against his laws. Melville challenges the judicial rhetoric of condemnation, which God and Job’s friends deploy. For instance, in the chapter “The Quarter-Deck,” Ahab famously soliloquizes,

How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond. But ’tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. (164)

The Joban problem of unjust and arbitrary punishment puts into perspective the cosmic scale Ahab frequently invokes when he expounds the scope of his victimization by arbitrary cosmic forces. Considering the Book of Job as a textual basis makes transparent the way Melville uses the Biblical source text as a platform for mounting a critique of this victimizing cosmology. In this way, *Moby-Dick* invokes mythical illustrative properties of Biblical language while rejecting its dogmatic quality. As Ahab observes—as if to respond to God speaking from the whirlwind to Job—asserting the limit of human epistemology presents a challenge rather than a deterrent to those minds driven by intellectual integrity.

In the OT text, God also imprisons Job (and leviathan) semantically by arguing from an unassailable rhetorical stance and rejecting causality as an argumentative basis. Ahab dramatizes his metaphysical prison break by stating accordingly his intent at breaking out: he wishes not just to draw out the entity that maintains the prison but to subject that entity to the very caustic logic

it deploys against the prisoners. Still, I argue that there is an important distinction to be made between the form and the content of his demand. Ahab's complaint is formally aligned with Job's in that he demands reality to correspond to his expectations of it. And yet what he nominally demands is the same kind of dispensary justice which Job's friends advocate.

The most common reading of the novel's end is that Ahab's zeal in enforcing his cosmological project leads to his destruction. Reading Ahab's death through the lens of the Biblical text, however, turns this reading on its head: Ahab dies not because he is the villain of an epic plot coming full circle, but because he abandons the grounds of his original complaint by becoming a fatalist. In contrast, Job, whose reward ultimately depends not on his piety but his intellectual integrity, insists on his innocence until the encounter with God. Reading the novel as commenting on the theological teachings of the Biblical text, then, reveals Melville's to be a minute, if conservative, exegesis. Despite his orthodox reasoning, Ahab's prison metaphor aptly captures the Joban problem of transcending dogmatic epistemology, to move from ritual to personal knowledge of God. Because Ahab believes vanquishing the whale will grant him metaphysical knowledge, the pursuit of the whale nominally reflects the Joban epistemological strategy of transcendence. However, his whole epistemological project, as I will show below, operates under the erroneous premise that the sublime encounter will repair the injury he received, re-establishing causal cosmic equilibrium.

Both Ahab and Ishmael interpret the whale's ability to navigate between the ocean's surface and the deep sea as symbolizing Moby Dick's universal access to the divine mind. Ahab in particular believes that such knowledge of God is portable, objective, and hence can be wrested from the whale's physical form. In the chapter "The Chase—Second Day" Ishmael observes,

The first uprising momentum of the whale—modifying its direction as he struck the surface—involuntarily launched him along it [the ship], [. . .] But soon, as if satisfied that his work for that time was done, he *pushed his pleated forehead through the ocean*, and trailing after him the intertangled lines, continued his leeward way at a *traveller's methodic pace*. (559, emphasis added)

Ishmael perceives not the frantic movements of animal instinct but discerns a methodology in the whale's oscillating between the two media. Its movements are as purposeful and strategic, yet its "untraceable evolutions" that "in a thousand ways" entangle the fasting lines, which signify the futile human efforts to fully apprehend and compute the whale's inscrutable method, in the water cannot be traced by the human eye. The whale is privy to the secret "wonder world" Ishmael romanticizes in the chapter "Loomings," but the human eye cannot apprehend either its body or its movements in action. Only the dead whale may be dissected and studied, yet without revealing its metaphysical knowledge. In this way, the whale's movements indicate an ambiguous epistemology that is simultaneously opaque, in terms of its full scale, and yet forcefully apparent, in its incidental manifestations in the form of the whale's violent, physical attacks. To Ishmael and especially Ahab, the whale's methodical movements thus signify immense complexity coupled with arbitrary power that is characteristic of its creator.

Concerning God's inconsistent depiction in the Book of Job, Wesley Morrison observes that traditional readings of the Joban complaint against innocent suffering summarize God's argument as "Job does not know enough to call God into question" (351). The whirlwind poem, in which God reproaches Job, conceptually refutes the application of human epistemology to Providence. Rhetorically, however, God's argumentative method in the poem compromises the book's internal logic by invalidating the casuist conditions for God's love set forth in the prologue:

Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? *and still he*

holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movest me against him, to destroy him without cause. (Job 2:3, emphasis added)

God's conversation with Satan clearly enlists the principles of causal distributive justice. Yet God later disavows these principles as the basis of His actions in the whirlwind poem. The Hebrew and Greek versions of the text even stylistically emphasize God's changing rationales by switching literary genres from prose to verse. The problem that famously emerges from God's inconsistency here is that his line of reasoning makes him susceptible to being accused of authoring injustice and evil in the world. Melville, of course, is primarily concerned with this antinomian issue throughout his career.

Although he relegates Melville's eclectic readings of the Bible and Bible commentaries to the realm of satire, Thompson nevertheless considers Melville's use of the Bible an original exegetical utterance. Ultimately, he is too preoccupied with the novel's dark humor to pursue this line of reasoning further, an oversight which arguably leads him to essentialize Melville's religious attitude as skepticist and ignore the nuanced exegetical work it performs. While *Moby-Dick* may not be Melville's attempt at writing a new Bible, as Pardes argues, Thompson usefully proposes "The Word of God, as Interpreted by Herman Melville" as the novel's subtitle (188). *Moby-Dick* therefore criticizes the paradigm of separate epistemological spheres for human beings and God and critically engages the concept of theodicy.⁷⁶

For instance, Ahab notes that the whale is not only the physical dispenser of his suffering but the very barrier that prohibits access to the governing principle behind that suffering. Like Satan in the Book of Job, the whale primarily functions as a straw man that camouflages God's arbitrariness. The universal contingency that this accusation proposes also constitutes the

⁷⁶ Thompson notes that by depicting the whale as signifying divine malice, "Melville here would seem to avail himself of the opportunity to combine his interpretation of Job forty-one with the orthodox interpretation of Isaiah twenty-seven, so that Leviathan might serve as an emblem of both God and Satan, the two being not merely coeternal, as the Manicheans taught, but one in source, according to Melville's dark exegesis" (Thompson 187).

antinomian specter that has always haunted American versions of Calvinism. Nineteenth-century pious readers would have reconciled this issue by denominational doctrine, available through the pulpit or printed periodicals. Yet the idea of theodicy had come under attack earlier by prominent figures such as Kant, who, in his essay “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,” argues that most attempts to justify God’s benevolent characteristics erroneously conflate moral and teleological notions of justice in discerning God’s character from world history. Melville, I would argue, spins this idea further with Ahab: even before he becomes a Calvinist fatalist, Ahab fears neither the whale nor God’s arbitrary justice, but the possibility that there could be “naught beyond” the surface meanings of the world (*MD* 160).⁷⁷

Besides his dread of the transcendental void lurking behind his prison wall, Ahab dreads the absence of a barrier, a threshold between this life and some higher plane of existence, and thus the impossibility of epistemological transcendence. Without God’s dual nature to rebel against, Ahab’s prison break becomes meaningless. The implications of this thought for Bible studies are dramatic: if God’s dual nature is a mere misreading of the Book of Job by various exegetes, human knowledge always already stands ridiculed by the intangible divine voice from the whirlwind. Humankind would be left with the questionable choice of either restricting its curiosity about the universe and its creator to empirical pontifications about material surface reality or abandoning reason completely and adopt the language of madness.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Herbert also points out—without recourse to Kant—that, “Melville does not interpret the whale as the figure of a morally authoritative Godhead; to him the enigma on the plane of religious reality implies a corresponding enigma in morals” (174). However, I disagree with Herbert’s final assessment of *MD* in which he sees Melville promote a form of “polytheistic amorality” (176).

⁷⁸ In a similar melancholic feat, Milton’s Satan laments that he was created the foremost angel with hopes that his ambition be rewarded, “lifted up so high / I ’s deigned subjection and thought one step higher / Would set me high ’st and in a moment quit / The debt immense of endless gratitude / So burdensome [. . .]”; Satan goes on to blame God for His love, which to him insidiously incurs the debt of gratitude in His worshippers: “Whom hast thou then or what t’accuse / But Heav’n’s free love dealt equally to all? / Be then his love accursed, since love or hate / To me alike it deals eternal woe!” Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 79. I will revisit Kant’s position on the issue of theodicy when I address Melville’s treatment of Ecclesiastes.

The Biblical text resolves this conundrum—certainly to Melville’s dissatisfaction—by way of God’s ad-hominem argument: Job lacks the knowledge to grasp the reason for his suffering; his human epistemology precludes him from any discussion of divine justice. Dogma has to intervene and exonerate God’s character from the implicit accusation of capriciousness. Melville offsets this evasion by contrasting dogma with other (metaphysical) means of inquiry. By showing how the character God really operates independently from causal logic in the Joban text, he effectively turns God’s ad-hominem answer to Job into an ad-deum method of meaningful inquiry.

For instance, Elihu, the final speaker among Job’s friends, seeks to justify God’s duality as egalitarian humanism when he proclaims, “[s]urely God speaketh in one way, yea in two ways, yet man perceiveth it not. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon man, in slumberings upon the bed” (Job 33:14, 15). In other words, although divine communication broadcasts on multiple epistemological channels, the message can never be received in a state of full consciousness; i.e., a state that allows computation and comprehension. Divine communication therefore is always imperfect, perhaps even pointless, because it continuously reproduces the unbridgeable difference between the material and the metaphysical realm. Concurrently, in the whirlwind poem, God accuses Job of “darken[ing] counsel by words without knowledge,” effectively informing him that any rationalist debate about divine justice only removes Job further from the truth he seeks (Job 38:2). As per Kant’s interpretation, the Biblical author thus distinguishes between the abstract concept of justice and human faith in God’s personal justness. The exchange between Job and God in the Book of Job ultimately

reveals the interlocutors' respective positions in the representational process: Job is confined to language whereas God constitutes language.⁷⁹

Yet Jehovah's gesture towards the complexity of creation and the axiomatic limitation of human understanding mock rather than answer Job's query, and Creation itself is depicted as a closed system that bars human comprehension from its inner workings. The universe appears a mechanism housing myriad processes that are at all times apparent but never transparent to human understanding, and Melville frequently acknowledges this dual logic in his works, whenever speakers comment on the apparent insidiousness of nature. A prominent example in *Moby-Dick* occurs in the chapter "The Gilder," in which Starbuck bids the "golden sea" not to tell him of its "teeth-tiered sharks, and [its] kidnapping cannibal ways" but to "[l]et faith out fact," and confirm his believe in the benevolent principle behind Creation (*MD* 492). I will return to this issue in Chapter 4. Rationalism here is the double bind for human epistemology because it simultaneously functions as the means of inquiry after God's character and as the engine generating the soothing illusion of cohesion that precludes that understanding. Any exodus from this warped perception, as can be seen in the case of Pip, results in psychological trauma, and those who are sensitive to this rift in perception—Job, Ahab, Ishmael, and Pip—cannot escape the notion of insufficiency that stains their efforts of making sense of the world. Melville therefore exposes God's rhetorical move outside human epistemology. God's retreat behind the wall, which is shoved near the seeker of metaphysical truth, constitutes the frustration that is the origin of Ahab's rage in *Moby-Dick*.

⁷⁹ As Jacques Derrida shows in *Of Grammatology* (1967), within any logocentric system of representation—in this case, Biblical discourse—God, as "transcendental signified," simultaneously sits at the center and outside language. His existence is conceptually necessary "for the difference between signifier and signified [the principle on which language operates] to be somewhere absolute and irreducible." In other words, God sets up language insofar as He stands at the end of the signifying chain. He is "precomprehended" and implied, as Derrida argues, by all possible signifiers, yet cannot be included or transfixed in language (314).

In *Moby-Dick* Melville exerts this aesthetic license by splitting the three primary aspects of the Joban paradigm (victimization, defiance, repentance) across three characters: Pip, Ahab, and Ishmael. Each Joban character performs a distinct function within the framework of Melville's aesthetic exegetic hermeneutics: Ishmael (repentant Job) engages in comparative historical readings of religious dogma; Ahab (defiant Job) undermines the notion of theophany; Pip, the hapless victimized sufferer, symbolizes the hypothetical scenario of gaining insight into God's mind and losing his sanity. Yet, as we will see, these functions constitute dynamic evolutionary movements rather than static hermetic categories.⁸⁰

3.4.2 *Ishmael as Repentant Job*

On the character level, Melville engages God's dualism by fracturing Job's tri-parted character representation (sufferer, skeptic, convert) into three distinct character representations (Ishmael, Ahab, and Pip) and pitting those characters against the very problem of epistemology (i.e. the whale). Starting from the traditional binary of defiant versus repentant Job, Melville contrasts a hermeneutics of transgression (Ahab) with one of moderation (Ishmael). Ahab represents the prosaic, skeptical Job, while Ishmael represents the lyrical, repentant Job. This use of personae allows Melville to engage the Bible's formal and logical inconsistencies by allowing Job's three distinct attitudes to confront each other in dialogical exchange. Ishmael's fate in particular is bound up with both repentance and survival. In contrast to Ahab, his quest for transcendent knowledge includes discussions of moderation. This claim contradicts what Hilton Obenzinger sees as a characteristic common trade of the novel's characters, "In *Moby-Dick*

⁸⁰ Derrida concurs with the message of the whirlwind poem insofar as God deems any notion of wholeness illusory and the product of our arbitrary privileging of logo-centric worldviews and perceptive faculties. The only truth, according to Derrida, consists of the (perceptible) play of difference and deference in language. Since neither Melville nor the other exegetical writers I employ in my reading have access to this kind of post-structural systematic vocabulary, and since God functions as both principle and object of Job's and Melville's discourses, Derrida's usefulness ends at this point.

either one does not know enough or seeks to know too much” (“Wicked” 185). Ishmael, I argue, presents a middle ground here. He thus embodies the qualities of spiritual transformation while fulfilling the most important narrative function: surviving to tell the tale and set off the plot.⁸¹

While Ahab and Job assume an intrinsic morality operating behind the foil of the natural world, Ishmael, like the repentant Job of the Biblical epilogue, conversely foregoes, “the whole problem of evil in human experience,” as Wright argues, “and describe[s] a natural world that is neither good nor evil but *sheerly* marvelous” (“Jonah’s” 193, emphasis mine). Wright thus sees Ishmael describe the natural world in terms that emphasize its ability to impart immediate divine presence. In these moments, Ishmael’s state of mind indeed approximates some of the more idealistic versions of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s barde.

Contrary to the repenting Job, however, Ishmael does not dismiss his inquisitiveness in favor of equanimity or submission. Anything but an uninterested observer, Ishmael attempts to differentiate between the contingent forces operating in the world and his personal moral judgment. While acknowledging his propensity for emotional responses to metaphysical questions, Ishmael shields himself from taking personal exception to his observations and phrases this self-admonishment as business advice to ship owners looking to hire young, dreamy-eyed sailors: “Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditateness; and who offers to ship with the *Phaedo* instead of Bowditch in his head” (*MD* 135). The *Phaedo*, Plato’s dialogical discussion of the immortality of the soul, contrasts Nathaniel Bowditch’s pragmatic nautical *Almanac*. Here Melville’s

⁸¹ Pardes claims that Melville “is always well aware of the limits of the power of literature and commentary” (*Bibles* 114). Yet she characterizes Melville’s moderation of these two impulses as an “insatiable passion to fathom the stubborn vitality of interpretive endeavors” without expounding on the ways in which Melville breaks the confines of historical versions of Joban exegesis (“Remapping” 135). Concerning Ishmael’s role as narrator, Wright and others have observed this defining characteristic of Ishmael as taking up the mantle of Job’s servant (51).

characteristic intertwining of high- and low-brow wisdom becomes apparent. Ishmael does not discredit metaphysical contemplation, but bemoans his tendency to fall into reverie at inopportune moments, namely when practical attitudes are called for. He repeatedly stresses the positive disciplining effects rational discourse has on his emotional predisposition.⁸²

Rationalism becomes auto-therapeutic and even vital for Ishmael as he uses it to combat the dangerous effects of his contemplativeness. When the mesmerizing vistas of the “infinite series of the sea” threaten to dissolve Ishmael’s mind “into languor” to the point that—like White Jacket—he almost plunges off the masthead to his doom (*MD* 159). And yet these liminal moments carry utility because they translate phenomenal into metaphysical knowledge: “[T]he blending cadence of waves with thoughts” lures Ishmael into staking his identity and physical existence to achieve a direct bond with the natural world (*MD* 159). Later, when manning the helm, Ishmael is mesmerized yet again by the light of the try-works and rejoins his earlier sermon against giving into day-dreaming at sea while warning other prospective young sailors to “[n]ever dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly” (*MD* 424). While Melville does not consistently valorize the ability of technology to circumvent the illusory trappings of human fancy, the nautical compass, here, symbolizes the rationalizing effect of technology and empirical knowledge of the world.

Their use of technology puts into relief Ahab and Ishmael’s distinct methodologies. When, Ahab, in a fit of rage, discards an essential piece of nautical technology, he derides the quadrant as a “babies’ plaything of haughty admirals” because it cannot furnish him with the

⁸² Sealts notes that Melville owned a copy the *Phaedo* since 1849. Melville may also have thought of Moses Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon* (1767), a defense of the immortality of the soul. Kitto refers to the “immortal” Mendelssohn as a well known figure and leader of the Reformation of Jewish literature in eighteenth-century Germany (1:505).

exact whereabouts of the white whale (501). In the chapter “The Needle,” Ahab then proceeds to create his own compass after a storm had magnetized his, thus asserting his masterhood over “the level loadstone” and thus the Newtonian universe itself (518). The fundamental contrast between Ahab and Ishmael’s epistemologies is visible in their invocation of technology as providing prophetic and empirical knowledge, respectively. While Ishmael expects the compass to anchor him in reality, Ahab’s demands are rooted in what today would be called the theory of special relativity, in that he expects his tools to help him predict his enemy’s future whereabouts. Ishmael admonishes himself against straying from the method of rational inquiry when faced with the ambiguities of perception. He thus projects an objective persona that grounds him in Descartes’s mechanical universe while strategically shields him from Ahab’s obsession.

The whirlwind poem fulfills a similarly didactic function in the Book of Job. It warns believers against extending their personal cosmology onto the natural world and misreading that cosmology as universality. Several critics have noted that Ishmael heeds the expressly Joban lesson of restraint in his cetology. Wright argues that the “knowledge of cetology which [Ishmael] acquires seems calculated to save him from a fate similar to Ahab’s by persuading him of the purely physical nature albeit the endlessly marvelous complexity of the universe”; yet the “mood of wonder, exhilaration, even jocundity, pervading these chapters [those dealing with cetology] is in pointed contrast to the horror accompanying Ishmael’s periods of metaphysical speculation and introspection” (“Jonah’s” 194). Cetology is thus not only a mode of inquiry, it is a survival strategy. Yet Ishmael does not always heed his own advice, because experiencing wonder only seems possible by abandoning curiosity and accepting visual sensations at face value. For consistently adopting this restrained epistemological strategy would render exploits such as measuring the Arctid whale temple impossible and therefore would have barred all

comparative theological readings. Beyond that, Ishmael's assertions of self-restraint cannot absolve him from his complicity in Ahab's quest. Melville subverts Ishmael's role as repentant Job by having him argue for an epistemology grounded in reason while disavowing a rationalism that suffocates emotional responses to curiosity. Ishmael's cetology teeters precariously on the precipice of obsessive compulsion.⁸³ At the same time, he doubles as narrator and framer to the story, and delivers the report of the *Pequod's* destruction that connects the end of the novel to its beginning. The parallax perspective that emerges for both readers and narrators at the end of the tale is intricately bound up with Joban Biblical lore here. To reduce Ishmael to a mere rational chronicler of events, therefore, is to discard the very paradoxical dynamic that constitutes his function as narrator and Joban exegetical commentator.⁸⁴

3.4.3 *Not a Rebel After All: Ahab as Defiant Job*

If Ishmael represents the meta-level of Joban exegetical commentary, Ahab's point of view signifies the plot-level perspective of the Biblical text. Ahab ventriloquizes skeptical Job in his insistence on cosmic fair play. In "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab critiques the very "insatiable" rhetorical pursuit that also consumes Job (19: 21-22). With Ahab and Pip, I will suggest, Melville constructs an expanded version of the Joban inquiry towards God, in which the inquirer

⁸³ Obenzinger notes that because Ishmael addresses the reader directly in the persona of Job's servant, he forces a stake in the cosmic tragedy upon his audience:

[. . .] the reader has become implicated, has become a character, a stand-in for Job, and we can now differentiate between two readers, as we can between two Ishmaels: the Ishmael we read for the first time and the second Ishmael we reread, knowing the full import of his ultimate questions, along with the first reader who has not been given a "last revelation" and the second reader who has. ("Wicked" 189)

⁸⁴ In "Song of Myself" (1855, 1881) Walt Whitman famously develops the idealist theme of universal love working as social adhesive: Whitman's poet notes, "Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is / not my soul" (*Leaves of Grass* 28). On this basis, Whitman develops the dilation of his poet speaker as he traverses the cycle of life and death to finally become "afoot with [his] vision," i.e. to have reality and thought coincide (*Leaves of Grass* 53). In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (orig. "Sun-Down Poem" 1856; renamed in 1860) Whitman approximates Melville's train of thought from *Moby-Dick* and delineates how such love enables the subject to transcend temporal and spacial limitations: "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so / many generations, hence" (*Leaves of Grass* 136). A variation of this idea appears in *Moby-Dick*: Ishmael inherits Queequeg's coffin turned life-bouy, a symbol of their amative connection.

defiantly sustains in the face of external challenge, only to abandon his position and reconceive his opposition as part and parcel of Providence, just as the final confrontation with the deity's agent is immanent. Both Ahab and Job set out to prove that their respective suffering violates an ulterior cosmic principle of justice. However, in the Biblical text Job only remains defiant as long as he "knew God only by tradition" (Maimonides 439). In the OT story, God's intervention transforms divine remoteness into tangible religious experience for Job. Melville initially imitates this narrative pattern of revelation and epistemological growth with Ahab: the captain tries to find the proportionate means for vanquishing Leviathan. Eventually, Ahab's preoccupation with extending his will turns into an obsession with retribution, causing him to abandon his Joban query about the justice of human suffering, the moment that the crew prepares to lower for Moby Dick. Melville's most iconoclastic character suddenly retracts his bombastic demands and retreats to a position of mundane, conservative, dogmatic Calvinist fatalism.

In Maimonidean terms, Ahab regresses into the very dogmatism the Book of Job critiques. Job, meanwhile, performs a diametrically opposed switch across the hermeneutic barrier: the debate with God ultimately shatters his dogmatic perception of history and transforms his abstract knowledge of divine power into one of personal experience. Job concludes this paradigm shift by facing the whirlwind, exhaustedly admitting, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent because of dust and ashes" (Job 42:5, 6). For Ahab, the prospect of an encounter with the divine bears no such transformative quality because his thirst is for vengeance, not justice. He seeks not only restoration of an imaginary caustic balance but also reparation for injuries he sustained when said balance was violated. This purpose causes him to force a scenario that would let him avenge himself by subjecting the sublime entity to its own violence. Indeed, Ahab

“would strike the sun if it insulted” him (164). He ultimately strives to fill the void behind the mask for “fear that there is naught beyond” (164). His self-perpetuating agenda is not to investigate whether something exists behind the veil of reality, but rather to ensure that the assumed entity behind it fits his imagination. Yet Ahab’s ideological change of heart feeds back into the very dogmatism he seeks to annihilate. He does not mobilize against all boundaries but rather seeks to achieve the authority to determine boundaries as he does seemingly over the laws of physics. And while Job also has his more bombastic rhetorical moments, his strife is fenced in by his pious acknowledgement of the distance between him and God:

*I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause:
Which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number:
Who giveth rain upon the earth, and sendeth waters upon the fields:
To set up on high those that be low; that those which mourn may be exalted to
safety. (Job 5:9-11, emphasis added)*

Job wishes to appear before God as a defendant, while Ahab has already established legal transgression and seeks to be appeased by a higher power. The sense of humbling awe that Job experiences in facing the whirlwind is forever unavailable to Ahab, because his sense of self is not based on the assertion of personal innocence in the face of material injury but on entitlement to compensation for perceived spiritual injury. Thompson calls Ahab, somewhat tongue-in-cheek “that self-pitying and tragic hero which was the darling of the romantics” (179). All the while, Janis Stout maintains that Ahab is the only true Job in *Moby-Dick*, not for his suffering but for his determination to get to the bottom of the systemic significance of suffering in human life (77). What speaks against such straight-forward simple identifications is Ahab’s last-minute disavowal of personal agency, which eliminates the possibility to be overwhelmed by encountering the sublime. Ahab foregoes this central moment in Job’s transcendence, the

moment in which all expectations for distributive justice are nullified.⁸⁵ He therefore fails to develop an experience-based relation to God by choosing self-annihilation over epistemological challenge. Ahab's final relinquishing of his defiance invokes the advice Job's wife gives to her husband when he despairs of his fate, "curse God and die" (Job 2: 9). His obsession with detecting injury and outrage, rather than trying to unravel the mystery of the whale's agency is what really constitutes Ahab's monomania and ultimately motivates his intellectual retreat into fatalism. In righteous rage he discards the "[f]oolish toy[s]" of nautical science and lashes out against "all the things that cast man's eyes aloft to that heaven[,] whose live vividness but scorches him" (*MD* 501). Yet when Ahab lectures Starbuck that their roles in the tragic events about to unfold were, "'rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders,'" he abandons his independent motivation in favor of Calvinist dogmatic comfort (*MD* 561). A defiant Job no longer, Ahab arrives at a fatalism that whimsically converts his rage into utility and begins to rationalize his madness as divine charge.⁸⁶

In the end, we may consider him iconoclastic and monomaniacal only insofar as he embraces his purpose to affix all meaning by eliminating symbolic variety. In historical exegetically regressive perspective, Ahab's adoption of fatalism is simultaneously his "topmost greatness" and "topmost grief" because it absolves him from making meanings in favor of pre-fabricated ones (410). In this way, the Joban binary of defiance and repentance is recreated in

⁸⁵ Stout notes also that simple identifications are of limited use here, because they would discredit "Melville's creativity" (77). I agree to the extent that what Melville's texts actually do with the source material, as Stout shows in her article, is much more akin to exegesis than mere intertextual reference.

⁸⁶ In a contrary reading, Herbert asserts that experience operates as a supra-ideological force in Melville's writing. "What Melville centrally conveys," Herbert says, "is the confrontation with that depth of experience which is always beyond all systems" (19). Concerning Ahab's ideological steadfastness, Wright evokes the Biblical genealogy of Ahab's name: "[l]ike the captain of the *Pequod*, King Ahab attempted to compromise in an uncompromising realm" (63).

the twice-crossed character lines of Ahab and Ishmael. Melville modifies the Joban archetypes by transforming the skeptic into a critical analyst and the blasphemer into a compliant fatalist.⁸⁷

3.4.4 *Pip as Victimized Job*

In using the motif of Joban suffering, Melville is interested in the sufferers as victims who themselves gets utilized by one or several other characters. Joban suffering has a distinctly physical dimension, and the sufferer's body becomes problematic to the community as it makes visible the contingency of divine justice. One of the most explicit examples of Joban physical recalcitrance is the character Pip in *Moby-Dick*. His encounter with the weaver god below the sea leads to the complete dissolution of his individuality. Pip is transformed into pure material utility by becoming Ahab's metaphysical compass. All the while, Ahab and Ishmael negotiate the orthodox Joban binary of rebellion and subsequent repentance. As I will show below, *Moby-Dick* distinctly investigates these three discrete dimensions of the Biblical character Job. As Ahab seeks the physical encounter with the whale and Ishmael investigates dogma as man-made imitation of divine prohibitions, the fate of the black cabin boy Pip produces an epistemology of victimization. Pip goes overboard during one of the lowerings after the whale only to emerge traumatized and unable to formulate cohesive thoughts in speech. Insofar as he falls prey to overwhelming elemental forces, Pip represents Job as an innocent victim. Although Pardes considers Pip mainly a castaway Jonah, she fleetingly acknowledges that he is "a Job of sorts, an innocent sufferer who is unwilling to accept the blows that have been inflicted upon him" (*Melville's* 69). Pip's exegetic function consists of the symbolism of his fragmented speech acts

⁸⁷ Ahab's turn to fatalism inverts the theological argument between John Calvin and Jacob Arminius on free will: While Calvin maintained that the Covenant of Grace supersedes the Covenant of Works, Arminius retorted that Providence would assign the creation of sin to God, contradicting His alleged universal benignity. Maimonides finds a different way to affirm the barrier between human and divine knowledge in chapter XXIII of his *Guide*: "This lesson is the principal object of the whole Book of Job; it lays down this principle of faith, and recommends us to derive a proof from nature, that we should not fall into the error of imagining His knowledge to be similar to ours, or His intention, providence, and rule similar to ours" (443).

as a mockery of rationalism and Cartesian ideals. To his shipmates he is an unpleasant reminder of the horrors that lurk below the sea's surface. Pip's utterances appear as ominous cyphers to the crew because they resist comprehension based on English grammatical rules.

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman terms the recalcitrant, unwelcome presences the incongruence or the slimy, an "indestructible ambivalent entity that sits on top of an embattled barricade (or rather, a substance that is poured over it from above to make both sides slippery), that blurs boundaries" (Bauman 104, my translation). Pip becomes a presence that transcends physical existence because he survives both nature's treacherousness and even the direct encounter with God. Melville compounds that mark of exclusion represented by Noah's curse with the secondary sign of insanity to turn Pip into the quintessential outcast, cursed by man, God and even nature itself, and spat back into the world to enact the futility of reason.⁸⁸

When Pip falls overboard, the narrator notes that "[b]y the *merest chance* the ship itself at last rescued" the boy (414, emphasis mine). Melville contrasts the cosmologies of empirical science and metaphysics to demonstrate how the randomness of Pip's fate contradicts Calvinist determinism. "The intense concentration of self in the middle of such heartless immensity [i.e. the ocean]," causes Pip to go insane (414). Physically unharmed, yet mentally deranged, Pip henceforth serves as a physical reminder for the artificiality of all cohesive epistemology. His dialog makes transparent the contrived character of human edifices, including social institutions such as language. For example, his interpretation of the doubloon merely amounts to a cacophony of personal pronouns: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (434). Pip here performs what Bauman terms the "anomaly coinciding with semantic ambiguity" (111). His scattered comments retroactively unsettle the other characters' possessive assertions about

⁸⁸ Contemporary pro-slavery sentiments still saw the institution of slavery as consummating Noah's curse of Ham's son Canaan (cf. Gen. XI:25).

the certainty of the coin's symbolic meaning down to the grammatical level. The slimy, Bauman argues, interferes with society's efforts to create socio-cultural cohesion by complicating and blurring the boundaries between epistemological categories. Melville detects this symbolic function in the figure of victimized Job.

In Joban terms, the cabin boy's encounter with the "unwarped primal world" illustrates the devastating effect the sudden withdrawal of the veil of epistemological cohesion has on the human mind (*MD* 412).⁸⁹ The world of the Weaver God is too raw and unrefined, too akin to the original, dynamic, constitutive force of the universe for a static rational mind to comprehend. Direct contact with this force lifts God's protective spell that makes the world cohere to the human mind. The "primal world" Pip falls into precedes human comprehension and can therefore never be part of any epistemology. Pip's mind consequently becomes unhinged, forcing the cabin boy to perceive the world outside the protective (grammatical) framework of personal reference.⁹⁰

As a victimized Job, Pip also figures as the residue of the discourse between divine and human notions of justice. He contributes to Melville's hermeneutic project by enacting the communication gap between divine and human knowledge. However, Melville does more than merely restate the incompatibility of the two realms, or the ambiguities produced by those like Pip, whose perception has been altered by liminal experiences. Ahab, for instance, sees utility in

⁸⁹ Compare Exod. III:6, "Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God." God threatens Job in the whirlwind poem with withdrawing his protective hand, a metaphor for the contrived epistemological consistency of human experience of the world.

⁹⁰ Melville must have had 1 Cor. 3:19-20 in mind: "the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God." Starting from a similar ethos as Maimonides, Martin Luther in his *Vierzehn Tröstungen für Mühselige und Beladene* [*The Fourteen of Consolation: For Such as Labor and Are Heavy Laden*] (1520) optimistically reads suffering as the moment when God lifts His protecting hand that normally shields our consciousness from the harmful effects of full knowledge of the universe and its forces: "[. . .] From this [the instance of suffering so defined] we see how sweetly we ought to love our Lord, whenever any evil comes upon us. For our most loving Father would by that one evil have us see how many evils threaten us and would fall on us" (Luther, *The Fourteen of Consolation*, 15).

Pip's altered state of mind: "There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health" (*MD* 534). The decision to keep Pip close is part of Ahab's strategic "Madness maddened"; this decision seems ironic in light of that fact that Pip, after his accident, comes to symbolize contingency rather than fate (168). Nevertheless, Ahab perceptively gathers Pip's unique role in complicating the binary of human rational categories (knowable/unknowable). To Ahab, Pip's condition is not one of utter madness, but rather one of utter objectification. Pip is transformed into pure utility and henceforth coerced to Ahab's venture of obliterating the boundaries, which Pip has already made slippery through his antics. Pip and Job's victimization not only consists in the loss of material goods and mental faculties, but also in their respective objectification. Like Leviathan, they become playthings in God's hand; as their subjective agency is annihilated, they become the object of another.

Summarizing this meta debate between the three contending cosmic forces, the chapter "The Mat-Maker" sees Ishmael postulate a three-pronged logic of the universe as a synergy of "chance, free will, and necessity—nowise incompatible—all interweavingly working together" (*MD* 215). Each of Melville's Jobs here is tied to one of these fundamental creative forces: Ahab seeks to assert his free will, while Ishmael seeks to investigate and delineate necessity. Pip falls victim to chance, the most random and destructive of the three principles that "by turns rules either [of the others], and has the last featuring blow at events" (*MD* 215). And although we have seen that Ishmael and Ahab assume increasingly complex roles in this scheme, the Joban vantage points provide a characteristic vocabulary that enables Melville to problematize these cosmological forces and explore their implications and contingencies on the character level.⁹¹

⁹¹ Although Maurice Lee curiously does not address the case of Pip as a special victim and avatar of contingency, Lee points out the implicit atheist gesture towards David Hume's essay on miracles that Melville

That being said, this statement digs up grainier soil in stipulating that free will and necessity could be compatible. Of course, this belies the theological grounds of the feud between Calvinists and Arminians while implicitly putting those theological debates in the context of the emergent body of theorizing over contingency. Arguing from within the realm of theology, the study of God's character, Ishmael suggests, at least at this point in his narrative, that contingency is ultimately the controlling force of the universe. However, this impression is belied by Ishmael's alluding to the Book of Job at the end of his tale. Lawrence Buell recognizes the Book of Job as a structural correlative, barring the prolog and epilog. Yet Buell does not acknowledge the implications this allusion has beyond the structural level. Recontextualizing his narrative in Joban terms also reframes his cetological cosmology in the dialogical terms of Job's interview with God. While I will say more about this in a moment, it seems opportune to point out that Melville would repeat this structural pattern, including the reference to the Book of Job, in "Bartleby."

3.4.5 Moby-Dick: Melville's Mature Exegetical Method

The novel's primary aim consists in making accessible (again) Biblical language as literary language. Moreover, this endeavor must be contextualized in Hebraic wisdom knowledge and exegetical techniques, which allow for both skepticism and humor as viable modes of spiritual inquiry. Such technique met the ire of reviewers, who, in turn, were often entangled in the emerging doctrinal strife among the powerful evangelical denominations and publishers (cf. Gunther Brown 35). Accordingly, the polemical reception that authors who held unorthodox and skeptical positions faced frequently led them to consider their works in the

performs by having Ishmael postulate chance as a major creative force in the universe: "[. . .] Melville understood the etiological implications of the miracles controversy, as well as the fact that the argument from design—a foundation of faith in Melville's time—ultimately rested on probabilistic ground" (Lee, *Uncertain* 63).

binary terms of pious and impious.⁹² After all, Melville wrote in an increasingly complex local spectrum of piety and theological free inquiry that had begun to manifest in the New York area since the early 1830s. Publishers, such as A.W. Matsell, circulated skeptical accounts by deist commentators such as Thomas Paine and Thiry d’Holbach. *Moby-Dick* productively investigates this murky intermediary religious atmosphere by conceiving of it as productive space in which to develop a symbolic language based on antiquated, historical notions of typology and exegetical methodology.⁹³

In *Moby-Dick*, then, Melville does more than subversively recant Job’s complaint about the arbitrary limits of human epistemology. He explores the fault lines that run out from OT Joban epistemology. By conceiving of Job as divisible tripartite persona (victimized, defiant, repentant) *Moby-Dick*, as I have shown, moderates the exegetic trajectory of the OT text for nineteenth-century American audiences. The resulting dissonance of perspectives becomes part of an original hermeneutics. Melville’s differentiated symbolic layering of Ahab’s inner conflict, for instance, centrally hinges on the history of the conceptual juxtaposition of Calvinism and Arminianism as well as their respective exhaustion and sublation as religious forms devoid of personal investment. The Book of Job enables Melville to express those historical and theological complexities, which neither dogma nor skepticism can tolerate. As I noted above, Melville would repeat his exegetical experiment in the medium of the short story with “Bartleby.”

⁹² Melville famously writes to Hawthorne about having written a wicked book and yet feeling spotless as a lamb (*Correspondence* 212). Reynolds argues rather pessimistically that Melville’s “dark subversive” style eventually disintegrates under this psychological tension (*Beneath* 152). I would add that there is a discernible contrast between the persona Melville puts forth in his letter to Hawthorne, a man he admires and whom Melville thinks to have invented the literary mode he employs, and the actual operations present in Melville text.

⁹³ See also Brumm’s *American Thought* (16-18), as well as Reynold’s *Beneath* (455) and *Faith* (6).

3.5 To Sleep with Kings and Counselors: Herman Melville's Use of the Book of Job in 'Bartleby'

While *Moby-Dick* arguably is Melville's most comprehensive engagement with the Joban theme, the novel does not terminate that engagement. In "Bartleby," the scrivener's cryptic suffering reduces him to a literally immovable physical object—a Job that refuses to curse God and die. Bartleby's recalcitrant existence unravels the lawyer's belief in the compatibility of NT Christian charity and profit-oriented urban professionalism. If there is an overall trajectory to be identified within Melville's treatment of the Joban theme throughout his works, it is that the novels use plot as a metaphor for pondering metaphysics. Meanwhile, the short-fiction pieces install the Joban paradigm into a specific socio-economic scenario. The short-narrative format does not diminish the level of complexity to which Melville integrates the OT text into his fiction.

In a recent article in *Harper's Magazine*, Esther Kaplan weighed the pitfalls of a world in which work-place surveillance was absolute and social relations become not only visible but completely monetized, "to have your collaborative partnerships scored as assets and your brainstorm rewarded with electronic badges" (March, 2015). The underlying assumption of such measures is, of course, that the employee be made apparent to the employer by becoming absolutely transparent, in thought and deed. Incidentally, this is the very project in which the lawyer in Herman Melville's Wall Street story engages when he struggles to uncover the mental operations of his strange scrivener, Bartleby. Compared to modern surveillance technology, the means by which the lawyer tries to render Bartleby transparent are crude. Still, his evaluative judgments are both more invasive and hermeneutical than any technology would allow. The lawyer's reading of Bartleby is grounded in religious moralism as informed by Biblical

literalism. Between the mid-point and the end of the narrative, the lawyer's typological reading of Bartleby curiously shifts from being grounded in New Testament doctrine of charity, represented in his indirect references to the Gospel of Mark, to that of Old Testament suffering, indicated by his literal reference to the Book of Job. While Bartleby's Christological symbolism has been closely examined in a long line of arguments, the lawyer's ultimate identification of Bartleby as Job remains unscrutinized. What is the significance of this, structurally a summarizing, concluding remark on the lawyer's part? Why does Melville choose to juxtapose NT and OT theology in the story? I argue that the referential framework that Melville constructs around the narrator's attempt at confessional form constitutes not only a critique of nineteenth-century, urban charity as based on NT theology but also an exegesis on the OT story of Job for the emergent American metropolitan context. If Bartleby is an Old Testament Job cast in the mold of a modern urban clerk, Melville seems to suggest that the quintessential character of the modern workspace is not the hope for transcendence but rather the ability to bear suffering, to maintain one's intellectual integrity.

3.5.1 The Lawyer's Plight of Representation and Bartleby's Suffering

Analogous to the lawyer's struggle to figure out Bartleby, discerning readers of "Bartleby the Scrivener" face the initial task of untangling the narrator's agenda from the story's fabula. The narrative begins with a New York lawyer's assertion of having amassed wealth through diligent and prudent business practices. Yet he asserts that the story he is about to tell is not concerned with touting his business achievements but rather presents a curious scrivener's life. This alleged goal immediately casts doubt on his credentials as a close confidant of John Jacob Astor and a trusted member of the city's elite. Why would a supposedly shrewd businessman relate the story of some scrivener, a performer of menial labor, one who, on top of that, was only

briefly in his employ and, if anything, caused him significant inconvenience? Why engage in any literary project at all? Biographies of morally exemplary people had circulated widely in a number of short-lived periodicals since the early days of the Republic. Yet the literary market still was not an arena in which riches and widespread fame were to be won. And if write he must, one may also wonder at the lawyer's incentive to write the life of a person "about whom nothing is ascertainable," while foregoing "the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby" (*PT* 13). Such a project seems, at best, paradoxical and in any event is doubtful in accruing either literary fame or praise for business acumen and certainly does not sound like a profitable allocation of time and resources one would expect from a businessman.

What these preliminary considerations indicate, besides Melville's keen awareness of the literary landscape of his time, is that the narrative is an account predicated not on verifiable data but on the *telos* of the narrative frame. What is at stake, then, is not so much the production of any authoritative record of a "singular set of men of whom [. . .] nothing [. . .] has ever been written" (*PT* 13) but rather a coming-to-terms with the symbolic ambivalence of Bartleby's life. This essential distinction helps put in perspective the lawyer's proposed project of literary canon expansion, based on his socio-economic observations about scriveners, on the one hand, and his actual project of personal moral exoneration by literary means, on the other hand.⁹⁴

The lawyer's implicit demand for his audience to acquit him *a priori* of some yet unspoken moral offence is ever present and underwrites the main thrust of his argument. The

⁹⁴ Since this is a story of Wall Street, the fact that the resolution to the mystery of Bartleby comes in the form of unverifiable hearsay rather than religious doctrine or investigative journalism is a comment on the sensationalist print-media landscape of mid nineteenth-century New York. As Bergmann observes, "Bartleby" exists in an emerging, original New York literary genre about the middle-class urban workplace (149). One prominent example for this genre is James A. Maitland's *The Lawyer's Story, or; the Orphan's Wrongs*, appeared in the *New York Tribune* as well as the *New York Times* in 1853 and bears several structural similarities to "Bartleby." Thompson also concurs with the recent trend in Melville studies to regard Melville's short fiction as a stylistic corrective that disciplined his mind after the (implicitly) stylistically frivolous escapade of *Pierre* (108). See also Graham Thomson's "'Bartleby' and the Magazine Fiction" (104).

lawyer, I will show, aligns Bartleby's suffering with the assertion of his own extraordinary capacity for emotional empathy by stating that "to a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain," a sense of "hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill" which to him must otherwise be a natural impulse (*PT* 29). In this way, the lawyer's empathy makes him a fellow sufferer alongside Bartleby. In the larger context of the social realities of the modern workplace, Bartleby exemplifies the human remains that increasingly feral competition leaves in its wake.

Initially, this statement appears to be a declaration of naturalized charity, an assertion of the pious truth that we are all fellow sinners traveling on the road to perdition. However, the narrative soon reveals itself to be a rationalization of resentment. The narrator *de facto* naturalizes self-interest by bringing it into the fold of Christian morality, while simultaneously denying that such resentment originates from any "inherent selfishness of the human heart" (*PT* 29). His allusions to the alleged patronage of John Jacob Astor place the lawyer's account within the rhetoric of the gospel of wealth, the ideology about the responsibility and coeval inevitability of the dominance of a few businessmen. Melville covertly underscores the lawyer's religious sentimentalism and conservatism by having him claim these allegiances. At the same time, he exposes the fundamental hypocrisy of the ideology of wealth. What of those workers who cannot be uplifted to participate in the universal competition of the market by the stewardship of those best minds who hold in trust the wealth and resources of the community? What of those sensible souls who are constitutionally unable to function in the commercial market place which robber barons like Astor and Carnegie conceived? By falling back onto Biblical versions of historical determinism, the lawyer, ironically, cannot help but upbraid the very personal agency that the industrial tycoons advocate.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Andrew Carnegie, in his famous essay "Wealth" (later renamed "The Gospel of Wealth") argued that social inequality was an unavoidable fact of competitive capitalism and while harsh for the individual, was

Yet the lawyer's musings also have generic literary implications. The positioning of the metaphor of the human heart elevates his meditation beyond the nominal head-heart dichotomy so common in romantic literature and places it at the intersection of the competing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses of natural philosophy and skeptical materialism. Apart from the more widely publicized idealist notions of intuition as a viable epistemological strategy—Emerson's definition in *Nature* (1838) of the term 'intuition' as a higher form of seeing comes to mind. But materialist arguments curiously enough used the same metaphor to advocate sentiment as a viable means of knowing the self and the world.⁹⁶

In his *System of Nature*, Thiry d'Holbach, for instance, refers to 'the heart' when taking to task the deference of human agency he perceives in natural philosophy.⁹⁷

It suffices to know that, by his essence, man tends to conserve himself and to render his existence happy; [. . .] Man, [. . .] frequently deceives himself upon the means of arriving at this end; [. . .] but whatever may be these means, they have always necessarily and invariably for object [sic] either an existing or imaginary happiness directed to preserve himself in a state analogous to his mode of existence, to his manner of feeling, to his way of thinking whether durable or transitory. It is from having mistaken this truth, that the greater number of moral philosophers have made the romance rather than the history of the human heart; they have attributed the actions of men to fictitious causes; at least they have not sought out the necessary motives of his conduct [. . .] man either sees or believes he sees much more distinctly the necessary relation of effects with their causes in natural philosophy than in the human heart [. . .] whilst he refuses to acknowledge necessity in the acts of the human will. (1:98)⁹⁸

ultimately necessary for the evolution of society at large (122). In the same essay, Carnegie actually makes a case against the kind of almsgiving charity that the lawyer displays in Melville's story. However, this part of his argument ultimately does not offset his historical determinism.

⁹⁶ Melville later continues this project of disentangling the philosophical discourses of truth and morality in *The Confidence-Man*. See also Wright *Melville's Use* (125).

⁹⁷ In a letter from June of 1851, Melville famously reacts to Hawthorne's treatment of the heart-head dichotomy in "Ethan Brand." He identifies himself as a romancer of the heart whilst declaring emphatically, "to the dogs with the head!" (*Correspondence* 192). While he does not consistently avoid logical arguments in his own writing, Melville's spirited defense of the human heart as the exclusive repository of universal truth, clearly identifies him as a romantic thinker. To him only the heart can begin to authorize an epistemology that encompasses the multi-faceted complexities of Truth.

⁹⁸ As I noted earlier, D'Holbach's *System of Nature* (1835) along with Thomas Paine's famous *Age of Reason*, Ethan Allen's *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (1836) appeared at the small publisher George Washington Matsell of Chatham St., New York (in close proximity to Melville's friend and patron Evert Duyckinck's offices). While no record of Melville owning or borrowing copies of these particular editions of these texts exists, they

For d'Holbach the metaphor of the human heart encapsulates the very human agency and causal rationalist materialism that religious moral cosmologies deny. Melville's lawyer reveals his religious orthodoxy when he preemptively rejects human agency by assuming the heart's inherent sinfulness. Reacting against such deterministic preconceptions, d'Holbach attacks what he perceives as a prevaricating religious sophism that substitutes human historical agency with divine predetermination. As in *Moby-Dick*, Melville here utilizes a symbolic language that references the specific philosophical framework of eliminative materialism. Meanwhile, the lawyer pithily comments that "[t]hey err" who attribute his retreat from previously asserted social obligation; i.e. his abandonment of Bartleby, to personal moral defect (*PT* 29). It is rather a systemic error, a flaw in the constitution of the human mind and soul. By broaching the lawyer's moralist agenda in this whimsical fashion, Melville critiques the duplicitousness of Christian charity as it is found in the American urban space.⁹⁹

The lawyer's flights of "fraternal melancholy," which are contrasted by Bartleby's stoic "austere reserve," increasingly reveal him to be an unreliable narrator (*PT* 28). Once again, d'Hobach's observations are useful for contextualizing the lawyer's rhetorical strategy:

Man naturally challenges every thing with which he is unacquainted; he is desirous to see clearly, to the end that he may guaranty [sic] himself against those objects which may menace his safety, or that he may be enabled to procure for himself those which may be useful to him. (1:120)

To the lawyer, Bartleby is such a dangerous object precisely because he categorically resists being profitable—in the sense of having use value—while at the same time refusing personal autonomy. In fact, it is this resistance to objectification that triggers the lawyer's sentimental

circulated prolifically through the intellectual circles of the city and were readily available by the time Melville returned to New York. According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, Matsell's offices in particular were a harbor for religious free thinkers in the 1830s (July 26, 1877).

⁹⁹ In all of this, I do not suggest, however, that the lawyer is wicked or insidious. I concur with Dillingham, who considers the lawyer to be a man of deep-seated fear who, by the use "protective rationalism" (*Short* 21), seeks to insulate himself from Bartleby's disarming presence, a presence that threatens to force him to "see himself honestly" (*Short* 26).

outbursts. As such, d'Holbach continues to be a productive interrogator for the lawyer's rationalizing moral argument. About the state of melancholy, he observes,

[. . .] accustomed to think, to feel, to be stimulated into activity, to enjoy society, he [the melancholic person] contemplates as the greatest misfortune a dissolution that will strip him of these objects, and deprive him of those sensations which his present nature has rendered necessary to him. (Vol. I, 120)

The lawyer subscribes to the capitalist logic of expansion underwritten by Christian charity. As such, the prospect of having someone in his own office effectively “denying [his] authority” and obfuscating his business schemes sends him into fits of despair (*PT* 27). Bartleby not only subverts the logic of perpetual gainful productivity that the lawyer promotes but, more importantly, he shatters the phantasy of the amicable coexistence of this exploitive logic with the nominal decrees of Christian charity.

In his final reflections on theism and its penchant for producing superstition, d'Holbach supplies an observation that may serve as a functional explanation for the lawyer's compounded anxiety:

[. . .] as soon as the portrait of his [the theist's] God is found disfigured, the beautiful order of nature will be overthrown relatively to him, and melancholy will, by degrees, plunge him into superstition, into pusillanimity, and into all those irregularities which produce fanaticism and credulity. (257)

This axiom illuminates how the lawyer's attempts to (mentally and physically) insulate himself and his business from the threat of human defect—as becomes apparent in his compulsive arrangement of Nippers and Turkey's office hours, which are timed in such a way that he “never had to do with their eccentricities”—have metaphysical implications (*PT* 18). As a man who identifies with his socio-economical position, any threat to the office's power structure represents an attack on his personal moral and spiritual integrity. If the story of “Bartleby” is, as Leo Marx argues, “a parable of walls,” the story deals with the physical as well as intellectual

barriers the characters confront (241). Arguably, the narrator fails to perceive the ultimate wall: the facade of charitable capitalism he helps maintain.¹⁰⁰

Following d'Holbach's pathology of superstitious beliefs almost to the letter, the narrator ends his story by incessantly lamenting the inevitability of Bartleby's fate. The moment of Job's wish for death the lawyer cites while beholding Bartleby's lifeless body incidentally affirms the reconciliatory Christian fantasy of perpetual consciousness in the afterlife. However, while Job eventually overcomes his melancholy by overcoming his dogmatic belief system and finding a direct and personal understanding of the deity, the lawyer cannot shake his harmonizing fantasy because he insists on morally framing Bartleby's plight within the dictates of an optimistic yet deterministic worldview. Moreover, he casts his own perceived suffering as Bartleby's keeper as a marker of moral superiority and thus naturalizes his resentment for Bartleby: to hate and abandon Bartleby is human, for the things Bartleby resists are pillars of the lawyer's ideological framework and the very foundations of civic society which must function to the inevitable dictates of expansion and progress. Like Nietzsche's man of resentment, the lawyer evaluates his timidity as strength while constantly reiterating the moral untenability of Bartleby's behavior. And like Job's friends, the narrator is caught in a perpetual psychological cycle of defeatist determinist melancholy.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ For a contrary reading, see McCall, who defends the authenticity of the lawyer's filial sentiments towards Bartleby and argues that the narrator undergoes a spiritual transformation because he experiences Bartleby's death as personal loss. Yet McCall seems to suggest that the Joban dialectical mechanism of skepticism and religious transcendence remains intact in the story, but does not develop this observation in detail. He rather lapses into an authorial reading at this point of his analysis, and opaquely asserts that the story communicates, "a religious emotion and it comes from the deepest regions of Melville's heart" (286).

¹⁰¹ Cf., Nietzsche 474. Arsić notes that the narrator's continuous stream of words ultimately precludes the moment at which he would have to surrender his fantastic beliefs. As the man of written words and testimony, his story "will be about writing the impossibility of writing certain people. And as long as narrator narrates the impossibility of narrations, the principle of reason remains safe" (*Passive* 32).

3.5.2 *Bartleby as Job: Melville First Critique of American Urban Christian Charity*

In pursuing his goal of creating a rational account of Bartleby's behavior, the lawyer initially operates within the linear logic of legal testimony, which relies on statements of causality and motivation. While trying to prove Bartleby's alleged derangement, the lawyer never leaves the realm of causal argument. His method unsurprisingly fails to produce satisfactory reasons for Bartleby's suffering, precisely because it is a kind of suffering grounded not in the specific external circumstances, for instance the poor lighting conditions in the office which eventually make him go blind, but in the mystery of creation itself. Yet because he frames the narrative as a moral exoneration of his character, he never recognizes the metaphysical implications of Bartleby's suffering. Ultimately, his story merely calls us to judge his motivation based on his testimony: either he is fully aware of his role in Bartleby's demise and thus deviously tries to pull the wool over the eyes of his audience, or he is truly appalled and dumbfounded by what befalls Bartleby, and, years later, continues to agonize over the possibility of his involvement.

Either reading requires disregarding certain information the narrator provides about himself. Accordingly, the lawyer's agency, like that of Job's friends,' is never full. Like them, he functions as a mouthpiece of the dominant social ideology of his time. What complicates this reading is the lawyer's switch from invoking NT theology when justifying his selective charity towards Bartleby, and eventually switching to an OT frame of reference when assessing the circumstances of the scrivener's death:

[. . .] I [the lawyer] paused; then went close up to him [Bartleby]; stooped over and saw that his dim eyes were open; otherwise he seemed profoundly sleeping. Something prompted me to touch him. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet. The round face of the grub-man peered upon me now. "His dinner is ready. Won't he dine to-day either? Or does he live without dining?"

“Lives without dining,” said I, and closed his eyes.
 “Eh!—He’s asleep, ain’t he?”
 “With kings and counselors,” I murmured. (*PT* 44-45)

The Biblical text, by comparison, strikes a markedly different tone. Yes, Job fantasizes about never having been born, but it is a dream motivated by the wish to escape his immediate predicament of physical suffering and, as such, lacks the finality which Melville’s narrator attributes to the statement:

Why died I not in the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? [. . .] / For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept: then had I been at rest, / With kings and counselors of the earth, which build desolate places for themselves; / Or with princes that had gold, who filled their houses with silver: / Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light. (Job 3:11-16)

Examining the narrator’s Biblical hermeneutics and editorial technique will allow for an unobstructed (by the narrator’s moralizing rhetoric) view at Melville’s contrasting of NT and OT hermeneutics in the story. To this end, it is necessary to first work through the ideological layers that the narrative voice presents.

A temperate and “eminently safe man,” who conducts a “snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title-deeds,” the lawyer’s narrative agenda, as I show above, consists in cultivating a coherent moral persona (14). He masquerades as charity the “delicious self-approval” he initially draws from tolerating Bartleby around the office, despite his dwindling work force (23). On the one hand, he distances himself rhetorically from Bartleby by characterizing his life exclusively in terms of his occupation as scrivener, a position Bartleby retains only for a few weeks. The increasing slip from free-indirect discourse to reported dialog in the lawyer’s narrative voice, on the other hand, suggests an increase in personal attachment, yet this switch also exposes and emphasizes the lawyer’s initial, clumsy attempts at narrative

objectivity and detachment. Narrative structure and tone thus reveals his complicity in the social ill that his brand of charity wreaks.

While his jovial naiveté would disqualify him from charges of premeditated acts of ruthless economical exploitation, his boastfulness bespeaks a narcissistic streak that compels him to accumulate power, connections, and people. Most tellingly, the lengthy rationale he gives for arranging his employees in what he considers the optimal productive configuration, a strategy that marries “manner, privacy, and society,” reveals the repressive nature of his business (*PT* 19). Leo Marx notes that only Bartleby’s presence makes visible “the stark problem of perception presented by the walls” (607). Nevertheless, it is Bartleby’s passivity that exposes the manner in which the congenial arrangement of office space does not produce the utopian state of gleeful productiveness envisioned by Carnegie and by extension the lawyer. Importantly, though, Bartleby’s recalcitrance begins as a challenge to his physical placement in the office space: he subverts the lawyer’s conception of the office climate in which his employees are out of sight yet at his beck and call. When it becomes obvious that Bartleby’s presence threatens to disrupt, not just the lawyer’s, but also any future business venture on the premises, law enforcement intervenes to remove him.

Yet the lawyer constitutes only one of the barriers that confine the individual in Melville’s story. In the world of Wall Street, God, the legal arbiter of justice as depicted in the Book of Job, seems conspicuously absent. Hans Bergmann in *God in the Street* shows how “Bartleby” depicts an urban sphere in which God has been dissolved in the man on the street, the busy humdrum of business, and the proliferation of professionalism; i.e., “an emergent bourgeoisie flourishing in the new market economy” that embraces “a religious discourse based on the relational availability of God” (167). Accordingly, Melville turns the idea of God’s

availability in man on its head: the lawyer's solicitation of moral validation from his audience attests to God's unavailability as either omniscient legal arbiter (the Father) or everyman avatar (Christ). The encounter with insurmountable (divine) power in "Bartleby" becomes an off-stage struggle with an invisible and anonymous entity, the only characteristic of which is its complete elision from the narrative. Insofar, Melville utilizes the notion of a hidden God from the Old Testament.¹⁰²

In contrast to the Joban text, Bartleby ultimately falls victim to the conditions of the city because human divinity—the romantic idealist project that amalgamates Enlightenment and New Testament humanism—fails to inspire those around him to transcend their superficial preconceptions of human pity and charity. The story bears characteristics of literary realism insofar as Melville does not suggest the possibility of relief for this social dilemma outside of the lawyer's utopian fantasies. Even Biblical consolatory plot devices, such as God's address from the whirlwind, or argumentative theodicy, are absent. And yet, Bartleby's fate becomes meaningful when the lawyer finally recasts it as a life of Joban suffering with the added observations about the numbing, cyclical, (self-)alienating character of the modern work place (a dead-letter office) as expressed in the epilog.

Critical readings often reduce Bartleby's resistance to his inhibition of the dialogic circulation of language. However, his social objectionableness increasingly congeals with his physical presence: the 'problem' with Bartleby, as I will show in a moment, is ultimately one of lingering materiality that does not participate in the logic of testimony and self-explanation that the lawyer employs. Critics have long debated the complexion and utility of Bartleby's epistemological position. Some may question whether a cohesive philosophical position can be

¹⁰² Stan Goldman productively adopts this idea of Old Testament divine hiddenness in his excellent study of *Clarel* (5).

articulated by the scrivener. In his chapter on “Bartleby” in *The Method of Melville’s Short Fiction* (1975), R. Bruce Bickley notes that “Melville suggests that all man can choose to do is to *endure and to state his wishes*” (43, emphasis mine). But Bartleby can only state preference. If he is, in fact, categorically similar to Ahab insofar as he is an iconoclast it seems curious that he has “neither strength nor will to aggress through the walls which hedge him in” (Bickley 43). Bartleby explores a perspective of weakness and confinement that Ahab only comes to whimsically acknowledge just before his final encounter with the whale. What distinguishes Bartleby within Melville’s oeuvre, then, is that he symbolizes the endurance of misery for another, a suffering with profound, arguably revelatory, implications for the narrator.¹⁰³

Regarding Bartleby’s suffering rather than his rhetoric as the story’s central issue enables a reading that foregrounds Melville’s illumination of the failed integration of religious sentiments about charity with nineteenth-century urban culture of commerce, while circumventing the need of radical hermeneutics to deconstruct Bartleby’s statements. The reading I offer focuses on Melville’s reciprocal use and critique of both theological and skeptical concepts of charity in order to provide a practical assessment of Melville’s differentiated use of the OT text in the story.

