The Whale's Three Jobs:
Postsecularist Literary Studies and the Old Testament Hermeneutics of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

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ABSTRACT

This essay is concerned with Herman Melville's mediation of the wisdom tradition in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. I situate Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* at the intersection of literary studies, the philosophy of religion, and the transatlantic cultural history of the Bible to challenge older scholarly depictions of Melville as a religiously subversive and irreverently skeptical author. In doing so, I build on recent work by scholars such as Ilana Pardes, Jonathan Cook, and Zachary Hutchins, all of whom have read *Moby-Dick* as being not only religiously iconoclastic but also productive and even reverent towards the Bible. However, many of these discussions have not addressed to what extent Melville harnesses the skepticism towards religious belief that resides within the Bible itself. Using the example of the Book of Job, a text that has received prolific literary responses in romanticism, as a point of comparison, I show how Melville mediates the language and themes of biblical wisdom to discuss the philosophical problem of theodicy, the question of God's benign character. In response to this issue, Melville, I argue, constructs a tripart typology, in which he contemplates the three distinct vectors of Job's personality (repenter, sufferer, and rebel). In doing so, he produces what theologian D. Z. Phillips has called a "hermeneutics of contemplation" (30): Melville compares critically the biblical book with competing contemporary epistemological schemes, such as secular science, religious orthodoxy, and moral philosophy, to determine its explanatory potential. Advocating an ethos of reverential yet critical inquiry that can be traced to eighteenth-century deist societies, the novel ultimately asserts a nostalgic reverence for the Bible's wisdom epistemology.

In his history of American theology, E. Brooks Holifield argues that "one can hardly hope to understand the nineteenth-century literary renaissance without knowing something about the theological ideas current in the culture" (2). Writers of the American Renaissance were sensitive to religious and theological debates of their time because these discourses governed the majority of socially constitutive and transformative forces in the United States. Although he privileges secularism as an intellectual point of departure in his analysis, M. H. Abrams characterizes the formal challenges romantic authors in both Europe and America faced when confronting the prospect of nostalgic religious language:

> Despite their displacement from a supernatural to a natural frame of reference, [...] the ancient problems, terminology, and ways of thinking about human nature and history survived, as the implicit distinctions and categories through which even radically secular writers saw themselves and their world, and as the presuppositions and forms of their thinking about the condition, the milieu, the essential values and aspirations, and the history and destiny of the individual and of mankind. (13)

What Abrams calls displacement was by no means a smooth, harmonious transition so much as it constituted a struggle. For those, for instance, who understood the stakes of the Bible's transformation from a document containing revealed knowledge into one containing cultural knowledge, this displacement of religious and theological values could be outright traumatic. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, I want to suggest, exemplifies this struggle on the part of American authors. The novel expresses a nostalgia for a time when the Bible and its literary content wielded moral authority. Tracing this optative mood in the novel illuminates its position at the intersection of literature and biblical exegesis. This assessment clashes with authorial studies of Melville's work and career. These studies depict him as an irreverent iconoclast, an author who delights in subverting the pious views of sheepish readers.[1] In contrast, I align myself with those scholars who trace the productive ways in which Melville engages the Bible.

Particularly centered on *Moby-Dick*, recent studies have revived this long extant yet less prominent strain in Melville scholarship. Early quantitative research into Melville's annotations of his Bibles by Luther Mansfield and Howard Vincent, the editors of the Hendricks House edition of the novel, and particularly Nathalia Wright's *Melville's Use of the Bible* already illustrated that the Old Testament wisdom tradition anchors the novel's moral perspective, prominently expressed via Ishmael's narration. While *Moby-Dick* may not be Melville's attempt at writing a new Bible, as Ilana Pardes argues, Lawrance Thompson usefully suggests as the novel's subtitle "The Word of God, as Interpreted by Herman Melville" (188).[2] Zachary Hutchins proposes to read *Moby-Dick* as Melville's attempt to redact modern homogenized views of the Bible as consisting of an Old and a New Testament, both of which put forward distinct and contrary moral viewpoints. For Hutchins, Melville saw form and moral content as inextricably linked and naturally asserted the Bible's literary nature and generic complexity to argue for its utility as a book that can compute moral complexity. "From Melville's perspective," Hutchins notes, "nineteenth-century American Christians have forgotten to temper mercy with justice and consequently ignore the fullness of the Bible's moral messages, obscuring God's willingness to chasten as well as exonerate" (33). Jonathan Cook builds on these arguments by proposing that "the biblical themes of theodicy and eschatology give distinctive shape and meaning to *Moby-Dick*" (6). Cook expertly illustrates the presence of biblical scholarship and etymology within Melville's thematics. In doing so, he opens up the analytical territory I want to explore here by

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[1] Critics have long considered Melville's engagement with biblical themes as motivated by personal irreverence and even wickedness. See, for instance, Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel*, and Murray, "In Nomine Diaboli" (436).

[2] Thompson is one of the first scholars to acknowledge Melville's eclectic readings of the Bible and Bible commentaries, but he considers these studies a means to the end of satire. Still, Thompson frequently attributes to the novel the quality of exegetical commentary. For instance, concerning Ahab's reading of the whale as a symbol of divine malice, he notes, "Melville here would seem to avail himself of the opportunity to combine his interpretation of Job forty-one with the orthodox interpretation of Isaiah twenty-seven, so that Leviathan might serve as an emblem of both God and Satan, the two being not merely coeternal, as the Manicheans taught, but one in source, according to Melville's dark exegesis" (187).

tracing the lines of communication between Melville's novel and the Book of Job. While I agree with Cook, Hutchins, and Pardes that Melville's novel evinces the sensibilities of biblical scholarship, translation, and mediation, I wish to narrow the argumentative scope by pointing out that Melville does not draw indiscriminately on all biblical genres and books in all their respective complexities but specifically engages the Old Testament moral wisdom tradition. Rather than merely tracing thematic correlations, I wish to tease out Melville's adaptation of a specific hermeneutics through his studies of the Bible. *Moby-Dick*, then, constitutes one instance in his career, one nodal point, at which we may observe a process of mediation that arguably spanned his entire literary career.

