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Restless Waves, Endless Striving: The Absence of Finality in Moby-Dick

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Restless Waves, Endless Striving: The Absence of Finality in Herman Melville's Moby-Dick

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Introduction

Mention Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* at a gathering and you will instantly be greeted with a myriad of personal stories about the experience of reading the book. Whether it be on a fishing boat in the middle of the Caribbean seas, alternating between reading chapters and spotting nearby whales, or on the wharf of the old whaling town of Sag Harbor—from one person to the next, the experience is always entirely unique. Such individual encounters with Melville's book serve as reminders of how varied the comprehension of the text (as much as the reading process itself) can be. Though the utter subjectivity of reading can be attributed to any text, it seems particularly important to emphasize in the case of *Moby-Dick.*

In his text, Melville leaves ample breathing room for indeterminacy—he is not simply writing about blubber but is creating, rather, a melting pot of themes, ideas and questions. It is for this reason that no single overarching truth can be derived from the book. If Melville himself avoids an all-encompassing conclusion, then how can the critic make an overall claim about the text? In his letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne Melville muses about the universe, "perhaps, after all, there is *no* secret" ("To Hawthorne" [16 April?] 1851)[1]. Even if there *were* an ultimate secret or an absolute truth to *Moby-Dick*, the reader—trapped within his own subjectivity—cannot grasp it. He is trained by the narrator to mistrust such absolutes, asked instead, to treat the text, like human experience itself, as a series of attempts, trying-outs.

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[1] The letters cited throughout this paper were found in a book of Melville's Correspondence, listed in the Bibliography section. The letters are cited with addressee first, followed by the date.

In a letter that Sophia Hawthorne writes to her sister Elizabeth, she reveals one of the strong urges that Melville harbored—an urge akin to the one retained by the characters, and oftentimes the reader, of *Moby-Dick*. Sophia had enclosed a section of Melville's letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, in which he "speaks his innermost about GOD, the Devil & Life, if so be he can get at the Truth" (Intro to "To Hawthorne" [16 April?] 1851). She advises Elizabeth not to show it to anyone since "[Melville] is a boy in opinion—having settled nothing as yet ... & it would betray him to make public his confessions & efforts to grasp" (Intro to "To Hawthorne" [16 April?] 1851). The heart of Melville's relationship to Hawthorne, it seems, was comprised of the very theme that is so present in *Moby-Dick*—that is, the effort to grasp truth. In their interactions, Hawthorne provided Melville with a silent springboard, or mirror-like screen to bounce his ideas off. "Nothing pleases me better," Sophia continues, "than to sit & hear this growing man dash his tumultuous waves of thought up against Mr. Hawthorne's great, genial comprehending silences" (Intro to "To Hawthorne" [16 April?] 1851). "A grow*ing* man," "a boy in opinion," Melville did not pretend to *know* truth, but instead humbly continued his search. In his spirit, Melville was so like the sea, hurling its waves against a boulder in an attempt to move it, to see what it is concealing. No matter how perpetual the motion, the boulder still will not budge. Hawthorne's silence was, in this way, comparable to this mass, to the silent mystery of the universe that will never wholly reveal itself.

In my exploration of *Moby-Dick*, I do not aim to make a single assertion about Melville's work. Instead, my aim is to bring forth a deeper understanding of some of the novels silences and points of resistance. Despite its dramatic ending, Melville holds on to a lack of finality that reflects a philosophical distrust of

conclusions, of short-lived catharses.

Moby-Dick's plot is sustained and enveloped by a forward motion fueled by its characters' perpetual striving. Not always named, this striving points to an ideal that pivots around the characters' quest for an ideal, for an objective truth they can hang onto. While Ishmael, the narrator, fluctuates between objects to strive after, the monomaniacal Captain Ahab is consumed by his chase for his one and only whale, Moby Dick. In either case, if it is indeed finality that is sought after, that state is a mirage. Like a never-ending circle, the cycle of striving pushes onward, thwarting resolution, flying in the face of any absolute truth.

The entire book is based on Moby Dick, and yet the eponymous whale only makes a mere appearance. Could this be indicative of the fact that Melville's sprawling narrative is about what those painful moments-in-waiting tell us about ourselves? What really happens is not primarily the frantic chase of the monomaniacal whale-captain. Indeed, in the large intervals of the book the reader spends a lot of time waiting for Moby Dick's appearance; it is this anticipation, this imagining the encounter with the whale that shapes the reading process. This projection not only requires effort on the part of the reader, but places him on equal footing with the characters. Like Melville's characters, only alive in the reader's mind, the reader's relationship to these lengthy periods of inaction, of stasis, where description supersedes action, is also one of striving and projection.

It is in regard to striving and projection that the insights of Soren Kierkegaard and Arthur Schopenhauer will prove to be particularly useful when considering the absence of finality in *Moby-Dick*. Setting the foreground, Arthur Schopenhauer published his text, *The World as Will and Representation* in 1818, Soren Kierkegaard his *Either/Or* in 1843, and it was in 1851 that Herman Melville

published *Moby-Dick.* Although it was only later in life that Melville turned to Schopenhauer, there is, in the two texts, striking parallels between their meditations on striving. In Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, it is the Aesthete's[2] emphasis on these matters that will be particularly valuable, crucial tools when considering the role of projection in *Moby-Dick.*

[2] Soren Kierkegaard first published *Either/Or* under the pseudonym of Victor Eremita. Eremita claims to have found the texts and then compiled them together. He sections the book in two; the first section is comprised of the Aesthetic texts, while the second consists of the Ethical texts. I will focus largely on the Aesthetic texts, whose anonymous author we may call "the Aesthete." One of the Aesthetic texts called "The Seducer's Diary" is signed by the name "Johannes," but it can be assumed that he is the same author of the rest of the texts. Johannes the Seducer seems to represent the author's idea of the perfect Aesthete.

I. *The Perpetual Motion of Striving*

"Lord, when shall we be done growing? ... As long as we have anything more to do, we have done nothing. So, now, let us add Moby Dick to our blessing and step from that. Leviathan is not the biggest fish;--I have heard of Krakens".
--("To Hawthorne" Nov [17?] 1851)

In November of 1851, Herman Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne regarding his recently published *Moby-Dick*. Melville had just finished completing his *Whale* so why did he consider, although in jest, tackling the Kraken? Perhaps it was because he strove to reach this state of satisfaction but was required to project these ideals elsewhere when, once *Moby-Dick* was completed, satisfaction did not come. This urge to strive perpetually, to maintain motion without ever being satisfied, is the very problem that Melville's own characters are afflicted with.

As the perceptive narrator, Ishmael, takes note of the restless motion that surrounds him. On the wharf, he notices the docked whaling ships, reminders that "... new cruises were on the start; that one most perilous and long voyage ended, only begins a second; and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, for ever and for aye" (*MD* 62). With their never-ending cruises, men are endlessly creating new goals and anxiously chasing after them. Yet, what exactly is the driving force behind the sustained motion and the creation of each new goal? Moreover, if "such is the endlessness, yea, the intolerableness, of all earthly effort" as Ishmael remarks, is the urge to strive inherent to human nature and, if so, what does that say about man's nature? (*MD* 62)

In *The Lee Shore* chapter, Ishmael notices that Bulkington portrays this human quality by perpetually taking to ship. He looks "with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon [Bulkington], who in midwinter just landed from a four years' dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term ... the

land seemed scorching to his feet" (*MD* 96). Once one voyage ends, he quickly begins a new one, allowing himself no time to rest. Yet, why is it that Bulkington must move onto new projects so swiftly? Is he "unrestingly" pushing off in search of something concrete, something fulfilling? Perhaps he is always in motion because it is at rest, when without a focus, that an intolerable disorientation takes over. Propelled by his desire for discovery and perhaps also fearful of disorienting chaos, Bulkington avoids stasis at all costs. If this is the case, why does Ishmael consider him with these mixed feelings of "sympathetic awe and fearfulness?" Conceivably, Ishmael beholds Bulkington in this way because his restless activity reminds him all too much of himself, and of all other men who are never satisfied, eternally striving after a new goal. Ishmael both understands Bulkington but seems also to fear the consequences of what it means for man to be a perpetually striving being and, consequently, incapable of enduring a state of rest. Though a man's yearnings constantly change shape and are as fickle as the winds, the striving motion itself always remains. Ultimately then, it is something more than just the thrill of the whaling hunt that inspires these men to incessantly set sail—it is the hunger of striving.

Like Bulkington, Flask, the third mate, also illustrates the way in which striving afflicts man. Due to his rank, he is allowed the least amount of time to enjoy his meals and cannot, as a result, ever satisfy his hunger. "For what he ate," Ishmael notices, "did not so much relieve his hunger, as keep it immortal in him" (*MD* 129). Striving, in the same way as hunger, cannot be cured; when one eats, one must eat again. With his always-whetted appetite, Flask is given no rest or relief from the eternal cycle of desire. Is this not similar to the way in which men perpetually shove

off land, incapable of savoring any achievement and already hungry after a new pursuit?

