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Damien Brian Schlarb
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MELVILLE'S QUEST FOR CERTAINTY:
QUESTING AND SPIRITUAL STABILITY IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY-DICK*

by

DAMIEN BRIAN SCHLARB

Under the direction of Reiner Smolinski

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates Herman Melville's quest for spiritual stability and certainty in his novel *Moby-Dick*. The analysis establishes a philosophical tradition of doubt towards the Bible, outlining the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes, Benedict de Spinoza, David Hume, Thomas Paine and John Henry Newman. This historical survey of spiritual uncertainty establishes the issue of uncertainty that Melville writes about in the nineteenth century. Having assessed the issue of doubt, I then analyze Melville's use of metaphorical charts, which his characters use to resolve this issue. Finally, I present Melville's philosophical findings as he expresses them through the metaphor of whaling. Here, I also scrutinize Melville's depiction of nature, as well as his presentation of the dichotomy between contemplative and active questing, as represented by the characters Ishmael and Ahab.

INDEX WORDS: Herman Melville, Moby-Dick, certainty, uncertainty, doubt, pyrrhonism, questing, nineteenth century philosophy, religious allusions in Moby-Dick, Ahab, Ishmael, Stubb, Queequeg, doubloon, charts.

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

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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2006

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DAMIEN BRIAN SCHLARB

Major Professor: Reiner Smolinski
Committee: Robert Sattelmeyer
Paul Schmidt

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
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I. Introduction

Over the last four decades scholars have been particularly concerned with theological themes in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The interpretations of Melville's religious allusions have been as multifaceted as the crew's interpretations of the doubloon in the novel. However, none of these approaches deals with Melville's inquiry of spiritual uncertainty in the novel.

For instance, Thomas Vargish claims in his essay "Gnostic Mythos in *Moby-Dick*" (1966) that Melville distinguishes between the inferior creator god of the physical world (Demiurgus) and the spiritual realm (Pleroma) in his theological system. According to Vargish, Melville's cognizance of this Gnostic dualism allows him to depict God as "an inferior and imperfect" and therefore assailable creator in the form of the white whale (273). Thus Vargish delivers an Arminian[1] reading, claiming that man is not entirely dependent on God. Three years later, Walter Herbert claims more pessimistically in "Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in *Moby-Dick*" (1969) that Melville did not have a specific religious agenda, but rather tried to display "an actual cosmic evil which challenges the validity of Christian theology altogether" (1619). Herbert is especially interested in the idea of Ahab's "maddened madness" as an expression of individual

[1] "Arminius, Jacobus. 1560–1609, Dutch Reformed theologian, whose original name was Jacob Harmensen. He studied at Leiden, Marburg, Geneva, and Basel and in 1588 became a pastor at Amsterdam. […] He was professor of theology at the Univ. of Leiden after 1603, and he engaged in violent theological debates, seeking to win the Dutch Reformed Church to his views. His teaching, known as Arminianism, […] asserted the compatibility of divine sovereignty with human freedom, denied John Calvin's doctrine of irresistible grace, and thus modified the strict conception of predestination." ("Jacobus Arminius").

"defiance against the monster God," which is still in keeping with Vargish's Arminian reading (1618, 19). In the same year, Helen Trimpi surveys the individual characters and their connection to the topic of diabolic possession, as she explores "Melville's Use of Demonology and Witchcraft in *Moby-Dick*." In contrast, Mark Lloyd Taylor rather traditionally considers Melville's Christian allusions in his essay "Ishmael's (m)Other: Gender, Jesus, and God in Melville's *Moby-Dick*" (1992). Taylor suggests that Ishmael embodies Christlike character trades of compassion, passiveness, and feminine love. Therefore, Taylor argues that Ishmael contrasts "associations of God, power, and masculinity" employed by Melville in his description of nature's cannibalistic character (Taylor 349). A decade later, popular journal author Gary Sloan evokes Herbert's notion of the Calvinist "God-bully" in his short essay "Moby Dick: Broiled in Hellfire" (2002), claiming that Ahab's monomaniac quest is Melville's coping with the early death of his father and his childhood (62). This cycle—and recycling—of religious analyses culminates in most recent collection of religious elements in Melville's writings by Gail Coffler in her book *Melville's Allusions to Religion: A Comprehensive Index and Glossary* (2004).

As my survey demonstrates, religious motifs inhabit a prominent role in the critical discourse about *Moby-Dick*. However, none of these critics considers Melville's underlying task of arriving at some kind of spiritual certainty—be it Christian or mystic—in the novel. The quest for spiritual certainty, as I will propose it in this paper, therefore has not been explored fully in the critical history of the text. As a matter of fact,

the questing component of Melville's search for certainty has received more critical attention than the problem of uncertainty itself.

In an early analysis of questing in *Moby-Dick* Beongcheon Yu suggests the dichotomy between Ahab and Ishmael's modes of questing in his essay "Ishmael's Equal Eye: The Source of Balance in *Moby-Dick*" (1965). In fact Yu claims that "Ahab pursues while Ishmael quests" (118). This creates a continuum of obsession and fascination between the two characters. If the whale stands for God, Ishmael turns away in respect (like Moses) while Ahab has to step closer to get on eye-level and ultimately gets destroyed.

Carl Vaught expands this concept in his perceptive essay "Religion as a Quest for Wholeness: Melville's *Moby-Dick*" (1974), when he notes that Ahab, Ishmael, and Queequeg attempt to attain stability by hunting whales, which Vaught sees as keepers of the mystery of the ocean and thus of the mystery of the person reflected by the water. For instance, Vaught claims that the white whale primarily fascinates Ahab because it represents a "symbol of the eternal dimension of himself" (19). Consequently, Vaught assigns different modes of questing to each of the three characters: Queequeg poses as consistency personified because he stoically awaits his death, while Ahab represents questing by all means (negative quest), and Ishmael embodies observation and rebirth (positive quest). Nevertheless, Vaught fails to address the exact process by which Melville has these characters quest for stability, i.e. certainty.

Ten years later Bruce Grenberg surveys Melville's earlier and later works, while postulating the existence of a universal truth at which Melville tries to arrive through

questing in *Some Other World to Find* (1989). Although hidden in the deep of the ocean, Grenberg claims rather simplistically that truth can indeed be unraveled and is actually obtainable by Melville's characters. At the same time, Grenberg acknowledges the complex multiplicity of human perspectives, as well as the methodological dichotomy of Ahab and Ishmael's quests.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, Eliza New seizes on Vaught and Grenberg's suggestion of the different representations of questing in Melville's characters in her essay "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville's *Moby-Dick*" (1998). New vividly illustrates the pressing issue of "unification of the disjointed scripture" in the nineteenth century by assessing Ishmael and Ahab as representatives of opposed textual principles (288). However, she also reintroduces Yu's concept of Ishmael as a passive quester who is respectful to nature and its boundaries as the primary reason for his survival.

As these previous surveys of theology and questing show, Herman Melville describes both a literal and spiritual quest for certainty in *Moby-Dick*. The crew of the *Pequod* utilizes various means by which they make sense of their environment, evaluate the world within their own religious system (Queequeg), and analyze their encounters with the divinity in nature, as Melville illustrates the dichotomy of unprecedented economic expansion and decreasing grounds for spirituality that American society faces in the wake of the Enlightenment.

Moby-Dick thus accurately displays the public mindset of Melville's age. Melville appears to stay true to Emerson's comment that "the temper of the age becomes a cultural

determinant of the themes and style of great literature" (qtd. in Reynolds 5). The plot poses as a metaphor for the author's own quest for religious certainty and mysticism in an age dominated by reason. Melville toys with man's search for an anthropomorphic God in an unrelenting struggle with nature. To put it quite simply, Melville poses several questions: Is human perception capable of attaining true insight into the nature of God? Is God synonymous with nature, or does he weave—to borrow from Goethe's *Faust*—the fabric of the universe from a realm beyond physical reality and operate in the world by means of agents? Seeing that nature is depicted as being treacherous and violent; is man faced with a malignant or a benign God? And if God is nature, can he indeed be tamed and be made assailable by hunting and taming the whale?

In my analysis, I will show how Melville negotiates his own quest through his characters. The verb "negotiate" here illustrates the nature of the discourse—both Melville's and the reader's—as the author addresses questions that obviously cannot be answered with decisive closure. The act of addressing them remains a continuous process of negotiation through time. If nothing else, Melville's discourse exhibits the questions and the rationalist tools with which the citizens of Post-Enlightenment society negotiate their reality, as well as the mindset of an age in which it became increasingly hard for the author to simply believe.

To assess the zeitgeist of Melville's age, I will use Herbert Hovenkamp's *Science and Religion in America 1800-1860*, a study that illustrates the debate surrounding natural theology and science in the wake of the Age of Enlightenment. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was still assumed that "Scriptures contained a set of facts in exactly

the same way that nature contained facts"; accordingly "science and theology were merely two different ways of coming to know and appreciate God" (11, 16). My discussion of Enlightenment pyrrhonism includes an examination of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Benedict de Spinoza's *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, David Hume's Essay "On Miracles," Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, and John Henry Newman's *Fifteen Sermons preached before the University of Oxford between A.D. 1826 and 1843*.

Although there is no explicit empirical evidence that Melville read all or any of the above-mentioned sources, I will demonstrate that the texts drawn on in my first chapter capture the spiritual and philosophical zeitgeist in which Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*. Establishing the fact that no author writes in an intellectual vacuum, I will set the stage for the analysis of Melville's quest for religious certainty in an age in which the spiritual values of society were renegotiated.

After sketching the theoretical foundations that shape the American Renaissance, I will continue to examine Melville's quest for certainty in various aspects of his characters' with nature. The chapter "The Doubloon" will play a central role here, as it demonstrates Melville's coping with subjectivity and his deconstruction of reality. Melville utilizes various forms and representations of charts in the text by which the characters try to negotiate their role in Providence or even attempt to map the nature of God. Charts appear in various forms, from physical charts—such as the ones Ahab uses to track the whale—to metaphysical charts, such as Queequeg's tattoos. I will survey the various representations of charts and how the characters use them as rational anchors of spiritual certainty.

Nature functions as another factor of spiritual disruption in *Moby-Dick*. The various representations of nature—e.g. the ocean and the whale(s)—command tremendous power but also appear treacherous and deceitful. I will examine the recurring motif of the "pasteboard mask" of God, i.e. the pairing of surface and deep-structure of reality, as it occurs on multiple levels in the plot (Melville 140). Accordingly, it should be kept in mind that the dichotomy between a beautiful appearance and the unrelenting violent force that lurks behind it ultimately mark the defining character trait of the white whale itself. The dichotomy between the surface and the deep-structure leads Melville to explore the reality of human nature, as well as the nature of nature through the metaphor of whaling. Thus the uncertainty evoked by the ideological concept of the "pasteboard mask" inhabits a central role in the author's quest for certainty and therefore in my analysis.

The physical dissection of whales will be another aspect of the text covered by my analysis. Melville's cetology chapters not only provide practical knowledge and handbook terminology about whaling, but also demonstrate the method by which the Leviathan can be measured and analyzed. I will use the chapters "A Bower in the Arsacides" and "Jonah Historically Regarded" to demonstrate this notion.

However, the most essential question to be addressed in this analysis of *Moby-Dick* is whether Melville actually provides closure to his quest of uncertainty. The objective of my analysis is not to demonstrate the sources that Melville drew on for his work, but to illustrate how perceptively he debates the spiritual meltdown that his generation faced. The disconcerting idea that all truths are subject to negotiation marks

the Enlightenment as the touchstone age for scientific exploration. However, this idea by no means eliminates the human need for complete reliance on unalterable truths, but rather makes the search and the justification of any findings more complex. Writers of the American Renaissance such as Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau continue to address these topics and drift towards a new notion of "connectedness" of all beings (compare Emerson's *Over Soul* in his essay on nature).

Consequently, I argue that Melville performs a negotiation of faith that continues in our own age. Can God and nature be trustworthy? Can the human existential quest for faith be trustworthy, or is it merely a crutch to reconcile one's belief in a benign God with the reality of the unsympathetic force of nature, and a deterministic God who has abandoned us to the cold mediation of his divine machine? In all of this, Melville tries to gain certainty about the relation of man's internal perception with a supposedly superior moral principle that exists independently and outside of itself. This principle may carry various names (nature, fate, God, or chance), but ultimately the answer to Melville's inquiry seems to be implied in the question itself. He wants to find certainty, meaningful proof for man's connection with something, anything, that surpasses him in his comprehension of existence.

To illustrate Melville's quest for certainty, I will begin my analysis with assessing the zeitgeist, as well as the philosophical tradition of doubt that Melville was writing in. This initial survey will give us an understanding of how Melville perceived the issue of uncertainty in his own age. Having assessed the problem of uncertainty, I will proceed to show how Melville uses charts in order to resolve it. In a final step, I plan to show how

Melville presents the philosophical findings of his quest to the reader by means of his whaling metaphor.

As I have said in my survey of the existing body of literature on the topic, I do not intend simply to account for Melville's incorporation of Bible passages and Judeo-Christian symbols in *Moby-Dick*. My aim is to demonstrate Melville's use of the text as a tool in his own spiritual quest for certainty and to show what, if anything, this inquiry brings forth. Throughout his professional career, Melville tried to balance the conflict between writing popular literature to make a living and communicating his philosophical knowledge to create a monumental work. He loathed the fact that he had to comply with popular demands and economic constraints in his profession. Through *Moby-Dick* Melville seeks to transcend popular literature and enter into the realm of philosophic inquiry. For Melville then, *Moby-Dick* was more than just another novel; it was more than "the culmination of Melville's early permutations of the dark reform mode" (Reynolds 152); it was his finest attempt yet to explore his own need for certainty at a time when the concept itself seemed hopelessly lost in his eternal "If" (Melville 373). Finally, I want to establish that Melville's negotiation of certainty is both a timely expression of his zeitgeist and a psychological endeavor to regain his mental stability.

II. The Issue of Doubt and the Loss of Faith in the Nineteenth Century

"Controversy, at least in this age, does not lie between the hosts of heaven […] and the powers of evil […]; but it is a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself, and friends and foe stand together. When men understand what each other mean, they see […] that controversy is either superfluous or hopeless." (201)

- John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons*.

The age in which Herman Melville was writing was marked by fundamental changes in both Christian faith and the natural science. I have principally relied on Herbert Hovenkamp's *Science and Religion in America 1800-1860* as a proverbial chart through the voluminous discourses of the time period in question. Hovenkamp provides a thorough discussion of the strongly contested issues of genealogy, geology, and textual criticism on the Bible in the nineteenth century, and manages to turn the renegotiation of ground between religion, philosophy and science into a fascinating narrative.

Hovenkamp illustrates the struggle natural theology—science that proves biblical accounts—faces, as it tries to make finite statements about God and his perpetual influence on the universe. The author identifies an increased need to explain God amongst discerning minds of the nineteenth century, a need that is expressed by the rise of German Higher Criticism. Higher criticism, as Hovenkamp notes, questioned the formerly predominant orthodox assumption that "truth stands still," and debauched

conservatives to claim, that "the Bible must be its own final authority" (61, 62). Higher criticism thus challenged many traditional categories of truth associated with scripture. For instance, the term "history," as a linear process that consolidates thought and action to biblical science.

This new current in natural theology promoted the assumption that all of creation is based on the rational thought process of God.[2] Eventually, the notion of constructed history drove orthodox observers like Horatio Black Hackett, a professor at Newton Seminar, to the observation that "all history loses its certainty" if this deconstructive method is applied (Hackett in Hovenkamp 74). Still, "Americans wanted to *know* what they believed" [3] and thus "orthodoxy and literalism would always appear to be straighter answers than higher criticism and mythology" (Hovenkamp 78).

As Hovenkamp notes, the theological debate ultimately became a discussion about whether science could "describe the laws of nature" in a way that did not violate biblical history (94). Catastrophists, who sought to reconcile science and religion and Uniformitarians, who pleaded for complete separation of the two disciplines opposed each other in this discussion. Ideologically, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been marked with a fascination of the scientific field of mechanics. For example, Calvinism suggested a concept of the universe as gigantic unalterable clockwork. In the nineteenth century this perception changed and an organic model of the cosmos became popular. The organism still followed natural laws but could also change and adapt. These

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[2] This ideology led David Friedrich Strauss to publish *Das Leben Jesu* (1835) in which he pits empirical historicity against scriptural mythology.
[3] Hovenkamp's italics.

assumptions made it possible for scientists to refer to natural developments in geology, genealogy[4] and paleontology without having to refer to God directly.

At this point, the era of metaphysical mathematics began. Empiricists believed that creation in its entirety could be deciphered by a "mathematical key to the universe" (Hovenkamp 104). The "Law of Unity" of God and creation, deducted from Maquis de Laplace's *Celestial Mechanics* (*Traité dé Mécanique Céleste*, 1800-05), seemingly provided "proof of a thoughtful and purposeful creation by a wise and moral God" (Hovenkamp 104). This school of idealism restored the belief in the complete predictability of nature and God.

However, the idealism of the laws of unity and succession would spread out to various other scientific fields. For instance, geologists attempted to account for the history of the earth without referencing supernaturalism, which rendered miracles like "the deluge" increasingly hard to prove. Meanwhile, on the conservative side, advocates of the "long day theory" maintained the accuracy of the biblical creation account, but granted variations for the length of the time period of occurrences like the deluge and the creation of the earth (Hovenkamp 127).

Another separate but related key issue was the debate about the unity of man. Science found itself faced with the problem of demonstrating the direct lineage of Adam and Eve down to modern human beings to support the biblical account. For, as

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[4] For example, Francis Wayland suggests in *The Elements of Moral Science* (1831) that knowledge of "succession 'forms the first conception of a law of nature'" (Hovenkamp 100). Since nature represents the concept of one divine mind, all of its parts are connected. According to these "laws of succession," the "blanks" in scientific knowledge can be "filled in" by association (Hovenkamp 101, 102).