3.5.3 ‘Curse God and Die’: Unwanted Physical Remains

When he begins to refuse to work, Bartleby becomes persona non grata on the premises of the lawyer’s office. Bartleby’s physical presence in the office invokes a vocabulary of contamination. This shift in stylistic registers approximates the way in which Job is perceived by his wife and friends in the Biblical story. The increasingly explicit demand for the removal of

¹⁰³ For a thorough survey of arguments about the involvement of the narrator in framing Bartleby’s statements and positions, see McCall’s “The Reliable Narrator” (267-80). Giles Deleuze discusses the linguistic destructiveness of what he calls Bartleby’s formula as well as its effects on Bartleby’s environment. Deleuze sees Bartleby’s language as self-entrapping. It inhibits Bartleby’s own activity and locks him in the stasis of potential (70).

Bartleby's body first establishes the Joban motif in the short story. The Joban sufferer's body records and displays the divine arbitrary violence in a way that disrupts social circulation. This is what is at stake for Job's wife, who implores her husband to "curse God and die," and it is the same issue of lingering physical presence that haunts the lawyer even after he quits the premise of his original offices (Job 2:9). The body of the sufferer refuses to disappear and stop signifying the violence deployed from a place of unassailable power. It is as if the lawyer, as part of a collective divine, has become aware of the harmful effects of his own wielding power, yet cannot identify its direction or point of origin. And indeed this is consistent with the scholarship on the Joban story. These bystanders' inaction and morally complacent subservience to religious dogma detain them from offering balm or meaningful solutions. In fact, they can only lay the blame for unjust suffering at the feet of the sufferer. Melville's story therefore depicts nineteenth-century American Christian charity as perpetuating a dogmatic cyclical argument unfit for ameliorating the social injustice of urban commercial space, which it professes to address. Melville drapes the thematic trope of Joban suffering across the pointy social realities of the emergent capitalist metropolis.¹⁰⁴

Once Job's suffering manifests as physical affliction, it becomes unbearable for his friends and family (Job 2:7, 8). When his wife demands he foreswear God and perish, Job initially refuses to obey because his dogmatic faith demands the belief in an eventual corrective divine intervention that will reinstate the logic of causal justice which his plight seemingly offsets. Job's refusal to become impious in response to the violation of the Covenant of Works poses a two-fold epistemological problem to the community: first, his refusal to admitting his own guilt or condemning of the transgression against the perceived causal cosmic order

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Prickett reminds us that in the seventeenth century, the very act of producing language, as is the lawyer's self-professed first foray into literature here, is in itself, according to Johann Gottfried Herder, the attempt at apotheosis (54).

conceptually resists his interlocutors' dogmatic theology. Secondly, his refusal to die perpetually confronts the community with the physical evidence of said violation. Job's physical presence becomes problematic because his body can neither be acknowledged nor dismissed by a dogmatic reading of his fate. The question then becomes what is to be done with bodies that signify the contingency of divine justice, bodies that do not mend or wither when confronted by sublime might? The reaction of Job's interlocutors implies that such bodies must be eliminated from social circulation. It is precisely this idea that Melville addresses in "Bartleby."

Similar to the way the Joban text proceeds structurally, the lawyer's troubles with the scrivener escalate when the latter refuses to vanish when he is of no further use. What is initially a semantic problem becomes a problem of presence: Bartleby's physical presence in the office threatens the lawyer's economic interests, so much so that he vacates the premises. What is more, Bartleby points to his own body as the record of his incommunicable injury. When the lawyer asks him point blank for the reasons behind his behavior, Bartleby replies, "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" a statement that indicates the reasons for his behavior are apparent in his physical appearance (*PT* 32). Despite professing to be "touched" by his employee's suffering, the lawyer avoids both further inquiry into the matter and heeding the pious NT commandment of universal filial love. He wishes not for a permanent amelioration of Bartleby's condition but merely hopes that Bartleby's impairment will make him "less inflexible" for taking up other work (*PT* 32). The hermeneutic criticism Bartleby expresses here consists in debunking the lawyer's sentimental wish for Bartleby's body to signify what the reader wants rather than what it overtly implies. Such wishful thinking on the lawyer's part is of no avail, however. Bartleby's recalcitrant body, impaired by poor physical working conditions and psychological

deterioration from his employment in the dead letters office, is ultimately transferred to the city prison.

Melville's equivocal reference to the famous New York penitentiary by its colloquial name, The Tombs, grounds the story in New York discourse and simultaneously exposes the intentions behind Bartleby banishment. His confinement is simply the logical extension of the lawyer's earlier demand for more symbolic flexibility. However, this fact remains opaque to the lawyer, as he demonstrates when resolving to find some "less harsh" *via media* between letting Bartleby roam free and confining him to prison (*PT* 42). Yet Bartleby must part with his physical existence in order to eliminate the looming threat of invalidating the utopian harmony of commercial society and Christian charity realized in New York and crystalized in the lawyer's Wall Street office. In the same way the demand to curse God and die in the Book of Job is a prompt to affirm dogmatic belief in rationalist divine governance, Bartleby's removal stabilizes the new dogma of social harmony under the umbrella of commerce.¹⁰⁵ In terms of the Joban template I propose here, Bartleby becomes what Branka Arsić calls "the receiver" of truth (8). However, it is not the truth of universal human isolation but rather the more devastating communal truth of the incommensurability of commerce and charity that is on display here.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ The name tellingly broaches urban commercial society's solution to the problem of the sufferer's lingering physical presence. Bergmann illustrates that "The Tombs" is slang and specifically invokes New York urban frame of reference. Melville thus operates within what Bergmann calls New York discourse here. However, he seems primarily interested in The Tombs's symbolic dimension as simulacra of the Egyptian pyramids. The reference is also consistent with the emerging interest in Egyptology in the early nineteenth century.

¹⁰⁶ Arsić ultimately uses the lawyer's invocation of the Joban dream of unbornness to support her argument about Bartleby representing a positive, distinct epistemology of deathlike neuter tranquility (Arsić *Passive* 108). I am less confident than Arsić about the possibility of construing Bartleby as representing a discrete cohesive epistemology, because of the lawyer's aforementioned hegemony over and effective distortion of the narrative perspective. His perspective filters Bartleby's suffering through the lens of the utopian harmony of commerce and charity and thus makes comically visible the very things it does not recognize. Insofar as he is a symbol that must be read by the lawyer and therefore exists *for* him, the epistemological value of Bartleby's suffering depends on his physical presence as public spectacle. Bergmann similarly suggests Bartleby's status as episteme, an object of knowledge, for both readers and the lawyer alike (176).

Arsić resolves the paradox of Bartleby’s simultaneous objectivity and subjectivity by casting the scrivener’s epistemology as a kind of dialectic disembodied thinking, a consciousness that rises from the vantage point of extra-physical exteriority, but retains the nominal traits of the Cartesian cogito (*Passive* 10). She identifies Bartleby as a Job that dreams of a state of unbornness, which she deems a “neuter” state of “unindividuated existence as something in which everything lives neither as articulated nor unarticulated,” rather than in a state of non-existence (*Passive* 108). As I showed above, however, if we accept the intertextual link between “Bartleby” and the Book of Job, we must not forget that the point of contention for the lawyer and the other residents of the office building is Bartleby’s unwanted *physical* presence. The physicality is essential the Bartlebyan cogito. If that physical presence is eliminated, if Bartleby was indeed striving to become unborn while at the office, all that remains would be his disembodied semantic recalcitrance, a “vigilance that stares into the blankness of absent dreams” (*Passive* 108). In other words, the vision of consciousness detached from external material reality; i.e., a ghost.¹⁰⁷

Incidentally, when the lawyer’s temper threatens to get the best of him, he momentarily contemplates ending Bartleby’s physical life by his own hands. However, it is on that occasion he employs the teachings of Christ as a behavioral corrective whenever he feels his “nervous resentment” against the scrivener well up to the point of effectively contemplating murdering the scrivener:

Bartleby and I were alone. I remembered the tragedy of the unfortunate [Samuel]Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt in the solitary office of the latter; and now poor Colt being dreadfully incensed by Adams, and imprudently

¹⁰⁷ While she does recognize the Joban tint in Bartleby’s character, she dismisses the analogy as an “obvious comparison” (*Passive* 108). Meanwhile her own implementation of Job’s contemplation of prenatal death and communing with “kings and counselors” in heaven (Job 3:14) ignores the context of the Biblical story. Job fantasizes about momentary reprieve from physical suffering, an element that Arsic develops in great theoretical detail elsewhere in her analysis but never connects to the Joban paradigm in Melville’s writing.

permitting himself to get wildly excited, was at unawares hurried into his fatal act—an act which certainly no man could possibly deplore more than the actor himself. [. . .] It was the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, up stairs, of a building entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations [. . .]; this it must have been, which greatly helped to enhance the irritable desperation of the hapless Colt.

But when this old Adam [the urge to murder] of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him. How? Why simply by recalling the divine injunction: ‘A new commandment give I unto you, ye love one another.’ (36)

The lawyer’s reasoning here retraces the move prescribed in Protestant theology from the sinfulness of the Adamic state to the overcoming of sin in Christ. The textual reference to Christ’s injunction in the Gospel of John (13:34) stands opposite the assertion of a naturalized feeling of resentment against one’s fellow man. Equally disturbing is the lawyer’s assertion of solidarity with the murderer of Samuel Adams, John C. Colt, which undermines his later pious remonstrations of Christian forbearance. In these instances, his selective use of agency also seems problematic in the context of the capitalist ideology of wealth he operates under. While the insinuation is that he, like Colt, could not be held responsible for his actions and would have to be considered a victim of circumstance, were he to murder Bartleby on the spot, he immediately touts his strength of character for following Christ’s dictate of fraternal love.

The lawyer displays the same inconsistency when he visits Bartleby at the Tombs. By concurring with the grub-man in deeming the scrivener a “deranged” sufferer yearning for death’s release, the lawyer rationalizes Bartleby’s end as inevitable (*PT* 44). However, Bartleby is not granted a resolution as per the Joban plot as the lawyer’s quote would imply. Rather the quote expresses the lawyer’s NT vision that Bartleby had been transported to a place where “the wicked cease from troubling” (Job 3:17). That being said, Melville does not religiously follow the Biblical text either. By quoting Job in the story’s final passage, for instance, he has the

narrator retroactively cast Bartleby's life as an emblematic story of Joban suffering. Yet he also misrepresents Job as advocating the release from suffering through the gift of death. The purpose of Joban suffering in the OT, however, ultimately consists of an epistemological transformation that obliterates dogma and installs an experience-based faith in the religious individual. Yet the narrator, still attempting to coerce the Biblical text to his utopian harmonizing ideas, reads the passage from the Book of Job typologically as underwriting the immortality of Bartleby's soul and his admission into the afterlife. He thus seeks to reinstate the New Testament theology he employed earlier. In the epilogue, the lawyer even admits the informational insufficiency of his narrative; his story fails to convey an unambiguous idea of the man.¹⁰⁸

3.5.4 *Christ and Not: Bartleby's Christological Symbolism*

Melville effectively substitutes an OT Joban interpretation of suffering for a Christological suffering that, like NT charity, has become hollow and purely performative: The procession that follows Bartleby to the Tombs consists of "curious bystanders" that hunger for spectacle (*PT* 42). Incidentally, the scene presents a caricature of the reading public of sensationalist periodicals, such as the *New York Herald*, in the 1840s and 50s, the very readers that would have numbered amongst the bystanders that form Bartleby's procession. The procession is drawn by curiosity for scandal rather than for context, yet they fail to comprehend the significance of the scene because they have no historical knowledge of Bartleby's life, incidentally the very information the lawyer tries to record with the story. As such, Bartleby's arrest displays as much a religious scene of suffering as it does a scene of sensationalist reading

¹⁰⁸ McCall observes that due to their "special delicacy" Bartleby's illocutions are not merely deferential but bespeak careful deliberate discernment on the part of the scrivener (*Silence* 50). This observation integrates with the widely held opinion that what is unsettling about Bartleby's dialog is that we never get behind the obviously discerning intellect that puts forth these terse and dense statements constitutes a deliberate trap on the part of Melville. McCall has been charged with appreciationism for considering this aspect of Bartleby as representing Melville's own artistic epistemology. However, considering, as I have here, the Joban thematic presence in the text strengthens McCall's assessment.

habits. Melville suggests an overlap between the two spheres. Moreover, he mocks a social epistemological phenomenon that Bergmann calls, “[. . .] an emergent bourgeoisie flourishing in the new market economy in the United States” that, “would welcome a religious discourse based on the relational availability of God” (167). Significantly, this type of reading does not presuppose comprehension as a necessary or desirable outcome the way Puritan didactics had presupposed. The crowd must not understand Bartleby’s story to recognize the Christological symbolism he overtly signifies at the moment of his arrest. On the contrary, it is precisely because of their, merely sentimental, relational link to Bartleby, that no deeper attachments form. After all, Bartleby is alone in the Tombs when the lawyer comes to visit. As such, Melville displays a kind of superficial reading of religious symbolism that is diametrically opposed to the serious contemplative hermeneutics institutions such as the American Tract Society or the Sunday School Union sought to cultivate in their readers. All of these evangelical institutions presuppose that the project of salvation was interwoven with the project of intense reading to the end of textual comprehension in the sense of a specific exegetic doctrine. The account of Bartleby’s arrest, or rather its elision, suggests that this project of symbol-making has become impossible in the age of surface readings fostered by sensationalist journalism and increasingly loose relations between meanings and symbols.¹⁰⁹

“As this drama becomes clear,” Franklin observes regarding the possibility that the salvation of humankind may be bound up with the possibility of Bartleby’s salvation, “the narrator’s language becomes more and more grotesquely ironic” (129). Still, his is not a subversive irony. Only the lawyer, reading the account of Bartleby’s arrest in his study after the

¹⁰⁹ It is in this sense of a failed salvation based on an incomplete reading of religious symbolism that I read Bruce H. Franklin suggesting that we should entertain the idea of Bartleby being Christ (128). Melville would use this device in other pieces as well. Joshua Matthews argues that in “The Lightning-Rod Man” Melville comments critically on the commercialization of the literary market place based on the salesman’s threat to publish the house-owner’s alleged impious sentiments against his wares (56).

fact, derives a moment of epiphany from the news of Bartleby's incarceration. In fact, it is enough to shock him out of his initial "indignation" and sympathy for the landlord of his former offices and, through a state of genuine consternation, forces him into action. The example of Bartleby, therefore, does for a brief moment seem fundamentally able to inspire change based on providing new knowledge about the world. As Richard Kopley, one of the first critics to seriously consider the OT implications of "Bartleby," suggests,¹¹⁰

Melville's work is an incisive critique of inadequately developed Christian perception, yet finally this work is not without hope. The ironic glimmer of the story is that the unseeing lawyer/narrator nonetheless reveals to the reader that Christ has returned to the Temple. (203)

For the reasons I stated above, I remain skeptical about the extent to which the lawyer's account can be considered as redemptive of his professed NT Christology. And while I find Kopley's equation of Bartleby's advent at the Tombs as the return to the Temple compelling, I propose considering this event as part of the imagery through which Melville performs his critique of NT hermeneutics. There seems to be little change in the lawyer's reading of Bartleby's predicament. In fact, his immediate resolution that "something less harsh might be done" falls into the familiar pattern of presupposing the magical compatibility between two incongruent opposites—in this case, Bartleby's loitering and the dictates of private commercial property and office space (*PT* 42).

But the rule of sentiment and the rule of law are not concomitant. Jacques Derrida, in *The Gift of Death* (1996), construes Bartleby's eventual demise as determined by the OT gift logic to a demanding yet conspicuously absent God. Bartleby, Derrida argues, has given himself over to divine will, pure determinacy. His repeated assertion that he would prefer not to merely implies

¹¹⁰ The landlord's interactions with Bartleby as well as Bartleby's arrest are conspicuously elided. That this is indeed a matter of editorial choice on the part of the lawyer becomes evident in the introductory remarks that come from an older narrator who reminisces about the events. Yet the narrative remains restricted to the temporarily and specially confined perspective.

that, “he has decided *to*”; as such, “Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ is also a sacrificial passion that will lead him to death, a death given by the law, by a society that doesn’t even know why it acts the way it does” (*Gift* 75). Derrida’s reading is useful here, because he construes Bartleby’s death as a Christological passion story outside of Christological doctrine. Bartleby’s fate, Derrida says, is the ultimate extension of the paternal law as it is set forth in the OT. His suffering and death make visible the machinations of Providence, the very principle both Carnegie and the lawyer insist on as the spring at the center of reality. Therefore, if we wish to consider Bartleby as Christ, Derrida suggests, we may do so only insofar as he represents the fulfillment of OT prophecy, the consummation of an older covenant. In other words, Bartleby’s symbolism does not extend into the NT ethics the lawyer initially attempts to impose on it. Despite the apparent genuineness of his fraternal feelings towards the scrivener in the scene at the Tombs, the lawyer operates under the same illusion as the crowd that accompanies Bartleby: that their messiah would survive the change he brings.

But Bartleby, if he is, in fact, Christ, is not part of the apostolic Christology. Earlier in the story, when he consults theological and morally philosophical authorities, he reads them exclusively on the basis of their pragmatic applicability. The immediate occasion is his enervated reaction to Bartleby’s semantic deflections, which lead him to casually reference (“to look into”) “Edwards on the Will,” and “Priestley on Necessity” (*PT* 37). His is a cursory and fragmentary reading of these sources, one that ignores methodological questions of mutual compatibility, historical context, and the viability of selective, bias reading. Even his own literary project of writing Bartleby’s life is plagued by such methodological inconsistencies. For example, he insists that writing Bartleby’s life will resolve his personal spiritual crisis created by the challenge to urbanite Christian charity that Bartleby represents. It is this compulsive and

paradoxical kind of writing that is based on a sort of magical thinking about the epistemologically unifying capacities of the written account.¹¹¹

His arrival at the Tombs marks the first incident in which the lawyer employs an OT reading that, at the very least, indicates an admission of error as well as an acknowledgement of a representational impasse. Yet it is also a reconceptualization of Bartleby as a victim whose suffering is mysterious, as Franklin suggests. As such, the lawyer acknowledges that he cannot persist in his defense of rationalism. He has to acknowledge that Bartleby is sheerly curious in an extra-rational sense, even as it does persist in the paradoxical project of “writing the impossibility of writing certain people” (Arsić *Passive*, 32).

Giorgio Agamben uncovers yet another level of significance in this process by situating “Bartleby” in exegetical and philosophical history and reading him as a messianic figure that redeems the potential from the actual. He claims that Bartleby’s formula announces a cosmology that transcends the simplistic notion of a universe ruled by dispensary justice into the realm of metamorphosis and rebirth: “His [Bartleby’s] word is not Justice, which gives a reward or a perpetual punishment to what was, but instead Palingenesis, apokatastasis panōn, in which the new creature [. . .] reaches the indemonstrable center of its ‘occurrence-or-nonoccurrence’” (“Bartleby” 271). Agamben ultimately reads the story as prophetic text in the NT tradition; to him the text announces a new kind of creature that does not operate in the epistemological confines of rationalism. However, that new creature, as the anchoring narrative presence of the lawyer imparts, has not come to liberate, but has, in fact, departed to sleep with kings and counsellors. It has become part in God’s mystery and therefore cannot sound forth its message to

¹¹¹ Arsić sees the lawyer brush up against “the resistance of allegory, the fact that the clarity of his narration cannot narrate its content” (*Passive* 31). His NT hermeneutics is based on what Arsić terms a “philosophy of assumptions” that presumes references to be understood by audiences and events to be translatable and accountable to rational means of narrative (*Passive* 14). Bartleby escapes such assumptions and thus exposes the lawyer’s flimsy hermeneutics.

the world of the living. Agamben usefully conceptualizes the fact that Bartleby's pseudo-Christology is not redemptive. But he does not read Bartleby's silence as the divine language in the OT moral sense.

My point here is not to disprove Bartleby-Christ analogy but rather to put it into perspective within the frame of what I have termed Melville's critique of NT hermeneutics and Christology. In fact, it is essential that Bartleby's messianic symbolism be overt in order for the irony of its indecipherability to work. Text and audience, Melville suggests, do not cohere with one another in their hermeneutic dispositions, a fact that leaves the lawyer stuck in the carriagehouse of piously professing his adherence to the NT principles of charity. While his reference to Job indicates a momentary switch of vocabularies—a switch from a NT to an OT hermeneutics—and thus to a reading of reality in which God is not incarnated but forever distant and hidden. His comprehension of this fact only manifests in the epilogue, in which the only evidence of divine justice consists of the fragments of human life found in the Dead Letter office.

3.5.5 Conclusion: *Bartleby as Job*

The clustering of Bartleby's ascetic characteristics has fostered a critical tradition of reading him as a messianic figure and consequentially grounds the story's religious allegory in NT lore. And while certain passages in Melville's texts overtly point to a Christological reading, I have tried to show that this interpretation does not fully acknowledge the extent to which Melville engages Biblical hermeneutics in the story. While furnishing a clear-eyed analysis of the narrator's dubious morality, Franklin, for instance, overlooks the fact that the narrative frame itself exists to exonerate the lawyer from any accusation of uncharitable behavior. The lawyer's hypocrisy is a direct product of his NT hermeneutics. This observation puts emphasis on those

moments in which the lawyer attempts to justify moral choices to his narratees. Hence, it is not the lawyer's three denials of Bartleby but rather his casting aside the tranquility bestowed upon him by the knowledge of acting in accordance with "some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence" that reveals his guilt (*PT* 37).¹¹²

The lawyer's moral dilemma begins when he rejects Bartleby after having embraced responsibility for him. He abandons the state of purposeful contentment because of "the constant frictions of illiberal minds" (*PT* 37). Yet he cannot maintain the stability that his care of Bartleby requires of him without impairing his commercial opportunity. Bartleby's isolation therefore does not constitute an a priori epistemology but—as both the narrative frame and especially the epilogue suggest—presents a continuously reaffirmed state of betrayal and abandonment. In a variation of Franklin's reading, Bergmann considers Bartleby's divinity as that of a god (instead of the Christian God): "In Bartleby a word is made flesh [. . .], but the word is only the word of an individual's isolated, and apparently momentary, inclination—his preference" (176). Bartleby's semantic multiplicity and intangibility allegorizes New York as a space where God resides with everyman on the street and is thus both ubiquitous and absent. In other words, Bartleby is an un-Christ, a figure whose plight symbolically disavows the possibility of synchronizing chronometrical and horological time.¹¹³

Melville continues the debate about the contrast of horological and chronometrical time, which he began in *Pierre* and recasts the Christological vision of consolidating earthly and heavenly time as the lawyer's illusory project of marrying commercial success and ethical

¹¹² Especially the lawyer's three denials of Bartleby warrant a Christological reading and there has been no shortage of such readings in scholarship (*PT* 39-40). Franklin is often (mis-) quoted as considering Bartleby a Christ figure, when he merely suggests reading "Bartleby" in terms of Matthew 25:40 (131). Hans Bergman, who is sympathetic to Franklin's reading, proposes to interpret the story with Luke 23:27 and suggests that nineteenth-century liberal Christians would have condoned this interpretation, as well as Melville's overall depiction, on the grounds that "the construction of a new Christology" was the most important theological issue of the day (166).

¹¹³ Cf. the first lecture of Plotinus Plinlimmon in *Pierre* (212).

behavior. When flying in a fit of “old Adamic rage of resentment” over Bartleby’s passiveness, the lawyer tellingly adds a rationalizing interpretation to Jesus’s injunction that effectively subverts its meaning: If “self-interest then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should, especially with high-tempered men, prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy,” then charity is merely a guise for pacifying a person’s fears about condemnation in the afterlife (*PT* 36). This reasoning echoes Adam Smith’s materialist philosophy more than it does Christian charity.

Given that his allegorical value arises from his suffering and resistance to the lawyer’s erroneous practice of religious charity, Bartleby, I argue, is more convincingly construed as a Joban sufferer than a transcendental teacher. As the victim of an unspoken, unknowable crime, he symbolizes loneliness in the Joban sense of being singled out and victimized by arbitrary forces beyond the story’s frame of reference. The narrative unity of the short-story format adds a new dimension to his treatment illuminates the Joban component of Melville’s ongoing literary exegetical project. While being a suffering and—in his semantic passivity and physical recalcitrance—defiant Job, Bartleby is denied the redemptive moment of the sublime encounter that causes Job to transcend the dogmatic religiosity of his friends and family. Bergmann argues that, “[t]here is no eternity, no transcendence in the word that this god [Bartleby] brings” (176). This observation applies not only to the kind of epistemology Bartleby arguably represents but also, more importantly, to Bartleby’s symbolic role as a sufferer in the OT sense. The failure of hypocritical Christian charity to integrate him into a community of fellow human beings in a meaningful inter-personal way; i.e., outside the throngs of commerce, precludes any systematic inquiry into metaphysical ills that caused Bartleby’s suffering. If anything, the text chronicles

how the lawyer's "pure melancholy and sincerest pity" transforms into fear and revulsion at Bartleby's inability to function properly within the given lines of commercial culture (*PT* 29).¹¹⁴

Only in the epilogue does the lawyer begin to comprehend the Joban quality of Bartleby's dilemma insofar as he regards Job as a type of Christ. That this final piece of the story is supposedly based on vague yet corresponding reports does not matter, since the whole narrative hinges on the lawyer's editorial authority. What is more, Bartleby, whom the lawyer conceives as "a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness" must bear witness to the failure of charity and to the unrelieved calamities and individual fates that are symbolized in the letters he destroys (*PT* 45). Melville thus has the lawyer curiously propose a medical response to his theological dilemma: Bartleby's suffering stems from his inherent disposition towards melancholy. Once again, the lawyer's latitudinarian reading technique allows him to avoid making any lasting change to his epistemology.¹¹⁵

While he continues to rationalize Bartleby's fate as genetically determined by the strange scrivener's inert melancholy, his final exclamation takes on a different meaning when considered against the backdrop of the Biblical text's epistemological thesis. It is not the factual harshness evinced by the lives of sufferers but rather the hopeless and burnt-out prospects that emerge when one attempts to write such lives. Realizing this fact compels the lawyer to lament both Bartleby and humanity. Death for Bartleby, he comes to recognize, does not necessarily mean salvation, but rather leaves the matter of divine justice ambivalent and unresolved. Melville conceives of a Joban plot without its redeeming resolution. To the lawyer, the tale's tragedy lies not in the instance of the individual, undeliverable letter, but in the possibility that a melancholy

¹¹⁴ "I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause" (Job 5:8).

¹¹⁵ Compare again d'Holbach, addressing the problem of theodicy: "In considering nature they [believers] however would have seen that physical evil is a necessary consequence of the particular properties of some beings" (1:186).

personality, such as Bartleby's, suggest the permanent impossibility of redress to human suffering. Analogously, the Book of Job does not advocate a belief in rationalist divine justice but underscores the limits of human understanding while advocating a personal sense of faith. The lawyer's ambivalent final interjections, "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" echo this dualism and have been read as evincing lawyer's arrival at a deeper understanding of the dilemma Bartleby symbolizes (*PT* 45). Even if he cannot see Bartleby's life as redemptive in the Christological sense, he ultimately comes to recognize his suffering. Stuck between these two epistemologies, the lawyer is left to mourn the tragic reality of the human condition, symbolized in the dead letters that promise "swiftest charity" and relief but never reach their destination (*PT* 45).

3.6 The Encantadas: Melville's Everlasting "No"

In December of 1853, Melville had been contracted with Harper Brothers to write a novel on tortoise hunting, with a three-hundred-dollar advance attached to the project. In his original pitch, he described the novel as consisting "partly of nautical adventure, and partly—or, rather, chiefly of Tortoise Hunting Adventure," the implication being that the book would return to the style and tone of Melville's earlier successes. The novel never materialized. What was to become "The Encantadas" was supposedly included in a three-hundred-page manuscript that Melville had completed in January of 1854 but kept reworking. In May of that year, the ten sketches that form "The Encantadas" were finally published in Putnam's *Monthly Magazine* under the pseudonym Salvator R. Tarnmoore, although Melville's authorship was revealed prior to publication (Parker *PT*, 601). Putnam also marketed the release of the sketches as Melville's return to adventure genre with an ad announcing that the author of *Typee* and *Omoo* had returned from his "distempered dreams" in the New York *Evening Post* (qtd. in Dillingham *Melville's Short*, 75). The campaign was waged to disavow the ill-received *Pierre*. More importantly,

however, it was to signal to audiences that Melville had abandoned the line of dense, metaphysical inquiry and allegedly controversial religious debate he had begun in *Mardi*.

Even though the methodology that went into creating “The Encantadas” was nominally similar to that which Melville had employed in his first three novels, the series of sketches are highly symbolic, non-linear discussion of human suffering and the nature of evil. Bruce Bickley notes, “Melville’s goal was to bring the sketches out of his researches and memory into structural and thematic coherence, and there is some disagreement about his success in doing so” (110). What is more, they investigate the rift between reality and perception while mounting a meta-discussion of literary symbolism and its roots in Biblical lore. I will discuss these three thematic dimensions of the sketches in greater detail in subsequent chapters. For the moment, I am interested in the ways the series of sketches construct a moral topography that is based on and simultaneously mounts a critique of Biblical history. Investigating this process will yield further evidence as to Melville’s conceptual criticism of evil and the problem of theodicy.¹¹⁶

Melville had visited the Galapagos Isles twice, at the end of 1841/42 and again in ’43, respectively. Beyond his personal recollections, he used Charles Poerter’s *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean* (1815) as well as several other sources to develop the topography and characters of his sketches. Several critics have examined “The Encantadas” on the grounds of its intertextual borrowings from other travel accounts. Especially Charles Darwin’s publication of *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1831) allegedly lead Melville to comment on the idea of genetic determinism and evolutionary development. I propose that while these influences are significant,

¹¹⁶ Melville wrote the letter to Harpers November 24, 1853. Hershel Parker notes that Harper ultimately did not publish either the tortoise-hunting adventure or the now lost *Isle of the Cross* (orig. “Agatha’s Story”), which Melville had offered to Harper as well (*Correspondence* 249, 250). The debate about *The Isle of the Cross* is ongoing with Parker functioning as chief advocate for the existence of the book. For a summary of the debate, see Parker (2007).

they only tell half the story about the argument the text makes about the symbolic quality of the isles as an ambiguous space that exists in both Biblical and empirical material history.¹¹⁷

Pertaining to these latter issues of Darwin's research on evolutionary genetics, critics are divided between those who consider Melville to be proposing a materialist and indifferent universe and those who see him condemn an invisible yet personal entity that condones the suffering that abounds on the islands. In this latter vein, I. Newbery argues that the sketches constitute an "inverted Theodicee [sic.], one in which the ways of God in relation to evil cannot be justified anymore" and "[e]vil reigns supreme" (67). Newbery equates the narrator's account of a particularly grievous kind of desolation with postulating a regime of evil. This seems an understatement since evil is—up until the sketch on Oberlus—rendered as principle that becomes conspicuous only through the ravaged materiality of the desolate landscape and the despair of those forced to dwell in it. On the contrary, the narrator, particularly in the sketch on Hunilla, seems preoccupied with the admirable tolerance for misery the sufferers exhibit. He even finds grounds to celebrate the unyielding spirit of humanity. Reading the text in terms of its references to wisdom literature, particularly the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes, may allow us to differentiate these nuances and thus situate the sketches in the exegetical strain of Melville's literary project.

It is worthwhile pointing out that no explicit accusation against a malignant God is uttered here. The speaker does traverse a fallen world, one that appears to him tailored to instill suffering. By implication, Melville gestures to William Paley's popular watchmaker argument, according to which the shape of creation implies the creator's moral character. By grounding the world of the Encantadas in OT history, he constructs a world that is ambivalent in the sense that it exists in an in-between space of Biblical history in which the Fall has already occurred but no

¹¹⁷ Parker points out that the story of Oberlus in its prototypical form can be found in Porter's *Journal* (603). Bruce Bickley also provides a comprehensive list of sources in his reading of the sketches (110).

new covenant of redemption has been forged yet. And yet the sketch “The Chola Widow” in particular indicates that such redemption may be reasonably expected and is even condoned by the narrator.¹¹⁸

On the topic of Melville’s use of sources, Denise Tanyol more recently proposed that Melville critically responds to Darwin’s theories and considers them emblematic for the ideological conflict between a secularized empiricist outlook on humanity’s genetic history and the *ordo salutis*. Indeed it seems plausible that Melville would have recognized the “underlying fictionality of the seemingly objective classifications of islands and living things” and consequently attempted to free “the Galapagos from the grasp of the naturalist, revealing that the marvels of the world are not to be easily mapped, counted, and classified” (Tanyol 244, 45). William Dillingham finds the underlying structuring principle of the sketches expressed via Oberlus and Hunilla in their respective symbolizing of genetic degeneration and disinterested materialism. Dillingham provides an alternative reading to the initial description of the islands as part of a fallen world (*PT* 127): He considers the adjective “fallen” as literally referring to the waste product of burned material (78, fn 6). Meanwhile, Marvin Fisher identifies the problem of art and illusion as Melville’s ultimate theme. Fisher here usefully elevates the discussion to the aesthetic realm by proposing that Melville attempts an “imaginative reconstruction of reality” with his sketches on tortoise hunting (49). However, his engagement with Melville’s theological references remains glossary and superficial, as do most other readings of the sketches.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Frye confirms that the Bible invokes a unique and distinct sense of history as it “deliberately blocks off the sense of the referential from itself: it is not a book pointing to a historical presence outside, but a book that identifies itself with that presence” (137).

¹¹⁹ Sealts, apparently more certain of the fact than Tanyol, claims that Melville had read Darwin’s *Journal* around 1847 (*Reading* 122). True to *Putnam*’s original advertisement for the series, critics consider the compositional methodology behind “The Encantadas” to be aligned with *Typee* and *Omoo*. By creating a pastiche composition of personal recollection as well as other borrowed materials, Melville seemingly returns to his methodological roots with the piece. My argument here extends this discussion about methodology by emphasizing

Both Fisher's and Dillingham's hypotheses seem useful here, although they warrant some modification: first, I argue that Melville constructs this proposed symbolic reality on the basis of OT symbolic repository. Secondly, this strategy constitutes a critical engagement with the OT by aesthetic means. As with "Bartleby," he explicitly references Joban suffering when constructing the penal reality of the Encantadas. Direct reference, we should remember, was a rather uncommon method in Melville's intertextual repertoire. It thus seems reasonable to assume that explicitness, in this case, is a means of emphasis. Therefore, these references constitute a cohesive symbolic register that delineates the metaphysical and psychological scope of the sketches. The mimetic part of the narrator's description of the isles ecosystem hinges on Biblical text. The events in the Encantadas are situated in a landscape that is part and parcel of OT history, and the abounding despair and suffering, far from being characterized as pure contingency, to him are specifically tied to said history.

While I argue here that the Biblical text constitutes the frame of Melville's literary aesthetic efforts, the coeval publication of Darwin's *Journal* impacted how Melville thought about hereditary genetics, but it more overtly informs the way critics contextualize Melville's creative effort in the sketch series on a level that over time has come to be disparaged in theology-based readings on his work. This oversight is all the more egregious when we consider that much of the philosophical volatility of Darwin's axioms stems from the challenge they posed to religious orthodoxy in all its gradations. What is of most consequence to the present discussion is how Darwin's theories intervened in nineteenth-century theological debates about the morally benign character of nature. The debates I surveyed above included the search for a

the importance of OT structure for Melville's thematic organization of the sketches, a point that has thus far been neglected in scholarly reviews of the sketches.

materialist basis to make an effective case for theodicy.¹²⁰ And it is in this sense that Dillingham is justified in deeming Darwinian materiality the ultimate border of theology in the world of Melville's *Encantadas*. However, neither of these critics, except for Fisher and Newbery, examines Melville's response to the problem of theodicy as a central theme in the sketches. And both Fisher and Newbery ignore reviewing Darwin's findings in the context of the critical debates between orthodox Calvinists and liberals that had occurred earlier in the century. In fact, Dillingham maintains that "the ten sketches do not develop a theme so much as they objectify a condition or state, that barren condition that results when a fire has burned out and left only ashes" (*Melville's Short* 77).¹²¹

One of the unifying paradigms of the sketches consists of Melville's synergizing of Darwin's findings and theology. Indeed, allusions to the world's (burned-out) materiality abound here more than elsewhere in Melville's oeuvre. At the same time, the narrator early on stresses the emblematic quality of the landscape. Dillingham therefore dismisses "mood" and the affective temper of the "vision of barrenness" (*Melville's Short* 77) as inconsequential narrative devices, when in fact these stylistic elements constitute the thematic basis of the sketches. Despite this emphasis on materiality, Melville's narrator—especially in sketch eight—struggles with the lingering urge to discover a final instance of agency in the divine. And yet the Darwinian revolution begs the question whether such urges have become untenable, nostalgic impulses rather than viable modes of inquiry. Melville thus depicts not a realist burnt-out island

¹²⁰ Of course, German neologism had benefited from philosophical accounts against theodicy, such as Kant's seminal essay "On the Miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy" (1791). Kant extended the philosophical tradition of separating theology and philosophy proper that had been initiated by Baruch de Spinoza and Thomas Hobbes.

¹²¹ Dillingham's stress of materialism in his reading here seems a bit out of character when compared to the rest of his book. Sealts, in his review of *Melville's Short Fiction*, argues that, to Dillingham, Melville's "ultimate aim was character delineation" and that "Dillingham unequivocally dissents from any assumption that 'historical, social, political, economic issues' were Melville's primary interests" (*Short* 53).

group, but rather a symbolic landscape that mirrors the psychological ramifications of loss, treachery, and indifference and derives its images from OT wisdom lore.

Reading the Encantadas' desolation as informed by Job's suffering yields an explanation for the narrator repeatedly implying a discerning agency behind the suffering (*PT* 126). Whereas in "The Apple-Tree Table" (1856) the narrator navigates his subject matter by coolly moderating opposing philosophical positions, the narrator of "The Encantadas" presumes the universal appeal of his sentiments and images. The islands' melancholic desolation is first conveyed indirectly by means of comparison.¹²²

It is to be doubted whether any spot of earth can, in desolateness, furnish a parallel to this group [of islands]. Abandoned cemeteries of long ago, old cities by piecemeal tumbling to their ruin, these are melancholy enough; but, like all else which has but once been associated with humanity they still awaken in us some thoughts of sympathy, however sad. Hence, even the Dead Sea, along with whatever other emotions it may at times inspire, does not fail to touch in the pilgrim some of his less unpleasurable feelings. (*PT* 126)

While his imagery may be heavy-handed, the narrator invokes a specific kind of melancholy associated with abandoned cemeteries slowly falling into ruin. The image of cities and cemeteries duplicate the visual register of death and decay by postulating that even the mementoes to the dead must fall into ruin and waste away. The description denotes a positive identification. Cemeteries may invoke the standard image of *memento mori*, yet to the narrator they represent more overtly a residual humanity that is based on a shared experience of corporeal existence between the living and the dead, that is, existence is necessarily material and finite. As a space, the Encantadas, however, negate even this residual common humanity of gravestones

¹²² Bickley, pursuing a reader-response argument, also observes this underlying moral vain in the story, even if he does not attribute it to the narrator's but to Melville's "rhetorical technique" (110). Bickley concludes that Melville creates "throughout the sketches a series of opposing tensions, meanwhile hinting that a metaphysical and moral order will be found among the isles once these tensions are resolved. It is finally, the reader's job to resolve them, thereby discovering for himself the aesthetic and philosophical unity of 'The Encantadas'" (110-11). I will argue contrarily that Melville actually embeds the demand for a moral center in his narrator's invasive comments in the latter sketches.

and thus emphasize the unpoetic character of human life as pure materiality; as such, the islands denounce the possibility of aesthetic transcendence of death. The immortality of the soul may be possible in this world, but it remains unascertainable. The only empirically verifiable universal law seems to be the ubiquitous process of material decay. Even the gravestones, erected to poeticize those lives that have ended, must fall into decay and therefore expose the futility of human art. The Encantadas receive neither “change of seasons nor of sorrows” (*PT* 126). Their special curse is eternal stasis, a curse that unfolds in both space and time; accordingly, the isles’ inhabitants suffer not by degree or intensity but by the perpetuity of their anguish and therefore their hopelessness. The topographic ambiguity, therefore, also plays itself out in the suffering of the Encantadas’ cursed inhabitants.

As a social sphere, the isles constitute a realm of material, physical, and psychological suffering. In “Bartleby” Melville had first developed a differentiated notion of hopeless suffering on the basis of the Joban text. Job dreams of a state of unbornness in which he could have avoided the physical and mental suffering he feels condemned to endure (Job 3:3-16). But such palliative dreamscapes are inaccessible to the sufferers of the sketches. What is important in this passage is that Melville combines the social and topographic characteristics of the isles into one symbol of desolation.

Beginning with sketch three, the narrator depicts the island group as a social microcosm. He compiles an index of the socio-ornithological strata of Rock Rodondo that is reminiscent of Ishmael’s cetological analyses in *Moby-Dick* and arranges the various species of birds in a social hierarchy. In this hierarchy, pelicans emblemize the Encantadas’ topography, for “their ashy plumage imparts an aspect as if they had been powdered over with cinders” (*PT* 135). Given their “lugubrious expression,” the pelican appears to the speaker a “penitential bird [. . .], fitly

haunting the shores of the clinkered Encantadas, whereon tormented Job himself might have well sat down and scraped himself with potshreds” (*PT* 135).¹²³ Melville anthropomorphizes the pelicans via physiognomic description and couches this characterization within Biblical history. The Encantadas may not be the land of Uz where Job resided, yet their desolate landscape—echoed by the pelicans’ penitentiary demeanor—invokes Job’s physical affliction as he sits in a hole of ash whilst scrubbing his sores.¹²⁴ Rock Rodondo, therefore, materializes Biblical history. Fisher usefully posits that Melville’s analytical method here exceeds Charles Darwin’s observations in the sense that Melville may speculate more boldly about the symbolic implications of the hierarchies he finds on the Encantadas (Fisher 33). Fisher echoes Newbery in pointing out how the narrator’s description of aviary social strata bespeak “less a divine order than a diabolical decree” (Fisher 33). Melville grafts his fallen world firmly onto the existing topography of Biblical history while covertly embedding the critical implications against theodicy. Yet neither considers the theological argument behind this narrative empiricism.

Because the Encantadas exist within Biblical history, the suffering of its inhabitants simultaneously becomes historicized and mystified. For instance, the scorched landscape crying out for Lazarus to quench its thirst, invokes the way the rich man from the NT parable does the same while being tormented in hell.¹²⁵ The narrator cites the passage out of context here—in Luke 16:24, Abraham states that Lazarus goes to heaven while the rich man burns in hell because in life their roles were reversed—yet the reference announces the careening of a cosmic moral equilibrium. Melville uses the passage to develop within Biblical history the islands’

¹²³ Several critics, including Sealts, trace this strategy back to Melville’s compositional method of using Darwin’s *Journal* as a reference work. I argue here that Melville combines Darwin’s methodology and project with his own reading of Joban lore.

¹²⁴ Melville refers to Job 2:7-8 here: “so went Satan forth from the presence of the LORD and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown. / And he took him a potshred to scrape himself withal’ and he sat down among the ashes.” The pelican’s penitential forlornness is also reminiscent of *Bartleby’s* loneliness.

¹²⁵ Cf. Luke 16:24-26.

specific desolation as the experience of said cosmic imbalance. It is a violation of the OT order of dispensary justice provided by an all-seeing deity. As a historical and topographical space, however,

[. . .] the Encantadas refuse to harbor even the outcasts of the beasts. Man and wolf alike disown them. Little but reptile life is here found:—tortoises, lizards, immense spiders, snakes, and [. . .] the *iguana*. No voice, no low, no howl is heard; the chief sound of life here is a hiss. (original emphasis, *PT* 127)

It is a place where even Melville's favorite Biblical archetype, Ishmael, the quintessential outcast, would not fair well. Galapagos—a name imparted in reference to the tortoises native to the isles—is a land for low reptilian creatures. Moreover, the isles' collection of outcast denizens include both the innocent, humiliated, such as the Chola widow Hunilla, and the naturally deranged, such as the depraved and bestial Oberlus.

The description of native lifeforms, however, evokes Christian typology. Melville paints the island group in the colors of the colonial rhetoric of the devil's corner. He even extends the zoological category "reptilian" to include spiders and amphibians and thereby transforms it into a tautology of the term "satanic." Plant life is distorted and corrupted as only seems fit to bear the "Apples of Sodom" for sustenance, the only inherent quality of which is its organic property of decomposition (*PT* 128). And even the ocean rages against the islands' shores as if the very existence of the isles was a cosmic affront; its deadly "Plutonian" character hints at a personal entity that malignantly directs events on the islands from afar and whose ire manifests in the vehemence of natural forces (*PT* 127).

Ultimately, the narrator subsumes his topographic and metaphysical survey of the land by stating that only in a rebarbative, fallen world "could such land exist" (*PT* 127). As I noted earlier, the desolation that abounds in this realm is both material and chronological. On the temporal axis, the isles appear frozen within the history of salvation; they exist in a moment that

is simultaneously postlapsarian and antediluvian. This corrupted land indefinitely awaits its messiah. Its shores contain the wreckage from all other realms “from Paradise to Tartarus” and display the broken “relics of distant beauty” among “charred wood and mouldering ribs of wrecks” (*PT* 127). Melville invokes the image of the isles as a museum or curiosity shop, a loose collection of artifacts that tauntingly signifies the existence of an aesthetic of fully realized artistic visions by presenting the only blasted remains of artistic objects that emerged from this aesthetic. An aesthetic of ‘full’ beauty or positive creation does not exist here. On the contrary, beauty is not an apparent quality on the isles but rather one that must be discerned by inference. Its aesthetic is built around fragmentation and contingent victimization. These images map a living-dead realm—a veritable limbo—that devours all hope while taunting the observer with visual echoes of a shiny, full presence that reverberate through the islands’ “penal hopelessness” (*PT* 129).¹²⁶

Fisher usefully considers this aesthetics grounded in OT epistemology, which he identifies in the sketch “The Pisgah View from the Rock.” Sketch four even begins with a reference to Deuteronomy 34:1, which invokes the death of Moses at Mount Moab in plain sight of the Promised Land. The image therefore denotes the inherent ambiguity of sight as containing both presence and absence of the thing desired by the observer. The Pisgah view, according to Fisher, constitutes the essential epistemological strategy of the sketches. Yet the sketch, in contrast to the earlier ones, also renders the Biblical landscape in essentially American terms—the references to a “watery Kentucky” and the burned-over district of upstate New York situate the OT textual passage in the context of the American Second Great Awakening. The analogy connects the Encantadas to contemporary evangelical upheavals in America. Melville thus

¹²⁶ This passage may have inspired Fisher’s valid reading that, in terms of Melville’s career trajectory, the sketch series “foreshadows the diptychs and constitutes Melville’s first fully conscious attempt to link Paradise and Tartarus in a transcendent ideological dichotomy” (35).

extends the purchase the Encantadas have on Biblical history—they are, for example, material manifestations of the land of Uz where Job resides—to contemporary readers. The Encantadas, like the Holy Land depicted in *Clarel*, are a space through which readers can experience Biblical history as material reality. By exploring the isles' topography and history the narrator also learns about contemporary American religious conflicts because he is able to conceive of them in the context of a historicized Biblical landscape. In this sense, Fisher does not go far enough with his analysis of the vistas that the Pisgah view allows.

As per Fisher's model, ambiguity is the Galapagos islands' primary symbolic quality: Their precise geographic location, for one, seems unascertainable. In fact, some sailors believe there to be two distinct groups of islands existing side-by-side (*PT* 128). The two names the islands bear—the Encantadas and Galapagos—suggest that their symbolic ambivalence even extends into the semantic realm. Most of all, however, tortoises are the primary symbols of the Encantadas' geographic duplicity and penal desolation. Dillingham ads that they are foreboding creatures (*Melville's Short* 78). Their breast and back plates signify desolation and hope, respectively (*PT* 130). Yet their value as emblems of the sketch series' epistemology is even more significant.

[. . .] Every one knows that tortoises [. . .] are of such a make, that if you but put them on their backs you thereby expose their bright sides without the possibility of their recovering themselves, and turning into view the other. But after you have done this, and because you have done this, you should not swear that the tortoise has no dark side. Enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can, but be honest and don't deny the black. Neither should he who cannot turn the tortoise from its natural position so as to hide the darker and expose the livelier aspect [. . .] for that cause declare the creature to be one total inky blot. The tortoise is both black and bright. But let us to particulars. (*PT* 130)

The proverbial style of the narrator's admonishment functions not only as a guide for reading the Encantadas's symbolic topography but also applies to their place in Biblical history. Turning

over the tortoise, the narrator argues, constitutes an epistemological choice, one that reveals agency as well as consequentialist logic: once the tortoise is flipped on its back, it cannot turn over on its own accord. The darker aspects of the world cannot be unseen once they have been unraveled. Insofar, the passage furnishes a proverbial guideline for epistemological responsibility, a reading which the narrator's anaphoric style of this passage warrants.

Dillingham shows cogently how the tortoises crystalize the islands' duplicitous nature. Although he does not recognize the foreshadowing of the Joban depression of life that is to be expressed in the sketch about Rock Rodondo, nor does he connote Job's dream of unbornness—another death in life—when he contests that the tortoises represent a “death in life, which takes two principal forms: degradation to bestiality and the changeless state of catatonic hopelessness” (*Melville's Short 79*).

The sketch's paradigmatically states that in the quest for truth, be it empirical or the revealed kind, what has been seen cannot be unseen. Otherworldly knowledge, which is obtained under considerable strain, may yield adverse effects. Melville had already explored this idea in chapter ninety-three, “The Castaway,” in *Moby-Dick*. While Pip's accident dramatizes the detrimental psychological effects of glimpsing the inner workings of the universe, the narrator of the second sketch here appears morally diplomatic in suggesting that knowledge gained cannot be unlearned. He never addresses the glaring antinomian consequences of this rule; i.e., nature's apparent treacherousness and God's authorship and/or condolence of evil. And yet the sketches illustrate the ways in which human beings suffer in a broken and fallen OT world. The Encantadas' dual symbolism becomes personalized in sketches eight and nine respectively. Sketch eight on the Chola widow Hunilla, to whom I will return in Chapter four, expounds on both Ecclesiastical anaphora of the vanity of human machinations. The thematics of

bestialization, as Dillingham terms it, we find more fully developed in the hermit Oberlus. In Melville's works, Oberlus, *Redburn's* Jackson and *Billy Budd's* Claggart, act as part of a group of characters that personalizes evil. This group of characters represents an antinomian refutation of theodicy, which I will comment on more extensively in the next chapter.

3.7 Battle-Pieces: "Apathy and Enthusiasm" and the Pebbles

An abundance of recent political and historical readings often neglect the fact that Melville also explores the Civil War as a crisis of spirit as well as one of politics. Thematically, *Battle-Pieces* focuses on the traumatic realities of war. Specifically, many of its early poems depict the crisis of spirit among the Union troops after their initial defeats. These pieces dramatize the war of brother against brother as a crisis of religious faith, which, under the secularization narrative, seems almost anachronistic in the late 1860s. However, Melville introduces religious issues as they grow dynamically out of the more clearly visible crisis of conscience among the opposing armies. This historical tragedy has theological implications, though: Many of the early poems in the collection illustrate a hostile and deadly universe in which skepticism and inhumane behavior finds easy footing among all troops due to Satan's military presence on the battlefield. Accordingly, God here is frequently conceived of as the absent creator, even though His presence becomes reaffirmed in later pieces in the collection. It is therefore not surprising that *Battle-Pieces* evinces both formal and thematic borrowings from Biblical poetry, ranging from thematic allusions to stylistic devices such as antithesis and parallelism.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Beyond the Biblical stylistic influences I address here, Parker stresses Melville's indebtedness to English poets—Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, a.o.—as well as their methodological writings. "*Battle-Pieces*," he writes, "was very much [immersed] in British literary traditions, very obviously the product of a man steeped not only in British poetry of the previous three and a half centuries but also in their writings about that poetry in 'supplementary' essays" (*PP* 509).

In “Apathy and Enthusiasm,” for instance, the speaker alternates between skepticism and optimism as he tethers his assessment of the ethical viability of the war effort to the expectation of God’s perpetual presence as moral arbiter. He begins by invoking a wintry November scene; winter here is a multifarious symbol that invokes the annual cycle, the pragmatic military dimension of company morale and emotional detachment, as well as a deep-seated metaphysical skepticism. It is a November that signifies all of the pre-established symbols of a total spiritual desolation and ambiguity that first appeared in “The Encantadas”: The season is “clammy cold” and “the winter white and dead, / and the terror dumb with stupor, and the sky a sheet of lead” (*PP* 12.2-4). Melville (re-)introduces readers to both the hermetic, dumb whiteness—heavy with meaning yet impenetrable—that Ishmael meditated in the chapter “The Whiteness of the Whale,” as well as the omnipresent, symbolic grayness that permeated the scenes of *Benito Cereno* and infused that narrative with its epistemological ambiguity. Hypotaxis in the sentence structure, achieved through multiple ‘and’ conjunctions, makes the speaker appear boxed in by his own sense perception. He launches his assertions from the perspective of a soldier in camp as he muses over physical ailments and the absence of family and loved ones. The landscape, his interior life, as well as the sky above seem to entrap him. Like Job sitting in his ditch of ash, the soldier displays forbearance in the face of the sinister dual prospect of the harsh season and the uncertain outcome of the military campaign: “And the doubt on every side, / and the patience under gloom / In the stoniness that waits / The finality of doom” (*PP* 12.20-23). The season, now symbolically absorbing the soldier, eventually dies “despairing” (*PP* 13.24), as the only way forward is the enemy’s destruction or death. The soldiers had to abandon all hope of salvation and thus crossed the narrow of absolute despair. Yet it is precisely from the “tomb of Faith” that hope, and eventually victory, emerge (*PP* 13.27). The speaker’s optimism, clad in overt NT

resurrection imagery, grows organically and pathetically out of the changing of the seasons. The people of the now unified nation like the “springing of the grass” eventually “rebounded from dejection / After Easter came to pass,” and the invigorating power of recuperated life in Spring restores faith to the point of exuberant optimism (*PP* 13.28-31). Compared to this fervor, Satan—here in the NT guise of the military enemy of humanity—appears “but a dwarf” (*PP* 13.37).¹²⁸

3.8 Conclusion: What to Do with Job

Janis Stout ends her important essay review of Melville’s use of the Job story throughout his career by asserting that Melville found in Job’s story “an index of his progression from questioning to bitter defiance to resigned acceptance of the irrational necessity of evil” (82). Stout’s assessment conceives Job’s acceptance of divine mystery as begrudging admission rather than epiphany. Her reading of Melville’s reception of the text reiterates the tired narrative that Melville’s mind and creative faculties were subject to a steady decline that ultimately left him bitter and creatively barren. Stout constructs her account exclusively around Melville’s prose writings. The examples I have discussed in this chapter paint a more complex picture about the nature of Melville’s engagement with the Biblical text. Melville’s use of Biblical themes and style serves simultaneously as textual and historical basis, allegorical foil, and, most surprisingly, semantic register. Melville referenced the Book of Job frequently and consistently throughout his career, and its protagonist’s tragic heroism specifically informs Melville later poetry, particularly *Clarel*. Mere to list the various explicit and implicit ways Melville uses this source is virtually impossible outside of a stand-alone voluminous book project. Nevertheless, one particular theological phenomenon that Melville’s use of OT wisdom literature has authorized is the critical

¹²⁸ In his editorial notes on the poem, Robert C. Ryan observes that the even the phrase ‘come to pass’ connotes in biblical terms a providential turn of events as per prophetic testimony (*PP* 626).

renegotiation of NT enthusiasm and its mythologization in the context of the American market economy.

The Book of Job therefore does more than just allow us to chart a straight course from defiance to begrudging acceptance of cosmic suffering. It frames the way Melville talks about moral and intellectual integrity, the wisdom that comes from innocent suffering, and, the problem of theodicy. The moral question of Job, therefore, is not whether one may defy God or submit to Him—Ahab had already failed at deciding between these two equally impossibly hypotheticals—but rather how to maintain one’s intellectual integrity in a world riddled by unavoidable evil. It is in this sense that Melville’s aesthetic can be called radical.

One particular issue that is paramount in the Book of Job has been conspicuously absent from the previous discussion: the problem of evil as it appears in human beings. Besides Ecclesiastes, the Book of Job is the one OT text that openly considers the possibility of God’s authorship of human suffering. In the preceding chapter, I examined Melville’s depiction of this antinomian problem mostly from the perspective of the sufferer. It will be necessary in what follows to critically examine this perspective and re-evaluate instances in which Melville addresses the possibility of natural, inherent evil in human beings.

4 Proverbs and Practical Wisdom: “The Lightning-Rod Man,” “The Appel-Tree Table,” and *The Confidence-Man*

4.1 Introduction

Aphorisms are scattered throughout Melville’s poetry and prose. Although he was not as prone to it as Emerson, his characters frequently begin or end major discussions or contemplations with aphorisms. This is especially true, as we shall see, in *The Confidence-Man*. Wisdom aphorisms—or apothegm—occupy a prominent position in Melville’s stylistic arsenal. In contrast to the Book of Job, the Book of Proverbs is formally more obviously anthological as it does not include a prose plot. Within the anthological scheme of the OT, Proverbs is also rather prescriptive in its emphasis on various forms of order (social, moral, legal). Here as elsewhere, the origin of individual proverbs is difficult to establish, yet the tradition is attributed to Solomon, who is more directly invoked as a patron for wisdom in the book of Ecclesiastes about which I will speak in the following chapter. Theologian James Williams comments that the book constructs a moral outlook on the world that is built around the central pillar of distributive justice, the idea that God will punish the wicked and reward the good; as such, Proverbs confronts the individual with an “imperative of discipline and self-control” (265). And yet the pragmatic nature of its content associates the book with religious moral life in the world (cf. Prov. 1:33). To a large extent, its aphorisms are designed to help believers navigate the inconsistencies and paradoxes of sense perception (e.g., Prov. 17:28). As such, Proverbs transfers agency from the individual to the text. Even though they are not laws, they are mnemonic devices designed to offset the contingent moral grey areas of life.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ As with the other wisdom books, scholars agree that its anthological format precludes a singular unified authorship. Wheeler and Gabel consider proverbial wisdom as its own distinct literary genre that functions in opposition to what they consider the *belle lettres* tradition that operates within the Bible, for instance in the Book of

The book calls attention to language itself as an elementary particle of wisdom writing. In terms of form, proverbs may contain a variety of other literary devices such as riddles, puns, anecdotes and rhetorical questions. Williams points out that, as a semantic unit, “the proverb is the literary foundation of Wisdom poetry” (266). It presents “an ideal present which recurs constantly in accordance with a specific model of the world” (267). In doing so, however, wisdom, paradoxically, “has no systematic view of the human self, but the individual is seen as a complex order held in check and guided by wisdom” (Williams 265). The individual, as conceived of by the Biblical text, is a heterogenous assembly of dichotomous impulses that can only be harmonized by external authority. Put in positive terms, the book postulates a fundamentally orderly universe to which the individual must rise from its chaotic, pre-moral, internal disunity. Unfortunately for human beings, cosmic perfection is not achievable other than by means of a moral corset of revelation. What stands out in these considerations is, of course, that the individual is transformed into a mere negative space, a collection of destructive impulses, were it not for the civilizing effects of the wisdom text. In fact, personhood, as a cohesive experience of existing in the world, fundamentally depends upon the strength of the textual harness and its ability to contain the morally centrifugal forces that comprise human mental life.