Ishmael believes that, to some extent, even Captain Ahab of the *Pequod* is aware of this human condition. Though Ahab enlists the crew to hunt his personal nemesis Moby Dick, according to Ishmael, he allows them to pursue other whales as well in order to keep feeding their insatiable desire. "For the love of it they give chase to Moby Dick, [but the crew] must also have food for their common, daily appetites," Ishmael surmises of Ahab's thoughts (*MD* 178). The crew's drive to hunt whales is a pursuit similar to Flask's hunger—in neither case is the desire truly quenched. Schopenhauer elucidates that "[the will] always strives because striving is its sole nature, to which no attained goal can put an end" (Schopenhauer 308). The capture of one whale or the end of one voyage, then, can never be sufficient. Many of the novel's characters (with Ahab as the main example) seem, in one way or another, to display an inherent urge to strive. Schopenhauer might, therefore, provide useful insight into the novel's characters and into Ishmael's very urge to tell the story.

In all cases of pursuit, whether it be Ahab's hunt to kill Moby Dick or Flask's craving for a full meal, it is always "want, deficiency, or dissatisfaction with one's own state of condition" that sets striving in motion (Schopenhauer 309). If this is the case, then what is it that men like Bulkington or Ahab lack? Bulkington joins one voyage after another, perhaps with the belief that it is always the next voyage that will provide him with glory or the sense of complete discovery, which he lacks. In his desire to kill Moby Dick, Ahab, who is missing a leg from his first encounter with the White Whale, seems to be afflicted with something more powerful than just dissatisfaction. "[Moby Dick] tasks me; he heaps me," Ahab says in a soliloquy, "I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it ... that

inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate" (*MD* 140). It is Moby Dick's living existence that not only dissatisfies and burdens Ahab but also elicits hatred in him. The monomaniacal Ahab is convinced that the annihilation of Moby Dick is the only answer to curing his disease.

It is an end-point, where this dissatisfaction is vanquished once and for all, that men like Bulkington, Ahab and the other crewmembers desire more than anything. Ahab longs to seize Moby Dick only because he imagines himself in a state of satisfaction after having grasped this object. He desires to exterminate Moby Dick in the hopes of quenching his thirst for revenge and expunging any feelings of *malaise.* Ahab "at last came to identify with [Moby Dick], not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations" (*MD* 156). To Ahab, obliterating Moby Dick means obliterating his exasperations, his bubbling hatred. The chase, therefore, can only occur by projecting an image of rest from his current state of unrest. If an image of satisfaction, or an ideal, is not associated with the object, then it is not worth striving after.

How come, then, does striving preserve its tireless vigor even after the desired object is attained? "No satisfaction, however, is lasting," Schopenhauer emphasizes, "on the contrary, it is always merely the starting-point of a fresh striving" (Schopenhauer 309). In the same way that a wave crests only to begin the formation of a fresh one, an object is always ready to be replaced by another. This is because "the goal is only apparent; [and] possession takes away its charm" (Schopenhauer 314). Dissatisfaction, then, cannot fully disintegrate. Had Ahab actually killed Moby Dick, would he have achieved satisfaction? Like Bulkington, who unceasingly projects a place of ultimate satisfaction onto each new voyage, it is probable that, after Moby Dick, Ahab would have turned to a new object to color with the same

"intellectual and spiritual exasperations." Perhaps this is why "vengeance on a dumb brute...that simply smote thee from blindest instinct" seems absolute madness to Starbuck (*MD* 139).

While there may be new objects or new goals to project onto, like each of Bulkington's new voyages, the same longing or lack persists throughout. The transference of an ideal onto a new object does not affect the yearning itself. Why would the activity continue if that all-consuming agitation were resolved once the object was held? The projected ideal and the object, then, are entirely separate. Moby Dick, the whale, and Ahab's vision of Moby Dick are completely independent of one another. And while Ahab's striving drive is contagious—all crewmembers take part in it as if in a sect—each individual projects their own independent ideal onto the White Whale. The same is true for the reader as well. R.E. Watters rightly wonders then, "might it not have been Melville's own intention to invest his great symbolic leviathan with a plurality of meanings?" (Watters 77). It is precisely because projection is utterly subjective and individual that no single definition of Moby Dick will entirely encompass him; he is not only out of Ahab's grasp, but out of everyone's grasp. Thus, the sought-after goal or object can never be truly gratifying because it is always separate from the ideal that is projected onto it.

If the ideal is dissociated from its object, then yearning must stem from somewhere deeper—it is from the self that dissatisfaction originates. "Suffering [and dissatisfaction are] essential to life, and therefore [do] not flow in upon us from outside," Schopenhauer writes, "but everyone carries around within himself its perennial source" (Schopenhauer 318). Even Ishmael discerns this when, in his reaction to Ahab's announcement to hunt the White Whale, he perceives that it is "the innermost necessities in our being, [that] still drive us on" (*MD* 141). According to

Ishmael, the innermost being is never complete—it is always lacking, always in need, and hence always driven to find what it lacks. Perhaps, in this case, Ahab's physical body is a representation of the dissatisfied self. Ahab strives to seize Moby Dick as if this could retrieve his missing leg, yet, no matter how many new whale-bone legs are whittled for him, even if made from Moby Dick's bones, that missing space cannot ever be appropriately filled. That space of lack accounts for man's need to be in constant motion; this is because striving is always dedicated to finding fulfillment.

Melville compares this intrinsic dissatisfaction, and consequential striving, to the way in which the sea "heaved and heaved, still unrestingly heaved the black sea, as if its vast tides were a conscience and the great mundane soul were in anguish and remorse for the long sin and suffering it had bred" (*MD* 193). He even uses the same adverb, "unrestingly," that he employs to depict Bulkington's restless tendencies. In *Moby-Dick*, man's impetus to strive and to be in motion, then, is as innate as the undulating waves are to the ocean. Because dissatisfaction finds its source in the self, in the internal, how can the attainment of a material object, something external, ever provide satisfaction? As Bulkington proves with his never-ending voyages, it is contradictory to "constantly [be] looking for a particular external cause, as if it were a pretext for the pain that never leaves us" (Schopenhauer 318).

Soren Kierkegaard's Aesthete criticizes the strivings of man for this very reason—that is, because the desire for change is always expressed in the material world. Though an aesthete is, traditionally, concerned with objects and their material façade, Kierkegaard's Aesthete differs in fundamental ways. Kierkegaard's Aesthete can only admire beauty found in the creations born from his imagination, from the internal. Like Schopenhauer, he recognizes the unsatisfying nature of objects in the urge to strive and, instead, insists on cultivating the very ideas that are projected

outwards. He disagrees with the ordinary view of resolving dissatisfaction, which, traditionally, only involves "a change of field". That is, in essence, only striving after a new material pursuit or changing one's external circumstance. For the Aesthete, dissatisfaction is only perpetuated when attempting to solve it by always chasing new objects.

While the Aesthete agrees with Schopenhauer in acknowledging that the object cannot satisfy an inherent lack, he goes one step beyond by claiming that all objects are the same. This is what the Aesthete aims to illustrate when he writes, "you transform something *accidental* into the absolute, and as such, into the object of your admiration" ("RM" 32) [my italics]. What is significant is what is projected onto the accidental object—the object itself is of no importance whatsoever and thus, is just as valuable (or worthless) as any other. If material variety is an illusion, then searching for satisfaction in the material realm, the way Ahab, Bulkington and the crew do, is to the Aesthete, completely useless.

The Aesthete introduces this theme at the beginning of his essay, "The Rotation Method," with a quote from Aristophanes' *Plutus:*

> Chremylos: You get too much at last of everything. Of love,
> Karion: of bread,
> C: of music,
> K: and of sweetmeats.... ("RM" 21)

Chremylos' statement, "you get too much at last of everything," points to those men who are carried away by their passions, desiring different objects, while thinking each will provide gratification. Yet, none of these things do, and all that these men are left with is excess. By radically equating what are seemingly very different things like love, bread, music and sweetmeats, the individuality of all

material objects is destroyed. The desire for one object after another, without ever quenching one's thirst for satisfaction, crumbles the value of these things to nothing.

This particular argument of the Aesthete's is somewhat problematic in terms of *Moby-Dick*. While Moby Dick seems to be the accidental object that Ahab projects his ideal onto, one cannot help resist equating the whale, Moby Dick, to all other objects. Conceding entirely to the Aesthete would seem, in the case of the White Whale, all too simplistic since it would devalue the entire book. The attempt that Ishmael, the narrator, makes both to represent and comprehend the Whale would, if every object were equal, no longer be compelling. It is because Ishmael and Ahab are convinced that the White Whale has meaning that the reader does as well.

The overemphasis on the external, however, is precisely the traditional "Rotation Method" that Bulkington, Flask and the crewmembers demonstrate when, in their attempts to find satisfaction, they look only to discovery, meals, and whales. This method of "Rotation" "depends on change in its boundless infinity, its extensive dimension," the Aesthete writes, "[...] this method defeats itself; it is plain endlessness" ("RM" 25). It is this dependence on the external object, which cannot satisfy, that only perpetuates the endless striving motion—it does not resolve dissatisfaction. This is what the Aesthete considers boredom and since most men follow this route, "all men, [including the *Pequod*'s crewmembers,] are [thus] bores" ("RM" 21).