Hovenkamp notes, only if Adam and Eve could bring sin into the world, then Jesus Christ could take it away, since he is "of 'one blood' with Adam" (173). Thus natural theology had to account not only for the unity of mankind as a race, [5] but also for the possibility of salvation. The empirical truthfulness of original sin would cement the necessity of a savior, as well as the authenticity of the deluge and therefore of scripture.[6] Being unable to reconcile the fundamental issue of species with scripture, science created an additional dimension of insecurity. With Darwinism rising in the middle of the century, orthodox commentators, like Matthew Boyd Hope (1850), suggested that if the Bible explicitly addresses any given subject, literal scripture should be considered the final scientific authority on the matter. Only in those cases where the Bible "touches 'incidentally' on a scientific question" it leaves room for interpretation and the acknowledgement of non-scriptural sources (Hope qtd. in Hovenkamp 169). Orthodox scientists perceived this as a final attempt at reconciliation; an attempt that ultimately acknowledged that natural theology had failed. As Hovenkamp notes, representatives of both sides of the discussion realized that "true religious commitment requires a leap of faith" (213).

Having outlined the main issues in the philosophical debate of the nineteenth century, I will now focus on the discourse that provided the theoretical background for Melville's assessment of man's hunt for the leviathan. To achieve this goal, I will

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[5] Samuel George Morton initiates the polygenesis controversy with his study *Crania Americana* (1839), insinuating that God had made "multiple creations" and had shaped different peoples (Africans, Caucasians) according to their environment (Morton in Hovenkamp 172). This hypothesis was strongly contested, as orthodox interpreters, for example, associated the dark skin pigmentation with the Curse of Cain in the story of Noah and thus claimed the unity of race as proof for both original sin and deluge.

demonstrate the philosophical bearings that the works of such as Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), Benedict de Spinoza's *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise* (1670), David Hume's *An Inquiry Concerning the Human Understanding* (1748), Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1795), and John Henry Newman's *Fifteen Sermons* (1872) had on the zeitgeist of the nineteenth century and how their revolutionary challenges to the Bible are reflected in Melville's quest for certainty. The ideas advocated by these critics prove essential to the philosophical and intellectual zeitgeist of Melville's day.

As Hovenkamp demonstrates, the debates about the reliability of the Bible during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were as groundbreaking as they were numerous. Any and all of these debates, as I will argue, create an atmosphere of spiritual doubt that Melville discusses in *Moby-Dick*. Therefore, in the first step of my analysis, I will present central spiritual issues such as *the reliability of the senses*, *the reliability of human testimony*, *the certainty of miracles*, and *scriptural authority*, as they are established by the aforementioned critics to establish the philosophical groundwork for my discussion of Melville's quest for uncertainty. Ultimately understanding the historical debate surrounding these issues of certainty will help us determine whether Ahab and his crew perceive nature as a panentheistic[7] God recognizable in the whale, or as a

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[7] Panentheism is "the theory or belief that God encompasses and interpenetrates the universe but at the same time is greater than and independent of it. Freq. contrasted with *pantheism*" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
In contrast, pantheism "A belief or philosophical theory that God is immanent in or identical with the universe; the doctrine that God is everything and everything is God. freq. with implications of nature worship or (in a weakened sense) love of nature" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

malignant, intangible, deterministic, and impersonal God, whose mechanistic laws indifferently crush both the large and the small. Accordingly, the topics mentioned above establish the themes developed in Melville's greatest work.

This survey of the philosophic debate about doubt will demonstrate that Melville wrote in an age ideologically marked by transition from biblical science, which strove to validate the literal accounts of scripture, to secularized empirical investigation. As David Reynolds notes, *Moby-Dick* represents the "culmination of Melville's early permutations of the dark-reform mode," but more importantly, as I find, the novel addresses the spiritual anxiety of Melville's day and suggests solutions to this anxiety (Reynolds 152). I will argue that Melville's attempt at reform is constructive rather than merely subversive because it focuses on the epistemological question of attaining spiritual certainty in a world increasingly dominated by religious doubt.

Furthermore, this chapter will illustrate the fundamental problem of a changed standard for truth that was created by a school of scriptural criticism initiated by Thomas Hobbes with the publication of his *Leviathan* in 1651. For instance, Hobbes asks how we can be sure about the truths we find in Scripture if we cannot even be sure about the information our senses give us. Almost three hundred years later, Melville is faced with the same dilemma, including one significant new development that heightened the volatile nature of the issue of certainty: The rise of modern science had increasingly alienated believers from their time-honored creeds. By the time Melville published *Moby-Dick* it seemed as if society, and American society in particular, could no longer blindly believe in religion, Scripture, and God because it had developed a reverence for empirical

methodology. Thus discerning minds in the nineteenth century required evidence for spiritual axioms that had to be of the same category as empirical knowledge, even as they displayed the same psychological craving for faith demanded in previous centuries. Melville is cognizant of this dilemma because he experiences it himself. In fact, I argue that the ideological basis for *Moby-Dick* is an inextinguishable but sadly unquenchable thirst for faith.

For these reasons, I shall demonstrate how the zeitgeist of spiritual disorientation of Melville's age originate from a philosophical tradition of pyrrhonism that can be traced back several hundred years, and how Melville processes previous philosophical discussions of uncertainty in an artistic manner in the nineteenth century. Although Merton Sealts notes in his work *Melville's Reading* (1988) that a list of Melville's complete library has not yet been compiled and that "it seems likely that additional volumes {…}[5] will continue to turn up in years to come" (13). I argue that Melville had absorbed the philosophic content of the works by Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume, Paine, and Newman, even if he never read any of their works first hand. Sealts notes, quoting Harrison Hayford and Walter Blair, that "Melville 'often put into the manuscripts he was working on some sort of predated reference to books that were currently interesting to him'"; however, Sealts acknowledges that there is currently no data on how extensive Melville's reading of Hobbes, Spinoza, etc. was because Sealts does not include these authors (with the exception of Hobbes) into his listing of Melville's personal library (Sealts, *Reading* 25). By the time Sealts published his study, he lists 269 "titles

[5] Sealts's braces.

surviving," and 232 "located" in Melville's library (13).[8] Though far from identifying specific works that should be added to Sealts's list, my analysis focuses on Melville's assessment of his zeitgeist, while providing a selective overview over the history of uncertainty in the Enlightenment tradition of philosophy.

The Reliability of the Senses

A fundamental question in Melville's quest for certainty is whether the tools we use in order to gain certainty are reliable. Melville is aware that we rely on the faculty of our senses to attain information about the world around us. At the same time, Melville is fully cognizant about the unreliability of this information. The quest for certainty therefore inevitably involves the reliability of our senses. If sensory perception can help us understand nature, then we can gather knowledge about God by scrutinizing nature.[9] Unfortunately, Melville does not share this optimistic view of the senses because he repeatedly shows how they can be deceived. For example, when Ishmael first encounters Queequeg in the Spouter-Inn bedroom he is horrified by the outlandish tattoos of his "terrible bedfellow" (Melville 33). Shortly after he first encounters Queequeg, Ishmael calms himself by thinking "it's only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin" (Melville 34). In this particular instance, Melville demonstrates how Ishmael realizes that

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[8] The sources I introduce have also not appeared in Olsen-Smith and Sealts's recent article "A Cumulative Supplement to Melville's Reading" (2004) an article that expands the library list Sealts provides in *Melville's Reading*. For details see Olsen-Smith, Steven and Merton M. Sealts Jr. "A Cumulative Supplement to Melville's Reading." *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 6.1 (2004): 55-77.

[9] See Ralph Waldo Emerson's panentheistic rendering of nature in his essay "The Over-Soul" (written in 1847) where Emerson declares that there is no "wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins" (Emerson 165).

Queequeg's appearance does not necessarily reflect his character.[10] Even though Ishmael finds Queequeg frightening, he learns to look beyond the sensory information and to judge the aborigine by his character rather than his appearance.

In a more telling example, Melville has Ishmael claim that the whale's behavior includes "suggestions of supernatural agencies, which eventually invested Moby Dick with new terrors unborrowed from anything that visibly appears" (153). Melville acknowledges that the white whale itself cannot be understood by mere perception and its motivation cannot be judged directly by its actions. Even though Ahab perceives what one may consider physical proof of the animal's malign intent, its metaphysical dimension remains mysterious to the whalers. In the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael surpasses Ahab's skepticism by arguing that nature willingly deceives the individual because it "paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within" (165). Melville thus exposes the base materiality of and deception of nature[11] exemplified in "the monumental white shroud" of the whale that blinds the individual of the true essence of nature (165).

Contrary to David Reynolds, I propose that Melville does not explore sensory uncertainty because it is a popular topic in his time or because he enjoys the subversive implications of such pyrrhonism. Rather his skepticism is grounded on the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. For instance, in his chapter "Of Man" (*Leviathan* I) Hobbes introduces his readers to the basic assumptions about man's inability to understand and analyze his

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[10] Interestingly, Melville takes a different stance in *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1924) when he claims "moral nature was seldom out of keeping with the physical make" (Melville, *Billy* 104).

[11] See chapter IV.

environment by scrutinizing sensory perception. Sensory experience, Hobbes argues, is triggered by outward objects that press against the inward "endeavor of the heart to deliver itself" (13). However, Hobbes asserts that "the object" that executes this pressure, "is one thing, the image or fancy is another" (10). Sensory perception therefore only provides the image of an object, but does not grant us understanding of the object itself. Any sensory experience is merely an inner reflex that is disconnected from the outside, its reality. Significantly, sensation that may seem familiar to the individual may also be reproduced by other means than the causes we naturally associate with them. Feelings of warmth and cold and tactile sensations such as holding a cup or receiving a kiss, can potentially be hallucinations because the mind may project on the body sensations that do not come from actual stimuli from outside.

We see that Hobbes defines imagination as "*decaying sense*," [12] meaning the image of an object that appears before the sensory "inner eye" after the stimulus of the senses is no longer present (11). Sensory perception does not enable man to directly experience the world but merely represents the interior reaction of his organism to exterior stimuli. Hobbes reasserts that sensual perception can be misguided by malfunctioning, but also affirms that "God can make unnatural apparitions," meaning that He may use human senses as channels of communication (14). However, divine communications of this type are unreliable at best, as the addressee of such communication cannot determine its true cause with absolute certainty. Imagination, i.e.

[12] Hobbes's italics.

decaying sense, thus merely represents the reminiscence of previous sensory impressions that are untrustworthy.

Consequently, Hobbes sees human faculties of perception and of abstract thinking as unreliable means to ascertain reality. Hobbes argues further that all mental processes based on these primary faculties of perception are unreliable as well. A train of thought consists of a sequence of remaining images. If this sequence occurs "*unguided, without design*[13]" it will produce visions and dreams (Hobbes 16). A "*regulated*" sequence creates either knowledge about first causes, by enabling the individual to review past events and evaluate their causal relation, or predictions about the future, by allowing the individual to combine past experiences in a manner that is contrary to reality (Hobbes 16). For these reasons individuals will never have full control over the unguided portion of their contemplative powers. If Melville's leviathan is seen in the light of Hobbes's argument the manifestation of the white whale can be as much an illusion as it can be a natural phenomenon. Perception is unreliable in either case, which forces individuals to rely on supplemental data to make an informed judgment about sensory data.

While not being the only philosopher to address the certainty of the senses, Hobbes surely sets a standard, which Benedict de Spinoza, Thomas Paine, and John Henry Newman uphold. At best, the senses can supply human beings with preliminary information of the world. This initial data must then be checked and verified by principles that are independent from the sensory faculty in order to arrive at certainty about the nature of sensation. Hobbes, as well as Benedict de Spinoza and Thomas Paine,

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[13] Hobbes's italics.

suggests that reason alone provides such a reliable standard by which to judge sensory information.

Melville's contemporary, John Henry Newman, a Cardinal and former minister at Oxford University, wrestled with the same demons. However, contrary to Hobbes, Spinoza, and Paine, Newman advocates faith as the independent principle with which to evaluate sensory information. Newman sees the argument about the unreliability of the senses as proof of the quintessential human urge to know about principles exterior to oneself. Faith, Newman argues, is an expression of this natural inner disposition, and thus religion can be a guiding principle to evaluate sensory perception. Starting from this general assumption, Newman distinguishes between "Natural and Revealed Religion" (17). "Natural Religion" represents the human disposition towards faith, while "Revealed Religion" refers to institutionalized faith that is based on authorities like scripture and doctrine (Newman 17). Newman denies that "Natural Religion" could have evolved out of "unaided reason," but claims that "no people […] has been denied a revelation from God" that attests to the "existence of powers exterior to this visible world" and thus anticipates "the conclusions of Reason" (17, 18). Beyond that, Newman classifies "Natural Religion" as a sensory enhancement that is provided by God as a gift, while "Reason" in his system seems merely an auxiliary construct to support the findings to which faith leads us (17).

Consciousness, Newman suggests, thus represents "a relation between the soul and something exterior," with sensory perception functioning as a mediator between the two principles (18). At the same time, sensory perception creates an "obligation of

acting" that supposedly informs us of "our moral nature" (Newman 19). The notion that there is a difference between the inner self and the world outside compels the individual to act in and influence his environment in order to explore the boundaries of this division. Just like Melville, who describes Ahab's vendetta with a giant whale in "The Quarter-Deck," Newman acknowledges that the individual feels heaped and tasked by the sensory limitations that his environment imposes on him. The realization of this division, as Melville and Newman seemingly agree, makes the individual quest for means to bridge the gap between internal and external perception.

Obedience to this "inward law of Conscience" and activity represents to Newman "the nature of Faith" (19). He proposes a model of consciousness in which God equips man with an inner moral disposition that seems completely reliable. This model also seems appealing in light of Hobbes, observation that sensory perception is merely an inner movement triggered by an outer sensation. Newman seems to acknowledge Hobbes by placing the guiding principle of the interpretation for the senses inside the individual, but also admits to the "uncertain character" of this inward moral system, as a person still follow his own inclination to obey or to ignore this inner voice (20). While "Conscience is thus ever the sanction of Natural Religion," man still needs to train and refine his ability to hear the inward moral voice (20). A "Revealed Religion [,] supplies the deficiency" of "Natural Religion" because scriptural authority and doctrine represent reaffirmations of the principles that God bestows on mankind, but which man's inadequate sensory faculties cannot substantiate with absolute certainty (17, 22). Therefore, faith must be one guiding principle in processing sensory data, but it must

again be supplemented by yet another system of checks and balances and therefore merely poses another level of uncertainty. Newman's dual system of religion thus seems to make matters worse rather than providing a solution to the dilemma.

In order to solve this new problem, Newman claims—quite contrary to Spinoza and Hobbes—that the senses do provide us with "direct knowledge" of the material world (205). Initially this claim appears to be a plea for the absolute certainty of human perception. However, Newman argues that the immaterial world can be known through "faculties analogous to sense," faculties that he describes as quasi intuitive (205). Unfortunately, Newman admits that "we have no consciousness of that perception or influence," as the human mind cannot process the reminiscence of divine interaction (205). While acknowledging that we can have subconscious knowledge of God, Newman implies that we can have no conscious understanding of God. Still Newman maintains that while "Reason" expands the range of our perception beyond the senses and provides "knowledge of things external to us," it cannot function as a means to obtain spiritual certainty (17, 206). Newman sees the resolution to this dilemma in having faith in faith. Seeing that "we trust our senses in spite of their often deceiving us," he argues that it seems rational that we should equally trust our inner disposition to faith (Newman 213). The human dependence on sensory certainty makes faith a creative faculty. Faith, according to Newman, must be seen as an additional mode of perception, a sixth sense, of which we can never be aware but that in combination with (scriptural) moral training of our character compels us to believe.

Accordingly, the need for supplemental concepts to evaluate sensory data leads the philosophers to the search for alternative sources of spiritual trustworthiness. These sources again become the object of scrutiny regarding their reliability, which expands the problem of reliability from the personal realm to the realm of abstract concepts. The divine origin of the Bible and its truthfulness therefore depend on individuals' faith in auxiliary constructs, which supplement sensory perception. What is more, divine inspiration of texts and individuals becomes subject to personal inclination to believe in such inspiration.

Prophets

Melville also explores ideas of supernatural inspiration and foreknowledge as a principle theme in *Moby-Dick*. Just like the ancient prophets whose divine afflatus rendered them insane in the eyes of man, Melville introduces his own prophet, Elijah, as a deranged character, who warns Ishmael and Queequeg against shipping with Captain Ahab. Eventually Elijah dismisses them both because their fates are "fixed and arranged a'ready," meaning that they will die with Ahab on sea (Melville 88). Elijah also claims that Ahab "lost his leg last voyage according to prophecy" and thus introduces himself as a seer (Melville 87). However, Ishmael considers Elijah "a humbug," thinking that the alleged prophet has been "a little damaged in the head," as Elijah seems merely to tease Ishmael and Queequeg without giving them any explicit information (Melville 88, 87). Ishmael, the proponent of empiricism, ridicules Elijah's obscure communication by claiming that it is "the easiest thing in the world for a man to look as if he had a great secret" (Melville 88). Ishmael rejects the unreliability of prophetic communication

because Elijah's revelation is uttered out of context. Nevertheless, Melville does not simply dismiss Elijah, whose metaphors are as unassertive as those of Scripture, as a kook the same way Ishmael does earlier on, for it is through Elijah that Melville foreshadows Ahab's catastrophe toward the end of *Moby-Dick*. Even though Elijah's prophecy comes true, Ishmael survives the encounter with the whale, even though, according to Elijah, he should have died with the rest of the crew for shipping with Ahab.

Through this device, Melville clearly takes a differentiated look at the issue of prophetic testimony and its reliability. Similarly, when Melville has Father Mapple open his sermon on the prophet Jonah, the priest seems aware of the contemporary debate, for he asks his congregation not to "mind now what that command [from God to Jonah] was, and how conveyed" [14] (49). Mapple is concerned with the ubiquity of God and the inscrutability of his will—not the trustworthiness of divine communication.

The problem of how a prophet may receive and explain the revelation of God is specifically addressed in Thomas Hobbes's discussion of prophets in *Leviathan*. Hobbes claims that it is "impossible to know" whether a purported prophecy truly presents the word of God (248). The truth of the account thus depends on the prophet's authority invested in him by his audience. What is more, the way in which God communicates with the prophet cannot be distinguished from dreams or visions that are mere projections of the prophet's mind. The would-be seer himself might thus be unsure whether God spoke to him or not. Hobbes suggests that "though God almighty can speak to man by dreams […] he obliges no man to believe he hath done to him that pretends it" (249). He further

[14] My brackets.

advises that a true prophet must prove himself by performing "miracles" and by teaching only the religion that is "already established" (249). However, since "miracles now cease," man can no longer distinguish true prophets from the false ones (251). Concurrently, only natural reason can test and verify the prophet's utterance. Hobbes narrows the group of true prophets down even further, when he asserts that God literally *spoke* only to Moses and Christ (*Leviathan* III, xxxvi, p.277ff). Thus Hobbes seems to question the authority of all but two divine prophets in the Bible, namely those who can validate their own testimony by their status.