Despite its apparently restrictive epistemology we would be mistaken in conceiving of Proverbial wisdom texts as a purely authoritative and didactic form of writing. And yet, there are

Job (4). More important than historical authorship however is the matter of internal (within the Bible) referentiality: Proverbs traditionally is considered subdivided into three sections, a general prologue by Lady Wisdom—a personification of the moral good that wisdom represents—attributed to Solomon (chs. 10-22:15); a passage of Solomonic wisdom as transcribed by Hezekiah (approx. 8th century B.C.E., Prov. 25-29); as well as several later appendices (30, 31). Solomon’s authorship is sometimes extended to the whole of Proverbs, as well as Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs and the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon. Yet his name is used as a laudatory moniker and as an invocation of patronship rather than as a serious declaration of authorship. Incidentally, Melville’s most famous direct reference to Solomon in the chapter 96 of *Moby-Dick*, “The Try-Works,” gestures ambivalently towards Solomonic authorship. I will discuss this further down.

many instances in the OT text in which moral didacticism clashes with formal dynamism. While it features the typical OT trope of parallelism, for instance, Proverbs also employs a variety of dynamic formal tropes such as intensification, narrative elements in poetic form and what Williams calls “metaphoric palsy” (273); this latter term expresses the complex relationship between individual elements, or “members,” within a single aphorism.¹³⁰ Many proverbs go beyond their typical admonitions to the foolish, those who actively try to forgo reproof and rebuke by wisdom as it is defined in the book’s many anecdotal scenarios (Prov. 15:10). But wisdom is not just a moral corrective but rather a universal principle that must be sought out and integrated into the activity of living in a contingent world. To fulfill this rather pragmatic function, the Biblical text depicts wisdom as both an abstract organizational principle and as personified goddess (Prov. 1-9). In its later form, Wisdom may directly impart her pragmatic commands but must forever compete for humanity’s attentions with her insidious seductive counterpart, foolishness. The narrative hyperbole of this conflict between the two goddesses alone illustrates the Book of Proverbs’s stylistic versatility; yet this base-line opposition gets fleshed out even further by a whole array of oppositional images such as the crooked and the straight path, the contrast between the mouth of folly and the wise and silent heart, or the formal difference between platitude and piety (Prov. 16:24).

If the Book of Proverbs conceives of the individual as a set of radical contingencies, its teleological function as text is to benignly reduce those contingencies. As can be expected, Melville is rather critical and sometimes even dismissive towards this dogmatic proposition. And yet there seems to be a strain within romanticism that allows a more flexible working out of this seemingly inflexible proposition of an outwardly imposed morality. After all, as Pricket reminds

¹³⁰ Especially metaphors are extremely flexible due to their Hebraic linguistic root; consequentially, many words in the Hebrew original do not refer to one singular image but point to whole image clusters (Williams 275).

us, European literary romanticism made its beginnings as a reading of the Bible as a “plurality of competing voices” rather than a dogmatically unified one (*Origins* 108). Considering this move in the context of the aforementioned epistemological argument of the Book of Proverbs, it marked a moment in which literary representation became concerned with the cost and bonds of individual freedom over against written doctrine. What should interest us in Melville’s dealings with the Book of Proverbs, then, are two things: on the content level, his evaluation of its potentially unifying moral influence over against the set of diametrically opposed forces that, according to the Biblical text, comprise human beings.¹³¹

More important here is his use of the literary form of the Biblical Proverb. This special usage is illuminated by the initial meeting between Taji and King Media in *Mardi* as an ironic meditation of Proverbial form and moral authority. On a meta-linguistic level, Melville contemplates the entanglement of form and morality. In the case of the scene I take up here, he uses the Proverb form to poke fun at the self-congratulatory power-mongering of divine rule on earth. Next, with the sketch of Hunilla in “The Encantadas,” I consider the way in which Melville uses Roman Catholic iconography to examine the so called reality-perception cleft, a central concern of wisdom literature in both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Subsequently, “The Lightning-Rod Man” (“LRM”) as well as “The Apple-Tree Table” (“ATT”) illustrate how individuals may deal with this cleft in communication with and revolt against various forms of authority. In *Clarel*, this issue of coping with the cleft is elevated by two characters’ dialog about the nature of the universe. The poem “Of Desert” continues the aforementioned short stories’ meditation to flesh out Melville’s version of what I have identified as the hermeneutics of

¹³¹ When taking Williams’s definition at face value, one may thus assume that Proverbial wisdom was anathema for Melville. On the contrary, Melville, as well as Emerson and Thoreau, frequently employ aphoristic thinking in their writings. In doing so, they perform the curious balancing act of invoking the dynamic formal properties of the proverbial tradition (riddles, rhetorical questions) while often contradicting the proverbial conception of the individual in need of moral correction.

contemplation. The sample from *John Marr's* sub-collection of “Pebbles” illustrates in the way “ATT” had done, the exchange of doctrine and the individual with the added caveat that Orm, the sailor and subject of the poem, rebels against a hidden, impersonal, and institutional doctrinism. By examining the final chapter of the *Confidence-Man*, I investigate Melville’s potentially subversive use of Proverbs 3:26 as the mantra of the ultimate confidence-man—in both the numerical and the evolutionary sense—the Cosmopolitan. Melville contrasts the Cosmopolitan’s professed literalism with the old believer’s doctrinal faith in order to examine the general usefulness of divine texts in interpersonal affairs.

4.2 Mardi’s King and Proverbial Wisdom

Having befriended the local sovereign Media, King of the islet Odo, Taji, who assumes the identity as a messenger of the gods, proceeds to describe the process of jurisprudence on Mardi (*M* 165). If Melville, according to his claims to his British publisher, was “only but begin[ning] to feel [his] hand” for metaphysical discussion with *Mardi*. As I showed in the previous chapter, he makes great strides toward nuanced characterization here. The novel contains several dense meditations on epistemology that rival some of *Moby-Dick's* more auspicious cetology chapters (*Correspondence* 99). The present chapter’s objective is to show that Taji uses Proverbial wisdom as a platform from which to launch his satirization of the process of jurisprudence on Mardi.¹³²

Taji’s status as a conman complicates this process of satirical commentary because he cannot claim moral superiority over against Media, who professes his divine bloodline. On the

¹³² On the significance of *Mardi* for Melville’s evolution as an author see Wenke (408). On the issue of creative self-fashioning by the narrator and author in *Typee*, see Sanborn “Purple” (130). On the implications of Melville’s early narrators’ assuming indigenous personas, see Banerjee (208). The structural, stylistic, and methodological (as it pertains to narrative style and hermeneutics) family resemblance between *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* is best seen in the aforementioned chapter 38, “The Sea on Fire” and Chapter 83, “Jonah Historically Regarded.”

contrary, Taji's arrival and self-professed divine origin intimately link him to the islands' sovereign. As such, the ironic undertone in Taji describes Media's rule not from a position of cultural superiority. On the contrary, he seems to nod knowingly to the would-be demigod; arguably he recognizes their kinship based on their respective duplicitousness. Both perform the role of divines. Accordingly, both may recognize the other as performer. Taji's pithy rhetoric suggests begrudging admiration for the demigod autocrat's ability to coax even himself into believing in his divine heritage. On the flip side, Taji's relationship with Media perpetuates his masquerade, particularly in those instances when he is unsure about the dictates of protocol (*M* 166). And it is in those same moments that Taji's description of Media become most critical. Although we must not equate Taji with the morally ambiguous narrator of *The Confidence-Man*—in Taji's case, the con-game represents a survival strategy amongst the 'savages'—examining his relationship to Media may tell us something about the way the novel depicts judgment in both the legal and the epistemological sense.¹³³

In the chapter "Belshazzar on the Bench," Taji describes Media holding court as a telling example for this phenomenon. This is particularly useful because Melville cloaks Taji's satire in the axiomatic language of the Book of Proverbs. Taji invokes the moral didacticism of the Book of Proverbs presents a sharp contrast to the outright sarcastic tone with which he depicts Media's jurisprudence. Media "don[s] his symbols of state; and sit[s] on his judgment divan or throne, to hear and try all causes brought before him, and fulminate his royal decrees" (*M* 182). Media, "looks very much like a god" when seated on his divan, and Taji even places Media within a genealogy of Biblical kings such as Nimrod and Darius and judges (*M* 182, emphasis added). Yet

¹³³ When the narrator is first introduced to the chieftains of Mardi, he actually hesitates for a moment before deciding to continue the charade of portraying Taji: "The regal bearing of these personages, the deference paid them, and their entire self-possession, not a little surprised me. And it seemed preposterous, to assume a divine dignity in the presence of these undoubted potentates of *terra firma*. Taji seemed oozing from my fingers' ends. But courage! and erecting my crest, I strove to look every inch the character I had determined to assume" (165).

the scene seems comic because Media's jurisdiction does in fact not have genealogical legitimation but rather stems from the spectacle he presents. Even from a Lockean democratic vantage point, which Taji—being an American—implicitly represents, Media's right to rule seems absurdly based on the image he presents rather than on the quality of his rulings. Indeed, this spectacle is so powerful that it radiates out from Media and influences the way Taji describes the rest of the scenery: Media's parlor obtains regal attributes as Taji begins to ruminate on the moral aesthetics of the king on his throne. "This divan," Taji finds, "was elevated at one end of a spacious arbor, formed by an avenue of regal palms, which in brave state, held aloft their majestic canopy" (*M* 182). And he proceeds to facetiously defend the moral integrity of his *tableau vivant*: "[F]or all the rant of your democrats," Taji jokes that the visual alone leaves little doubt about superiority of monarchy over against democracy in its ability to facilitate justice via its judiciary system; after all, "a fine king on a throne is a very fine sight to behold" (*M* 182). The circular reasoning behind this whimsical aphorism illustrates the ironic distance Taji attempts to place between himself and Media, as does the mock eulogy that follows.

When Media holds court, Taji delivers an exaggerated, blank-verse ode about the merits of "a king on his throne!" based on the Biblical Proverb (*M* 183); and it is here that the scene attains a differentiated exegetical quality:

A king on his throne! It is Jupiter nodding in the councils of Olympus; Satan, seen among the coronets in Hell.

A king on his throne! It is the sun over a mountain; the sun over lawgiving Sinai; the sun in our system: planets, duke-like, dancing attendance, and baronial satellites in waiting.

A king on his throne! After all, but a gentleman seated.
And thus sat the good lord, King Media. (*M* 183)

Taji here reads the anaphora "a king on his throne" metaphorically and contemplates all possible personages to which it may apply. His list consists of what might be called moral and spacial

binaries of jurisprudence: Jupiter and Satan as well as the sun and Mount Sinai, from which Moses derived the commandments. Yet Taji's central anaphora paraphrases Prov. 20:8: "A king that sitteth on his throne of judgment scattereth away all evil with his eyes." In his description, however, Taji emphasizes the first part of the Biblical verse while seemingly ignoring the latter. Media's gaze does not dispel evil but selfishly seeks out and punishes those who would pose a threat to his power. By having Taji list various metaphorical readings of the Biblical passage, Melville thus satirizes a literalist reading of the proverb. The Biblical poet meditates upon the possibility of human justice as it must be manifested in a judge or ruler. When occupying his seat of power in order to judge his subjects, a king must harmonize right thinking and right action under the banner of wisdom and intellectual integrity in order to subsequently project these ethical values to his subordinates. The proverb thus purports that to rule justly is to strike a delicate balance between multiplicities of contending motivations, not all of them ethical. A king must mediate between these multifarious motivations and only that king presents a sublime image when seated on his throne, an image that is simultaneously ethical and aesthetic.

In the previous chapter, I pointed to several instances in which Melville explored this connection of ethics and aesthetics. It seems unsurprising he would build this short chapter in what was to be his first metaphysical novel on this semantically dense proverb. *Mardi*, then, presents a distorted version of the Biblical Proverbial ideal, as the image of the king on his throne is emptied out of content and becomes pure form. For one, Media spends more time standing on ceremony than weighing the pleas of his subjects, as becomes clear from one incident in which he incessantly asks a petitioner to kneel before hearing their plea (*M* 183, 184). But the Book of Proverbs has other things to say about the burden of rule. Prov. 20:6 speaks of the need for integrity for regular men in all their personal judgments, while 25:2 differentiates

between God's sovereign right to remain aloof of human reasoning and a king's duty to be inquisitive in seeking out justice and weighing human affairs. Beyond that Prov. 31.4-5 forbids a king to drink wine so as to not impart his ability to rule fairly. Melville may have been thinking of this passage in Proverbs when he has Media declare himself the embodiment of justice seated at a comfortable distance from the meddling crowd and its incessant need for rational verdicts:

And as Justice, in ideal, is ever painted high lifted above the crowd; so, from the exaltation of his rank, an honest king is the best of those uncial judges, which individually are better than twelve. And therefore am I, King Media, the best judge in this land. (*M* 185)

For Christian readers, the scene would invoke associations with papal infallibility that is based on episcopal succession. And indeed, Media thinks of himself as infallible when seated on his throne, again emphasizing rather selectively the first part of the Proverb, which Taji quotes verbatim while ignoring the moral obligations that arise from the burden of rule. In this sense, what is at stake for Melville, here, is more than mere social satire.

Recalling another case, Taji points out how his lord sits "judge and jury upon" one who plotted to overthrow him (*M* 183). This constellation of accuser, accused, and judge violates Enlightenment sensibilities about due process and public sovereignty. In "An Essay on Civil Government" (1689-90) John Locke proposes that judicial authority is derived from the public will and thus fundamentally depends upon the suspension of personal interest from the process of jurisprudence in a court of law.¹³⁴ In a sardonic turn, Media never hides his bias and fully acknowledges that the object of his verdicts is not justice but the preservation of power. He considers any attempt at diversifying authority an insurrection. "Jiromo [the defendant insurgent] was a rebel," he explains to Jiromo's advocates; "Had I tried him by his peers, I had tried him by

¹³⁴ Cf. Locke's rationale for forming impartial courts states that it is "unreasonable for Men to be Judges in their own Cases, that Self-love will make Men partial to themselves and their Friends. And, on the other side, that ill Nature, Passion and Revenge will carry them too far in pursuing others" (262).

rebels; and the rebel had rebelled to some purpose” (*M* 183). Taji sardonically eulogizes these instances of comedic circular reasoning. Media is the sovereign who openly considers his citizens enemies. And Taji is quick to observe how this form of rule impacts communal life on Odo.

Ventriloquizing Media, Taji apes Media’s critics as “muttering some wild jargon about ‘bulwarks’ [. . .] ‘safeguards,’ ‘noble charters,’ ‘shields,’ and ‘pladiums,’” all references to the *Magna Carta* (*M* 183). Next to the earlier reference to Lockean democracy this instance references a form of jurisprudence, one that values due process. Melville contrasts two distinct legal traditions: Christian monarchy based on the theocratic image of a divine autocratic legal arbiter and the Early Modern democratic tradition, here represented by the petitioners.¹³⁵

Unsurprisingly, Media’s ultimate rejection of the petition for a democratic court that would consist of twelve judges for civil cases proceeds as an argument from a final Judgment Day. He claims that

an unerring justice dwells in a unity, and as one judge will at *last judge the world* beyond appeal; so—though often here below justice be hard to attain—does man come nearest the mark, when he imitates that model divine. Hence, one judge is better than twelve [. . .] so, from exaltation of his rank, an honest king is the best of those unical judges. (*M* 185, emphasis added)

By misreading nominal accord for practical correlation, Media resolves the argument by distorting the idealized unity of principle in judgment as per Prov. 20 to mean the arbitrary rule of one. Beyond Media’s comedic rejection of Enlightenment principles, however, the petitioners’ failed demands also recount Biblical history by invoking the transition of judicial power from OT lawgivers (beginning with Moses) to individual monarchs. Media mobilizes both the divine right to rule and the connotation of papal infallibility, based on NT theology, to justify his rule.

¹³⁵ Besides establishing other legal principles, the *Magna Carta* first granted the right to *habeas corpus* to the landed gentry of England.

As he would do with “Bartleby” later on in his career, Melville here argues against the utilitarian reading of NT theology that he finds prone to usurpation and charlatanism. As such, the chapter illustrates how Enlightenment humanism is turned upside down to produce the grand yet hollow OT image of the godking on his throne. As Odo’s sovereign, Media justifies his rulings with a mix of whim and aphoristic pseudo-wisdom. His status as demigod king makes him the link between divine and human epistemologies. Yet his denial of rationalism and ineptness in the disciplines of knowledge reveal him to be comically ill-suited for the job. Thus cut off from all remnants of transcendental respectability, he pursues the only avenue open to him to assert his rule, brute force (*M* 185).¹³⁶

Media’s and Taji’s relationship symbolizes two competing epistemologies in the novel, the rational empiricism and the whimsical supernaturalism. Dillingham observes that in *Mardi* any attempt at understanding the world is “based principally on the assumption that reality is not static but dynamic and thus ultimately unknowable” (*Artist* 4). As a result, social relations in the novel are informed by the way characters solve the problem of contingency. According to this view, Taji’s ultimate decision to accept nothing less than the ideal at the end of the novel, his “stubborn but courageous blindness,” as Dillingham has it, does not constitute an independently motivated epistemology but a reaction to the implications of Media’s rule as we find it described in “Belshazzar on the Bench” (*Artist* 6). Indeed, the social system formed by those living under Media’s rule reflects his epistemology: Odo, the main island of the group surrounding Mardi, is a segregated society in which the “higher classes” live scattered yet visible around the island, while “serfs, Helots, war-captives held in bondage lived in secret places, hard to find” (*M* 853). Media’s jovial ignorance parodies the very divine dispensary justice he proposes to uphold.

¹³⁶ Melville must have in mind the twelve generations of “judges” (divinely inspired leaders) who ruled Israel prior to the adoption of monarchy with David. Cf. 1 Samuel 10:24, “And all the people shouted, and said, God save the king.”

Melville frequently asserts through his various speakers that these two realms are incompatible. Babbalanja, the contentious poet philosopher of Media's court, points out this fact in a litany of deliberations. In fact, his main function, stylistically, seems to consist in disrupting Media's claims to the regularity his rule may bestow on reality and personhood. In one such instance, Babbalanja categorically denies the possibility of synchronizing human and divine behavior, let alone find any consistency in human behavior. He argues, "[. . .] the sum of my inconsistencies makes up my consistency. And to be consistent to one's self, is often to be inconsistent to Mardi" (459). If consistency in itself means unified self-perception, Babbalanja claims, then consistency is meaningless. This premise, however, invalidates the whole basis of Media's rule. As such, Media seems expandable as far as his significance for the subsistence of Odo's social order is concerned, at least when seen through the subversive lenses of Babbalanja.¹³⁷

In this instance, Babbalanja's vision seems complicit with Taji's assertions about the king on his throne, earlier in the novel. The conflict on Odo is not between autocracy and anarchy. Taji's narrative perspective of the conman indicates that there is no such choice because the stable, unified legal order that Media touts does not exist to begin with and therefore cannot subsist as parody indefinitely. Taji hints at this fact by reporting the presence of insurgents on the island. Beyond that, the chapter title tellingly refers to Media as "Belshazza," the Biblical king to whom the prophet Daniel showed that the writing on the wall concerned the doom of his reign. Seen from Taji's and Babbalanja's angle, then, Media's rule was always a mockery of the concept of unity and consistency to begin with.

¹³⁷ Wright notes that Babbalanja and Badianna's *Ponderings* is a quasi-Solomonic wisdom book that includes "discourses on many Solomonic subjects: the superficiality of fame, the finality of death, the authority of reason" (*Use* 98). In opposing such wisdom through his constant quarrels with Babbalanja, Media is as a voice antithetical to wisdom.

Ellen Suzuki observes how the novel continues the line of critical inquiry for the origins of religion that began in *Typee* and *Omoo* (382). In all three novels, Suzuki argues, “[. . .] Melville maps out the way in which this myth-making idealism transforms the material into the allegorical and the real into the ideal” (382). Yet Taji’s invocation of Proverbial wisdom in this chapter seems to mount a contrary argument. Literal, rather than metaphorical, readings of reality must be overcome in order to arrive at a form of justice that is worthy of its name. And wisdom literature seems to suggest as much.

Later in the novel, Taji’s Neo-Platonic musings about the relative role time plays in any ventures of creation, divine or humane, seem to confirm this impression:

For we are not gods and creators; and the controversialists have debated, whether indeed the All-Plastic Power itself can do more than mold. In all the universe is but one original; and the very suns must to their source for their fire; and we Prometheuses must to them for ours; which, when had, only perpetual Vestal tending will keep alive. (*M* 229)

Taji attacks the so-called controversialists (read: ‘clergy’ and their opponents, the so-called infidels and deists) on their deliberations about the reality-constituting powers of God. In doing so, he echoes eighteenth-century deist objections against the argument from design. Taji here reflects on whether God can provide what Puritans called special providence, and thus influence human free will. The implications of God being able to do little more than mold rather than create are cosmic and depressing. Therefore, all that human beings, even of the heroic Promethean stripe, can do is tend the vestal fires of their personal faith by following their own intuition.

Taji thus presents Media’s rationale for judging others as a violation and mockery of the OT wisdom text. Media’s arbitrary and whimsical rulings not only invalidate Taji’s expectations for benign dispensary justice, based on the concomitant promises of due process and causal

reasoning, but his verdicts also justify Media's rule by misreading the NT millennial promise of a unified final judgment of the world. Media, of course, remains ignorant of this rather overt critique of his rule. Enjoying the regalia of power and status as he rules over the islands with a disposition residing somewhere between *laissez faire* and tyranny. His brute anti-intellectualism informs his literalist hermeneutics and epistemology against which Taji, and arguably Melville, speak out.

4.3 The Burnt-Over District and the Pisgah View in "The Encantadas"

Similar to Taji's critique of authoritarian jurisprudence, the sketches collected as "The Encantadas" also comment on the state of contemporary American spiritualism. Fisher notes how "Melville refers to it as 'yonder Burnt District,' using the same metaphor that referred to areas swept by the fervor of evangelical revival [. . .], the metaphor simultaneously implying holiness and hellfire" (34). These and other overt references indicate the sketch series' allegorical implications for contemporary American theology. In the period prior to his own venture to the Holy Land, Melville was certainly aware of the increasing influx of skeptical hermeneutics on the Biblical text. He was, after all, familiar with at least some of the German scholarship on Biblical criticism. And while he appreciated its intellectual earnestness, he begrudged the undeceiving effect German higher criticism exerted over personal faith.

Three years after "The Encantadas" had been published, Melville began his journey to the Middle East via England. And even though *Clarel* encapsulates many of his impressions and confusions about what he found on his visit of the Biblical sights, Melville's journal echoes poignantly if polemically, the epistemological admonitions of "The Encantadas." On his way to Smyrna he notes on February 5, [h]eartily wish Niebuhr and Strauss to the dogs. — The deuce take their penetration & acumen. They have robbed us of the bloom. If they have undeceived any

one—no thanks to them. Pity that ecclesiastical countries so little attractive by nature.—

(*Journals* 97).¹³⁸ I will have more to say about this passage when I discuss *Clarel* in more detail.

For the moment, I only wish to point out the peculiar contrasts and similarities between the narrator of the sketches' equilibrated epistemology and the unruly pilgrim's (Melville's) gruff snide of higher criticism. Although Melville's comment here seems spiteful, he conveys the same sentiment, as does the narrator: truth-seeking may adversely affect personal faith, but intellectual integrity demands that one confront both amicable and uncomfortable truths. According to his *Journals*, Melville seems to struggle with adhering to the second part of his narrator's proverb. And despite the intellectual earnestness he displays in acknowledging Niebuhr's and Strauß's methodological thoroughness, their findings make it increasingly difficult for a discerning mind such as his to maintain the balance between reason and romantic mysticism.

In both his short fiction and *Journals*, Melville hits on a central problem within the debates about Biblical criticism that had begun to gain momentum on both sides of the Atlantic in the early nineteenth century. As I showed in Chapter 1, the introduction of historicist as well as literary methodology to Bible studies produced multilateral debates between pious defenders, rationalists with irenic designs, and skeptics. Diego Lucci points to Spinoza's differentiation of theology and philosophy and his assertion of the Bible's imaginative style in the province of ethics rather than history or science (39), as well as to Thomas Hobbes's comments on the connection between politics and religion (43). Deists in particular sought to wrest away political power from the clergy, and thus utilized the new methodology to illustrate that the Bible was only inspired insofar as its message coincided with natural religion, the inherent moral

¹³⁸ The reference here is to Barthold Georg Niebuhr, whose *Roman History* Melville knew, as well as David Friedrich Strauß, whose *Leben Jesu* (Life of Jesus) I have mentioned before. See also Sealts, *Reading* (122). John Kitto's *Cyclopedia* references Niebuhr in several entries, among which is "Arabia," which Melville may have consulted prior to his trip.

predisposition in human beings. Lucci attests a strategic interest in Biblical exegesis. “[T]he deists,” he argues “devoted themselves to Biblical exegesis in order to reduce the importance of religion in social and political life and [. . .] to assert freedom of thought and promote the free search for truth” (Lucci 44). Suffice it to say that the emergent discipline of historical scholarship had established the Bible’s anthological character as well as its linguistic fluctuations in its various translations. The deists regarded the Bible as a text like any other with its inconsistencies resulting from composite authorship and textual corruption introduced over time by numerous translations. These new views jeopardized the doctrine of verbal and plenary inspiration. Hence debates ensued about authorship—prominently the OT Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch—and about whether inspiration applied directly to the words, the authors, and the overall composition of the Bible or was merely a fabrication dependent on individual readers. On the side of orthodoxy, the new methods were initially adopted because scholars expected to confirm and ideologically strengthen doctrine by basing it on empirical data.

However, as the debate commenced eroding Biblical authority, orthodox commentators began to stress the need for learned interpretation when dealing with a dense metaphorical text such as the Bible and even inadvertently began to invalidate the book’s authority in order to transfer power to the clergy. Catholic commentator Richard Simon, for instance, “recommended studying the works of the Fathers of the Church and other ancient writings, approved by the Catholic Church, in order to understand Scripture” (Lucci 49). Even though German Higher Criticism did not find secure footing in American seminaries, its tenets presented problems that American Christians could not ignore. Melville addresses some of these issues in “The Encantadas.” Stephen G. Bullfinch, for example, had reviewed Strauß’s *Life of Jesus* in the *Christian Examiner* in 1846. The essay, entitled “Strauß’s *Life of Jesus*—Mystic Theory”

prefigures, although in a more pensive mood, Melville's personal apprehensions about the strict separation of empirical historical fact and theological mysticism: "Truly, if the caput mortem of Christianity which mysticism leaves us, be all that is true of our religion, our feelings would tempt us to forgive the Evangelists who have so beautifully deceived rather than the critics who so coldly disenchant us" (qtd. in Brown 141).¹³⁹ In front of this historical backdrop the equilibrium Melville's narrator advocates that which Melville himself struggles to uphold is indicative of the larger discussion about Biblical criticism raging in Europe and New England at the time. Melville would revisit this topic in "The Apple-Tree Table," a story published several years later in 1856, yet arguably conceived around the same time Melville drafted "The Encantadas." The tortoises also symbolically encapsulate the only feasible attitude one can assume in the face of a desentimentalized and secularized world history, "dateless, indefinite endurance" (*PT* 131).

Marvin Fisher proposes that what he calls the "Pisgah principle summarizes the appearance-reality debate and characterizes the world of natural facts and human relationships as a series of concealments, deceits, implicit contrasts, surprising connections, and inherent contradictions" (34). The Pisgah view is first introduced in sketch four and refers to the view from Rock Rodondo. The utility of the term lies in its acknowledgment of a rift between reality and the vista upon reality. While this is certainly useful, the original context, as well as Melville's supposed application, appears more allegorical than Fisher acknowledges. Deuteronomy 34 depicts Moses who dies in plain sight of the Promised Land and is buried in an unmarked grave.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Bulfinch's review appeared in *The Christian Examiner* 39 (1846): 145-69.

¹⁴⁰ "And Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto the mountain of Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, that is over against Jericho. And the LORD shewed him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan, / [. . .] And the LORD said unto him, This land which I swear unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy seed: I have

The sublime vista is not only split in terms of Moses' material situation—being at a physical distance from the land of milk and honey—but also because of the premise that he cannot bridge the rift between actual and aspired location as per God's decree. God's agency in precluding Moses from traveling to the Promised Land, despite his explicitly stated virility, recalls the Joban paradigm of divine unknowableness. What is at stake in this scene, from an epistemological standpoint, as well as in Melville's rendering of it, however, is not only acknowledging the rift between material and imagined reality but also the potentiality of overcoming the difference between these two positions. While Fisher correctly points out that “[I]n Melville's hands the Pisgah principle summarizes the appearance-reality debate and characterizes the world of natural facts and human relationships as a series of concealments, deceits, implicit contrasts, surprising connections, and inherent contradictions,” these concealments, as per Deuteronomy, are not random occurrences but take place in an OT ontological context (Fisher 34).¹⁴¹ Melville, I argue, uncovers this inherent quality of the Pisgah view in sketch nine.

When meditating on the sudden death of her family, Hunilla experiences the horrific event as “trance-like [. . .] mild pictorial effect” of the scene that simultaneously paralyzes and condemns her to “sit thus dumb, in stupor staring on that dumb show, for all that otherwise might be done” (*PT* 154). Her physical remove, obscured vision, and consequent inability to aid the two drowning men give the scene its impressionist melancholy. Even if she were to stretch out her “enchanted” arms, she could not reach the “four fated ones” (*PT* 154). And while her

caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither. / So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. / And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day. / And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated” (Deut. 34:1-5).

¹⁴¹ According to Fisher, “‘The Encantadas’ foreshadows the diptychs and constitutes Melville’s first fully conscious attempt to link Paradise and Tartarus in a transcendent idonological dichotomy” (35). Fisher thus argues that Melville negotiates the problem of Pisgah in his heuristic experimentation. I would add that this also applies to his use of OT lore to construct his worlds.

paralysis precludes her from drowning as well, material reality in this sketch assumes the attributes of contrivance as “the real woe of this event passed before her sight as some sham tragedy on the stage” as she looks on through the “oval frame” of leaves, “through which the bluey boundless sea rolled like a painted one” (*PT* 154).¹⁴² Melville records the transformation of reality into artifice, of action into play. What is at stake, if we were to apply the Pisgah principle, is the rift between Hunilla’s contemplative position and the tragic events that occur at sea. However, the effect of the scene is only partially predicated on the rift between locations or the fact that a horrible scene is defamiliarized by way of picturesque framing. The OT materials yields another aspect of Pisgah that Melville picks up on. Hunilla looks on as

the invisible painter painted to her view the wave-tossed and disjointed raft, its once level logs slantingly upheaved [. . .] the four struggling arms undistinguishable among them; and then all subsided into smooth-flowing creamy waves [. . .] death in a silent picture; a dream of the eye; such vanishing shapes as the mirage shows. (emphasis added, *PT* 154)

While Melville does address the reality-perception cleft here, there is also the assertion of invisible agency behind the dramatic framing of the natural scene. The point emphasized does not seem to be the event itself but rather the intentional staging of it in a way that is diametrically opposed to its content. Hunilla watches in silence as nature rolls on in the face of her family’s turmoil. In an odd stylistic choice, Melville duplicates the noun “painter” in the adjacent verb, thereby drawing attention to the conspicuous presence of an unseen agent behind the natural forces. Yet the narrator here is no Ahab. While he does tacitly hint at a mutual liability between Heaven (God) and believers—again, the Joban paradigm per excellence—he immediately asserts that “they cannot break faith who never plighted it” thereby acquitting “the painter” from any fault in the matter (*PT* 155). Whether Melville had more explicit accusations against God in his

¹⁴² In “Benito Cereno” (appearing in *Putnam’s* in 1855), Melville explores this idea further. Amaso Delano, although not struck by melancholy, finds himself equally epistemologically overtaxed by the scene he beholds aboard the *San Dominick*.

original draft is unclear.¹⁴³ What is also clear, however, is that we are not dealing with a state of mere disinterested “variant perception” as Fisher would have it (39), nor is this merely a world ruled by evil as a “supra-human, semi-environmental force” (Newbery 50). Possible editorial revisions notwithstanding, the implied divine agency behind the scene combined with the briefly indicated, mutual contractual obligation between God and his creatures, suggests conspicuous divine presence. Again, the narrator does not go to the length of monological accusation of Ahab, although this would not be out of character given his later incursions. However, he does invoke a covenantal logic that is grounded in the Deuteronomy passage quoted above and extrapolated in the Book of Job. This God afflicts yet He keeps His distance. No theophany occurs for Hunilla beyond the perceived artistic framing of her family’s death.

4.4 Evening the Playing Field: “The Lightning-Rod Man” and Melville’s Equation of Religious and Scientific Fear Mongering

Proverbial wisdom for Melville did not merely constitute reinforcing repressive traditional moral maxims. While in previous discussions of *Mardi* I suggested a satirical approach to this issue, that approach is by no means universally valid with all of Melville’s writing. On the contrary, Melville does employ aphoristic wisdom in other, more straightforward, historicizing ways. In “The Lightning-Rod Man” (1854) satire does not constitute the story’s essence, even if it does characterize key sequences in the characters’ dialog. In actuality, the story extrapolates an epistemological problem, the nature of thunderstorms, in a dialogical discussion between two characters representing two distinct epistemological methodologies: scientism and religion. The ensuing quarrel allegorizes the ideological conflict between these

¹⁴³ Fisher reads the sketch as criticism of Christianity and speculates that Melville’s remarks were more scathing in his original draft but were scaled back in vehemence by his editor, Charles Briggs, to “shield tender sensibilities from the troubling themes of a literary heretic” (44).

discrete epistemologies. What has been an afterthought in critical discussion, however, is the way the story traces the rhetoric of these seemingly oppositional vantage points back to a common historical root.¹⁴⁴ The fact that the difference between these two systems of perceiving the world runs only skin deep and suggests that they are, on a crucial level, mutually translatable. This fact does not make Melville beam with transcendentalist idealism. On the contrary, the story illustrates the costs and consequences of synchronic thinking that shuts itself off from its own intellectual history. Melville therefore works to expose the naturalization of the authority Franklinian science gained in the Early Republic. This naturalization shrouds the similarities between empiricist and religious frames of reference while bestowing on scientism a quasi-mythological power to safeguard those who believe in its universal efficacy as preached by the salesman.¹⁴⁵

As with “Bartleby” or “The Apple-Tree Table,” the latter of which I discuss below, Melville wrote his salesman story not in an intellectual vacuum but drew on a pre-existing genre of what may be called ‘thunder-storm’ narratives. A famous example is Cotton Mather’s reflections on thunderstorms as being part of God’s special providence in *Magnalia Christi Americana*, which the Pittsfield Library Association had newly acquired just months before

¹⁴⁴ “The Lightning-Rod Man” is part of what I will call the ‘domestic trilogy’ of short stories, which includes “The Apple-Tree Table” (1856) and “I, and My Chimney” (1856). Several critics argue that the stories feature the same protagonist/narrator. For a contrary view, see Dillingham, *Melville’s Short* (349). The short-story form yields greater thematic focus. As I show above, Melville utilized the stylistic device of the agon in *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Clarel*. The short-fiction format allows Melville to extrapolate the issues at stake here without having to develop complex characters or multiplying and thereby compounding their philosophical positions by having them engage in multiple discussions. These characteristics set “The Lightning-Rod Man” apart from the more congenial domestic settings of later pieces, such as “The Apple-Tree Table,” in which the narrator plays comically off his potentate wife. Yet it also is distinct from the historicizing narrative voice of the explicitly epistemology-centered *Benito Cereno*.

¹⁴⁵ I use the term ‘ideology’ in the Althusserian sense of subject interpellation. An ideological reading would likely argue that Melville explores the inevitable violent eruption that ensues resulting in two ideological subjects confronting one another. However, I am only tangentially interested in this line of reasoning here.

Melville published the story.¹⁴⁶ But Melville's story also exists in a contemporary tradition of short fiction that negotiates the individual's role in an empiricist universe. Philip Coleman, while not mentioning "The Lightning-Rod Man," places Poe's Dupin Tales and *Eurika* as well as Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" in that same category. Yet Coleman maintains that "the short story emerged in the nineteenth century as one of the most effective literary forms for examining the relationship between science and the self and their examinations of the ethical and existential consequences of scientific research have provided important examples for a number of contemporary American writers of short fiction" (176).

One of Melville's direct literary predecessors, William Cullen Bryant, in an ill-fated attempt at breaking into the fledgling short-prose business at a time when Irving dominated the genre, wrote a story surprisingly similar to Melville's about the catastrophic effects of the phenomenon and its possible providential readings, in "The Whirlwind" (1825): After losing his family in the storm, a boy, given over into the care of a Baptist minister, decides to become a traveling preacher. On a country road, the preacher meets the narrator and shares his life's story with his fellow traveller. As with Melville's story, the structure of Bryant's piece is dialogical, although the majority of the story is told from the preacher's perspective. In contrast, "The Lightning-Rod Man" tells the story of a salesman who visits the narrator's house during a thunderstorm to peddle his wares. Upon gaining entry to the narrator's house, the salesman begins to commandeer the narrator in his own home, spouting a plethora of behavioral maxims about how to protect himself from the potentially harmful effects of the storm. The narrator's initially jovial forbearance towards the salesman's increasingly commandeering tone quickly turns into indignation, when the salesman accuses him of impiety. Eventually, the beleaguered

¹⁴⁶ In his editorial notes to the Northwestern edition, Parker actually reads the salesman's voice as echoing Mather's in his demand to make peace with God in the face of the impending storm; i.e., God's wrath (*PT* 598).

narrator snaps the salesman's rod in half and violently casts him out into the street. The story's minimalist, domestic setting enhances the focus on dialogical structure, also compared to Bryant's text to which I will return in a moment.

The polarity of the viewpoints of science and religion that the story supposedly purports has been the platform for most critical responses to the text. What I propose in the way of revising the academic narrative is that the story may be more fruitfully historicized in the intellectual evidentialist style that had transformed religious sensibilities in Europe as well as in the United States since the early eighteenth century. Such contextualization would enable critics to forego the contrived binary of allegorical versus historical readings and allow them to ask more interesting questions about the cross-pollination between the discursive fields of science, commerce, and religion.¹⁴⁷ By examining Melville's story through this lens, we may find that these are not discrete conversations after all. In fact, all three conversations mutually impact each another in the way that they utilize evidence and deploy rhetoric: A salesman may use sermonic elements in his pitch, while a minister may adapt his sermon to 'market' sensibilities of his congregation. These overlaps raise questions about the interdependencies of rhetoric and religious symbolism in the science discourse of the antebellum period; most importantly, though, they open up the salesman's dialog to categorical analysis as to its homiletic and theological qualities. If this is so, the narrator's religious indignation to the salesman's proposition is not unwarranted but a response to the formal religious underpinnings of the salesman's argument.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ In the context of the current disciplinary debates about religion as a subject of literary criticism, "The Lightning-Rod Man" may conceivably be read as a methodological meta-commentary in the context of what Kaufman calls the secularization narrative within literary studies ("The Religious" 609). Kaufman sees motivated by the insistence of literary theory to segregate the religious and the secular rather than dealing with its hybrid forms. See also my general introduction.

¹⁴⁸ Both orthodox and liberal ministers were intimately aware of these trends, and evinced by their methodological conversations about the practice of extemporaneous preaching across denominational lines (Coleman 37-39). Francis Parkman, for instance, argued that "Rational Christianity addresses itself to the Heart" (qtd. in Coleman 32). Ultimately, there is no discontinuity between the narrator's and the lightning-rod man's

4.4.1 *The Evidentialist Thrust*

Compared to “The Lightning-Rod Man,” many of Melville’s other narrators are characterized by a placid dreaminess (Ishmael and Pierre) or even youthful naiveté (White-Jacket and Redburn). Even the hen-pecked husband of “I, and My Chimney,” while being given to his grumblings, never displays violent inclinations. I argue that the narrator seeks to salvage the mystical symbolism found in nature against the encroachment of secular empiricism by exposing scientism’s indebtedness to the mysticist tradition.

Many readers misconstrue the conflict between religion and scientism that the story uses as its allegorical basis as amounting to a conflict between mysticism and rationalism. Melville playfully juxtaposes these two word pairs throughout the story:

[. . .] Tell me at once, which is, in your opinion, the safest part of this house?
 [narrator]
 ‘This room, and this one spot in it where I stand. Come hither.’ [salesman]
 ‘The reason first.’
 ‘Hark!—after the flash the gust—the sashes shiver—the house, the house!—
 Come hither to me!’
 ‘The reasons, if you please.’
 ‘Come hither to me!’ (*PT* 122)

The salesman’s alarmist adjurations—as well as his running commentary of the thunderstorm’s noises—are contrasted by the jovial house-owner’s demand for these commands to be grounded in (pun intended) rational proof. Even though it is the narrator who ultimately introduces notions of religiosity into the conversation, he bases these sentiments on a long-established tradition of Baconian evidentialist theology, an epistemology that ultimately assumes the symbiotic unity of religious and scientific truths (Holifield 185). Sean Silver observes that Cotton Mather, whose

argument. As Fisher observes, the lightning-rod man is “so dependent on a God of awful wrath, is peddling an old-fashioned product, but science and the rhetoric of rationalism have provided him with a more up-to-date and attractive package, a new pitch for the fear and superstition of the past” (119).

dissertations on lightning are referenced in the story as well, was himself tied to this new intellectual style and thus worked at the intersection of two theological traditions. Yet Silver mistakenly assumes that empiricism was disruptive to theological thought. Doing so, he merely reinforces the false binary that has plagued the reception of Melville's story. To reiterate, empiricism had at the latest gained entry as a valid analytical category of inquiry since English deism had begun to make inroads into theology in the 1720s. By the 1830s, American religious orthodoxy had adopted evidentialism as a mode of theological argumentation. Silver does acknowledge that Mather assumed a "basic correspondence between physical and the moral world," but deems this somehow oppositional to religiously orthodox positions (17). Meanwhile, the salesman's incessant demands for adopting his—the supposedly secular and scientific—method of evaluating danger to the narrator represents a fragmenting of this unified image of scientific exploration in the service of religious faith. The problem is not, as Allan Moore Emery would have it, that, "an unreliable science has become his [the salesman's] religion," but rather that the salesman believes that scientific empiricism has exclusive purchase upon rationalism and thus enjoys primacy amongst the epistemological strategies humans use to know the world (568).¹⁴⁹

The salesman begins by employing evidentialist logic and empiricist techniques in peddling his wares. He compiles a veritable taxonomy of the different kinds of lightning and thunder, computing its distance in time and space as well as its sound and tactile force (*PT* 121). But much like Ishmael's cetology, systemizing the thing dreaded does not render it harmless. On

¹⁴⁹ Silver reminds us that Mather was not an obstinately orthodox disciple of an antiquated theology but "the first major American Puritan to grapple significantly with the implications of medical science for Protestant theology"; as such he helped redirect the whole Protestant project (Silver 15). Unfortunately, Silver proceeds to situate both Mather and Melville in the now standard narrative of religious decline in Early Republican culture. As I show above, the case is by no means that simple. In fact, it was a very active (albeit cultural rather than theological) orthodoxy that prevented publication of more ambitious pieces such as "The Two Temples."

the contrary, the multiplication of data and detail puts the salesman in a state of permanent frantic angst, as the ever-increasing “indigo-circles” around his eyes bespeak his anxiety (*PT* 124). Being able to classify and categorize thunderstorms merely impresses him with more vivid fantasies about the different kinds of calamities against which he needs to inoculate himself. Hence, the salesman engages in a kind of prophetic discourse in which he presages doom for the narrator. Emery argues that Melville was irked by the fact that science may turn people into “paranoid technicians” (567), constantly on the look-out for newer and better gadgetry to fortify them against the terrifying prospect of the ever-more threatening advances of the natural world. As such, it seems doubly curious that the narrator winds up advocating what appears an archaic sense of natural theology as it regards the lightning rod.

Thomas Werge points out that, “The ‘religion’ of Melville’s satanic salesman, then, is scientism; God, for him, is the lightning rod itself and the ‘security’ and ‘omnipotence’ it seems to offer” (7). The problem with the first part of this assessment is that the moniker ‘satanic’ does not provide a specific context for the proposed characterization. (For instance, the OT Satan from the Book of Job functions as God’s agent in the world, while Milton’s Satan is a much more rounded, individualistic, and thus tragic presence.) And while reading the lightning rod as an idol seems less convincing here, Werge compellingly assesses the cultish quality the rod has for the salesman. Most importantly though, Werge underscores the fact that the salesman’s protective ‘magic’ depends on the use of his walking stick, “the lightning-rod man himself cannot be separated from the lightning rod that is at once his scepter and his object of worship” (7). Emery notes that the salesman’s tone is indeed “evangelical” insofar as he preaches science’s protective virtuous prudence in opposition to the calamities of a hazardous material world (568). In a comical twist, it is the salesman who is constantly on edge and nearly driven insane by his fear of

being struck by lightning while the narrator maintains a demeanor of ironically detached rationalism.¹⁵⁰

Keeping a watchful ear out for the noises the storm makes while trying to position himself at the upmost secure position in the narrator's living room, the salesman works himself into an emotional frenzy. His rhetoric ebbs and swells like the wave during a storm at sea, and as such indeed approximates evangelical sermonic cadence: "The storm deepens again. Have you a rug in the house? Rugs are non-conductors. Get one, that I may stand on it here, and you too. The skies blacken—it is dusk at noon. Hark!—the rug, the rug!" (*PT* 123). The sentiment that the darkness at noon spells impending destruction is a sentiment Melville would have found spelled out in the OT prophetic wisdom.¹⁵¹

The passage illustrates the connection Isaiah makes between the inversion of the day-night cycle and that inversion's symbolic meaning as indicating the threat to human existence by an arbitrary divine force. Because that force may offset the laws of nature at any moment, the fact that day has become night, to the salesman indicates that his life is in immanent danger. However, it merits pointing out that he infers this fact not from empirical investigation or statistical fact, but Biblical aphorisms. The world of hazard the salesman sketches, therefore, is one of supernatural as well as natural threats. Werge is only partially correct when he argues that Melville distinguishes consistently between "the narrator's fundamentally religious perception of the universe and the lightning-rod man's faith in, and reliance on, commercial science" (8).¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Insofar as the lightning-rod may be read as a religious ceremonial tool is a spiritual successor to Ishmael's exploration of the whale-bone temple in *Moby-Dick*. Here, Ishmael, too, uses a measuring rod to assess the technical qualities of the structure when the local priests becomes upset with him for measuring their god (450).

¹⁵¹ "I said, I shall not see the LORD, even the LORD, in the land of the living: I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world. / Mine age is departed, and is removed from me as a shepherd's tent: I have cut off like a weaver my life: he will cut me off with pining sickness: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me / I reckon toll morning, that, as a lion, so will he break all my bones: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me" (Isa. 38:11-13).

¹⁵² Melville marked Isaiah in his Bible. See also Amos 5:8.

Emery points out that the salesman's timidity is based on his abandoning of the very (orthodox) "faith in a supervisory Providence" that gives the narrator his confidence in the face of the thunderstorm (565). While the narrator thus negates the problem of catastrophic natural phenomena by referring to God's inherently benign character, the salesman's only option is to spread his fear. This viral logic also explains the fervent urgency with which he peddles his wares.

Emery proposes that Melville did not condone the way technology produces the type of "paranoid technician" the lightning-rod man represents; i.e. one who, "having put aside the 'primitive' notion of Providence [. . .], was now troubled by the possibility that somehow, someday his protective technology" might fail to protect him in his Franklinian "impregnable hammock fortress" (567, cf. *Franklin's Letters* 418 in Emery's edition). This kind of repose, encased on all sides in the protective yet isolating arms of technology, is not to be confused with the pondering repose we find in *Moby-Dick* and *Mardi*. In fact, technology functions as an anti-social cocoon, rather than providing a platform for sovereign action. Ironically, it is in a religious sentiment that is personally motivated that the narrator finds the kind of broadminded surveying attitude towards the world that the lightning-rod's product merely promises. What the lightning-man offers, then, is not relief that is freedom from want but a nervous barricading, a shutting oneself off from all social contacts.¹⁵³

Following the sermon inroads cited above, the salesman, frantically switching rhetorical registers, begins to move rapidly from deductive logic to testimonial evidence in order to urge the narrator to buy.

¹⁵³ Fisher usefully argues against the neat classifications of either character's religious sentiments: "It is a personal revelation that enables him [the narrator] to reject the burden of the past whether in the jealous tyranny of the Old Testament God or the overly zealous, fear-based evangelism of post-Puritan America" (123).

You mountaineers are most exposed. In mountainous countries the lightning-rod man should have most business. Look at the specimen, sir. One rod will answer for a house so small as this. Look over these recommendations. Only one rod, sir; cost, only twenty dollars. Hark! There go all the granite Taconics and Hoosics dashed together like pebbles. (*PT* 123-24)

In all this, however, his strategy remains didactic. He seeks to educate the narrator on the merits of personal home security and fortification to close the deal. It is in this moment that his scientism attains religious quality because he gives it the form of morally prescriptive statements.¹⁵⁴ This is the logic of reproof, according to the poet from the Book of Proverbs one of the fundamental prerequisites to attaining knowledge.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, these statements are Proverbial in the sense that they condemn the addressee in case of non compliance. Compare the following two assertions, one by the salesman, enraged by the narrator's obdurate refusal to buy, the other from Proverbs:

How long ye simple ones will ye love simplicity? *And the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge?* / Turn you at my reproof? I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you / Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; / But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: / I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; / When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you [. . .] / For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. (Prov. 1:22-27; 32, emphasis added)

When compared to the aforementioned list of directions the salesman provides for surviving in a storm, his response to the narrator's refusal to buy into his way of seeing the world becomes analogous "Impious wretch!' foamed the stranger, blackening in the face as the rainbow

¹⁵⁴ I use the term 'moral' in its original, broader sense as indicating a value judgment about human behavior. When discussing moral poetic language, Terry Eagleton observes how the term is often used reductively as denoting a good-bad binary. However, it may harbor a broader spectrum of assertions about human behavior. Although, I presently discuss short prose fiction, I believe Eagleton's point is useful for understanding how both the salesman and the narrator mutually understand their respective statements to be moral ones. See Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, 28.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Prov. 1:7: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction."

beamed, ‘I will publish your infidel notions,’” the implication being that he will bring ruin upon the unwilling customer’s house (*PT* 124). Joshua Matthews observes that the salesman’s threat “implies that the narrator’s refusal will engender the scorn of a local or national readership already convinced of the truthfulness of the peddler’s sales pitch about lightning rods” (56). At the same time, Matthews wonders whether the salesman’s threat actually has teeth since the narrator’s refusal to buy hardly constitutes a national scandal. A closer look at the context of the salesman’s remarks may provide the answer.

Since the late 1790s, the derogatory label ‘infidel,’ as Eric Schlereth reminds us, continued to be a flexible term, encompassing all kinds of religious and some non-religious sentiments that were deemed inappropriate to the prevalent notions of civic religion (78, 79). The charge of impiety, here, ultimately is a charge of a lack of communal spirit. The refusal to buy is a refusal to partake in the community of buyers connected by their unshakable faith in the wonders of scientific ingenuity. Melville’s use of the term, therefore, illustrates his awareness of its characteristic semantic flexibility during that time. Moreover, the term’s ambivalence emblemizes the blurred lines between the two seemingly opposing epistemologies presented in the story. Similar to the narrator of “The Two Temples,” a story that remained unpublished for its alleged impiety towards the clergy, the house-owner’s personal religious sentiments ironically preclude him from the community of his fellow citizens who are united and ‘congregationalized,’ as far as the salesman is concerned, by their consumerism. Beyond that, the term’s ambivalence also explains the Proverbial quality of the salesman’s charge. The label ‘infidel,’ in the context of the story not only bespeaks blasphemous sentiments but also connotes a certain resistance to wisdom imparted. As I have shown above the Book of Proverbs frequently calls for those who do not follow in the path of wisdom to be ostracized. To be labeled an infidel, then, is to be branded

a fool in the Proverbial sense. Interestingly, both the salesman and the narrator seem to follow this idea in the last consequence of their respective argument. Once the rationalizing and persuasion hit a dead end, furious condemnation ensues on both ends until rhetoric escalates into physical violence and even attempted murder.

Emery, too, acknowledges that while the narrator's religious sentiments seem to spring up in reaction to the salesman's remonstrations, they are rooted in a theological tradition that predates American Calvinism, but is rather

[. . .] the Protestant continuation of an intellectual tradition far older than Mather and Edwards, a *Hebrew and Greco-Roman tradition* encouraging man to interpret all heavenly occurrences not as 'natural productions' (to use the words of Mather's minister) but as profound theological signs. (564, emphasis added)

However, Emery fails to elaborate on what he correctly, if somewhat clumsily, identifies as a pre-Puritan theological tradition. While useful, this observations must be modified in two important ways: first, the theology Emery reads into the narrator's rhetoric applies equally to the salesman and the narrator, ergo, the narrator's indignation does not stem from the notion that this theological tradition is under direct attack from scientific rhetoric. On the contrary, as I show above, Melville illustrates minutely how the two seemingly distinct discourses use religious fervor to make their respective arguments. Moreover, the conversation between the narrator and the salesman does not consist of two distinct discourses, but is rather a dialogical meta-conversation about the use of moral aphorisms. As such, it can be read productively through the moralizing lens of OT Proverbial wisdom.

4.4.2 *The Returning-Stroke*

Security for the salesman, as I noted earlier, requires isolation as well as ceaseless calculation of risks and odds. This kind of quarantine repose does not grant the individual room to ponder metaphysics; on the contrary, it seeks to eliminate the need for metaphysics by

eliminating the need for an investigative gaze into the machinations of the natural world. The lightning rod staves off the potentially harmful effects of natural phenomena. What more is there to know about them? The logic insinuated here is one of fear mongering, not because it puts its subjects in a perpetual state of angst, but also because it disconnects them from the material world. Melville's narrator rejects this stillborn security the lightning-rod man peddles.¹⁵⁶ Maurice Lee recently investigated Melville's attitude towards the emerging relevance of chance in the American public mindset of the nineteenth century as evinced in a select number of his novels. "In Melville's theaters of suffering," Lee concludes, "action is demanded, but directions are not included" (88). Even if we label Melville a card-carrying religious skeptic, the present story deems decisions to be necessary and personal agency an indispensable good. For Melville, agency is "simultaneously unknowable and central to the moral decisions of characters and the critics who would judge them" (Lee *Uncertain*, 88). In other words, agency must be confronted and utilized, both in oneself and another. To shy away from this encounter is a form of moral cowardice. The salesman shuns agency both in himself and others. In the case of the present story, moral cowardice consists in neither trusting in oneself or one's personal God. The salesman is incapable to confront and 'weather' the storm and by doing so recognize, as the narrator would have it, its true character as a phenomenon evincing the (OT) character of the deity, awe-inspiring but not unjust. These two points of view ultimately represent distinct strategies of historicizing human experience in the world. Their difference therefore consists in the way each systematizes natural events in the form of a record. Their methodological opposition therefore, is one about history writing rather than about the value of empiricism. This opposition may be usefully characterized as the difference between what Hayden White calls the

¹⁵⁶ The sentiment Melville touches upon here is explored in greater detail in realist novels of the late nineteenth century. Particularly William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) which Melville read later in his life. See also Jason Puskar "William Dean Howells and the Insurance of the Real" (2006).

integrative ‘Organicist’ and the reductive ‘Mechanistic’ method of history writing (16). While the narrator operates under the assumption of the synthetic nature of reality in which events and individuals must arrange mutual space for one another, the salesman believes that the relationship between individuals as well as between individuals and events may be articulated in a static taxonomy.

But what irks the narrator about the salesman is not his cowardice in the face of what he, the narrator, considers personal religious revelation, the fact that God will not make war with humanity as evinced by the rainbow, but the salesman’s imposition on his own ability to surmise God’s face in the storm:

‘you mere man who come here to put you and your pipestem between clay and sky, do you think because you can strike a bit of green light from the Leyden jar, that you can thoroughly avert the supernal bolt? [. . .] who has empowered you, you Tetzels, to peddle round your indulgences from divine ordinations? [. . .] In thunder as in sunshine, I stand at ease in the hands of my God [. . .] I read in the rainbow, that the Deity will not, of purpose, make war on man’s earth.’ (124)

In contrast to the bleak implications of the salesman’s ideology, the narrator’s concluding remarks are uncharacteristically optimistic, albeit not pious per se, for one of Melville’s protagonists. Beyond that, they are also rather orthodox when considered theologically. Meteorological conditions are deemed symbolic indicators of His attitude towards humanity. And while he asserts his belief in the possibility of a “supernal bolt,” with which God may strike down humans at will; yet he subsequently denies this possibility based on his divinations of “divine ordinations” in the rainbow (124). The kind of symbolic reading Melville’s narrator proposes here is strikingly akin to Cotton Mather’s aforementioned divination of meteorological events and to Puritan typology in general. In short, God, according to the narrator, does not disburse suffering arbitrarily, and he does not deviate from the regularity of his schemes, even if those schemes may appear frightful to the rational comprehension of human minds. Melville’s

narrator, however, is no mere religious optimist, but finds his jovial attitude encouraged by the very empiricist observations the salesman employs to scare him into buying. A case in point is the phenomenon of the returning stroke, lightning flashing from the earth to the sky.

Accordingly, the narrator does not flat-out deny the salesman's data, but merely his propositions on how to interpret them:¹⁵⁷

“[Salesman:] ‘Aye, the returning stroke, as it is called; when the earth, being overcharged with the fluid, flashes its surplus upward.’
[Narrator:] ‘The returning-stroke; that is, from earth to sky. Better and better. But come here on the hearth and dry yourself.’” (PT 122)

While Melville elides the rationale for what must be a dumbfounding statement to the salesman, the narrator's words indicate that he is somehow pleased with what the salesman intended to be another fear-instilling piece of evidence for the absolute need of his wares. For the salesman this phenomenon frightfully compounds all his anxieties about storms because it renders the very ground he inhabits unsafe. In contrast, the narrator states a “strangely inspired confidence” upon perceiving this new piece of information (122). His symbolic reading lets him consider the returning-stroke as indicating an equilateral relation between the realms of heaven and earth; God may strike at the earth, but he would allow the earth to strike back. Confidence, here, means assurance, assurance by empirical observation in the fundamentally equilateral arrangement of the universe. Empiricism, in the Baconian tradition, works not to separate humans from the heavens or from each other but to produce a unified theory of reality, which coincides with one's dispositional beliefs.¹⁵⁸

This brief exchange about the returning-stroke is also significant for contextualizing the narrator in Melville's oeuvre. This phenomenon seems to deny the very possibility of innocent

¹⁵⁷ For a contrary view regarding the narrator's rationalism see Dillingham *Melville's Short* 171-75.

¹⁵⁸ On the influence of Calvinist typology on Melville's conception of the (literary) symbol, see again Brumm 194. Silver usefully embeds the story in the wider literary tradition of what he calls New England allegory (2).

suffering and arbitrary victimization by divine force, the very problem that occupies so much of his fiction. As such, he chooses to cast this agency in an interpersonal form rather than depicting himself over against the free interplay of possibilities. The reference to Johann Tetzel—one of the figureheads of indulgence sales and thus a main antagonist to Martin Luther—historicizes the agon within the Protestant and in opposition to the Catholic tradition. Melville once again not only operates within Biblical history for many of his stories, in this case, he specifically invokes church history, a strategy he would carry over to “The Apple-Tree Table,” which I discuss in the following.¹⁵⁹

In terms of its direct Biblical borrowing, the narrator’s final denunciation of the salesman again recalls Proverbial practice of ostracizing foolishness. Given the salesman’s indignation upon being refused, Melville may have had in mind (Prov. 14:2-3): “He that walketh in uprightness feareth the LORD: but he that is perverse in his ways despiseth him. / In the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride: but the lips of the wise shall preserve them.” This time, it is the salesman who is brandished as foolish; his folly consists of his very indignation at being called out on his intellectual cowardice.

