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Melville's Geryon:

Empiricism and Meditation in *Moby-Dick*

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Living in an age of unpublished findings populating news stories where one can sufficiently bolster a claim with the simple phrase, “studies show,” many of *Moby-Dick’s* contemporary readers see the book’s nonfictional chapters as filler that numerous professors altogether suggest skipping (Hilbert 825). In light of this, philosophy and skepticism within these sections bind the very pages of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and are integral to *Moby-Dick’s* status as the great American novel it is today. Depicting such chapters as a mere transcription of life at sea would deprive them of meaning, for their critical function that extends beyond support and setup of *Moby-Dick’s* fictional aspects. Especially in relation to Ishmael, the book’s central character, the non-plot-related chapters serve as the key insights to *Moby-Dick’s* underlying theme of encouraging a broader understanding of the world and questioning knowledge at a fundamental level.

Critics almost universally understand the theme as the danger of the unknown and unknowable, and much of Melville’s great work supports such a claim. Ishmael paints direful depictions of the ocean in the chapters “Loomings” and “Brit” along with various paragraphs scattered throughout the book and illustrates that the sea is nature’s dangerous domain, containing “all the horrors of the half-known life” (Melville 225; ch. 58). Though, a theme that is ardently against the pursuit of knowledge would seem to be a peculiar choice, for Melville devotes a significant portion of *Moby-Dick* to non-fictional or partially fictional inquiries and extensively read contemporary scientific publications ranging from the discovery of the oxygen-carrying capacity of blood in 1840 (Ferry 819; Melville 290; ch. 85) to Darwin’s *The Voyage of the Beagle* in 1839 (Hoare). Ishmael actively indulges in the pursuit of knowledge and, at times, even upholds the integrity of science by asserting that physiognomy and phrenology, the studies of personality

inferences from facial features and the skull respectively, are “semi-sciences” (Melville 273; ch. 79) instead of generalizing all sciences as inherently flawed. Although criticism of either study was not uncommon, physiognomy had still been the focus of voluminous academic research in Melville’s time (Porter 497), and phrenology would continue well into the twentieth century, but Ishmael’s insistence on caution forbid him from blindly accepting such pseudosciences. This further displays Melville’s scientific skepticism that promotes seeking the truth, and it undermines *Moby-Dick*’s widely accepted theme of the perilous pursuit of that which is beyond the limits of the known world and largely replaces it (Ward 164).

The first chapter dedicated to science is “Cetology,” which comes in the critical shift in which Ishmael becomes largely absent from the plot and slips into narration. The reader must remember that he is indeed the post-tragedy narrator as opposed to Melville, for his choice of selection and possible falsification of details is critical to understanding the true meaning of *Moby-Dick*. Though, discussing “Cetology” and its related chapters requires more overarching discussion of narration.

“Call me Ishmael” is one of the most iconic opening lines in all of literature, for it serves the purpose of displaying the commanding style of narration, the narrator’s personality, and, more subtly, the theme of the great work, accomplished by immediately evincing the narrator’s unreliability, especially since such a sentence precedes, “Some years ago—never mind how long precisely...” (Melville 18; ch. 1). Here, “narrator Ishmael” (Melville 103n6; ch. 26) makes his brief commentary before largely disappearing for the next twenty chapters and again for chapter-twenty six, twenty-seven, twenty-nine, and onward as he entirely takes sailor Ishmael’s place until chapter forty-seven. Here, narrator Ishmael briefly recedes before dominating the rest

of the book as sailor Ishmael busies himself with the mysteries of the world. Along with being far more fatalistic, Ishmael as a post-tragedy narrator takes the role of the writer and editor of the *Pequod's* activities as he interpolates soliloquies and conversations that he could not have possibly witnessed, as he clandestinely admits in "Surmises." From this point, *Moby-Dick* comes to mirror Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, which Melville read three years prior to *Moby-Dick's* publication (Parker 434), through its perspective puzzles that challenge the audience to determine when the narrator's descriptions reflect his imagination instead of his experiences and why the narrator is including or excluding specific sections.

Understanding "Cetology" merits consideration of when Ishmael would have come to know the intricacies of cetaceans, for he could not have possibly comprehend the full scope of whale, dolphin, and porpoise behaviors and structures on his first whaling trip even though he had certainly seen a few during his merchant voyages. For many readers, "Cetology" is the first of many "semi-relevant" discussions of whales and whaling (Ward 164), but the active eye will readily discover the true satirical purpose beyond mocking William Scoresby. Ishmael begins the chapter by justifying it as a "Thorough appreciative understanding of the more special leviathanic revelations and allusions of all sorts which are to follow" (Melville 115; ch. 32). While this chapter definitely serves as a tribute to cetaceans, he never manages to reference his arbitrary classification of whales for the remainder of the book; instead, this statement almost certainly refers to his repository of known false assertions that he promptly contradicts in subsequent chapters.