Hobbes makes it clear that the office of civil and spiritual government ought to be united in one person – the sovereign king – as only the sovereign can interpret the Word of God, i.e. His direct communication. Hobbes sees the sovereign is a reliable prophet because he is a direct successor to Moses, who derived all privileges form his original covenant with God.[15] Thus Hobbes derives certainty of testimony from historical lineage. Consequently, Hobbes attempt to legitimize prophets through their heritage reveals Hobbes's assumption that Moses was a historical rather than a literary figure.

Nevertheless, Hobbes continues to underscore the subjective nature of testimony. Accurate testimony or "right reason," he demands, has to be determined by "some arbitrator, or judge" to whose judgment the community bows (Hobbes 28). Thus on the issue of testimony, Hobbes specifies that the process of human discourse can never produce factual knowledge, as this knowledge would be based on unreliable sensual

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[15] Hobbes notes earlier that it is impossible for a human being to enter into a direct covenant with God. However, the covenant concerning a whole people can be administered by His lieutenants on earth. For a complete description of the system of covenants, see *Leviathan* I, xiii.

perception. Prophetic testimony, can merely establish conditional knowledge about "the consequence of words" (48). Accordingly, Hobbes perceives discourse about testimony as merely describing the quality of accounts, rather than being an instrument that ascertains the truthfulness of testimony. Prophets may thus interpret the past by means of their own mental faculties, but they can make no reliable statements about the future.

Spinoza seems less critical and demanding than Hobbes in his evaluation of prophetic testimony, as he praises "the imagination of the prophets" as being a part of the divine mind (24). However, this prerequisite of imagination becomes a double-edged sword as imagination impairs the prophet's perception of God. According to Spinoza, God appears in the form in which the prophet "usually imagined Him" (32). If God therefore conforms His appearance to the prophet's disposition, the prophet can never be sure whether he saw God, or convinced himself that he saw God, or was simply hallucinating or dreaming. Therefore, the prophet cannot be sure whether or he actually spoke to God after the supposed fact, neither can he be certain about the meaning of God's supposed communication. Hobbes as to Spinoza, divine communication becomes subject to interpretation and can therefore not function as a source of certainty.

Although prophetic testimony represents one of several doorways to divine knowledge for Spinoza, this divine testimony can be erroneous and must therefore be verified by reason. Similar to Hobbes, Spinoza provides three factors by which to identify prophets: a vivid imagination, "the presence of signs," and the prophet's moral character (29). However, Spinoza also acknowledges that neither of these categories is foolproof. The distinction between true and false prophets thus adds yet another layer of uncertainty

to the discourse because it is a subjective decision. Spinoza abandons doctrine and challenges believers to judge by themselves on both the issue of prophets and the signs that endow the prophets' message with authority, an authority that depends as much on moral character as on the performance of true miracles.

Miracles

Herman Melville and his ideological predecessors appear to dismiss human testimony of supernatural events as unreliable. In the following section, I will scrutinize Melville's position on experiences that seemingly offset natural laws. Melville explicitly addresses miracles in the chapter "Jonah Historically Regarded." Here Melville's narrator introduces a comic element of doubt in form of a Sag-Harbor sailor that displays a "want of faith" regarding the probability of Jonah being swallowed by a whale because the beast's throat "is so very small" that "'a penny roll would choke him'" (287). Melville further questions the Jonah story because it does not explain what kind of vessel Jonah used for his voyage. Melville offers several theories about the nature of the leviathan that swallowed Jonah, ranging from "the floating body of a *dead*[16] whale" to "an inflated bag of wind" (287). Granting that Jonah did in fact travel inside the whale, the narrator, driven by the pyrrhonism of the Nantucket whaler, also questions how the beast could circumnavigate Africa in three days, swim up the shallow waters of the Euphrates to its source near Nineveh, and there to disgorge of Jonah. Eventually, Melville's impassioned narrator dismisses outright the religious doubts of the Sag-Harbor whaler as "foolish,

[16] Melville's italics.

impious pride," the result of a "little [book] learning" and refers the clergy who testified to the authenticity of the miracle of Jonah (288). The ironic tone of this passage can hardly be ignored. Melville's narrator introduces the discussion of Jonah's story on the basis of what he initially considered valid doubt. However, when he realizes that he would have to oppose the "revered clergy" to pursue his deductive argument, the narrator turns on his client and accuses him of impiety, just as the contemporary church would do in confronting the issue (Melville 288). Even though Melville deals with the issue of miracles in a comic fashion in this incident, the problem of verifying miracles presents a central pillar of Christian religious and scriptural authority leading up to the nineteenth century and remains volatile issue to this day.

Thomas Hobbes begins his discussion of miracles by distinguishing between God and nature. The "right of nature" represents the "liberty each man hath to use his own power […] for the preservation of his own nature" (86). Any law of nature is "found out by reason" by the individual rather than scriptural evidence (Hobbes 86). Hobbes goes on to define miracles as "*a work of God (besides his operation by the way of nature, ordained in the creation,) done for the making manifest to his elect the mission of an extraordinary minister for their salvation*[17]" (293). He distinguishes between subjective "miracles" which are called so by individuals who are ignorant of the natural causation of an event, and "real miracles" which represent "the effect[s] of the immediate hand of God" (Hobbes 293). Hobbes reassures his reader that "there is nothing contrary" to natural reason, and although he acknowledges God's ability to offset the course of nature

[17] Hobbes's italics and parenthesis.

and to communicate with man via direct revelation, reason provides the touchstone for understanding one's place within divine providence (247).

Just like the Sage of Malmsbury, Spinoza eliminates the problem of individual doubt by demanding that miracles are unnecessary to prove God's existence. Spinoza claims that miracles are defined objectively as events "of which the causes cannot be explained by natural reason" (84). But miracles are unimportant to Spinoza because even though they are events "which surpass human understanding […] we can gain no knowledge of God's essence" from them (85). On the contrary, miracles "appeal powerfully to the imagination" rather than to natural reason – which Spinoza considers the only source of certain knowledge (86). However, according to Spinoza, God does not communicate with man through obscure channels but deals in absolutes and necessity. Therefore "phenomena which we clearly […] understand have much better right to be called works of God" because they fall in line with God's character as they express "the infinity, the eternity, and the immutability of God" (Spinoza 86). To Spinoza, miracles would represent a "contravention to the order which God has established in nature" and thus "a contravention to God's nature and laws" (87). Spinoza even goes on to assert that whenever Scripture addresses miracles, it actually describes natural phenomena of which mankind at the time was ignorant. Nevertheless only natural phenomena are explicit evidence of God's intervention in Spinoza's system. For God to offset the natural cause of events is illogical because a miracle implies that His creation is imperfect and requires repeated adjustment to correct its course.

A century after Spinoza in 1754 David Hume also discusses miracles in his essay "Of Miracles."[18] Unlike Spinoza, Hume does not eliminate miracles completely from the scope of his analysis, but rather claims that their categorization has been faulty in previous analyses. Initially, Hume postulates a correlation between experience and reason on the one side, and testimony and faith on the other. Man has an *a priori* inclination to trust his memory and "regards his past experience as full *proof*" of future events (126). Experience marks the weighing of empirical data that has the formation of a general rule as its end. Testimony marks the other end of the continuum of certainty that Hume sets up. Its validity depends on empirical factors like the "number of witnesses" for a certain event, the manner of delivery of the message, i.e. the performance and authority of the speaker (Hume 128). Hume asserts that "no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle," as he claims that events that offset the laws of nature require solid, empirical evidence and a "uniform experience" of multiple individuals (131, 130). Witnesses are unreliable and their testimony can therefore never sufficiently establish a miracle. Accordingly, the belief in miracles is often inspired by either ignorance or human treachery, drafted up by individuals hungry for power who are then "industrious in propagating the imposture" (Hume 136). According to Hume, one motivation for this falsification of testimony is the authority and power that lies in assuming the role of "an ambassador from heaven" (144).

However, Hume also asserts that false testimony concerning miracles may be caused through the deception of the senses. Hume thus agrees with Hobbes that the

[18] The essay "Of Miracles" is part of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1754).

senses are easily deceived and that a man with a "heated imagination" first makes "a convert of himself" before he sets out to preach his sighting of a miracle to others (Hume 144). As he disqualifies human testimony as proof for miracles, Hume insists that miracles be examined by neutral judges. Their evaluation should be detached from the judgment of the masses because the vox popoli can be manipulated too easily.

Concurrently, Hume refutes miracles as "a just foundation for any [such] system of religion," as they can be "opposed by another proof, derived from the very fact which it would endeavor to establish" (146). Hume suggests a method of deductive reasoning on the basis of probability for the judgment of miracles. Since the likelihood of a miracle actually happening is lower than the likelihood of a witness giving false testimony. Thus in the majority of cases, Hume perceives miracles as more unreliable than the occurrence of false human testimony. For this reason, the testimony of miracles always carries its own refutation in its argumentation, but Hume does not completely rule out that "there possibly be miracles" (147). As Spinoza before him, Hume acknowledges that testimony would be a valid foundation for believing in a miracle if the testimony would approximate a universal experience. If all historians in all countries report an event as a fact, then we "ought to receive it as certain" (147). Miracles are thus judged quite mathematically by comparing the "instances of the violation of truth in the testimony of men" with the certified instances of "violation of the laws of nature by miracles" (148). For Hume the validity of testimony thus depends completely on a process of computing and comparing data of different sources.

Despite the fact that Hume suggests to judge miracles by the standards of deductive logic, he still asserts that "religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason"[19] (149). Such belief requires more than reasonable evidence to be accepted as truth to the individual. Although he does not account for the probability of miracles, Hume acknowledges the creative element of inner conviction that faith requires. In these respects, he has much in common with Cardinal John Henry Newman, who addresses the same issue less than a hundred years later.

Newman discusses the reliability of miracles on the basis of his discussion of the creative nature of faith. He acknowledges that the authenticity of miracles depends on "considerations about testimony, enthusiasm, imposture, and the like," but suggests that true miracles ultimately are "the sort of proof a man does not make for himself, but which is made for him" (Newman 192). Newman concedes that any eyewitnesses of miracles are "already believers," a fact that renders their judgment partial (196). Consequently, he finds that the benefit of miracles does not lie in their contravention of "the physical laws of the universe," but rather in their didactic function of enforcing "moral laws" (Newman 196). Thus Newman's perspective falls in line with the views of Melville's fictional priest, Father Mapple, a minor character that renders the philosophical conundrum all the more interesting. However, Newman claims, in accordance with Spinoza, that miracles are not tools to instill faith, but rather reassertions of the righteousness of faith for those who adhere to their belief in the first place. In this context of didacticism of miracles**,** Thomas Paine also finds miracles problematic, as the belief in miracles presupposes "a

[19] Hume's italics.

transfer of faith from God to man to believe a miracle upon man's report" (67). Paine rejects miracles as a valid form of communication between God and man and thus disregards their instructive aspect that Newman and Melville's Father Mapple would embrace in the next century. Finally, Paine reasserts that miracles depend too much on human faculties to function as a reliable source of information about God's will.

Scriptural Authority

At this point I have shown how Melville questions sensory reliability and the testimony of prophets and how he speaks out against the reliability of miracles, especially in his chapter "Jonah Historically Regarded." Closely related to these issues is Melville's attitude towards scriptural authority in *Moby-Dick*. In the chapter "The Sermon," Melville delivers a description of the teleological interpretation of scripture. Ishmael hears Father Mapple's sermon in a church in Nantucket. Mapple, expounds on a story of Jonah, whom he calls a "prophet" whose "canticle in the fish's belly" is a inspiring and "noble thing" that teaches selflessness in the face of God's commands (Melville 49). To Mapple, the story represents merely "one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures"; but a telling lesson of how the "hard hand of God" becomes visible through the force of the story's imagery (Melville 49, 52). Reading *Jonah* on a literal level, Mapple applies the moral of the story at this point to exhort his congregation. The clergyman presents what he considers factual evidence from scripture. However, in the chapter "Jonah Historically Regarded," Melville' narrator transcends Mapple's literal

reading and shows how "Jonah's prodigy of pondering misery" can be read in various ways (51).

Melville first has Father Mapple discusses the story's literal meaning in the chapter "The Sermon" and later lets Ishmael account for more critical approaches to the story. In "Jonah Historically Regarded," the narrator conjectures that the whale in *Jonah* might be an allegory for Jonah being saved by "some vessel with a whale for a figure-head," or that the whale is used symbolically and "merely meant a life-preserver" (Melville 287). Melville foreshadows the technique of displaying subjective interpretations, which he will exhibit in the chapter "The Doubloon." Contrary to the chapter about the doubloon though, Melville dismisses these historical, empirical, allegorical, and symbolic reading of the whale in *Jonah* in favor of a literal canonical reading. Nevertheless, "Jonah Historically Regarded" must be read as an ironic attack on doctrine and biblical literalism, as I have shown in my discussion of miracles.[20]

As with the other concepts of uncertainty, the idea of scriptural uncertainty was well established by the time Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* in the nineteenth century. Thomas Hobbes notes almost three hundred years earlier that the "scripture was written to shew man into the kingdome of God," which exists only in the after life, "leaving the world and the Philosophy thereof, to the disputation of man, for exercising their natural reason" (58). The Bible thus evidently teaches "how to go to Heaven, not how the heavens go" (Galileo qtd. in Andrews 63).[21] Of course, one has to keep in mind that, Hobbes's agenda was to exhibit the king as the rightful sovereign and mediator of God's word, and to

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[20] See page 28.
[21] From *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christine* (1615).

invalidate clerical claims to political authority. Scriptural authority for Hobbes arises from its analogy to the laws of nature. Scripture forms an expansion of the human faculty of reason. Hobbes acknowledges that the original authorship of the individual biblical chapters cannot be ascertained; still, the Book "is not unuseful to give us knowledge about the time wherein they were written" (252). For example, Hobbes states, quite controversially at the time, that Moses was not the author of the *Pentateuch*, and that "the five Books of Moses were written after his [Moses'] time" [22] (253). Nevertheless, regarding the content of the Bible, Hobbes declares that "none can know that they are God's word" (259).

Similarly, Spinoza addresses the problem of textual transmission when he claims that the Bible's "foundations are not only too scanty for building upon, but are also unsound," partly because of carelessness of translation and compilation over the ages, and partly because its "books were compiled from sources originally incorrect and uncertain" (121, 154). Accordingly, a literal reading of the text will gain the reader only limited insight into eternal truth and the nature of God. The reader can merely train himself to know the cultural frame in which the Bible, or the individual books thereof were written, in order to speculate about the author's intention.

For these reasons, Spinoza claims that we can arrive at an understanding of God through the study of the natural principles of causality, as "God's existence is not self-evident" but that it must rather "be inferred from ideas […] incontrovertibly true," i.e. from natural laws (84, 85). Spinoza denies the authority of scripture, proclaiming that

[22] My brackets.

"men relate in chronicles and histories their own opinions rather than actual events" (92). It is therefore "necessary to know the opinions of those who first related" the events in question to arrive at their intentions and to correctly interpret their recordings (93).

Spinoza thus sharply distinguishes between the author's intention and God's will, which means that we cannot know God's will through scripture. However, both can be known individually. As we have seen earlier, Spinoza believes that God's intention can only be inferred through the study of nature. However, we can arrive at the intentions of the biblical authors however by analyzing the historical context in which they were composing, "for many things are narrated in Scripture as real, and were believed to be real, which were in fact only symbolical and imaginary"; a concept that the nineteenth century Higher Critics would capitalize on (93). Accordingly, Spinoza asserts that texts as well as authors have rhetorical agendas, which unfortunately are often impossible to reconstruct or distinguish. Reconstruction becomes especially hard when it can no longer be established whether the meaning of a text is factual or metaphorical, as it happens with the Bible. Ultimately, Spinoza's devastating verdict on scriptural authority is that "the true meaning of Scripture is in many places inexplicable, or at best mere subject for guesswork" (112). While Hobbes merely wanted to shift control over scriptural authority, Spinoza annihilates it, stating that the true meaning of the text cannot by established by any method and is purely subjective. If this philosophical debate is echoed in Melville's masterwork, then "The Doubloon"[23] is a key chapter to the entire novel.

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[23] See my chapter III.

Spinoza's inquiry leads him to conclude that the only standard by which scripture is to be judged should be the "natural light of reason which is common to all – not any supernatural light nor any external authority" (119). He questions direct divine revelation, as reason to him seems the only reliable source for spiritual guidance. What is more, numerous textual inconsistencies, like the question of authorship of the Pentateuch, finally lead Spinoza to the conclusion that "the Bible is not so much imperfect as untrustworthy" because it is a man-made account that has been handled without care and critical scrutiny regarding the methodology of its compilation (120). This verdict deals a blow to the central pillar of certainty that the Bible had provided for society up until the seventeenth century. For if a text that was previously deemed holy and a direct account of the will of God absolute truth and certainty become a matter of purely personal preferences.

While Spinoza's verdict about scripture is rather bleak, his outlook on the human capacity to know God is quite optimistic. He suggests to avoid the danger of entangling ourselves in the linguistic inconsistencies of scripture and to arrive at a more general spirituality.[24] He makes it clear that "the sacredness of Scripture depends on our understanding of the doctrines therein signified, and not on the words, the language, and the phrases in which these doctrines are conveyed to us" (150). As "words gain their meaning solely from their usage" they cannot provide a proper basis to gain certainty about God (167). The author asserts the subjectivity of testimony by claiming that "nothing is in itself absolutely sacred, or profane […], apart from the mind, but only

[24] Foreshadowing Thomas Paine's suggestion to adopt Deism as the only true religion.

relatively hereto" (167). Spinoza thereby redirects authority from the text to the individual. The mind is the proverbial measuring stick by which to judge Scripture because it carries the "true original of God's covenant" by providing mankind with the "idea of Himself" (165).

Spinoza separates scripture and theology, proclaiming that true spiritual theology teaches obedience to the divine principles already inscribed in the human heart, while reason provides mankind with "truth and wisdom" (194). Basing theology on scripture therefore is pointless, as theology already wields the same authority as reason. Spinoza pontificates that "Theology is not bound to serve reason, nor reason theology, but each has her own domain" (194). The only intersection of both fields of spirituality lies in "the morality they teach," and must correspond to "the Word of God written in our hearts," these moral principles, then, are the only standard by which to judge religion and the prophets.