Subsequently, the violence that ensues is a result of the salesman’s attempt to translate aphoristic moral wisdom into consumer behavior. Emery makes a similar, if less character-driven, observation when he notes that, “once we come to depend on scientific ingenuity as a protection against the threatening forces of nature, then we [. . .] become liable to the danger of

¹⁵⁹ See also Silver 4, 13. The brief debate about the symbolic value of the returning-stroke has had a prolific reception in criticism. Fisher (122) and Dillingham (175) both argue that the concept of the returning-stroke in the story suggests to the narrator Promethean emancipatory capability of humans to strike back at God, since such capability, as the narrator’s ridicule of the salesman shows, is deemed impossible by the rest of the text. Since the returning-stroke is being debated in the abstract here, it seems to me that the passage shows a difference in method rather than any personal identification on the part of the narrator. Emery extends Fisher’s premise by cautioning that the narrator is not tied to any specific theological framework but is first and foremost a “a devotee of environmental symbols” (564). Meanwhile, Wertheimer speculates that the narrator’s response is absurd and solely exist to parody the alleged absurdity of the salesman’s own pseudo-scientific discourse (192), while Matthews misreads, I believe, the returning-stroke as being enabled and ‘weaponized’ exclusively by the lightning rod (69).

human error” and thus folly in the Proverbial sense (561). What finally causes the salesman to lose his temper is arguably the narrator’s refusal to acknowledge the universal efficacy of his wares. However, it is significant that the narrator rejects buying into the salesman’s argument not because he finds the evidence presented intrinsically unconvincing but because the salesman makes authoritative claims about the world that it then seeks to naturalize. The salesman’s mythologizing quasi-religious rhetoric and his coeval denial of the narrator’s personal religious sentiments are part of what Roland Barthes calls the privation of history. Indeed, he makes it seem as if the lightning-rod had descended from the heavens to conclusively assert man’s dominion over nature. If science is the salesman’s religion, Melville seems to suggest, the blasphemy in the narrator’s challenge does not consist in his rejection of the salesman’s offer but in exposing its formal proximity to the supposedly outdated mode of religious sentiment.¹⁶⁰

To be sure, Melville does not draw on the style of the Book of Proverbs uncritically; nothing could be further from the truth. The narrator, in his nervous attitude, rattles off an elaborate scheme of precautions which to the narrator appears a litany of behavioral maxims, as Melville reflects critically about the authoritative function of aphoristic wisdom.

I avoid pine-trees, high houses, lonely barns, upland pastures, running water, flocks of cattle and sheep, a crowd of men. If I travel on foot,—as today—I do not walk fast; if in my buggy, I touch not its back or sides; if on horseback, I dismount and lead the horse. (*PT* 123)

The list bears a comical resemblance to Proverbial wisdom. For instance, the staccato of his itemizing of things to avoid in a thunderstorm reiterates his stressed disposition. It is not the thunderstorm that excites him, but arguably his own eagerness to compute the dimensions of the

¹⁶⁰ Cf. *Mythologies*, 154. Emery does acknowledge in a footnote, however, that Melville’s narrator’s attitude is reactionary and that he merely “adopts a ‘Puritan’ position in reaction to his guest’s arguments” (563). He sees the narrator in the tradition of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards’s “Account of His Conversion, Experience, and Religious Exercises, written by himself,” Works IV, 1:16-17 (qtd. Emery 563). While I do not agree in this assessment of the narrator’s religious sentiments as being merely tactical, Emery’s argument has merit in the sense that it corroborates my own impression that Melville was a student of not only European but also American literary and religious tradition.

potential danger the storm presents and subsequently economize his means of avoiding that danger. His taxonomy of safety entraps him in perpetual angst to compute ever-new hazards to be minded and fundamentally informs the way he perceives the world. When entering the house, for instance, he immediately begins triangulating the safest spot relative to its layout. In doing so he does not merely rely on a rule of thumb but computes countless contingencies and parameters to arrive at the optimal solution.

4.4.3 *Critical Voices*

Traditional readings have focused on the story's allegorical display of two distinct religious ideologies, represented by the two dialogists: the lightning-rod salesman—a thinly veiled metaphor for the fire-and-brimstone rhetoric of revivalist evangelical preachers—faces off against the house-owning narrator, a fierce democrat and proponent of personal independence and private religious sentiment. Thomas Werge even finds a “genuinely ‘satanic’ darkness” in the lightning-rod man and his “object of worship,” the lightning rod (7). Yet these readings tend to overemphasize the religious positions held by the two characters by situating them at opposite ends of a moral spectrum while ignoring the historical context in which scientific rationalist rhetoric, door-to-door sales practices, and religious traditions were bound up. Responding to these earlier critics, Allan Moore Emery finds Ben Franklin himself to be the “theoretical and technical progenitor of Melville’s salesman” (558).¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Emery critiques Werge and Dillingham by arguing that “Melville’s salesman as the complex embodiment of both religion and science; yet Melville’s sources suggest that his story was built around a dichotomy of science and religion rather than a symbolic conflation of the two” (fn 14, 561). Emery shows conclusively the rhetorical indebtedness of Melville’s prose in the story to both Louis Lyon’s *Treatise on Lightning Conductors* (1853) and Benjamin Franklin’s *Letters (Experiments and Observations on Electricity)*. However, Emery reduces the narrator to “an authorial mouthpiece,” deeming him closer to Melville’s personal opinion on the subject of scientific gospel than his other narrators (559). Emery is correct in assuming that the story’s central theme is the dichotomy of science and religion, however, he misses the point that both employ equally alarmist rhetoric.

Other recent studies have analogously regarded the story as a historical commentary on the business practices of empirical science, commerce, and the insurance as well as the magazine industry. Studies that comprehend the salesman as a spokesperson for what may be called the Franklidian scientific revolution emphasize his fear-mongering and the connection between the discourses of science and security he purports. Indeed, the salesman is looking to cash in on the house owner's putative fear of the storm's destructive power. When analyzing the conflict between the two characters, Emery sees an evolutionary relationship between their respective ideologies: Franklidian scientific discourse had replaced the Calvinist semiotics practiced by Jonathan Edwards and the Mathers and in the process had shifted the conversation about personal security from a basis in Providence to one in contingency (564). This approach allows Emery to neatly cast the narrator as an archaic democrat, while characterizing the salesman as a disciple of commercial scientism. The trade-off, however, is that Emery cannot account for the religious quality of the salesman's pitch.

While the lightning-rod salesman may thus indeed be more convincingly characterized as a fear-monger in the service of commercialized empirical science than a Miltonic Satan, such readings often forego questions of ethics and the source of the narrator's righteous indignation. Eric Wertheimer suggests that the contemporary discourse of safety for Melville raised bigger questions about the idea of insuring and monetizing property, both intellectual and material. Such considerations cause Melville to sketch out an "ethic[s] of ownership that subverts conventional underwriting and denies the discourse of safety that gives underwriting its epistemological force" (Wertheimer 179). Yet this fantasy of personal insulation against calamity clearly has its roots in

religious discourse.¹⁶² Yet none of these arguments accounts for the religious quality of the salesman's argument that Melville inscribes here.

As such, the new divide in the criticism about the story seems to be between allegorical and historical critics but rather between those historical critics who read the story as commenting on the emergence of commercial culture and those that recognize Melville's indebtedness to Biblical notions of mysticism in framing the story's central dialog. By eliding discussions about personal agency, the former studies tend to ignore the story's dialogical structure and the questions about personal ethics and religious form it raises. Moreover, they trivialize the central problem of the narrator's flight into violence at the end of their debate. In doing so, these studies, on a methodological level, inadvertently mirror the epistemological disconnect that sparks the conflict between Melville's characters.

When Jenny Franchot maps out the challenge the category of (religious) mysticism presents to the dominating disciplinary practice of Foucauldian empiricism in literary studies, her verdict on the current state of scholarship seems to echo the conflict depicted in the story: "In our negation of mystery and of conscience as categories of experience that disrupt deterministic, particularizing accounts of human identity, in our insistence that 'mystery' and 'conscience' be reduced to the most literalist accounts of being [. . .] we disqualify ourselves from authoring profound scholarship" ("Invisible" 836). To Melville's narrator, the idea that all hazardous contingency may be normalized and justified by the magic bullet of science seems ludicrous, not because empiricism is an invalid methodology, but because its claim to unilaterally defining

¹⁶² William James in his lectures on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) reviews the so-called mind-cure culture within the more idealist off-shoots of Protestantism (e.g., transcendentalism). In reviewing several testimonial correspondences, he notes how religious regiments, whatever their denominational specificities, function as measures of "mental hygiene" (105) and notes that the conflict of the German Reformation, for instance, was fought over questions of self-perception and the possibility of a meritological system of works that could insulate believers from harm, both present and future (106-07).

human experience is to him reductive and ultimately naive. Rather than the break between the two epistemological methods, Melville's narrator, through the form of his own argument, suggests a complementary relationship between the two.

In the academic methodological arena, Michael W. Kaufman notes analogously that we need to reflect critically on our historical methodologies when addressing religion. "Where historical and sociological debates thus center on how and where to measure secularity or religiosity," Kaufman writes, "theoretical debates insist instead that the difference between the religious and the secular cannot be assumed uncritically, that this difference itself has been a product of historical change" (608). Analogously, Werge hints at the blurred ideological lines along which the story's agon operates and observes that "the controversy over the lightning rod within the churches of New England—a controversy in which several traditional Calvinists were 'Electricians' [those believing in the efficacy of Franklin's invention] as well—could neither be confined to the churches nor limited in its depth and implications" (9). All the while, Steven Frye, in responding to Goldman's aforementioned reading of *Clarel*, takes a useful step in the direction of the kind of aesthetic complimentary reading I am proposing here. Frye argues that, "The Lightning-Rod Man" ponders an "assent to the affective, to a realm of comprehension that works its magic beyond the purely rational—in effect to a faith newly defined [. . .]" ("Melvillean" 115). When viewed through this lens, the story reflects on modernist sensibilities towards technology insofar as those sensibilities take on the form of already established, and ostensibly engrained in the American collective consciousness, religious sensibilities. Yet Frye's reading seems too optimistic because it considers it a foregone conclusion that both the logic of scientism and religious mysticism are reconcilable. In contrast, Melville in constructing the story's central dialog did not leave out that step and sought to prove that the two needed to be

made compatible by a brave, discerning mind. “The Lightning-Rod Man” mobilizes the genre conventions of the Book of Proverbs. By having the salesman leverage aphoristic labels that approximate the condemnatory rhetoric of the most prescriptive Proverbs, Melville plays out the violent conflict between the discourses of religion and science, only to suggest an underlying, insidious common ancestry. He would reverse his idea in “The Apple-Tree Table” to show how these two epistemologies—when considered as distinct viewpoints—may be productively harmonized.¹⁶³

4.5 *John Marr’s Pebbles of Wisdom*

From what essentially amounted to a momentary call for cooperation in *Clarel*, Melville would return to contemplating the individual’s position in the world with his penultimate published collection of poetry, *John Marr*. The collection evinces a two-parted structure. The first section deals with Marr’s personal history as well as that of other archetypal sailors. Part two features various short poetic sketches about life at sea. Poems of the latter group expound on the sea as metaphor for the pursuit of truth as it is articulated in both *Mardi* and, most succinctly, in *Moby-Dick*’s chapter “The Lee Shore.” The image is central for Melville’s prose as well as those poems that deal with the inert character of nature and humans’ ability to perceive it completely.

Even though cognition is usually conjoined with social criticism, there are moments—particularly in the cluster of epigrams entitled “Pebbles”—in which Melville uses these observations to discuss divine presence, the dispensation of justice, as well as the role of religious dogma in perceiving the world. The “Pebbles” aphoristic format seems contradictory to

¹⁶³ Contrary to Lee’s tacit version of the argument, Melville does rule out the possibility of neutral ground between agency and none agency, even though he leaves the choice of epistemological method up to the individual. Cf. Lee 88.

their implied triviality; pebbles after all are diminutive in size and significance. Arguably those qualities necessitate them being addressed as a group, rather than individually. And it is precisely in this sense that this series of brief poems must be considered Proverbial in a formal sense. At the same time, Melville continues to conceive of history in Biblical terms and within Biblical imagery. For instance, “Pebble II” expounds upon the difference between tradition and experience.

Old are the creeds, but stale the schools
 Revamped as the mode may veer.
 But Orm from the schools to the beaches strays,
 And, finding a Conch hoar with time, he delays
 And reverent lifts it to ear.
 That voice pitched in far monotone,
 Shall it swerve? Shall it deviate ever?
 The Seas have inspired it, and Truth—
 Truth, varying from sameness never. (*PP* 244)

The antithetical assertion in the opening line about old creeds and stale schools derides institutionalized knowledge with the added allusion to religious institutions as facilities of indoctrination. While such old creeds promise to reveal truth, the speaker observes that these truths periodically require re-articulation in new forms. The speaker does not condemn the creeds themselves but rather the modes by which their inherent wisdom is presented through the ages. Melville subversively expresses this dichotomy by using an aphoristic antithesis in line one. Lines one and two thus marshal a skeptical argument against the claim to universality and timelessness by religious doctrine. Melville points out that the increasingly public tension between the Bible’s chronological age and the clergy’s usurpation of its authority obscures more and more its moral content. The temporal distance from the ideal *urtext* necessitates frequent reconceptualizations of its formal presentation, and, by inference, its content. At the same time,

this distance authorizes personal speculations about the nature of truth that use the Biblical text as a springboard.

Sheehan notes that such tensions between text and exegesis illustrate the fallout of Enlightenment readings of the testaments. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the scholarly investigation of the OT was increasingly abandoned due to its “antiquity,” while commentators began accentuating the NT’s distinct and autonomous cultural tradition. As such, the OT was considered a stale, historical archive that authorizes the much more vibrant NT scholarship (Sheehan 150).¹⁶⁴

The shift of scholarly predilections away from OT scholarship made room for inventive poetic interpretations of the text and set in motion the rise of the literary Bible in the late eighteenth century: “[. . .] in Germany after 1750, literature (and poetry specifically) became a tool for reinventing the Old Testament by scholars committed to overcoming archaism, and to preserving a relationship between the increasingly distant Biblical world and late eighteenth-century Germany” (Sheehan 152). And while Melville distrusted the ultimate outgrowth of this German critical tradition, his use of OT style is underwritten by the very same scholarly void that authorized higher criticism. From a nineteenth-century perspective, his way of incorporating the OT text, when taken at face value, would have seemed a rather antiquated one when viewed in the context of the long history of critical readings of the Bible in the eighteenth century. Yet Melville’s assertion of being a poet of the heart, while leading him to draw on archaic forms, is consistent with the way OT text was treated in other fields of the human sciences: In his

¹⁶⁴ “All these changes,” Sheehan notes concerning Biblical scholarship, “left the Old Testament in a precarious yet productive position in the Christian context. On the one hand, as the Old Testament fell in theological importance, Christian scholars were forced to address the question of archaism, to consider whether this collection of ancient Hebrew writings had any bearing on modern Christian thought [. . .] this same devaluation of the Old Testament opened it up to more speculative interpretations and, more importantly, more speculative translations” (151).

methodological assessment of the praxis of Biblical translation, for instance, Sheehan comments that the “poetic Bible retained temporal distance to the past in practice even if it claimed that sympathy evoked by the content of the OT could bridge that gap in any translation and in effect guaranteed translatability” (160). In literary endeavors, such temporal and spacial constraints could be ignored and, as Walt Whitman frequently demonstrated, potentially overcome. In the case of “Pebble II,” the speaker, Orm, may thus comment on the eternal sameness of the ocean tides by collapsing time into a singular moment of apprehension.

When Orm flees from the schools of his youth to the beaches where he uncovers knowledge hoary with time—again a reference to Job 41:32, he believes to hear absolute truth in the conch’s consistent rhythm. The conch is a means of accessing the truth represented by the ocean’s rhythmic motion, as the waves of the ocean become transferred to waves of sound. It is an organic, intuitive kind of knowing that exists outside formal, didactic language and therefore is not subject to the incessant need for new translations and revisions. In contrast, scriptural revelation, which claims to be eternal, has to be interpreted and reinterpreted by designated authorities for each new age. Melville is sensitive to the ironic claim of an absolute truth that requires frequent reiterations based on human craftsmanship.

Orm’s renegade hermeneutics is not formless, however. While this knowledge may be intuitive, it is also formally symbolic: its claims to universality, different from those of revealed truth, signify the extra-moral assertion of the universality of motion in matter. In fact, the truth communicated by sea’s motion is supra-moral in the sense that it requires no formal schooling to comprehend it, and it is apparent because it is conveyed through simple cognition. Melville’s speaker thus channels a materialist argument against revealed truth, the kind of which was standard fare in the religious debates between English Protestants and deists in the eighteenth

century and continued to have currency in Melville's day. While its mode of communication may be democratic, full comprehension of the conch's wisdom requires a special semiotic intelligence that knows to read the conch's sound as symbolizing the sound of the ocean waves. As such, Orm is an exceptional reader of nature's symbolism because he happens to be attuned to its motions. The whole poem, insofar as it is a brief cosmological excursion, is based on Melville's decision to read symbolically the sound-compacting, empirical properties of the conch. As such, Orm's epistemology moves from a Proverbial to an empirical basis of knowledge. Formally, the poem maintains its allegiance to Proverbial forms by utilizing both aphoristic antithesis (*PP* 244.1-2) and the riddle format (*PP* 244.7).

Earlier I argued that borrowings from Biblical theme and style illustrate that Melville continued to be interested in wisdom literature as a mode of philosophical inquiry. A case in point that illustrates this difficulty for scholars is Helen Vendler's analysis *Battle-Pieces*, which she ends with a brief excursion into the "Pebbles." She sees "VII" as a counterpoint to the unsettling ambiguous depiction of war-time patriotism in "The House-Top":

Healed of my hurt, I laud the inhuman Sea—
 Yea, bless the Angles Four that there convene;
 For healed I am even by their pitiless breath
 Distilled in wholesome dew named rosmarine. (*PP* 249)

Vendler identifies "Pebble VII" as a seraphic poem with a conciliatory tone that seems to propose a "Stoic and Christian doctrine of the compensatory moral value of suffering" as "the human mind can distill their [the four winds'] assaults on the body into salutary hearings of the soul" ("Lyric" 594). In terms of wisdom literature, the poem falls into the genre of a praise poem or psalm. And yet the theme may again be considered Job's: it is the harsh winds of the "inhumane" oceans that heals the speaker (*PP* 249.1). In other words, confronting the inhumane harshness of the material universe works as a balm for wounds, arguably both physical and spiritual. Overt

and covert wisdom elements are present here, and Melville's speaker employs the infinitive "to bless" in the Christological sense and refers to the four winds as angels bestowing their harsh balm on the weather-worn traveler.

Considered in this context, the final two lines of "Pebble II" become antithetical: "truth," as it is used in line eight, implies the knowledge nature imparts, whereas "truth" in the subsequent line represents that man-made truth which veers and is, therefore, no truth at all (*PP* 244.8-9). The marker of truth is perpetual sameness in motion, which only the sea can boast. Melville's contrasting of dogmatic and experience-based truth echoes the refutation of exegetic orthodoxy found in Job and Ecclesiastes, while the presence of characteristic Biblical stylistic tropes, such as repetition, antithesis, and signature vocabulary, formally cement this impression. On a second level, Melville's attack on dogma ridicules the arduous history of institutionalization that human creeds evince. Even the mode of accessing this knowledge is diametrically opposed: Orm "strays" from the schools and thereby transgresses against social convention to find this rivaling, seemingly intuitive knowledge (*PP* 244.1).

4.6 No Sense or Non-Sense? *The Confidence-Man* and the Problem of Trust

Melville's final novel provides arguably the most prolonged and detailed engagement with the problem of epistemology. As with *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre*, one of the main obstacles to the quest for truth is the unreliability of sense perception. However, unlike those novels, *The Confidence-Man* examines the philosophical premise of truth-seeking strictly from the side of human perception. Its speculation is less metaphysical than epistemological.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Dillingham characterizes the book's signature technique of inquiry as "epistemological solipsism" based on the assumption that Melville uses his novels from 1850 forward as a laboratory of the mind (*Melville's Later* 401). Since I do not attempt a forensic biographical reading, I find this term useful only insofar as it loosely characterizes the way the narrator and individual speakers introduce hypotheses into discussions and proceed to dissect them dialogically with their interlocutors.

Characters search not for transcendental truth but for true insights into the hidden motivations of others in order to navigate the social. Hence the novel asks not only what we can know but also inquires on what basis that knowledge of the world is founded and how decisions about the future, such as placing confidence (in oneself, in others, in objects, and concepts), can be justified. The novel, therefore is concerned with the praxis of distinguishing foolish and prudent behavior. This emphasis on moral decision-making places the novel in the province of Biblical wisdom literature. What is more, few of Melville's works engage the problem of Proverbs, in the context of Biblical history, canon-formation, and exegesis, as explicitly as *The Confidence-Man*.¹⁶⁶

As far as contemporary religious sensibilities are concerned, the novel raises what Turner deems the three essential questions about religious thinking at the time: How is belief in the supernatural related to observable reality? What is religion's essential utility in the tumble of social life? How can the objects of belief be verified? (*Without* 114-15). While neither question is unique to *The Confidence-Man* among Melville's novels, it is the air of constant solicitation that sets the novel apart. Characters are constantly called upon to make moral judgments based on, at best, scanty sense-based evidence. The novel illustrates the stressful choices involved in navigating the realm of the social, while simultaneously asserting the futility of these choices. Decisions have no absolute yield, nor do their foundations ever remain stable. Judgments based on character may turn out to refer to mere persona and documents designed to authenticate intent and authority may turn out to be forgeries.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Critical debate about the novel has always been contentious. In many respects, it represents a refreshing instance of a literary object capable of producing truly distinct readings rather than gradations of meaning. For a detailed survey of the discussion surrounding the book's philosophical project, see Dillingham, *Melville's Last*, 301. Wright sees *CM* as functioning in a tradition of literary debates about national character ("Confidence Men" 266).

¹⁶⁷ It is worthwhile noting, as Ivor Winters does, that Melville was coming off a project with *Pierre* in which readers follow the protagonist's struggle with the creeping realization that he cannot judge anything with certainty (227).

A moment ago, I referred to the 'knowledge' of the world as the underlying problem of the novel. Wisdom in the Proverbial sense represents a teleology and therefore must be differentiated from a broader conception of knowledge as the disinterested collecting of empirical data. Northrop Frye points out that the difference between knowledge and Biblical wisdom lies in their respective conceptions of time. "[K]nowledge," Frye argues, "is of the particular and actual [present], and wisdom is rather a sense of the potential, of the way to deal with the kind of thing that may happen" (122). This distinction also helps explain the particular allure of the confidence man's schemes. His demands for confidence not only engender an interpersonal indebtedness but, moreover, exploit the victim's anxiety toward future states.

Gale Temple cogently describes the confidence man's function as that of a purveyor of wish-fulfillment fantasies. "Confidence is necessary," Temple argues, "for the aspirations that inspire citizen-consumers to seek after new and ostensibly improved versions of themselves" (461). Therefore, the confidence man's wares and services catalyze a market economy based on personal reinvention and what Temple names fluid identities. The transactions between the confidence man and his victims are predicated on the psychological anxiety of a public sphere that demands changeability and dictates what the confidence man, in the guise of the P.I.O.-man, describes as moral "flexile gracefulness" (*CM* 126). Temple, who speaks for those that read the novel as a satire of the modern American marketplace, where masquerade and commerce are inextricably intertwined. She unknowingly uncovers a curious dynamic with her argument. On the one hand, she places a conceptual premium on the individual as an ideal to be realized via the marketplace. On the other hand, this idealization of individualism seems shallow in light of her assertion that "[. . .] the processes represented in the book have a cyclical quality; new victims will pop up for the Confidence Man like a series of ducks at a carnival game on a mechanical

loop, and he will continue to alter his identity in keeping with their ever-novel hopes and desires” (464).

Market forces not only motivate potential dupes to be productive in keeping up appearances, but, as Christopher Sten points out, also operate under the corrosive threat of exposure and public humiliation of said foolishness (*Weaver-God* 296). The confidence man’s victims are shackled to this bipolar dynamic and locked in a grind of constant metamorphosis, which alienates them from themselves. Ironically, it is the ever-changing confidence man who displays the most consistency by presenting his dupes with what Dillingham calls an “impenetrable surface” (*Melville’s Last* 337). As Melville illustrates in “Bartleby” and particularly in “The Lightning-Rod Man,” in which the salesman threatens to “publish” the home-owner’s alleged heresy (*PT* 124). The confidence man’s methods are more sophisticated by comparison because for his victims, the threat of public exposure for behavior that could be construed as imprudent or immoral is always implied but never expressly stated. As such, Gale Temple usefully describes the invisible force that drives dupes into the arms of confidence man.¹⁶⁸

Playing out this dynamic, the novel depicts the interactions of two distinct groups of characters: one assumes that wisdom; i.e., a life of prudence within the parameters of the American market economy, can actually enter human knowledge, while the other works actively to utilize the first group’s premise for monetary gain. Divining the ‘truth’ in *The Confidence-Man* means uncovering a person’s motivations to protect one’s future return on investments, be they monetary or moral. Characters are thrown back upon themselves and their primary agenda is learning how to divine the intentions of their fellow human beings. This dynamic, of course,

¹⁶⁸ Interpretations of the confidence man’s identity are diverse. Dillingham adds that the confidence man’s “disguises are really a metaphor for the surface of the consistent man, a surface that is always deceptive to those ordinary human beings who view it” (*Melville’s Last* 337).

creates several layers of psychological and ideological conflict between and also within the characters, as they negotiate means of establishing the authenticity of testimony.¹⁶⁹

The initial appearance of the mute famously sets the tone of the central conflict between faith and skepticism the novel plays out. Chapter 1, “A Mute Goes Aboard a Boat on the Mississippi,” already presents a miniature version of the plot by contemplating the genre of the aphorism. His demonstrative aphorisms about charity present the first riddle of the text, and it is indeed the riddle format that makes aphoristic wisdom Proverbial in the Biblical sense. A case in point is the narrator’s opening meditation on the steamer *Fidèle*’s exchanging various passengers on her way downriver in the chapter “Many Men Have Many Minds”:

Though her voyage of twelve hundred miles extends from apple to orange, from clime to clime, yet, like any small ferry-boat, to right and left, at every landing, the huge *Fidèle* still receives additional passengers in exchange for those that disembark; so that, though always full of strangers, she continually, in some degree, adds to, or replaces them *with strangers still more strange*; like Rio Janeiro fountain, fed from the Cocovarde mountains, which is ever overflowing with strange waters, but never with the *same strange particles in every part*. (emphasis added, *CM* 8)

The river analogy is simultaneously metaphorical and deconstructive in terms of its emblemizing of the book’s central conflict. The passage cited above points to the linguistic incongruences that we take for granted when we use words such as ‘river’ and ‘passengers’ to designate dynamic phenomena: fixed terminology makes us think of these phenomena as stable entities when in actuality, on the molecular level, they are volatile. Meanwhile, the narrator’s atomist view alerts us to the fact that the river exists only as a semantic auxiliary due to our habit of simplifying topographies. Yet the basis for his analogy is the idea that strangeness is increased exponentially in a steady stream of particles, be it drops of water or passengers on a Mississippi

¹⁶⁹ Mitchell and Snyder comment on the component of futurity in the confidence man’s deals only insofar as charity implies for the bestower a comfortable afterlife. The logics of charity and credit, they point out, mutually support one another as “moral and economic systems” (40).

steamer. Accordingly, the narrator submits that we falsely assume that all passengers on a ferry boat are bound by the same character just because they are traveling in the same direction, just as we err when we assume said passengers are governed by the same ethical systems as their observers. In the course of the novel, this seemingly innate, affective fallacy underwrites all the passengers' misadventures in rendering ethical judgment. Accordingly, its technical manifestations are manifold. From the perspective of the dupes, who delude themselves into thinking that language can give them reliable information about reality, conversations serve to assess the trustworthiness of their interlocutor and their utility. In the first half of the novel, the confidence man appears almost exclusively in the guise of the beggar. The mute soliciting charity with his semiotic demonstrations of Pauline aphorisms is as reviled as the Black Guinea, a crippled black man who provides bystanders a list of persons aboard the *Fidèle* that can vouch for his character.¹⁷⁰

The problem with all of these scenarios is that intentions do not announce their own authenticity. They can only be gathered by moral evaluation and explication. Because such judgments are always contingent, it becomes necessary to modulate interaction through a medium fit to eliminate the ambiguity of sense faculties and persuasion. Critics have largely taken for granted the curious juxtaposition of people and texts—as well as people taken as texts—in the book. As the confidence man in various guises requires his victim's confidence above all before performing the sought-after business transaction, many of these transactions are countersigned by means of some sort of authoritative documentation. I will be concerned here with these instances insofar as they present a discussion of Proverbial wisdom and the Biblical

¹⁷⁰ Susan Ryan sees Black Guinea as a foreshadowing presence in the novel, arguing that he exemplifies the interrelated problems of “knowing race and knowing benevolence,” both of which, the novel seems to suggest, are impossible epistemological endeavors (697).

text, as I have been throughout this study. Specifically, I am interested in the way Melville presents and contextualizes Biblical texts to underwrite the confidence man's schemes.

4.6.1 *On the Social line and the Demand of Legibility*

As a first step in understanding the way the Melville here deploys Proverbial wisdom is to comprehend the moral and epistemological context in which such wisdom operates in the Bible. As I have argued throughout this study for wisdom literature's pragmatic tint as well as for Melville's context-sensitive deployment of it. A useful concept for understanding Melville's use of Proverbial wisdom in the context of the nineteenth-century American market economy is what Michael Gilmore calls the "demand of legibility," a cultural project throughout American history (xi). Gilmore argues that essentialized categories of communal differentiation, especially race and class, are the consequences of an all-pervasive American demand for transparency that can be traced back to the colonial period (x). The demand for transparency is anchored in an obsession with documentation and certification. The purpose of this demand is to create a space in which confidence can be given without risk as every interpersonal transaction is codified, duplicated, and thus fixed via contract, ledger, notebook or the Bible, to create what Gilmore punningly calls a "readerly, writerly world" (x). Melville broaches the issue of authenticity by illustrating how outsourcing moral judgment to documentation merely creates more surfaces for potential dupes to contend with.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Masquerade and confidence games have no discernible endpoint, and readers are left in the same place of uncertainty as actors in the marketplace: all either can ever uncover are "further layers of fictionalized representation in the continuing revolutions and re-formations of the market, and the fluid identities that inhabit it" (Temple 465). The implications of this statement are devastating when it is read in the context of Ahab's famous speech about the "little lower layer" he discerns behind the "pasteboard mask" of every living creature (*MD* 164). Ahab's professed confidence about the whale's hidden agency is turned on its head in *CM* because sense perception is fundamentally prone to deception. The novel plays out Ahab's nightmare scenario that the captain only utters in a by-line, seemingly under his breath when we follow the rhythm of his speech pattern; i.e., the fear that there may be "naught beyond" the mask he faces (*MD* 164).

The issue of whether or not the confidence man enables and performs real transgressions against socio-economic boundaries also raises questions about the novel's generic affiliation. Is the novel a romance or a realist novel concerned with social milieu? Traditionally, the realist novel examines the intersection of social strata and its characters' navigation of those strata along what Amy Kaplan defines as the "social line" ("Knowledge" 71). In her reading of William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Kaplan argues that knowledge of the social topography of the city is what enables characters' positive self-representation. Knowing the metric of the line allows social climbers, such as the Marches in Howells's novel, to define themselves socioeconomically over against those of the lower social strata. As Kaplan observes, the "line not only denies the social reality of the poor, it also effaces any conflicting perspective" ("Knowledge" 73). Analogous readings exist for *The Confidence-Man* as well. For instance, Jonathan Cook argues that the characterization of the soldier of fortune, Thomas Fry, ironizes the fact that American commercialism threatens to betray the values of the Revolution at the cost of the socio-economic prospects of common people, especially those that have performed military service (*Satirical* 42). When Fry takes to begging and passes himself off as a veteran of the U.S.-Mexican War, it is only the confidence man, in the guise of the herb-doctor, who, in the presence of the morally outraged bystanders, asserts that "the vice of this unfortunate [Fry] is pardonable" and proceeds to give alms to Fry in the form of one of his boxes of medicine (*CM* 97).

Interesting for our purposes here is the way the herb-doctor justifies his stance on Fry's begging by repeating the mute's initial reference to 1 Corinthians 13:8, "charity never faileth." He then proceeds to craft his own Pauline apothegm in response to Fry's initial unwillingness to accept his gift: "Charity marvels not that you should be somewhat hard of conviction [. . .] but forget not that those who are loved are chastened" (*CM* 99). Melville's use of the KJB style here

is apparent in the placement of the negation after the full verb as well as poetic antithetic parallelism in the last sentence. But the herb-doctor also transcends Paul's advice about charity by assuming the persona of charity, albeit in an attempt at an uplifting pun at the distraught Fry. By assuming the speech pattern of the Bible to gain the trust of the needy, the herb-doctor performs a kind of Biblical ventriloquism here. The confidence the herb-doctor desires to obtain from Fry is predicated on Fry's and the reader's recognition of Biblical apothegms about charity. Melville's usage in this passage indicates a critique of the form of the Biblical aphorism by demonstrating how codifying communal practice in terse, brief proverbs is open to stylistic imitation and, potentially, manipulation. Still, the herb-doctor's words manage to transform Fry's despondency into hopefulness.¹⁷²

The novel resists Kaplan's theory of the line as a hermeneutical device for discerning a communal topography by insinuating that positive identifications along a rigid social grid are meaningless because such grids represent yet another means of manipulation of the gullible by the confidence-man. Moreover, the novel flat out denies the efficacy of any empirical cognitive navigational tools that are based on empirical observation of the kind Basil March and his wife utilize in *Hazard*. Responding to Pitch's aforementioned self-upbraiding, the Cosmopolitan quips that subscribing to any dogma, be it religion, Hume, or Bacon, is futile because both "will betray him who seeks to steer soul and body by it, like a false religion" (*CM* 135).¹⁷³

As such, knowledge of the line merely perpetuates yet another cynical masquerade. In fact, the confidence man is the only passenger who uses his knowledge of the line to dupe

¹⁷² Again, parallelism is one of the stylistic signatures of Hebrew poetry. In its recognizability, it is akin to English rhyme schemes. See Alter, *Poetry* 211, as well as Gable and Wheeler, 38.

¹⁷³ Maurice Lee provides a useful differentiated assessment of the novel's genre affiliation: "Unlike romantic texts that aspire to feel real by inhabiting self-generated, self-contained universes, *The Confidence-Man* with its meta-critical asides purposefully punctures verisimilitude. And unlike the realist novels that aspire to feel real by corresponding with material and cultural conditions, *The Confidence-Man* is not committed to finely textured settings and intricate social relations" ("Skepticism" 117).

would-be social climbers and those trying to make a quick buck—like the stock holders of the Black Rapids Coal Company—in the wake of the rising economic tide. The case of Fry shows that the social line can be crossed both ways, as beggars mingle with merchants, charity workers, philosophers, collegiates, and Christian ministers, the confidence-man has the advantage over his victims partially because he is omnipresent in all social quarters on the ship. He shuns no social milieu. Melville does more than merely satirize the emergent corporate greed of a country teeming with economic growth potential, which many other realist novels do just as well. In an environment of absolute social and economic mobility, determining who belongs where becomes a vital issue one, that Melville problematizes here.¹⁷⁴

4.6.2 *The Barber and Hermeneutic Inconsistency*

Certificates, guides, and other documents serve to authenticate identities, reveal truth, warn against counterfeits, and shield their bearers from bamboozlement. These texts may consist of simple phrases, such as the “No trust” sign at the barber William Cream’s door; more complex textual entities, such as the “Counterfeit Detector,” which in itself is a means of trickery; or authoritative texts such as the Bible. Melville situates the Bible alongside other textual ‘lie detectors.’ However, the text does not perform an irreverent mockery or deconstruction of the Biblical proof-text, but rather explicates the two contrasting philosophies outlined in the apocryphal Ecclesiasticus and Proverbs. Particularly the final chapter’s dialogical structure bears a strong resemblance to *Clarel’s* meditation on Biblical authority (see the previous chapter).

¹⁷⁴ While it does not conform to any one single generic paradigm of literary realism, *The Confidence-Man*, when considered in the theological context I have staked out for this study, stands in a distinct literary tradition of what may be called the literature of folly. As with “Bartleby,” Melville draws on the conventions of social satire as a formal template for the novel. Sebastian Brant’s *Das Narrenschiff* [The Ship of Fools] (1494), a Reformation-era moral satire, is one of the foundational texts of this literary genre. Modern examples include Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) and Katherine Anne Porter’s *Ship of Fools* (1962). While I will not venture a comparative reading here, Brant’s book in particular can be seen as part of a literary history of moral instruction within the Christian literary tradition that traces its roots to the Book of Proverbs.

Melville juxtaposes the static authority of doctrinal texts and the dynamic interpersonal relations of the social, and problematizes the exegetical practice of comparative reading of different Biblical passages.

At the same time, the debate about Biblical hermeneutics epitomizes the ongoing negotiation of the foundations of confidence that the novel is concerned with in an exegetical debate spreads over its final three chapters. Specifically, Melville contrasts the moral perspectives of the Book of Proverbs and the Ecclesiasticus, which is, ironically, The Book of Proverbs's apocryphal extension. This debate is set up in the chapter "Very Charming," in which the Cosmopolitan, Frank Goodman, who is one of the central incarnations of the confidence man, advocates universal trust in his fellow creatures based on his interpretation of Proverbs 3:26. His interlocutor on the topic is one, William Cream, a barber who plies his trade aboard the *Fidelé*. Cream operates his business under the figurative aegis of a sign above his door declaring "No Trust" in big bold letter. When the cosmopolitan inquirers about the sign, Cream refers him to the apocryphal skepticism of Jesus ben Sirach, which cautions against entering into commerce with those who seek to persuade with "many words" (Ecclesiasticus 12:16 and 13:11). Presaging his later debate with the old man, the cosmopolitan asks Cream "what precisely may be this mysterious knowledge"; i.e., apocryphal knowledge, he obtained in his trade (*CM* 232).¹⁷⁵

Ultimately, the cosmopolitan only succeeds because he gets Cream to admit that the sign contradicts his own natural sentiments and that such contradiction is, in fact, an offense to his conscience (233). Hence taking down the sign and therefore symbolically dejecting his adherence to wisdom literature, absolves Cream from said moral sin. The cosmopolitan here

¹⁷⁵ Dillingham reads the confidence man as an alchemist adept in precisely this context. As a wise man, he is the only one qualified to wield the power that comes with the apocryphal knowledge of manipulating surfaces (*Melville's Later* 349). Gable and Wheeler remind us that the term apocryphal, coined by St. Augustine, designates a hidden body of texts reserved only for the most learned wise men, meaning those who can tolerate harsh and controversial ideas (171).

operates as harbinger to an idiosyncratic *kerygma*—the NT notion of the message, the gospel, to be spread to all nations—that announces casting off sin by abnegating distrust. And indeed, in the final chapter, he carries the old man's pun about reading the Bible as a newspaper, thus revealing his Christological interpretation of it:¹⁷⁶

„Sir,” said the old man, after looking up puzzled at him a moment, “sir,” said he, “one would think this was a coffee-house, and it was war-time, and I had a newspaper here with great news, and the only copy to be had, you sit there looking at me so eager.”
 “And so you have good news there, sir—the very best of good news.”
 “Too good to be true,” here came from one of the curtained berths.
 “Hark!” said the cosmopolitan. “Some one talks in his sleep.” (CM 241)

Frye observes that the special rhetorical thrust of NT Christology resides in its aim to empower the individual by exterminating through a language of love “man’s fear of freedom and his resentment of the discipline and responsibility that freedom brings” (232). The cosmopolitan also reveals his proclivity towards NT theology as an argumentative and rhetorical platform for his schemes by preaching his own gospel of charity to Cream and others in the novel. Cream’s natural inclination is to have confidence, yet prudence and experience, the two Proverbial wisdom virtues, have allowed him to peer “behind the scenes” of society’s universal masquerade and thus prevent him from acting on that impulse (CM 231). His attitude is consistent with his reference to wisdom literature as scriptural authority, insofar as he invokes experience as the reason for his being skeptical towards humankind. The ingenuity in the cosmopolitan’s argument consists in convincing Cream that he in fact sins against his own consciousness by refusing to enact universal charity and keeping the sign. This conflation of charity and identity is an extension to the aforementioned characteristics of wisdom literature cited by Frye. In this

¹⁷⁶ A number of scholars have examined the novel’s implied hypothesis that the confidence man’s composite identity indicates that Christ and the devil “are equally representative of God’s divided moral nature and enigmatic identity” (Cook, *Satirical* 61). Ricoeur observes that the *kerygma* in the first instance marks not another text but announces a person—that of Christ—and his paying witness to the text of the OT (35). It is insofar not a counter-text to the OT reference displayed here but rather an interpretation of them.

context, Ryan has shown how the self-identification for affluent Anglo-Saxon whites partially depended on their ability to be charitable, specifically “their capacity to care for and improve society’s ‘weaker’ members,” such as the cosmopolitan professes to be in this scene (688). Although he initially denigrates fixing their agreement to paper as a negative reflection on their “joint honor,” the cosmopolitan eventually demands written proof for the fact that once Cream takes down the sign, they will be “kind, considerate fellows, with responsive fellow-feelings” (*CM* 235). For the cosmopolitan, the contract does not affix their experiment in confidence, but records their mutual moral status. The subsequent farcical drawing up of the piece confirms this as well. Both names and designations of the signatories are comically contrasted: Cream’s “Barber of the Mississippi steamer *Fidèle*” is occupational, local, and specific, whereas “FRANK GOODMAN, Philanthropist, and Citizen of the World” is ideological, global, and broad (*CM* 235). The whole procedure parodies all other instances of written authentication in the book and simultaneously sets the stage for the final debate about the ultimate authenticator, the Bible.¹⁷⁷

Cream, unable to accept the conditions of the agreement, refuses to give the cosmopolitan credit for his shave. Once again, Melville here is consistent in his interpretation of theology, for it is in this instance that Cream directs Goodman to the Book of Proverbs and hence to wisdom literature. As Dillingham notes, the cosmopolitan, in this chapter playing the eponymous role of a snake charmer, ultimately does not convince the barber through arguments but through a kind of animal mesmerism (*Melville’s Last* 347). Since money would violate “the inmost spirit” (*CM* 237) of their agreement, the cosmopolitan leaves the barber only with the “flimsy stuff” of the

¹⁷⁷ Concerning the confidence man’s channeling of Christology, Franklin comments that “All orthodoxies, heterodoxies, and blasphemies of the Christian world begin by defining Jesus as either the divine Savior, one of the incarnations of God, a great but mortal teacher, or a dangerous impostor—insane, wicked, or merely deluded. Any of these theories might possibly be argued about the Cosmopolitan, perhaps or perhaps not the last avatar of the Confidence Man, perhaps an earthly or divine savior, perhaps an earthly impostor” (*Wake* 183).

contract they both signed (*CM* 235). The barber quickly realizes that he has been tricked, but is only able to rally his better sense after the cosmopolitan had left.

4.6.3 *Before the Light Fades: The Cosmopolitan Debates Exegesis with the Old Keeper of Faith*

The cosmopolitan's conversation with the old keeper of faith is basically a continuation and extrapolation upon the encounter with the Barber, and the latter's invocation of wisdom literature, which also functions as the cosmopolitan's argumentative basis for his creed of universal confidence. The encounter with the old man expounds on this issue by raising several questions concerning Biblical hermeneutics and canonization: What is the relation of revealed and apocryphal wisdom? Are they compatible? And if so, how can they cohere in practice? The conversation mixes questions of morality with questions of textual history and editorial authority.

The cosmopolitan's alleged confusion at William Cream's invocation of Ecclesiasticus as the source of his skepticism toward humanity warrants further consideration. Frye argues that the Bible structurally consists of a progressive dialectical sequence, which is composed of seven phases, each phase relating typologically to the previous and the succeeding one (106). The second phase, revolution, consists of the sublimation of the creation myth under a nationalist banner, beginning with the covenant Moses makes with God. Frye notes that such exodus/revolution fundamentally depends on, among other things, the

[. . .] adoption of a specific canon of texts, clearly marked off from apocryphal and peripheral ones, along with a tendency to regard the heretic who differs on minor points of doctrine as a more dangerous enemy than the person who repudiates the whole position. (114)

Frye's observation illuminates the reason why the cosmopolitan's distress at William Cream quoting apocryphal wisdom literature to him carries over into the novel's final chapter. Without

clear delineation, revolution and thus the progress from past to future becomes impossible.

Hence the interview with the old keeper of faith is necessary to gauge his exegetical compass.¹⁷⁸

The novel's final chapter, therefore, is preoccupied in the first instance with sorting out the authority of canonical over against apocryphal wisdom. On the surface, Proverbs 3:26—the cosmopolitan's mantra—advocates trust in God's omnipresent protection, which the cosmopolitan claims as an a priori condition for his endeavors: "For the Lord shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken." To the cosmopolitan the Biblical text inspires confidence in oneself and others when entering into commerce. His exegesis of the passage deviates significantly from the literal meaning, however, because he considers the apothegm as guaranteeing not just divine dispensary justice but personal favor and protection: "[. . .] I believe in a Committee of Safety, holding silent sessions over all, in an invisible patrol, most alert when we soundest sleep, and whose beat lies as much through forests as towns, along rivers as streets" (*CM* 230). His interpretation comprehends divine presence as underwriting his sense of ubiquitous protectedness while foreclosing the spirit of continuous inquiry after the deity as the fixed point of existence that the OT hermeneutics seeks to inspire. His explication of the Proverbs passage to the old man modifies this idea in two significant ways: First, the protective entity is not singularly individual but consists of an anonymous and thus impersonal—in the sense that there is no singular identifiable entity to which the faithful may appeal—committee which stands guard over those who have confidence. Apparently, this guardianship is indiscriminate of their geographical location or socio-economic class.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Bible scholars might take issue with Frye ignoring the Bible's complex textual history and anthological character here. However, his approach in this instance of his argument works to articulate what Frye calls the "more metaphorical and less conceptual appeal of the Oriental conception of enlightenment" that Western authors who use the Bible in their writing respond to (106).

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Deut. 32:35 as well as Jonathan Edwards's famous exegesis in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Edwards 211). The foot metaphor is apropos here because it implies a correlation between worldly and moral life. Those who follow the law are in firm standing in lie and with God. On canonicity, see Frye 110. By stressing

The passage from *Mardi*, which I discussed earlier in this chapter, may serve as a useful interlocutor here and therefore justifies a brief tangent. What the cosmopolitan suggests here is precisely the sort of rule by committee that King Media categorically rejects when he boasts that “an honest king is the best of those uncial judges, which individually are better than twelve,” while Taji, waiving the banner of democracy, ridicules the quaint image of the king on his throne sitting in judgment over his fellow human beings (*M* 185). When read in context, the two passages are inversions of one-another. And while each refers to a particular context, both scenes draw upon the OT text to construe the terms of just rule. And yet in both cases, the Biblical text is both adopted and refuted. Taji rejects Media’s grandstanding and thus composes a mock poem to honor him based on Proverbs. Meanwhile, the cosmopolitan perverts the literal meaning of the Biblical text to suit his argument with the old keeper of faith. Neither text outright rejects Biblical moral wisdom, though, as either features a counter figure that subscribes to its maxims, albeit that that person is either simple or naive. And even if we were to construe this last fact as a willing mockery of the text on Melville’s part, it does not constitute a rejection of Biblical wisdom but merely a negative assessment of human kind’s hermeneutical abilities.

The second way in which the cosmopolitan modifies the literal meaning of the Biblical text is by mocking the Bible’s simple call for faith. By democratizing the protective entity (singular sovereign—committee of equals) and its realm of influence, the cosmopolitan mocks idealist conceptions of society as a joint stock company, and thereby ridicules the more general idea of warding oneself against folly and embarrassment by appealing to a sovereign moral arbiter. A potential inhibition to these considerations is, of course, the confidence man’s inherent untrustworthiness. Like his Biblical hermeneutics, his meanings are never literal. Even if we

the invisible and intangible quality of his guardian entity, his reading nominally conforms to the OT wisdom books’ vision of a hidden, if not absent, God whose presence is constantly sought after by the faithful. At the same time, it is a reading that harkens back to the foundational notion of universal divine surveillance set up in the Pentateuch.

were to believe in his confusion on the subject, at the cost of ignoring his earlier swindling the barber out of his payment, his personal beliefs are comically self-indulgent: He feigns himself as operating under the aegis of a committee of personal guardian angels, an assertion that simultaneously satirizes pedestrian superstition and democratic idealism. And yet his reading nominally is consistent with the Book of Proverbs's concern with historical continuity and regulating communal life.

William Cream's rebuttal apparently lingers enough with the cosmopolitan that he uses confusion to snare an old man into a conversation about Biblical canonicity and authority. The cosmopolitan's interlocutor is a "clean, comely old man," which the narrator extrapolates as a particular type of Jeffersonian agrarian idealist:

[. . .] the old man seemed a well-to-do farmer, happily dismissed, after a thrifty life of activity, from the fields to the fireside—one of those who, at three-score-and-ten, are fresh-hearted as at fifteen; to whom seclusion gives a boon more blessed than knowledge, and at last sends them to heaven untainted by the world, because ignorant of it; just as a countryman putting up at a London inn, and never stirring out of it as a sight-seer, will leave London at last without once being lost in its fog, or soiled by its mud. (*CM* 241)

The narrator sees the old man taking an intellectual stance of confinement. He is ignorant in the ways of the world and insofar "untainted by the world," and yet the consequence of such purity is a lack of experience and a rather abstract notion of prudence. Like the narrator's proverbial London tourist, the old man has never been lost in the fog of spiritual doubt triggered not by reading but by coming into contact with the nefarious designs of other human beings. If nothing else, Biblical wisdom is to be practical. It functions to personalize those laws, divine and man-made, that seem too abstract to comprehend in writing (Frye 125). Hence wisdom always implies concomitant lived experience in its reader. But the old man's epistemology lacks this latter, discerning tint and curiosity necessary to make use of wisdom. For despite his extensive

experience reading the Bible, he claims to have never noticed the Apocrypha and confidently dismisses it as unwarranted:

„Man and boy, I have read the good book this seventy years, and don't remember seeing anything like that. Let me see it,” rising earnestly, and going round to him [. . .]

„Ah!” cried the old man, brightening up, “now I know. Look,” turning the leaves forward and back, till all the Old Testament lay flat on one side, and all the New Testament flat on the other, while in his fingers he supported vertically the portion between, “look, sir, all this to the right is certain truth, and all this to the left is certain truth, but all I hold in my hand here is apocrypha.”

„Apocrypha?”

[. . .]

“Yes; and there's the word in black and white,” pointing to it. “And what says the word? It says as much as ‘not warranted;’ for what do college men say of anything of that sort? They say it is apocryphal. The word itself, I've heard from the pulpit, implies something of uncertain credit. So if your disturbance be raised from aught in this apocrypha,” again taking up the pages, “in that case, think no more of it, for it's apocrypha.” (*CM* 242-43)

Here, the label ‘apocrypha’ is reduced to being antonymous to the label ‘canonical,’ a curious mistranslation of the original meaning of the term: hidden. The structural and physical position of the Apocrypha between both Testaments symbolize its ambivalent meaning. The old man's assertion of having heard of but never investigated the term makes his ignorance painfully obvious to the cosmopolitan who proceeds to exploit his interlocutor's absolute trust in canonical authority in his subsequent retort.¹⁸⁰

Before discussing said retort, though, I want to briefly broach the idea that, on the one hand, human interaction always carries an air of contingency, while, on the other hand, wisdom literature is designed to overcome such contingency. Many of the novel's dupes are preoccupied

¹⁸⁰ The question of the canonical status of the “hidden books” of the Bible remains controversial to this day. The term was originally coined by Jerome, a cleric turned monk, and famous translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible. He designated the books “hidden” because he deemed their contents fit only for the wisest men (Gable and Wheeler 171). Melville also symbolizes the Apocrypha's physical position as books hidden “in-between” two other books as indicating its ambivalent status within Biblical canon. The organizational scheme not pioneered but made famous by Martin Luther in his German translation of the Bible (Gable and Wheeler 172, 173).

with the devising ways in which to offset the potentially detrimental effects of interpersonal or commercial transactions. That this inclination is not only paradoxical but nonsensical is the overall message of the confidence man's ploys. In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Bruno Latour recently redefines the term 'social' as a contact-based praxis built on trust and contingency. To be social, to interact with others in all manners of communal context, be it economic, romantic, scientific, is "no longer a safe and unproblematic property, it is a movement that may fail to trace any new connection and may fail to redesign any well-formed assemblage" (Latour 8). If we conceive of 'the social' not as additive to all sorts of interactions but rather as a conditional principle of mobility that underwrites all interaction, we can bring into focus contingency as the very precondition for human interaction. If we grant that Melville's novel is interested in observing the means and conditions by which such interactions proceed, then Latour's methodological admonitions can be useful to conceptualize the faulty logic behind the dupes' machinations in the novel.

The confidence man exploits his intricate knowledge of the old man's particular brand of naiveté based on wrongful terminology and doctrinal obedience. Respond to the old man's earlier dismissals of the apocryphal texts as untrustworthy, the cosmopolitan launches into a pathetic series of boastful exclamations in which he mockingly celebrates folly as virtue.

"But, sir," resuming, "I cannot tell you how thankful I am for your reminding me about the apocrypha here. For the moment, its being such escaped me. Fact is, when all is bound up together, it's sometimes confusing. The uncanonical part should be bound distinct. And, now that I think of it, how well did those learned doctors who rejected for us this whole book of Sirach. I never read anything so calculated to destroy man's confidence in man. This son of Sirach even says—I saw it but just now: 'Take heed of thy friends;' not, observe, thy seeming friends, thy hypocritical friends, thy false friends, but thy friends, thy real friends—that is to say, not the truest friend in the world is to be implicitly trusted. Can Rochefoucault equal that? I should not wonder if his view of human nature, like Machiavelli's, was taken from this Son of Sirach. And to call it wisdom—the Wisdom of the Son of Sirach! Wisdom, indeed! What an ugly thing wisdom must

be! Give me the folly that dimples the cheek, say I, rather than the wisdom that curdles the blood. But no, no; it ain't wisdom; it's apocrypha, as you say, sir. For how can that be trustworthy that teaches distrust?"

"I tell you what it is," here cried the same voice as before, only now in less of mockery, "if you two don't know enough to sleep, don't be keeping wiser men awake. And if you want to know what wisdom is, go find it under your blankets."

"Wisdom?" cried another voice with a brogue; "arrah, and is't wisdom the two geese are gabbling about all this while? To bed with ye, ye divils, and don't be after burning your fingers with the likes of wisdom." (CM 243)

This scene crystalizes the special satirical quality of Melville's final novel as it lays out the anatomy of the confidence man's meta-commentary on the interplay of wisdom and folly as set forth in Biblical wisdom literature. On the surface, his latitudinarian attitude towards friendship humanizes the rather stern demands of the Biblical text. In contrast to his earlier assertions about the committee of safety, his hermeneutics here is rather literal. If we are to believe, as I have argued in this section, that the confidence man operates with detailed knowledge of Biblical wisdom, his earlier assertions of ignorance become less and less convincing. His endorsement of folly over wisdom thus appears purely satirical. Just like the Apocrypha, the meaning behind his assertions is only partially discernible from his literal explication: "Give me the folly [in others] that dimples the cheek, say I, rather than the wisdom that curdles the blood" (CM 243). Proverbial folly, then, is the medium in which the confidence man traffics and yet he must know how to test for prudence in his victims.

Ultimately, testing for confidence in others coincides with what Christopher Sten has called testing for humanity (303). Yet by replacing the terms 'trust' with 'humanity' Sten seems to merely raise the stakes, and the pressure, to which characters in *The Confidence-Man* are exposed. By critiquing doctrinism in the Proverbial context, the novel points out that it is foolish to reference any ideal, fixed textual intermediary when evaluating one's relationships with

others. In fact, the novel suggests that Proverbial wisdom is paradoxical because it explicitly points outside itself, to human experience, to underwrite its apothegms and, more importantly, that this fact may be exploited by skilled obscurantist exegetes. In this sense, its wisdom is extra-textual and therefore inimical to the kind of literal interpretation the confidence man gives the old man. The case for my reading is best made several chapters earlier in the interaction of the confidence man and the old miser: while the miser initially refuses to enter into any commercial activity, he soon grows completely dependent on the belief in the confidence man's (as herb doctor) tonic (*CM* 110).¹⁸¹

I have argued that the contrast between the confidence man's statements and his actions reveals himself to be an astute practitioner of Proverbial wisdom as part of my overarching argument that Melville's writing features a heretofore unrecognized layer of Biblical hermeneutical meta-discussion. In this context, a word should be said about Melville's supposed reevaluation of the term 'trust' in the novel. Communal structures, insofar as they are abstractions of the way people interact in various settings, are inherently messy. Melville's novel considers those structures on their own terms as exchange-based on trust. Introducing intermediary moral arbiters, such as the Bible, invariably creates problems, because such arbiters try to rig the game by eliminating the risk involved in trusting another human being. Trying to avoid or automatize this laborious task is tantamount to intellectual cowardice, as the one-legged skeptic from the earlier chapters of the novel reminds the "flock of fools" scorning him for his harsh treatment of the Black Guinea (*CM* 15). Regularizing human interaction is an absurd fantasy, because

¹⁸¹ In fact, the confidence man's whole notion of language is based on the flexibility of semantic categories. See his Nietzschean discussion with Pitch, the Missourian about the appearance of a new type of philanthropist, the genial misanthrope (*CM* 176).

irregularity and unpredictability are constitutive properties of any meaningful human interaction.¹⁸²

To put it differently, the possibility of being disappointed, tricked, or duped is what makes trust such a desirable and rarefied commodity. Naomi Morgenstern poignantly illustrates this logic when discussing what she considers Melville's take on Emersonian friendship as a moment of crisis in "Bartleby" (250):

The necessary possibility of performative failure not only haunts from outside but in fact guarantees or seals every event or experience of friendship from within. Friendship, like language, happens on the threshold of its incurable (constative) failure, and we never leave this threshold. (252)

Morgenstern's poststructuralist analysis of friendship, I want to suggest, equally applies to the *Confidence-Man*. Here individuals only exist insofar as they are called upon to perform the function of trust the same way that, according to Morgenstern, "the lawyer and his scrivener would be called—by each other—into being and, simultaneously, into a relationship that never achieves constative certainty" (252-53). By acknowledging this fluidity, the novel stakes out an idealist sense of trust through its negative depiction of the confidence man duping his victims. Yet these negative examples serve to advocate a practice of confidence as informed, congenial trust. Confidence consists in tolerating unfiltered and unmediated contact with another.

Seen in this light, the cosmopolitan's seemingly cynic turn of phrase becomes an apologia for his function as a hermeneutical corrective for the reader, who is the only party that is prone to both the confidence man's prudence and his victims' folly. To trust in others is to enter into open and free communication with them at the risk of losing one's investment of confidence. The only way to gauge the risks of this inevitable process is by drawing on one's experience from previous

¹⁸² My argument therefore contradicts Bradley Johnson's claim that the "radical theatricality of his [Melville's] Masquerade" lets us access the true properties of theology as fundamentally inadequate in its promise to reveal truth (135). It is theatricality, I argue, that draws attention to the usefulness of a text-based theology grounded in an experience-based hermeneutics.

interactions with humanity. This is precisely what the confidence man, especially in the guise of the metropolitan, advocates all along. The possible responses to this perpetual challenge are twofold: either we adhere to our preconceptions of how to behave and remain desperately concerned with not being duped, or we wager our trust and face the potentially adverse consequences with open eyes. In other words, to trust means to accept one's own vulnerability.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Sten concludes that "In a world where ethical and biblical admonitions have become contradictory, their authority uncertain and 'apocryphal,' one person cannot know the truth about another. People no longer act in prescribed ways, if indeed they ever did" (303). I am going further than Sten by reading the confidence man as an adept reader of Proverbs as well as an idealist construction of a person that can in fact know people's hearts.