While Schopenhauer and the Aesthete agree that the external object cannot satisfy, it seems that where they do differ is in their definitions of boredom. According to Schopenhauer, it is when one is without a focused goal that man becomes bored. "If [the subject] lacks objects of willing," Schopenhauer writes, "[...] a fearful emptiness and boredom come over it; in other words, its being and its

existence itself become an intolerable burden for it" (Schopenhauer 312). This boredom becomes an intolerable burden because he has no other option but to look within. Is this a similar burden to the one that Ishmael must struggle through at the beginning of the novel? "I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world...it is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation," Ishmael admits (*MD* 18*).* Like Bulkington, Ishmael distracts himself from the intolerable burden of boredom by joining a whaling ship and traveling around the world.

When Captain Peleg asks Ishmael what he sees over the weather-bow, he responds that "the prospect [is] unlimited, but exceedingly monotonous and forbidding; not the slightest variety that I could see" (*MD* 72). Peleg continues, "well, what dost thou think then of seeing the world? Do ye wish to go round Cape Horn to see any more of it, eh? Can't ye see the world where you stand?" (*MD* 72). The lack of external variety is what Ishmael considers boredom; keeping busy and distracting one from the self, is, for him, the only solution to internal dissatisfaction. For this reason, Ishmael is convinced that 'seeing the world,' experiencing a physical change of pace, will cure the "damp, drizzly November in [his] soul" (*MD* 18). Peleg makes clear that if curing the "damp, drizzly November in [his] soul" is the change he desires, this, Ishmael cannot find on a ship at sea. This is because, like the Aesthete, Peleg seems to think there is no variety in the external world. Since Ishmael does nothing to address the self's dissatisfactions, the fruitless chase for material variety only perpetuates the unrest in his soul. "Everyone who feels bored cries out for change," the Aesthete claims, "with this demand I am in complete sympathy, but it is necessary to act in accordance with some settled principle" ("RM" 25). While the

Aesthete agrees that change is desired, it is only a change of perspective that can, in his view, be significant.

Because he looks to the sea and to travel as a cure for his restlessness, Ishmael is then, in the Aesthete's view, also a 'bore.' He is a 'bore,' because he does not attempt to resolve internal dissatisfaction, but instead chooses to partake in the endless routine of striving after an external object. After joining the *Pequod*, he trails Ahab in his quest for Moby Dick; "Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine," he says (*MD* 152). Yet, Ahab himself does not find satisfaction, because he focuses on the material (on the external), on making Moby Dick "spout black blood and roll fin out" (*MD* 139). Ishmael has succeeded in finding a leader that diverts him from his inner plight; this he projects onto Moby Dick. Yet, because the focus is on the external, it is still, however much displaced, simply one form of restless activity transformed into another.

In the attempt to avoid their own dissatisfied thoughts, men anxiously find ways in which to keep themselves busy but "those who do not bore themselves usually bore others." These "are generally people," the Aesthete writes, "who, in one way or another, keep themselves extremely busy; these people are precisely on this account the most tiresome, the most utterly unendurable" ("RM" 24). The Aesthete's view of boredom, in contradiction to Schopenhauer's, is characterized by man's restless activity, "busy-ness," geared towards forgetting his own dissatisfied self. The Aesthete emphasizes that "restless activity excludes a man from the world of the spirit, setting him in a class with the brutes, whose instincts impel them always to be on the move" ("RM" 24). It is precisely the instinct always to be on the move that brings one further away from satisfaction, since the movement tends to leave the self behind.

For Schopenhauer, on the other hand, boredom is characterized by the lack of an object to strive after, which in turn provides a blatant awareness of the self. This state of awareness, however, can be an intolerable burden. Neither Ahab nor Ishmael weather this awareness, or what Schopenhauer calls boredom, well because they travel the seas, covering half of the earth's surface to escape the *malaise* of being themselves. Even though they are physically transported around the world, their souls will continue to remain stuck in the neutral, incapable of moving one inch closer to self-examination. Man is stuck, then, in this predicament between boredom and striving where neither place can provide satisfaction. Satisfaction, or utopia is, thus, always "no-place."

To break out of the internal standstill, the Aesthete proposes a new method that "does not consist in a change of field, but resembles the true rotation method in changing the crop and the mode of cultivation" ("RM" 25). For the Aesthete, satisfaction comes only from a change in perspective, which is a change that radically challenges at the same time that it is produced by the imagination. "The eye with which you look at reality must constantly be changed," he says ("RM" 32). In fact, he goes as far as to say that this method involves an uncanny immobility: one must not even move physically, since "the more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become in invention" ("RM" 25). Paradoxically, it is the lack of motion that counteracts the endlessness of dissatisfaction since it calls for a mental rebellion; it demands the activity of one's imagination. When striving, the emphasis must be laid on what one projects and how one uses the imagination, over the object itself. As the Aesthete says elsewhere, in his Diapsalmata: "The essence of pleasure does not lie in the thing enjoyed, but in the accompanying consciousness" (Diapsalmata 34). For the Aesthete, the internal realm is infinitely more interesting than the external. While the

Aesthete's project could provide Ahab, Ishmael or Bulkington with relief from craving external objects, as well as from the burden of existing without a drive, could it actually solve the self's dissatisfactions?

II. *Escaping the Self*

In his text *Minima Moralia*, published in 1951, Theodor W. Adorno notes, since "everybody must have projects all the time... [this] excludes all reflection, and therefore [man him]self" (Adorno 138). Adorno published his text approximately 100 years after Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Melville wrote theirs and, yet, the notion that endless activity distracts one from the self still rang true and arguably still does, even today. Perhaps the timelessness of this idea indicates a truth or a universality about human nature. Because, according to Schopenhauer, dissatisfaction is indeed inherent to the self, it might be concluded that passions and striving are necessary in order to distract from this discontent. "[Pseudo-activity] is seen as a license for flight that will take one somewhere else with the utmost speed," Adorno writes "[...] one learns through this playful excess of self-loss that to live in earnest without a self could be easier, not more difficult" (Adorno 138-139). Striving, as a form of forgetting the self, might be considered necessary because it is what makes life easier and more bearable. This perpetual flight for novelty, which Bulkington partakes in when starting each new voyage is, in fact, a perpetual flight from the self. It is clear then that Ahab and Ishmael are just as guilty of escape as Bulkington is. Ishmael cannot tolerate his "hypos" and must, like Bulkington, start a new voyage. Ahab does not claim his "intellectual and spiritual exasperations" as his own, and looks to Moby Dick with a fiery vengeance as the cause of his disquieted self. It is because they focus their energies outwards, thereby avoiding the self, that they are considered escapist.

In turn, does Kierkegaard's Aesthete, in his aesthetic project, take any part in flight from the self? While he does not necessarily strive for the external object, his

project is also not geared towards resolving the dissatisfactions of the self. His ploy is, first and foremost, to seek pleasure, which he finds only in controlling his projections. It is this complete control over his imagination that is his craftsmanship, his poetry. Since he wants to poetically recreate reality for himself, he is not dependent upon the external world in the way that Ahab, Bulkington and Ishmael are. Striving implies a lack of control and being carried away by passions, which the Aesthete claims he is not. If this is the case, then perhaps he does not strive after anything, which means also that he is content unto himself, and would, therefore, have no need to take flight from the self. Could his project, then, afford Melville's characters (and Melville's reader, for that matter) with the possibility of overcoming the dissatisfactions of the self and abolish, once and for all, the need to take flight? Although, since the Aesthete must recreate his own reality and, arguably, cannot remain content with what lies before him, he is also indeed suspect of engaging in escapist behavior.

It is in "The Seducer's Diary" that the Aesthete, under the name of Johannes, makes the claim of being unaffected by passions and striving. "Roar on, ye wild forces, ye powers of passion!" he writes, "let your dashing waves hurl their foam against the sky...you shall not pile up over my head; serene I sit like the king of the cliff" (Diary 45). The Aesthete is self-assured because he believes that he is in control of his projections and, therefore, not subject to the delusion of striving. His declaration, however, is suspiciously similar to Ahab's, who cries "ha, ha, my ship! thou mightest well be taken now for the sea-chariot of the sun... ho, ho! all ye nations before my prow, I bring the sun to ye! Yoke on the further billows; hallo! a tandem, I drive the sea!" (*MD* 388). In his soliloquy, Ahab chuckles with laughter because he thinks he wields power over unconquerable elements like the sun and the sea. To

Ahab, he himself is the master and commander, not only of his ship, but of the entire universe. Yet, while Ahab believes that he is in command over his own destiny, he, unlike the Aesthete, still strives after an external object. Because he projects the source of his internal exasperations outwards onto Moby Dick, he does not in fact retain complete control or awareness of his self. Ahab's sense of power is a delusion then, as he ends up drowning in the sea he believes he controls. Could the Aesthete's sense of power also be a delusion? Is he, in his so-called "controlled," poetic projections, also fleeing from a dissatisfied self?