In 1843, John Henry Newman seemingly refutes Spinoza's anti-scriptural theory because Newman claims that scripture provides a "tangible history of the Deity," which creates "definiteness of the practical impression" by producing a "personal presence" of God. In other words, Newman postulates that the Bible fleshes out the idea of God and thus creates spiritual certainty (22). Newman also seems to agree with Hobbes that the human mind cannot grasp God as an infinite concept. Melville exhibits this realization as one of the central motivations for Ahab's monomania, when the captain admits that he hates the whale as an "inscrutable thing" (140). The quest for certainty lies in unraveling

the mystery of the motivation behind natural forces. Ahab's quest is to find out whether the whale is "agent" or "principle" (Melville 140).

Newman states further that the Bible is a reliable document insofar as it teaches "religious truths historically, not by investigation [as Natural Religion, i.e. reason]"[25] but through accounts of faith (30). Newman thus differentiates between historical reliability and spiritual importance of the message communicated through scripture; the Bible does not claim to be a history book, but it rather teaches us by incorporating historical elements into its argumentation. Still, these elements are secondary to the moral values that are communicated through the biblical stories. And while Newman acknowledges that similar doctrines may be derived from heathen cults, he notes that no other source "illustrate[s] virtue" [26] like the Revelation of Christianity (34). The Bible thus metaphorically verbalizes virtues that are ingrained in all human beings. Its value, according to Newman, lies in its communication of a universal human experience.

Ultimately, Newman does assert that Scripture can communicate God's will, as he sees the "last and complete manifestation of the Divine Attributes and Will contained in the New Testament" even though – as we have seen – this communication is not explicit (35). Like Spinoza, Newman implies a positivistic anthropological worldview. The state of moral innocence of the prelapsarian condition lies not beyond man's reach in Newman's system. Through revealed religion mankind gets the chance to aspire "towards a divine *principle*" (28) outside itself, a moral ideal that is free from moral corruption. By teaching "self-denial," scripture guides the individual's view towards a higher moral

[25] My brackets.
[26] My brackets.

principle (147). According to Newman, doctrine leads the way to the paradisial mindset of "disinterested attachment," signifying the mindset of Adam and Eve (28).

The most radical attack of scriptural certainty comes from Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1795). Paine performs a close reading of scripture – and revelation in particular – and classifies it as a "book of riddles" created by "Church Mythologists," the content of which was "decided by *vote*"[27] (18). While Spinoza merely points out the uncertainty that lies in the composition of the Bible, Paine takes issue with the fact that "*vote stands in place*"[28] of divine inspiration in the creation of Scripture (166). Paine's demolishes biblical authority by enumerating the logical errors made by its compilers and by audiences who read its contents as literal truth. Biblical authority to Paine is an oxymoron. The Bible is a book compiled by human beings, not a flawless account of God's divine character. Paine asserts further that mankind "cannot even imitate so much as one blade of grass that he [God] has made, and yet we can make or alter *words of God* as easily as words of man"[29] (166). Contrary to Newman and Spinoza, Paine's evaluation of the human capacity to gain divine knowledge seems pessimistic at best. Paine cannot find any superior moral principle to be derived from scripture, as the accounts of human misery and treachery with which the Bible is filled mark it as a "history of wickedness," not the Word of God (20). Scripture seems morally uninspiring to Paine, and he discredits any creative aspect of faith that might be based on scriptural analysis.

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[27] Paine's italics.
[28] Paine's italics.
[29] Paine's italics, my brackets.

Paine compares the compilation of Scripture to the composition of poetry. The prophets (nabi) are not oracles of the future but poets and historians. However, creative faculties, according to Paine cannot lead to spiritual certainty because proof for the existence of God has to hold up to rational, empirical standards. Contrary to Newman's notion that creativity is a necessary faculty of faith, Paine seems to sneer at the fact that the authors of the Bible attempt to pass off inspired documents. Paine notes that since there is always arbitrariness involved in human accounts, "human language, whether in speech or print, cannot be the vehicle of the word of God" (24). Beyond that, scriptures were not compiled by God, but rather by theological parties who "had no authority for what they were doing" (Paine 111).

Consequently, Paine postulates that the Bible is easily corruptible and therefore cannot function as a basis of faith. He sees nature as the only explicit expression of the will of God. Paine thus joins Hobbes and Spinoza in their claim that scriptural testimony is unreliable, but also demands that its authority should be completely disregarded. Paine is much more radical than his ideological predecessors, since he plainly classifies scripture as riddled by "inconsistencies and absurdities" (27). Again contrary to Newman, Paine despises doctrine as it teaches man "to contemplate himself as an outlaw, […] thrown […] on a dunghill at an immense distance from his Creator, and who must make his approaches by creeping back and cringing to intermediate beings" (30).

Melville seemingly picks up on the rancor that Paine shows towards these "intermediate beings" and recreates it in the nefarious zeal of Ahab in his pursuit of the white whale (30). In "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab feels challenged by the "inscrutable

thing" in the whale, which he hates with a vengeance (Melville 140). He cannot accept the pasteboard mask of the white whale as the closest that man can get to God. Ahab feels compelled to "strike through the mask" to know the principle behind the agent, i.e. the whale (Melville 140). Paine suggests man must use "the "the GIFT OF REASON"[30] as his metaphorical harpoon to strike through the veil of spiritual confusion that scripture engenders (30).

Finally, Paine asserts "THE WORD OF GOD IS IN THE CREATION WE BEHOLD and it is in *this* world […] that God speaketh universally to man" [31] (31). Paine is quick to establish that human language cannot communicate God's nature. Scripture thus cannot function as a source for certain knowledge about God; only nature, God's visible creation, can provide clues about his existence. He classifies God as "a *first cause*, the cause of all things,"[32] at which one may arrive through scientific contemplation (33). Much like Spinoza, Paine disregards scripture as medium of God's will. However, Paine asserts only nature can do so when scientifically examined through reason. Man's ability to deduce cause from effect lets him arrive at God as the ultimate cause beyond which no further investigation is possible. Accordingly, Paine sees scientific inquiry and objective doubt, as the only valid means of ascertaining God's existence. Man can arrive at this result by realizing that "everything we behold carries in itself the internal evidence that it did not make itself" (33). Melville's "pasteboard mask" falls in line with Paine's view of

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[30] Paine's capitalization.
[31] Paine's capitalization and italics.
[32] Paine's italics.

nature as a veil through which a "reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features" (Melville 140).

The survey of the tradition of philosophical doubt has demonstrated how volatile and fractured the notion of truth and therefore spiritual stability had become in the nineteenth century. As the examples from *Moby-Dick* show, Melville accurately identifies and addresses the paramount philosophical issues of his time and displays a high sensitivity to the pressing nature of the discussions about scriptural authority and spiritual certainty. As we have now explored the philosophical context in which Melville composed his novel, we will now scrutinize the practical means that the author employs to resolve the problem of uncertainty, i.e. the concept of Melville's charts.

III. The Doubloon and Melville's Charts to Certainty

"The Doubloon" is one of the central chapters of *Moby-Dick*, one through which Melville first communicates his methodology of obtaining certainty. Ahab nails a Spanish coin to the main mast of the *Pequod*, proclaiming that whosoever raises the white whale may obtain the golden prize. The doubloon becomes the object of various interpretations provided by the different characters as they pass by the mast. By providing a close reading of the coin's meaning, each character projects his personality onto the object and thus infuses it with meaning. In light of the personal construction of meaning, the doubloon thus transforms into a multivalent cipher. Melville thus uses the doubloon as a prism of interpretation that refracts each character's strategy of making sense of the human experience and thus of obtaining certainty.

However, the doubloon does not remain the only postmodernist stage prop that Melville uses in the text. The crew of the *Pequod* uses various objects as a means to bridge the void of uncertainty that existence places before them. These objects are visual representations of meaning, i.e. Melville's "charts" on his quest for certainty. Charts appear in various forms in the text: Ahab's whale charts, the doubloon, and even Queequeg's tattoos—all represent tools that aid the characters to deduce meaning from phenomena that they cannot explain; in nautical terms, these implements are compasses through the uncharted waters of existence.

Melville's "charts" represent signifiers for the characters that utilize them to navigate through a hostile natural environment and to counteract the feelings of instability and isolation that existence brings forth in them. Following Martin

Heidegger's concept of "being thrown into the world,"[33] many characters in *Moby-Dick* convey an air of displacement and disorientation. For example, Ishmael learns that the owners of the Peqoud are mostly "widows and orphans" (Melville 76). In fact, Ishmael himself sets out to escape a "November" in his soul that makes him wish to knock "people's hats off," which indicates that he experiences strong feelings of unsociability and isolation ashore that he strives to shed off on the ocean (18). These minor plot details also establish dislocation as a fundamental theme in the novel.

Existence is puzzling to all characters that attempt any form of critical contemplation of reality. The significance of the chapter "the Doubloon" thus arises from the fact that it displays the various characters' associative and contemplative assets. Metaphorical charts are used in various ways throughout the novel: While Flask—and to a certain extent Stubb—see the doubloon as a material means to pleasure, Queequeg consults the stars and his tattoos in the process of making decisions. Meanwhile Captain Ahab initially relies on a sextant and an actual chart to obtain certainty about the course of the whale. Ultimately he disregards every tool and completely relies on his instinct to chase the whale. Ahab's emancipation from all "charts" represents the climax of Melville's experimentation with charts. While I do not believe that Melville suggests for the reader to abandon all charts and to rely solely on instinct, the novel, especially through Ahab, explores the ramifications of complete isolation from reason and society for the individual.

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[33] Compare Martin Heidegger's related concept of "in die Welt geworfen sein" (being thrown into the world) in the twentieth century, as it occurs in his treatises *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit* 1927, §31).

The Coin as an Existential Cipher

The coin that Ahab nails to the main mast poses as the ultimate social hieroglyph in Melville's quest for religious and existential certainty. Although not the only "chart" to meaning in the book, the doubloon bundles meaning infused into it by the various characters who examine it; the coin represents the multiplicity of perspectives, which is one of the main themes of the novel. The act of interpretation thus is a necessary means of creating stability for Melville. According to Bernhard Radloff, Melville considers "the movement of presentation as" an act of "making certain" (186). Melville represents the doubloon as "the ship's navel" because it is the focal point that concentrates the contemplative powers of the crew (335). Thus the coin can potentially function as a symbolic provider of stability, if it can bring one or several characters to establish absolute certainty in the meaning of existence. However, further analysis will show that this is an unrealizable task.

On a basic level of interpretation, one may relate the doubloon to another signifier of meaning in the text: the white whale. The leviathan to Ahab represents "all evil […] made practically assailable" (Melville 156). Ahab believes he can decipher the meaning of his own existence by killing the whale. To Ahab the whale thus becomes both an end itself and a means to this end. However, if the whale is the ultimate representation of the hidden principle that steers the course of the world, the doubloon stands firmly connected to it as the ultimate signifier of the multiplicity of interpretation. The coin is the "white whale's talisman" and a token of its life (Melville 332). As Melville has Ishmael classify the coin as one of the "medals of the sun," the doubloon mirrors the whale's supernatural

origin (332). “The Doubloon” illustrates that all physical objects are signifiers and thus receive significance only through human interpretation.

Melville acknowledges the impossibility of objective truth. The doubloon does not have a fixed meaning. In fact, Pip, the deranged cabin boy, provides a reading that expresses this notion of multiplicity when Melville has him comment on the procession that passes by the coin: “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look” (335). By his antics, Pip expresses the pluralism involved in the interpretation of the doubloon, as it can have as many meanings as it may have spectators to contemplate its mystery. Like a convex lens bundles sunbeams, the coin consolidates all the interpretations of its meanings offered by the crew. Accordingly, Pip considers the metaphor of the “ship’s navel” (Melville 335) closer when he examines the doubloon. He sees the doubloon as the sign of natural birth but at the same time as the harbinger of the ship’s destruction. Pip seems quite sure at this point that “the White Whale; he’ll nail” Ahab and his ship because the coin is the symbol of the whale and it sits at the ship’s center (Melville 335). Pip thus is the first to detect the instability that the coin creates through its physical position on the ship. The *Pequod* literally carries the symbol of its dismemberment at its heart. Thus one might argue that Pip rightfully considers the rest of the crew as blind “bats,” while he sees himself as a “crow,” i.e. a bird of prey, indicating that he is the only one that realizes the doom that the coin symbolizes. Melville seems to indicate that wisdom can only be revealed by the insane by rendering Pip the one character that fully realizes the destructive implications of the coin as the whale’s symbol.

Starbuck's Doubt

The "Doubloon" thus demonstrates each character's philosophical approach to life's mysteries and displays the ways in which each persona tries to chart its course through life. As a character, Starbuck most closely resembles Herman Melville's own psychological disposition. Starbuck's spiritual crisis parallels Melville's own, as the first mate finds himself entangled in a conflict between duty and moral responsibility. Melville repeatedly stresses the steadfastness of Starbuck's character, through the dialog among the rest of the crew. Starbuck is a man of strong faith and strong integrity. While he calls Ahab's quest blasphemous he cannot bring himself to take the mad captain prisoner. In several instances throughout the plot when Starbuck debates this inner conflict he indeed seems to be "wrestling with an angel"[34] (388). After the captain threatens him with a rifle, Starbuck considers assuming command over the Pequod, but drops the thought as he sees "no lawful way […] to wrest this old man's [Ahab] living power from his own living hands" (Melville 387). Contrary to Ishmael, whose role is purely contemplative, Starbuck feels morally compelled to take action and resist participating in Ahab's diabolic quest. However, his doubt prevents him from taking up the cause and assuming control over his fate. Accordingly Starbuck sees himself standing "alone here upon the open sea" unable to take action even in light of the knowledge that "Starbuck's body this day week may sink, with all the crew" (387).

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[34] Note that this phrase refers to Jacob's wrestling an angel (*Genesis* 32:24). Starbuck, like Jacob is in a spiritual crisis. However, different than Jacob, Starbuck does not gain a blessing form his "angel," which is rather his spiritual doubt personified in Ahab (Melville 388).

Unlike Ahab, who is all action and braving steadfastness of will, Starbuck represents integrity without defiance. Starbuck is the mediator whose objective is peace on the ship and an even flow between the different personalities on the ship. However, he lacks the incentive to take action because he faces internal moral struggles. Although Starbuck displays a supreme moral disposition, he opts to ignore the inner and outer conflicts he encounters. His reaction to the coin in "The Doubloon" is no exemption of this behavior pattern. He perceives the doubloon as a "beacon and a hope," a symbol of God's presence, but also as a sign of the immanent threat posed by the white whale (333). Starbuck seeks to deny this feeling of ambiguity of existence when he beholds the coin. He dreads that "truth [may] shake" him "falsely" [35] (Melville 333) if he lingers with it any longer and ultimately turns away. Starbuck thus suppresses his instinct and tries desperately to rely on his faith to carry him through crisis.

Starbuck cannot help questioning his own faith when regarding the coin. He seeks to deny the uncertainty of his faith when he dreads that "truth [may] shake" him "falsely" while beholding the doubloon (Melville 333). Accordingly, his generic verdict about conditions that contradict his moral disposition is "let faith oust fact" (Melville 373). Starbuck finds himself victimized by his intellect, which constantly threatens his faith. This inner conflict puts him in a deadlock between reason and faith rendering him unable to act. Beholding the doubloon paralyzes Starbuck with doubt. His rendering of the coin exhibits his lack of will to action, despite his exemplary moral disposition. It seems clear that for Starbuck the doubloon functions as a mirror that shows his spiritual weakness.

[35] My parentheses

However, not all characters share Starbuck's introspective notions, when examining the coin. In fact some, like Stubb, provide an interpretation that is more concerned with the surface of the coin and therefore their own surface.

Stubb's Alamanac

Melville notes how Stubb observes a train of characters passes by the coin in order to find the "clue" that must be hidden "somewhere" (334). However, Stubb's reading of the object of everyone's desire remains purely linear, as he believes that there is only one truth to be discovered in the object. The coin bears the signs of the zodiac; thus Stubb conjectures its meaning must lie in the doubloon's symbols and therefore lies open to anyone who can look up their meaning "straight out of the book," i.e. Nathaniel Bowditch's vastly popular *American Practical Navigator* (1802) (Melville 334). The almanac contains information about celestial navigation that Bowditch—originally trained as a mathematician—collected on his voyages. Seeing that the almanac is composed with a practical methodology, Stubb finds his practical attitude towards life reflected in the book. In fact, Stubb holds a ideology directly opposed to any kind of rational interpretation, as he comments rather practically that "there is nothing wonderful in signs" as he observes that only human beings "come in and supply the thoughts" about the texts and objects (Melville 333, 334). His attitude represents hostility against the postmodernist notion that the physical world consists of the text and is therefore open to interpretation. As a character, Stubb therefore counteracts the intuitive methodologies that Melville evokes with Queequeg and Ahab. Like Starbuck, Stubb is a practical

seaman, but Melville makes him less concerned with philosophical dilemmas and more focused on physical pleasures and material wealth, which he embraces with "unusual but still good-natured excitement" (236).

For instance, Stubb's interpretation of the coin bears similarities to the purely materialist reading of Flask, who considers the doubloon only in terms of its pecuniary value. Like Starbuck, Stubb has realized that "all things are queer," referring to material experiences in the world (Melville 112). Stubb thus is well aware of the need to interpret experiences, but also knows about the moral turmoil this philosophizing may cause. Thus he has established a linear system of reference for himself that provides him with authoritative certainty. In modern terms, he outsources the process of interpretation that all other characters perform on their own, to Bowditch's almanac, to which he resorts for guidance. To Stubb all objects found in the physical world are symbols whose correct interpretation can simply be looked up in reference works (Melville 333). Contrary to Starbuck, obtaining certainty does not pose a philosophical dilemma to Stubb, as he has chosen to accept the simplest authority to provide him with answers. His logic is reasonable because as a sailor, he naturally follows the advice provided by the navigation handbook. Stubb's interpretations are neither creative (Ishmael), nor philosophical (Ahab), nor based on spiritual faith (Starbuck) but rather result from blind faith in authority. Stubb accepts the pregiven interpretation of the coin that he finds in his almanac rather than drawing conclusions by his own contemplative power.

Accordingly, Stubb uses a pre-given chart—the almanac—for his quest. Contrary to Ahab, Ishmael and Queequeg though, Stubb's quest is not metaphysical but practical.