5 Ecclesiastes's Constructive Religious Skepticism: *Pierre*, "The Two Temples," and *Billy Budd*

5.1 Introduction

So far, I have advocated the productive nature of Melville's literary exchange with OT wisdom, to argue that his use of the Bible exceeds the merely subversive. Considering the same kind of interaction with the final prominent book in Biblical wisdom tradition, the Book of Ecclesiastes, means moving into decidedly more complex territory. Hence, some terminological clarification must precede my analysis. As with the other wisdom books, many Ecclesiastes's exegetical and textual history are mired in controversy. The author identifies himself as, "the Preacher" (Heb. "Qoheleth"), a title that connotes both the Solomonic tradition—one of the debates concerning the authorship of the text is whether the preacher refers to himself as Solomon or as merely channeling Solomonic wisdom—as well as a didactic impetus. The book's frequently misunderstood mantra, 'all is vanity,' often leads to it being considered the bleakest tome in the anthology of wisdom books next to the Book of Job. In contrast to this truncation, the book's message is spiritually affirmative as it advocates a life of belief and even condones the enjoyment of material things, as long as such pleasures are relished in the awareness of their divine origin. It contemplates this issue by contrasting the inherent spiritual shiftlessness of a life "under the sun"; i.e., a life that is merely secular as opposed to a view of existence that regards life as daily bestowed from God's hand. As a philosophical proposition, the Book of Ecclesiastes is concerned with moral life in the world and consequently with questions of teleology: When all prefabricated categories of meaning are void, when we are completely detached from material yearnings, what meaningful action can we take? Can the individual escape self-delusion? And, if so, is positive action possible without the appeal to transcendental first causes? Structurally, the

book presents a dialectic of faith in three distinct argumentative steps: an account of the secular, material life; an exhortation of the purposeful life under God; and a debate of challenges to that life in faith by the existence of evil. The last is often rationalized as the problem of horological and chronometrical time, an expression that refers to the fact that earthly and heavenly knowledge are isolated and irreconcilable.

For those versed in the skeptical tradition, these preconceptions about the purposeful life present various problems, which I will consider as thematic tropes in Melville's writing. These implications include the inherent dependence on God's transcendental presence and his coequal hiddenness, a genetic determinacy of the human body and mind in the secular realm, and the inherent circularity of history. In addressing this conundrum, Ecclesiastes speaks practically, not prophetically (Gabler & Wheeler 116). The Preacher proposes a voluntary surrender of individual agency to God's sovereignty and asserts that only this surrender may constitute a personal sense of purpose. Existential purpose arises precisely from the act of relinquishing self-determination. To lead a purposeful existence, the individual must live neither ascetically nor hedonistically, but rather must quest daily to discover divine presence through its interactions with the world.

In his introduction, the Preacher emphasizes God's presence as structuring purpose-giving force in the believer's life. Robert Alter distinguishes the central critical thrust of Ecclesiastes over against the other wisdom books by arguing that the book's initial "endless cycles of futility" are inherently skeptical, not because they question God's judgment but because they trivialize "the possibility of enduring value and meaningful human action" (*Pen* 60, 61). Without this hidden presence, history is cyclical (Eccls. 1:9). Divine presence, in this context, conveys the notion of history as deliberately ordered, which the Preacher asserts by

observing that, “to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:” (Eccls. 3:1).¹⁸⁴ The text therefore does not disavow materialism *a priori*; rather it qualifies the epistemological conditions under which engagement with the world becomes spiritually meaningful. Material objects and possessions have value only if they are enjoyed in the knowledge of God’s presence. This idealist utilitarian perspective conceives of the material world as being comprised of auxiliary entities designed to experience divine presence. Without God’s presence, human edifices, be they material or conceptual, are vaporous clouds without substance or staying power. Alter usefully points out the correlation of folly and cyclicity of the book. The idea behind the text is to show believers a path out of the intellectual trap of secular materialism—or, what modern readers would call commodity fetish—and to point them toward a meaningful life in the world. This life encompasses communal and cultural interactions. It involves commercial and sensual experiences, all lived out under a divine mandate that is to be renewed daily. Considering the book’s epistemological dimension, Northrop Frye cautions that in the context of Ecclesiastes, “Wisdom [. . .] is not knowledge: knowledge is of the particular and actual [present], and wisdom is rather a sense of the potential, of the way to deal with the kind of thing that may happen” (*Great* 122). Frye incidentally puts his finger on the inherent paradox of the genre: Biblical wisdom is future-directed, idealist, perhaps even utopian, and therefore feigns itself distinct from all things empirical, present, and tactical. And yet, while it tries to speak universally, its examples are based on quotidian experiences.

Ultimately, Ecclesiastes proposes that existential meaning, as I have outlined it above, is derived exclusively from believers’ continuous discovery of divine giftedness as the central characteristic of existence. The Preacher stresses that this discovery is necessarily an open-ended activity. The conception of the material world as gratuitous reiterates the incomprehensibility of

¹⁸⁴ cf., Eaton 47.

God as prime mover. Moreover, considering life and use of the material world gifts establishes personal indebtedness to the donor. The complication with this approach is that human beings behold this gift through the limited framework of horological (earthly) time. The focus here is not so much God's impending punishment for violating moral law but rather humankind's struggle to live up to life's promise. Melville confronts this dynamic most explicitly in his novel *Pierre*, in which the protagonist sets out to reconcile these two realms. As such, Pierre takes on a momentous but ultimately impossible epistemological and theological project. In this sense, the book negotiates the inevitable compromise forced by the finite, yet material, framework of natural law and the absolutist dictates of divine moral law.¹⁸⁵

What makes Ecclesiastes a thought-provoking text is the fact that the Preacher freely admits the paradoxical nature of his proposals. For instance, in 7:16-18 the speaker proposes that those who want to walk in wisdom as he conceives of it must travel a *via media* between self-righteousness and capitulation to evil. In Eaton's words, this path runs between the pitfalls of moral legalism and moral indifference (114). At the same time, Ecclesiastes is rather orthodox in its unequivocal disavowal of what the Preacher identifies as foolishness; e.g., the unmediated attachment to materiality. Subsistence to status and possession is foolish because individuals, in their subsistence, mistake material goods and worldly fame for first causes rather than seeing them for the empty, unmotivated objects they are. In *Moby-Dick* Ishmael accordingly reads Ecclesiastes as upbraiding him for trusting his sense perception too much even though he knows

¹⁸⁵ The implications of the logic of gift exchange as symbolic exchange are intriguing here. The Preacher advocates the life under faith as a mode of being that brings to consciousness human indebtedness to God. In the face of evil subsisting in the world, human beings are to understand the inherently disproportionate nature of the gift exchange. For post-industrialist societies, dependent on what Jean Baudrillard calls the system in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993), the expectation of reciprocity is precisely the means by which the gift economy remains lob-sided (36). James Walters notes that Baudrillard usefully explores the symbolic reenactment of death in initiation rituals: Symbolic exchange as a means of communalizing death. For pre-modern societies, such as the ones that brought forth the Bible, gifting was a means of establishing and fortifying reciprocal relations of generosity and trust. However, this exchange always remains ambiguous (48).

how easily it may be manipulated. The KJB's term 'vanity' remains controversial in scholarship, although Alter notes that the KJB generally remains the "most adequate rendering of Qohelet's style" (Alter, *Wisdom* 339). The Hebrew 'hebel' is an ambivalent metaphor for smoke or vapor and therefore characterizes material reality as fleeting and devoid of substance. In the same vein, Frye cautions against ascribing *a priori* any negative value to the term. He proposes situating it along the lines of the Buddhist *shunyata* ('void') (123). Again, such semantics do not license either hedonism or asceticism. Ecclesiastes is neither a call to a monkish life nor a nihilist affirmation of pleasure. Both Eaton and Frye concur that the real message of the book is that once we learn to perceive literally the inherent emptiness in earthly things, we can begin to lead a life of conscious enjoyment rather than one of mindless consumption.

By characterizing the Preacher as "a vigorous realist determined to smash his way through every locked door of repression in his mind," Frye incidentally, and somewhat paradoxically, styles him as a proto-Enlightenment humanist devoted to the perfectibility of the human mind (123). This statement challenges literary students to consider Melville's mediation of the Biblical text not only as a translation of theological maxims into layman's philosophy but also in the critical reception of a realist politics by literary means. Melville, I argue below, explores the phenomenological repercussions of this realist attitude towards the individual's epistemological capacities. Meanwhile, James G. Williams also observes the revolutionary address of Ecclesiastes and considers the text self-reflexively critiquing the genre of wisdom writing. According to Williams, the book "both presupposes and attacks the conventional wisdom represented by Proverbs"; Ecclesiastes "sees polarities in creation but subordinates them to a skeptical questioning of what the ancient sages taught" (Williams 266). The Preacher's

meditation can therefore be read as a deviation from the essential moral baseline of Proverbs and as marshaling a critique of the sapiential tradition.

The philosophical and revisionary axioms of the book also have strong implications for its overall epistemology: Ecclesiastes's disavowal of materialism is based on the idea that attachments to worldly objects and reputation emerge from a position of spiritual isolation, which the Preacher equates with an atheist perspective on life; it is not so much an active denial of God's presence but rather a form of negligence that limits human potential and keeps human beings confined to the cyclical tracks of history. Existence without transcendental cause, therefore, is literally purposeless. Raising this negligence to consciousness brings about a spiritual liberation that in turn enables teleological action. The purposeful life is lead under God rather than under the sun, and in this mode of existence innovation and progress become possible. The Preacher portrays the shift from one mode of living to another. It is a shift from an ontological to a metaphysical worldview. The sensation of liberation arises, somewhat counterintuitively for modern readers, from the comfort derived from constant divine surveillance and guardianship. On the other hand, the 'life under the sun,' is an existence of instability and contingency. The Book of Ecclesiastes's central *aperçu* lends itself to a Neo-Platonism many literary critics have considered characteristic for writers of the American Renaissance. Still, the wisdom-book tradition, in which Ecclesiastes functions, distinctly operates on the basis of secular experience, and so its apparent dissociation from worldly matters is an argumentative gambit more than it is a programmatic dictate. Essentializing its maxims therefore goes against the internal logic of its argument. My argument here is that this dialectic provides Melville with a means of exploring the demands for intellectual earnestness as positive statements.

5.2 *Redburn* & The Historical Transformation of the Bible

In one of many reflective passages of *Redburn* (1849), an aged Whellingborough Redburn, the novel's narrator, assures his younger self that "this world [. . .] is a moving world" (*R* 157). Historical record, calcified and committed to paper, can teach nothing about the world he encounters in the present. Redburn had set out to Liverpool in search of the memory of his father. Using his father's guide-book, the young man finds himself wandering the streets of the metropolis while quickly realizing that none of the landmarks that formed his father's experience of the city are left. The *Bildungsroman* contemplates generational conflict, orphanage, the quest for family and, like many of Melville's early novels, level a good bit of social criticism against the indifference with which European city dwellers treat the lower classes. Wyn Kelly argues that Melville explores the cityscape via Biblical figuration. "Cain's story," Wyn Kelly notes, is "a powerful prefiguration of modern civilization" and therefore a fitting symbol to explore the generic liminal space between literary romanticism and realism (27). Yet Kelly seems to think this is a rather mundane strategy, considering that Melville wrote in "a period when fictional revisions of Scripture abounded" (28). And yet, the novel does more than merely revise Biblical proof texts to fit its own context; it reflects upon the practice of Biblical authority and Bible reading and ponders the hereditary value of patrician mores. It should be noted that *Redburn* is by no means the only text that does so. *Pierre* and several short stories and poems engage in the same debate.¹⁸⁶

Despite his assertion of universal dynamism as the ruling principle of the world, a statement that harkens back to Holbachian materialism, the old Redburn points out one

¹⁸⁶ Kelly also acknowledges this connection by noting that "Pierre is Melville's most fully developed Cain figure" (32).

exemption: moral Biblical history alone seems capable of resisting the changeableness of the material world.¹⁸⁷

Every age makes its own guide-books, and the old ones are used for waste paper. But there is one Holy Guide-Book, Wellingborough, that will never lead you astray, if you but follow it aright; and some noble monuments that remain, though the pyramids crumble. But though I rose from the door-step a sadder and a wiser boy, and though my guide-book had been stripped of its reputation for infallibility, I did not treat with contumely or disdain, those sacred pages which once had been a beacon to my sire. (*R* 157)

This key moment in the novel clarifies Redburn's attitude towards the memory of his father and history in general. When considered in the context of his other novels that deal with questing in the world as a metaphor for free inquiry, *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, and *Moby-Dick*, the guide-book metaphor usefully encapsulates this, the Melvillean quest. It equates geographical with intellectual exploration. The image also expresses the need for an original epistemology, a way of making sense of the world, in every generation. Hence knowledge from a generation ago, while it should be revered, cannot account for the shifting intellectual landscape. Old Redburn does not necessarily condone this fact, but acknowledges it as a datum. Nevertheless, he advocates reverence towards the history and wisdom locked in these pages, a sentiment that must equally apply to the Bible.

Although old Redburn explicitly exempts the Bible from the same fate that must befall all guidebooks, young Redburn's lament about the lost, supposed infallibility of his father's guide book is not merely a thinly veiled coming-of-age metaphor but must be understood as a historicist allegory about the loss of the spiritual comfort formerly provided by Scripture. His sentiment, incidentally, summarizes the painful exegetical transformation that the Bible had undergone in the previous century under the auspices of Enlightenment thinking. Yet old Redburn's reverence towards the Bible complicates the narrative of linear secularization because,

¹⁸⁷ For a more detailed discussion of Baron Thiry d'Holbach, see chapter 1.

as Redburn, the narrator, observes “some noble monuments” do remain, not as mausoleums but as edifices that challenge human intelligence and inquisitiveness and force future generations to deal anew with moral questions that are inextricably linked to the human condition. In this sense, one can never be done with the Bible and thus with one’s genealogical baggage. Contrary to R.W.B. Lewis’s remarks in *The American Adam*, the “young innocent” is never fully “liberated from family and social history or bereft of them” (127). Young Redburn may be a new man in a hostile world, an innocent abroad, “radically affecting that world and radically affected by it,” as Lewis has it, but the old narrator persona feels the inescapability of history (127). Although he has explored the world and settled his affairs, he cannot completely renounce his roots and step unto new land, as Thoreau would have it in *Walden*’s fulminant “Where I Lived and What I Lived for” chapter. Even Thoreau, in his pursuit of original relations to nature and being, echoes Ecclesiastical maxims when he observes, “enjoy the land but own it not” (137). In the same vein as *Redburn*’s implicit note on Biblical textual authority, Jonathan Sheehan critiques what he sees as a false equation of Enlightenment and secularization often occurring in historical scholarship. This notion often boils down to the simplistic contraction, “more books, more readers, more skepticism” (xi). While it is true that Enlightenment rationalism significantly changed the Bible’s cultural valuation, “The [historical] argument accounts only for the disappearance of authority and cannot account for its [the Bible’s] reconstitution” as a fragmented entity with multifarious medium (Sheehan xi). Redburn’s sentiments, then, reflect those of many believers who faced the new realities produced by the historical criticism of the Bible in the early nineteenth century.

With *Redburn*, Melville scouts a via media between the clashing epistemologies of skepticism and naive faith. In this sense, the novel exceeds the thematic confines of the *Bildungsroman* into which Dillingham and others have painted it. It is also an allegory about the

loss of scriptural certainty. Redburn holds fast to the idea that his father's guide-book will serve him in exploring the old city core of Liverpool—were, ironically, he will encounter a more stinging challenge to his moral outlook upon the world in the form of the class division and poverty. And yet, the older, wiser Redburn of the narrative frame echoes his younger self's optimism in asserting that there exists at least one guidebook that transcends the temporal restrictions to which all such books are subject. Redburn thus moderates his own disillusionment and salvages the Bible as a source of knowledge for himself and the reader.¹⁸⁸

5.3 Entering the Try-Works and Leaving the Meadows

Moderation, as a methodology of balancing one's perception of the world with one's expectations for divine justice, is a central issue for the Preacher in Ecclesiastes. Neither the Preacher nor Melville advocates simple detachment from the material world. By calling for moderation, the Preacher distinguishes between a joyful presentism, based on an awareness of God's 'hidden presence,' and a constant vexation that results from speculative accumulation of material goods.¹⁸⁹ In an article on the marginalia in Melville's Bibles, Mark Heidmann points out that Ecclesiastes also advises for moderation as to temperament and that Melville's notes evince his differentiated reading of these sources (351). In *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Melville considers this difference as the problem of chronometrical and horological time. In other words, he ponders the difference between idealism and realism and ponders the implication of this difference on how humans may form critical attitudes about the reliability of sense perception. Like Redburn, Ishmael's self-regulation must be read in this context.

¹⁸⁸ See again Dillingham, *Artist* 54.

¹⁸⁹ "For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath labored under the sun? [worries about the safety and endurance of the worldly goods he has laid up] / For all his days *are* sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity. / *There is* nothing better for a man, *than* that he should eat and drink, and *that* he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it *was* from the hand of God" (Eccls. 2:22-24).

Ishmael's debate of the problem of moderation, as it was stated above, causes him to deploy strategically a rationalist persona that acts as a counterweight to his propensity for imagination.¹⁹⁰ This dynamic is, of course, not exclusively derived from Bible reading, but conspicuously steeped in the Enlightenment ideal of the perfectible individual. What is more, the need for moderation arises precisely from the inherent property of innocence that is characteristic for the American new man, a morally good yet innocent, intrepid individual who faces the world head on. This type of character equally undergirds the concomitant crystallizations of American civil religion and nationalism between the 1790s and 1850s. Famous examples of the 'new man' include Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1793) and Emerson's essay on the American scholar. Ishmael is such a new man.¹⁹¹ He is, however, not a heroic demigod, like Bulkington, but a wanderer, too heady to fit with the other sailors and obsessed with cataloging the wonder and mystery he sees reflected in nature and human behavior. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael is a librarian, perhaps the sub-sub librarian from the initial chapter "Excerpts," who tries to assemble an authoritative account of moral behavior based on all manner of empirical and literary evidence. Unsurprisingly, the novel includes the most explicit references to wisdom literature and has therefore been the focus of much scholarship on the subject. Eaton comments that the Preacher's topic in the first half of Ecclesiastes is the problem of having "a practical, not necessarily a full-blown intellectual, secularism" (55). Ishmael, likewise, embeds his metaphysical reflections in an experiential framework. Yet some of the most powerful moments in the novel use such findings as a basis upon which to interrogate the OT text, causing both to overlap technically as well as thematically. Like the Preacher, Melville dramatizes the possibility

¹⁹⁰ See chapter 2.

¹⁹¹ Michael Broek considers Ishmael as an evolving character across several of Melville's novels (514). For an older version of this argument, geared toward Biblical typology in Melville's protagonists, see Wright *Use*, 47.

of skepticism and secularism over against the intuition of a hidden yet obtrusive final meaning in existence that presents itself in several characters in the novel (Ahab, Ishmael, Pip).

In *Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (1990), Leon Chai elevates this issue to become Melville's literary *raison d'être*. Chai's overall argument is based on the hypothesis that literary romanticism puts an emphasis on the operations of consciousness as defined by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's postulation that the self may confront itself as object in consciousness (Chai makes no specific reference here). Melville inverts Emerson's concerns with "subjective and objective, self and divinity," which are expressed through symbolism, in order to ask, "what if the dissolving of self and external world in the medium of consciousness should lead, not to an apprehension of consciousness itself [as Hegel argues], but rather to that of an unknown and unknowable Other?" (8). According to Chai, "[a]n aura of the sacred surrounds this mysterious presence," the impregnability of which ultimately leads Melville to reject the technology of symbolism and return to that of allegory (8). Obliqueness is characteristic for the divine in OT theology, and God's hiddenness challenges believers to cope with the contingency of existence while balancing the unsettling prospects of secular materialism and despair over God's absence and the world's injustice. As such, Ecclesiastes addresses the same dynamic Chai considers the lynchpin of Melville's romantic project.

Reception of Melville's dealings with Ecclesiastes, however, has been mixed at best. A representative case in point is Stephen J. Bennett's assertion that "The ambiguity of Ecclesiastes allows a skeptical and pessimistic interpretation, which is how Melville read the book and how he ended *Moby-Dick*" (13). Bennett proceeds to conflate analytical license with fact when he suggests that Melville's "pessimistic interpretation resonated with his own religious experience" seems to describe his own reading bias more than Melville's (3). While he usefully sets up

distinct thematic categories—informed by the content of Ecclesiastes—for his analysis, his conclusion is based on a rather narrow assessment of character motivations in the novel along a moral binary that, in actuality, neither of his primary texts supports: “The theology of God in Ecclesiastes can be read in a positive or negative way. *Moby-Dick* seems to resonate with a negative reading, inasmuch as authority figures in the novel act in ways that are arbitrary or unfair” (6). Bennett never conceptualizes the nuanced ways in which Melville’s text deals with the Biblical one. His reading is symptomatic of what I have called earlier the narrative of decline in Melville studies. Against this hypothesis stands Heidmann’s aforementioned analysis of Melville’s OT marginalia, which illustrates that “Melville’s personal distress was not strong enough to obliterate the meaning of the text he confronted”; and while, “He surely did create new emphases, he was not an eisegete”; i.e., an interpreter that reads a preconfigured meaning into the Biblical text, but rather a “profound writer/reader who learned to use his reading for his own great purposes” (369). Moderation, as a frequently overlooked moral maxim in Ecclesiastes as well as *Moby-Dick*, will serve as a thematic platform for reconsidering how the novel interacts with the Bible.

Ishmael’s warning to other “impressionable youths” against falling victim to their fancy, in the chapter “The Try-Works,” on the surface appears a rather explicit disavowal of the imagination and the reliability of sense perception. His subsequent meditation on the problem and particularly his intertwining of this issue with Solomonic wisdom—specifically to Eccles. 1:2 and Prov. 21:16—make the matter appear more ambiguous. Ishmael’s monolog (cited below)

begs the question, what if reverential visions tell us something about the nature of reality rather than about the danger of fancy?¹⁹²

“The Try-Works” has traditionally been read as illustrating the problem of human phenomenology. However, the explicit references to Solomonic wisdom, suggest a different reading: While Ishmael does make the point that only empirical knowledge, the world seen in sunlight under “the only true lamp” can provide an accurate image of the world that would otherwise be deformed by the specters of human fancy (*MD* 424). The passage is worth quoting at length here:

Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp—all others but liars! Nevertheless the sun hides not Virginia’s Dismal Swamp, nor Rome’s accursed Campagna, nor wide Sahara, nor all the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon. The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped. (*MD* 424)

The passage intertwines two distinct ideas about the interplay of human perception and material reality: one, a symbolic critique of the way fancy can overtake reality by way of fire based on the preceding episode of Ishmael’s falling asleep at the helm as a result of the try-work fire’s hypnotic lure and waking up so disoriented as to almost capsizing the ship. Second, as it pertains to theology, the chapter marshals an allegorical critique of what might be called closed-circuit religious thinking; i.e., the idea that skepticism becomes destructive if it is not checked against pragmatic necessities that come with living in the world. Seen through this lens, Ishmael’s

¹⁹² Ishmael’s warning harkens back to a key scene in *White-Jacket* in which the protagonist, lost in similar reverie, suddenly finds himself plunged from the mast on which he stands and tumbling down into the water. He eventually has to lose the jacket that had accompanied him throughout his journey in order to survive.

visions, disorientation, and monolog allegorize not on the unreliability of the senses but the inescapable contingency of sense perception. In other words, our sense never allow us access to reality as it exists out there, or for itself, and this is an essential step towards the Preacher's universal condemnation of the material world as vainglorious.

Several earlier passages support this differentiated reading. For example, Ishmael notes how the kiln's fire "strangely revealed in the capricious emblazonings of the works" the crew's and the ship's real character (*MD* 423). Initially, Ishmael celebrates this as an epiphanel moment in which the true character of the *Pequod's* mad mission and crew are revealed. In adopting the vantage point of divine hiddenness, Ishmael finds his own vision congeal and brings Ahab's madness in clear view: "Wrapped [. . .] in darkness myself, I but the better saw [from the outside looking in] the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others" (*MD* 423). Thompson argues that Ahab's 'madness' constitutes tragic wisdom which 'enlightened' man evolves form accurate perception of "usable truth" (184). However, this claim seems to be inconsistent with the rest of the passage quoted below. In contrast, Milton Stern ties what could be perceived as Ahab's opposition to God as falling under the purview of a search for God. Ahab's quest for and need to believe in God is motivated by "the most freezing terror in the thought that there might be no ideal to fight" (10); however, in doing so, Ahab commits the cardinal sin of taking his vision of reality to be comprehensive. In Stern's words, "It makes no difference how man defines what he considers to be absolute; the error is that he thinks he perceives it at all beyond the infinity of a natural existence which in itself does not have constant (by human standards) moral qualities" (10). This dynamic is played out in Ishmael's warning against succumbing to the visions of the fire. While the try-works' fire defamiliarizes the proceedings on the ship and allows him to glimpse the symbolic correlation between Ahab's fiery temper and what appears to him the

crew's demonic dance on deck, it also distorts reality to the point of making everything seem demonic. Although it speaks mysteriously to Ishmael, the fire's glow does not reveal the whole truth but stretches and distorts all objects and persons in its immediate vicinity, creating an augmented reality in which everything appears "ghastly" (*MD* 424). This dark view of the world is distinct from that honest, all-encompassing view provided by the sun, which casts the grotesque images of the night in "gentler relief" (*MD* 424).¹⁹³

The visions that the fire avails have a narrow epistemological compass, a dynamic that Ishmael intuits when he remarks upon the circular relationship between the fire and its source, the whale: "Like a plethoric burning martyr, or a self-consuming misanthrope, once ignited, the whale supplies his own fuel and burns by his own body" (*MD* 422). Boiling down the whale is equated to the burning of a martyr at the stake. The religious connotation of the image underwrites the notion of the trying-out of the whale as a mystical ceremony, in which the whale sacrifices itself to enable Ishmael's prophetic vision. Still, the visions that such flames produce retain the circular characteristics of their origin – the fire feeds on the corpse to burn and the whale martyr burns as long as the fire consumes its body. The process is self-contained as well as temporary. Concurrently, the images Ishmael sees are equally closed-circuited and distortive, as an "artificial fire" makes "all things look ghastly" (*MD* 424).¹⁹⁴ And yet, the vision is not per se deceitful. This is not a fire stoked by Descartes's insidious demon. In fact, the unnatural light

¹⁹³ Fire as an element that can reveal truth harkens back to Ahab's baptism of the harpoons and his summoning of lightning in what is essentially a Zoroasterian ceremony. Stan Goldman, again talking about the presence of skepticism in *Clarel*, provides a useful platform for integrating Ahab's fear into the theological framework of wisdom literature: "[U]nder the duress of suffering," Goldman notes concerning Psalm 10 and 14, "the psalmist can even raise the frightening possibility of 'there is no God' (e.g., Psalms 14:1), although this line is always attributed to the wicked or foolish" (48). License to question God is tied to suffering; but Goldman further qualifies regarding the OT text that "when the innocent suffer, the lament question turns into a theodicy question asked God" (48).

¹⁹⁴ Insofar as it meditates on fire symbolism, "The Try-Works" further qualifies Ahab's Zoroasterism. As I noted earlier, Zoroasterism reveres fire as an element with cleansing properties. Its ability to reveal truth and strip away falsehood derived from Middle-Eastern mythology make it an agent of revelation. Melville here argues that this belief is demonstrably false, considering the fact that the senses may be lead astray by the fire's distortive properties and sometimes with harmful and even life-threatening results.

does allow for a productive reconceptualization of the *Pequod's* quest and the means by which it is lead. However, such visions are always characterized by their constitutive elements: the materials feeding the proverbial fire, the events that Ishmael witnessed prior to this episode as well as the events to come. They point away from the present and may therefore cause the observer to accidentally endanger the ship of their lives. Realizing this causes Ishmael to exclaim, "Never dream with thy hand on the helm! [. . .] believe not the artificial fire" (*MD* 424). Melville here does not celebrate the breakdown of referentiality or the limitations of phenomenology. True, such instances of mischievous glee do exist elsewhere in the novel, for instance in Ahab's famous assertion about his epistemology of 'madness maddened,' which presupposes the equivocation of truth and madness. But Ishmael's assertion that truth exists only in comprehensiveness does not ring with the same semantic equivocation and defiantly creative energy of Ahab's soliloquies. His plea calls for a moral and spiritual equilibrium in encountering the material world.¹⁹⁵

The final part of this allegory, which cites the indiscriminate and revelatory properties of the sunlight, on the theological plain, refutes the principle of theodicy. Life under the sun includes, as per Ecclesiastes, many of the evils and depravities that call into question divine justice. One illustration of this point is Starbuck's reverie on the same topic a few chapters later in "The Gilder." Here, the first mate willfully refuses to see the shadowy aspects of nature so as to not jeopardize his monolithic belief in divine justice as the operational principle of reality:

"Oh, grassy glades! oh, ever vernal endless landscapes in the soul; in ye,—though long parched

¹⁹⁵ As Thompson argues, the "significance of these two words depends entirely on the viewpoint of the user"; this fact, he speculates further, causes Melville "'unspeakable' pleasure," a pleasure Thompson sees refracted throughout the whole novel (137). Melville's refusal to disavow fully Christianity and its texts, even as referential foils, contradicts Thompson's conclusion. In fact, the uneasy balance between skepticism towards dogma and reverence for OT morality makes the novel engaging and productive of a better understanding of Melville's sophisticated Biblical hermeneutics. Thompson does add more productively that "Melville would seem to baptize himself, figuratively, [. . .] so that he might take issue with the Christian insistence that there is only one approach" (138).

by the dead drought of the earthy life,—in ye, men yet may roll, like young horses in new morning clover; and for some few fleeting moments, feel the cool dew of the life immortal on them. Would to God these blessed calms would last” (*MD* 492). Recognizing that the mind’s repose in faith is only temporary, Starbuck gazes inward to replace the harsh, complicated external realities of life under the sun with the gilding vision of faith. This is not willful ignorance but a conscious turning away from a truth that he reckons would overburden his soul if accepted. Starbuck responds to Ishmael’s earlier sermon in “The Try-Works” by delivering a jeremiad on the dangers of sense perception:

But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm. There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; [. . .]—through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’ doubt (the common doom), then skepticism [sic.], then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? In what rapt ether sails the world, of which the weariest will never weary? Where is the foundling’s father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it. (*MD* 492).

Starbuck’s lament here contains many of the anxieties of orphanage and isolation, transposed to OT divine hiddenness, that Melville had developed in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. While Ishmael finds in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs a call for intellectual integrity and consistency, Starbuck capitulates at the challenge of Solomonic wisdom, opting to ignore those truths too painful to acknowledge. In claiming this, I oppose critics, such as Herbert, who read the two as united voices, expressing the shared sentiment of spiritual exhaustion.¹⁹⁶ Starbuck reacts to Ecclesiastes’s rejection of secular materiality by lamenting the constant state of spiritual drift

¹⁹⁶ In an alternative reading, Walter Herbert reads the two scenes as consecutive steps in a common thought process. Ishmael and Starbuck face a common dilemma, a crisis of faith, in which “Solomonic wisdom of woe leads to this moment of spiritual exhaustion where one does NOT find truth but is relieved of the impulse to quest for it” in “Solomonic austerity” (167). I propose to read the two sections as thematically connected but oppositional. Herbert is correct in characterizing Starbuck’s stand in the matter as a “fatigued realization of failure” (165)

such rejection produces. Rather than earnestly engaging the process necessary for transcending what the Preacher condemns as secular materialism by struggling with contingency, Starbuck verbalizes his rejection of those contingencies. As he gazes upon the ocean's surface, Starbuck verbalizes his decision to henceforth only contend with the surfaces and the sunny aspect of creation: "Loveliness unfathomable, as ever lover saw in his young bride's eye!—Tell me not of thy teeth-tiered sharks, and thy kidnapping cannibal ways. Let faith oust fact; let fancy oust memory; I look deep down and do believe" (*MD* 492). This monolog presents an epistemological alternative to Ishmael's veridical proposal. Under the purview of sapiental literature, Starbuck derives faith from the vain surfaces of the world, precisely because they shroud an uncomfortable truth. His perspective is pious, but not true in the sense that his theodicy avoids engaging the challenges posed by Ecclesiastes as well as by experience.

Between Ahab's cynicism and Starbuck's evasive theodicy, Ishmael plants a standard of truth-telling that rejects the priority of personal perspective to promote a broader, integrative view of reality. Under Chai's aforementioned Hegelian approach, Ishmael's call could be read as a plea for tarrying with the negative; i.e., death. Consequently, his admonition cuts two ways: Ishmael upbraids himself for looking too closely at the fire and taking the visions for reality, but he also admonishes those who would cling to the sunny aspects of the material world and extrapolate them to encompass the whole of reality. What is at stake, then, is bringing to consciousness a standard of truth that sublates personal perspective without abandoning it in favor of some external, dogmatic authority. Doing so would enable a life of prudent material enjoyment reined in by a reverence for intellectual seriousness.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ In his review essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville had defined this as "the great Art of Telling the Truth," which he found in Hawthorne's fascination with darkness and Original Sin (*PT* 244).

The model for such a life, Ishmael notes finally, is not found in the stylish writings of Melville's contemporaries but in Solomonic wisdom:

With books the same. The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. 'All is vanity.' [Eccles. 1:2] ALL. This wilful world hath not got hold of unchristian Solomon's wisdom yet. But he who dodges hospitals and jails, and walks fast crossing graveyards, and would rather talk of operas than hell; calls Cowper, Young, Pascal, Rousseau, poor devils all of sick men; and throughout a care-free lifetime swears by Rabelais as passing wise, and therefore jolly;—not that man is fitted to sit down on tomb-stones, and break the green damp mould with unfathomably wondrous Solomon. (*MD* 492)¹⁹⁸

Similar to the way the final chapter of *The Confidence-Man* performs a comparative reading of Proverbs and the Apocryphal Ecclesiasticus, this passage from *Moby-Dick* reads Eccles. 1:2 and Prov. 21:16 as cumulative assertions of the same epistemological theory.¹⁹⁹ The passage, presenting a combination of allegory and symbolism, is technically dense and thus warrants close consideration: Ishmael's basic claim is that the standard of truth-telling he defined earlier applies to people as well as books. He supports his hypothesis with the assertion that while Christ was the person most closely approximating his standard of truth, Ecclesiastes is the truest book in the same respect. The passage's structural parallelism formally evokes OT language, but the references are even more theologically precise: he refers to Christ not as preacher (rabbi) or as the already exulted Son of God, but as the man of sorrows, in the process of dispensing salvation through suffering. Equally, Ecclesiastes is the book of woe, yet its steel, as with the blade of a sword, is finely crafted, precise, and surgical, rather than crude and bombastic. Melville explicitly references Ecclesiastes's master apothegm, 'all is vanity,' but, through repetition, shifts the emphasis from the verb (to be) to the subject pronoun (all), effectively shifting the semantic meaning of the KJB text. The Preacher's original, ontological statement about the

¹⁹⁸ Melville may be more correct here than he knew. Scholarly debate persists about the Greek influences visible in Ecclesiastes, see Alter, *Wisdom* 338.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Chapter 4.

immateriality of all things (KJB) becomes a metaphorical one that denotes the universal quality of the Preacher's formula (*MD*). Melville grounds this assertion in OT hermeneutics by calling Solomon, the supposed author of Ecclesiastes, "unchristian," seemingly rejecting the reference to Christ he made only shortly before (*MD* 492).²⁰⁰

Ishmael's assertions about the truest man and the truest book, at first glance, appear contradictory. However, they evince a critical stance towards NT morality that is consistent with other moments in Melville's later writings. By calling Solomon unchristian, Melville sets up a dichotomy between OT and NT theology. But doing so also distinguishes Ecclesiastes from the prophetic OT books; i.e., those texts that, under the system of typology, presage Christ's arrival. By foreclosing this interpretive horizon, Ishmael emphasizes wisdom literature's focus on morality over the Gospel's concern with salvation. This rhetorical maneuver is accentuated by dismissive reference to several contemporary thinkers, who are generally "passing [for] wise" or are considered "joyful" (*MD* 424). In Ishmael's mind, contemporary popular thinkers cannot match the timeless, essential truths of the Preacher. The nominal distinction between the rhetorical drollness of these authors over against profound wisdom of the Biblical text expresses the reverential attitude of the passage.

Nevertheless, Ishmael does not fully subscribe to the Ecclesiastical proverb, but proceeds to weigh it against another piece of Solomonic wisdom:

But even Solomon, he says, 'the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain' (*i.e.*, even while living) 'in the congregation of the dead' [Prov. 21:16]. Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in

²⁰⁰ For an illustration of how Melville's view of Christ is diametrically opposed to Emerson's definition of the Poet's function as inspirational, see New, *Regenerate* 99.

the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar. (*MD* 424)

Ishmael's interrogation proposes, what Stan Goldman, in his analysis of the religious vision expounded in *Clarel*, calls "a spiritually honest combination of doubt and faith, of protest and love," which is grounded in "a distinctly biblical perception of how to survive spiritually in a time when spiritual imagination wanes and the thirst for faith waxes" (170). Ishmael reads Solomon as calling for a skeptical epistemology but cautioning skeptics that any myopic view of reality, be it optimist or pessimist, leads to madness (as represented in Ahab). Melville therefore is sensitive to the Preacher's paradigm of sublating skeptical knowledge to achieve a productive life in the world that exceeds mere materialism. He uses Ecclesiastes as a ground on which to develop an epistemology that integrates alternative ways of knowing (vision, reverie, dream) without mistaking them for comprehensive representations of that world.

Although less riddled with external references, Emily Dickinson, a poetess with similar Calvinist upbringing as Melville, has her speaker note in "Tell all the truth, But tell it slant" (1129) equally comments on the productivity of human reductions of reality, when she notes, "Success in Circuit lies" (506, line 2). The poem may be read productively as expounding upon Ishmael's exegesis on Solomonic wisdom. The speaker proposes that slanted sense perception is not an external event that befalls human beings, but a constitutive aspect of cognition.

As Lightning to the Children eases
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind – (Dickinson 507, lines 5-8)

Comprehensive perception of the world and all its intertwined glory and darkness would leave human beings blind and overwhelmed. Dickinson's speaker notes with her analogy of the lightning that truth must be made palpable for human perception—which is childlike compared

to divine perception—by a process of epistemological digestion, for instance rationalizing. The poem was finished in 1868. Dickinson therefore clings somewhat archaically to the orthodox hierarch between human and divine perception. She advocates a humanized vision of God that, as I showed in Chapter 1, created a problematic bind for orthodox Christian commentators as it ultimately stripped the divine “Truth” of the very “superb surprise” that required mediation in the first place (506, line 4). The theological version of this evidentialist intellectual style considers reason to be of God, mediation of reality through reason—or rationalizing—is theologically ambivalent. On the one hand, exercising reason enables human kind to comprehend the material world and therefore bespeaks human mind’s divine spark. On the other hand, our ability to perceive our rationalizations as depictions, limited and thus arbitrary, paradoxically also illustrates humanity’s divine genealogy. Humanity’s connection with the divine is evinced by the ability to reject our simplifications of reality on account of a divine sadness (*MD* 355). Doing so, Ishmael argues, enables us to attain wisdom. This syncretic epistemology is also grounded in material reality: for instance, in the passage cited above, Starbuck refers to this dynamic, when he ultimately rejects, as the “mingled, mingling threads of life.” Meanwhile, Ishmael, while exploring the whale-bone temple overgrown with plants in the Chapter “A Bower in the Arsacides,” discovers a Melvillean *locus amoenus*, a place where “Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curly-headed glories” (450).

Dickinson’s poem and Melville’s chapter alert readers to the fact that human sense perception, phenomenology, and what might be called internal computing are neither instantaneous nor coincidental. Both texts depict these processes as organic sequences, comprised of apprehension and (self-)representation, that, by definition, unfold over time. Apprehension of the sublime, as Kant notes, makes visible the constructed nature of cognition.

Because representation, specifically fictionalizing reality in the way that Ishmael talks about, is a constitutive part of apprehending truth. The skepticism both texts purport is tactical and serves to remind readers not to take for truth the means of representation; e.g. the visions created by firelight or the explanations provided by parents to their children.

Only the Catskill eagle is able to behold reality from multiple vantage points. In this image of the eagle, the temporal axis that both Melville and Dickinson agree is constitutive of apprehension translates into the eagle's perpetual motion in flight. In fact, it is precisely its mobility—its restlessness—that allows it to oscillate between the “sunny spaces” and the deepest gorges of the world (*MD* 492). The image, therefore, becomes not just an allusion to the disembodied soul's freedom and mobility but rather characterizes the soul's ideal means of apprehending and comprehending the world: perpetual motion. Solomonic wisdom is concerned with truth-seeking as moral activity in the world rather than as a conceptual question. As I show above, Ishmael's anecdote contemplates the Preacher's distinction of life under the sun and life in faith as epistemological maxims. As such, *Moby-Dick* participates in a meta-discourse about literary form as a means of inquiry into theological subjects and, ultimately, forms its own Biblical hermeneutics.

5.4 Pierre's Failed Prophecy and Ecclesiastical Skepticism

Whereas Ishmael utilizes the Preacher's commandment about the irreconcilability to mediate his own phenomenology, Pierre attempts to put Ecclesiastical wisdom into action. Like *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, *Pierre* is another coming-of-age story, with the added twist that it recounts a spiritual awakening in its hero. Again, the figure of an absent father, who stands as the crystallization of cultural and moral values of America's landed gentry, looms large in the protagonist's mind. Pierre, the novel's young eponymous hero, begins his life in the pastoral

setting of Saddle Meadows under the dotage of his caring mother. When he learns that his father had sired a daughter out of wedlock, Pierre experiences a fall from innocence that suddenly awakens him to the ambiguities of existence. Nathalia Wright argues that Pierre is Melville's most explicit actualization of the Bible's quintessential social pariah, Ishmael (*Use* 52). Indeed, the genealogy of the Ishmael type within Melville's works is undeniable; yet the book's scope extends beyond the standard generic literary categories: it reflects on American patrician morality and its modern cultural outgrowths; it critiques the literary market place, which in the 1850s came to be dominated by the so-called sentimental tradition, particularly in novel writing; it meditates upon the limits of literary representation and hermeneutics as a way of knowing the world.²⁰¹ Finally, *Pierre* is also a thinly veiled allegory that explores the consequences of the Bible's factual loss of authority and the conflict between religious orthodoxy and liberalism over its interpretation. Sacvan Bercovitch goes even further than Wright and considers *Pierre* a critique of New England theology and its legacy. According to Bercovitch, Pierre transplants himself from a pastoral paradise to a "republican Babylon, where he finds himself the fool of prophecy, messenger of [a] god whose only voice is silence, ranting to no one about a New Revelation that remains forever unrecorded, unfulfilled, except in the mock apocalypse of his self-destruction" (28). Bercovitch's reading usefully reconceives the novel as dramatizing the

²⁰¹ Sentiment, as an expression of heart religion, became increasingly popular towards the middle of the century, partially because religious authors began to publish novels as well, while the more conservative voices continued to condemn novels for their alleged appeals to base senses. Between the late 1700s and the 1830s, novel reading had been considered dangerous, especially for young girls. The rise of the novel as a popular genre, as Coleman illustrates, was closely linked to religious forms of discourse, e.g. homiletics and didactic etiquette books, and both clergy and layman authors wrestled over the novel's role in the moral education of the American people (4). Several religious authors, such as the Beechers and the Stoddards, made literary forays into the genre, effectively softening resistance within religious orthodoxy. In scholarship, particularly under New Criticism, sentimental (women's) writing was long regarded as less valuable. In her introduction to *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology* (1998), Paula Bennett takes to task earlier analyses that consider sentimentality a delegitimizing property of women's literature in general and argues for more complex interactions between sentiment and irony in women's poetry (xxxix). In *Poets in the Public Sphere* (2003), Bennett subsequently discusses women's "poetry as an instance of speech whose expressive and mimetic power is organized explicitly or implicitly for argumentative ends" and therefore attempts to shape social reality (5).

problem of conceptually integrating Christian with American national history beyond the confines of typology. As I showed earlier, anxieties of the U.S.'s new status as nation state manifested in the various millennialist and Zionist movements that emerged in the early 1800s, eventually producing what Shalev calls a "confluence of Christianity and modernity" toward the end of the century (191). Melville satirizes the US American identity crisis as one of faith by casting Pierre as a self-fashioned OT prophet delivering his message to what is essentially a deaf audience. The fact that Pierre's resolve to reinstate moral integrity to the world leads directly to his annihilation suggests that the narrative of Christian Providentialism has been voided of its spiritual content and now functions exclusively as rhetorical strategy underwriting the economy of the literary market.²⁰²

5.4.1 *Providential Genealogy in Pierre*

Genealogy has broad implications in the novel since it is the one element in Pierre's history that alerts him to the constructedness of all history. Hence the first part of the novel deals with the exodus from childlike, innocent faith and filio piety. The memory of Pierre's father, for example, exists in a shrine of marble within the hallowed chamber of Pierre's heart: "In this shrine, [. . .] stood the perfect marble form of his departed father; without blemish, unclouded, snow-white, and serene; Pierre's fond personification of perfect human goodness and virtue" (*P* 68). The extended metaphors of the shrine and the marble statue denote Pierre's pious reverence toward his father while also alluding to classicist aesthetics and higher education as class markers. Pierre's mental shrine mobilizes a whole cluster of symbolic invocations of a

²⁰² Ellie Faustino goes further by arguing that Melville propagates what she calls an ethics of failure in the novel. Faustino construes the narrator's occasional refusal to divulge information as resistance against the "confidence game of modernity" and suggests that by depicting Pierre's failure as an author calling attention to its own technical deficiencies, "*Pierre* affirms failure as a way [. . .] to avoid participating in the inhumanities of empire" (465). While her reading seems to speculate to some extent on Melville's intentions, the notion that *Pierre* develops an alternative literary ethics that has political implications is useful.

romanticized past which the novel subsequently dismantles. This corrosive process begins with Isabel's appearance. And while her identity is never fully ascertained, Pierre chooses to accept his father's responsibility, but in so doing, he finds himself questioning the faith and moral values of his ancestors. Isabel commences a chain-reaction that effectively annihilates the socio-economic fortunes and prospects of the Glendinning family. Bercovitch even considers *Pierre* as mounting "the most incisive critique" in classical American literature of the cultural hegemony of a middle-class Calvinism that sees itself as leading civilization from Egypt to New Canaan (28). Critics have considered the novel Melville's parody of the domestic sentimental genre.²⁰³ Pricilla Wald points out that, for Pierre, writing becomes a means of resisting the moral tyranny of his own genealogy as well as American social history; the novel is therefore a meditation on literary invention as well as hermeneutics, a "compilation of unraveling that frustrates narrative expectations as it explores the impulse to narrative" itself (Wald 100). In a sense, the double helix of Pierre's DNA symbolizes the distinct yet interwoven strands of history and epistemology. When Pierre abandons the hollowed, normative memory of his father to pursue the deviant strain represented by Isabel, he jeopardizes both cultural and religious tradition.

In a thinly veiled Biblical metaphor, Isabel initiates Pierre's 'fall' from innocence by granting him knowledge of those "darker, though truer aspect of things" which the worship of his father, whom Pierre feigns "unconspicuously *sainted* in heaven," had precluded (69, emphasis added). The narrator satirizes Pierre's hero-worship of his father by situating these memories in the vocabulary of the Calvinist *ordo salutis*. The phrase "unconspicuously *sainted*," for instance, appears redundant, since Calvinism dictates that the saints, by definition, persevere incorruptibly

²⁰³ For a differentiated discussion of *Pierre* as a text that adopts traits from multiple novel genres, including the sentimental novel, the romance, and the realist novel, see Howard and Parker's "Historical Note" in the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *Pierre* (370); as well as Richard Broadhead's *Hawthorne, Melville and the Novel* (22).

once they enter heaven. He also mocks Pierre's naiveté by duplicating grammatically the incorruptibility of sainthood, and this emphasis, in turn, opens the door to the novel's theological critique of Protestantism. The passage suggests that while theology precludes the saints from being corrupted after achieving sainthood, Pierre's mental shrine to his father may very well be defaced and even dismantled. Significantly, Melville conceives of this phenomenological plane as a material space filled with symbols: the statue to Pierre's father, or the Memnon Stone. As Pierre copes with the contingencies of secular materialist experience, those experiences purge and revise the theological connotations of the mental objects within. The revelation of Isabel's identity, "in one night, stripped his holiest shrine of all over-laid bloom, and buried the mild statue of the saint beneath the prostrated ruins of the soul's temple itself" (69). Learning of Isabel's existence also transforms Pierre's cognition. Through a letter, she relates her upbringing and childhood. Isabel is reared a factual atheist, a practice that, as I showed earlier, was virtually incoceivable until the 1830s. Her individuation is dialectical: "When I saw a snake trailing through the grass [. . .] I said to myself, That thing is not human, but I am human" (122). Lacking Christian mythology to underpin her experience, however, empirical observation merely reveals to the little girl the shadow of a hidden, cruel creator: "all good harmless men and women were human things, placed at cross-purposes, in a world of snakes and lightning, in a world of horrible and inscrutable inhumanities" (122). This is, of course, the skeptical challenge that looms large over Biblical wisdom literature. Although Isabel notes that she received no formal religious education, her letter is steeped in Biblical language and symbolism (cf., 121-23). The passage about her realizing her own humanity is elliptical in the sense that it refutes the undisclosed theodicy of Pierre's implied Christian upbringing.

Discovering Isabel's mystery constitutes a spiritual rebirth for Pierre. And even if the experience does not turn him into an atheist, it awakens in him a tragic sense of Providence:

Now alive as he was to all these searching argumentative itemizings of the minutest known facts any way bearing upon the subject; and yet, at the same time, persuaded, strong as death, that in spite of them, Isabel was indeed his sister; how could Pierre, naturally poetic, and therefore piercing as he was; how could he fail to acknowledge the *existence of that all-controlling and all-permeating wonderfulness*, which, when imperfectly and isolatedly recognized by the generality, is so significantly denominated The Finger of God? But it is not merely the Finger, it is the whole outspread Hand of God; for doth not Scripture intimate, that He holdeth all of us in the hollow of His hand?—a Hollow, truly! (*P* 139)

Pierre's epiphany is one of the titular ambiguities the novel ponders. The novel initially treats Pierre's fall from innocence as traumatic: 'God's finger,' here, does not refer to a comforting, structuring presence, as the Preacher suggests in Ecclesiastes, but evokes a feeling of profound entrapment. Melville takes some liberties here with Isaiah 40:12, as he transforms the prophet's assertions about God's deliberate, mechanical engineering of the world into a metaphor of entrapment. Pierre's awakening can thus be read as initiating a struggle against pious, uncritical religiosity of his childhood.²⁰⁴ The verb "alive," again, contextualizes Pierre's experience in religious terms. Pierre ceases to regard his father as a pristine, if ominous, idol and begins to see him as a multi-faceted, flawed individual. His encounter with Isabel causes him to progress from a mental state of picture thinking, a mode that deals with understanding the world and its shapes, towards one of conceptual thinking.²⁰⁵ Pierre's crisis of conscience renders him obsessed with finding a stable center from which to form an original relation to the customs and traditions of his own culture.

²⁰⁴ The verse presents a rhetorical question that presages some of the intimations God makes in the whirlwind poem in the Book of Job: "Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?" (cf., Chapter 3).

²⁰⁵ The terminology usefully enables me to demonstrate the qualitative shift in Pierre's mental categories at this point in the novel. However, a systematic Hegelian reading would exceed the conceptual framework of this study. For a discussion of picture thinking, see Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), 65.

As the passage cited above suggests, he initially seeks to maintain his faith in the face of experiencing all-pervading contingency. On the one hand, the feeling of entrapment by God's hollow hand, of awakening to a world that seems to have existed in spite of his long ignorance. On the other hand, the term ambivalently hints at a hollowing out of faith as a result of his new perspective on life. Pierre seeks to develop a new faith from a position of deep disillusionment and skepticism. When summarizing Paul Ricoeur's Biblical hermeneutics, Lewis Mudge characterizes such a project as a "new articulation of faith [that] must pass through and beyond the 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' not slide around it" (6). Accordingly, Pierre comprehends his encounter with Isabel as a challenge to redefine his purpose and become reborn by accepting his father's absence and moral incomprehensibility. This enterprise has a religious quality because it tries to back up against the horizon of ambiguity. James Walters notes, when reflecting of Baudrillard's discussion of symbolic exchange and death in tribal initiation rites, that "to rediscover our 'fate' is to rediscover something of this ambivalent symbolic exchange of presence and absence [. . .] But to do that is also to re-examine our society's exclusion of death, both re-articulating it symbolically [. . .] and learning to embrace its reality as a gift to be both received and given" (49). As in "The Try-Works," Melville explores in *Pierre* the idea that death is part of the secret meaning life: "[. . .]unending as the wonderful rivers, which once bathed the feet of the primeval generations, and still remain to flow fast by the graves of all succeeding men, and by the beds of all now living; unending, ever-flowing, ran through the soul of Pierre, fresh and fresher, further and still further, thoughts of Isabel" (*P* 141). Isabel symbolizes the inescapable historicity of reality that connects human beings, living and dead, across time. The mystery of Isabel's origins simultaneously ambiguates Pierre's own heritage. Only by tracing the metaphorical river to its source, past the graves of primeval generations, can Pierre hope to

unravel the mystery of his heritage and earn the right, in Ishmael's words, to "break the green damp mould with unfathomably wondrous Solomon" (*MD* 492). However, time is not a river easily traversed. In fact, the narrator notes in the beginning the "quenchless feud [. . .] that Time hath with the sons of Men" (*P* 8).

Throughout the novel, Pierre finds that he cannot completely abnegate either the need for religious mysticism or literary hermeneutics as modes of knowing. Moreover, he comes to recognize the fundamental interwovenness of both modes when he begins to consider Isabel's sudden interjection into his life as a providential event that emblemizes the literary character of life: "In her life there was an unraveled plot; and he felt that unraveled it would eternally remain to him. No slightest hope or dream had he, that what was dark and mournful in her would ever be cleared up into some coming atmosphere of light and mirth" (*P* 141). Finding the entrance into the proverbial house of mirth barred, Pierre decides to practice what Ishmael calls the wisdom of woe by developing literally the profound truths of the human mind. The germination of this idea is worth citing at length here:

Like all youths, Pierre had conned his novel-lessons; had read more novels than most persons of his years; but their false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystemizable elements; their audacious, intermeddling impotency, in trying to unravel, and spread out, and classify, the more thin than gossamer threads which make up the complex web of life; these things over Pierre had no power now. Straight through their helpless miserableness he pierced; the one sensational truth in him transfixed like beetles all the speculative lies in them. He saw that human life doth truly come from that, which all men are agreed to call by the name of God; and that it partakes of the unravelable inscrutableness of God. By infallible presentiment he saw, that not always doth life's beginning gloom conclude in gladness; that wedding-bells peal not ever in the last scene of life's fifth act; that while the countless tribes of common novels laboriously spin veils of mystery, only to complacently clear them up at last; and while the countless tribe of common dramas do but repeat the same; yet the profounder emanations of the human mind, intended to illustrate all that can be humanly known of human life; these never unravel their own intricacies, and have no proper endings; (*P* 141)

Pierre's frustration with popular novels and the novel genre as a means of exploring the mysteries of life is well documented in criticism. In *Pierre*, Melville therefore contemplates the limitation of literature, not merely as mimetic apparatus but as a means of contemplation. Bernd Engler identifies Pierre's tragic flaw as believing that he may produce in text an authentic representation of universal truth despite the fact that he recognizes the unsuitability of literary representation to accomplish finite endings (280). Engler cites Pierre's meditation on great books, in which Pierre complains that literature can only project the "mutilated shadowings-forth of the invisible and eternally unembodied images of the soul" (*P* 283). Engler construes the novel's preoccupation with the dissatisfying epistemological limitations of text as a sign of Melville's "creative fatigue [künstlerische Erschöpfung]" (281). Wald argues that Pierre's literary career is doomed because he is "incapable of extending the limitations of language into an understanding of its inherent incapacities," yet he also cannot bring himself to consummate his incestuous desires for Isabel (130). And both Engler and Wald regard Pierre's authorship as either a Quixotian battle against the windmills of language or a compulsory vent for his frustrated sexual desires. But in Robert Milder's mind, it is precisely the demand of open-endedness, of *in*-finite plots, that distinguishes Melville's quest plots from those of other romantic authors (31). *Pierre* thus navigates the liminality of what Chai perceives as the great project of literary romanticism: a celebration of the world-constituting properties of language. Melville's penultimate novel sounds the despair that comes from realizing not all the soul's contents cannot be completely made visible in language. Acknowledging that language is simultaneously the worst and only tool for making sense of the world, Melville's reflection on its limitations, again, invokes Biblical language as an intermediary.

The narrator's adaptation of Isaiah already demonstrates Melville's rejection of the watchmaker metaphor. In its stead, he inserts what might be called the plot-maker metaphor, which recasts God as a rather inelegant author who has an erratic penchant for sequels and transitions. However, even the image of God as author proposes a constitutive hiddenness, an "unravelable inscrutableness," as per OT theology (*P* 141). Recognizing this mysteriousness enables Pierre to conceive of hermeneutics as a form of spiritual inquiry. Ricoeur becomes a suitable interlocutor for Melville's text in this instance because he insists that, in lieu of dogma, hermeneutics constitutes the modern religious subject's mode of belief. Because the universe is structured like a text, Pierre can "believe only by interpreting"; hermeneutics alone can provide what Ricoeur, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, calls a "second immediacy" and a "second naïveté" (qtd. in Mudge 6). The narrator eventually subsumes Pierre's meditation by noting that "Pierre renounced all thought of ever having Isabel's dark lantern illuminated to him" and gives over to pursuing an aporetic vision of life (*P* 141). For Pierre, Providence does not invoke associations of mechanical precision but of literary invention and mystery. However, most novels fail to depict those intricate mysteries worth exploring, arguably because they fail to recognize the literary nature of reality. Existence is woven together out of chunks of text without evincing any discernible compositional logic. On the contrary, its "imperfect, unanticipated, and disappointing sequels (as mutilated stumps), hurry to abrupt intermergings with the eternal tides of time and fate" (*P* 141). In what follows, I investigate how the novel negotiates theological and religious ambiguities. The book, I argue, performs this feat on the basis of Pierre's epistemological transformation.

5.4.2 *Biblical Hermeneutics as Spiritual Exploration*

The aforementioned excerpts demonstrate the novel's intriguing approach to Biblical hermeneutics. Melville essentially conceives of a hero that decides to practice the ethics of writing as moral activity, and explores the failure of Pierre's idealist agenda as a failed literary career. Pierre's authorship is a methodological extension of Ishmael's cetology. While Ishmael investigates the problem of existence metaphorically by compiling an exhaustive account of whales, Pierre continues this project as a metonymic activity by seeking to replace the ideal of a great book that coincides with the soul's inner life with the actual book he seeks to write in his urban exile. Importantly, both Pierre and the narrator continue Ishmael's contemplation of Biblical text as a template for a universal epistemology. The initial challenge for readers interested in Melville's Biblical hermeneutics is to systematize *Pierre* as a novel that talks about religion and theology.

David Reynolds's conceptualization of the religious literary genre of the "Oriental Tale"—a critical interrogation of some aspect of Christianity through allegory—provides a platform for investigating this dynamic. One variety of the tale, Reynolds explains, "dramatize[s] the contest between two religious value systems—tyranny, predestination, enigma, and emotion versus democracy, self-determination, clarity, and reason"; such tale, he continues, "expose the illusory nature of wealth and knowledge on behalf of virtuous poverty and contentment" by picturing an "indigent protagonist desiring material or intellectual advancement, be given them by a genius, becoming disillusioned with them, and returning to his former life having learned that virtue is its own reward" (*Faith* 31). Reynolds's metrics serve to comprehend how *Pierre*'s plot transitions from the mundane drama of a family secret to a reflection on Biblical hermeneutics. For one thing, Pierre is not materially impoverished. In fact, the narrator describes

him as a natural aristocrat, possessing beautification of spirit, intellectual earnestness, and moral integrity. However, he initially does lack insight into the hidden springs and mechanisms that have heretofore enabled his pastoral life.