His first incorrect argument comes after thorough background on the unquestionable mammalian qualities of whales, though he settles that whales are fish. Ishmael's messmates both

were of such an opinion, so his only support for such a belief is that one of them thought Linnaeus' findings were "humbug" (Melville 117; chapter 32) and that the King James Version of the Book of Matthew [mistakenly] refers to the giant fish in the Book of Jonah as a whale (*King James Version*, Matt. 12.40). For the ever-skeptical Ishmael, such beliefs were vigorously unwonted and were intentionally so, given that Melville extensively studied Jonah's tale in order to write two chapters on it exclusively. Melville's, and likely Ishmael's, disbelief in the fish-like nature of whales lies in his continual reference to the human-like and otherwise mammalian qualities of whales in numerous instances (Melville 247, 263, 266-267, 268, 273-274, 275, 303, 393). In "The Grand Armada" Ishmael even slips, "The more whales, the less fish" (Melville 305; ch. 87), distinguishing the two groups of creatures. Although Ishmael promises "nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty" (Melville 116; ch. 32) in a manner entirely devoid of satire, his following statements that the whale is a fish as his friends and Jonah claim directly capsizes Ishmael's skeptical paradigm.

The bulk remainder of "Cetology" follows Ishmael's parody of non-empirical science through his arbitrary division of whales, dolphins, and porpoises according to their sizes. Ishmael does deliver more satire-free discussion as he comments, "Some pretend to see a difference between the Greenland whale of the English and the right whale of the Americans .... Nor has there been presented a single determinate fact upon which to ground a radical distinction. It is by endless subdivisions based upon the most inconclusive differences, that some departments of natural history become so repellingly intricate" (Melville 119; ch. 32), which aligns with his previous statement regarding zoology and anatomy, "Though of real knowledge there be little, yet of books there are plenty" (Melville 115; ch. 32). Albeit, he contradicts this criticism with

discussion of orcas as three different creatures: “the Grampus,” “the Killer,” and “the Thrasher.” Ishmael “discovers” the latter two, making the Killer’s distinction its comparative ferocity and unknown quantity of oil and the Thrasher’s differential feature its even more unknown nature (Melville 121, 123; ch. 32). Apart from classification, Melville, who began his book with an etymological exegesis of “whale,” inserts a false origin of the word “narwhal,” “That is, *Nostril whale*.—Another instance of a curiously named whale, so named I suppose from his peculiar horn being originally mistaken for a peaked nose” (Melville 122), while the true origin is “from Dutch narwal, Danish narhval, based on Old Norse *nár* ‘corpse’, with reference to skin colour” (“Narwhal”). These inaccurate observations are Ishmael’s, for Melville purposes them with displaying that even knowledge-seeking Ishmael is not infallible, and even if Melville was not aware of distinctions between the list of unknown whales and those included in Ishmael’s books, he had Ishmael notify the reader of the limits of his knowledge. As one of Ishmael’s calls to empiricism, he comments on whale skeleton observations and indirectly reveals the true purpose of “Cetology”: “No. Only in the heart of quickest perils; only when within the eddyings of his angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out” (Melville 348; ch. 103).

Beyond “Cetology” Ishmael’s skepticism extends to numerous subjects, and the first of which are religion and culture, coming to develop skepticism beyond analyzing outright incorrect information. One of the critical reasons for *Moby-Dick*’s infamous commercial failure was its continued disregard of traditional Christian principles amid Presbyterian and evangelical Protestant conflict, for Melville was far from orthodox in his beliefs and struggled with religion for his entire life (Braswell 4). Along with the more subtle commentary on organized religion such as his

cannibal friend Queequeg's knowing "a good deal more about the true religion" than Ishmael (Melville 83; ch. 17), Ishmael overtly suggests the shortcomings of strictly adhering to certain teachings as he pleads for Queequeg's validity as a sailor by describing that his referenced church is the " 'same ancient Catholic Church to which you and I, and Captain Peleg there, and Queequeg here, and all of us, and every mother's son and soul of us belong; the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world ... only some of us cherish some queer crotchets nowadays touching the grand belief' " (Melville 84; ch. 84). Ishmael sees this as one of the numerous curiously accepted dogmas of civilization, and he balances the story arc that spans the second chapter through the twenty-first on his unlikely companionship with Queequeg, whom he first saw as a monstrous and dangerous savage before readily bedding with his "Bosom friend," being "George Washington cannibalistically developed," as if they were "a cosy, loving pair" (Melville 57; ch. 10).