For him whaling is not a metaphorical quest[36] to arrive at spiritual certainty. On the contrary, his quest of killing—and eating—the whale has no metaphysical dimension. The almanac supplies him with all information necessary to achieve this goal. Stubb's interpretation of the coin is therefore unimaginative as it only regards the coin in terms of the nautical information it carries. Consequently, his occupation with the coin only lasts as long as it takes Stubb to identify the star constellations depicted on the coin. While his reading of the coin itself seems one-dimensional, his description of the zodiac as a "sermon […] writ in high heaven" seems rather creative and lively (Melville 334). Stubb acknowledges the deterministic aspect of nature as he describes how the star constellations metaphorically influence the fate of humanity. As Radloff notes, Stubb thus considers the coin "plot of fortune" because of the star constellations depicted on it. Ironically, this leads Stubb to a similar notion of determinism to that which Ahab discovers later in the novel[37] (187). Contrary to Ahab though, Stubb does not venture to understand this metaphysical plot or the driving forces behind it. As Melville notes, Stubb finds consolation wheeling through "toil and trouble […] alow" while watching the sun and the stars do the same aloft (334). He can render his existence meaningful because he performs the same motion than the celestial bodies. Thus his existence is one of imitation and of reading, without the need for critical investigation into the meaning of his actions.

Melville pokes fun at literal-minded readers of scripture through Stubb, as his attitude represents hostility towards the postmodernist notion that the physical world

[36] See chapter IV.
[37] In the chapter "The Chase—Second Day."

consists of text and therefore requires continuous interpretation. The recalcitrant second mate completely relies on scriptural evidence to determine his actions, even though he uses a surrogate Bible in form of his almanac. As Stubb's "eleventh commandment" is "think not" Melville endows Stubb with the bliss of confidence in authorized interpretations of texts (112). Stubb relishes in finding simple answers to the complex questions life puts in front of him. While the doubloon might appear multi-dimensional to the other crewmembers, for Stubb its meaning resides in his handbook, which explains coin's hieroglyphs. To seek any meaning beyond the horizon of the almanac would require creative, critical, and independent thought—something that Stubb's nature cannot conceive of. His ignorance of critical strategies of interpretation provides him with certainty and happiness.

Through Stubb's reading of the coin, Melville casts apprehension on readers who refuse to use their own metal powers to attain certainty. Surprisingly, Melville himself seems a bit envious of individuals like Stubb, who do not feel compelled to quest for the deeper signification of the coin, because Melville's complex moral imagination does not allow him to settle for simple answers. Consequently, Melville does not end his investigation into the doubloon's meaning with Stubb's interpretation. On the contrary, Melville introduces yet another character that looks to celestial constellations to chart his course on his quest for certainty: Queequeg.

Queequeg's Tattoos

All the charts that Melville uses in the text are compiled to reconnect their owners with the divine. Queequeg supports this thesis unlike any other character in the novel. The markings on his body, according to Ishmael, are a "complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth," as he uses his own body to map the events he faces in life (Melville 366). Furthermore, a "departed prophet and seer" created Queequeg's tattoos; Melville thus indirectly deals with the authenticity of prophecy through Queequeg, making his role as a living chart even more cryptic. Thus Queequeg is the keeper of knowledge which he does not fully understand. Similar to Ahab thus, Queequeg represents a character that bears a level of spiritual alienation, although other than Ahab's alienation represented in his scar, Queequeg is spiritually alienated; yet his markings are voluntarily inflicted and thus symbolize a positive spiritual disposition. As shown in "The Doubloon," Queequeg's physique only becomes disconnected from his psyche when he interprets supernatural occurrences, making him fall into a trance.

Beongcheon Yu states that Queequeg' personifies the "riddle" of human existence and confirms that "Melville rather than Ishmael must try to unfold" the secret behind the cipher (Yu 120). Yu thus suggests to broaden the meaning of Queequeg's character and to see his tattoos as a visual representation of man's willful alienation from himself. Queequeg therefore functions as a living map in Melville's quest for certainty. But the tattoos are a map that strips meaning from whichever object their bearer beholds. Similar to Stubb, Queequeg does not develop a contextual signification when scrutinizing the

doubloon, but only compares the symbols depicted on the coin with the symbolic reference system of his body. He thus translates the coin's implied meanings onto his own fixed system of reference (the tattoos) to reduce the plethora of possible interpretations of the doubloon. Thus for Queequeg translation precedes interpretation, as certainty can only be derived from a system of symbols that is completely intelligible to its user.

In this manner, Queequeg uses his own body as a reference guide for unknown phenomena, just as Stubb uses his almanac. The indigenous harpooner compares the constellations of the stars with the tattoos on his body to predict future events. Radloff notes that Queequeg's "cosmological *Komparatistik*"[38] counteracts "Christian pretensions to know the one true God" and represents a "critique of the rising humanist religions of comparative anthropology and mythology" (187). Melville gives Queequeg's a binary role as both instrument and conduit of divine power. Even Stubb observes this doubling when he sees Queequeg looking at the doubloon, noting that the cannibal "looks like the zodiac himself" (Melville 335). Melville contrasts Stubb as a metaphorical uninformed reader, who needs a conduit outside of himself to make sense of the world, with Queequeg in the role of an informed reader, who synthesizes meaning by processing new data with analytic tools.

Queequeg is similarly related to almost all other characters in the novel. For example, Ishmael uses empirical science for his investigation of the skeletal remains of the whale in "A Bower in the Arsacides," while Queequeg uses the marks on his body to

[38] Radloff's italics.

predict future events. Melville thus postulates the validity of Queequeg's mysticist[39] approach in several instances in the text. Also, when Ahab beholds St. Elmo's Fire during the storm described in "The Candles," Melville connects Queequeg to the white arch lights that foreshadow the Pequod's doom, as his "tattooing burned like Satanic blue flames on his body" (381). In this instant Queequeg's tattoos become a sensor for supernatural forces and thus make a mediator—an avatar, if you will—between the physical and the spiritual world. Ahab, being aware of this mystical connection, asks for the blood of "Tashtego, Queequeg, and Daggoo" when he baptizes his harpoon in the name of the devil; he apparently preserves the three indigenous harpooners as vessels of supernatural power, a power that Ahab's harpoon can tap into as a conduit (Melville 371). Melville thus describes how Ahab utilizes the mystical powers of the "heathen flesh" to forge his supernatural weapon (371). Consequently, Queequeg's role in the novel is threefold: he becomes his own chart, a tool to Ahab, but also a friend and partner to Ishmael.

Interestingly, the only other character that functions as a living chart is Moby Dick himself. Ahab depicts the whale as a supernatural "brutal monster" that is part of a "creation" that is "not an act of love but of hatred" (Herbert 1613, 1614). In contrast to the whale though, Queequeg rather functions as a pacifier to Ishmael. In fact it is safe to say that Queequeg's friendship initiates a process of reconciliation between Ishmael and humanity. Yu thus notes that Queequeg contributes to Ishmael's – and therefore

[39] I use the term positively here, referring to "mystical theology; belief in the possibility of union with or absorption into God by means of contemplation and self-surrender; belief in or devotion to the spiritual apprehension of truths inaccessible to the intellect" ("Mysticism").

Melville's – quest by providing the gift of "universal fraternity" (120). On the one hand, the pair of Ahab and the whale is tied to each other through a cosmic vendetta, with Ahab seeking to avenge the "cosmic affront" against him (Herbert 1614). Queequeg and Ishmael on the other hand are connected by, the bonds of brotherhood, and even by the yoke of marriage. Finally, the two living ciphers, the whale and Queequeg both appear as agents of fate. As Herbert notes, the whale is the "symbol of a malignant God" who inflicts "swift punishment" on Melville's various representations of Jonah, while Queequeg portrays the humane character of the noble savage in his relation to Ishmael (1615, 1614). Ultimately, Queequeg indirectly counteracts the whale's destructive force and becomes instrumental in Ishmael's Jonah like redemption when his coffin functions as Ishmael's lifeboat. As his tattoos are transferred to his coffin they form a chart that transcends the barrier between life and death.

Queequeg's character underscores the importance of community. Ironically it is only when Ishmael seeks to escape society by boarding a whaling ship that he makes Queequeg's acquaintance and finds a loyal friend in him that helps him to chart his way back into the community of man. Although the role of Ishmael shall not be elaborated at this point, it seems noteworthy that Yu sees Ishmael as a mediator between Ahab's aggression and Queequeg's humanity. He has to "exalt 'democratic dignity' and 'divine equality' as he remains a quester like Ahab, despite the stoic influence of Queequeg (Yu 122). The cannibal thus also fulfills an instrumental role for Ishmael as he poses as the wanderer's chart to regain his sense of community.

Ahab's Charts and Sextant

Ahab's course in the novel guides him away from humanity and into his monomaniacal obsession with doom. The captain is also the only character in the text that actually utilizes literal charts. Ahab initially uses conventional instruments to locate the whale on the open sea. However, his methods become more mysterious as he grows more and more convinced that his encounter with the whale will not occur by following his sea charts, but the cosmic decrees of his destiny. At the beginning of Ahab's quest, he still needs a conductor to make contact with the supernatural realm. Melville describes how Ahab seems to receive "secret intelligence from the deity" when studying his charts (167). In utilizing such tools as the charts or the sextant, Ahab becomes passive and contemplative. He intrudes on Ishmael's modus operandi in studying charts and reading the whale's trail in the "waves storied with his deeds" (Melville 168). Of course, the act of marking "additional courses over spaces that before were blank" on the chart, symbolizes the act of rendering the unknown familiar (Melville 166). As Harold Aspiz points out in "Phrenologizing the Whale" (1968) Ahab's charting of the ocean as the realm of the whale narrows down the meaning of the supernatural leviathan by giving it a *"tangibleness and certainty*"[40] (Fowler qtd. in Aspiz 22). If Ahab can track the route of the whale takes, he can virtually locate him at any given moment. The whale would no longer follow an incomprehensible route and would thus loose at least part of its mystical ubiquity. A major element of suspense surrounding the whale consists in its ubiquity. By

[40] Aspiz's italics.

deciphering the whale's hidden movements, Ahab demystifies the demi-god to a mere malignant animal that can be hunted down and eventually killed.

Aspiz suggests further that Ahab wants to confront "nature unveiled in her true light" (22). However, Ahab's reasoning is flawed because he cannot hope to give rational mathematical form to the movements of an agent of a supernatural principle. On the contrary, supernatural goals require supernatural means. Ahab realizes his error in "The Quadrant," when he curses the "foolish toy" as it can only tell him "the poor, pitiful point" of its own location, but not the future location of Moby Dick (Melville 378). The quadrant's alleged "impotence" as a nautical tool enrages Ahab as it ultimately reflects his own impotence to find the white whale.

Being the whale's counterpart and nemesis, the captain too, has to undergo a transformation. Accordingly, his own methods have to be adapted to the supernatural pursuit he embarks on. When he discards the quadrant, Ahab's will is not fully formed according to the object of his pursuit. He has to "tranquilize his unquiet heart" in order to force himself to "cautious comprehensiveness" (Melville 168). On the issue of Ahab's inner conflict, Bernhard Radloff also notes in *Will and Representation: The Philosophical Foundations of Melville's* Theatrum Mundi (1996) that Ahab displays a split between mind and soul[41] in the chapter "The Chart." He "allows us to distinguish between the agency of the vengeful scheming will; the 'characterizing' mind; and the 'eternal […] soul'" (Radloff 141). It is only when he abandons science and empiricism by disregarding the charts and the sextant, that Ahab can confront the whale. He abandons secular means

[41] Symbolized by Ahab's scar.

of pursuing the whale because he realizes that the whale and he are equals. If the whale operates by supernatural means, so must Ahab because they are both chess pieces in a fated battle. Thus Ahab can only engage the whale in combat when he embraces and fully assume the metaphysical role of "Fates' lieutenant" (Melville 418).

Through Ahab, Melville thus finds a new way of underscoring the fundamental division between faith and scientific knowledge. Initially, Ahab does not realize that his crusade against the white whale requires supernatural means to achieve his ends. Only when he comes to terms with his spiritual aspect of his quest, i.e. when he embraces his madness and the deterministic nature of his actions during the second "Chase" chapter, does Ahab becomes fully armored for the final battle with Moby Dick. Once Ahab makes this fundamental choice of a supernatural method, his choice of charts becomes suitable for his ends.

On the verge of his final confrontation with the "God-whale," Ahab's opinion about his mission turns drastically as he considers himself the "Fates' lieutenant" (Melville 418). However, before he changes his ideology, Ahab seems preoccupied with self-agency during most of the plot. The "The Doubloon" chapter demonstrates this as well, because Ahab reads his own signification into the signifier, i.e. the coin: "all are Ahab" (Melville 332). One may argue that Ahab has to expand his megalomania to extraordinary proportions in order to be a match for the god-whale in the ensuing battle. Ahab's ego even expands to encompass other members of the crew. For example, Starbuck finds his soul "overmanned […] by a madman" but still feels "tied" to Ahab by an inexplicable bond of horror (Melville 144). But despite the fact that monomania has

been made the defining character trait of Ahab in the text's critical history, he is by no means a static character, as his eventual turn towards Calvinism demonstrates.[42]

Ahab adapts his methodology when he baptizes his harpoon with blood in "The Forge." He continues to use supernatural means to chase the whale when he consults the corpusants in "The Candles," claiming that "the white flame but lights the way to the White Whale" (Melville 382). It seems that he worships St. Elmo's Fire as his "fiery father," and challenges the supernatural manifestation, proclaiming: "I know of me what thou knowest not of thyself" (Melville 383). However, Ahab is a Zoroastrian,[43] he perceives the deity of truth and purification in the flames, as opposed to the deceiving principle of the pasteboard mask that he finds in Moby Dick. Interestingly here, "Zoroaster consistently contrasts […] two peoples as the People of Righteousness (*asha*) and the People of the Lie (*druj*),"[44] a notion that corresponds to Ahab's dual assessment of himself and the whale as mortal enemies ("Zoroastrianism" *Columbia*). In addition, Alan Williams notes that the evil spirit "Angra Mainyu and his demons are actually states of negativity, denial or, as the religion puts it, 'the Lie,'" which explains Ahab's obsession with unraveling the true nature of the whale ("Zoroastrianism" *Routledge*). Therefore to oppose the treacherous god-whale, Ahab's monomania expands into a deification of his self in his encounter with nature. He claims that he is self-sufficient and

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[42] For more details, see my discussion of Ahab and Calvinism in chapter IV (page).
[43] "The dubbing of Zoroastrians as 'Fire-worshippers' is an old and obvious misunderstanding of the religion"; Ahab thus does not worship the flame, but righteous deity signified by it ("Zoroastrianism" *Routledge*).
[44] Encyclopedia italics and parentheses.

an equal to the forces of nature. Therefore, his weapons to hunt down the whale can only be of the same supernatural origin.

Like no other character in Melville's novel, Ahab embodies the iconoclastic age in which Melville was writing.[45] In the context of Melville's quest for certainty,[46] Ahab represents relentless questing by all means. Melville's psychological need for religious belief is played out to its most extreme conclusion. Accordingly, Melville's fashions "from his own race and time his own Prometheus" to take up his cause and to quest without conscience (Taylor qtd. in Parker 178). Ahab loses his humanity in the hunt and thus becomes unfit to provide Melville with a practicable solution to the issue of uncertainty. If we assume that Melville creates Ahab to explore the possibility of monomaniacal questing, the creature (Ahab) ultimately fails to provide its creator (Melville) with the philosophical insight that the latter craves. Ahab embarks on a quest without conscience, a chase without scientific charts or moral limits on which Melville, due to his social obligations, cannot follow in the real world. Thus Ahab's questing without limits hardly presents the final solution to Melville's dilemma, as Ahab's methodology does not consider the quester's humanity.[47] However, Ahab exhibits the action of a man that follows the modus operandi suggested by the quest to its ultimate conclusion. To acquire knowledge of God that transcends faith and becomes factual

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[45] See chapter II.

[46] Ahab represents only one aspect of Melville's quest, as it may be argued that other minor characters embody different but related aspects of Melville's psyche. For example Starbuck inherits the role of the doubter who tries to cling to his faith.

[47] See also my discussion of Ahab in chapter IV (page).

certainty, the quester has to transcend existence itself. Ahab follows through with his task and like the first protoplasts in Eden, suffers the same punishment.

Melville's Reading of His Charts

Charts in their various forms play an important role in Melville's quest for certainty. He plays out his spiritual quest on the cardboard map of *Moby-Dick*'s fictional plot. Each of the pieces –i.e. each of the characters— follows a different course mapped out by a different chart, in its pursuit of certainty. In order to establish certainty, Melville appropriates pagan mysticism, and fatalism in his arsenal of the investigative methods employed by the various characters. Seen in combination, his characters cover a methodological spectrum that is as wide as a whole ocean, while Melville, in Hegelian[48] fashion, sits back and watches the products of his mind pursue their individual quests for him.

Charts help Melville's characters to cope with a seemingly hostile and secretive nature. Significantly, all charts lead their holders to a crossroad in their journey where they have to choose between their temporal existence and the fulfillment of their respective quest. Ahab's final encounter with the whale and Ishmael's rescue are two examples of this narrative strategy which Melville pursues with his charts. Seeing that any literal chart can only provide its holder with a linear course, I suggest that the

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[48] At the beginning of his reflections in the chapter "Consciousness" in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel advocates the "*receptive*" nature of his approach (79). He proposes to simply watch the mind unfold its potential stating that in "*ap*prehending it, we must refrain from trying to *com*prehend it" (Hegel 79).

concept of the chart in itself already suggests fatalism and finality. A chart establishes a correlation between the beginning and the end of a journey. Therefore a chart can only point to a finite number of locations. In like manner, charts by their very nature only allow for a finite number of interpretations of the events that Melville's characters encounter. As suggested in *Moby-Dick* and especially in "The Doubloon" chapter, existence is more complex than any manmade map that portends to render life meaningful can render it. The metaphysical aspect, i.e. the need to believe, in the human experience cannot be gagged by a chart. Charts are thus in adequate instruments for the attainment of certainty because they can only be as useful as their embedded principles are effective in ascertaining truth.