5.4.3 *The Stone and the Pamphlet*

When Pierre learns to accept the gift of knowledge from Isabel, he begins to regard the world as a domain of ambiguity. Intellectual advancement in the novel is represented, generally, by text, and concretely by several found epistles: Isabel's letters, and, most importantly, the partially torn pamphlet by the Philosopher Plinlimmon. In addition, the narrator adds yet another layer to this process by cloaking Pierre's intellectual evolution in the language of OT wisdom. It is important to note that Melville factors out clerical authority in the matter. In "Book V: Misgivings and Preparations," Pierre consults the resident reverend Falsegrave on the matter of acknowledging his sister. But the minister tautologically refers him to the ambiguity of the issue: "Millions of circumstances modify all moral questions; so that though conscience may possibly dictate freely in any known special case; yet, by one universal maxim, to embrace all moral contingencies,—this is not only impossible, but the attempt [. . .] seems foolish" (102). Falsegrave disappoints Pierre's trust in the clarity of "Christian propriety" (99). Melville depicts Falsegrave, whose name already alludes to duplicity, as one of a new generation of ministers who have retreated from the complexities of moral judgment to the more abstract legislation of taste. His sermons are concerned with aesthetics rather than theology, and he has a "genius for celebrating such things, which in a less indolent and more ambitious nature, would have been sure to have gainted a far poet's name ere now" (98). The clergyman is a social climber and sycophant, who trades on his manners. Throughout the breakfast-table conversation between Pierre, his mother, and Falsegrave, whom she holds up to Pierre as a role model of manners, his

shallowness is expressed by musical metaphors, which reiterate the narrator's initial character assessment that "Heaven had given him [Falsegrave] his fine, silver-keyed person for a flute to play on in this world; and he was nearly the perfect master in it" (*P* 98). Yet, he is too idle to be a charlatan. He rather takes advantage of the false superficial morality of Mrs. Glendinning who concurs with her late husband that "no man could be a complete gentlemen, and preside with dignity at his own table, unless he partook of the church's sacraments" (*P* 98). Having thus dismissed clerical as well as institutional authority, Pierre begins to craft his own moral epistemology.

As Pierre contemplates a lifestyle of radical idealism, he unknowingly engages in OT exegesis. This contemplation occurs episodically throughout the novel. The two most important moments here occur in books VII and XIV. In the former, we find Pierre lying under the Memnon Stone, an ancient boulder he had discovered as a boy, which sits precariously balanced on the edge of a slope. Pierre's first brush with Biblical wisdom comes at second hand, and his exegesis here is neither purely speculative nor philological but accidental.

When Pierre finds the initials "S. y^e W." carved into the stone, he mentions the curious signature in passing to a town elder and tries to enlist the elder's help in discovering their hieroglyphic meaning. Melville arranges the interview as an ironic flashback sequence, in which the young Pierre dismisses the old Bible scholar's natural theological methodology:

[. . .] his city kinsman, who, after a long and richly varied, but unfortunate life, had at last found great solace in the Old Testament, which he was continually studying with ever-increasing admiration; this white-haired old kinsman, after having learnt all the particulars about the stone—its bulk, its height, the precise angle of its critical impendings, and all that,—and then, after much prolonged cogitation upon it, and several long-drawn sighs, and aged looks of hoar significance, and reading certain verses in Ecclesiastes; after all these tedious preliminaries, this not-at-all-to-be-hurried white-haired old kinsman, had laid his tremulous hand upon Pierre's firm young shoulder, and slowly whispered—'Boy; 'tis Solomon the Wise.' (*P* 133)

The narrator does not explicitly reference Ecclesiastes here; it is possible that Melville thought of 3:5, which lists one item in a list of metaphors for God's purposeful arrangement of time and seasons: "[There is] A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together." What is more intriguing, though, is the old scholar's blending of empirical and Biblical analysis. Tying this methodology to a comical figure such as the old kinsman, typifies Pierre's dismissive attitude towards the scholar's explanation. Young, educated readers of novels were becoming dismissive of Biblical hermeneutics. In fact, the reason Pierre discredits the old man's opinion in the matter is that he had earlier in his career claimed that Solomon had visited the North American continent:

Pierre could not repress a merry laugh at this; wonderfully diverted by what seemed to him so queer and crotchety a conceit; which he imputed to the alleged dotage of his venerable kinsman, who he well knew had once maintained, that the old Scriptural Ophir was somewhere on our northern sea-coast; so no wonder the old gentleman should fancy that King Solomon might have taken a trip—as a sort of amateur supercargo—of some Tyre or Sidon gold-ship across the water, and happened to light on the Memnon Stone, while rambling about with bow and quiver shooting partridges. (*P* 133)

The narrator's free indirect discourse mocks the old scholar's hypothesis. However, Pierre's own investigation into the symbolic nature of the stone eventually reveals it to be indeed connected with Ecclesiastical wisdom, specifically Eccles. 7:16-21.²⁰⁶ It bears repeating that attempts at inscribing America into Providential history were ongoing at the time of *Pierre's* publication. Authors such as William Cullen Bryant speculated on an American antiquity that predates not only "the era of Columbus's discovery of the hemisphere," as the narrator mentions here, but even the settlement of the American Indians (*P* 133). Although Melville apparently mocks

²⁰⁶ Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself? / Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time? / It is good that thou shouldst take hold of this; yea, also from this withdraw not thine hand: for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all. / Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city. / For there is not a just man upon earth that doeth good, and sinneth not. (Eccles. 7:16-20)

attempts at constructing such an antiquity here, he subsequently salvages in Pierre's meditation the inherent usefulness of the Biblical text as an interlocutor on questions of morality.

The scene is reminiscent of the chapter "A Bower in the Arsacidies" in that narrator and protagonist find the contingent character of the universe expressed in a curious natural phenomenon (e.g., the overgrowing of the whale bones by plant life). In his moral crisis, the stone takes on new symbolic dimensions for Pierre, and he utilizes it to conduct what is basically an empirical experiment designed to tease out, in evidentialist fashion, the universe's hidden moral character: Pierre lies down underneath the Stone and taunts the now-renamed Terror Stone to crush him, if "[. . .] Life be [a] cheating dream, and virtue as unmeaning and unsequel'd with nay blessing as the midnight mirth of wine; [. . .] and all things are allowable and unpunishable to man;—then do though, Mute Massiveness, fall on me!" (134). The stone remains unmoved and Pierre "owed thanks to no one, and went his moody way" (135). Pierre's struggle to articulate his philosophy commences in the metaphorical and literal shadow of Memnon's stone, looming deadly over Pierre's head as he decides to venture out into the world to engage the ambiguous entanglements of his heritage.²⁰⁷

Eaton acknowledges that the Preacher's call for moderation; i.e., beating a path between innate wickedness and self-righteousness, advocates fear of God as ultimate wisdom, as either self-righteousness or wickedness can lead to one's "untimely death" (114). Like the preacher, Melville presupposes in Pierre a human being that is created not sinful but "*upright*, a word used of the state of the heart which is disposed to faithfulness or obedience" (Eaton 116). The ambiguities invoked by the apparent lack of justice in the natural world and the impression of a tangible depravity of humankind, crystalized in his father's double-life, stir Pierre's innate

²⁰⁷ For an alternative reading, see Wright asserts that Pierre's meditation under the Memnon Stone sets him ad odds with Solomonic wisdom (*Use* 100). Wright seems to overlook the way Melville ironizes Pierre's dismissive attitude by having him basically intuit his old kinsman's Biblical studies.

uprightness. In Ecclesiastes, the subject finds its capacity to belief and surrender to God's benevolent guidance tested by its existence in the world. But Pierre, as I show above, perceives God's guiding hand as a confining space, emptied out of meaning. Yet the episode of his meditation under the stone casts into relief Melville's use of wisdom literature as a foil for Pierre's intellectual metamorphosis.

In the Chapter "Journey and the Pamphlet" the narrator frames Pierre's mission as the pursuit of truth that has the quality of revelation. When Pierre leaves Saddle Meadows to live with Isabel and venture to the city to become a novelist, he finds himself shaken in his resolve in a "rebellion and horrible anarchy and infidelity in his soul" (*P* 205). To expound the feeling, the narrator interposes an analogy about a priest beset by a crisis of faith at the pulpit. The free indirect discourse blurs the line between the narrator's and Pierre's consciousness. In a moment of pious orthodoxy, Pierre contemplates the devil mocking his plans "[. . .] when the Evil one suddenly reveals to him the possibility of the mere moonshine of the Christian Religion" (*P* 205). Yet the corruption and seemingly universal mendacity of the secular world cannot be blamed on any demon. The observable disconnect between Christian ethics and the state of moral life amongst humans in the world is too blatant, so much so that Pierre feels aggravated and driven to crisis at considering the state of capital: "[. . .] Christianity calls upon all men to renounce this world; yet by all odds the most Mammonish part of this world—Europe and America—are owned by none but professed Christian nations, who glory in the owning and seem to have some reason therefore" (207). In the face of such inconsistencies, Pierre finds himself besieged by the "overpowering sense of the world's downright positive falsity" (208). Melville renders Pierre's inner turmoil a military conflict in his soul, spurring him to an impossible task: "unless he prove recreant, or unless he prove gullible, or unless he can find the talismanic secret, to reconcile this

world with his own soul, then there is no peace for him” (*P* 208). The narrator enumerates all the same options the Preacher faces when contemplating life under the sun, life in faith, and the moral inconsistency of the world due to the presence of evil. Unfortunately, the irenic project Pierre proposes, the “Talismanic Secret,” has never been achieved in human history. As with the statue of Pierre’s father, Melville conceives of Pierre’s soul as a material space filled with objects of symbolic import.

Plotinus Plinlimmon’s pamphlet treats of the compatibility of what he calls chronometrical and horological time; i.e., the laws of heaven and earth. The pamphlet explores the Preacher’s distinction of the secular and the pious life under the metaphor of the chronometer. Plinlimmon begins rather theologically orthodox by acknowledging God as prime mover and ethical ideal. Similar to his various meditations on the epistemology authorized by navigational equipment in *Moby-Dick*, Melville constructs the pamphlet around the allegory of nautical navigation to illustrate that secular morality is necessarily distinct from divine justice. However, this is not a pious Calvinist meditation of innate depravity. Plinlimmon hypothesizes that the moral discrepancies of heaven and earth are not due to humanity’s tragic flaw but spring from the teleological contingencies of living in the world. His is a pragmatic ethics. He ponders the fact that “earthly wisdom of man be heavenly folly to God; so also, conversely, is the heavenly wisdom of God an earthly folly to man” (*P* 212). By confronting this dynamic, the individual is to be empowered to strategically use its knowledge as either comfort or corrective. Plinlimmon puts forth an argument from utility and therefore partakes in the romantic project of contemplating the power of the individual’s mental and moral action: according to Plinlimmon, keeping chronometrical time is not so much impossible for human beings as it is “unprofitable” and impractical, for to transpose the ethics of one realm to the other would be to misrepresent

either (*P* 212). Knowledge of this incompatibility becomes useful the moment the individual brings to consciousness the “ascertained degree of organic inaccuracy” in the moral edifices that regulate communal life (*P* 211). Plinlimmon argues that humans have an intuitive notion of heavenly ethics that by means of “so-called intuitions” may often “be contradicting the mere local standards and watch-maker brains of this earth” (*P* 211). As with his earlier novels and especially with “The Lightning-Rod Man,” Melville here swipes (Baconian) empiricism as a restrictive corset that privileges experience over the intuitive morality. Meanwhile, he exemplifies Christ as the singular successful human practitioner of chronometrical ethics. Analogously to Unitarian theology, Christ’s humanity overshadows his divinity in this textual insertion. While many scholars have attributed this to personal preference, the integration of Christ, the moral exemplar and preacher in Plinlimmon’s pamphlet demonstrate perspicaciously acknowledges the impact historical studies such as Strauß had on Biblical hermeneutics.

Melville utilizes the found-letter form to convey a rather provocative theological claim here: when encountering the secular circumstances that give rise to skepticism, Plinlimmon conjectures that any “earnest and righteous philosopher” may have been struck with a sort of infidel idea, that what whatever other worlds God may be Lord of, he is not the Lord of this; for else this world would seem to give the lie to Him” (*P* 213). Melville precludes criticism of infidelity in Plinlimmon’s reasoning by presenting this provocative meditation in the found-epistle format. Generally, the philosopher must be considered a straw-man voice whose authority Melville formally qualifies with multiple layers of textual contingency and thus deniability: for one thing, the text is incomplete. Pierre unknowingly carries the pages in his pocket and is later unable to reassemble a complete version of the document. The partial pamphlet furthermore contains only a transcript of a lecture series, which potentially makes it an account at second

hand. Beyond the ample opportunity for misconstruing by the transcriber, the lecture format itself is less axiomatically precise than, for example, a monograph. In contrast to, for instance, to Babbalanja in *Mardi*—Plinlimmon is conspicuously absent from most of the text. His presence in the novel is less personal as it serves to catalyze the continuity of wisdom morality.²⁰⁸

Beyond the pamphlet's generic framing, Plinlimmon himself, at first glance, appears to soften the blow of this heretic proposition by arguing that it is quite easily dismissed as a misapprehension: The secular ethics' dissimilarity with divine law is not due to the world's dissimilarity to God but due to its "meridianal correspondence" with fallible human beings (*P* 213). Chronometrical time, at second glance, is therefore not merely impractical because it flows from an epistemology inaccessible to humans, but it is also 'useless' precisely in the sense of not being rooted in the experience of living among other fallible creatures.²⁰⁹

Like the Preacher, Plinlimmon repeatedly cautions against misconstruing his argument as authorizing amoral behavior. In fact, Plinlimmon reiterates twice that such a line of reasoning would "finally run into utter selfishness and human demonism" that would violate both chronometrical and horological morality (*P* 214). On the other end of the spectrum—and consistent with Eccles. 7:16-20—he notes that he is attempting, like Pierre, to fashion moral behavior by heavenly standards. On the contrary, Plinlimmon recognizes that such a project is futile, lest one "committed a sort of suicide as to the practical things of this world" (*P* 213). In this, the pamphlet continues Pierre's meditation under the Terror Stone. While the stone did not acquiesce Pierre by crushing him if his goal to reconcile chronometrical and horological time be unsound, Plinlimmon's pamphlet foreshadows the social and eventually factual suicide Pierre commits by relocating to the city to be an author. While romantically chivalrous, the fatal flaw in

²⁰⁸ Wright provides a cogent analysis of how Babbalanja channels the Solomonic wisdom, which is why I will not tread the same ground here (*Use* 98-99).

²⁰⁹ For Melville's notes on Christology as lacking practical wisdom of this world, see *Journals* 324.

Pierre's plan is that he ignores the strategic character that both the Preacher and Plinlimmon prescribe for an ethical life in the world. Chronometrical time cannot be kept on earth, however, "the monitor," Plinlimmon notes, "can not be wrong itself" (*P* 213). What eludes Pierre's grasp, according to Plinlimmon's argument, is the fact that he is "a man and a horologe" and therefore cannot act as an angel (*P* 214). Plinlimmon thus expounds on the notion that the horological chronometer is an innate and inescapable property of humanity.²¹⁰

Plinlimmon ultimately submits that the two modes of living are irreconcilable but not diametrically opposed. Common sense and intuition are the ultimate mediators against the extremes of willful vice and self-annihilation that both the Preacher and Plinlimmon lay out for their audience. Both claim "virtuous expediency" as the highest attainable moral feat for humankind (214). In *Pierre*, Melville novelizes the destructive consequences of radical idealism. While he lobbies his readers to be pragmatic in tempering their idealism, Plinlimmon's pamphlet acknowledges simultaneously the communally transformative potential of moralism. Those wishing to be moral should still "aim at heaven" in their everyday practice, but should do so, not because they have been "authoritatively taught" by "dogmatical" teachers, but because they remain "agonizingly conscious of the beauty of chronometrical excellence" (*P* 215). This agonizing awareness, this wisdom of woe that allows living in the world while renouncing its viler temptations is precisely the second plateau Pierre fails to reach.

After reading the pamphlet, Pierre is beseeched by doubt. Wright observes that Pierre exorcises said doubt "by appealing not to Scripture but to the chivalry of his own action" (*Use* 123). I extend Wright's argument by claiming that the pamphlet quite explicitly calls for adopting an OT attitude towards moral action. All three passages I have analyzed demonstrate

²¹⁰ On the inescapability of horological perspective, see Eccles. 10:12: "For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, [. . .] so *are* the sons of men snared in an evil time."

how Melville construes *Pierre's* as resulting from Pierre's rejecting OT wisdom as well as the Biblical text itself as archaic forms of knowledge and hermeneutics. The irony in this rejection is that he enacts precisely those consequences against which OT wisdom and its modern interpreters (Plinlimmon and Melville) caution.

5.5 The Two Temples

Melville attends to this issue—the difference between Biblical text and moral praxis—particularly in his Atlantic diptychs. The controversial short story “The Two Temples” ponders a version of this problem by reflecting critically on the restriction of access to religious service based on class markers. The narrator recounts his experiences of attending two communal events: one, “Temple First,” is a public service in New York, the other, “Temple Second,” refers to a metropolitan public playhouse in London in which he finds an emotionally stimulating sense of communal membership. Location is key in both parts of the diptych, as Melville illuminates the spiritual dimensions of the church and the theater, suggesting quite provocatively that the former fails as a place of religious congregation while the latter conveys the kind of fellow feeling typically associated with religious liturgy. In the first part of the story, the narrator, based on his shabby appearance, gets barred from attending service at New York's newly constructed, opulent Grace Church by a “beadle-faced” sexton (*PT* 303). The disbarred congregant quickly realizes the reasons for him being “excommunicated; excluded, anyway” is based on perceived class membership (*PT* 303): “had my new coat been done last night, as the false tailor promised, and had I, arrayed therein [. . .] tickled the fat-paunched, beadle-faced man's palm with a bank-note, [. . .] I would have had a fine seat in this marble-buttressed, stained-glassed, spic-and-span new temple” (*PT* 303). The monolog facetiously begs the question to which god this temple is dedicated, Mammon or Jehovah, thus calling into question the correlation of the church's

institutional organization and spiritual content. As if to confirm this discrepancy, the speaker momentarily considers readopting the old Protestant maxim of *sola scriptura* rather than attending church as he debates returning to the Battery while “peeping into my [his] prayer-book” (PT 304). Any such restriction on church admission necessarily reveals the contingency of the overall program, its hollow and, in Ecclesiastical terms, vain character.²¹¹

Having gained access to the building clandestinely by climbing the church steeple, the narrator begins to reflect on his exclusion from service based on class markers. His current physical positioning in church thus symbolizes his ambivalent status as a congregant: “Though an insider in one respect,” the narrator thinks to himself, “yet am I but an outsider in another” (PT 305). In other words, he cannot claim membership in the congregation precisely as long as he attends the service. This curious inversion is symptomatic for what the speaker perceives as a tragic flaw in the way theology translates into religious practice. If spacial placement—of the affluent congregants inside the church and the speaker outside or in the upper gallery—emblemizes class, the same placement implies one’s position in the soteriological order. Melville thus satirizes the notion that heavenly knowledge can be represented by material means.

The narrator eventually turns his analytical faculties to the unsuspecting flock below him. If class is indicated by appearance, then surely his current, physically elevated position must analogously suggest his favorable position in the order of salvation. “[L]ittle dream the good congregation away down there,” he muses, “that they have a faithful clerk away up here. Here too is a fitter place for sincere devotions, where, though I see, I remain unseen. Depend upon it, no Philistine would have my pew. [. . .] Height, somehow, hath devotion in it. [. . .] Yes, Heaven is high” (PT 306). This last sophism is, of course, a mockery of the hypocritical, circular logic by

²¹¹ Composed between 1853/54, the story remained unpublished in Melville’s lifetime and was rejected by Putnam due to sensitive nature of spiritual content. See *Correspondence*, May 16, 1854.

which the sexton turns him away at the gate. More devastating, perhaps, is the implication that communal piety results directly from communal ostracism. Neither the satire to be derived from the slapstick interaction between his narrator and the sexton, nor the simple irony to be had by pointing out that urban spiritualism is built hypocritically around socio-economic markers are central here. In fact, he makes the latter point more explicitly in “Bartleby.” Melville here rather echoes the Ecclesiastical condemnation of vanity by hyperbolizing the idea of a superficial litmus test for church membership. In theological terms, such tests mistake material for spiritual values and therefore indicate a problematic misapprehension of the Biblical text.

The falseness of this economy of piety emerges even more clearly when viewed, figuratively and literally, from above: From his lofty pew, the narrator feigns the service “some sly enchanter’s show” as he beholds “the theatric wonder of the populous spectacle” as if looking through “some necromancer’s glass” (*PT* 306). The narrator remains unaffected by the ceremony as his elevated perspective defamiliarizes the liturgy and counteracts the intended emotional effects of the service. And yet the same vista enables genuine piety: “I seemed gazing from Pisgah into the forests of old Canaan. A Puseyitish painting of Madonna and child, adoring a lower window, seemed showing to me the sole tenants of this painted wilderness—the true Hagar and her Ishmael” (*PT* 308). The narrator’s OT religious sensibilities are laid open in this passage as he references the Pishgah view—a motif Melville would use again in the sketch of the same name in “The Encantadas” (1856)—and reads Mary and Jesus as types of Hagar and Ishmael. As in the sketch “The Pisgah View from the Rock,” pious introspection is tied to OT historicity, and the glass window painting manages to invoke the spiritual sense of place that the sermon cannot. Moreover, the narrator experiences genuine religious sentiment as a result of his recognizing the material entanglements and corruption of institutional practice. This moment of

introspection and recognition—arguably, Melville’s forlorn wandering protagonist here recognizes himself as Ishmael in the stain-glass window—is equally predicated on the rejection of materialism, a conversion per excellence, in Ecclesiastical terms. The Ecclesiastical maxim is instantaneously realized through the narrator’s gaze. And the short form and diptych structure of the story duplicate and thereby underscore the narrator’s point of view in attending the service and, later on in the second sketch, a theater performance in London. As I show below, the two episodes present two parts of the same thought process.

Prima facie, the reference to Edward Pusey seems curiously specific. For one thing, it references indirectly England, and thus foreshadows the location of the second temple in the narrative. At the same time, linking the issue of authentic religious experience with the theological controversy of the Anglican Oxford Movement seems, at best, far-fetched or, at worst, accidental. However, the narrator’s critique of Christian liturgy within the church appears to be alleviated when beholding this particular version of Marian iconography. The reference also indicates an awareness of the irenic efforts by religious scholars based on patristics; i.e., the study of the church fathers. In the U.S., these efforts, as Clark reminds us, were often underwritten by the hope that some of the religious controversies could be purged by recovering ‘authentic’ Christianity, therefore scholarly reactions to such findings as Pusey’s were “highly ideological” and strongly emotional and turned figures like him and Newman into pariahs (3).²¹² Melville’s inversion of typology in this scene parallels the tenor of the reform efforts associated with the Oxford Movement in that it is restorative and, from the perspective of the theological institutional establishment, regressive. Contrary to the standard Protestant reading of the OT as prophesying the NT, Melville has his narrator read Mary and the Christ as types of OT

²¹² Clark notes further that patristics, the study of the church fathers, was for American scholars a project of institutional and social history rather than theology (2).

characters, emphasizing once more the archetype of Ishmael, lost in the wilderness with all hand against him (Gen. 16:12). At the very least, the layered references in this scene evince a melancholic, nostalgic tone that compliments the narrator's vulnerability and proclivity for dramatizing his status as outcast. Melville illustrates a moment of introspective escapism by having his narrator fantasize about a welcoming spiritual community. This fantasy, in turn, is underwritten by a network of insinuations about the bleak prospects of persons within any church that attempt to put such longings for a past that perhaps never existed into action.²¹³

In "Temple Second," the narrator-wanderer, having settled some debts for his passage across the Atlantic, finds himself penniless in the streets of London (*PT* 310). The scene echoes Redburn's lonely exploits through the streets of Liverpool while also anticipating the explicit social critique of "Rich Man's Pudding / Poor Man's Crumbs" as well as of the critique of urban charity culture in "Bartleby."²¹⁴ Being without means, the narrator wishes for it to be Sunday, a day on which he would be able to seek asylum at church: "if it were but Sunday now [. . .] [b]ut it is Saturday night. The end of a weary week, and all but the end of weary me" (*PT* 310, 311). His lament implies that charity can only occur at certain times in specific settings and that charity

²¹³ Reverend Edward Bouverie Pusey was a professor of Hebrew at Oxford and Anglican minister. Pusey was an intellectual leader of the Oxford Movement, a variety of English Tractarianism, a controversial and (historically) regressive reform effort within the Anglican Church. The movement's prominent figures, besides Pusey, were John Keble and John Henry Newman, who famously recounts the intellectual and moral struggles behind his eventual Catholic conversion in his spiritual autobiography, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864). Pusey studied the church fathers and sought to re-import Catholic practices into Anglican liturgy as part of a greater irenic movement for reconciliation of the two churches. He had a reputation of being a stern, scholarly-minded person, yet, at the same time, was said to have retreated from the contemporary theological challenges of German neologism (Faught 551). Although this view on Pusey is presently being contested in scholarship, Melville may have felt a kinship, given his own apparent distaste for Higher Criticism. One of Pusey's controversial axioms, and probably the source of Melville's familiarity with Pusey, is his sermon on Christ's presence in the Eucharist and his literal interpretation of transubstantiation in Matt. 26:28. Melville's reference to the Virgin Mary here is perplexing for several reasons, not the least of which is his Calvinist upbringing. Carol Engelhardt Herrington recently argued that the Virgin Mary was a volatile figure for Anglicans because they deemed her responsible for Catholic conversions, of which Newman would become a famous example (18). Victorian Protestants, in contrast, posited Mary as an "ordinary woman" and rejected what they considered to be a pagan depiction of her as a goddess and partaker in Christ's divinity and genealogical source of his humanity (Engelhardt 78).

²¹⁴ Parker notes that "The Two Temples" and "Poor Man's Pudding Rich Man's Crumbs" together with "Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," belong to a triplet of socially critically short fiction (*PT* 697).

is unavailable to him because his need does not conform to the rigid economy of charitable dispensation. Again, Melville engages with the problem of charity; in this case, its ideological inconsistencies are expressed by its logistical superstructure: charity as it is implicitly practiced by the people of London and New York is not a spontaneous outpouring of fellow feeling but a strictly regulated ritual. Its temporal and local restrictions (Sunday mass, for instance, is an appropriate venue) make it a symbolic rather than an interpersonal exchange. In contrast, want is based on contingency, Melville argues, and as such cannot be computed in, let alone alleviated within, the rigid economy of gratuitous urban humanitarian symbolism.

Being without such help, the narrator is left to drift forlornly through “great London, the Leviathan” (*PT* 310). The hellish scene is reminiscent of Ishmael’s vision of hellfire in “The Try-Works.” As he tumbles through the onslaught of people in “Babylonian London,” he concludes dramatically that death may ultimately outstrip charity under such a rigid system, the insinuation being that this is, in fact, the end to which the whole edifice of institutional charity is geared (*PT* 310). As in “Temple First,” Melville lays the blame for these conditions at the feet of organized religion. The narrator seeks an authentic experience of fellow-feeling, “not merely rest, but cheer; the making one of many pleased and pleasing human faces; the getting into a genial humane assembly of [his] kind; such as, at its best and highest, it is to be found in the unified multitude of a devout congregation” (*PT* 311). The speaker notably proposes the possibility of genuine congregational membership, and, more importantly, insinuates that such membership is transformational. Similar to his experience in New York, however, he finds himself barred, not only from admittance to any particular church but also, categorically, from any such genuine congregational experience, by the classed “scruples of those fastidious gentry with red gowns

and long gilded staves, who guard the portals of the first-class London tabernacles from all profanation from a poor forlorn and fainting wanderer like me” (*PT* 311, 312).

But London ultimately provides an alternative ‘temple,’ one in which such communal spirit may be found: the theater. Contemplating pawing off his coat to gain admittance, the narrator finds himself “providentially with-held by a sudden cheery summons” uttered in a “voice unmistakably benevolent” belonging to a “working-man,” no doubt another class reference (*PT* 312). Perplexed at the event, he begins contemplating the fact that he just received unsolicited charity. In contrast to his other texts dealing with charity, Melville here illustrates in positive terms an alternative model of charity based on the orthodox conception of the NT kerygma, or pronouncement and summons to Christ’s message. Under this conception, charity is an informal yet highly symbolical act, the emotional intensity of which is transformative and outstrips the mind’s capacity to process it right away. Compared to *The Confidence-Man*, for instance, charity here is not a multi-layered, interpersonal scheme hinting at the universal masquerade underneath. Rather, charity is contingent, uncodified, and curiously ambivalent. It is at once anonymous and intensely intimate. That being said, the benefactor merely states as a rationale for his charity that he “knows”—either from observation or intuition—that the narrator seeks admission to the theater, and, being unable to go himself, bestows the ticket upon him (*PT* 312). Melville’s plain, paratactic phrasing leaves open the possibility that the working-man did not have any deeper thoughts about his gift at all and was just acting out of impulse. And yet it is precisely this spur-of-the-moment character that infuses the transfer of the ticket with symbolic meaning. The ticket too is symbolically determined as it embodies the kind of ideal communal membership for which the narrator was yearning earlier in his tale: “Its [the ticket’s] presentation ensures unquestioned re-admittance” (*PT* 312). The ticket is therefore not merely a means of

admittance but of recognition. It allows the owner to be literally seen again as a member of the community. Its symbolic value allows for an instantaneous sense of belonging because it short-circuits the usual social protocols of introduction and gradual acquaintance.

Thus the stranger's gift becomes a symbolic gesture and triggers a profound emotional response in the narrator which eventually causes him to meditate on the universal presence of charity in human existence. This effect illustrates that both charity and gift-giving, as charity's superordinate category, are symbolic exchanges that derive their value from their respective capacity for evoking emotions. The narrator's reaction is transformative in the Ecclesiastical sense, insofar as it modifies his perception of reality based on such evocation. For instance, when he receives the plain red ticket under the very same gaslight that had before "fiendish[ly]" poured its "Tartarean ray across the muddy sticky streets," the stranger's gesture dissolves the gloomy vapors of the sharkish city and, at least temporarily, provides the wandering narrator with a physical and mental safe haven (*PT* 310). The narrator's initial reaction—astonishment, bewilderment, shame—echoes the vocabulary of Calvinist conversion (*PT* 312). The experience is transformative, above all, because it makes the narrator contemplate the problem of charity from the side of the receiver.²¹⁵ Facing "unvanquishable scruples," he suddenly realizes, along the lines of the Preacher's axiom of life under God, that, "All your life, nought [sic] but charity sustains you, and all others in the world" (*PT* 312). Charity, in this instance, is both transcendental and material. Channeling Thomas Hobbes, the speaker notes that, in a world marked by universal warfare, finding oneself unharmed by one's fellow creatures is already an act of immense charity, as "all mortals, live but by sufferance of your charitable kind" (*PT* 312).

²¹⁵ Dennis Berthold claims that the narrator's proletarianism contrasts to Melville's Anglophile conservatism and his omission of the Astor Place Riot (1849) in his fiction. Berthold concludes that Melville's support of democracy excluded mob violence. Despite picturing the amelioration of class difference in his fiction, in times of crisis, "Melville would side with authority and tradition" (453).

While he does not consider life as a daily gift from God, his conclusion is consistent with the Ecclesiastical axiom in that he reconceives of human existence in the world as the result of a universal atavism and as such must be rediscovered and appreciated daily. What initially keeps him from embracing charity is his pride; i.e. his inability to accept a gift at face value without discerning its hidden causality:

The plain fact was I had received charity; and for the first time in my life. Often in the course of my strange wanderings I had needed charity, but never asked it, and certainly never, ere this blessed night, had been offered it. And a stranger; and in the very mar of roaring London too! Next moment my sense of foolish shame departed, and I felt a queer feeling in my left eye, which, as sometimes is the case with people, was the weaker one; probably from being on the same side with the heart. (*PT* 312)

Once he exorcizes the “foolish shame” that had previously kept him from using the ticket, he is overcome with sentimental weakness. The speaker reacts ambivalently to this sensation. But by connoting his reluctance with foolishness, Melville situates the narrator’s internal monolog in the moral register of wisdom literature. The instantaneous shift in perspective, a move from vanity to wisdom, transfixes him in epiphany, so much so that he is overcome with emotion and almost moved to tears. By describing these micro reactions, Melville illustrates how such epiphany may be externalized. Yet the impending emotional exuberance is tempered and held back, it seems, by the social norm of countenance: the narrator instantaneously rationalizes his momentary sentimentality by referencing folklore about the connection between the left eye and the heart.

When seen through the religious lens, the force of this reaction must be ascribed to the momentary ability to see the other as one sees oneself. Stan Goldman’s reading of *Clarel* can be useful in this respect as it is one of only a few accounts that stress OT divine hiddenness as part of Melville’s cosmology. According to Goldman, “Job and Ecclesiastes admit that the reason for the failure of human wisdom-searching is that absolute wisdom is of God” (*Protest* 32).

“[H]uman likeness to divinity,” Goldman continues, motivates self-concealment as “not only a psychological but a theological need” (*Protest* 41). Connecting the narrator’s quasi-religious sentiment towards communal belonging in the church and the theater to OT divine hiddenness provides an explanation for his reverential reaction to charity and community. In this context, the stranger’s gift represents a moment of mutual, metaphysical recognition between two otherwise separate and hidden entities. This rare event, unsurprisingly, inspires strong emotional responses. In conclusion, Robert Alter’s characterization of the Preacher may be transferred seamlessly to the epistemological methodology Melville advocates in the story: “[. . .] he [the Preacher] turns around, turns back, like a man in restless pursuit of some maddeningly elusive quarry, trying to find true wisdom [. . . .] He is a serious thinker who is constantly in motion [. . .]. He has an interest in weighing antithetical propositions and moving dialectically among them” (*Wisdom* 340). Alter’s comment expounds upon the dialectical quality of the narrator’s epiphany, his brief recognition of his benefactor as a fellow traveler in a life guided by hidden purpose and his indulging in the transient pleasures of theater-going help us view his arresting epiphany as a momentary freedom from restlessness and a celebration of mystery and religious fellow feeling.²¹⁶

Melville, once again, seems unable to live up to his reputation as a subversive religious cynic or of being an advocate of meaninglessness. He constructs a scene of transformative positive spiritualism that is as layered and multifaceted as any of his skeptical episodes. In “The Two Temples,” juxtaposition of universal adversity and universal atavism, for instance, seems quite precarious, even paradoxical, unless viewed through the lens of Ecclesiastical, purposeful

²¹⁶ My earlier discussion of the Joban paradigm in Melville’s writing necessarily built on scholarship that reads Melville’s writing as a laboratory of the mind that allows him to work out his inner religious skepticism (Dillingham *Melville’s Later* 401; Sedgwick 18). My dissatisfaction with this approach has been that, despite their disavowal of this method, the majority of studies invoke Melville’s personal religious convictions as the ultimate extension of how and why we may read what happens in his texts with respect to the interrogation of the Bible.

life of faith. Against the state of universal enmity, the life under the sun, of which Babylonian London and New York and their human and religious masses, are emblems, one act of random kindness transfixes the individual seeker of truth in a state of quasi-religious, communal reverie.

5.6 Hunilla's Suffering and the Demoralizing Forces of Nature and the Mind

Frank O'Connor, in his instructive analysis *The Lonely Voice*, comments that the short story is characteristically concerned with dramatizing moral behavior, as it carries "an intense awareness of human loneliness" (87). "Always in the short story," O'Connor continues, "there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo – Christ, Socrates, Moses" (87). If in "Bartleby" Melville conceives of a pure sufferer, than the sketch "The Chola Widow" from "The Encantadas" depicts a moral exemplum of forbearance and patience. Sketches eight and nine on Hunilla and Oberlus have often been discussed by scholars as opposite ends of the emotional spectrum O'Connor outlines (cf., Bickley 115). Both sketches explore human responses to degrading environmental conditions and divine victimization. In the case of Hunilla, the Chola Widow, the narrator takes account of the suffering effected by human treachery, loss, and the humiliating helplessness in the face of nature's unsympathetic violent course. The sketch, I argue, extends the previous discussion of divine justice and morality by conceiving of a pure victim. Structurally, it also transitions my present investigation to the topic addressed in the final third of *Ecclesiastes*, the existence of evil in the world and the question of theodicy. The previous examples from *Redburn*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre* have pondered the problem of evil as a conceptual question. In the following, I investigate how Melville conceives of personified evil. In the case of Hunilla, he curiously adopts a religious vantage point less familiar to him in

Roman Catholicism. As with “The Two Temples,” Melville, on a secondary level, appears to be interested in the inspiring properties of iconic sainthood, particularly the Virgin Mary.

Hunilla does not possess Bartleby’s otherworldly, ephemeral nature. Hence her suffering becomes tangible and concrete, so much so that it challenges the mimetic capacities of literature itself. With her party marooned on Norfolk Isle, she watches helplessly as her brother and husband drown in an attempt to leave the ill-fated islands. Shipwrecked and stranded, she suffers in isolation; by the time she is finally rescued by the narrator’s party, she has tasted bitter despair and has confronted God’s moral arbitration. Apart from its ethical discussion, the sketch presents a meta-discussion of literary short forms. Melville equivocates on the genre of the sketch as both literary and visual art by invoking an impressionist aesthetics based on the properties of a hand-drawn sketch. The sketch begins with a meditation on literary form. The narrator claims from the beginning that he feels himself incapable of creating a narrative that will convey the depth of his own sympathy to the reader. In what is essentially a prefatory apologia, he laments that if his audience does not wind up sharing in his compassionate sentiments toward Hunilla, it will be due to his lack of technical skill rather than “artistic heartlessness” (*PT* 152). This is his rationale for choosing the format of the sketch, in which he may draw the scene in crayons, “tracing softly melancholy lines,” which “best depict the mournful image of the dark damasked Chola widow” (*PT* 152). Crayons with their oily complexion, accordingly, produce broadly textured, yet inconsistent lines. They are explicit enough to capture the mood of a scene, but too unrefined to show detail. The choice of this impressionist technique is partially motivated by melancholy but also appears to be derived from Hunilla’s dark complexion. Her racial ambiguity—the narrator describes a Chola as “a half-breed Indian woman of Payta in Peru”—matches the geographic ambiguity of the Encantadas (*PT* 152). In a Whitmanesque gesture, Melville equivocates the

literary and visual form of the sketch, effectively announcing the failure of romantic literary symbolism. Hunilla's suffering exceeds the pictorial immediacy of symbolic language and thus pierces the veil between narrator and narrative. Consequently, the narrator finds himself in need of a new language that operates with the vividness and emotional intensity of pictorial systems. Similar to *Pierre*'s meta-reflection on the epistemological yield of literature, "The Chola Widow" simultaneously contemplates Hunilla's suffering as a cosmic injustice as well as the suitability of literary representation to be a medium for conveying moral sentiments. By having his narrator declare so emphatically his sympathy for his literary object, Melville places a premium on the moral content of the sketch over its form. Marvin Fisher suggests that the narrator's moralist preoccupation becomes equally apparent in his negative judgment, for instance in his condemnation of the demonic creature Oberlus (44).²¹⁷

Hunilla thus becomes subject to multiple forms of determination, all of which the narrator acknowledges: the thick broad strokes of his crayon sketch emphasizes her symbolic function as religious martyr, while her racial ambiguity mirrors the geographic ambivalence of the islands. Her stoic forbearance in the face of catastrophic loss and isolation is framed by a poetic development of various OT themes and forms. For instance, the narrator develops symbolically even the husband's faithfulness to her in death. His body is swept ashore, "with one arm encirclingly outstretched" as if to hold her again (*PT* 154). Again the narrator dramatizes the scene by interpreting it as a Joban demand for reciprocity in the relationship between human beings and God: "Ah, Heaven, when man thus keeps faith, wilt thou be faithless who created the faithful one? But they cannot break faith who never plighted it" (*PT* 154-5). The dense comment first invokes the OT contract logic of the Covenant of Works, symbolized by Hunilla's

²¹⁷ On the narrator's bias, see Bickley (118) and Stierle (18). Fisher also acknowledges Melville's experimentation with literary form in "The Encantadas" when he notes that the blending of historical and fictitious data constitutes a distinct, "highly imaginative nonfiction" form (50).

faithfulness in marriage as well as to her God. Yet the narrator precludes theophany by arguing that those among the human race who never broke divine law are still condemned mercilessly and arbitrarily. Moreover, their sentence is passed under a moral standard that is higher even than that to which their creator is beholden. In Plinlimmon's terms, Hunilla serves a sentence passed under chronometrical law. She can therefore have no experiential knowledge of her offense. Both *Pierre* and "The Encantadas" ponder the term "divine contract" through the lens of secular contract teleology. In the sketch, the narrator implies that contracts presuppose mutual vulnerability of all parties as their basis. Penalty in the case of injury is what grants the contract its power. Hunilla's plight seems to insinuate that divine contracts are less equitable than those made by humans. Thus marriage vows—although of a lower cosmological order—are more binding than the covenantal ties between God and His people. These antinomian undertones in "The Encantadas" covertly indict Ecclesiastical admonitions against the folly of all human artifices (including contract law).

For one thing, Hunilla's moral example consists in her patience in awaiting the return of the ship that had abandoned her on the island. Secondly, however, her stoic forbearance is based on a strong personal faith. Melville is less interested in the specifics of that faith as he is in the effect belief has in this crisis. Incidentally, Melville explores the mysterious quality of belief in opposition to religious orthodoxy's literary censorship and Lockean empirical doctrine. At first glance, these two systems seem like strange bedfellows; however, as I showed above, nineteenth-century theology had already entered into what would turn out to be an uneasy alliance with empiricism. On two occasions, the narrator interrupts the story to expound on the spiritual significance of Hunilla's suffering. In a curious diegetic twist, the first interruption seemingly "descends" upon the narrator against his will and triggers an odd comparison between the

ensorship of books and Hunilla's unwarranted suffering (*PT* 156). Having acted as external focalizer for Hunilla's internal transformations throughout the sketch, he now begins actively disrupts his storytelling by linking the fabula of the sketch to reflections on the ethics of censorship.

[. . .] if some books are deemed most baneful and their sale forbid, how then with deadlier facts, not dreams of doting men? Those whom books will hurt will not be proof against events. Events, not books, should be forbid. *But in all things man sows upon the wind, which bloweth just there whither it listeth; for ill or good man cannot know. Often ill comes from the good, as good comes from the ill.* (*PT* 156, emphasis added)

Using Biblical verbiage, Melville addresses the problems of religious dogma and zeal—specifically the problem of censorship—and explores familiar ground about the incongruity of heavenly and secular morality. Melville parodies Solomon's anaphoric insight of Ecclesiastes 'all is vanity' and constructs a Biblical aphorism of his own design that uses elements of Prov. 10:2 and Eccles. 11:6, with the former asserting the fundamentally moral nature of the world, and the latter expressing the fundamental contingency involved in strategic action.²¹⁸

Melville contradicts Proverbial orthodoxy and has his narrator lament the fact that instead of barring discussion of morality in books, such as his, censors should ponder the moral integrity of the world around them. The narrator's excursion also gestures to religious censorship as historical phenomenon. The censorship and usurpation of books and ideas from the middle ages on, and continuing well into the nineteenth century, encompassed not only issues of Biblical criticism but also scientific findings. Melville's equivocation of the imbalance between censorship of books and events alludes to the deist notion of nature as the only valid book. Since nature is the ultimate tome shaping human experience, Melville's narrator seems to say, would-

²¹⁸ Eccles. 11:6 addresses the fact that there is not correlation between industry and gains: "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand; for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both *shall be* alike good"; meanwhile, Prov. 10:2, more conservatively, pronounces that "Treasures of wickedness profit nothing: but righteousness delivereth from death."

be literary censors should concern themselves with its contents (events) instead of banning novelist productions. If censorship were to accomplish its purpose; i.e. to protect humankind from mental harm, it would have to be leveled against the original author of nature, God. Since censoring events is impossible, the comment pokes fun at the deist notion of a perceptible divine presence in material nature while simultaneously linking Hunilla's suffering to divine authorship of nature. This antinomian statement implicates God as the literary author of Hunilla's suffering, a point Melville already presented in *Pierre*.²¹⁹

Despite the bleak narrative context, the narrator ends his excursion on a placable version of Ecclesiastical wisdom: human machinations may be futile, but a universe given over to randomness and driven by chance may at least occasionally produce favorable results from unfavorable beginnings. Like some wild "silken beast," the narrator continues, "Feline fate will sometimes dally with a human soul, and by a nameless magic make it repulse a sane despair with a hope which is but mad" (*PT* 156). In contrast to his previous comment, fate here is no longer a neutralizing force of chance but a feral and fickle creature that toys mercilessly with human souls to prevent the juxtaposition of sane despair and mad hope.²²⁰

Melville's insertion of this self-deprecating humorist acknowledgment, therefore serves the double purpose: first, pointing to his own structural control over the narrative as an allegory for human fate acknowledges a compositional method that aims at achieving unity of effect.

²¹⁹ A.D. White provides a readable, if at times passionate, account of the history of these multi-layered conflicts, and cites various instances of theological suppression of secularized empirical science—for instance, the Society for the Study of Nature at Naples (1560)—and the subsequent utilization of scientific method for supporting spiritual truths in various disciplines (White 41). A prevalent example for the increasing self-eviscerating character of censorship as it pertains to religious orthodoxy is the fate of Richard Simon's first publication, *Critical History of the Old Testament* (1678), which questions the Mosaic authorship as well as Hebrew being humankind's original language, and was banned and destroyed on behest of archbishop Bossuet (White 319).

²²⁰ Fate's ferralness characteristics approximates those of Oberlus, the most degenerate and bestial inhabitant of the islands. In *Moby-Dick* the narrator conceives of Ahab's madness in similar terms: "Human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing. When you think it fled, it may have but become transfigured into some still subtler form. Ahab's full lunacy subsided not, but deepeningly contracted" (*MD* 185). Reading the two texts in conjunction underscores Ahab's claim that his madness maddened responds in kind to the violence nature heaps upon him.

When the narrator declares self-reflexively that he “imp[s] the cat-like thing” by treating a fellow human soul—his readers—contemptuously by interrupting his narrative for his ramblings, he admits to stalling those readers who await the continuation of the adventure plot yet admonishes that those who “feel not” for Hunilla, those who read without empathy, “read[s] in vain” (*PT* 156). In the final instance of the sketch, Melville thus validates a classic romantic trope, the socially adhesive properties of empathy and emotion. Incidentally, those are the qualities that Norfolk Isle seems to absorb and annihilate in any sentient being that dwells on its shores, if it does not exterminate them altogether, as with Hunilla’s family.

The mock apothegm serves to justify what the narrator deems Hunilla’s pride. Bruce Bickley suggests that pride is her means of survival and the key to her “triumph over disgrace, pain, and grief” (116). Although it may not be consistent with orthodox morality, the narrator insinuates that pride as a survival strategy pragmatically confronts the contingent realities of life. Melville’s mock apothegm ironizes the Ecclesiastical warning against ‘vanity’ by depicting a form of vanity that is arguably licensed by the sapiential tradition: Hunilla’s pride is not conceited indulgence but a hardening against personal grief, not an attachment to secular pleasure but a crystallization of the human attachment to life and faith. Melville’s sketch thus explores the semantic flexibility of the term ‘vanity.’

5.6.1 *Her Suffering*

Prior to adopting this special form of pride, Hunilla already displayed the kind of equanimity towards death that Ishmael considers the basis for a mind in moral equilibrium: “With equal longing she now looked for the living and the dead; the brother and the captain; alike vanished never to return” (*PT* 155). The ambivalence of the fate of her loved ones plunges Hunilla’s soul into spiritual twilight. The absoluteness of her physical and psychological

confinement even imposes a spiral quality on her thoughts, which “now wandered to the unreturning ship, and were beaten back again” (*PT* 156). Suffering the death of her family, and even sexual victimization of bypassing sailors, Hunilla becomes physically and mentally violated. Eventually, she even suffers self-inflicted violence by having to act against her own natural inclination to hope for rescue.

Melville here subverts a key romantic trope—the individual genius’s ability to transcend time and space by the sheer force of will and mind. Like the waves surrounding Norfolk Isle, Hunilla’s fleeting thoughts are beaten back and return to the island. Her perpetual hope for rescue amounts to self-torture, so much so that she must abandon hope to continue living. Even the sympathetic narrator deems her self-soothing fruitless because “to those whom earth’s sure indraft draws, patience or impatience is still the same” (*PT* 156). Melville curiously modifies the connotations of one of his stock symbols, the ocean, and reinvisions it as a symbol of this unnerving confinement: If, in *Moby-Dick*, the open sea is a sanguine, pure space of metaphysical exploration, “The Encantadas” depicts the ocean as an absolute, impenetrable prison, akin to *Bartleby*’s office and prison walls. The sketch, therefore, extends his stylistic vocabulary as it inverts many of the meanings Melville scholars have come to adopt as stock images. In contrast to his sea-faring novels, Melville’s focus here is no longer the dynamic individual, constantly in motion, engaged in an open-ended quest, but the ossified individual, cast on the barren shore and exposed to the continuous onslaught of nature and its own mind. “The Encantadas,” therefore explores nature and the mind as literally demoralizing forces. Hunilla’s suffering does not derive from her insufficient capacity for sentiment or rationality; the island’s atmospheric desolation symbolizes the futility of either methodology.

Having conceptualized Hunilla as paragon of forbearance, the narrator attempts once more a physiognomical reading of her racially ambiguous features. Her “strangely haughty” air expresses a pride, not of hyperinflation but of remoteness from emotion, “[p]ride’s height in vain abased to proneness on the rack; nature’s pride subduing nature’s torture” (*PT* 161). This dense image must be understood in light of the narrator’s earlier condemnation of religious censorship: the vanity of human machinations, which Ecclesiastes condemns, differs from the pride that helps Hunilla survive her marooning. It is this pride that the narrator worships as strength. And yet he recognizes that the Biblical literalists and moral custodians among his white readers would never have countenanced such pride (*PT* 157). Hunilla’s emotional detachment is not a sign of vanity or pragmatism, but the product of self-contentious natural forces that have fought to a stalemate. Her inability to even shed a tear over her plight announces this dynamic.

Having exhausted the escapism of fancy, confinement causes her to turn to engage in equally futile but less emotionally draining mathematics of misery without being tortured by hope (*PT* 157). Consequently, the narrator pronounces Hunilla “entirely lost,” not because she is physically abandoned and isolated, but because of her unsuccessful attempts at computing her situation, by sentimental and rational means, the exact time of her salvation (*PT* 156). The narrator, therefore, celebrates not the stoic absence of emotion in Hunilla but embellishes the dialectical process by which she abandons sentiment in order to survive. This sacrifice elevates her pride to natural royalty, one that is universally recognizable, even to Hunilla’s small dogs which surround her “[l]ike pages” prior to her final departure from her prison (*PT* 161).

In a personal prayer to the Holy Virigin, Hunilla ceremonially surrenders her hope—arguably a psychological projection of her self—that “to buy the certainty of to-day, I freely give ye [hope], though I tear ye from me!” (*PT* 156). Her acknowledgement of an extant divine

economy must be read with the narrator's subsequent assessment that Hunilla was the victim of "treachery invoking trust" (*PT* 157). Hunilla not only adopts a pagan presentism but commits idolatry by sacrificing to a patron saint the one thing she has left: hope. From this point forward, she pledges to follow the dictates of empiricism in order to calculate the time which she has already spend on the island, a "mathematics of misery," as the narrator pityingly reports, designed "to weary her too-wakeful soul to sleep; yet sleep for that was none" (*PT* 157).²²¹

Notably, the actual horrors Hunilla suffers during her stay on the island "remain untold," as the narrator chooses to elide them (*PT* 157). The harsh realities of her exile must "abide between her and God," for in "nature, as in law, it may be libelous to speak some truths" (*PT* 158). His rationale harkens back to his earlier conflation of literary and moral censorship. Yet the omission is conspicuous because it suggests Hunilla's physical and possibly sexual victimization by parties whose identities the narrator at least suspects. His fear of facing charges of libel as well as legal ramifications point toward white sailors as culprits, and indeed this assumption is consistent with subsequent sketches that explore the abyss of human depravity. Narrative ellipses, then, transforms the sketch's argument from a plea for compassion to silent accusation. The text does not explore suffering from the inside; in fact, the narrator professes that he may

²²¹ Melville expounds on the idea of emotional economy in *The Confidence-Man*. Sianne Ngai discusses the conditions of the emotional economy promoted in the novel in *Ugly Feelings*. The confidence man, in his many masquerades, is a "feelings-broker" overseeing a fiduciary market place (62). Yet while, as Ngai notes, *The Confidence-Man's* tone prevents emotional tethering to any of its protagonists, "The Encantadas" explicitly seeks to teach empathy through allegory. Nevertheless, Ngai's reading usefully illuminates Hunilla's decision to purge hope and sentimental attachment. By arguing that "the desire for detachment is a direct consequence of the kind of interest our feeling about the object has fostered, and it is precisely this combination of steps—an affective engagement that itself prompts distancing—that constitutes the object as an aesthetic object: [. . .] [t]he creation of distance in turn produces fresh affect and ensures that aesthetic engagement will be maintained—in a feedback loop made possible by a momentary disconnection in the circuit" (85). Hunilla's attempts at expunging hope from her emotional repertoire inevitably create an even greater urge for that very same sentimental longing for rescue. And her mathematics of mystery can therefore be construed as anesthetization of said hope that prepares its inevitable return. Ngai argues that it is the brief moment of relief between the vanquishing and reemergence of desire that enables the deception. Moreover, Hunilla conceives of her emotional capacity as economic space because of the ecclesiastical (Catholic) spiritual framework she subscribes to. The Holy Virgin as a patron saint underwrites this economy in the same manner she underwrites the apostolic succession that authorizes church authority.

only advocate compassion through his account. Melville therefore does not explore the psychological trauma so much as he is interested in uncovering its undisclosed political implications. Neither the sailors' nor God's alleged crimes against Hunilla may ever be brought to trial, because of the hypocrisy of moral literary censorship. False piety and racism foreclose even the acknowledgement of Hunilla's suffering as a crime. Divine and human agency conspires to victimize Hunilla and even rob her of her faith, which had previously been second nature to her. Her dilemma occasions Melville to rethink the semantic limitations of the Ecclesiastical notion of vanity and contingency. Ultimately, it is contingency through which Hunilla finds salvation. Despite her disavowal of hope and the narrator's indictment of divine and human morality, Hunilla martyrdom ends when she spots the narrator's ship out of "mysterious presentiment" and is saved by "a narrow chance" (*PT* 158). Contingency, in this instance, works as a solvent against the morally reprehensible conspiracy of divine and white, male power. Yet Melville also implies that the narrator who is forbidden to tell the truth at least partakes of Hunilla's burden.²²²

5.7 Antinomian Evil: Redburn/White-Jacket/Billy Budd/ "The Encantadas"

In most discussion about evil in Melville's writing, evil emanates as God-bullying. On the human side, Ahab often appears as a diabolical man who harnesses evil for epistemological ends. In theology, theodicy serves to explain why God countenances evil in the world; however Ecclesiastes addresses evil as wicked human action that seems to gain those who walk in its ways an advantage in life (e.g., Eccles. 8:8). Melville ponders evil not merely as an abstract phenomenon but consistently develops a corpus of wicked characters that represent innate evil. With these characters, Melville contemplates the innovations in evolutionary genetics in the

²²² The wording is also reminiscent of the description of Pip's rescue in the chapter "The Castaway" in *Moby-Dick*, a scene in which Pip is saved by "merest chance" (414).

context of Biblical history. Apart from Ahab and Claggart, the category of naturalized personal evil has received little critical attention as an original corpus within the larger framework of Melville's writing. While these characters thus mediate the concept of genetic depravity, Melville roots their evil to Biblical history, thereby expounding the elusive Biblical references to "evil" and "wickedness." Conversely, their actions attain theological significance as they talk back to the Biblical framework. Melville thus explores personified evil under the double vision of genetic determinism and OT notions of personal wickedness. Insofar as characters represent this hybrid evil, they operate, I argue, as structural agents of divine order, as per the OT template of Satan.²²³

First, Melville's villainous characters frequently take external markers that are either animalist or racist: slanted or even repulsive exterior appearance (in the case of Claggart's physiognomy or the racism involved in the description of Baboo in *Benito Cereno*), unsettling eyes, and brutish personality. In spite of infusing them with Biblical genealogy, Melville does not deal in caricatures. On the contrary, he depicts them as slaves to their animal nature. Frequently, they are not free agents but rather spokes within the wheels of an inconceivable cosmic order. The wickedness they bring into the world simultaneously victimizes them. Melville characterizes evil as viral, inevitable, and yet divinely ordained. These characterizations interrogate Ecclesiastes, I argue, because they are interested in evil as interpersonal wickedness rather than the non-causal suffering depicted in the Book of Job. In doing so, Melville conceives science as a branch of natural theology, a conceptual technique that rapidly become devalued

²²³ T. Walter Herbert argues that Melville does not reference any one particular theological issue, Calvinist or otherwise, but rather "uses traditional religious themes to develop the character of an actual cosmic evil which challenges the validity of Christian theology altogether" ("Calvinism" 1619). While Herbert correctly assesses the scope of the evil Melville addresses, I disagree with his claim that Melville's references are restricted to religious practice. As I noted above, the distinction between religion and theology became permanent in the 1850s, and Melville's allusion to Biblical wisdom and differentiated notion of evil bespeak his awareness of this split.

after the so-called Darwinian Revolution. Interlinking what had essentially become two distinct epistemological strategies may seem archaic on Melville's part; however, the argument here is precisely that the interlinking of both methods creates knowledge that exceeds either one individually. And since their disciplinary split had already become fact, Melville demonstrates that the epistemological yield of this archaic hybrid method can only be recovered in the literary arena.

Importantly, Melville's conception of evil as a biological agent of atavism exploits a particular fear in modernist consciousness; i.e. the dread of cultural and evolutionary backsliding. One of the standard polemical complaints by theologians was that Darwinian evolutionary theory degraded humans from luminary beings to glorified chimpanzees. Evolutionary theory was thought of as trivializing the accomplishments of civilization, which, after all, defined itself against the Other of primitivism in its multifarious forms (African blacks, Indians, Palestinians, Pacific indigenous cultures). Equally colonial in its approach, literary romanticism conceived of primitivism as enviable moral innocence and thus projected its own idealization of the state of nature unto these groups. Robert Milder comments on the putative influence of Schiller's concept of natural naiveté over against modern sophistication in Melville's early novels. "[F]eeling themselves both inferior in harmony to earlier peoples and incalculably distant from a higher harmony," Milder summarizes Schiller, "moderns could never be certain of their relative worth, much less find ease in their amphibious state" (*Exiled* 30). According to Schiller's observation, moderners endlessly and futilely strive to recapture through education the kind of uninhibited communal relations and spiritual tranquility they enshrine in indigenous primitivism. The romantic subject is amphibious in the sense that it hopes to achieve what Milder calls a "higher primitivism" that will yield "personal and communal wholeness"

(*Exiled* 30). The tragedy in romantic ideology, according to Milder, resides in the fact that “societies could not regress to the primitive, they might ideally *progress* through life experience and history” towards a primitivism of a higher order of harmony (*Exiled* 30). Beholding what it perceives as primitive social harmony traumatizes modernity because the site alerts moderners to the evolutionary intermediacy of their civilization. For Melville, Milder adds, the “‘interim’ phase [of evolving towards that higher state] is permanent, and any resolution to the quest, should there ultimately prove to be one, will occur beyond, not within, human time” (*Exiled* 31). What Milder overlooks, however, is the number of instances in which Melville flat-out inverts the romantic formula of positive evolution. *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, “The Encantadas,” and *Billy Budd* all posit as antagonists emissaries of civilization who have regressed to the point at which social connections become sociopathic. Melville, in these instances, contemplates the possibility of a cultural regression to savage barbarism. Against Schiller’s amphibian moderner, Melville purports the reptilian moderner as savage, an individual sophisticated by education yet morally unbound and fundamentally antisocial. The moral ambivalence of such creatures can only be comprehended in the mythical language of the OT.²²⁴

Secondly, personalized evil is not a chaotic force but actually serves as a structuring agent within the theological framework. It is in this sense that Melville deploys an OT rather than a NT theological framework. By testing their respective heroes, forcing skeptical crisis, and illustrating the ultimate transience of wickedness, Claggart, Jackson, Oberlus, and Baboo are usefully conceived as ‘satanic’ insofar as they act as divine agents of order. Reading them this way allows for an elevation of the question of evil from causal and ontological questions—Does God condone evil in the universe?—to teleological ones—to what productive end does evil

²²⁴ Political criticism has since revealed either approach to be a strategy of subjugation towards the other. What is of interest to me here is the association of evil with (genetic) primitivism that Melville uses in many of his characters.

operate in creation? *Moby-Dick* arguably receives much scholarly attention because it is almost exclusively concerned with the former question. In what follows, I will be interested in the latter set of questions. Posing teleological questions about evil implies an acceptance of—or at least a momentary suspension of questions after—God’s authorship of evil. In theology, this gesture is commonly referred to as the argument from greater good; i.e. the notion that Providence runs its course to an end that will be congruent with God’s positive attributes. Conceiving of characters as ‘satanic’ Melville acknowledges providential determinism as operational principle. By presenting evil as it operates in human beings, Melville thus contemplates the dual nature of evil as both systemic and moral principle.