The comparison is not so easily made, however, since Ahab's and the Aesthete's affirmations seem to be two different kinds of claims. Ahab upholds that he has control over the external (that is, over the sea and finding and killing Moby Dick), while the Aesthete alleges to have complete control over the internal, over his own imagination. It would seem in this differentiation then, that because Ahab's claim of control is a delusion, he lacks an awareness of the self that the Aesthete has. Yet, to what extent is the Aesthete's conviction not also a delusion or yet another figment of his imagination that he tries manipulate? While he can, to a certain extent, control his imagination and poetically recreate reality, there is always an element of actuality that is beyond his control.

In order for the imagination to set to work, an element of the actual is first necessary to trigger it. This is true even for the Aesthete, who notes in the Diapsalmata, that he must first take from reality and then poetically transform it, internalize it. "I fly down into reality to seize my prey;" he says, "but I do not remain down there, I bring it home with me, and this prey is a picture I weave into the tapestries of my palace" (Diapsalmata 35). Though the Aesthete plays and creates with his own imagination, he must draw inspiration from reality first; the idea is

consequently always rooted in reality. In the diary, the Aesthete compares this act of poeticizing the real to the way in which Cuvier imagines the rest of an animal from only one bone. "I have already seen the little foot, and since I am a natural scientist, I have learned from Cuvier how to draw definite conclusions from such details," he says (Diary 37). From a glimpse of her foot, he can transform his "beautiful unknown" into the work of art he calls Cordelia. The element that first inspires, however, is not his own. Because of this fact, the Aesthete's claim that he is utterly in control might not be entirely legitimate.

If the Aesthete must rely on the external, does this indicate that, perhaps, he is not entirely in control of his projections? Moreover, if the Aesthete does not hold the kind of control he claims to have, does this mean that he, like Ahab, also has an aim rooted in discontentment, but which he attempts to conceal? Perhaps it is by always aestheticizing that he avoids his discontented self, never accepting reality for what it is. This alleged complete control over his imagination is further proven moot when the Aesthete occasionally, horrifyingly, realizes that there is nothingness at the heart of existence. "My grief is my castle," he writes in the Diapsalmata, "which like an eagle's nest is built high up on the mountain peaks among the clouds; nothing can storm it...there I live as one dead...everything finite and accidental is forgotten and erased" (Diapsalmata 35). The Aesthete's celebration of subjectivity turns negative when he realizes that if life is without an objective or anything "finite and accidental," then existence is composed of nothing but lack. High up in his castle, the Aesthete is left entirely unto himself and his own subjectivity. It is because he is not distracted by the external world that perhaps, for this reason, he must create all the more distractions for himself in his imagination. Yet, in the moments when he is not poeticizing, or not active in the imagination, his discontents begin to surface. If this is

case, it seems that, in his creations of the imagination, the Aesthete is also seeking escape instead of just mere pleasure.

In his introduction to "The Seducer's Diary," which is also presumably authored by him, the Aesthete points out that "[the author of the diary] egoistically, personally, savoured what in part reality gave him and what in part he himself had impregnated reality with... he was in constant need of reality as the occasion, as an element; in the second case reality was drowned in the poetic" (Intro to Diary 249). While Johannes, or the Aesthete, requires reality to motivate internal creation, his over-transformation of reality seems to be a form of escape from it. If "reality [is] drowned in the poetic," it seems almost as if he is willingly suppressing or suffocating it. He plunges himself into the aesthetic to avoid his self's dissatisfactions, which is, for him, the loneliness of subjectivity. In another moment of despair, he writes, "I have lost my illusions...vainly I seek to plunge myself into the boundless sea of joy; it cannot sustain me, or rather, I cannot sustain myself" (Diapsalmata 34). The Aesthete admits that he "plunges" himself in these "illusions" to ignore the pitfalls of being trapped within his own consciousness. Yet, if these moments come unexpectedly, then the Aesthete does not have complete control and his project is, as a result, flawed. Although he does not strive after material objects, the Aesthete still takes part in escapism by seeking perpetual activity—his activity, however, is in his mind. He distracts himself from the discontents he has of being stuck within his own mind, his own subjectivity. If the Aesthete cannot cure his discontents, then, perhaps his project of poeticizing one's ideals cannot provide men like Ahab, Ishmael and Bulkington a valid way to settle their dissatisfactions. On the other hand, could Moby Dick and Queequeg, in their calm, provide them with answers instead?

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In Chapter 27, "Knights and Squires," Ishmael calls the harpooners, Dagoo, Tashtego and Queequeg, who are all islanders, "Isolatoes." He calls them such, not only because they are islanders but because "each Isolato [lives] on a separate continent of his own" (*MD* 107). The harpooners, and Queequeg in particular, seem removed from the crew—not striving after whales or Moby Dick like the rest of the crew, but simply going along with motions. "They seem as self-sufficient as nature itself," Paul Brodtkorb Jr. writes of the harpooners, "they don't need us or our understanding for completion...like Queequeg, men experienced by us in this mode are content with their own companionship and are always equal to themselves" (Brodtkorb, Jr. 65). Given the more intimate introduction to Queequeg at the beginning of the novel, it is him, out of all the harpooneers, who acts as an important figure in relation to Ahab, Ishmael and the rest of the restless crew. Like Dagoo and Tashtego, Queequeg stands completely on his own—not agitated and not striving, but content. In this way, Moby Dick, who does not travel in a pack as most whales do, is very similar to Queequeg. Instead of the Aesthete then, should Ahab, Ishmael and the crew look to Moby Dick and Queequeg as models for attaining satisfaction?

If Queequeg plays such a fundamental role in the novel's reflection on selfhood, it is because he represents the very equanimity of resolve that Ahab and Ishmael lack. "There was Queequeg, now," Ishmael observes, "certainly entertaining the most absurd notions about Yojo and his Ramadan;--but what of that? Queequeg thought he knew what he was about, I suppose; he seemed to be content; and there let him rest" (*MD* 79). Queequeg "knows what he is about" and therefore does not feel the itch of boredom, instead he feels the restfulness of being content. His calm and

inner stability clashes with the restlessness that leads Ahab and Ishmael to take flight. In contrary to Ahab and Ishmael, Queequeg does not concern himself with the material by striving after objects. He even lets Ishmael choose the whaler that they are to join because, to him, they are all the same. For Queequeg, and for the Aesthete, the small external details are interchangeable. But unlike the Aesthete, Queequeg does not toy with his imagination in an attempt to repress the discontented self. He does not seem to be plagued by dissatisfactions and therefore has no need to take flight with activity, either in the external or in the internal realm. It is because he doesn't strive that Ishmael describes Queequeg as distant and removed from the others. Moby Dick, with his "solitary jet," is like Queequeg: "calm, snow-white, and unvarying" (*MD* 194). Their calm and unagitated qualities are what single them from the pack.

This calm and self-composure seems to be precisely the state of satisfaction that is most longed for. Ishmael observes Queequeg and notes, "surely this was a touch of fine philosophy; though no doubt he had never heard there was such a thing as that ... but, perhaps, to be true philosophers, we mortals should not be conscious of so living or so striving" (*MD* 55). While Ishmael recognizes the value and even craves to be without striving, there is still, at the same time, an incomprehensible quality to stasis that he cannot bear. Ishmael seems both attracted and repulsed by Queequeg's satisfaction; conceivably, because he desires to be more like him, but is still unable to fully comprehend him.

Though they desire Queequeg and Moby Dick's satisfaction, it tends also to provoke Ahab and Ishmael's agitation even further. While Ishmael is "tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote," yearning for that end-point where satisfaction reigns, he still cannot tolerate Queequeg's stasis (*MD* 22). When

observing him in his Ramadan, he "almost [feels] like pushing him over, so as to change his position," he says, "for it was almost intolerable, it seemed so painfully and unnaturally constrained; especially, as in all probability he had been sitting so for upwards of eight or ten hours" (*MD* 81). Desperate to end stasis and provoke motion, self-content appears to inspire aggression in Ishmael. Moby Dick seems to elicit the same reaction in Ahab and the crew that Queequeg does. It is "no wonder," Ishmael observes, "[that] there had been some among the hunters who, namelessly transported and allured by all [of Moby Dick's] serenity, had ventured to assail it" (*MD* 409). Ahab is repulsed by this calm not only in Moby Dick, but even in Perth, the blacksmith. "Thy shrunk voice sounds too calmly, sanely woful to me," Ahab snaps at him (*MD* 370). Even though the end of anguish and striving is above all things what they desire, why is it that Ahab and Ishmael still gaze at Moby Dick and Queequeg in horror? Perhaps it is because "to us [and to Ishmael and Ahab] they seem unconscious," Brodtkorb, Jr. writes (Brodtkorb, Jr. 65).