Additional to intentionally falsifying parts of *Moby-Dick's* nonfictional chapters, Ishmael ardently admits to generally altering reality in his book while retaining what he believes to be the cores of the events. Although it may be excessive, Ishmael insists that his speech is based in reality, and even in his sailor tales, he sticks to the truth, basing his story off of Luther Fox's manslaughter (Melville 214n6; ch. 54) while stretching various parts to render his "Steelkilt" a more honorable man. Anticipating the reader's doubting in the story, Ishmael begins his tale by detailing that he includes the secondary version of his story that occurred in an atmosphere more favorable to the story's believability, which Peruvian audience inquires, " 'This your story is in substance really true? It is so passing wonderful! Did you get it from an unquestionable source? Bear with me if I seem to press' " (Melville 213; ch. 54). Even though the legitimacy of Ishmael's tale is not

pertinent to its ability to entertain, it calls into question Ishmael's honesty and accuracy, to which Ishmael responds by asking for a Bible on which to swear (Melville 214; ch. 54). The Peruvians say that this is wholly unnecessary, but he politely insists and requests the largest Bible available and confirms that it is "in substance and its great items, true" (Melville 214; ch. 54). The reader could understand this as a mere joke, but the story bears thematic implications. Ishmael does not portray his friends in Lima as captious, nor does he rebuke their questioning; Ishmael intentionally surrounds himself with individuals who seek the tantalizing truth, and none of them suffer for doing so. He plainly admits to slightly stretching the story as he does at large with *Moby-Dick* in "Sumises" while retaining its core events, and he once more readily invites skeptical interpretation of his book. Ishmael's uncanny dedication to the truth is by no means hidden to the casual reader, and his tendency to include intentional inaccuracies do not escape most critics despite the limited literature on Ishmael's imprecision. Error exists in glossing over Ishmael's genuine proclamations of the value of knowledge due to the lack of discussion regarding the connection between his traits and his impact on the theme.

The heart of the perceived theme of cautioning the pursuit of knowledge, especially in regards to the divine, emerges in the chapters following "The Town-Ho Story" as Ishmael describes the shortcomings of artists who attempt to illustrate the ethereal yet ruthless reality of whales without ever witnessing their catastrophic acts. As he will do at the close of the chapter, Ishmael begins by claiming that external works such as paintings cannot quite delineate the "true form of the whale as he actually appears to the eye of the whaleman" (Melville 214-215; ch. 55), in between commenting that specific works are "unprofessional attempts" or disproportionate, even when created to be the "most conscientious compilations" (Melville 216; ch. 55). Famously,



Melville concludes that “the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness,” afterward emphasizing the danger of setting out to see whales with one’s own eyes (Melville 218; ch. 55). Though, Ishmael immediately follows this chapter with the more acceptable contrast, for “it is by such pictures only, when at all well done, that you can derive anything like a truthful idea of the living whale as seen by his living hunters” (Melville 219; ch. 56). All of the artists discussed in this chapter have directly viewed whales or have thoroughly studied them through a whaler and are able “capable of conveying the real spirit of the whale hunt” (Melville 220; ch. 56). Ishmael does not condemn attempts to understand the world as he does condemn attempts to falsify an understanding of the world, and he humbles himself in admitting that the pictures in chapter fifty-six are surely far better than anything he could muster (Melville 219; ch. 56). The pitiful peg-legged whaler who does not cry to be heard or wave to be seen instead wears a painting of his tragedy before him, for “never a stump-speech does the poor whaleman make: but with downcast eyes, stands ruefully contemplating his own amputation” (Melville 221; ch. 57). The sailor, too, has seen the whale and does not forge a disaster unknown to him, as is the case for Ishmael’s book.

Continuously present in *Moby-Dick*, nature, especially the black waters of the ocean, bolsters the danger of assaulting the unknown instead of investigating it. Beyond casual skepticism that can occur on land, Ishmael sees the sea as the dichotomous to land with the waters as the “image of the ungraspable phantom of life: and this is the key to it all” (Melville 20; ch. 1) in light of its unruly nature. Ishmael consistently aligns his sailor self with the green, naive grounds that grew increasingly rare in his three-year voyage, and he persistently finds himself in danger in the

masthead not only from the whale but also from his own philosophizing (Blum 1). The ocean is a universal call not merely to indulge in skepticism but to traverse the unknown and confront the wild abyss. Although Ishmael attributes his depression as his chief motive for venturing out into the sea as a sailor, he continuously cites the desire to obtain knowledge of the hooded phantom that startled him when he was younger as his compelling call (McSweeney 24-25). It is this action of challenging nature instead of merely attempting to study it that meets misery, and it is through Ahab's attack on God that he acquaints himself with fate: "...however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make" (Melville 224; ch. 58). No single individual shall ever hold knowledge of all things, but there is no atrocity in endeavoring to gain insight and working with it, though, akin to art, feigning omnipotence is the attempt to defeat the Leviathan in the Book of Job (*English Standard Version*, Job 41.1-11), the very act that Ahab carelessly attempts.