5.7.1 *Jackson*

In his biography of Melville Tyrus Hillway comments that Redburn’s oppressive fellow sailor Jackson is “the first of several persons in Melville’s books who embody the principle of absolute evil” (qtd. In Dillingham *Artist*, 39). Hillway considers Jackson prototypical for the category of personalized evil in Melville’s *oeuvre* because he appears naturally depraved and wicked, a man overcome by his inner demons whose animal nature coerces a diabolical intelligence to subversive, blasphemous ends. While Melville will frequently revisit the dichotomy of agency and determinism in his works, the character Jackson presents the typological blueprint in a character study that continues with Oberlus and Claggart. Melville begins his exploration of the theme of evil with *Redburn; His First Voyage* (1849). Within the novel’s moral universe, the character Jackson, a mate and bully, propels forward Redburn’s moral education by vociferating bombastically a bitter rhetoric of religious irreverence and disillusionment. Jackson plays both the role of Satan who tests the faith and morality of unassuming mortals in the guise of the religious deviant and that of the tortured sufferer whose

inability to access saving grace places him outside the normative history of salvation. His epistemological function within the narrative consists in testing Redburn's moral and religious mettle—notably, the two are conjoined in this novel—and in pointing out the discrepancy between moral expectation and experience in the novel.

Jackson's origins and genealogy are mysterious. We learn that he is a native of New York, a full-blooded Yankee, yet he boasts a supposedly noble military lineage that reaches back to the General Jackson of New Orleans (*Redburn* 57)—a notorious hunter and killer of Indians in the Seminole Wars (Beaver 20). Old Redburn—the narrator—confronts the aforementioned specter of modernity by noting that Jackson himself in fact looks like “a wild Indian,” especially when he engages in one of his frequent tirades on the subjects of religion, race, nationalism, or morality (*Redburn* 104). Redburn and Jackson share a mutual, and supposedly natural, antipathy, similar to that between Billy and Claggart. Their animosity even invades the narrative frame of the novel: old Redburn comically invalidates Jackson's claims to racial superiority by pointing out an absence of corroborating, empirical evidence for that claim. Claiming intellectual superiority, Redburn likens Jackson to one of the New York rowdies which Redburn despises for their crudeness. This rhetorical tension between frame and narrative emblemizes the ambivalence of Jackson's indwelling evil. He is both driven and victimized by his need to antagonize the other sailors and make life miserable for young handsome Redburn (*Redburn* 58). Redburn insinuates that there is something supernatural and uncanny about Jackson's atheism because it seems to be driven, literally, by blind hate rather than a respectable (deist) intellectual impulse to free inquiry. Moreover, the wickedness of Jackson's language operates under some kind of pathology. To Redburn, his words appear physically corrupted by some alien principle to the point at which he seems compelled to spew forth his bile, “full of piracies, plagues, and

poisonings” (*Redburn* 58). Infecting those around him and forcing them to share in his misery seems the only remedy to Jackson’s pain. The viral evil that possesses him seeks to contaminate the healthy moral tissue of those around him. At the same time, his venom affects his own rational capacities and even his corporeal form. For instance, Jackson lacks any physical marks of aging, hence his age is impossible to determine. In fact, the only physical relationship between himself and the world that his body evinces are the signs of deterioration from some indeterminate sickness, a condition that causes him to look like a man that had “just recovered from the yellow fever” and renders his appearance simultaneously ageless and deteriorated (*Redburn* 57).²²⁵

Melville remains ambivalent about Jackson’s moral culpability by having Redburn introduce a modernist clinical rationale for Jackson’s behavior. His verbal transgressions against moralism and religion are relativized by the pathological nature of his suffering; for, can a man crying out in fever pangs be held responsible for his pain-stricken, impious utterings? Accordingly, Redburn’s responses to Jackson’s bile are equally ambivalent. Time and again he tells us that he sometimes “almost hated” Jackson, only to express his deepest sympathy and pity for so corrupted a creature (*Redburn* 104). Redburn’s apologia paints Jackson as the perfectible, moral Enlightenment individual that has become corrupted by an indwelling moral sickness (*Redburn* 48). Redburn’s pathological description depersonalizes Jackson’s evil, rendering it an autonomous entity. Evil thus operates independently of the rational individual whom it coerces. Jackson is a victim of circumstance and moral suffering. Corrupted by what the Preacher calls

²²⁵ Melville later conceives of a more sophisticated Indian-hater in *The Confidence-Man*’s Col. John Moredock from. Moredock’s rationalized, pragmatic, and emotionally private hate can never be as destructive and consummate as Jackson’s animalistic malice. Different from the brutish overbearing Jackson, Moredock is an (Indian) hater *per excellence* whose consistent adherence to this creed demands “self-containings” (*CM* 150). As we will see with Claggart, Melville’s delineation of these hate-filled characters becomes more nuanced over time as the characters that fit this mold become more cerebral. Melville engages the issues of genetic determinism and regression in greater detail in sketch nine of “The Encantadas.”

‘life under the sun’ and driven to infidel rage, Jackson externalizes his suffering on multiple levels: In its clinical permutation, his ailment manifests as mysterious, potentially supernatural, affliction that distorts his body and mind. Jackson’s impious utterings, while rhetorically blasphemous, also match a clinical definition of compulsion. (Melville incidentally ponders the validity of pathological illness as a cause of deferred agency.) While I will not attempt a clinical psychoanalytical reading here, it seems noteworthy that Jackson’s deferred agency foregrounds his function as ploy for Redburn in his moral development. The depiction of evil as sickness in the novel makes Jackson appear as both victim and principle. The very same duality makes him a morally instructive, foil for Redburn. Concurrently, Jackson’s moral ambivalence authorizes a discussion about his narrative function as OT Satan.

In one of his sterner didactic moments, Redburn argues that Jackson’s “unflinching face” would have repelled even Satan (*Redburn* 57). This rather broad reference nevertheless hints at Jackson’s symbolic genealogy. Despite lacking formal (Biblical) education (*Redburn* 48), Jackson is “by nature a marvelously clever, cunning man,” whose “most deep, subtle, infernal looking eye [. . .] by good rights [. . .] must have belonged to a wolf, or a starved tiger [. . .] cold, snaky, and deadly” (*Redburn* 57). At first cursory glance, the passage would seem to invalidate the notion that Jackson may not be accountable for his actions. His eyes symbolize his animal persona, the prospect of which not only repels his shipmates but also affects the way he perceives the world. Redburn implies that Jackson’s eyes are not really his and subsequently phrases the question of ownership in a way that suggests Jackson’s eyes were grafted onto his skull *a posteriori*, as if he was part of some monstrous secondary creation. His eyes cannot produce a cohesive, rationally structured vision of the world because they are not susceptible to the light of human reason. Indeed, the very act of beholding the world causes Jackson

discomfort, as he squints “from one eye and did not look very straight out of the other,” getting only glimpses at a time (*Redburn* 57).²²⁶

In Redburn’s mind, Jackson’s evil is superior to that of Satan because of his repugnant appearance and feral relentlessness. Redburn, therefore, refers to Satan not as the NT military enemy, but conceives of him as a clerk in the service of divine order.²²⁷ Redburn’s comment notwithstanding, Jackson’s role in the novel may be considered constructive in the same way that Satan’s is in the Book of Job; for Jackson performs the task of challenging Redburn’s naive moral beliefs and ultimately furthers his education. Harold Beaver certifies the utilitarian dimension of the character in his introduction to the text, in which he sees Jackson functioning as a catalyst of Redburn’s “new self-awareness” and thus as a central gear in its journey plot (19). Redburn’s shock at Jackson’s verbal affronts lead Dillingham to conclude that these are the “outraged protestations of a man in spiritual agony, a man who wants and needs God but who can believe in nothing (*Artist* 40). Redburn observes Jackson to be “a great bully” and yet the weakest man, physically, aboard the *Highlander* (*Redburn* 57). Dillingham notes accordingly that Jackson’s evil is reactionary rather than premeditated and thus contingent upon his physical and mental ailments (*Artist* 40). As such, Jackson can be pitied and even potentially forgiven his blasphemy. And it is his capacity for forgiveness that ultimately distinguishes Redburn from his

²²⁶ Melville’s language here invokes the premise of Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), in which the creature represents the related ambivalence of scientific innovation and strife. Besides criticizing modernity, the symbolic ambivalence of Jackson’s eye also indicts Ralph Waldo Emerson’s declaring the early nineteenth century an “ocular age,” a label that F.O. Matthiessen considers the fundamental characterizations of American Romanticism. For Emerson the world-constituting force of the individual’s perspective indicates the rhapsodic possibility of universal connectedness, the “all in each in human nature [. . .] how a single man contains within himself, through his intuition, the whole range of experience” (qtd. Matthiessen 7). Melville’s wry, literalist retort in *Redburn* seems to be that such perspective may easily be altered and even corrupted to produce a distorted vision of reality. If vision, as Emerson suggests, is the faculty with which human beings not only perceive but construct the world, then such construction, Melville seems to say, must be governed by a firm ethics. If seeing is a world-constituting activity it is also an inherently moral one. Hence any truly compassionate idealism must be equipped to deal even with its own subversion.

²²⁷ The prolog of the Book of Job finds Satan arriving to “present himself” to his lord as one of the “sons of God” (Job 2:1). The prologue depicts heaven as a pagan pantheon of Gods, in which Satan is beholden to God, but not His equal.

fellow sailors. In fact, Redburn thinks all aboard “capable of almost any enormity” because of the psychological cruelties to which they subject him (*Redburn* 52). As opposed to Jackson’s, however, Redburn dismisses the crew’s evil as mere mischievous sadism.

The internal friction between animal animus and rationalism spurs Jackson on to engage the other sailors. To find release from this inner turmoil Jackson’s natural callousness must join with his animal ferocity. The result is a supra-rational commitment to contamination that reeks of desperation rather than ill will. Like a sick man’s fever pangs, Jackson’s evil ravages him as much as he tortures others. Like a virus, it both drives and consumes and ultimately destroys him. Against Jackson’s impulsive bile stands the narrator’s soothing reassurance toward younger Redburn. Old Redburn foreshadows this dynamic when he describes Jackson’s snake-like eyes which seem “to kindle more and more, as if he was going to die out at last, and leave them burning like tapers before a corpse” (*Redburn* 104). Notably, Jackson’s eyes transform from feline to reptilian oculi. (The latter, incidentally, foreshadows Claggart’s characterization.) The eye symbolism overtly indicates that the state of Jackson’s soul matches that of his body: tinder for an all-consuming fire. Like Oberlus, whom I will address later, Jackson seems to exist merely as “the foul lees and dregs of a man [. . .] thin as a shadow and nothing but skin and bones” (*R* 58).

Jackson’s disavowal of Christian moralism is not based in learned refutation of doctrine but emerges from reactionary impulse. Compared to Melville’s other incarnations of evil, Jackson’s ambivalent agency stands out, as he seems as much a culprit as a victim of his own wickedness. Although he shares character traits with Oberlus, Baboo, and Claggart, Jackson lacks the refinement and subtlety, especially of the latter. In Jackson, Melville conceives of evil not as an inherent quality but rather a disease of the soul that ravages the sufferer. At the end of

Jackson's life Redburn submits the spurious observations that "hell is a democracy of devils where all are equal" (*R* 276). As a final verdict, this comment raises as many questions as it answers: For one, the statement subverts the supposed radical democratic beliefs many ascribe to Melville. More importantly for the context of the novel, the comment disqualifies Redburn's earlier compassionate sentiments toward Jackson. His condemnation of the infidel insinuates in the older Redburn a religious conservatism that no longer finds Jackson's blasphemy morally instructive.

5.7.2 *Oberlus and Genetic Degeneracy*

The hermit Oberlus's degenerate state is announced by the same language as Jackson's condition mentioned above. Both seem to be physical residues of organic material. However, the narrator of the "Encantadas" sees Oberlus's misanthropy as innate to his character and therefore does not afford the hermit the same moral leniency that Redburn temporarily grants Jackson. A former sailor who has abandoned civilization, Oberlus is a genetically and culturally suspicious character. His moral character is reprehensible, not because he has 'gone native' in a socio-cultural sense—as Tommo in *Typee* had, for instance—but because he has given into his basest animal urges. Melville here inverts Protestant notions of wilderness as a morally and physically corrupting space that is hostile toward white Anglo-Saxon civilization.²²⁸ Oberlus's existence is odious to the narrator, and the audience whose sentiments he channels, because he upends the project of civilization as a linearly progressive historical process. Worse, it is precisely his European heritage that allows him to "bring into this savage region qualities more diabolical than are to be found in any of the surrounding cannibals" (*PT* 162-3). What is unsettling about

²²⁸ Miller explores the American continent as symbolic space in the Puritan imagination and expectations of mission and, eventually, contrition and reformation ("Errand" 5, 11). Bercovitch expounds on this notion, arguing that the wilderness was transformative for Puritans as a historical and prophetic space (*Jeremiad* 15).

Oberlus as a fictitious character is that he deliberately abandons civilization and chooses to regress both culturally and genetically. And yet that choice, the narrator insinuates, merely represents his wicked nature working itself out. He combines inherent wickedness and with a distorted vision of genetic Darwinism.²²⁹

Oberlus's uncanny adaptability enables him to transform into a creature most effectively attuned to the scarred landscape of Hood's Isle. In a note on the existence of distinct species on the Galapagos Islands, Charles Darwin wrote

[. . .] From these views we can deduce why small islands, should possess many peculiar species -for as long as physical change is in progress or is, present with respect to *new arrivers, the small body of species would far more easily be changed.*— Hence the Galapagos Islds [sic] are explained. On distinct Creation, how anomalous, that the smallest newest, & most wretched isld [sic] should possess species to themselves.—Probably no case in world like Galapagos, no hurricanes.— islds [sic] never joined, nature & climate very different, from adjoining coast. (Darwin 167v, emphasis added)²³⁰

Darwin hypothesizes that the smaller the population introduced to any new environment, the higher its evolutionary potential. In Oberlus's case, Melville condenses evolution to metamorphosis. In Darwinian terms, Oberlus constitutes an original species. His adaptation is triggered purely by his unique tyrannical brutishness: he rejects the company of others except to enslave them. Melville combines the genetic and colonial arguments by having Oberlus claim Hood's Isle as in the name of the genetic line of Sycorax—the fairy mother of Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Oberlus's self-asserted royal lineage parodies both the moral and genetic justification of colonization: North American colonization, for instance, was carried out

²²⁹ Oberlus's genetic ambivalence is also unsettling in the terms outlined by Schiller and Milder (31). The historical precedent of the character is Patrick Watkins (Parker, 603). Although no definitive theories have been advanced, the name conceivably is a hybrid of Oberon, the king of the fairies from Shakespeare's *A Midsummernight's Dream*, and Prospero, the tyrannical sovereign of *The Tempest*. Fisher notes that Oberlus's appearance and self-professed genealogy reference Caliban from the same play (46). Other depictions of morally ambivalent indigenous characters include Cooper's *Last of the Mohikans* (1826), which is, incidentally, preoccupied with the protagonist's racial purity and the fear of miscegenation.

²³⁰ Incidentally, a recent study re-emphasizes the fact that the abundance of living space rather than violent competition triggers physical evolutionary change in a species. See Shaney, Benton, and Ferry (2010), 547.

in the name of European monarchs under the banner of religion. Melville satirizes Anglo-European notions of genetic supremacy as a basis for colonialism. What qualifies Oberlus to rule over the isle and its tortoise population is his “larger capacity for degradation” and an “intelligent will,” that tends toward moral evil (*PT* 164). His motivation to set himself up in this depraved kingdom comes not from any diffuse cosmic evil but from “selfish ambition, or the love of rule for its own sake” (*PT* 164). The narrator’s editorial intervention here places this sketch in the short-fiction tradition of the moral exemplum. For Oberlus, his inherent lust for subjugation coupled with prolonged isolation “gradually nourished in him a vast idea of his own importance, together with a pure animal sort of scorn for all the rest of the universe” (*PT* 164).

Melville here explores further the multiplicity of the concept of fallenness. Dillingham suggests that Oberlus’s transformation is an intense condensation, and his malignance is what remains when “all the best in human nature has been distilled away” (*Short Fiction* 79). Yet he is not a master of metaphysical evil but merely a despot ruling over a dung-hill kingdom of volcanic craters. As a callous reprobate, he lacks the noble adversity of Biblical Satan. In fact, the sketch can very well be read as a heavy-handed parody of Milton’s regal Satan building his kingdom in hell. Melville notes that Oberlus’s fall from human grace really is a deliberate exodus from civilization, a plunge down the evolutionary ladder. If Jackson’s fate was illustrative of biological determinism, Oberlus emblemizes the human capacity to choose evil of its own volition. As with Jackson, moral depravation physically transforms Oberlus, so that he appears to have “drunk from Circe’s cup” (*PT* 163). His metamorphosis is two-fold: on the one hand, he regresses morally to the state of a bi-petal reptile. On the other hand, this change causes his appearance to cohere with his moral character. No longer bound by the duality of phenomenology, he becomes able to use ambivalence as his predatory strategy. He uses his

human camouflage to lure in unsuspecting new arrivals to his island. Unlike the tortoises who meet strangers on their bellies, he insidiously encounters his victims with his back turned.

Incidentally, the narrator informs us that this is his “better side, since it revealed the least” (*PT* 163). Regardless of his actual crimes, Oberlus’s cosmic offense consists in choosing corruption and lust for oppression over human companionship.

In contrast to such novels as *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, the sketch omits any contemplation of first causes. And while Melville’s decision to avoid addressing the issue via a longer tangent may have practical reasons (special constraints, editorial preference, etc.), the extant text appears to advocate human volition rather than providence as the catalyst of moral evil. Melville thus follows such Enlightenment thinkers as Immanuel Kant in their divinations of theodicy as a concept unfit to explain moral evil in the world. Far from the accusatory rhetoric of god-bullied Ahab, the sketch, at face value, suggests that God, who is conspicuously absent from the piece, is ultimately not responsible for Oberlus’s deeds. Terry Eagleton recently contemplated the concept of evil and notes that “[p]lain wickedness, like destroying whole communities for financial gain or being prepared to use nuclear weapons, is a great deal more common than pure evil. Evil is not something we should lose too much sleep over” (*Evil* 96). Neither Kant nor Eagleton tries to downplay the perceptible, adverse effects created by unmotivated destructive behavior. Yet both agree that the term ‘evil’ is ill suited to characterize the agency involved in producing such effects. Alluding to Darwinian evolution, Melville seems to concur by showing how Oberlus develops equilibrium with his inner self as well as his surroundings. In contrast, one may recall the self-destructive tendencies of Jackson and Claggart.²³¹

²³¹ In his essay “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy” (1791) Immanuel Kant proposes distinguishing teleological and moral knowledge of evil as separate entities. Kant argues that “Teleology (and, through it, physicotheology) gives abundant proof in experience of this artistic wisdom. But from it no inference is allowed to the moral wisdom of the author of the world, for the natural law and the moral law require

What works against this foregrounding of personal agency in the narrative is the fact that the narrator explicitly identifies the island group as a Biblical realm of desolation. The result is an internal thematic tension between the frame and the sketch. In this framework, Oberlus's wickedness would no longer be a sign of his volition but a symptom of the wickedness condoned by the creator of this fallen world. The charred land of Hood's Isle is a store house for the waste products of all kinds of destruction—combustion, bursting, splintering, erosion, dehydration—that are swept to its shores. Oberlus accordingly appears a “vulcanic creature [. . .] a heaped drift of withered leaves, torn from autumn trees, and so left in some hidden nook by [. . .] a fierce nightwind” (*PT* 163). Insofar as he blends into his new habitat, we can consider his behavior ‘natural,’ as per Darwin's paradigm. The moral component of the sketch is more difficult to decipher. Beyond God's potential culpability for Oberlus's deeds, which is only insinuated here, Melville also questions the moral compass of those who despise Oberlus on religious grounds.

After being captured by a group of sailors, the would-be king of Hood's Isle ultimately meets with his just punishment in a South American prison. Yet his new habitat seems to suit his natural inclinations even better than his island exile. Incarceration, ironically, reconnects Oberlus with his human (and moral) kinsmen, when he becomes the “central figure” of a group of assassins there (*PT* 169). The narrator concludes the sketch by noting that Oberlus was “a creature whom it is religion to detest, since it is philanthropy to hate a misanthrope” (*PT* 169). The comment presages the more in-depth discussion of hate as metaphysical principle in *The Confidence-Man*. Beyond that, the term ‘religion’ here translates to moral obligation rather than

principles of entirely different kinds” (“Miscarriage” 25). Kant notes that *evil* is an inaccurate term because it does not clearly identify a culprit. Therefore, he distinguishes between three analytical categories of evil: the absolutely counterpurposive, the conditionally counterpurposive, and the disproportion between crimes and punishment. As a counterpoint, Eagleton acknowledges that the sensation of absence of transcendental purpose may be precisely what drives human beings to evil. “The damned,” i.e., those who commit evil deeds, Eagle claims, “are those who experience the ‘good’ infinity of God as a ‘bad’ one. In the same way, one can experience what art historians call the sublime [. . .] as either terrible or magnificent, or both” (Evil 23).

to theological doctrine. Melville courts the ambivalence of the term by suggesting that hating depravity for many faithful constitutes the totality of religion. The phrase's simplistic moral didacticism reduces religion to a negative formula by stripping it of its ceremony, dogma, and doxology. The narrator, somewhat clumsily, follows up the sketch with a formulaic moral remonstrations about the historical accuracy and authenticity of his sources, a strategy reminiscent of the epilogues of *Typee* and *Benito Cereno*. Yet all these assertions are immediately invalidated when he admits to having altered his rendering of Oberlus's correspondence to "suit the general character of its author" (*PT* 170). Moral instruction and dramaturgy therefore supersede journalistic integrity.

In writing "The Encantadas" Melville set out to present a unified theme, that of fallenness in both the Biblical and genetic sense. This dichotomy plays out reasonably well between the first four as well as the penultimate two sketches in the series. Due to their serialized publication, the pieces present a less cohesive moral vision of the world, however. While the narrator mounts a nuanced critique of religious optimism in sketch eight, he retreats to a position of normative moral complacency in sketch nine. Melville's attempt at unifying the series remains unsuccessful. His interpretation of the preceding sketches as allegories of a sailor's tarrying with his inner resentments against his superiors, sea life, and mortality presages a modernist mode of expression: hermits maybe made by accident indeed the only unifying element of the islands seems to be the obtuse materiality of "the vanishing humanity to be found upon the isles" (*PT* 172). Hunilla's plight illustrates how the landscape shuts down any attempt at metaphysical speculation. Galapagos, then, is a place devoid of even a God to blame for its desolation.

And yet, Melville does not give in completely to modernist destitution: in a whimsical final passage, the narrator notes that, among the vestiges of ever-fleeting human life, bottled

messages are to be found here. These letters symbolize the essential human impulse to connect and communicate, especially in the face of absolute desolation such as he sees fit to depict in “The Encantadas.” In contrast to the dead letters in “Bartleby,” Melville here presupposes that communication is possible and inherently meaningful. Even grave-stone epitaphs provide a viable, if macabre, means of communication between those who have perished and those who happen to stumble over their remains. Although these bottled messages offer no “very exhilarating object,” they nevertheless symbolize community and solidarity among the sailors (*PT* 172). Whenever “good-natured seamen chance to come upon the spot, they usually make a table of the mound, and quaff a friendly can to the poor soul’s repose” (*PT* 173). As a case in point, the narrator cites a doggerel epitaph,

Oh, Brother Jack, as you pass by,
As you are now, so once was I.
Just so game, and just so gay,
But now, alack, they’ve stopped my pay.
No more I peep out of my blinkers,
Here I be – tucked in with clinkers! (*PT* 173)²³²

Melville adapts what is apparently a widely circulated and frequently altered poem. At face value, the poem addresses the inevitability and material banality of mortality. Yet Melville imports it into the moral register of Ecclesiastical wisdom as per Ishmael’s aforementioned discussion. The narrative frame converts the epitaph into a wry celebration of human connectedness and loyalty across time and space. The poem thus echoes the transcendental optimism of pieces such as Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” while at the same time macabrely grounding this optimism in the base materiality of death. Rather than an uplifting assertion about ascension, the poem ends by noting that the sailors will henceforth be tucked in with the shards and specks of dirt that make up the charred landscape of the islands. Still, the

²³² Melville only deserves editorial credit here, because he adopted the well-known epigraph for the sketch.

dead sailor speaks not forebodingly but wisely and comfortingly from beyond the grave, telling his kinsman, “As you are now, so once was I.” Pronoun positioning in the verse symbolizes the perceived distance between speaker and addressee. What separates the sailors from their departed comrade is not spacial distance, but the temporal difference. Melville suggests that this distance can be bridged, and solidarity can best even the pangs of time. Without such communal sentiments, life becomes an austere and solitary affair, in which one may find oneself entombed alone in “the great general monastery of earth” (*PT* 172).

5.7.3 *Claggart and the Epitome of Satanic Function*

The novel that Herman Melville was trying to write during his final years in the 1880s would have been a significant topic for scholars even if it had been finished and published before his death. As it stands, *Billy Budd; Sailor* is a story about the rhetorical, ideological, and psychological processes involved in judgment. During the Anglo-French War (1793-1815), the innocent foretop man Billy Budd, formerly a sailor on the merchant ship *Rights of Man*, is forcibly enlisted aboard the man-of-war ship *Bellipotent* under the honorable Captain Fairfax Vere and within the grasp of the cunning master-of-arms John Claggart. Because of his innate hatred of Billy’s beauty and amicability, the sophisticated and duplicitous Claggart implicates Billy in alleged secret mutiny plot. In wartime, this was a capital offense, one that could spell mortal doom for the accused. Yet Billy appears constitutionally incapable of such conspiracy. His disposition is such that he can only read surfaces and not the hidden motives behind the actions of others. When confronted by the master-at-arms, Billy’s natural speech impairment—which manifests under intense stress—prevents him from defending himself against Claggart’s accusations. Instinctively, he strikes Claggart and kills him with one blow to the forehead, all in

the presence of Captain Vere, who finds himself compelled to convene a drumhead court and sentence Billy to death for killing a superior officer.

From the onset of the Melville revival, scholars approached *Billy Budd* (publ. 1924) as a last will and testament that would potentially allow critics to formulate a definitive verdict about the philosophical complexion of Melville's oeuvre. As with all of Melville's writings, the novella has incited a number of authorial and psycho-biographical readings, and the story's religious dimension has been analyzed almost exclusively through that lens. In determining the story's spiritual legacy, critics are split in two camps: those who consider *Billy Budd* as Melville's testament of acceptance of orthodox belief and those who read it as his final assertion of philosophical skepticism and religious irreverence. Furthermore, the book has been canonized into the cluster of late masterpieces, a critical category that has come under scrutiny. Parker cautions that critics must not ignore the unfinished character of the novella in their eagerness to assign to it a place and function within the literary canon. Parker reminds scholars to delineate carefully between a strategic need to stabilize and defend extant canonical categories and their intellectual responsibility to acknowledge the extant textual history of the text in question. These latter considerations, naturally, become magnified in the debate about a final work. Early criticism accordingly made *Billy Budd* shoulder the burden of retroactively structuring Melville's literary philosophical project. In light of the danger of overtaxing the work's structural limits with interpretive vigor, the forces of the academic market must be checked and contained within sensible limits.²³³

²³³ Barbara Johnson (567-68) and Gregg Crane (144) usefully survey both this debate. In this context, Parker admonishes us to consider the market forces of academia and its disciplinary predilection for the somewhat arbitrary category of final masterpieces. The concept illustrates the tendency of scholarship to reconstruct authorial careers according to its own image and according to its own contemporary standards. Parker notes that Melville fares little better than Hawthorne or Twain, whose final works were either pieced together without authorial consent or even forged in hopes of homogenizing the early literary canon in the twentieth century (*Reading* 5-8).

Traditionally, scholarly attention has been devoted to considering *Billy Budd* as a meta-reflection on the various forms of judgment, with scholars primarily examining either the perspective of Captain Vere (judge) or Billy (defendant). In this framework, knowledge of good and evil functions as the grounds of detecting guilt or innocence. Yet the story's fundamental dilemma consists in the fact that legal and moral justice do not coincide universally. The resulting aporia produces a literary and philosophical contemplation of wickedness that integrates genetic determinism, Biblical hermeneutics, and layman psychology.²³⁴

It would be inaccurate to consider *Billy Budd* as existing outside and beyond of Melville's negotiation of epistemology, religion, and the Bible. In fact, the novella picks up and enhances many of the structural and thematic tropes Melville had pursued in earlier pieces. For instance, it juxtaposes the political philosophies of Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke and thus echoes structurally the negotiation of supernatural apparitions between Cotton Mather and Democritus presented in "The Apple-Tree Table." At the same time, the book continues Melville's contemplation of natural evil under the auspices of OT wisdom. Contrary to Wright's assessment, *Billy Budd* is not merely an "old story refurbished with new names" in which "Claggart is another Jackson, the bully of the *Highlander*; and Budd is Captain Jack Chase of the *Neversink*, whose crew also contains a forerunner of Claggart in the person of the smuggler Bland" (*Use* 126). To be sure, the narrator's meditation of Claggart's wickedness travels on familiar territory, but Melville's treatment of the tropes is cumulative rather than derivative. *Billy Budd* most overtly of all the texts mentioned in this section, references OT wisdom as to its viability of functioning as a basis for assessing human nature. OT morality becomes a foil for

²³⁴ Wendell Glick reads Vere as Melville's rendering of Captain Nelson as a role model of "social expediency" (109). Roland Duerksen considers Billy an "acquiescing victim" that has to be sacrificed to maintain the inconsistency of the ruling order; i.e., military code masquerading as religious doctrine (66). Meanwhile, Gregg Crane explores what he calls intuitive judgments in legal cases. Crane interrogates Vere's capacity to mediate and subvert the letter of the naval code, which he has to represent and apply to Claggart's murder (145).

exposing the doctrinal rigidity of legal justice systems, such as the military naval codex. In the course of these divinations, the narrator reveals a melancholy nostalgia for the ability of Biblical language to address good and evil as moral phenomena. As the narrator finds his epistemological tool kit deprived of the Bible's mystical language, Melville reflects critically on the consequences of labeling Biblical hermeneutics archaic and methodologically anathema. In this manner, he conceives of Biblical moral authority as a negative presence. Melville use of the Bible is not, in the words of Jay Holstein, "deeply corrosive" and uniformly subversive but rather contemplative in its sensitivity to the factual corrosion of Biblical authority ("'Inside' Role" 36). In other words, the novella tries to come to terms with this negative presence in the context of ethical judgments.

In contemplating Claggart's propensity for evil, the narrator consults the memory of an unidentified sage philosopher who advises him that moral behavior must be confronted not as a particular but as an essential form. Knowledge of good and evil, therefore, must proceed "from some source other than what is called 'knowledge of the world'" (*BB* 308). The sage deems such practical knowledge "superficial [. . .] serving ordinary purposes," which is essentially a paraphrase of the Preacher's condemnation of vanity in its permutations (*BB* 309). And much like the Preacher, the sage reinforces the line between the epistemological categories of experience and absolute truth. The shortcoming of human contemplation of the problem of evil is that they cannot access these phenomena as ethical essences. Hence the sage insinuates that humans require a mediating—preferably semiotic—substratum that enables them to confront essences in fictionalized form. The Bible as textual substratum can provide

[. . .] the finer spiritual insight indispensable to the understanding of the essential in certain exceptional characters, whether evil ones or good. In a matter of some importance, I have seen a girl wind an old lawyer about her little finger. Nor was it the dotage of senile love. [. . .] But he knew law better than he knew the girl's

heart. Coke and Blackstone hardly shed so much light into obscure spiritual places as the Hebrew prophets. And who were they? Mostly recluses. (*BB* 309)

The narrator distinguishes between three sources of knowledge here: first-hand experience, jurisprudence, and prophetic wisdom. He begins crafting his method by proposing that the letter of the Bible is as persuasive as the letter of the law when it comes to contemplating the metaphysics of the human heart. The comments may appear to flirt with moral relativism but they actually hypothesizes the existence of a unified strategy for asserting truth. Building on this premise, the narrator polemicizes that the Hebrew prophets are as reliable as Coke or Blackstone—the framers of British Common Law—when it comes to assessing abstract ethical essences. Doing so, however, requires a kind of knowledge that may only be wrought by training and experience.

At the time, my inexperience was such that I did not quite see the drift of all this. It may be that I see it now. And indeed, if that lexicon which is based on Holy Writ were any longer popular, one might with less difficulty define and denominate certain phenomenal men. As it is, one must turn to some authority not liable to the charge of being tintured with the biblical element. (*BB* 309)

Melville, here, proposes a hybrid hermeneutics composed of aesthetic and theological reading techniques. The narrator reveals his hand in reference to how he plans to utilize the Bible as a source for moral truth. While the tone here is humoristic, as many of the aforementioned critics assert, Melville's reflection on legal culture here appears too differentiated to be read as merely snarky. In the first place, the narrator significantly dismisses the technical difference between secular and theological jurisprudence. As I showed in Chapter 1, this distinction had become the touchstone of civil religion in the U.S. a mere one-hundred years prior. But thinking about judgment in these exclusionary categories, the narrator suggests, is ultimately futile because judgments that are merely rational, historical, or teleological—the analytical categories of secular legalism—ignore the hidden metaphysical truths that cannot be addressed directly. Only

Biblical wisdom literature reckons with the contents of the human heart in this fashion. Hence any systemic discussion of morality must necessarily have recourse to Biblical hermeneutics. And yet, the narrator realizes that even that body of textual wisdom is ultimately capricious because it emanates from the quills of observers rather than practitioners of life; i.e. those who do not heed the Preacher's call to engage the world in reverence to God. With Claggart's evil as his object, the narrator conceptualizes a method of judgment that incorporates all of these analytical categories by thinking of them as complimentary.²³⁵

Analogously to these preliminary considerations, the most expedient way to comprehend Claggart's evil would be by referring to "Holy Writ." As it stands, the narrator notes that he may only approximate Claggart's portrait but "shall never hit it" (*BB* 298). Even if simple deferral to exegesis were possible, it would require specialized hermeneutical training beyond the narrator's current faculties. Even more egregiously, he finds that what disqualifies the use of Biblical wisdom in this case is not his own lack of technical savvy but rather popular taste: Like him, his audience lacks the hermeneutical strategies necessary to unpack the covert wisdom in the Biblical texts; worse yet, they are biased against the approach. On the one hand, this statement clarifies the philosopher's advocacy for an allegorical hermeneutics. Only the "dark sayings" of Biblical language may capture the mystery of Claggart's evil because they transcend the blunt historicism and deterministic genetic empiricism the narrator is forced to resort to in his description (*BB* 310). On the other hand, Melville denounces public taste as having become enamored with empiricism and therefore unreceptive for older, less explicit sources of moral knowledge. The revealed truth contained in the Bible remains a viable source of such knowledge,

²³⁵ Holstein argues correctly that Melville's conception of truth "is radically at odds with the biblical affirmation that order, as personified by the one God of the Heavens and the Earth, is at the core not simply of the universe but of human existence as well" ("Inside' Role" 35). His subsequent absolutist claim that Melville "inverts every biblical reference" to show that "order is a passing fable" is too simplistic because it dismisses *a priori* any earnest reference to the Bible on the part of Melville ("Inside' Role" 35).

provided one approaches it with an aesthetic sensibility. Unable to access such mystical knowledge, the narrator proceeds to render Claggart's evil by means of literary plot and characterization.²³⁶

Like Jackson, Claggart has limited agency. Due to his inclination toward deviousness, he even suspects a mantrap under the "daisies" of Billy's personality (*BB* 327). And yet, the master-of-arms lacks the introspection to critically reflect upon this propensity. The only recourse for the evil within him is "to recoil upon itself and, like the scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible, act out to the end the part allotted to it" (*BB* 312). In contrast to the sketch on Oberlus, Melville here explicitly confronts the problem of theodicy. The Bible's ambiguous language, which Melville invokes here, corroborates this impression. Like Claggart, he "whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, / And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of truth, that they might be saved" (Thess. 2:9-10).²³⁷

²³⁶ Thessalonians 2:7, which Melville references here, holds that evil will perish at the coming of Christ, an event which will enable an unambiguous delineation between empirical truth and falsehood. In other words, Christ's Second Coming will mend the rift between sense perception and understanding, and the millennium—the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth that the passage announces—will be a state in which truth will be apparent. However, Paul, the author of the epistle, notes that even God works by deceptive faculties, as he sends the wicked "strong delusions that they should believe a lie" (Thess. 2:11). Despite the NT passage's stressing of the adversity between Satan and Christ, Melville seems to suggest its indebtedness to Joban skepticism. The sensibility of evil in both Thessalonians and in *Billy Budd* therefore exceeds the simple binary adversity of Christ and Satan.

²³⁷ According to Prov. 16:1, the autonomy of consciousness is gifted from God. Hence agency has palpable limitations within Biblical hermeneutics. What is more, the designation "Hebrew prophets," if it refers to Paul and the apostles, invokes their religious heritage rather than identifying them as disciples of Christ. As he had done in *Moby-Dick* almost forty years earlier, Melville seems to harken back to the notion that parts of the Bible contain knowledge that escapes a Protestant hermeneutics. Stern agrees with the assessment that Melville references OT wisdom literature, even if he considers "[. . .] the reintroduction of the isolated Solomonic insight [. . .] a jarring error" (fn 3, 228). According to Stern's argument, Melville had jettisoned any theoretical discussion of scriptural hermeneutics in favor of moderating political versions of the truth. Hence Stern considers the reference to wisdom literature a stylistic flaw, a crutch that distracts from the fact that Melville was now concerned with "the corollary of application of that [biblical] knowledge. [. . .] Though the Hebrew prophet saw truth, that recluse is an echo from Melville's literary past, whose motivation, but not whose isolation, belongs no longer in the exploration of the political administration of the truths the recluse saw" (228, fn 3). The melancholy expressed by the repeated assertion that wisdom literature is an outdated yet not an outmoded means of inquiry, contradicts Stern's assessment.

The aforementioned reference to wisdom literature illustrates that the moderation of surfaces by no means represents a higher category of epistemological knowledge. Rather it is the narrator's practical response to his audience's alleged ignorance and evidentialist predilections. Pragmatism in *Billy Budd* therefore constitutes a narrative rather than a philosophical strategy. Since popular taste, rather than categorical validity, disqualifies the Bible as an authority on the subject, the narrator must find an alternative avenue to explain Claggart's derangement. Puritan Calvinism, with its hermeneutical emphasis on NT salvation theology, is at least historically familiar to an American readership. The fact that Melville invokes it in opposition to the kind of Biblical wisdom he references only a paragraph earlier illustrates Melville's continued interest in distinguishing these two hermeneutic strategies.

5.7.4 *Billy, Claggart and the Man-of-War as Moral Microcosm*

Claggart's actions display the contingent nature of human communication as such. From the beginning of the story, the narrator points out that the man-of-war is a fit setting for this dramatic investigation of justice to play out. Melville had already pointed out his fascination with the warship as social microcosm in *White-Jacket* (175). In *Billy Budd* he turns to the epistemological underpinnings of the governing legal order aboard such ships. The ship's closed quarter puts into direct contact those volatile opposing personalities that necessitate legal order and moral governance in the first place: "Now there can exist no irritating juxtaposition of dissimilar personalities comparable to that which is possible aboard a great warship fully manned and at sea" (*BB* 308). One can hardly avoid the insinuation of the ship as social laboratory. Melville here echoes Thomas Hobbes's concept of the natural state of universal warfare: "[. . .] during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man" (*Leviathan*

84). For Hobbes and his spiritual successors, particularly John Locke, secular communal life proceeds from recognizing and regularizing this state of warfare. In the novella, the ship presents a miniature version of human society and is therefore ideally suited for examining the viability of legal order as essence. Its three main characters typify the principles of moral good, evil, and judgment.

In *Billy Budd*, the Royal Navy codex and the articles of war constitute the legal framework which contains the combustible social elements. This legal superstructure, Melville suggests, cannot completely cover the natural laws operational at its foundation. One example of this underlying claim is the ship's name. *Bellipotent*, or 'mighty in war,' already subverts the notion of a disciplined ship to begin with, because it presumes an underlying state of war. Military discipline becomes grafted on to this combustible scenario; worse yet, its codex operates on the assumption that all violations of discipline are discoverable and punishable. Ironically, this inherently literalist worldview benefits those like Claggart who are adept at manipulating surface meanings due to their awareness of layered meanings, while disadvantaging those like Billy who take the world at face value.²³⁸

The reason the setting is so conducive to the narrator's experiment is that all the combustible elements will necessarily explode: "Wholly there [aboard the *Bellipotent*] to avoid even the sight of an aggravating object one must needs give it Jonah's toss or jump overboard himself. Imagine how all this might eventually operate on some peculiar human creature the direct reverse of a saint?" (*BB* 308). Melville's pun refers to the unwilling prophet Jonah being thrown overboard the ship that was supposed to foster his escape from God's appointment of him

²³⁸ For a concise review of the notion that all laws are expressions of threatened violence—derived from Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida—as well as a useful contrarian reading based on Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, see Martha Umphrey's "Law's Bonds" (2007). Umphrey argues that *Billy Budd* "shows the relation between subjects and the law to be constituted and maintained by an ambivalent fusion of violence and love" (413). See also my comments in my Conclusion.

(Jonah 1:15). The crew sacrifices Jonah out of fear of God's wrath. The Biblical tale illustrates that there is no outside to God's jurisdiction; even the whale that swallows up Jonah acts on God's behest. In *Billy Budd* the possibility of extracting oneself from the logic of military jurisdiction is as illusory as Jonah's attempt at escaping God's will. Yet Melville also uses the image of Jonah's toss to foreshadow darkly Billy's burial at sea, sowed into his own sleeping hammock. The image grimly portends the inevitability of violence erupting on board a military vessel while insinuating that secular law is toothless and divine law is immutably cruel.²³⁹

John Claggart becomes the lynch pin of this combustible scenario. His biography, nationality, and the legitimacy of his position in the military hierarchy are ambiguous, as he is not English by birth but rather a naturalized citizen. In keeping with Melville's earlier characterizations of Jackson and Oberlus, the narrator observes a physical defectiveness in Claggart, and proceeds to vociferate what becomes the epistemological motto of the novella: the "moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make" (*BB* 280). Yet different from his 'brethren,' Claggart's physical defect is ambivalent: His forehead is "phrenologically associated with more than average intellect" whereas his complexion "though it was not exactly displeasing, nevertheless seemed to hint of something defective in the constitution and blood" (*BB* 299). These remarks insinuate that genetic ambivalence equates moral ambivalence demonstrates the moral dimension and prejudices of nineteenth-century pseudo-science. While

²³⁹ Melville's narrator claims that conflict is unavoidable aboard a man-of-war man, least one eliminates it ahead of time like Jonah's shipmates did. The assertion underlines the fact that Melville here deals with character types rather than fully rounded figures. In contrast, *White Jacket* speculates that the communal space of the ship may adversely affect or even invert a person's natural dispositions. However, this transformative potential may be alleviated by the aura of aesthetic objects:

[. . .] all people should be very careful in selecting their callings and vocations; very careful in seeing to it, that they surround themselves by good humored, pleasant-looking objects; and agreeable, temper-soothing sounds. Many an angelic disposition has had its even edge turned, and hacked like a saw; and many a sweet draught of piety has soured on the heart, from people's choosing ill-natured employments, and omitting together round them good-natured landscapes. (*WJ* 75)

this may point towards Melville sharing some of the racial prejudices of the time, his argument here is consistent: In contrast to Claggart, Billy's "[n]oble descent was as evident in him as in a blood horse" (*BB* 287). Yet the blood metaphor is too narrow to uncover Claggart's moral character. To accomplish that feat, requires one to sound the insidious dissonance between surface and deep structure that Claggart emblemizes. In order to "pass from a normal nature to his" the seeker of moral truth to "cross the deadly space between" (*BB* 308).

Accordingly, the narrator quickly disregards genetic and historical ambivalence in favor of exploring the deeper moral ambivalence in Claggart. Having already established that moral evil may be best addressed through Biblical hermeneutics, Melville references Calvinist exegesis to describe Claggart's particular brand of wickedness. The moral category of depravity, "though savoring of Calvinism, by no means involves Calvin's dogma as to total mankind" but rather "makes it applicable but to individuals" (*BB* 309). Depravity, according to the narrator's reading of Calvin, may be inherent in some, but it does not extend to all of humanity. Scholars often overlook Melville's sublation of Calvinist dogma by pointing to his references to the ideological conflict between Enlightenment humanist Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke and the historical context of the French Revolution (*BB* 284). Still, the narrator, in a feat of circular reasoning, bases his meditation on wickedness on his private contemplation of Biblical hermeneutics and history. The "depravity here meant," the narrator continues, "partakes nothing of the sordid or sensual. It is serious, but free from acerbity" (*BB* 310). In contrast to Jackson, in whom wickedness takes the form of pathological affliction, Claggart's evil is cool, methodical, and deliberate. If Claggart is evil according to Calvin's Biblical exegesis, he partakes in the Bible's history of natural depravity. However, the narrator's qualifications turn Calvinist doctrine on its head by proposing that total depravity is not universally true of the human race but only of

specific individuals. What appears to be a minor semantic nuance is actually a substantial exegetical revision on Melville's part: In contrast to orthodox Calvinist doctrine, depravity, here, is no longer characteristic of humanity but rather characterizes evil as an abstract concept found in a select few. In this sense, Melville's reading of the concept tends towards humanist idealism. However, by defining wickedness as a contingent rather than an inherent phenomenon to human behavior, Melville ambiguates the concept and sets up Claggart as both culprit and victim of the ensuing dramatic plot. Based on this moral ambivalence, Claggart becomes a function rather than an agent of Providence. Like Satan in the Book of Job, he must facilitate the divine plot by instigating humankind's second fall in Billy.²⁴⁰

5.7.5 *Claggart's Evil on OT Terms*

Several critical readings have productively explored Claggart's description as the "man of sorrows" as theological designation (*BB* 321). The context in which the narrator bestows this designation upon Claggart is key here: Claggart becomes melancholy when he observes Billy sporting with the other sailors, as his eyes "would follow the cheerful sea Hyperion [Billy] with a settled, meditative and melancholy expression, his eyes strangely suffused with incipient feverish tears. Then would Claggart look like the man of sorrows" (*BB* 320-1). The narrator seems to suggest that Claggart is deeply moved by Billy's demeanor to the point of appearing a caricature of Christ. Holstein observes that in this passage "Claggart becomes something other than simply

²⁴⁰ See John Calvin's assertions on the topic in *Institutions of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I (1539, 59 [1816]), which was subsequently adapted by Cotton Mather in his *Magnalia Chirsti Americana*, specifically in the *Confessions of Faith* (1702). In "Hawthorne and his Mosses" Melville had defined the "Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free," as a methodological prerequisite for his version of the romantic aesthetic project of truth-telling (*PT* 243). While he is often read as proclaiming an original aesthetic in his essay, "Mosses" proposes an artistic programme that is anchored in an idiosyncratically American brand of Protestantism. As I show above, Melville's mid-century short fiction in particular explores the issue of original sin by blending Biblical history and hereditary genetics. For instance, Bartleby's recalcitrance stirs in the lawyer the "the old Adam of resentment," a reaction that tethers the character's intemperance to Biblical genealogy at a time that the referential framework of Biblical history had become outmoded (*PT* 36). Melville also demonstrates his familiarity with Mather's Christian history of New England in "The Apple-Tree Table." I will revisit this connection in the following chapter.

satanic or Christlike. He encompasses both categories” (“‘Inside’ Role” 39). While this verdict offers a useful assessment of Claggart as an emblem of ambiguity and dichotomous meanings, Melville’s earlier references to OT wisdom literature as well as the overall structure of the novella authorize a third reading, according to which Claggart may be the man of sorrows as per OT wisdom-literature theology.²⁴¹

The first leg on which this hypothesis stands comes from the Book of Proverbs. At the beginning of Chapter 3, I noted that Proverbs basically collects moral aphorisms on a variety of topics while illustrating wise and foolish behavior in all their respective permutations. Proverbs is therefore a useful interlocutor for comprehending *Billy Budd*’s depiction of the interdependency between moral and legal justice. Melville draws on Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as textual and thematic sources for describing Claggart’s particular brand of deceitful, sophisticated wickedness. For example, Prov. 20:30 can help expound Billy’s reaction to Claggart’s false accusations, as it proposes that the only way of dealing with an evil person is corporal punishment (cf., Alter, *Wisdom* fn. 30, 281). Proverbs even outlines the specific moral antagonism that entraps Claggart and Billy:²⁴²

He that hateth dissembleth with his lips, and layeth up deceit within him; / When he speaketh fair, believe him not: for there are seven abominations in his heart. / Whose hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness shall be shewed before the whole congregation. / Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him. / A lying tongue hateth those that are afflicted by it; and a flattering mouth worth ruin. (Prov. 26:24-28)

Claggart is simultaneously an honorable officer of the Royal Navy, as per the naval codex, which underwrites the official version of events, and a Biblical villain. His methodical entrapment of

²⁴¹ For a complementary reading of Claggart as Arthur Schopenhauer’s man of envy, see Dillingham, *Circle* (61).

²⁴² Claggart’s pursuit of Billy is visually motivated insofar as it is triggered by his beholding Billy’s congeniality and form. Prov. 21:10 comments on this dynamic: “[t]he soul of the wicked desireth evil / his neighbour findeth no favor in his eyes.” Claggart and Jackson in particular display their depravity through their eyes.

Billy, his calm professionalism in mockingly repeating his fabricated accusation to Billy's face in Vere's presence, as well as his snake-like demeanor, oust Claggart as the Proverbial villain. Indeed, his evil "recoil[s] upon itself," laying up deceit within (*BB* 312). When Billy strikes Claggart dead, Captain Vere. Incidentally, Vere is described as the head of the "congregation of believers in hell, listening to the clergyman's announcement of his Calvinistic text" and thus is charged with giving doxological expression to the cosmic drama that has transpired in the state cabin (*BB* 348). Such nuances are impossible to depict in the framework of the naval code, which ultimately decides the fate of all three characters. The unbridgeable, "deadly space between" one needs to traverse, according to the narrator, in order to comprehend the master-of-arms, accordingly consists of precisely this dichotomy between praise and condemnation of the arbitrariness of language. The praise for well-chosen words and punishment for evil purpose are incongruent within both the OT text and Melville's novella. And while Alter reminds us that Proverbs "is by no means cut from whole cloth, and consequently generalizations about its outlook and literary character will not hold for all parts of the anthology" (*Wisdom* 185), Melville expounds upon these structural inconsistency in the Biblical texts by treating them as thematic contrasts in his plot.

When describing the court martial, the narrator, once again, invokes the frame of Calvinist dogma, which is here equated to the official version. Vere's greatest fear is of the sailors' possible autonomous reading of the case. In other words, he dreads their hermeneutic autonomy. His paranoia forces him to cling to the supposed impartial letter of the naval code with religious zeal: "Nor in any point could it have been deviated from [. . .] without begetting undesirable speculations in the ship's company, sailors, and more particularly men-of-war's men, being of all men the greatest sticklers for usage" (*BB* 348). The narrator's subsequent thick

religious description of Billy's death and ascension refracts Vere's quasi-religious paranoia. The narrative presents a counter-perspective to the impersonal letter of the law. The crew appears to be having a collective out-of-body experience when they reverberate Billy's final call of "God bless Captain Vere!" after which "Billy ascended; and, ascending, and took the fill rose of the dawn (*BB* 345). The repetition of the verb 'to ascend' conveys a sentimental tone, which is repeated and duplicated, causing the impression of crude stylistic reinforcement.²⁴³

The second way in which Melville grounds Claggart in OT lore is through his characterization of Claggart as Satan. When meditating on the origins of Billy's stutter, for instance, the narrator observes that "the interferer, the envious marplot of Eden, still has more or less to do with every human consignment to this planet of Earth" and is "sure to slip his little card, as much as to remind us—I too have a hand here," he indeed points out that all communication is contingent, but also that this contamination is part and parcel of the nature of communication (*BB* 289). Once again, this sentence invokes an OT Joban sensibility to the role of Satan as a complicit force of Creation: His assigned role as interferer authorizes the devil to slant, taint, manipulate, corrupt, but never to destroy; this latter function is performed by human will, in this case by Vere's drumhead court. Amongst an array of cosmic forces, Satan's 'hand' may influence the artifice of human communication and social interaction. Still, the card metaphor bespeaks Melville's humorous attitude towards Claggart's role as plot disruptor: The

²⁴³ Umphrey notes that Billy's cry itself is a trance-like reaction, one that cannot be regularized by the letter of the law, which is why its ambiguity—at least for those unfamiliar with Billy's character—is unsettling (423). The previous observations about Claggart's ambivalent agency suggest that Melville is also critical of OT moral theology. Prov. 16:1, for example, illustrates that the problem of determining premeditation of a crime on the basis of potentially faulty testimony is a recurring issue in wisdom literature. Gail Coffler usefully adds that Vere's reference to the judgment of Ananias (*Acts* 22-24) is also ambiguous, because there are, in fact, three Ananiases, all of which Claggart may be compared to (68-9). Most likely, *Acts* 5:3-5, in which Peter kills the lying Ananias, may have served as a template for Claggart's fate. Coffler notes that Kitto's *Cyclopaedia*, records a rumor according to which Peter "killed Ananias while at the same time denying the rumor's validity by identifying its perpetrators as 'unbelievers'" (Coffler 69). If so, Melville's novella would be even more subversive, as it would imply Billy's conscious guilt.

devil has limited agency in the world; he may play his hand but cannot take more immediate action. As such, he is arguable subject to the same contingencies as the other ‘players’ at the card table of life.

Barbara Johnson sees this contingency crystalized in Melville’s choice of the word ‘marplot’ to characterize Satan’s role, not just in the plot of *Billy Budd* but also in the cosmic plot at large. She argues, “the stutter ‘mars’ the plot in that it triggers the reversal of roles between Billy and Claggart. Yet in another sense this reversal does not mar the plot, it constitutes it. Here as in the story of Eden, what the envious marplot mars is not the plot, but the state of plotlessness” (576). Genesis and *Billy Budd* depict characters falling into story. Claggart’s Satan is therefore not the NT enemy but the OT servant to the divine plot. While the over-Christological symbolism paints Billy’s death in melancholy colors, Melville does not mourn the fall from innocence but rather points out that such innocence is incompatible with the cosmic order, of which Satan is a part. His role among the cosmic forces, while minor, is an impish one which may taint otherwise magnificent edifices, such as Billy.

Arguably, it is this plotless innocence that stokes in Claggart an incomprehensible fire of enmity. His suspicion of Billy’s epistemological naiveté is therefore a natural function of the cosmic plot wanting to be in motion. This monomania only manifests in fits and starts, in moments when his demeanor betrays the inner workings of his mind. “[L]ike a subterranean fire,” Claggart’s hatred of Billy systematically eats “its way deeper and deeper in him” (*BB* 323). There is an explicit analogy here to the taper-like fire in Jackson’s reptilian eyes (*RB* 104). “Like the predatory character of certain sea creatures,” Chai argues cogently, wickedness “originates in the nature of certain individuals, from their subjection to the material element within themselves” (233). Hence Claggart experiences his antipathy toward Billy as a disruption of his inner

composition. In the same context, Wright observes that Melville's fire symbolism insinuates "excruciating trials of the spirit" that "burn without consuming" (*Use* 32). While both Jackson and Claggart thus suffer from similar afflictions, Claggart does not manifest exterior symptoms of decay and consumption. Claggart's evil, while "phenomenal," does not become externalized until it comes into contact with Billy's innocence (*BB* 309). In fact, his ability to hide even this unnatural obsession behind seemingly impartial professionalism is what qualifies him as a petty officer as per the navel code. Yet Claggart's internal motivation—like Jackson's—arises not from mere moral antipathy but from a sensation of pain, one that the master-at-arms has to alleviate by the means available to him given the legal framework in which he operates.

What is more, Claggart's ambivalent mediation on morality also reveals something about the way Melville contemplates the moral endeavor behind literary creation. By coercing theological and secular legal language, Melville produces an ambivalent reality in which truth no longer constitutes a clearly delineated epistemological category. In this way, Melville breaks out of the Ecclesiastical binary of life under the sun or in reverent faith by adding the option of life in fiction to the Preacher's equation. This third option constitutes Melville's answer to the crisis of faith due to the persistence of wickedness as outlined in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Nancy Ruttenburg explains how Claggart is implicated in this process by analyzing the way he transforms lies into truth:

lie—articulate, coherent, unimpeded, effective because it demands that reality conform to it—generates the vocal current electric and thus 'blendingly enters' the space of truth: a poetic production in which the infantilization of innocence plays no part [. . .] Thus, in the very process of refuting the lie whose passage to truth he chronicles, the narrator acknowledges the lie's undeniable constitutive power—its perfect choreography of directness and indirection-by telling his own negotiations and renegotiations of the text's deadly spaces[. . .] (99-100)

The narrator illustrates how practical lies can usurp and corrupt codified legal systems. According to his earlier remarks, the only viable alternative to such legal literalism are Biblical moral categories, since they alone have the moral clout and linguistic flexibility that can reveal and condemn Claggart's subtle cerebral evil, a feat that is hopelessly out of reach for practitioners of the official version like Vere. Contrary to Holstein's reading, however, the novella does not subvert Biblical authority but contemplates the corrosion of secular legalism ("'Inside' Role" 36). The official version cannot contain the moral crime perpetrated by Claggart because of its inability to apprehend moral ambiguity. In contrast, OT wisdom, specifically the Book of Ecclesiastes, apprehends truth dialectically because it reckons with the epistemological alternatives of life under the sun and absolute skepticism towards divine justice (Eaton 44). Melville therefore criticizes the naïve literalism of the official version and bemoans the intellectual laziness of those who would deny the viability of Scripture because they would only read it literally. Far from being a nostalgic plea for Biblical literalism, *Billy Budd* calls for a more differentiated vision of truth finding and truth telling based on literary sensibilities. Since popular taste deems Biblical morality archaic, new literary forms must be crafted that combine Biblical mysticism and the popular appeal of authoritative record. Since popular taste deems Biblical morality archaic, new literary forms must be crafted that combine Biblical mysticism and the popular appeal of authoritative record.

Like *Pierre*, *Billy Budd* blends narrative and methodological contemplation. And yet, the unidentified narrator of *Billy Budd* does not launch his verdicts from a distance. He has a vested interest in the outcome of the plot, and intersperses the plot with his musings, figuring it out as he tracks along. He is more akin to the narrative voices in *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, *Israel Potter*, "The Encantadas," and *The Confidence-Man*, all of which feature narrators who are eventually

compelled to take a stand on the oncoming deluge of moral ambiguity that bleeds through from the text. Melville thus demonstrates awareness for what Terry Eagleton has recently described as the fuzzy edges of literary narrative categories (*Event* 28). Melville arrives at this understanding after decades of trying to invent a literary method of uncompromising truth telling. As Eagleton demands that we think—on a conceptual level—of literature not in generically exclusionary categories, but rather, with Wittgenstein, utilize the more flexible category of family resemblances, Melville displays that very sensibility in his dealings with narrative structure. The linguistic inversions that Claggart represents not only subvert the accounts of reality that naval law and witness testimony may supply, but his manipulations of the official record also erode the very structure of the narrative itself; i.e., the distinction between narrative frame and the narrative. This invasion, Johnson and Ruttenburg agree, of one narrative space by another eventually forces the narrator to respond to Claggart's imposition (cf., Ruttenburg 96). When recovered in the dialectic of literary representation, Melville seems to say, Biblical language may mend those dichotomies of meaning that escape legal technical language and help seekers of truth cross the epistemological in-between space that Claggart symbolizes.