Since, as Schopenhauer stresses, man is a striving being and is always in motion, it is no surprise that Moby Dick and Queequeg's unvarying calm seems, to Ahab and Ishmael, inhuman and unnatural. Striving is life-affirming because it is the attempt to dissolve one's dissatisfaction and improve one's current state, thereby "[warding] off the death that constantly impinges on us" (Schopenhauer 311). If one is suffering, the immediate reaction is to try to end it as soon as possible; Ahab's longing to kill Moby Dick is an example of this. This seems to also be Ishmael's intent when he goes to sea, associating the end of his dissatisfaction with the impending whaling voyage. Yet, whenever energy is not focused on the root of one's discontent in the self, it is easily dismissed as an escapist action. The Aesthete distracts himself from suffering by creating ideals in his imagination, while Ahab and

Ishmael distract themselves by projecting their ideals outwards and striving after the external object that they associate satisfaction with. Although because dissatisfaction is innate, perhaps it is only by looking away, by distracting one's self, that life is made bearable. Though it distracts, it is in fact the action of striving that is essential to life.

When alive, Bulkington incessantly sets sail, always trying to grasp the state of satisfaction that is just out of reach. His yearning to start each new voyage is an effort to eradicate his suffering, but also a measure to distract him from the impossibility of surmounting it. It is this constant struggle against suffering and the attempt to overcome it that is, for Ishmael, essentially human. "Take heart, take heart O Bulkington!" Ishmael says, "bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!" (*MD* 97). Even in Bulkington's death, the motion continues—the spray of water, provoked by his drowning body, leaps upwards as if reaching for his absolute. For this natural and humanly effort, Ishmael calls him an earthly ideal—a demigod in his apotheosis. In this way, projection is fundamental since it propels one forward to keep searching for something better, while also providing for distraction from the suffering itself.

III. Projection and the Ungraspable Object

"Would that a man could do something & then say—It is finished.—not that one thing only, but all others—that he has reached his uttermost, & can never exceed it."
--("To Duykinck" April 5 1849)

In his letter to Evert Duykinck, Melville articulates the problem of all striving. Man's fate, it seems, is to be locked into an eternal cycle of striving without any comfort of any finality in sight. If the ideal goal can never be reached, then this seems to indicate that the foundation of living is structured around ambiguity and uncertainty. The end-point of striving, where a man could say, "it is finished," would be to finally attain the ideal that he projects onto his object.

Yet if, as Ralph Waldo Emerson notes in his speech entitled "Circles," "the one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves," then why is it that man perpetually chases his own ideals? (Emerson 157) Because man is fixed into his own individual perception of the world, what is above all else desired is an objective or an absolute truth that comes from outside. It is always an objective truth that one envisions in projection; "the [ideal] image of the ungraspable phantom of life ... is the key to it all" (*MD* 20). The image, however, can never actually be held; the water always slips out of the hand. The desire is always to grasp the objective in order to complete the self and dissipate the discontent. Ahab and Ishmael, though they are occupied in hunting the same object, project different ideals onto Moby Dick. This is because the ideal is always directly correlated to the lack that the self aspires to fulfill. Like Plato's lovers in his *Symposium* searching for their other halves, it is what the self lacks that is always sought-after—unity is the aim. This unified self that hypothetically grasps its ideal objective is what Jacques Lacan calls the "Ideal-I."

In his essay, '"Loomings': Yarns and Figures," Harrison Hayford observes that "an initial similarity between Ishmael and Ahab is the way both of them turn every object, situation, and person they confront into a problem, one which cannot be solved, a mystery whose lurking meaning cannot be followed to its ultimate elucidation" (Hayford 155). Though their quests take various forms, Ahab and Ishmael both long to grasp the objective truth, which is always a problem that "cannot be solved." The "key to it all" that Ishmael calls "the ungraspable phantom of life" is embodied, for Ahab and Ishmael, in the form of Moby Dick. Ishmael introduces his quest to the reader, when he says, "the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose ... endless processions of the whale, and, mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air" (*MD* 22). For Ishmael, the "one grand hooded phantom," Moby Dick, is the very same "ungraspable phantom of life."

In a letter he writes to RH Dana discussing *Moby-Dick*, Melville sounds suspiciously like Ishmael, when he writes "[...] blubber is blubber you know; tho', you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree;--& to cook the thing up, one must needs throw in a little fancy... Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this" ("To Dana" May 1 1850). Though Melville acknowledges the need to embellish for the sake of the plot, he still "means to give the truth of the thing." Unlike Ahab who seeks to grasp his objective in the annihilation of a whale, Ishmael, as the narrator, aims to, using his words, encompass the whale, "to give the truth of the thing." "What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan!" Ishmael says, "But I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans; I have had to do with whales with these visible hands; I am in earnest; and I will try" (*MD* 116). His shifts in style as narrator between the

descriptive, encyclopedic and the observer seem almost to be different attempts at giving a meaning. "[Ishmael] seeks not to destroy the whale for vengeance, profit, or pleasure, but simply to understand it, to comprehend it, to reduce the unknown to intelligibility," R.E. Watters writes (Watters 83). His striving to find an objective is not only projected onto the White Whale, but in his attempts to comprehend the sublime whale in general. Could the "Squeeze of the Hand" chapter be an example of this? "Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze!," Ishmael says, "all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it" (*MD* 322). His desire to grasp the Leviathan is exemplified in his physically grasping the material. When he says, "I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it," here is the comforting sensation of permeability, or the "All." If an "All" feeling is possible, then it would seem that so too is an objective explanation of Truth. The word 'almost' is key, however, because it signifies that there is still a barrier between Ishmael's self and the concrete objective idea he longs for.

Unlike Ishmael who tries to grasp the whale as a species, Ahab's fiery hunt for the objective Truth is directed only towards Moby Dick. In his soliloquy, Ahab says, "I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. *That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate;* and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (*MD* 140) [my italics]. Driven to find something objective, something conclusive, Ahab cannot tolerate that which is inscrutable; it is this that taunts him and that he associates with all evil. Ahab projects the evil of the world's ambiguity onto Moby Dick and, for this reason, is driven to chase him down. In the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael, too, expresses his horror at the subjectivity of the world. "All [characteristics] are but subtile deceits," he says, "not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from

without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot ... pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper ... Of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol" (*MD* 165). The Whale's whiteness stares back like a blank canvas, always requiring to be painted on the outside, "like a harlot," from the viewpoint of the person who does the observing. There is, as a result, no objective truth, "nothing inherent," to a thing, which also means, to Ahab and Ishmael's horror, that there is a lack of concrete answers to be found. The White Whale, then, is a symbol of the impossibility of exiting the self. It is for this reason that, for Ishmael, "...there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood" (*MD* 160). Subjectivity is horrifying because it indicates that there is no certainty outside of the self, and that, therefore, one can never forget the self. All are striving for one objective truth, yet the barrier of subjectivity makes this search impossible to satisfy. "Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?," Ishmael asks (*MD* 165).

Experience is entirely subjective, and man is stuck in his own perceptions of the world, "too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, ... thinking that thick water the thinnest of air" (*MD* 45). Since man can never step away from his own consciousness, or stand outside of his own oyster shell, the objective truth is, as a result, always out of reach. It is in "The Seducer's Diary" that the Aesthete notes, "a book, [like a person], has the remarkable quality that you may interpret it as you wish" (Diary 60). If there are endless possibilities to interpreting external objects, then the aspiration of finding a fulfilled self in the object one projects onto, like Ahab seeks in Moby Dick, is invariably fruitless. This quest for the "Ideal-I" then, according to Lacan, only "situates the agency of the ego...in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will

only rejoin the coming-into-being of the subject asymptotically" (Lacan 2). The pursuit for an ideal self can only be asymptotical because the idealized object cannot reciprocate. If one is always stuck within one's own consciousness, then the object in itself, whether a person or book, is inscrutable. Because this is always out of reach, therein lies the ultimate dissatisfaction of man's strivings.

The problem of grasping objective certainty is illustrated in the uncannily transient nature of material objects in *Moby-Dick*. Since material objects routinely adopt new uses and purposes, it is no surprise that Ishmael wonders, "how immaterial are all materials! What things real are there, but imponderable thoughts?" (*MD* 396). The coffin that was built to house the corpse of the near-dying Queequeg, in the end becomes a life-buoy for Ishmael. Every ounce of the dead whale is used and recycled for new purposes. The dead whale is often used to make new weapons in order to kill more whales with even more efficiency. Ishmael describes the time "a small cub Sperm Whale was once bodily hoisted to the deck for his poke or bag, to make sheaths for the barbs of the harpoons, and for the heads of the lances" (*MD* 344). Or ambergris, which is a soft and waxy substance found only in sick whales is also "largely used in perfumery, in pastiles, precious candles, hair-powders, pomatum...[and] some wine merchants [even] drop a few grains into claret, to flavor it" (*MD* 317). In their recycled state, the dead whale parts are brought back to life in an entirely different context and with a new purpose. Yet, if one thing can also be another, how then can there be an over-arching comprehension of any object or idea?