Ahab is thus the foundation for much discussion of the perceived theme of *Moby-Dick*, but it is only in reference to Ishmael that the reader can garner a more comprehensive understanding of the book's meaning. Ishmael is not the perfect antithesis of Ahab, for after Ahab charismatically rallied the ship toward the purpose of defeating Moby Dick in the presence of First Mate Starbuck's dismay and sense of self-preservation, narrator Ishmael proclaims, "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (Melville 152; ch. 41). In spite of this unison, Ishmael and Ahab vastly differ in their treatment of

knowledge and ignorance, and Ishmael as the narrator readily heightens this juxtaposition as he did with his story of Steerkilt; many of Ahab's actions are, consequently, embellished but telling nonetheless, such as his metaphorical lunge to "strike through the mask" by attacking Moby Dick, who serves as the physical embodiment of God's power (Melville 140; ch. 36). Descending into monomania, Ahab further attempts to blindly attack and disregard concepts of the known world as he neared Moby Dick: " 'Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy; and cursed be all the things that cast man's eyes aloft to that heaven .... The level ship's compass, and the level dead-reckoning, by log and by line; these shall conduct me, and show me my place on the sea' " (Melville 378; ch. 118). After casting these navigational tools overboard in an ultimate show of disobedience to the natural world, the next scene showcases a wild storm that threatens the *Pequod* as flames dance along its masts. The mad Ahab interprets this as God's directions to Moby-Dick, but Starbuck perceives it as an obvious sign to turn back from the perilous quest, especially when the harpoon that Ahab rabidly forged with the blood of his three harpooners begins to burn (Melville 381-382; ch. 119). Along with many other portentions sprinkled throughout the novel, here nature gives Ahab a chance to cease his vengeful quest, and similar to Steerkilt, his conception of his manhood forbids such an action. Twenty-two chapters before Ahab jettisons his navigational tools in favor of divine signs, narrator Ishmael calls to Ahab, "Turn not thy back to the compass" (Melville 328; ch. 96). In tandem with this Ishmael's previous comments on the horrifying divinity of the savage white whale in its hue, Melville embeds Ahab in a metaphor as Ishmael notes the captain to be "like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of these things the Albino whale was the symbol" (Melville 165; ch.

42). Jeopardy comes to those who seek it, and Ahab's complicit crew shared his fate. Without reference to Ishmael, the lone survivor, the meaning behind Ahab's actions and soliloquies do not extend beyond blind revenge with premeditated searching.

Ishmael's book comes after his painful survival that depended on his use of his best friend's unused coffin. He purposed it with a theme beyond a mere suggestion of increased empirical thought and meditation, for the motley crew that included Queequeg could have survived if only Ahab had taken the opportunity to consider the real possibility of escaping that belongs to tragic heroes. Although Ahab did come to empathize with his crew, his fatalistic beliefs bound him to accost the whale, costing his and his crew's lives, making Ahab an unforgiven Jonah. It was only by seemingly random chance that the non-unique sailor Ishmael took to the bowhead of Ahab's boat upon his harpooner's death, allowing Ishmael to survive, but the half-attentive critical analysis on why Ishmael prevailed is similar to the critical analysis regarding *Moby-Dick's* nonfictional portions; the latter ascribes Ishmael's need to write the book as his *deus ex machina* push from his boat so that he did not perish in the whirlpool that drowned the crew into a beige aftermath. Ishmael was not present to witness the details of the *Pequod's* sinking, and he may not even have seen Moby Dick's ramming that caused it, but gaps in knowledge have not stopped his narration before, so why should they now? He devotes a mere few paragraphs to the destruction of the connections he honed throughout the three years that exclusively belong to the *Pequod* and crew. As morbid as the reality is, the ship's sailors, excluding Ishmael, had to perish for Ishmael's story to be valid. Even the undeserving Starbuck needed to go down with the ship for Ishmael's undoubtedly stretched truths to live. With all proof gone, Ishmael has the freedom to create as he wishes and attempt to understand the reasoning for his survival that still exists beyond his

comprehension. For a theme with as much nuance across a motley of subjects and requirements for attention to detail as *Moby-Dick's*, the truth that critics have yet to manage to apply skepticism to a book about just that only augments it further, which is only a feat that one of the best works of literature could manage.

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