A chart and any representation thereof can only be an auxiliary device that helps its interpreter to make sense of the world. This device is necessarily a construct or representation of a reality that is removed from the thing itself. The reader of charts must thus either accept this inherent limitation of his tool or must completely disregard all charts. By endowing his principal characters with their own charts, Melville establishes that they must first define their own truth before embarking on their quests for certainty. Despite their shortcomings, charts are means to appropriate reality and indicators for the subjective nature of truth. Concurrently, the result of each quest for certainty can only lie within the scope of the specific chart that the quester chooses; the knowledge attained thereby will only support the predisposition of the quester. Thus, Melville seems to suggest that only questers with unconventional methods that lie outside their limited perview can obtain truly new knowledge. Melville then warns of the danger of losing

one's identity in the pursuit of certainty. The quester's own humanity appears to be the only limitation that Melville puts to the means of pursuit of certainty. For like the forbidden fruit in Eden, certain knowledge in matters of spirituality is for the gods alone.

IV. Dissecting the Whale

Herman Melville's assessment of the issue of uncertainty in the nineteenth century, as well as the examination of his technique of charting with which he attempts to resolve this issue, leads us to the third part of the discussion of uncertainty. Melville presents multiple potential approaches to solve the problem of attaining certainty in a treacherous and hostile world. I have demonstrated how Melville has assessed the issue of uncertainty as a psychological deficiency of his age and how charting presents the strategy to resolve these issues. The act of regaining certainty from nature marks the last step of Melville's quest.

I argue that Melville restores faith through his description of nature and the metaphor of whaling. These two factors form the basis for Melville's characters to negotiate faith. Ishmael and Ahab form the two prevalent approaches to the task: activity and contemplation. Melville seems to set up an experiment in *Moby-Dick*. He establishes two major agents, whom he moves like chess figures over the world map in pursuit of religious certainty. Ahab represents the active quester while Ishmael's role throughout the novel remains that of the contemplative measurer.[49] Melville thus has the luxury of watching his two antipodean questers come face to face with God. Since Ahab represents the physical act of whaling in the plot, while Ishmael focuses on the theoretical evaluation of the profession, I will focus on Ahab's character development to see how his methodology and faith develop and how Melville's notions of spiritual uncertainty are expressed by Hobbes, Spinoza, and Newman.

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[49] See especially the chapter "A Bower in the Arsacides" (Melville 346) and Walter Herbert's essay on Calvinism in *Moby-Dick*.

Ultimately, I suggest that Melville performs a constructive quest rather than a subversive attack on the zeitgeist of his age, in spite of his negative assessment of nature and the nature of God. I will analyze how Melville presents the process of attaining certainty through whaling.

Surface and Deep-Structure

In what may be called his inaugural address to the crew—or more specifically to Starbuck—Ahab asserts that "all visible objects are but as pasteboard masks" (Melville 140). This description of nature is in keeping with Thomas Hobbes consideration of the sensations of perception as mere "*seeming*, or *fancy*" (9).

Guided by the initial analogy of the pasteboard mask presented by Ahab in the "Quarter-Deck," Melville lifts the veil that nature pulls over the eyes of man in multiple manifestations in the text. The trope of the dichotomy of surface and deep structure is presented in the portrayal of nature as treacherous and vicious. Directing the reader's view at the "tranquil beauty […] of the ocean's skin," Melville notes in "The Gilder" that "one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it" (372). Melville hints at the malicious side of nature being "treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure" in "devilish brilliance and beauty" in the chapter "Brit," and openly exhibits this brutality in "The Shark Massacre," in which the crew witnesses a pack of sharks devour a dead whale that is tied to the side of the ship (225). Melville describes the unfeeling nature of the sharks as they "viciously snapped" at the whale's flesh and even "bit their own" (243). The creatures thus do not seem to possess restraint. The flesh they tear from the whale

seems to be "swallowed again and again by the same mouth," indicating a collective will that directs the sharks (243). This "Pantheistic vitality," as Melville suggests, indicates a volition manifested in nature. Nature is thus merely an expression of the divine will, and thus enables the individual to draw conclusions about God's character (243). Melville thus follows Spinoza's axiom that "Nature is the power of God," i.e. an expression of His will (Spinoza 25). However, Melville develops this thought further in this particular passage of the text by foreshadowing the concept of the panentheistic Over Soul that Ralph Waldo Emerson establishes in his essay "Nature." Melville deals with this issue extensively, when he depicts nature as an unforgiving force that hides behind the treacherous veil of the "pitiless sea" (405).

Also in "the Gilder," Starbuck makes a crucial statement that reflects on Melville's quest for certainty. Starbuck notes beholding this treacherous surface that he wants to forget the "teeth-tiered sharks" that lurk below (373). He wants to "look deep down and do believe," meaning that his wish for faith in God's benevolence outweighs his compulsion to acknowledge the brutal character of nature that he sees unfurled in the process of whaling, the sharks' attack on the whale corpse, and above all in Ahab's transgressions against humanity. Despite theses notions, Starbuck exclaims, "Let faith oust fact," signifying his decision to ignore the brutality of reality to keep his faith intact. This scene illustrates clearly how Melville makes nature the platform for a discussion of faith, and how the divide between the reality of nature and the romanticized notion of faith are played in the novel. We will see this inner conflict portrayed in more detail in Ahab's negotiation of his faith.

The division between the surface of the sea and the cruelty of the deep, which not even the fittest can survive, is only breached through the whale; and as the incident with Pip the cabin boy shows, only the whale can penetrate this barrier without harm. All the more curious is the scene when the benign mask of nature, represented by the calm sea, is fractured when Stubb kills his whale. The dying animal rolls over next to the ship "in blood which bubbled and seethed for furlongs" behind the ship and the whale, creating a "crimson pond" that "sent back its reflection in every face" on board" the Pequod (Melville 232). The imagery of the calm water coloring red with an unfeeling sun shining indifferently upon the bloodbath illustrates the cruel character of nature. The crew manages to make this cruelty of nature visible through killing the whale, tearing away the pasteboard mask, if only for an instant.

Equally violent as the process of killing the whale is the process of boiling down the whale blubber to sperm oil to distill the essence of the whale. The oil is used to fuel lamps, e.g. to create fire, which symbolizes independence from nature's arbitrariness. As we have seen in the discussion of Ahab's chart, fire in-itself is a religious symbol of divinity, as can be seen in Moses' encounter with God (*Exodus* 3:4ff Douay-Rheims Version). In Melville's narrative, however, fire becomes a symbol of human independence from God, rather than a sign of divine power. In this context, fire symbolizes mankind's control over nature. In whaling, Melville thus describes man's ascent to power and illustrates his ambition to dominate God. To achieve this end, man must not tremble before a malignant God that hides behind the "pasteboard mask" (140). Self-empowerment of "the prisoner" only occurs when he breaks "through the wall" of

nature that God has built to separate man from God (140). Accordingly, man becomes his own Prometheus by ripping nature's secrets from the god-whales bowels. As Walter Fuller Taylor notes in his article "Melville's Mythic Power," in Ahab Melville "fashioned from his own race and time his own Prometheus" in Ahab (Taylor 178).

If "The Doubloon" chapter presents us with an idea about the contemplative and analytic faculties that Melville saw in his fellow man, looking at surfaces and deep-structures provides us with an understanding of the obstacles individuals face when trying to chart their course through existence. In this context, we may be reminded of Reynolds' evaluation of Melville's style as the subversive "dark reform mode" (152). Although I disagree with Reynolds' overall evaluation of Melville's mode as merely subversive and intrinsically hopeless and depressing, it seems clear that Melville steers clear of any form of euphoria about the fact that he is able to provide his characters with an abundance of charts on their quest. The turbulent surface-deep-structure-dichotomy relativizes the chart motif as an anchor of meaning for the characters.

For example, each observer of the doubloon is able to make an initial assessment of the coin's value by utilizing a subjective form of chart in reading the coin. However, the deep-structural symbolic meaning of the coin remains hidden to them as they are confined by the narrative time of the plot. Accordingly, all of Melville's characters are merely able to navigate on the surface structure of the world they inhabit. In fact, Ahab is the only one who strives to penetrate this veil between reality and providence by the use of his intuitive chart.[50] Arguably he succeeds in transcending reality as he is symbolically

[50] See previous chapter.

dragged down into the deep (structure) by the white whale. Ahab's initial assessment of the whale's role in divine providence is correct, as he finds in it the symbol of the barrier between the natural and the supernatural principle. Melville's dissection of the whale is a quasi dissection of the nineteenth-century debate about scriptural interpretation; the cutting away of the whale's layers of blubber represents the gradual stripping away of biblical authority. As Elisa New notes in her essay "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville's *Moby-Dick*," Melville illustrates the pressing issue of "unification of the disjointed scripture" in the nineteenth century by assessing Ishmael and Ahab as representatives of opposed textual principles that Melville unites in his novel (New 288). Melville wrote in an ideological mileu in which God's communication with man is, at best, obscured or at its worst completely unintelligible. Melville's critique of the Bible, nature, and God in many respects runs counter to the belief in God's benevolent nature. Hobbes, Spinoza, and Paine claim that this benevolence can be detected through the study of nature through science, while Newman states that faith as a creative faculty has to guide man in his search for God. In contrast, the very faith that Newman praises represents the object of Melville's quest. Melville cannot find this faculty of faith in himself, but it seems as if he cannot trust nature either as the observations he makes about it only display nature's cruelty. Thus Melville wishes to postulate a malignant God who ravages and mocks, reasoning man, of His creation. The relation of nature to man thus appears to be antagonistic, for Melville expresses this relationship through the whaling metaphor. As Lewis Mumford notes in "The Fable and the Myth of the White Whale," "The whale is Nature, the nature he captures […] a

Nature that threatens man and calls forth his heroic powers" (169). Nature represented by the whale "checks the spirit of man"; the whale thus becomes the proctor for man's test of the divine will (Mumford in Parker 169). However, the role of the whale in general, like its token, the doubloon, remains uncertain in and for itself. For example, H. Bruce Franklin notes in his analysis *The Wake of the Gods* that Melville postulates "the whale's history is as dubious, as equivocal and as mysterious as his divinity" (54). Franklin observes correctly that the problem with Melville's presentation of the whale – as with the doubloon before—does not lie in the lack of attempts to define of the leviathan but rather in the "many degrees of assertiveness" that Melville presents (Franklin 62). The leviathan is divine; yet, each new representation of the whale merely reiterates his divinity, while leaving unclear which divinity it embodies and what its character is. Franklin defends this notion by claiming that Melville merely "asserts positive doubt." The whale to Melville represents the divine, but the story of *Moby-Dick* merely underscores the whales' roles as representative of the divine (55). Divinity is an attribute that, according to Franklin, limits Moby Dick; "it is to limit, not to extend" the meaning of the whale as a force of nature (65). Although I do not share Franklin's hypothesis that "Moby Dick is the Destroyer" of the Egyptian god Osiris, it seems logical that the whale's rendering as divine makes him definite, at least more definite than Ahab's classification of the whale him as an "inscrutable thing," (Franklin 72).

The Whaling Metaphor

The profession of whaling becomes an elaborate metaphor for the act of interpreting the metaphysical cipher that the whale poses to its hunter. In describing the profession of whaling, Ishmael examines every aspect of whales: their behavior, their genus, the rendering in art, even their physiognomy. Ishmael assumes that "in the internal parts of the whale, in his anatomy – there at least we should be able to hit the right classification" and thus arrive at certainty (Melville 120).

In his lengthy "cetology chapters," Melville uses whaling as a metaphor for his quest for certainty. The dissection of the whale represents the search for truth and reliable knowledge about God and His relationship to man. As Franklin notes, "*Moby-Dick* reveals, layer by layer the kinds of truth incarnated by the White Whale" (54). In other words, Melville discusses faith through illustrating the dissection of the whale. Of course, Melville's purpose in all of this remains the restoration of certainty through the text. This restoration, as Melville supposes, occurs when one of his characters finds certainty of faith. However, faith, as the historical discussion shows, requires conviction rather than empirical proof.

Faith

Thomas Hobbes begins his discussion of God and faith with a definition of religion, which he defines religion as the "*fear* of power invisible, feigned by the mind, or imagined from tales publicly allowed" (37). Hobbes goes on to deduce religious terminology from his first assumptions about human discourse. The term *faith* represents

discourse about personal contemplations and is "not so much concerning the thing [discussed], as the person" and the credibility of that person's testimony (43). Belief that is "drawn from [the] authority of men only and their writings; whether they be sent from God or not, is Faith in men only" (44). Hobbes even expands this rule to scripture when he declares that "when we believe that the Scriptures are the word of God, having no immediate revelation from God himself, our belief […] is in the church; whose word we take and acquiesce therein" (44). Thus Hobbes establishes a strict connection between statements and their sources, allowing no other authority than that of the source itself and thus denying both prophets and scripture the agency to express God's will.[51] Making declarations "in the name of God" therefore becomes impossible within Hobbes' system, as these declarations are always purely subjective.

While Hobbes ties the problem of faith to the uncertainty of the authenticity of divine communication, Benedict de Spinoza identifies the problem of faith as an inherent part of the human condition. "Inconsistency," he proclaims in the preface to his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670) is the reason for social instability, which is why religion is invested "with such pomp and ceremony, that it may rise superior to every shock" (5). Paradoxically, Spinoza seems to defend the formalized practice of religion, while simultaneously making a case for free will and against dogma, claiming that "without freedom, piety cannot flourish" (6). Spinoza's tone seems diplomatic and anxious not to offend, even though the results of his analyses could not be more revolutionary for his time. He clearly breaks out of the deterministic confines of the

[51] For a discussion of scriptural authority and the reliability of prophetic testimony, see chapter II.

Calvinism, and grants man a free will and thereby power over his own fate. However, Spinoza finds in human "minds also the mind of God and His eternal thoughts […] impressed" (24). He thus postulates a divine connection between mankind and God, while deviating from the concept of human depravity. Spinoza's concept of certainty of faith thus imposes a double standard on man's capacity to know the true nature of God. Man can only obtain knowledge about God through his own independent reason. However, his mind is merely an imprint in miniature of the divine mind of God. Thus one may argue that any knowledge that the human mind conceives of is merely discovered because of the human mind's similarity to the divine mind of God. Spinoza confirms that man has to use the mental faculties within him in order to arrive at certainty. He would therefore argue that Melville were justified in his whaling analogy for the search for certainty. However, while Spinoza's Arminian axiom of free will may confirm Melville's methodology, Spinoza's comment on the origin of the human mind denies the possibility of man ever attaining certain knowledge about God. If God made man but a miniature copy of Himself, it seems logical that the faculties of this copy may not carry the individual to a state of knowledge that can rival the original. Thus while Spinoza would deem Melville's quest a noble display of human inquisitiveness, he would still rule out that Melville's quest could push certainty beyond the quester's reach. To be entirely certain of God's existence, man would have to think like God and thus become God. The quester would thus have to become the very thing that he quests for. Melville realizes this inherent contradiction that Spinoza delineates in his *Treatise*, and therefore makes Ahab a

central character. Ahab is the embodiment of unrelenting activity. Ahab's unrelenting zeal does not accept any boundaries, a predicament that ultimately leads to his demise.

John Henry Newman is much more positivistic than either Spinoza or Melville could be in man's ability to attain certainty. Newman seems to second the notion that questing can lead to certainty, when he proclaims that "we must assume something to prove anything, and can gain nothing without venture" (215). Newman thus encourages the first step of the quest, which in Melville's case is the assumption that there is objective truth and certainty that can be unraveled through the act of questing. Newman declares that the motivation for such first assumptions, and thus the motivation for the active pursuit of their logical conclusions, forms the basis of faith. Beyond that, Newman states that faith uses "a method […] less open to analysis" than reason, and is therefore more prone to provide divine truths as it "rises above Reason in its subject matter" (216). Thus faith is a kind of reason, but one in which "much of the grounds of inference cannot be exhibited" (218). The tools by which faith provides insight are not fully assessable by the human understanding. Like Spinoza before him, Newman thus claims that human understanding has a naturally imposed limit. However, while Melville sees limitation as a challenge, an attitude that he expresses through the character Ahab, Newman renders this limit a positive aspect of the human mind. Faith is a mental faculty that resists empirical analysis; therefore, its potential for being of use on a quest for certainty cannot be rendered accurately either. For individuals that manage to tap into their potential for faith, faith is limitless and grants confidence and certainty. Thus Newman sees faith as a

positive, albeit dormant, aspect of the human mind that has to be activated in order to be of service to the individual.

This process of activating one's faith, according to Newman, requires courage, and the individual brave enough to have faith follows the pattern of activity that is already suggested by his senses. Melville seemingly agrees when he writes that Ishmael seeks to exorcize the "November" (18) in his soul, meaning that which Newman calls "that cold, skeptical, critical tone of mind, which has no inward sense of […] Providence, no desire to approach its God" (220). Through Ishmael then, Melville embarks on a quest for God rather than sitting "at home waiting for the fearful clearness of His coming" (Newman 220, 221). However, Melville does not feel the inner warmth of faith that Newman promises, a disappointment that manifests itself in Ahab's rage. In her study *The Pusher and the Sufferer*, Suzanne Stein describes Melville's hate as a rage directed at "a god he conceives as dictatorial, calculating" (19). Meanwhile, Newman would praise the mere fact that Melville ventures to write a book and thus dares to quest for certainty rather than to be stifled by religious doubt, and praise what Stein calls a "fear of staying still" as a positive incentive of activity (Stein 19). Melville's constructive defiance thus finds support in Newman's assessment of faith as a creative faculty of the human mind. If nothing else, the activity of questing presupposes the hope of finding something else. From Newman's perspective, one can argue that Melville would never have started *Moby-Dick* if he had not believed that his faith could be salvaged through his creative effort.

In Sermon X, which he preached on the morning of Epiphany in 1839, Newman exemplifies the contrast between faith and reason. He bases his discourse on the Bible quote from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews which defines faith as "the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not" (Heb 11:1, Douay-Rheims Version). Newman claims that "faith is an instrument of knowledge and action […], a principle *sui generis*, distinct from those which nature supplies and in particular […] independent of […] Reason" (179). Faith, as Newman claims, is not merely a weak form of reason, but a "creative power" of the human mind and therefore "something higher than Reason" (Newman 180, 183). Faith is the sum of "feelings not natural to fallen man"; i.e. the impulse of seeking God comes to man "only of supernatural grace" (193). Newman thus postulates that the human capacity to seek moral concepts outside of himself already functions as proof for the divine character of faith, if not for the existence of God.