Ishmael expresses horror at the lack of concrete answers because this means there exists no certainty outside of the self that one can fall back on. In the Melvillean universe, one is, as a result, often alone. This is true even for the reader since, already in the first few lines of the novel, there is a distance established when

the narrator advises the reader to simply "call [him] Ishmael" (*MD 18*). The command given to the reader to "call" the narrator by a certain name builds up mystery around his true nature. One wonders, what could his real name be? This mystery seems almost to caution that an objective interpretation of the book is impossible. "This dance of estrangement," Brodtkorb, Jr. writes, "requires that the perceiving self be always outside, a spectator, a voyeur, however much the self might wish to become more completely engaged with those separated from it" (Brodtkorb, Jr. 51). Not only is the reader distanced from the narrator, and the book, but the characters are removed from one another as well—each individual always remaining outside. On the deck, when making a sword-mat with Queequeg, Ishmael remarks, "each silent sailor seemed resolved into his own invisible self" (*MD* 179). The characters of *Moby-Dick* are seemingly always holding something back, and even Ishmael, as the narrator, cannot penetrate. The many soliloquies also cannot provide reliable access into any of the characters. This is because, as Brodtkorb, Jr. points out, "we are not in the presence of an unmediated encounter; instead, we remain within the consciousness of a storyteller who imagines the other" (Brodtkorb, Jr. 61). Entry into the characters is limited and inconclusive both because the reader's interpretation of the text is always individual, but also because the reader must read through the tiny key-hole that is Ishmael's perception. The horrifying loneliness of subjectivity is very much similar to when Pip gets thrown to sea from the whale-boat. "The awful lonesomeness [of swimming in the open ocean]," Ishmael notes, "is intolerable... the intense concentration of self in the middle of such heartless immensity, my God!" (*MD* 321).

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If experience is purely subjective, all that results when projecting onto an inscrutable object, then, is a narcissistic mirroring of the self. In his "Mirror Stage," Jacques Lacan writes, "we have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification...namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan 2). It is through the object that the subject recognizes itself. Thus, if this is the case, can projection still be considered entirely escapist? Are Ahab and Ishmael really avoiding their inner selves when trying to forget their dissatisfactions, or are they, in fact, brought closer to their selves in their quest for completion? In their ideas of the whales, with Moby Dick in particular, Ahab and the crew yearn to find balanced selves but these ideas are, in turn, only definitive of their own characteristics.

This reflection of the self seems, with Melville's characters, to be manifested in the material realm. In the same way that Narcissus' image is reflected in the water, the whales that are sought-after are defined in ways similar to the men that hunt them. In the Cetology chapter, Ishmael refers to whales as gentlemen. When Stubb, who habitually smokes his pipe, kills a whale, the whale he chases is "ever and anon tranquilly spouting his vapory jet, [and looks] like a portly burgher smoking his pipe of a warm afternoon" (*MD* 230). The third mate, Flask, is "so utterly lost to all sense of reverence for the many marvels of their majestic bulk and mystic ways... that in his poor opinion, the wondrous whale was but a species of magnified mouse, or at least water-rat" (*MD* 105). Isn't Flask, "a short, stout, ruddy young fellow," in some ways just a magnified land-rat living on water? It is clear then, as Charles H. Cook, Jr. notes, "the meanings which most men find in the whale are actually in the beholders themselves" (Cook, Jr. 62).

Like Stubb and Flask, the whale that Ahab chases also seems to represent him. "Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish" (*MD* 109). From years of sea-travel and grueling battles, Moby Dick, like Ahab, is similarly scarred all over. They also both, as a result of a wearisome existence, wear furrowed brows. "The peculiar snow-white brow of Moby Dick" is akin to "[...] the clouds that layer upon layer were piled upon [Ahab's] brow" (*MD* 169, 110). Because Ahab can only project his own self onto his object, the man-whale boundaries seem to almost blur together. Ahab himself is, in his physical body, even part-whale, since his "ivory leg had at sea been fashioned from the polished bone of the sperm whale's jaw" (*MD* 109).

By reason that their projections are intrinsically linked to their selves, the crew, as a result, tends to humanize the whales they strive after. Ahab is convinced that when Moby Dick first reaped his leg away, " no turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with more seeming malice" (*MD* 156). The whales are often compared to or depicted like humans because, as the crew's objects, they represent their own dissatisfied selves. In cases like Ahab's, he is convinced that it is only by offing his object that he will satisfy his self's void. No matter where he looks, however, new waters and new objects will always provide him with a reflection of his unfulfilled self.

While the act of projection is entirely individual, always originating from the self, the subject still requires the external object to associate its desires with. Thus, an object is needed in order for the self to be expressed. "Like light, the self contains all possibilities of color," Brodtkorb, jr. writes, "but color other than white can be selectively drawn out of the self's blankness only by its having an object—that is, a

goal" (Brodtkorb, jr. 65). It is by projecting onto an object that, not only is the object colored and brought to life, but the self is as well. When Ahab is still half asleep and not yet again conscious of Moby Dick, he is "for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself" (*MD* 170). Ahab's Moby Dick exists only if he is conscious of him. At the same time, Ahab is only truly present when he can project his ideas onto an object. If projection reveals anything of the self, it can do so only if the subject has an object, but in sleep, when one is unconscious, this process seems to be paused.

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Like Ahab and Ishmael, it seems that Kierkegaard's Aesthete also endeavors to grasp an objective truth outside of himself. In order to assuage his recurring dissatisfactions, he yearns to prove that there is more to existence than just his own self. The Aesthete does this by aiming to control both how he *sees* and how he is *seen.* Whether he realizes it or not, the Aesthete seeks to grasp a unified "Ideal-I" that is no longer dissatisfied. He is convinced that he can control what is beyond his own perception, including that of Cordelia. As Eric Downing notes, "it is [a] whole that Johannes seeks to possess in Cordelia, or rather in the picture, the myth of Cordelia ... it is just this unity that he works to bring to bear on her person, or rather with her person on the mythical picture he studiously strives to compose" (Downing 106). In the creation of his ideal Cordelia, he attempts to create a complete, ideal self that forgets, even if momentarily, his insecurities about the utter subjectivity of the world. His project, then, is not simply about enjoyment but is also about his own selfhood.

For his self-fashioning, the Aesthete requires an object; he chooses Cordelia and for this reason considers her to be "under [the category of] being for an other... woman shares this category with nature and, in general, with everything feminine" (Diary 73). She provides the occasion for his created ideals, she is "the dream of man," Johannes writes (Diary 74). He genderizes his subject-object relationship to Cordelia, comparing it to the story of Adam and Eve, which "teaches that woman is a being for another...that Jehovah created Eve from a rib taken from the side of man" (Diary 74). Because Eve is created from Adam's rib, it is clear that woman is in this way dependent on man, yet Adam himself is only fully realized once Eve is created, and not before. She exists only for his purpose, that is, so that his self can be expressed. The Aesthete, as the subject, can only come to life if he is conscious of his object, in the same way that, without his idea of Moby Dick, Ahab is "blankness in itself."

In the Aesthete's case, his object is also a projecting being, which, as a result, turns him into an object as well. His self is then comprised of both roles—subject as well as object. The Aesthete is all too aware of this, yet still maintains to have absolute control over his self-fashioning. He is assured that he can manipulate what Cordelia projects onto him, thereby retaining the mastery of his subjective and objective self. He becomes Cordelia's "unknown," her darkness, so that she can project onto him. "Insofar as I am visibly present, I am invisible; insofar as I am invisible, I am visible," he says (Diary 63). In keeping with his comparison to Adam and Eve, he even feminizes himself in order to become a being for *her*, to become *her* object. "She moves to the inner melody of her own soul," he says, "I am only the occasion for her movement ... I am easy, yielding, impersonal, almost like a mood"

(Diary 63). If he is her occasion for projection, then he stands as the woman waiting to be shaped like clay and Cordelia becomes the projecting male.

The Aesthete does not merely seek his "Ideal-I," but tries to create it by influencing Cordelia, his object's, projections. In his letters, Johannes quotes myths or texts like Pyramus and Thisbe or Aristophanes' speech from Plato's *Symposium* in order to plant ideals into Cordelia's mind (Diary 72, 78). Johannes then shapes himself to these ideals, "that is," Downing writes, "he shapes himself in the image of an image he himself shapes" (Downing 102). He creates an ideal for the both of them, and tries to fit himself to it, thereby, fashioning himself as her object and "insinuat[ing] [him]self into her thoughts" (Diary 44). As a result, he is confident that he has "presented a perfect picture of a confirmed bachelor" to Cordelia (Diary 55). Johannes finds his measures to be successful when he heeds her increasing desire in the way one watches a plant grow; "I am watching the birth of love within her," he says (Diary 63). Thus, the Aesthete trusts that he succeeds in crafting his own image in another subject as easily as he manipulates his own consciousness' projections. Yet, Cordelia is her own subject, with her own conscience, which no matter how much he attempts to manipulate, he can never actually penetrate.