5.8 Melville's Moral Epitaphs

Studying the impact of Biblical language in general and wisdom literature in particular is often stifled by the overt way in which Melville uses the sapiential tradition in his texts. A final, yet central piece of this investigation is the epitaph genre. Earlier, I commented on the ominous epitaph that Melville uses to bottom-line "The Encantadas." Similarly, *The Confidence-Man* and *Clarel* as well as several other poems reference the textual framework of OT wisdom morality. *Billy Budd* displays keen awareness that virtue and vice are not altogether unambiguous categories. The epitaphs I consider in the following extend this contemplation. Specifically, they

explore the idea that wisdom is not equal to virtue. Moreover, human wisdom exists in opposition to the deterministic forces of history. These forces, however, are not traces of direct divine interference, but mere manifestations of internal necessities. In his later work, Melville increasingly conceives of divine authorship as the systemic confinement of human beings. God therefore does not display cruelty but indifference in his dealings with human beings. And the Bible can provide humanity with a historical and cultural repertoire for examining its role in the history of salvation. Although Melville appears to be rather skeptical toward humanity's capacity to critically reflect on its self-destructive tendencies in texts such as *Battle Pieces*, he empathetically reckons with suffering and despair as elemental forces of the human experience. Thus the following pieces show how he increasingly moderates the Biblical text to contemplate the need for social transformation.

5.9 The Story of China Aster as Meditation on OT Wisdom

The parable of China Aster in *The Confidence-Man* contemplates wisdom as the moderation between secular experience and moral idealism. Orchis, a jovial businessman who recently has come into money through a lottery win, offers to loan one-thousand dollars to his friend China Aster, a struggling but honest candle maker. China Aster, up to this point, had been a traditionalist, crafting candles out of tallow instead of the more efficient spermaceti. As such, he is initially apprehensive to accept the loan. When he eventually does cash Orchid's check, he does so against the advice of his father's friends, Old Plain Talk and Old Prudence. China Aster's business ultimately fails because of his lack in business acumen. Worse yet, accruing debt becomes a vicious cycle for him that eventually leads to his death as lenders flock to claim their debts to the point at which he dies in squalor. The fable is therefore a moral parable on moderating skepticism and doubt. Melville subverts the traditional binary configuration of the

characters as positive and negative exemplars by constructing two characters in Orchis and China Aster who abandon prudence to bring about their own destruction.

Orchis mirthfully implores China Aster to receive the loan, interest free, and take a “bright view of life,” but over time Orchid becomes a skeptic of human nature and a stern collector who leans on the letter of the law as well as social convention to collect his debts (*CM* 211). The story goes through some contortions to stress that Orchid’s greed was circumstantial rather than premeditated. Once he gains access to the upper socio-economic stratosphere, he begins to demand back the interest on his original loan. As with “Bartleby,” Melville here also indicts the connection of religion and business: Orchis, as a result of his newfound wealth, joins “a church, or rather semi-religious school, of Come-Outers” apparently for the soul purpose of mythologizing his fortuitous ascend to fortune (*CM* 215). The “sect” of Come-Outers turn his mirth into melancholy, to the point at which his newfound infatuation with status causes him dyspepsia (*CM* 216). Orchis, therefore, travels in moral extremes. The hyper inflated rhetoric of selfless altruism that he uses to ensnare China Aster correlates with his merciless insistence on collecting his debts based on his own supposed hardship and victimization by other lenders (*CM* 216). Orchis, therefore, is equally entrapped in the economic cycle of lending and dwells, part time, in the house of mirth and in the company of those attached to worldly goods (Eccles. 7:2).

The story’s bleaker prospect, however, comes with the notion that trustworthiness becomes the means of China Aster’s destruction. The narrator notes that

[. . .] had China Aster been something else than what he was, he would not have been trusted, and, therefore, he would have been effectually shut out from running his own and wife’s head into the usurer’s noose; yet those who, when everything at last came out, maintained that, in this view and to this extent, the honesty of the candle-maker was no advantage to him, in so saying, such persons said what every good heart must deplore, and no prudent tongue will admit. (215)

Depicting Aster's integrity as detrimental to his happiness exceeds the skepticism Pierre faces. As such, the story condemns both the gullibility of the upright person—the man of chronometrical piety—and the pathetic rhetoric and naiveté of the shrewd business person—the man of secular experience, who comes to mythologize the contingencies that have led him to his fortune. The fable does not simply reiterate the binaries of mirth and prudence or morality and wickedness, but advocates moderation as the unity of head and heart.

Formally, the story follows the template of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* with its typological characters. These types, in turn, are once again rooted in OT theology, the most overt reference being to the Book of Job. When China Aster tells Orchis that his father's friends had advised against taking the loan, the former launches into a tirade of the duo:

Why, China Aster, I've often heard from my mother, the chronicler, that those two old fellows, with Old Conscience—as the boys called the crabbed old quaker, that's dead now—they three used to go to the poor-house when your father was there, and get round his bed, and talk to him for all the world as Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar did to poor old pauper Job. Yes, Job's comforters were Old Plain Talk, and Old Prudence, and Old Conscience, to your poor old father. Friends? I should like to know who you call foes? With their everlasting croaking and reproaching they tormented poor Old Honesty, your father, to death. (CM 210-11)

Orchis here rejects one of the central axioms of wisdom literature, the notion that criticism by the elders who have accumulated worldly experience is a necessary source of wisdom. In the Book of Job, the sufferer's friends are often called comforters, although their council actually incites Job to reject tradition and seek God on his own terms. Orchis misreads the Book of Job's call for an experiential relation to wisdom—as opposed to paying lip service to tradition. While China Aster does remember nominally his ancestor's admonition to avoid loans, “To ply my own hammer, light though it be, I think best, rather than piece it out heavier by welding to it a bit off a neighbor's hammer, though that may have some weight to spare,” he still fails drawing

actionable lessons from tradition (*CM* 209). The accusatory tone of Orchis's speech here is striking and makes the passage appear allegorical. Melville thus pithily remarks that conscience has no place in the contemporary marketplace and moral upbraiding by those who have experience is perceived as torturous nagging. In the same context, Cook argues that the fable consolidates the novel's criticism of laissez-faire market capitalism (*Satirical* 197). By linking the story to the tradition of Biblical wisdom literature, Melville illustrates the mores of contemporary business ethics.

In addition, the three elders Orchis berates are essentially the three personified aspects of Biblical wisdom. As Orchis's desire for convenience has overtaken his appreciation for wisdom, he effectively outlaws the only faculties available for the "philosophical investigation of human experience with unaided human reasoning" (Gable & Wheeler 120). Orchis wishes to sustain material wealth while remaining free of moral reproach. Melville is quite conservative in his commentary on Biblical wisdom by illustrating how contemporary business ethics is essentially a hermetic kind of thinking. Orchis increasingly believes his socio-economic status absolves him from being exposed to dissenting and morally upbraiding voices. His advice to China Aster rejects almost verbatim the Preacher's axiom that "*It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools*" (Eccles. 8:5). Even religious institutions, Melville points out further, cater to this willful ignorance by providing rhetorical spaces that elevate Orchis's self-pitying hypos to exemplary behavior. Yet the story also quite bleakly intimates that those guilty of such imprudence and hypocrisy will ultimately come to hold the leash of those with moral integrity.

Prudence and Plain Talk, both wisdom tropes and frowned upon in the fable, are made social pariahs, whose chief occupation consists of attending the funerals of those who would not

heed their council (CM 218). They are merely left to co-authorship his epitaph, which, summarizes the parable's illustration of the consequences ignoring Biblical wisdom.

‘HERE LIE
 THE REMAINS OF
 CHINA ASTER THE CANDLE-MAKER,
 WHOSE CAREER
 WAS AN EXAMPLE OF THE TRUTH OF SCRIPTURE, AS FOUND
 IN THE
 SOBER PHILOSOPHY
 OF
 SOLOMON THE WISE;
 FOR HE WAS RUINED BY ALLOWING HIMSELF TO BE PERSUADED,
 AGAINST HIS BETTER SENSE,
 INTO THE FREE INDULGENCE OF CONFIDENCE,
 AND
 AN ARDENTLY BRIGHT VIEW OF LIFE,
 TO THE EXCLUSION
 OF
 THAT COUNSEL WHICH COMES BY HEEDING
 THE
 OPPOSITE VIEW.’ (CM 219)

The epitaph is unidentified as to its reference to wisdom literature. Both Cook and Heidman speculate about a reference to Job (Cook, *Satirical* 194, fn 25). Although the reference is by no means explicit, the story's overall concern with moderation and receiving wisdom from tradition plausibly ground the epitaph in Ecclesiastes. It is not the mere indulgence in mirth that ruins China Aster, but the exclusion of the opposite view. Still, it seems important to note that these lines represent the interpretation of China Aster's plight at second hand. Prudence and Plain Talk's epitaph, after all, is a truncated version of the one found in China Aster's wallet. One could speculate that the candle maker had already realized the error of his ways prior to his death. However, Prudence and Plain Talk, the narrator notes, have a heavy editorial hand in the matter. Old Plain Talk even adds a postscript that hammers home the applicability of Biblical wisdom as referenced in the epitaph to contemporary business ethics: “The root of all was a

friendly loan” (*CM* 220). The phrase “friendly loan” underscores the devious and oxymoronic nature of an altruistic vision of market capitalism as propagated, for instance, by the gospel of charity. Indeed, the parable, when read from the perspective of Orchis, dramatizes the rich person’s whimsical self-perception as a victim of his charitable inclination.

The Confidence-Man thus chronicles the battle of confidence-based tricksterism with Solomonic wisdom. The insidiousness of the conflict becomes apparent in the way the confidence man uses those who share a simplistic, literalist understanding of Biblical wisdom against them. For instance, it is the Cosmopolitan who admonishes William Cream not to take people at face value, yet manages to manipulate him into changing his attitude at a whim several times (*CM* 316, 312). Mitchell and Snyder cogently point out that the charity, like all the confidence games in the novel, is inherently a reversible performance (38). The Deaf-Mute in cream colors advocates trust, while the barber named Cream rules out trust. The episode between Cream and Noble as well as between Noble and the old man in the subsequent chapter, are really reenactments of the China Aster story. The novel’s final three chapters therefore meditate on the Bible’s seemingly conflicting advocacy of trust and skepticism.²⁴⁴

5.10 The Conflict of Convictions and the Fall from Innocence

Similar to the sketch “The Chola Widow,” the poem “The Conflict of Convictions” in *Battle-Pieces* contemplates despair as the absence of hope. It explores the psychological and

²⁴⁴ Mitchell and Snyder erroneously assume that skepticism and Biblical wisdom are antithetical propositions in the novel, when they note that, “Both signs square off as competing appeals to the moral and economic instincts of the passengers aboard the *Fidèle*. Yet, while the staging of these two discourses seems antithetical — the former appeals to a biblical good while the latter refuses all faith in the guarantee of future payment — both signs espouse an absolutist principle for their respective audiences” (38-39). When William Cream points the Cosmopolitan to the Wisdom of Solomon in *Ecclesiasticus*, the barber transposes the conflict of absolute behavioral doctrines into the realm of Biblical hermeneutics. Both skepticism and trust base their claims of absolute truth on the Biblical text, yet only one can do so truthfully. The Cosmopolitan’s subsequent conversation with the old man rests on the former’s supposed confusion about the Bible’s advocacy of skepticism as part of wisdom. The novel’s foreboding yet ambivalent ending underlines this impression as well: the Cosmopolitan, seemingly having gained the trust of yet another dupe, leads the old man away and extinguishes the last light in the room.

historical ramifications of despair, as military conflict becomes increasingly inevitable. Melville addresses a particular historical moment in the winter of 1860-1, when melancholy over early defeats began undermining morale among Union troops. The speaker proceeds to contextualize this melancholy in the historical context of other modern failed idealist ventures to contemplate the implications of military defeat for the American national experiment and the advancement of civilization. These universal misgivings announce the speaker's skepticism toward the projects of empire and even civilization.

Yet the poem, has a third layer of meaning in which the speaker meditates on the autonomy of human and divine agency as constitutive forces of history. Melville combines NT and OT images and references to contemplate these two agencies in the framework of the history of salvation. While NT references are usually to Satan as the military enemy of humanity, OT references, which once again have been all but ignored in scholarship thus far, are to Ecclesiastes and its deliberations about secular and divine wisdom:²⁴⁵

[. . .] Heaven's ominous silence over all.
 Return, return, O eager Hope,
 And face man's latter fall.
 Events, they make the dreamers quail;
 Satan's old age is strong and hale,
 A disciplined captain, gray in skill,
 And Raphael a white enthusiast still;
 Dashed aims, at which Christ's martyrs pale,
 Shall Mammon's slaves fulfill? (*PP* 8, line 3-12)

The poem initially depicts a gloomy, brooding setting as "ON starry heights / A bugle wails the long recall; / Derision stirs the deep abyss" (*PP* 8, line 1, 2). Despair over impending military defeat becomes an allegory of lost religious belief. The synecdoche 'silence' duplicates God's

²⁴⁵ In his footnote, Melville elaborates this wide contemplative framework: The gloomy lull of the early part of the winter of 1860-1, seeming big with final disaster to our institutions, affected some minds that believed them to constitute one of the great hopes of mankind, much as the eclipse which came over the promise of the first French Revolution affected kindred natures, throwing them of the time into doubts and misgivings universal. (*PP* 173)

absence, as “ominous silence” is the only ascertainable communication from heaven (*PP* 8, line 3). Yet within this all-pervading silence, the supplicant speaker calls for “eager Hope” to return (*PP* 8, line 5). The resulting contrast between lyrical voice and narrated events—God’s silence and the speaker’s supplication—creates a tension. The speaker’s call is to animate the troops, to hold up hope in the face of melancholy. In religious terms, the scene invokes a battle between Satan’s army and the forces of heaven. While it may appear a rather open condemnation of the Confederate cause on moral grounds, the speaker immediately disowns any notion that military victory for the North may come from a perceived moral superiority. The numerous references to NT millennialist theology depict Satan as a formidable enemy, wise with age. In the face of such savvy, the speaker doubts that an army of “Mammon’s slaves”; i.e., those committed to profit, can vanquish evil—presumably in the form of slavery—where others of higher moral repute have failed.²⁴⁶

“Conflict,” however, is not a monologue. In fact, Melville blends several genre elements by injecting a dramatic choir of voices whose remonstrations alternate the speaker’s critical reflections. This second set of voices comments, in the style of Greek tragedy, on the moral issues raised by the speaker. It is decidedly more assertive and upbeat, contradicts the speaker at every turn, and even denigrates his observations as “the cloistered doubt / of olden times,” blurted out at an inopportune moment (*PP* 10, line 57, 58). These assertive parenthetical explications counter the pleading, at times vacillating, tone of the speaker:

(Dismantle the fort,
Cut down the fleet—
Battle no more shall be!
While the fields for fight in æons to come

²⁴⁶ In *Pierre*, silence carries the connotations of contemplation and mystical, secret knowledge. Contemplating this awe-inspiring phenomenon, the narrator notes that “Silence is at once the most harmless and the most awful thing in all nature. It speaks of the Reserved Forces of Fate. Silence is the only Voice of our God” (*P* 204).

Congeval beneath the sea.) (PP 8, lines 13-17)

Here, the choir calls to abolish the means of war and accept its futility due to history's cyclicity. However, the speaker tempers this enthusiasm by noting that "The terrors of truth and the dart of death / To faith alike are vain; / Though comets, gone a thousand years, / Return again," (PP 8, line 18-21). Faith acts as a shield against skepticism and the inevitable limitedness of life. Yet the primary position of the adverbial phrase in line 19 indicates that while truth and death are ubiquitous, faith is a limited and illusory personal faculty. Faith blinds believers to the empirically observable cyclicity of history, communicated, for instance, by the orbital movement of comets. The two voices subsequently explore the ambiguity of these coeval worldviews, faith and empiricism, by alternatingly presenting fits of enthusiasm and skepticism. In contrast to the congenial tone of the choir, which is arguably the congenial lullaby of faith, the speaker sees in history characterized by human suffering.

But God his former mind retains,
 Confirms his old decree;
 The generations are inured to pains,
 And strong Necessity
 Surges, and heaps Time's strand with wrecks. (PP 9, lines 28-32)

When historicized, the present military conflict is merely a reassertion of the timelessness of God's decrees. Simultaneously, this view refutes the belief that history moves purposefully toward a better future. Melville invokes the contemporary image of God as sovereign king and lawmaker, an image that still circulated widely in the early 1800s. At the same time, he also inserts in it deist, materialist notions, as per d' Holbach, of movement according to inner necessity. Strong necessity, the observable operational principles of nature, are divine decrees, changeable in principle but immutable in actuality. They remain operational as long as they remain unrevised by the divine legislator. But no such revision is to be expected, for ruling has

made God indifferent to the suffering that His system heaps on human beings as it does to every sovereign: “[. . .] He who rules is old—is old; / Ah! faith is warm, but heaven with age is cold”

(*PP* 10, lines 55-56). The speaker asserts the distant between the sovereign and his people.

Suffering cannot change law. But if history is circular, suffering, as its operational effect, seems to be its own cause and all human agency but a futile endeavor.

The Ancient of Days forever is young,
 Forever the scheme of Nature thrives;
 I know a wind in purpose strong—
 It spins *against* the way it drives.
 What if the gulfs their slimed foundations bare?
 So deep must the stones be hurled
 Whereon the throes of ages rear
 The final empire and the happier world. (*PP* 10, lines 61-68)

Like a strong wind, human purpose feigns itself a historically constitutive force but ultimately spins against its own perceived direction. By prefacing the wind metaphor with the personal pronoun, Melville calls attention to speaker’s subject position as observer of humanity’s futile struggles. The passage, incidentally, paraphrases Eccles. 1:6, which lists wind as one phenomenon that illustrates the vanity of all things in the realm of secular experience: “The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.” Melville develops the Preacher’s illustrative example as a metaphor of human historical agency. Humanity craves change. But the speaker, as observer and chronicler of the human condition, perceives the inherent paradox in humanity’s actions: its wish for a better tomorrow is constantly neutralized by its self-destructive impulses. Hence human agency cannot propel history forward but is forever caught in its cyclical structure.

Ultimately, history as a natural principle can only be changed by supra-natural force. A better world, a world of peace may only come in the final empire; i.e., the kingdom of Christ. Human purpose can do little more than add to the slimed foundations of that future state. Like

other empire's before it, America merely wields "Power unanointed" and therefore may only establish "Dominion (unsought by the free)" (*PP* 10, lines 74, 75). Yet its empire cannot be immutable in its convictions. Even if reconciliation between North and South were possible, "[. . .] the Founders' dream shall flee" (*PP* 10, line 79). The kindling of military conflict has already corrupted not only the political Union but also the original idealist vision of the United States as a nation of laws. Melville therefore exposes the inherent paradox of an innocent yet powerful nation. Man's second fall, which the speaker mentions earlier, refers simultaneously to the slaying of Able by Cain and to the prospective fall of the new American nation. Inherently innocent and brimming with might, that same nation is prone to fall victim to inner strife. When viewed in the grand scheme of global history, this fact does not carry dramatic consequences for the speaker.²⁴⁷

Age after age shall be
 As age after age has been,
 (From man's changeless heart their way they win);
 And death be busy with all who strive—
 Death, with silent negative. (*PP* 10, lines 76-84)

Besides the prospect of the Second Coming, death appears to be the only other truly modulating historical force. Its characteristic function is to negate even the futile human efforts toward change. If we take seriously the earlier reference to God as the entity that speaks through silence, death's "silent negative" rings with God's authorial voice (*PP* 10, line 84). Melville here is not so subversively skeptical as to convey infidel notions, however he does gesture towards the problem of antinomianism in God's decrees. The metaphor of God as author, as laid out in *Pierre* and "The Encantadas," suggests that is death a plot device by which God acts upon a

²⁴⁷ Helen Vendler notes that this ironic subject position of Melville's Civil War poetry made the project "unassimilable to his own epoch and to ours—his stoic irony, his steely view of warfare, his insistence on the ambivalence felt by any spectator, his refusal to pronounce easily on the whole, his invention of a species of epic lyric comprehensive enough to include metaphysics, narrative, panoramic tragedy, and individual pang" (593).

world that is essentially fictitious. Ironically, death also operates as the equalizer between the warring factions. As all ages remain the same due to humanity's immutable heart, death busies itself with all who strive, regardless of their political or religious convictions.

The poem's concluding stanza, is reminiscent of China Aster's epitaph. It too reiterates the Preacher's indictment of human knowledge but bestows on it prophetic quality:

YEA, AND NAY—
 EACH HATH HIS SAY;
 BUT GOD HE KEEPS THE MIDDLE WAY.
 NONE WAS BY
 WHEN HE SPREAD THE SKY;
 WISDOM IS VAIN, AND PROPHECY. (*PP* 10, lines 61-68)

God's way, as it may be discerned by contemplating the shape of history and the forces at play within it, is moderation and balance. Yet the speaker immediately qualifies even this rather global assertion by reminding his addressees that there is no first-hand testimony for the inception of history and its principles. This final debunking of causal reason and testimony as viable sources of knowledge leads the speaker back to assert the essential Ecclesiastical axiom: all professed human knowledge of God is insubstantial. Formally, the stanza dissolves the poem's alternating rhyme scheme, replacing it with two rhyming triplets. The new scheme emphasizes the contrast between the respective sets of information contained in each triplet. The first three lines represent a more or less stringent ratiocination about the foregone meditations, whereas the last three lines reiterate the utter uselessness of all such ratiocinations. The final line is perplexing, though. The term 'prophecy' in its now archaic spelling appears forced and ambiguous: because the verbal meaning seems unlikely here, Melville seems to reference the nominal meaning, which suggests a parallelism between the nouns 'wisdom' and 'prophecy.'

Because wisdom is both vain and constitutes prophecy, the failure of worldly knowledge points toward the wisdom of God.²⁴⁸

The social and political disruptions of the Civil War caused Melville to reject the Ecclesiastical notion that secular life could be improved by being lived out in Biblical wisdom. In war, “Senior wisdom suits not” for *Realpolitik* is lead by “The light [that] is on the youthful brow” and tends toward war (*PP* 9, line 49-50). The wisdom referenced in the concluding epitaph is the same that is rejected by the youthful brow. However, it is also prophetic of another hidden sort of wisdom on which human ratio has no purchase.²⁴⁹

5.11 “The Enthusiast”: Going Beyond Annihilation

The metaphor of domestic conflict would continue to occupy Melville long after *Battle-Pieces* had been published. The titular poem of *Timoleon* refers to the historical Timoleon of Corinth (ca. 411-ca. 337 B.C.), which Melville may have gathered from either Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* (New York: Harper Bros. 1840/75) or Pierre Bayle’s *Historical Critical Dictionary* (London: Harper, 1710).²⁵⁰ Timoleon’s life and story may have appealed to Melville because they present an instance in which patricide coincides with tyrannicide. This injunction of legal order invokes complex and intertwined questions of jurisprudence and moral judgment. These questions, in turn, tease out the ambivalence and potential arbitrariness of both systems. This tension simultaneously sets the thematic tone for Melville’s collection of poems. Plutarch

²⁴⁸ Ryan, et. al choose the noun option. They note that ‘prophecy’ was merely a spelling variant but acknowledges that the verb form did exist after 1700 (*PP* 626). The verbal meaning would suggest an invitation to the addressee to construct their own prophecy based on their internalization of the vanity of wisdom. Moreover, since ‘prophecy’ is a transitive verb, Melville’s usage here is either erroneous or elliptical. Since no prophecy delivered thus far is accurate, however, the only viable grammatical expression of prophecy is ellipsis. This would indeed present a rather intricate intertwining of theological content and grammatical form. In addition, the verb form would be evocative of similar elliptical ambiguities in Emily Dickinson’s poetry.

²⁴⁹ The last half oft he poem is riddled with paraphrases from Ecclesiastes. For instance, line 49 and 50 refers to what the Preacher calls wisdom under the sun; i.e. experience of the elders for righteous and comfortable living. Eccles. 9:17, 18 notes that “The words of wise *men are* heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools. / Wisdom *is* better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good.”

²⁵⁰ Cf. *PP* 751.

himself, in Clough's edition, sees Timoleon as a practical moral exemplar rather than an allegorical hero. Thus Plutarch's treatment of Timoleon presents a juncture in his text at which a methodological switch occurs and moral improvement become foregrounded. Plutarch's personal motivation for comprehending Timoleon's life as morally exemplary reverberates in Melville's collection, especially in "The Enthusiast."²⁵¹

It was for the sake of others that I first commenced writing biographies; but I find myself proceeding and attaching myself to it for my own; the virtues of these great men serving me as a sort of looking glass, in which I may see how to adjust and adorn my own life. [. . .] My method [. . .] is, by the study of history, and by the familiarity acquired in writing, to habituate my memory to receive and retain images of the best and worthiest characters. I thus am enabled to free myself from any ignoble, base, or vicious impressions, contracted from the contagion of ill company that I may be unavoidably engaged in, by the remedy of turning my thoughts in a happy and calm temper to view these noble examples. Of this kind are those of Timoleon the Corinthian, and Paulus Aemilius, to write whose lives is my present business; men equally famous, not only for their virtues, but success; insomuch that they have left it doubtful whether they owe their greatest achievements to good fortune, or their own prudence and conduct. (235)

The last decades of Melville's life enmeshed him ever more tightly in exploring the ambiguities and paradoxes of pragmatism and legal definition within various legal traditions, and frequently his use of Joban material and legal sensibility coincides with these issues. In *Timoleon* the first explicit reference to the Book of Job appears in the poem "The Enthusiast." The poem's epigraph cites Job 13:15: "Though He slay me yet will I trust in Him," a quotation emblemizing one of the fundamental themes of the Biblical book, Job's incorruptible moral integrity (*PP* 279).²⁵²

²⁵¹ Hershel Parker makes a compelling case that Melville began writing poetry well before the publication of his first collection and may even have compiled a collection entitled *Poems* which never appeared. According to Parker's historical note to the Northwestern-Newberry edition of the *Published Poems, Battle-Pieces* had thus been created in the second phase of Melville's career as a poet; yet some earlier pieces seem to reappear in *Timoleon*, even though Parker's evidence seems questionable on this point (cf., *PP* 499).

²⁵² In his editorial note, Tanselle observes that Melville omits the rest of the verse, which illustrates Job's moral integrity before God: "but I will maintain mine own ways before him" (Job 13:15). One conceivable pragmatic reason for this editorializing on Melville's part is that he may have felt the point was made by the first half of the verse, suggesting a level of familiarity with the Biblical text he came to expect from his readers. He may have wanted to avoid quoting a passage that could be misconstrued as a declaration of rebellion. In contrast, a teleological reading of the Biblical passage would suggest that Melville wanted to emphasize the exemplary

Melville here is explicitly interested in the moral wisdom imparted by the Biblical text. The poem, therefore, has a double meaning, because it addresses both the nature of faith in general and that of art and religion as modes of epistemological inquiry in particular. The discourses of art and religion are inseparably linked here, and the poetic speaker postulates a negative correlation between artistic commercial success and proximity to transcendental truth. The poem is thus in both its conception and its position within the collection a precursor to the subsequent poem “Art,” which addresses the practical process of artistic creation. “The Enthusiast,” in contrast, deals with the conceptual possibility of a pure artistic pursuit. Aesthetic purity is equated to religious fidelity. What is at stake, then, is the survival of the man of the heart who dares to follow his emotional impulse against external adversity—Melville’s consummate artist—in a material and commercial world.²⁵³

Shall hearts that beat no base retreat
 In youth’s magnanimous years—
 Ignoble hold it if discreet
 When interest tames to fears;
 Shall spirits that worship light
 Perfidious deem its sacred glow,
 Recant, and trudge where worldlings go,
 Conform, and own them right? (279 lines 1-8)

Formally, two of the poem’s three stanzas take the form of rhetorical questions, an echo of God’s mocking rhetorical questions to Job (39:19), while the third assumes a prescriptive tone of aphorism and thus responds to the first two. The questions of the first two stanzas address distinct objects: stanza one cautions the inhibition of the ‘heart’ by conformity, while stanza two

selflessness required for the pursuit of truth, a pursuit that is simultaneously directed against social constraints and personal apprehensions. I will elaborate on this idea below.

²⁵³ Melville’s famous letter to Hawthorne from 1 July, 1852, in which he reviews “Ethan Brand,” states this aesthetic maxim anaphorically: “[. . .] in those men who have fine brains and work them well, the heart extends down to hams. And though you smoke them with the fire of tribulation, yet, like veritable hams, the head only gives the richer and the better flavor. I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart, than Jupiter Olympus with his head. The reason the mass of men fear God, and *at bottom dislike* Him, is because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch” (original emphasis, *Correspondence* 192).

provides a vista on the adverse effects time has on a conformist heart. The speaker hyperbolizes the fate of a heart that abandons its pursuit of truth. From its initial unrelenting beat in “youth’s magnanimous years” (*PP* 279.2), the heart—here symbolizing what Melville deems the essential human intellectual urge to pursue truth—becomes corrupted if it subjects its rhythm to fears rather than its natural curiosity (*PP* 279.3, 4). The alternating rhyming couplet illustrates the notion that even tacit, discrete compromise in artistic purpose ultimately leads to corruption of the idealist quest (*PP* 279.3). Such loss of purpose is allegorized by the spirits which gradually invert their affinity to light—again, a symbol of transcendent truth—to a disregard of it (*PP* 279.5-6). Spirits so corrupted in their original artistic purpose “[r]ecant [their former beliefs and pursuits] and trudge where worldlings go, / Conform, and own them right” (*PP* 279.7-8).

Melville’s word creation, ‘worldlings,’ defames those who place material gain over metaphysical insight. The term therefore refers to those who are ‘of the world’ and are attached to its monetary lure. When transposed to the artistic arena, this assertion suggests an opposition between the metaphysical goods to be gained by intellectual artistic pursuit and the prospective monetary gains of catering to popular taste. The verb usage stylistically supports this idea by contrasting the ideological operations of worship—which I will here consider synonymous with the earnest pursuit of spiritual objectives—according to one’s nature with the denigrating drudgery to conformity. To deny the heart’s natural beat is “[i]gnoble” (*PP* 279.3), since tempering its rhythm leads to a corruption of the spirit. True art for Melville is always also ethical in the sense that it harmonizes with the inherent motions, such as the flow of the ocean, of physical existence. As Melville showed in his “Pebble” cycle within *John Marr*, as well as in the cosmological chapters of *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, motion is the foremost and universally accessible truth. To deliberately inhibit it and tamper with it amounts to an operation

qualitatively similar to original sin in Melville's cosmology. But Melville's point here is not about the efficacy of art; contrarily, his speaker characterizes artistic pursuit as being always already integrated with physical being by the very beating of the artist's heart. When considered as philosophical paradigm, the poem proposes monism, which in turn authorizes an artistic project grounded in an acceptance of physicality. The artist must confront his material existence in the world—represented here by the heart muscle's automaticity—on its own terms, rather than coercing into some kind of contrived economy. He must then engage this existence dialectically in order to overcome the morally corrosive influence of earthly pursuits and rise to truth. The heart-beat symbol insinuates a characteristically romanticist belief in the unique perspective and abilities of the individual artistic genius. What, at first glance, may therefore appear to be an idealist aesthetics actually requires quite a bit of differentiation. The speaker purports that truth may be technically apprehended as natural empirical data. However, articulating this truth is impossible under any empirical methodology. Fact can only be represented when it is versified. In the same sense that the worldlings are barred from apprehending truth, art is an exclusive occupation, but it cannot be radical. It requires recourse to material reality to communicate effectively.²⁵⁴

Stanza two escalates the consequences of the proposed corruption of purpose as the dual symbol of time and faith replaces that of heart and spirit. The speaker now takes 'time' to mean the prolonged practice of artistic conformity. As such, time, as the corrosive agent of conformity, will "Unnerve and cow" the heart into submission, make it compliant with the company and aspirations of those "heartless ones enrolled / With palters of the mart" (*PP* 279.9-10, 11-2). The

²⁵⁴ For a genealogy of the heart as symbol in the romantic aesthetic tradition, see Isobel Armstrong, 27. The allusion to a natural nobility, once again, echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's analogous assertions about naturalized nobility. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche reports of the vilification of this natural nobility by priestly ascetic *resentiment* (475). See also Nietzsche's discussion of nobility and how it ultimately emerges from "profound suffering" in "What is Noble?" within *Beyond Good and Evil* (410).

contrast between the continuous motion of the heart, reflected in the poem's metre, and the regressive verbiage of conformity underscores the contrast between commerce and artistic production. The speaker declares commercial enterprise an accidental and corrosive occupation that interferes with the noble and regular natural cadence of intuition. Melville embellishes the initial sketch of the market place as the realm diametrically opposed to the object of artistic pursuit. Prolonged exposure to conformity, he says, corrupts artistic purpose. To be heartless is to enter the logic of commerce, which has for its object not the kind of truth seeking which is at the heart of all artistic exploits. It is rather the confidence-game logic of the market place that the speaker condemns as ignoble here:

Shall Time with creeping influence cold
 Unnerve and cow? The heart
 Pine for the heartless ones enrolled
 With palterers of the mart?
 Shall Faith abjure her skies,
 Or pale probation blench her down
 To shrink from Truth so still, so lone
 Mid loud gregarious lies? (*C* 279 lines 9-16)

Against this sultry drudgery, the symbolism of artistic truth—light and height—connotes levity and freedom, as the speaker again escalates the issue at stake from artistic integrity to moral integrity in the second half of stanza two. Now it is winged faith itself that is in jeopardy of having to “abjure her skies / or pale probation blench her down / To shrink from Truth so still, so lone / Mid loud gregarious lies” (*PP* 279.13-16). Conformity alienates the heart to its natural element, truth, and the worldlings would want nothing better than for the speaker to adopt their practice of avoiding those insights that question their faith. But a faith based on “gregarious lies” is ignorance dressed up as piety (*PP* 279. 16). In fact, absolute truth cannot be confronted with one's faith intact. Importantly, Melville does not glorify asceticism here. On the contrary, truth proceeds from some kind of violent encounter with the sublime, as per Kant's aforementioned

definition in his discussion of the mathematical sublime. Melville had critiqued this approach in *Pierre*. Meanwhile, “The Enthusiast” proposes that the encounter of truth is always personal and isolated. Yet the poem does not go so far as to advocate that only the *isolato* can effect such an encounter. The bravery of the artist consists in seeking out this encounter, even if it spells doom for his faith. Truth, however, may also take the opposing meaning in this context.²⁵⁵

Each burning boat in Cæsar’s rear
 Flames—No return through me!
 So put the torch to ties though dear,
 If ties but tempters be.
 Nor cringe if come the night:
 Walk through the cloud to meet the pall,
 Though light forsake thee, never fall
 From fealty to light. (C 279.17-24)

In the same manner that “[e]ach burning boat in Cæsar’s rear / Flames—No return through me!” the artist must “put the torch to ties though dear / [i]f ties but tempters be” and “walk through the cloud to meet the pall” (*PP* 279.17-20, 22, emphasis added). Melville’s linguistic embellishment of his speaker’s message is again noteworthy here: the chain of sharp, edgy dental-plosive ‘t’s onomatopoeically enforces the idea of discipline and self-composure required to resist the lure of conformity. The first half of stanza three therefore calls for a particular kind of violence to be inflicted upon the habits that stymie artistic pursuits. The heroic artist must engage the world with fierce confidence and purge all habits that hinder his pursuit. Thus the poem assumes apostrophic qualities and becomes a hymn by the speaker to the would-be artist.²⁵⁶

The speaker’s addressee should not only not buckle to worldly enticements, but treat his artistic-philosophical project as religious pursuit. This reading would also unlock an alternative

²⁵⁵ Stern shows that the term ‘*isolato*’ is in fact Melville’s coinage and designates a specific class of hermit. Hence his disavowal of this specific form of isolation here is partially preceded upon our understanding of this category in Melville’s thought (Stern 12).

²⁵⁶ If we consider the epigraph, these lines echo God’s rendering of leviathan’s fierceness against military opposition in Job 39:21: “He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goes on to meet the armed men.” Hence Melville’s speaker suggests that the artist adopt a philosophy that is comprised to equal parts of Job’s integrity and leviathan’s fierceness.

reading of the term “truth” as it is used in the previous stanza, in which it refers to the instantaneously undeceiving knowledge that eliminates the grounds for naive, unadulterated belief. The speaker therefore notes that the artist’s pursuit of transcendental truth may produce results that severely challenge his belief system. Melville must have been thinking of the at this point ever-increasing impact of historical analysis of the Bible, which he had commented on in earlier pieces as well. In this sense, the light symbolism of the final two lines expounds upon the religious connotation of the image in line five. The night, which the prospective seeker of truth must brave, thus signifies those encounters that may challenge one’s personal faith, for instance the demythologizing effects of empirical scholarship on Biblical truth that may render the original object worthless. This reading makes intelligible the speaker’s final admonition: “Though light forsake thee, never fall / From fealty to light” (*PP* 279.23-4). Darkness here attains the same terminological ambivalence as light, because it may imply a realm unfriendly to faith. Yet artistic pursuit does not consist of preserving at all costs its object as it is originally conceived. On the contrary, the true object of such pursuit consists in hardening one’s fealty to such preconceived objects in the face of their destruction. While the light may thus forsake its pursuer, he must recognize fealty to the light as the true object of his pursuit.

In these lines Melville seemingly repeats a sentiment he had already uttered decades earlier in the concluding lines of *Mardi*:

“Ah! Yillah! Yillah!—the currents sweep thee ocean-ward; nor will I tarry behind.—Mardi, farewell!—Give me the helm, old man!”
 “Nay, madman! Serenia is our haven. Through yonder strait, for thee, perdition lies. And from the deep beyond, no voyager e’er puts back.”
 “And why put back? is a life of dying worth living o’er again?—Let me, then, be the unreturning wanderer. The helm! By Oro, I will steer my own fate, old man.—Mardi, farewell!”
 “Nay, Taji: commit not the last, last crime!” cried Yoomy.
 “He’s seized the helm! eternity is in his eye! Yoomy: for our lives we must now swim.” [. . .]

“Now, I am my own soul's emperor; and my first act is abdication! Hail! realm of shades!”—and turning my prow into the racing tide, which seized me like a hand omnipotent, I darted through. Churned in foam, that outer ocean lashed the clouds; and straight in my white wake, headlong dashed a shallop, three fixed specters leaning o'er its prow: three arrows poising. And thus, pursuers and pursued flew on, over an endless sea.” (*M* 654)

Taji's unrelenting, and eventually self-destructive, quest for Yillah illustrates the ontological limits of the project which the speaker of “The Enthusiast” proposes. Complete self-abrogation makes the quester the “unreturning wanderer” (*M* 654). Regarding the term ‘fealty,’ implying a feudal logic of servitude, one may argue that such idealistic devotion precludes deliberate self-annihilation. Because this version of the cosmology of questing purports cognitive grounds for the truth this fealty must eventually yield, one literally needs to be alive to experience truth. Moreover, faith, the poetic speaker's argument suggests, grows organically out of the most fundamental motion of human life: the beating of the heart to which the poet must always return while wagering his life in the quest for truth.

While sounding his familiar plea for intellectual earnestness and integrity, Melville also presents an unconventional exegesis of the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes with this poem. Beginning with the epigraph, the speaker invokes the emotional vehemence with which biblical Job defends his moral integrity against the skeptical and heretic onslaught of his friends' arguments. Melville foregoes the conventional reading of Job's sentiment as motivated by his recalcitrance and stubbornness and reads him as a paragon for artistic integrity. He then proceeds to connect the characteristic of relentlessness, which God attributes to leviathan in the whirlwind poem. This exegetical maneuver allows Melville to reverse the rhetorical juxtaposition that God installs between various parts of his creation in the Biblical text. In this reading, the leviathan is not an unassailable monster that symbolizes God's inscrutability and creative autonomy but becomes a source of inspiration for Melville's artist to claim that very same autonomy on a

personal level. Hence Melville's enthusiast artist is a Job who not only maintains his moral integrity but fiercely defends it against the corrupting influences of an encircling materialist society. In doing so, however, he does not become a monkish zealot whose beliefs are inflexible. Rather, his spiritual fortitude is such that he can brave the storm of skepticism that his pursuits may call forth. Like Job, the artist may face the creative forces of the universe and labor to keep his artistic impulse to create and pursue a life in the face of overwhelming odds. "The Enthusiast" is therefore an allegory of the Joban pursuit for truth that usurps some of God's own rhetorical strategies from that book in order to articulate its heroic message.

6 Conclusion

I have approached the matter of theology in Melville's writing as an extension of theological discourses prevalent in the early nineteenth century. This project proceeded from the assumption that romantic literature is the aesthetic expression of Christianity's encounter with modernity. To put it differently, romantic literature is a modernist digestion of Biblical revelation. David Reynolds points out that in America, "The adaptation of religion to human experience was impelled first by Scottish Common Sense philosophic movement and later by English and Continental romanticism" (*Faith* 4). In the last decade of the nineteenth century, historical research has embellished this argument by uncovering skeptical intellectual traditions—particularly free inquiry and deism—that helped shape secular discourses on politics, law, religion, and art. Accordingly, one of my secondary arguments in this book has been to integrate Melville in this complex intellectual tradition as it existed in America. In a larger sense, this new research illustrates that modernity proceed exclusively under the star of secularization. On the contrary, authors such as Melville evince an intellectual tendency within modernity that re-engages the Bible with the express goal of preserving its cultural and moral authority for a new age while divesting it from institutional authoritarianism. Melville reflects this complex and differentiated version of modernity in literature. To dismiss his dealings with the Bible as merely subversive skepticism is to misread the intellectual tradition in which he operated. I have adopted this idea as a premise for assessing Herman Melville's socio-economic, national, and transnational milieu.

Naturally, the single-author focus of this study necessitates some qualifications be made to this broad conception of the romanticist intellectual project. The Biblical hermeneutics Melville develops in his works undeniably emerges from Protestantism and is therefore less

grounded in other theological concepts. Melville's auto-didacticism, of course, enabled him to tap into other theological discourses, such as Catholicism, Hinduism, Zoroasterism, and the like; however, his Biblical hermeneutics, I propose, unfolds within a text-based theology. Protestantism, at least in theory, privileges the individual's direct interaction with the Biblical text and therefore with revealed truth. Melville dramatizes this basic principle into a tragic encounter: The modern enlightened individual, cognizant of its own intellectual potential, comes to confront Biblical truth as hieroglyphic. While Melville's texts do celebrate the liberating potential of radical humanism and scientifically rigorous language, they also eye these phenomena critically due to their dismissive attitude toward older alternative forms of knowing. Worse yet, Melville condemns the undiscerning transfer of religious fervor from the Bible (and the priesthood interpreting it) to new institutionalized categories of understanding that are built around market enterprise, jingoism, and technology. His writing heuristically ponders the implications of these shifts for personal belief. Burma is correct in her assessment insofar as Melville consistently advocates literary representation as the only viable means of bringing these emergent forms of knowledge into the service of morality. Literature may salvage the aura of mystery formerly associated with naive Biblical literalism. In doing so, Melville does not indulge in nostalgia but deploys a hermeneutics of contemplation towards holy and secular texts in order to arrive at what Paul Ricoeur calls a second naiveté.²⁵⁷

The fact that Melville was never personally able to achieve this mind-set does not diminish the significance this mentality occupies in his writing. To be clear, I am not arguing that

²⁵⁷ Literature is a mode of understanding rather than just communication; it is bi-directional sled-communication. Melville makes this clear in his epistolary inscription and dedication to W. C. Russel in John Marr: "And though by the world at large so unworldly a maxim [chronometrical] receives a more hospitable welcome at the ear than in the heart--and no wonder, considering the deceptiveness of so many things mundane--nevertheless, in one province--and I mean no other one than literature, not every individual, I think, at least not every one whose years ought to discharge him from the minor illusions, will dispute it, who has had experience alike receiving and giving, in one suggestive form or another, sincere contemporary praise" (*PP* 192).

Melville's personal thought has no bearing on his writing. In fact, there are many instances in his writing, which may be productively explored as biographical. In "I and My Chimney" (1856), for instance, the narrator characterizes his historicizing tendencies as a certain "behindhandedness" that produces a stooping feeling of "bringing up the rear guard," in terms of intellectual fashion (*PT* 353). This certainly echoes Melville's self-perception as an author that vociferates unfashionable truths cloaked in outmoded methodologies. Yet asserting Melville's personal stake in his writing does not help us understand the manner in which he interacted with the Biblical texts, nor does it clarify his mediating of skeptical traditions. As it stands, this study shows how Melville becomes a reluctant advocate for the Bible's epistemic value. It is in this sense, then, that I speak of Melville's texts as formulating an originally American Biblical hermeneutics rather than a new American Bible.²⁵⁸

The religious skepticism expressed in Melville's texts is therefore both more and less subversive than many scholars believe: much of his so-called irreverence operates within the already generous lines of skeptical thinking included in OT wisdom. Moreover, his skepticism is not merely rooted in bitterness over his failed career as an author, but rather the product of careful deliberation and inquisitiveness. At the risk of oversetting the apple cart of general consensus on Melville, I propose that scholars take seriously Melville's life-long advocacy of unadulterated intellectual integrity and at least entertain the possibility that he practiced said integrity in his literary dealings with the Bible. Doing so might incidentally help us transcend the omnipresent specter of ambiguity, a term often used as a label to characterize Melville's style (cf., Prickett, *Words* 88ff). On the contrary, his deliberations about the philosophy of religion and

²⁵⁸ In *Clarel*, Ungar, the military veteran, assess the state of American spiritual life in the nineteenth century and in doing so articulates the lack Melville identifies throughout his career. The New World, Ungar notes, lacks the "semitic reverent mood," a notion shared by Carlyle and Arnold who like Melville appear to identify the semitic with the tragic vision of Ecclesiastes and OT wisdom (*C* 1.1.92-96). In the same vein, Stan Goldman reads Ungar's comment as Melville's imperative of reverence (*Melville's Protest* 137).

the existential questions attached to it are impacted significantly by their form. The short story medium, for instance, apparently allowed for a more focused critique of Christology, specifically the connection of NT theology and bourgeois capitalist charity culture in terms of OT wisdom morality. Furthermore, one of the points I tried to make throughout my argument is that there is little utility in segregating Melville's writing by genre. In the case just outlined, the investigation of charity culture continues in *The Confidence-Man*. The novel does not simply rehash the tragic tone of "Bartleby" but conducts a broader, more nuanced investigation of interpersonal trust on the formal basis of the fable of China Aster. It blends typology and biologism, for instance in its dialogical investigation of misanthropy between Frank and Charlie.²⁵⁹

Far from being a mere instrument for moral investigations of culture, OT texts also provide 'historical' texture for narratives such as "The Encantadas," which purports to be set exclusively in a Joban fallen world, thus creating implicit contexts of inscrutability of harsh fates and the inscrutableness of cosmic justice, in which characters' personal suffering are not explained but at least rationalized. Making the cruelty of the world of the Encantadas transparent, however, does not mean that Melville works causation into his account of stories such as Hunilla or Oberlus. They too are types of sufferers that survive as per their respective nature, even if that nature cannot be comprehended in terms of genealogy. Therein lies the limit of what this short cycle can deliver in the way of cosmology. It does not profess a rationale as much as a cautionary didactic depiction of evil from the perspectives of the sufferer and the perpetrator.

Billy Budd illustrates how Melville consistently struggles with the formal restrictions of typology and allegory, yet finds himself unable to transcend them. The clash between Billy and Claggart is typological in the sense that their representative natures inevitably place them into

²⁵⁹ Mark Heidmann emphasizes the significance of the parable form as a medium that met his criteria for literary truth-telling (Heidmann 360).

opposition to one-another. Their shared, seemingly ‘other-directed’ impulse towards mutual destruction cannot be rendered by empirical methods; hence wisdom literature seems the only valid source for moral categories as it has not been usurped by crony capitalism yet. Arguably, one exemption to this statement is lyrical form. “Billy in the Darbies” provides the first-person inside narrative of the handsome sailor that the novella’s title promises yet drops in favor of the narrator’s heavy editorial hand.

The question arises whether Melville attempts to speak prophetically in his writing. Based on my analysis, I answer negatively. Melville was well versed in the code of prophecy; however, the prophetic mode does not carry the same gravitas in his writing as it has with more religiously orthodox religious writers of the period. For one thing, the prophetic voices in his texts are supplemented by non-theological axioms—for instance biology and the emergent social empiricism. Beyond that, *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd* stress the contingency of the official version and the historical record. Prophetic speech constantly crashes into these contingencies, and becomes continuously refracted through irreverent humor. The interesting tension in Melville’s writing, then, is his reassertion of the need for the Bible’s forms and moral content to address these ambiguities. In doing so, Melville articulates a need inside empirical frameworks for the non-rigid, fuzzy, and mysterious. Sanborn and Otter, who view existing discussions of aesthetics in Melville’s works as bogged down by strict delineations between the sublime, form, and the picturesque, both claim that “discussions of aesthetics in American literary criticism will eventually be located at a new axis, one that plots the relationship between ideological and phenomenological approaches to the subject” (*Aesthetics* 2). The authors consider ‘Melville’—the corpus of texts that evince a certain aesthetic perception—as the ideal catalyst to propel this discussion forward within American Studies, also because Melville demonstrates a unique

“attentiveness to preconscious experience, a radically situational sense of form, and an acute sensitivity to the writtenness of all writing” (*Aesthetics* 5). Incidentally, the editors and contributors “reject narrative of career decline” (*Aesthetics* 9). Hence OT wisdom literature, he seems to argue, still holds value as a means of investigation into the human condition precisely because it folds back experience into language and myth, thereby accounting for the uncanny and intangible in human action unfolding in time.

Meanwhile, “The Apple-Tree Table,” I think, is emblematic of the kind of epistemology Melville was trying to put forward. Following the interview with her parents, who advocate empirical naturalism as the only valid approach to the phenomenon of the bugs, Julia professes that her belief in spirits had only changed insofar as the emotional tenor of her response to the phenomenon had shifted. She now gleefully believes in spirits whereas before she had feared the uncanny noises coming from the table. While accepting the Baconian hermeneutics her guardians suggest to her, she never nominally changed her ghost belief but merely its emotional intensity. As in “The Lightning-Rod Man,” Melville satirizes the absolutist and verbose claims to the complete opaqueness of nature by showing how all empirical axioms in the world cannot alter personal belief. The story illuminates the dynamics of belief in a domestic setting: folklore, empiricism, evangelical heart-religion, and even a diffuse Calvinism, congeal into an amalgamation. Twenty-first-century readers often denote this kind of synergetic thinking as a mark of modernism; however, David Hall reminds us that even those seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “horse-shed Christians” already practiced a rather eclectic faith that constantly integrated doctrine with folklore and superstition (17). Hence, we should not undervalue the mental capabilities of nineteenth-century cosmopolitans to deal with multilateral discourses about religion and theology, we should also not overvalue it. The qualitative

assessment of empirical information had certainly shifted between 1800 and 1850; however, the mental operation that enabled synthesizing those new intellectual categories had existed in Protestant culture long before that time. Melville's short story usefully illuminates the history of this eclecticism, precisely because of Julia's conversion to empirical naturalism. One could even read the story's final scene as mediating between the traditional Calvinist conversion narrative and its mock duplicate, the infidel conversion, which emerged in the late eighteenth century. And yet, the story does not attack spirituality as such, because it leaves readers with the portrait of Julia as embattled individual, who preserves for herself a sense of mythical wonder in distinction to her naturalist surroundings. As I have argued before, the narrative perspective is not the central epistemological perspective that the story's plot treats of. While Julia's father is comically stuck between absolute superstition and absolute skepticism, Julia finds a way to mediate the two perspectives. Melville here explores not the indomitable, questing, male individual but the childlike, innocent, female novice with the ability to sublimate magic in the face of empiricism.

Even in his first official outing as a poet, *Battle-Pieces*, Melville argues that poetic form may help us think about the way reality is put together. His poetic speaker in "Dupont's Round Fight" notes that "In time and measure perfect moves / All Art whose aim is sure; / Evolving rhyme and stars divine / Have rules, and they endure" (*PP* 20). While the poem goes on to make the rather sentimental point that the Union groups took Port Royal because they were in league with a righteous cause, it seems curious that Melville conflates the notions of divine cosmic design, aesthetic craft, and moral justification of military operations. If the Union prevailed that day in November 1861, it did so because its cause is typological for all causes aligned with divine predestination: "A type was here, / and victory of LAW" (*PP* 20). The last verse invokes Calvinist Providence as well as the specifically American typological reading of history (New

England Way). Heavenly bodies, art, and the victory of the Union point to the common moral principle in creation, a sentiment that seems uncharacteristically idealist for Melville as it employs truist, circular reasoning—our cause is just because God is just—and a false equivalent between military strategy and the formalism involved in both divine and artistic creation.²⁶⁰

This short poem offers a glimpse at the deep texture in Melville's use of religious motives in his poetry. Even though the collection comments on the central American political and military event of the age, Melville articulates its military dimension in deist terms: God executes his function as creator with prudence and precision and whosoever imitates His methodology may find his cause morally aligned with that of the deity. Of course, this usage also alludes to both Calvinist dogma as well as the creation account in Genesis. However, the component of the argument that contends how formalism indicates a discerning mind behind every action more overtly references William Paley's famous watchmaker analogy in *Natural Theology* (1802).²⁶¹ By 1866, Paley's analogy was conventional wisdom; hence both Melville and most of his readers would have made the connection, even if they were not familiar with Paley's original text.

As with his prose fiction, the topography of Melville's usage of Biblical and theological motives is by no means flat. Besides a somewhat naive patriotism here, the poem's emphasis on earnest conviction as well as on deliberate technical execution in all creative endeavors echoes Melville's own aesthetic program of truth-telling, which he had declared in "Hawthorne and His Mosses": The artistic quality of poetry—and art in general—is not measured by its popular appeal but by its deliberate deployment of technical devices to communicate earnest conviction.

²⁶⁰ Elizabeth Renker sees Melville's turn to poetry by his growing interest in the manipulation of characters on the page, a fascination she finds announced in the intricate juxtapositions of letters in *The Confidence-Man* ("A ___!" 131, *Strike* 100).

²⁶¹ On the topic of consistency of natural laws and their intersecting principles, Paley observes, "OF the 'unity of the Deity' the proof is, the *uniformity* of plan observable in the universe. The universe itself is a system; each part either depending on other parts or, being connected with other parts by some common law of motion, or by the presence of some common substance" (original emphasis and capitalization, 234).

It is thus a synthesis of deeply felt sentiment translated without haste into the appropriate material form. Like many of his northern countrymen, Melville comprehended the end of the Civil War as a strategic victory, a matter of careful planning and execution, the payoff of which was by no means ensured to be swift, a sentiment that seems reasonable given the North's initial defeats due to Southern tactical strikes. One such strike is embellished in the poem, a reverie which, preceding "Dupont's Round Fight," features an insomniac speaker who meditates on the treacherousness of nature; as day turns into night, the speaker muses how the sunny midsummer season of June gives no indication to the young soldiers—the youth that "feels immortal" (*BP* 19)—in their warlike fray that death should reap them in their prime.

A lingering problem within Melville scholarship is the difficulty of documenting of his sources, particularly concerning his exposure to critical theological and philosophical studies. While many of his sources are known, records remain incomplete. Other references in his works are notoriously difficult to trace and are thus frequently dismissed as puns or ironic remarks. Beyond that, the scarceness of exact documentation has fueled a tendency toward authorial readings within Melville scholarship. Jay Leyda and Merton Sealts Jr.'s respective work has been the basis for three generations of scholars that have tried to match Melville's writing to his reading. The impetus to rely on documented sources to rule out speculative reasoning is desirable as a scholarly praxis. However, reducing Melville's thinking to the sum of the sources we can document is, in a word, naive. On the one hand, such quantitative empiricism dismisses any potential for growth, rejection, reevaluation, modification, parody and echo of these influences on the part of Melville. On the other hand, this perceived lack of exhaustive quantitative data often causes us to over- or underemphasize erroneously echoes, parody, and puns in his writing as bespeaking a generally irreverent and even nihilistic attitude towards the texts he uses as

interlocutors in his fiction. Several of the scholars I cited are convinced that Melville had intricate knowledge of exegetical history by second-hand reading; i.e., undocumented sources he perused, books he borrowed. Equally important are the reviews that were printed and reprinted in the emergent periodical media. Newspapers and magazines exploded onto the literary market in Melville's lifetime. In terms of their bearing on religion and theology, these publications connected believers across geographical distances and denominations while accelerating the exchange of ideas and the reshaping of intellectual predilections, sometimes in ways unintended by editors and contributors.

In deploying a reductionist rationale of linear correspondences as the only metric in what we count as evidence, we preemptively limit our understanding of the interconnectivity of texts. Worse yet, we run the risk of reducing texts to psychological foils, fit only to diagram at second hand the author's perceived mind-set. Unfortunately, this forensic approach remains resilient in Melville studies. What these extant debates lack is, in Otter and Sanborn's words, "a sense of full range of interpretative possibilities that is opened up by the subject of aesthetics" as a mode of knowing the world (*Aesthetics* 5). One possible explanation for this issue is that there is indeed an objective level of penetration between the problems Melville raised in his fiction and the documented personal struggles we gather from his correspondence, journals, and circumstantial testimony. In fact Melville himself got his start as critic and novelist by blurring the lines between literary invention and biographical account.²⁶²

For the purpose of this study, I have, for the most part, tried to view Melville's fiction and poetry in terms of the historical and theological arguments they put forward. For example,

²⁶² Charles E. May diagnoses Melville's turn towards short fiction as a covert revenge plot: "[n]ot only did Melville find a solution [to his financial dire straights], but also he found one which, while not ideal from an artistic standpoint, gave him a great deal of rather diabolical satisfaction" (*Survey* 1174). Controversy arose about the authenticity of *Typee* as a travel log almost immediately after its publication. On Melville's awareness and political use of voice in his editorials and prefaces, see Carlson "Fictive Voices" (41). See also Sanborn "Motive" (367).

Clarel's journey plot operates on multiple distinct levels: its harsher skeptical moments (predominantly represented by the character Rolfe) may be influenced by Melville's own disappointment at the sight of the Biblical landscapes as mere ruins and heaps of rubble. But his is not the only perspective in the poem. In the poem, the pilgrims' journey through a landscape vibrant with referentiality, and in the process they provide dialogical discussions of Biblical forms and traditions. In this instance, Ursula Brumm is correct when she claims "Melville regards the world allegorically in the same way as the Bible was regarded allegorically," for Melville recognized the implications of the tectonic shifts Biblical hermeneutics had undergone between 1790 and 1850 for communal life as it unfolds in the world (17). On a third level, however, these discussions are themselves stylistically influenced by the very Biblical forms and traditions they critique. Melville's texts thus cannot be insulated completely against his biography. How much of Melville's life to read into each work has been a critic's prerogative in all of the studies I have reviewed, even though not all have acknowledged this fact.

Ultimately, Melville constructs fiction and poetry that tries to express rather than explain such mystery. And there is a group of scholars within Melville studies that have made that case. But my point is not merely that Melville is an author comfortable with axiomatic inconsistencies and the inscrutable remainder of empirical inquiry. Rather, I argue that he is preoccupied with constructing a mode of expression that can depict these contingencies and that OT wisdom literature provides modes of lyrical and prosaic narrative as well as a hermeneutics that operates in the presence of a hidden deity. Melville, of course, is neither an orthodox Jew nor a Catholic, biographical evidence suggests that he finished his life as a member of New York's Unitarian Church. However, the OT hermeneutics, as evidenced in his writings, lend themselves to describing and examining the increasingly contingent experiences of modernity.

My goal has been to untangle the layered images about one of the central canonical figures of classical American Literature. Over the years, critics have uncovered several Melvilles: the subversive satirist, the adventure novelist, the failed author, the jaundiced isolate, the religious skeptic, and the irreverent pilgrim, to name only a few. In light of this cavalcade of personae, I find it plausible, then, that there is a scholarly Melville: An author who never tired of the project of telling the truth, and who employed all the epistemological levers at his disposal to make sense of a world in rapid motion. And it seems equally plausible that this Melville would have sought out the Bible as a comfort. But more importantly, the advocate of intellectual integrity would have spent a lifetime interrogating this monolithic document to tease from it those meanings he feigned that could no longer be uttered in fiction or poetry. That Melville does not suffer from a creative lapse but rather finds ever new ways of engaging the problem of truth telling in its various permutations. One thing Melville has claimed throughout his career is that truth is multiple, an insight that is echoed by the multifarious meanings residing in the cultural Bible he belabored all his life.

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