Newman also establishes a relation between testimony and faith on the one side, and experience and reason on the other side while acknowledging that "Reason is our ultimate informant concerning all knowledge" (181). Like Paine and Spinoza, Newman seems to propose for the individual to exercise prudence when making decisions relating to faith. "Faith is actually grounded on Reason" and acts of faith may "be justified, by Reason, without therefore being […] dependent on it" (Newman 183). He retraces the general assessment of faith as weak reason back to the fact that "Faith is content with weaker evidence" (185). While faith still requires evidence, its creative nature compels the individual to make a decision without having empirical evidence to judge the object

of that decision. Faith is in so far volitional "easiness […] of conviction" as the individual can either believe or not believe in light of the absence of evidence (187).

Newman admits that "Faith is influenced by previous notices, prepossessions, and […] prejudices" and thus implies that the individual can never be entirely certain whether their actions are truly inspired by faith or merely their socialization (187). However, faith has practical assets as it does not require "diligent collection of evidence" and "balancing of rival testimony"; on the contrary, faith to Newman represents a "principle of multitude and for conduct" (Newman 188). As a creative power, faith represents the realization of hope: "it is the reckoning that to be, which it hopes to be" (190). Faith, it seems to Newman, is less "Religious Truth" than a commitment to accept certain facts that are not "the result of an argument" (199, 198).

Newman would thus appreciate Melville's quest for certainty in *Moby-Dick* as the impulse for such a quest to him already communicates certainty of faith. Unfortunately, in Newman's ideology, Melville falls short of attaining faith through his methodology. The chapter "The Doubloon" illustrates how Melville tries to resolve uncertainty by argumentation and interpretation. Even if we argue that Melville celebrates the multiplicity of perspectives in his doubloon chapter Melville would still fail to attain faith under Newman's definition of the term, because faith does not stand at the end of a chain of reasoning but represents a conscious decision to believe. If Melville has to convince himself of the strength of faith before he applies it, his analysis cannot bring forth spiritual certainty.

Above all, a comparison between Newman with Melville's methodology illustrates a fundamental flaw in Melville's methodology in his quest for certainty. Melville seeks knowledge that is of the category of empirical certainty while expecting this knowledge to provide him with the same emotional rewards that faith would supply. Melville cannot follow Newman's simplistic advice to just decide to believe because his disposition is investigative. To return to the example of the doubloon, the fact that Melville does present the doubloon as an interpretative prism already disqualifies him to obtain the form of unconditional faith that he wishes to obtain.[52] One could thus argue that Melville's demands on faith are too high, as faith entails a willingness of the individual to belief its doctrines without proof that is of the same nature as empirical evidence. In essence, Melville attempts to attain spiritual knowledge that is of the same category of reliability as empirical knowledge, arguably an impossible endeavor. However, the term "faith" itself is subjective and thus cannot provide a resolution to the general state of uncertainty that Melville identifies in his age.

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[52] Ironically, Newman was accused of having no real faith because of his superior ability to apply logic in his arguments. Newman (like Melville) found himself in a spiritual crisis towards the end of his career and struggled to regain his faith after having been pressured out of his Office as Minister at Oxford by the Protestant Orthodoxy who did not approve his attempt at a via media between Protestantism and Catholic doctrine. For more details see especially chapter IV, "History of My Religious Opinions from 1841 to 1845," in *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1865).

Ahab

The attribute of divinity in the leviathan, is discussed in Ishmael's account of cetology, is enacted by Ahab in particular, who sees himself as a godlike agent of fate. In this Melville already illustrates the dichotomy between activity and passiveness in the two characters. In her essay "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves!" (1998) Elisa New establishes that Ahab is the history-altering force of Christian historicism, while Ishmael represents Judaism's contemplative recording. Accordingly, Ahab becomes the driving force in the plot, the physical quest for certainty. He embodies the profession of whaling as it metaphorically dissects the god-whale in order to arrive at certainty. Thus a closer look at Ahab's character will shed light on Melville's philosophy of activity in his quest.

Ahab's quest is not merely a quest for vengeance; his revenge for his physical dismemberment does not lie in the killing of the whale, but rather in a pursuit that is as relentless and deterministic as he makes the whale out to be. Considering himself "madness maddened," Ahab presumably becomes like the unknown force that drives the white whale: indifferent and above human sentiment (Melville 143). Suzanne Stein agrees with Melville's implication that Ahab "in a fundamental sense, does not feel"; "not his misery and little else" (16). However, she claims that Ahab does not undergo any development in the novel, "remaining in the same state of misery at the end of the novel as he was at the beginning," and that Ahab sees himself as the fated agent of God from the very beginning (16). It is this emotional emptiness that elevates Ahab above the rest of the crew, making him, according to Stein, godlike. I disagree with this assessment, for the simple reason that Ahab repeatedly stresses the strength of his will before he enters

into the introspective last conversation with Starbuck in second day of "The Chase," in which Ahab arrives at his epiphany that he is "Fates' lieutenant" (418). It is the physical pain of dismemberment that motivates him and the psychological pain of alienation form society that causes Ahab's intense melancholy.

Ultimately, Ahab seeks to render the unknown harmless by killing the white whale; if he can catch the beast and kill it, he will make his faceless fear tangible. Ahab seeks to meet the god that lurks behind the mask of the whale on eye-level. However, Ahab's transgression against his humanity is a tool, a strategy to approximate his will to that which he beholds operating through the white whale. Contrary to Stein's claim, I argue that Ahab does indeed feel himself. In fact, Ahab's emotions are important to Melville's quest, as Ahab represents a vital part of Melville's strategy to obtain certainty. Without his deep passions, Ahab would not be of use to Melville, because whatever degree of certainty Ahab may attain could not be vicariously experienced, either by Melville or any other reader of the novel. It is therefore crucial that Ahab does not become emotionless and thus, as Stein would have it, divine. Ahab is obsessed with the mechanisms that drive divine agents on earth because ultimately, he realizes that he is himself such an agent. But his inner transformation proceeds gradually in a way that the reader –and the author—may emulate to attain the same metamorphosis. Melville is interested to explore and at the same time demonstrate what kind of transgression against human nature is necessary in order to obtain certainty about the divine.

Ahab sees his own will opposed, not to the will of the white whale but to that of the puppet master that pulls the strings of the leviathan. According to Ahab's statements

in “The Quarter-Deck,” the whale challenges him not because he bit his leg off but because the whale represents merely a contraption, a facade that hides the face of the divine principle that tasks Ahab to come and seek out the true character of the divine. To Ahab, the whale is not just an abstract supernatural hieroglyph for the existence of the divine, but a physical gateway through which this supernatural force becomes tangible for Ahab. He pursues his quest with this awareness of opposition and invests real emotion into his pursuit. It is this emotional display that makes Ahab valuable to Melville in his quest for certainty. If Ahab were as unfeeling as the divine principle he pursues, identification with the character would be impossible. For Melville the quest would be lost and whatever evidentiary certainty Ahab would attain would be worthless to Melville, as this certainty produced by an inhuman methodology. If Ahab, as Suzanne Stein would have it, was unfeeling throughout the novel, his evolution from a free-willing Arminian to deterministic Calvinist, would seem less dramatic. This loss of individuality, resulting from the realization that his course in life is in fact predetermined, would seem less shocking if Ahab did not have a final bit of humanity to lose. In fact, Melville justifies Ahab’s decision to turn his back on civilization when Ishmael claims “what are the comprehensible terrors of man compared with the interlinked terrors and wonders of God.” (98).Without Ahab’s repeated introspection, Melville would not be able to identify with his fictional alter ego. The reader would be indifferent to Ahab’s transgressions against humanity. Maintaining a distinction between human and divine characters thus is essential for Melville’s narrative technique.

Ahab and Calvinism

As Ahab becomes the ultimate agent of determinism, Melville incorporates Calvinist elements in *Moby-Dick*. The bleak outlook Calvinism takes on the nature of mankind correlates to several aspects of Ahab's character profile. According to the concept of total depravity, the foremost principle of the five points of Calvinism, human beings are unfit to make innately good and moral decisions because they are subjected to sin from birth. [53] All that appears good in mankind is really decreed by God. Humans can thus never return to the state before the original sin, in which they had blind unquestioning faith in God. Accordingly, Ahab enters the world of the open sea tainted and marked by sin. He bears several marks of divine encounters on his body: the crucifixion that marks his entire body and the leg he lost in his encounter with the white whale. To Ahab, these are physical signs that he has been in contact with a divine entity. For if God can smite him, Ahab's reason dictates that he might strike out against his punisher as well. Ahab considers himself an equal to the unseen divine principle that he fathoms behind nature.[54] Ahab wears his scars as a badge of his divine encounter, and as physical evidence of arbitrary "God-bullying," as Gary Sloan notes in his essay "*Moby-Dick* Broiled in Hell Fire" (64).

Another central factor in Calvinism that relates to the plot of *Moby-Dick* consists of the individual's ignorance to his own salvation. A person whom God has chosen for

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[53] "Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto." *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1648), Chapter IX: "Of Free Will," p. 2, 3ff.

[54] "Who is over me?" (Melville 140).

salvation might as well be a noble king as he might be a humble thief. Significantly, Ahab however reads the signs on his body as marks of divine election. He is quite sure of his instrumental role in the plot and thus assumes that he has been chosen to encounter God face to face. One may thus see Ahab as a typological Moses. Indeed, Melville's allusions to the biblical King Ahab support, as Franklin points out, the notion that Ahab embodies the type of the "priest-king god," just as Moby Dick is the eternal destroyer (74). However, Ahab binds the will of his crew not because he has been charged by God to do so, but because he needs their skills to pursue his monomaniac quest. Ahab has no reverence for community or what may be called the common good. Other than the biblical figure Moses, the end of Ahab's quest, in its Arminian state, does not entail social change but a private satisfaction. It is only in the second "The Chase" chapter that Ahab turns to determinism and begins to see himself as part of a cosmic whole. Quite contrary to Moses though, even as a Calvinist Ahab—in un-Mosaic fashion—remains focused on *his* role in the divine plot and does not care for the fate of his charges, the crew. However, Ahab's attitude is in keeping with Calvin's teachings. Calvin postulates that God selects certain individuals from the fallen race of mankind into heaven, pardoning their original sin by limited atonement. However, according to the principle of irresistible grace, the selected person cannot influence this divine providence. A person may thus not be selected on the basis of faith or virtue but by God's arbitrary choosing.

Calvinism thus confirms the sovereignty and supreme authority of God and underscores the total dependence of the individual on God. Ironically, Ahab comes to this realization in his final conversation with Starbuck in the chapter "The Symphony." Ahab

doubts his independent agency when Starbuck prophetically bids him to "fly these deadly waters" (Melville 406). For the first time, Ahab considers the inevitability of his pursuit of the white whale. Like Starbuck he feels the "natural lovings and longings" that make him want to return to his family (Melville 406). However, his zeal to kill the whale is stronger than his urge to embrace his loved ones. Melville here displays Ahab's tragic flaw, as the captain is emotionally unable to accept the human redemption offered to him by Starbuck. The second in command offers Ahab the consolation of a "human eye" which to Ahab becomes "a magic glass" that shows him his family one last time before he encounters his doom (Melville 406). Ahab has chosen to cast his humanity aside and to accept the fatedness of his existence. Ahab realizes his role in the greater context of a cosmic theater; he also rejects Starbucks plea to return to humanity and his family. Ahab's sin is not his quest for the whale, but his decision to abandon society because he feels "deadly faint, bowed, and humped" (Melville 406). This, I argue is the fundamental flaw that Melville shows in Ahab's actions and death.

Ahab's persona is literally iconoclastic as he strives to "strike through the mask" at the reasoning, "inscrutable thing" behind it (Melville 140). However, Ahab firmly believes his quest will lead him to the hostile force behind the curtain. If there were indeed "naught beyond" (Melville 140), Ahab would strike out in vain against a "dumb brute" (Melville 139) as Starbuck initially suggest. But his quest to reveal the intelligence behind the whale appears to be based on the assumption that something must exist behind the mask.

Ironically, Ahab's quest is to detect the "hidden lord and master" (Melville 406) that guides both his actions and the actions of the whale. In the course of his quest, Ahab negotiates his volition and grows increasingly unsure whether he possesses free will. In one of his final dialogs with Starbuck, the captain inadvertently enumerates the three entities that can possibly determine his actions when he asks, "Is it I, God, or who that lifts this arm?" (Melville 406). Ahab's question might prove worthy of closer examination: Previously Ahab had considered himself the master of his own fate because he is endowed with free will and can thus volitionally chose to rebel against God. The pronoun "I" represents this position in his question. However as he feels compelled to act against his natural urge to return to his family, Ahab begins to dispute his unrestricted personal agency. Eventually he comes to realize that it is indeed God who determines his fate and finally embraces God's supernatural authority over his actions. Interestingly, Ahab's new-found devotion to the divinity amplifies his zeal to slay the whale, i.e. to fulfill his purpose,[55] because Ahab's mental transformation, the whale appears like a fellow actor in a play that was "rehearsed" for "a billion years" before their present existence, as Ahab defines existence in his dialog with Starbuck in the chapter "The Chase – Second Day" (Melville 418).

One might wonder whether Ahab acts out of Calvinist conviction or whether his sudden religious devotion is merely an argumentative charade. The eloquence, calculating zeal, and experience he demonstrates throughout the voyage attest to the latter conclusion. However Ahab also demonstrates a nihilistic fear early in the plot, which lies

[55] One may also note that, as a Zoroastrian, Ahab worships his god through defiance.

at the very heart of his existence. Ahab's change of heart in the matter of faith becomes understandable if one considers the third part of his rhetorical question: if neither Ahab nor God directs Ahab's action, "who" does? The question remains unanswered. Only the unknown divine principle or the human mind may control a person's actions. Had Ahab chosen the third and more indefinite option of "who," he would have acknowledged that his own existence and motivations are incomprehensible to him. In the absence of meaning, he might have faced the dreaded "naught beyond" that may lurk behind the mask of divinity (Melville 140). As "every probability" to Ahab is the "next thing to a certainty," he considers this fear very seriously (Melville 168). Accordingly the only concept that Ahab could derive from the relative pronoun "who" would be constant doubt, i.e. uncertainty in its most extreme form. With doubt being the only constant, and the ultimate expression of instability, Ahab's existence would become void of purpose, as "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth" (Melville 331). Indeed, the world would be an "empty cipher," which is the only solution to the question of purpose and therefore the meaning of life, that is unacceptable to both Ishmael and Ahab in the text (Melville 331). After all it is the "inscrutable thing" that he despises (Melville 140).

The evil that Ahab battles is really a void of meaning. However, as R.E. Watters notes in "Melville's Metaphysics of Evil" from 1940, Ahab creates this evil himself when he places "himself as the centre of all reality" and thus creates a "polarity between good and evil" after which "he seeks an intelligible explanation of this great dichotomy," which he created (Watters qtd. in Parker 183). Ahab poses as a thinking spiritual being at

one end of an equation that he tries to balance by investing meaning into an apparently supernatural occurrence, the white whale. It is therefore necessary for Ahab's mentality that there is meaning behind his physical dismemberment and the whale holds a truth and intelligence that is bigger than his physical appearance. Ahab thus projects the meaning of his own existence into the whale. Accordingly, Watters suggests that Ahab, and consequently Melville, create the very problem which they seek to solve.

Ahab's inability to lead a constructive life, to return to his wife and child, and to embrace the duties that the family community charges him with, leave him bound to the task of slaying the whale who symbolizes this inability to feel at home in the community. Ahab's rendering of the whale as his personal nemesis by divine decree would be merely a result of Ahab's lack of social skills. Watter's assumption also concurs with Ahab's Arminian mindset early on in the plot, as Watters presupposes a free will in man. However, Ahab's conversion to Calvinism negates Watter's interpretation. Before his final confrontation with the whale, Ahab no longer presumes that he has a choice to fight the whale or return to his family. On the contrary, Ahab assumes that his very existence is based on encountering the beast which, of course, irrevocably precipitates his doom.

Ahab has no choice but to accept the role of being "Fates' lieutenant," because in this way only does his life's quest attain meaning (Melville 418). After this final act of self-recognition, "Ahab is for ever Ahab," meaning that he embraces Calvinist determinism and the fate allotted to him (Melville 418). By claiming that his role in life was prescribed unto him "a billion years before this ocean rolled," Ahab constructs his own mythical origin and assumes his place in a deterministic universe (Melville 418). In

that respect, Ahab receives that which he thought to have possessed all along: purpose. However, he realizes that his role is not to fight "a God who is a brutal monster," as Walter Herbert assumes, but to encounter the whale as an equal, divine agent (1613). The animal is similar to Ahab in that its fate is also controlled by God with the difference that Ahab is to perish in the encounter. Ultimately, it is irrelevant who leaves the battlefield victoriously. The only important factor seems to be that the grand deterministic cosmic clockwork keeps running.

Ahab's mental evolution throughout the plot illustrates that he ultimately does not battle the whale and what lurks behind it, but he rather seeks to negate the possibility that there exists no meaning behind nature. His ultimate motivation for questing consists in the fear of discovering that existence is void of meaning. Insofar, Ahab succeeds in his quest. His death is not in vain, as he valiantly battles the monster and perishes in the attempt.

With the character Ahab, Herman Melville arguably creates a personified case study of the state of the religious mind in the nineteenth century, and of his personal quest for religious certainty. Throughout the novel, Ahab evolves from a free-willing Arminian who sets out to take revenge on God and ascend to his level, to a fatalist who fully embraces the Calvinist concept of determinism. One might argue that Ahab, as a fictional character, is pursuing the author as his creator and thus becomes the figure on the board that is most directly connected to Melville. If this thought is brought to its logical conclusion Melville's quest may be thus resolved: if the fictional character Ahab

can strike out against the God who inscrutably weaves on the loom of fate behind the narrative's reality Melville will perhaps be able to find certainty as well.

Ishmael

As Ahab quests to obtain certainty by physically encountering the whale, Ishmael dissects the concept of the whale in the cetology chapters. Ishmael's enthusiastic statement "I want to know what whaling is. I want to see the world," to Captain Peleg's question as to why the young man wants to go whaling, introduces one of Melville's primary metaphors in the text: whaling as a means to arrive at certainty about the existence of God. Melville establishes that the whale is a metaphor of divine meaning, i.e. certainty. Ishmael initially does not state that he wants to kill a whale and fight him to the death; he wants to see and *know* him. In this context, knowing the whale must be read as *understanding* the whale. This term incorporates Emerson's distinction of tuition and intuition at the same time. Ishmael hopes to learn about the divine nature of the whale by studying the whale from every angle imaginable. Therefore, Ishmael represents the empiricist in Melville's quest for certainty. His role is contemplative and less dramatic than Ahab's; however, his goal is the same, to obtain certainty about the existence of the divinity.