Lacan, then, who argues that the quest for the "Ideal-I" "situates the agency of the ego in a fictional direction," would deem the Aesthete's project of escaping his own subjectivity to be incapable of being fulfilled. Ahab seeks his "Ideal-I" in an imagined objective truth he associates with Moby Dick—that is, that he represents all evil. His ideal self, where he wields power over the objective, can only be obtained then by destroying the whale. Unlike Ahab, however, the Aesthete wants to grasp the objective, not in the material, but in the imagination. He endeavors to escape his subjectivity by striving to control that which is outside of him: his object, Cordelia.

Although, if one subject can never be inside another's conscience, how can Johannes be so certain of what Cordelia is projecting onto him? This is impossible because the other always remains impenetrable. At the same time, however, the external object is still necessary for the self to articulate itself in its projections. So, according to Downing, "in the dialectical movement that binds together his poetical realization with hers, we can then reconstruct [Johannes'] own mythification" (Downing 105). Though the Aesthete morphs his vision of Cordelia, and tries also to morph hers, this effort only returns back to him. He is confronted with a reflection of his own suffocating subjectivity, which in turn, makes him only more aware of his dissatisfied self.

For the Aesthete, all Cordelia is, then, is a vessel that allows him to get closer to his artificial self. Since he is trapped within his own consciousness and cannot know the other, he can only know and love himself. He loves her, if at all, only for this reason. He loves his own self-creation and, thus, loves her because she helps him achieve it. "People say that I am in love with myself," he writes, "[...] I am in love with myself, why? Because I am in love with you; for I love you truly, you alone, and everything which belongs to you, and so I love myself because this myself belongs to you" (Diary 67). Even though she too is a projecting subject, it seems that, in the end, for the Aesthete, Cordelia is merely a woman—a being for *his* purpose that allows for him to express his own self.

If the object-relation is necessary for the self to express itself, then it is for this reason that Moby Dick and Queequeg's solitude is horrifying. They are contented Isolatoes unto themselves, and since they do not strive or project, they have no need to partake in a subject-object relationship. Yet, since it is through the other that the self can express itself, their isolation from others seems, as a result, "unconscious."

Their solitude, then, seems to indicate an overall internal lack and not a whole. Even though, in projection, one gazes towards the external, seemingly away from the self, it cannot be considered wholly escapist because the self is always reflected back. It many ways projection seems to provide even more awareness of the self.

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In his essay, "Interaction between Text and Reader", Wolfgang Iser notes that "as the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text, and relates the different views and patterns to one another, he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too" (Iser 106). If reading is another motion, as Iser notes, or yet another distraction to cure boredom, is it then also a form of striving and projection? This seems to be the case in *Moby-Dick* when, through Ahab's drive, the reader is forcefully tugged away from introspection and from contemplating the sufferings of the self. It seems then that Melville does not only provide Ahab and Ishmael with a pursuit but supplies the reader with one as well. We too are urged to chase down Moby Dick but we can do so only by latching onto Ahab and his vision. "Who does not feel the irresistible arm drag?" Ishmael asks, "What skiff in tow of a seventy-four can stand still?" (*MD* 158) Faced with his overpowering drive, the skiff boats: Ishmael, the crew, and the reader are all dragged along by Ahab.

Melville seems to be aware that "striving is incapable of final satisfaction; it can be checked only by hindrance but in itself it goes on forever" (Schopenhauer 308). Though the reader will continue striving after the book ends, Melville has the reader's attention for a time and draws it out as much as possible. He does this both by incorporating the Cetology chapters as well as by delaying the individual entrances

of Queequeg, Ahab and then Moby Dick. John Seelye notes, that it is the cetology chapters "with the relatively static, discursive movements, [that] act to block and impede the forward movement of the narrative" (Seelye 121). The descriptions and technicalities used to hinder the plot, however, only seem to further agitate the reader's yearning for an end-point, in the way that Queequeg and Moby Dick's calm agitates Ahab and Ishmael.

The delayed entrances of the characters also functions as a way to draw out the reader's striving, while, at the same time, encouraging the reader's own perceptions of the mysterious figures. This is true for the reader as much as it is for Ishmael. Because of their indirect presences in the novel (Moby Dick's in particular,) the reader's mind is free to roam when constructing an idea of them. Queequeg's late entrance causes Ishmael to "cherish unwarrantable prejudices against this unknown harpooneer" (*MD* 31). Whereas, before he makes his first appearance, Ahab seems, to both Ishmael and reader, a god-like figure. "Yes, [Ahab,] their supreme lord and dictator was there," Ishmael says, "though hitherto unseen by any eyes not permitted to penetrate into the now sacred retreat of the cabin" (*MD* 108). Ishmael aggrandizes the absent Ahab and, as a result, all that is associated with him becomes 'sacred.' Before Ahab appears and offers Ishmael something to strive for, Ishmael is focused entirely on discovering Ahab. So much so that the constant postponement of his arrival causes Ishmael to suffer. "My first vague disquietude touching the unknown captain," he says, "now in the seclusion of the sea, became almost a perturbation" (*MD* 108). It is absence, then, that spurs the imagination to formulate its ideals. "What is concealed spurs the reader into action," Iser notes, "but this action is also controlled by what is revealed; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to light" (Iser 111). Because there is lack of blatant depictions of

the characters, the reader is obliged to compose his own notions of them in the imagination, thereby turning the implicit into the explicit.

The reader's imagination is also put to work when Melville delays the satisfaction of Ahab's encounter with Moby Dick. Melville employs the reader by giving him absence over presence, lack rather than plot. In the same way that the crew's rumors "eventually invested Moby Dick with new terrors unborrowed from anything that visibly appears," the reader must infuse the unknown, and therefore incomprehensible, with his own ideas (*MD* 153). Unlike the traditional and realist novel of the nineteenth century, Melville leaves room for and, in fact, requires the reader's own engagement. He wants the reader to work first, to suffer metaphysical absence, requiring him to create his own ideas of Queequeg, Ahab and especially Moby Dick.

The activity of reading quickly becomes a form of striving when the reader creates his own ideas and yearns to find corresponding closure in the text. It is an over-arching understanding of the book that he desires. In his desperate urge to come to a conclusive truth, could the reader also be seeking a whole and unified self, an "Ideal-I"? Yet, because experience is subjective, this is entirely impossible. Not only is the White Whale viewed differently from the individual characters' points of view, but the whale and the book is viewed differently from one reader to the next. Like all forms of projection, the reading process, though it seems a distraction, can only bring the reader closer to his incomplete self.

Since a comprehensive understanding of the book or its characters is impossible, it is in the reader's own interpretation of *Moby-Dick* that the self is mirrored back. This is what Watters argues when he writes, "to Ahab, Moby Dick was a composite entity—physical power, wilful intelligence, and malignant divinity—

a trinity of body, mind, and spirit in opposition to Ahab ... which of the three a reader chooses to emphasize as the meaning for Ahab is, as Melville clearly implies, a reflection of the reader's own personal character" (Watters 81). Like Narcissus who gazes at his own reflection in the water, the text also provides the reader with a reflective surface.

The book ends soon after the Pequod's fatal encounter with Moby Dick. There is no longer any need to continue since the end-point has been met and the reader's curiosity assuaged. Even though Ahab has not satisfied his quest, his death marks the death of the communal hunt and general striving to find Moby Dick. Without a drive, and with no more aim, the plot collapses and the book must end. Though the book itself ends, this does not mean that the reader can grasp an objective understanding. Objective truth, or the "ungraspable phantom," is what carries the reader to keep on striving. After the book ends, it is time for the reader to turn elsewhere for a new object—continuing the search for satisfaction and finality within it.

IV. Cycles, Circles, and the Absence of Finality

In the *Loomings* chapter, Ishmael perceives that "nothing will content [men] but the extremest limit of the land...they must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in ... Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues—north, east, south, and west. *Yet here they all unite*" (*MD* 19). This fascination with intangible water is comparable to the way in which man strives to get as close as possible to grasping an objective truth. One step too far, however, will only result in being drowned. Ishmael notices that the water-gazers, each coming from "north, east, south, or west," are all individual, but they all unite near the water where their individual projections reflect back to them. It is the instinct of striving, and the act of projecting an ideal, then, that unites all individuals together. Even though projection itself can be lonely since it is entirely subjective, one can find relief in the acknowledgement that because striving is a human, all-too-human condition, the individual will never be alone in his state of uncertainty.

Captain Ahab brings forth this sense of comfort amongst the crew and the reader by channeling their striving energy towards one united goal, that is, to hunt the White Whale. His hunt provides a forum for moral support for the ambiguity and uncertainty of all striving, uniting the men altogether into "one man, not thirty" (*MD* 415). It is because the suffering of striving is collective that Ishmael finds relief. The thumps of the universe are like the thumps of the sea-captains and "however the old sea-captains may order me about," Ishmael says, "however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that, it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way" (*MD* 21). "Who ain't a slave?" he asks (*MD 21*). Since, thanks to Ahab's vision, the crew is reassured that

the state of ambiguity must not be suffered alone, they are, for a while, cloaked in comfort. When Ishmael perceives that "Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine," he describes this as "a wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling [that] was in me" (*MD* 152). Because the goal is shared, it, in turn, creates the sensation of universal oneness, "a sympathetical feeling" reminiscent of the Greek philosopher Parmenides' theory that the world is One.