Melville acknowledges empirical science as one among several charts on his quest for certainty. This acknowledgement is uttered by Ishmael, who introduces his pseudo-scientific whaler's perspective into the narrative. In "A Bower in the Arsacides," as well as in the subsequent chapters "Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton," "The

Fossil Whale," and "Does the Whale's Magnitude Diminish? – Will He Perish," Ishmael accommodates empirical knowledge about sperm whales and combines it with biblical and pagan accounts that render whales as immortal godlike creatures. He discusses the possibility of sperm whales decreasing in size and eventually perishing. When elaborating on the perishing of whales in the periphery of the temple of Denderah in Upper Egypt, the speaker renders the whaler as a religious person who is not a member of the "common people" (Melville 351). The Nantucket whaler becomes Melville's critical measuring rod for scientific and mystical explanations of the whale. The whaler does not take "a Whale's Rib of an incredible length for a Miracle" because he has seen the animal first hand and has boiled down blubber of whales of different sizes (351). However, a whaler will still "silently worship" the majesty of the mysterious animal at Denderah (351). Melville thus illustrates the tension between science and spirituality within the whaler in his attempt to explain the pedigree of the Leviathan, which dates back to a "wondrous period, ere time itself can be set to have begun; for time began with man" (350).

Nowhere in *Moby-Dick* does Melville express the expectation that his age employs empiricism as the ultimate means to certainty more clearly than in the chapter "A Bower in the Arsacides." There, Ishmael conducts measurements on a whale skeleton with his "green measuring-rod" that the native priests of the island deem holy (346). Ironically, the priests quarrel amongst one other about the official measurements of their God, admonishing Ishmael "How now! […] darest thou measure this our God! That's for us" (346). Melville makes a practical joke against doctrine in this encounter of Ishmael

and the priests. The priests, who are the interpreters of the divine will, cannot decide among themselves what the correct physical measurement of their God is. They thus admit their inability to provide precise and reliable interpretation of the will of the deity, which, as I have demonstrated in my discussion of prophets,[56] should be the foremost duty of their profession. Instead of waiting for the priests of his time to agree on how to read God's reflection in nature, Ishmael measures the whalebones with a stick he carved. Ishmael seemingly mocks church authority by making his own measurements on the God. At the same time, he simplifies Melville's quest for spiritual certainty by implying that all it takes to fully understand a deity is to measure its earthly form. Ironically, the priests support this notion by confusing the physical measuring of the god with the metaphysical measuring of his power. Thus Ishmael merely performs pseudo science and refutes the concept of the "open-ended universe," which Charles Darwin would make popular in the middle of the nineteenth century (Hovenkamp 200).

Ishmael realizes later on in his narrative that his attempt at defining the whale is futile, since neither approach describes the leviathan exhaustively. Ishmael looks to the Bible to find equals in age to the mystical leviathan; however, even "Methusela seems a schoolboy" because "Ahab's harpoon had shed older blood than the Pharaos'" (Melville 350). As Ishmael seeks to "look at his matter from every light" (352) his rendering of the sperm whale is twofold. On the one hand, he accounts for the whales' mythological origin and its "unsourced existence," thereby reestablishing Ahab's fear of the great empty cipher of existence (350). For if the whale has no beginning in time and has

[56] See chapter II.

ubiquity in space, it is, by definition, a god. However the term "God," already entails a certainty by definition that does not apply to the whale. Ishmael demonstrates that the whale resists any attempt to define and thus limit it, be it theoretically by Ishmael or physically by Ahab. On the other hand, Ishmael grounds his investigation in the practicality of whaling by answering his rhetorical questions from the perspective of a whaler, not a cleric or church historian. However, Ishmael never directly engages the whale. He is employed in dissecting the dead animal, which has already had the life force driven out of it. Unfortunately, the whale in its dissected form cannot reveal any "secret thing that is in" it, as the soul that formerly dwelled in it has been driven out in the battle with the crew, as Ahab demonstrates when he commands the whale's "vast and venerable head" to speak in "The Sphynx" (Melville 249). Ishmael thus finds himself grounded by his own inactivity. His knowledge about the species of the whale grants him contemplative power over the whale as a concept but he lacks the will to action physically to encounter the whale. By the same token, Ahab possesses the iron will to fight the whale to the death, but does not posses the theoretic knowledge to make sense of its philosophical implications. Ahab's soliloquy about his role in the divine comedy of the fight between him and the whale demonstrates that his activity has given him riddles which he is unable to decipher.

Ishmael does not face this uncertainty of his own identity because he remains caught up in the daily duties of a sailor's life. The community with the other sailors keeps him form questioning his role in the quest for the whale, as he concentrates his contemplative powers on the rest of the crew. In "A Squeeze of the Hand," Ishmael feels

"divinely free from all ill-will"; as he squeezes his "co-laborers' hands," he finds himself overcome by an "affectionate, friendly, loving feeling" of community (Melville 323). This overemphasis of community underscores that while Ishmael does not find out about the nature of the whale, or God, he finds the consolation of community and friendship, which ultimately dispatches the November from his soul. In contrast, Ahab rejects Starbuck's suggestion to return to his family. Starbuck manages to divert Ahab's monomaniacal view, even if only for a few moments, back to civilization and communion with his race and away from "the desolation and solitude" that his life has been (405).[57] Accordingly, Melville proposes that community as a saving aspect of human existence. The state of community allows the individual to rest in the luxury of inactivity.

This state of complacency created by community becomes apparent when Ishmael renders the whale "immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality" (Melville 350). The leviathan thus being indefinable attains a dual definition. The whale "having been before all time, must needs exist after all human ages are over" (354). The word choice in this passage suggests a fusion of empirical science and scriptural accounts. Ishmael thus advocates a methodology of reconciliation between science and religion that exhibits the nineteenth century attitude that "knowledge about God and

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[57] Interestingly, Hawthorne paints a different picture when he addresses communion of the human race in "Young Goodman Brown." A communion that is formed in the wilderness – in Hawthorne's forest and on Melville's seven seas– represents a satanic bond of conspiracy against virtue and God. Hawthorne describes how Brown is forever embittered from seeing his whole village (his community) worship the devil in the forest, while Melville has Ishmael survive to tell the tale, because Ishmael has learned to appreciate community and friendship

knowledge about the world are of the same kind" (Bacon qtd. in Hovenkamp 23). Ishmael accepts this dualism and at the same time validates an ambiguity in the definition, as the whale cannot be both immortal and mortal. Whether it is Starbuck's faith, Pip's insanity, Queequeg's cosmology, or Ahab's monomania, every member of the crew ultimately perishes in using his strategic chart while pursuing a single dimensional certainty. Ishmael presents the exception to this rule: He accepts the boundaries nature sets, abandons his measuring of the god, and finds himself spared from the fate of those who follow Ahab beyond the limits of human knowledge.

Ironically, Melville seems to suggest that one must be willing to put existence on the line to uncover its hidden meaning. Community might provide happiness; however, it does not grant the category of certainty that is equal to empirical knowledge. As Hovenkamp notes, "Americans want[ed] to *know* what they believe[d]," meaning that Americans, including Melville, craved a faith made certain by scientific proof (78). Ultimately, Melville answers his question about the one true nature of existence by demonstrating the ramifications of the human willingness and capacity for change. In order to render the unknown harmless, to chart the inexplicable, Melville seems to believe that one must evolve beyond natural and mental limitations. In the most extreme extension of this doctrine, the quester must be willing to either choose blind faith or extinction.

Nevertheless, it seems certain to me, even though this term shall not be used recklessly, that Melville quests with the explicit purpose of finding certainty rather than merely creating a void of hopelessness. It appears to me that Melville seeks what

Newman calls "certitude," i.e. "a habit of mind […] that might equal in measure and strength the certitude […] created by the strictest scientific demonstration" (*Apologia* 29).[58] Melville approaches this challenging task with creativity and an eager mind in his novel and does not exclude any form of questing that might lead to the form of certainty he desires to find. Thus, I fail to recognize his alleged appetite for subversive quibbles to stress the spiritual shortcomings of his age, which Reynolds suggests in *Beneath the American Renaissance*. In *The Wake of the Gods*, Franklin follows the same notion about the constructive nature of Melville's endeavor in his discussion of myths. Franklin claims that Melville "destructively attacks religious and mythological orthodoxy and more constructively creates a new myth" (54). Melville's subversion of faith, as we see it unfold in Ahab and Starbuck, breeds creation as his narrative accomplishes at the very least a rendering of what can be considered certain, if not its original goal of providing new certainty in an age without faith.

[58] Newman distinguishes certitude as a "habit of mind" from certainty, as a "quality of propositions" (*Apologia* 29). Certainty, according to Newman, thus is always the result of evaluating data, while certitude is the conscious decision to believe in this data, i.e. a conviction.

V. Conclusion

Melville's assessment of the problem of certainty in his time as well as the literary tradition of spiritual doubt in which he wrote is as multifaceted as the doubloon itself. He invents the process of charting with which his characters seek to penetrate the veil of uncertainty in nature and in their own spiritual disposition. Ultimately, Melville's quest for certainty does not appear to answer his question for absolute empirical certainty about God. His quest rather manages to establish that empirical knowledge of God is unattainable simply because faith in God is a creative faculty that cannot be derived from empirical data. Throughout my discussion of uncertainty in *Moby-Dick*, I have shown that Melville writes in a literary tradition of spiritual doubt with its roots in the seventeenth century. Although not having explicitly consulted these texts, the ideas of Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, Thomas Paine, and John Henry Newman formed the zeitgeist of Melville's age.

I have argued that Melville primarily constructs a dichotomy between Ahab's and Ishmael's methodology in the novel, reestablishing what Spinoza suggests two hundred years earlier in his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, namely that God only expresses his nature in absolute and exclusive forms, such as life and death and activity and passivity. While Ahab perishes, Ishmael lives to tell the tale. While Ishmael's friend Queequeg dies, Ishmael survives by clinging to his friend's casket.

We have also seen through the analysis in the previous chapters, that nature expresses an unseen will with brutality and absolute force and dominance that symbolizes the barrier of human contemplative faculties. It is a barrier that neither Ahab nor Ishmael

can penetrate. Accordingly, Melville does not give prevalence to either approach in the text. Indeed, Melville's concept to attain certainty is more complex then to sit back and study his characters' quest, while hoping to be able to form a hierarchy of methodology based on which character survives the battle with the whale. Melville rather suggests that the various characters of *Moby-Dick* each have assets that one should draw upon in one's individual quest for certainty.

On the one hand, a life of zealous pursuit, as depicted by Ahab, inflamed by the monomaniac focus on attaining one static truth, will inevitably lead to destruction. On the other hand, a life spent in continuous scientific curiosity and with a focus on community with other human beings leads to a perpetual quest of learning, a journey that has many possible routes and intersections, but never yields practical certainty. Even though Melville presents Ishmael as an empiricist in "A Bower in the Arsacides," his investigation takes a back seat to his need for community. We see this in his friendship with Queequeg, but also in chapters like "A Squeeze of the Hand," or "The Tryworks." Ishmael does not sacrifice his need for community, for obtaining absolute certainty. Arguably, Ishmael lives because he chooses life, a life led in the midst of his fellow men, rather than striving for a literally single goal.

Herman Melville thus presents two solutions to the problem of uncertainty in *Moby-Dick*: activity and contemplation. Activity and monomania, as we have seen before are represented in Ahab, while Ishmael embodies contemplation and community. However, both concepts exist side by side in the novel and form a hybrid mode of action that Melville suggests the reader should adopt. I argue that Melville does pan moral

judgment in favor of one or the other method. As I have shown before, it is the unbreakable will of Ahab that draws Melville to the character. As Anne Baker notes, "Melville is fascinated by Ahab's mental processes" and thus does not simply kill off the zealous captain to demonstrate tragic irony or a sense of moral victory of humanity over delusion of divinity (193). Melville's concern with the character Ahab goes further. Similar to how "Ahab's obsession with finding Moby Dick is 'marking' his mind," Melville's mind is marked with the obsession to prove that certainty is a tangible concept and that there is indeed a mode of living which invokes the will's ascent to spiritual certainty (Melville 167). Melville is fascinated with Ahab's unbreakable will and activity, the character inspires and drives him to assume the existence of the mode of certainty in order to prove it. The defiant spirit of Melville's quest manifests itself in Ahab.

The chapter "The Doubloon" shows how Melville allocates one concept of investigation to one character in the novel in an almost mathematical process. While Melville's method of setting up his quest in the construction of his characters can thus be considered empirical, he does not favor the approach of one character over that of another. Melville admires Ahab's zeal as much as he values Starbuck's integrity and faith, or Ishmael's analytic descriptivism. As an author, Melville maintains critical distance from his characters, yet still wishes to present one possible solution to the issue of uncertainty: he does not want to commit to one perspective, but having postulated plurality as one of his modes of analysis, he cannot retreat to the comfort of dogma either. "The Doubloon" illustrates the author's dilemma and demonstrates Melville's commitment to pluralism as the ultimate solution to uncertainty. Melville tries to create a

via media—as Newman might say—between the axiom that "truth stands still," a notion that had dominated the early years of the nineteenth century, and the state of complete uncertainty (Hovenkamp 61).

Herman Melville strips the problem of certainty down to a binary decision. To obtain absolute certainty about the nature of God, one may either quest by any means necessary, which entails abandoning mankind to transcend society's emotional and moral boundaries or one must seek the community of others and adopt a contemplative attitude towards the divine while indulging in the daily struggles and duties of community life.

This certainty of smaller things, as one may call it, represented by Ishmael suggests, happiness that is only attainable within boundaries. Through Ishmael and Ahab, Melville illustrates the fundamental dichotomy between unbound and limited questing. Ahab is a quester without boundaries; he wants to know an inconceivably large world, while Ishmael is ultimately satisfied with overcoming the unsociable feeling that compels him to go whaling. With Ishmael, Melville proposes an attitude of achieving minor goals that respect and consider the limitations of human perception. However, Ishmael is not a complacent quester; he merely quests within the boundaries of his human frame, while Ahab seeks to transcend them. We can see this in Ishmael's attempt to measure the whale god, but where certainty is that the priests always interject themselves as mediators between God and the individual. Melville postulates that certainty can be attained in small categories, as the character Stubb comically demonstrates in his charting of the doubloon. Ishmael lives to function as the narrator of this truth, even though he has not fully understood it; for he still clings to his notions of inactivity and contemplation in his

narrative. Baker notes in the context of comparing Melville's text to biblical passages that Melville "dangles before his reader the possibility of a simple allegorical reading"; however, Ishmael does not survive because he won a hypothetical contest by using the supposedly correct method. Rather, Melville uses him as narrator because of Ishmael's contemplative character (190). While the outcome of the novel clearly favors Ishmael's empiricist approach on the surface, Melville has already demonstrated his commitment to plurality up to this point in the text. After the destruction of the Pequod, Ishmael remains as the last man standing to tell the tale. But his tale is not about his encounter with the White Whale or the things he learned from this experience, but about the hidden meaning of whaling in general. Ishmael elaborates on the representations of whales and how whaling is a metaphor for stripping away the secrets of nature to arrive at something tangible: certainty. Ishmael applies science to measure God, while Ahab rejects all empirical strategies to find certainty. Ishmael discovers certainty in the community he forms with Queequeg and the rest of the crew, while Ahab takes the secret of the nature of the whale's nature with him to a solitary grave.

Melville's solution to the dilemma of uncertainty can be considered unresolved at best, as he provides the options of either accepting one limitations in the search for truth or to quest eternally and without remorse until death. Again, Melville I believe shows us a *via media*, by presenting the process of questing from multiple angles in *Moby-Dick*. The consistent pursuit and the search for new methods of questing stand at the center of his investigation, as Ahab states in the chapter "The Gilder" that,

> "There is no steady unretracing progress in this life [...] through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence's doubt (the common doom) then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If." (373)

The ideology of perpetual learning is represented by Melville's narrator, Ishmael, as well as Melville's strategy of using charts in various representations. Activity and the perpetual act of questing are the tools with which the author seeks to combat his inner urge to ascertain the nature of God with empirical certainty. However, as both characters Ishmael and Ahab illustrate, Melville walks a thin line between contemplation and monomania. Nevertheless Melville pursues his various quests to the last. Andrew Delbanco agrees in *Herman Melville: His World and Work* (2005) that Melville, while suffering a decline in his career after *Moby-Dick,* never gave up being an author, nor did he fall into "a long silence" (288). Melville's ideology of activity defied his own spiritual uncertainty, as well as the physical limitations of his latter life (he was "suffering from recurrent skin and lung infections"), granting him the will to pursue his quest for certainty even beyond *Moby-Dick* (Delbanco 288). I therefore disagree with both Reynolds and Stein, who postulate that in his writings, Melville either expresses his disdain for society in an a attack on faith or is a bitter author who has retreated from society and takes revenge for his commercial failure by adopting a pessimistic mode of reform in his writing. I believe that Melville performs a constructive task in playing out his quest for certainty in *Moby-Dick*. As Robert Sattelmeyer notes, Melville "struggled to complete" the text, not because of his writer's block, but because of the inner struggle

between the conventions of his profession and his personal "ambitions and creative daring" to compose a philosophical work rather than a mere adventure story. As my analysis up to this point has shown, Melville does not merely bathe in melancholy and subversive metaphors when faced with the spiritual uncertainty of his Age. The fact that the author is writing *Moby-Dick* and explores the various approaches to obtaining certainty symbolizes an attitude of defiance against depression caused by uncertainty prevalent to the nineteenth century.

In *Fifteen Sermons*, John Henry Newman claims that "According as objects are great, the mode of attaining them is extraordinary; [...] Courage does not consist in calculation, but in fighting against chances" (219). Melville does not accept the separation of science and religion that increasingly shaped the mood of his age. Newman would have indirectly applauded Melville's attempt to chart a way through the uncertaintcies of his century. Even if *Moby-Dick* is "but a draught of a draught" and might not lead its creator to absolute certainty, the novel still is a chart that points at out a way out of the dilemma—even if it is only the first step on a long road (Melville 125). Despite the bitter encounters with nature that he depicts in the plot, Melville ultimately pursues a constructive end in his quest, not for annihilation but for life in all its faults.

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