It seems, then, that two forces are always at play in *Moby-Dick*—it is a wave-like oscillation between lonely individuality and the comforting "All." In a letter dating from June of 1851, sent to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville seems to highlight this exact fluctuation. He tells of coming across one of Goethe's sayings that says, "'*Live in the all*.' That is to say, your separate identity is but a wretched one [...] What nonsense!" In the very same letter, however, he admits that "this 'all' feeling, though, there is some truth in [...] you must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day...your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth....your hair feels like leaves upon your head...this is the *all* feeling" ("To Hawthorne" June 29 1851). "But what plays the mischief with the truth," he says, "is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion." It is from these temporary moments that men are convinced there is a universal, objective truth to be grasped. The "All" feeling does not last and one's subjectivity always comes creeping back. This is like the crew-boy who is "lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie" but, as Ishmael warns, "move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror" (*MD* 136). Ishmael expresses that, to him, the "visible worlds seem formed in love, [while] the invisible spheres formed in fright" (*MD* 164). Here, the "visible world" might be related to the "All" and the "invisible spheres" to the darkness of subjectivity that

seems to hinder comprehensive vision. Even Ahab notices the fluctuation when he says, "the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm ... but once gone through, we trace the round again ... where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more?" (*MD* 373). Though the "All" feeling gives the illusion of having attained satisfaction, a lasting objective truth is always out of reach. As a result, the cycle of striving does not stop, but alternates back and forth between comfort and seclusion**.** It seems that it is in the image of concentric circles that this duality of striving is portrayed.

In his speech entitled "Circles," Emerson says, "our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that round every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning" (Emerson 141). For Emerson, as much as Melville, the never-ending nature of life and striving is symbolized in circles, like those of Queequeg's eyes that are "rounding and rounding, like the rings of Eternity" (*MD* 364). The shape of a circle is both whole *and* never-ending and, for this reason, portrays both aspects of man's never-ending striving; that is, the comfort of the striving "All" as well as the absence of a concrete, objective Truth. When they appear in the novel, the image of concentric circles, like those that form on still-water from a raindrop, are always dually associated with both these feelings of calm as well as of terror.

As on earth, there is a pull towards the center of these circles, like gravity, or like Ahab's 'quenchless feud' sucking his crewmembers into it. At the center, one finds calm as in the eye of a storm or in the way that Queequeg sits there "altogether cool and self-collected; right in the middle of the room" (*MD* 81). In the center of the grand armada of whales, the mother whales are serenely nursing their young; while on the outskirts, the aggravated, drugged whales run amok. "And thus, though

surrounded by circle upon circle of the consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre feely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments" (*MD* 303). There is a similar sentiment when the Pequod is sinking, as "concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex" (*MD* 426). Though the boat is sinking rapidly and terror surrounds the vortex, Tashtego, at the center, peacefully hammers Ahab's flag into the mast. It seems the boundaries of the circles are chaotic, while the core remains tranquil. If striving is always both a combined feeling of being part of the "All" as well as being horrified at the absence of objectivity, are not these dual characteristics of the concentric circles be a portrayal of all striving? The universal "All" feeling of striving seems to be associated with the calm center of the circle, while the realization that the objective is terrifyingly out of grasp is associated with the surrounding consternations and affrights.

In the Melvillean universe, there is never any relief from the fluctuation between these two sentiments; the cycle continues on. It is the absence of any lasting finality that is the mystery of the universe that must be accepted. Ahab's death seems to hint at this, because while both he and Ishmael are desperate to eradicate mystery, Ahab is still incapable of recognizing his limits. "'One must get just as nigh the water as one possibly can without falling in,'" Hayford writes, "unlike Narcissus and Ahab who 'with the crew of the Pequod thrusts off from land into the ocean, and in his effort to grasp a tormenting image, the White Whale, plunges in and is drowned" (Hayford 157). His incapability of recognizing the limits to knowledge seem to cause Ahab to be drowned. "In landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God," Ishmael says (*MD* 97). Truth and satisfaction are at their closest,

only when one accepts that there is no end-point or "shore," but one still continues, like Bulkington, to make the attempt of reaching it.

Though Ishmael is equally as tormented by the absence of any objective finality, he is capable of acknowledging the out of reach. This is the fundamental difference that differentiates Ishmael from Ahab. "Despite the magnetic attraction he feels towards the mystery which lures one on to destruction," Hayford writes, "[Ishmael] is still not by nature disposed, like Ahab, to press up so close to it as to plunge in and drown" (Hayford 158). It is because he thinks he can grasp the ideal that he projects onto his object that causes him to plunge in and drown. "Would I could mount that whale and leap the topmost skies," Ishmael dreams, "to see whether the fabled heaves with all their countless tents really lie encamped beyond my mortal sight" (*MD* 223). Ishmael reaches upwards, always striving to satisfy his thirst for a conclusive truth about the whale but, is still, at the same time, aware of his limits. "Dissect [the whale] how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will," Ishmael confesses (*MD* 296).

Ishmael recognizes that "[...] the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last," whereas Ahab is unable to stand humbly before anything (*MD* 218). It is as if, for Ahab who would "strike the sun if it insulted me," the Sublime simply does not exist (*MD* 140). In his essay "*Moby-Dick*: Line and Circle," John Seelye observes that "[certain] chapters suggest that the [White] Whale can never be 'known' (i.e., caught), that as a symbol of the universe he shares the puzzlelike nature of the universe and is shadowy, elusive, paradoxical, inscrutable ... Ahab, who tries to impose an absolute interpretation on Moby Dick, fails to read the puzzle rightly" (Seelye 121). Moby Dick represents the ambiguity of the universe, which terrifies Ishmael because he cannot deny it, but, for Ahab, seems

a temporary frustration that he is convinced he can and will resolve. "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks," Ahab cries, "if man will strike, strike through the mask!" (*MD* 140). Ahab seems to recognize that all objects are projected upon, but is still convinced that it is possible to "strike through the mask" and reach an objective truth.

It is the whiteness of the whale "that above all things appalls [Ishmael]" because, without an over-arching truth and it being a blankness in itself, it is Ishmael that is responsible for bringing the object to life. Though terrified of the complete subjectivity of experience, it seems that, by the end of the novel, Ishmael comes to accept the singularity that this entails. While the *Pequod* is sinking, "round and round ... like another Ixion [Ishmael] did revolve ... till, gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst ... rising with great force, the coffin lifebuoy shot lengthwise from the sea" (*MD* 427). Ishmael floats towards the "All," the centre, of the circle where the entire crew of the *Pequod* is being sucked under. He, however, does not follow the collective down into the watery world—instead he latches onto the coffin and asserts his singularity as the lone survivor of the Pequod. The coffin that saves him is originally made for Queequeg, who is ill at one point, and who spends many hours copying his tattooings onto the wood. These tattooings were drawn by a prophet who wrote out "a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth, ... whose mysteries not even [Queequeg] himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them" (*MD* 367). Ishmael, floating in the coffin, has gotten "just as nigh the water as [he] possibly can without falling in." He knows he cannot decipher the symbols but still admires them as closely as possible. In this moment of his salvation, the wild and mysterious universe sends Ishmael a symbol, not of death, but of after-life. (Queequeg wanted the coffin

as a mode of transporting his body into the afterlife.) This is because, like the images of concentric circles, cycles don't end—they continue. Floating peacefully in his coffin-buoy somewhere striving and death, Ishmael is a symbol of being closest to the Truth, to the "All," without falling in and drowning. He has accepted the limits to grasping an objective truth and has, thereby, embraced his singularity— he is the lone, but no longer lonely, survivor of the *Pequod*.

Conclusion

The only conclusion that feels appropriate is an anti-conclusion. Like Melville and like Ishmael, I often find myself restless to draw perfect conclusions and to connect dotted lines, yet an over-bearing claim can only dilute the text. Still, if Melville teaches the reader anything, it is that to give up on the attempt to grasp is stasis, or death. It is the struggle that vitalizes.

The experience of reading *Moby-Dick* is a deeply personal one every time it is read. It varies from reader to reader but also each time one reader himself reads it. Therefore, a seemingly conclusive understanding of the book may not be appropriate the second time around. In this way, *Moby-Dick* is timeless—elusive and changing shape as often as the tides come and go. The attraction man has to the sea—as Ishmael describes in the first chapter—seems related to the reader's attraction to the book. Man is physically made up of mostly water and it seems, in his gravitation towards the sea, that he almost attempts to acquire the water he lacks, to complete his self. Could this appeal be similar to the one for the reader*?* That is, the search for and the attempt to grasp the ideal and complete I in *Moby-Dick*?

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