I argue that the novel mobilizes what D. Z. Phillips calls a hermeneutics of contemplation, i. e., a manner of considering religious experience and text as "examples of irreducibly religious meanings" while at the same time holding them to the standards of natural experience (30). Melville finds this hermeneutics of contemplation presented in the so-called wisdom literature, i. e., the Books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament. The wisdom books compile a body of practical moral advice literature, but they also contain discussions of spiritual crises and skepticism. In *Moby-Dick*, biblical wisdom functions as a versatile moral philosophy that balances religious skepticism with literary assertions of moral truth. Old Testament wisdom thus underwrites an intellectual stance of free inquiry that informs Melville's idea of questing. My goal here, then, is to work out precisely how Melville engages this exegetical tradition in the novel by rehistoricizing his work in the multilayered story of the erosion of biblical certainty, which occurred in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America and Europe. In doing so, I show how Melville mediates biblical language, textual history, and historical exegesis as he derives some of his most subversive ideas from the Bible itself. In this manner, I offer an alternative to earlier suspicious readings of the novel.

Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Biblical Scholarship and Reading

In the nineteenth century, the United States and Western Europe saw dramatic shifts in the religious landscape: In America, the collapse of the colonial dominance of Calvinist Protestantism left in its wake sectarian proliferation. From the ashes of an (already theologically heterogeneous) New England Calvinism rose Evangelicalism and other Protestant denominations. These groups in turn catalyzed a number of social reform movements: Societies advocating temperance, workers' rights, women's and black suffrage, and the abolition of slavery came to share the communal landscape of the Early Republic. Importantly, both proponents and opponents of these causes still referenced the Bible as an argumentative basis for their respective efforts. By the 1830s, literal readings of the Bible had given way to more nuanced, metaphorical, and historical interpretations. While effectively eroding its status as the literal, timeless word of God, new ways of looking at the Bible diffused and expanded its meaning and turned it from an authoritative into a cultural and literary document. This erosion resulted

from a multidirectional revaluation of evidential and epistemological standards. This intellectual movement permeated all social strata and consequently swept through both expert and layman reader communities in the eighteenth century. Since the early eighteenth century, deists and so-called free thinkers in both Europe and the American colonies had attacked what they saw as the Bible's archaic supernaturalism. Meanwhile, scholars, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands, experimented with historical methodologies to produce philology, a new evidence-based, biblical hermeneutics.

Ultimately, neither atheist firebrands nor deist dissidents alone effected this change. On the contrary, orthodox religious commentators, who tried to stem the tide of critical inquiries from both inside and outside the clerical community, attempted to place biblical interpretation on a rationalist foundation. Commenting on the nineteenth-century intellectual scene in the United States, Michael Lee asserts that

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

Neither orthodox nor liberal commentators intended to devalue the explanatory capacity of the Bible, yet their attempts inadvertently opened the door to creative, democratic, and ultimately corrosive interpretations. Social and cultural historians have recently documented how biblical certainty came to be dismantled by its religiously orthodox advocates in their attempts to modulate their own methodologies to stave off the attacks of so-called infidels. Deist and free-inquiry, or free-thinker, societies often consisted of well-situated and educated laymen, who conducted independent, critical research on the Bible.[3] However, these groups were by no means advocating Bible burning or dispensing with faith entirely. Rather, they tried to purge mysticism from institutional practice and theology in order to reconcile belief to modern standards of evidence. All the while, many such efforts were personal rather than systemic. The revaluation of religious faith as "one human possibility among others" and the rise of secular humanism as a viable worldview, as Charles Taylor notes, were slow but steady (3). Even instances of full-fledged atheism were almost always the result of rather earnest engagements with the foundations of personal faith. For example, infidel conversion narratives—a generic parody of Protestant conversion narratives—regularly recounted struggles to hold fast to faith in the face of mounting rationalist skepticism. "Infidel converts," Eric Schlereth concludes, "ultimately argued that efforts to redouble their Christian faith led them to disbelief. The more they explored Christianity, the more worthy it seemed of rejection, but also ridicule" (179). Even

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[3] On the rise of Deism and its influence on exegetical methodology, see especially Diego Lucci, *Scripture and Deism*. In his magisterial *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America* (1969), Jerry Wayne Brown first documents the controversies over biblical interpretation and the reception of European methodologies in the United States.

American layman readers were all but blissfully ignorant of these controversies surrounding biblical interpretation in the late 1700s.[4]

Between the late 1700s and mid-1800s, efforts by both American and European clerics to make faith more accessible thus came at a price. While the New Testament garnered most scholarly attention in this intellectual climate, the Old Testament initially carried an unattractive, dusty gloom, which to many theologians rendered the book less relevant to modern Christian theology. Jonathan Sheehan shows that this neglect "left the Old Testament in a precarious yet productive position in the Christian context," for its "devaluation […] opened it up to more speculative interpretations and, more importantly, more speculative translations" (151). Translation had long been the primary scholarly mode of engaging the Bible, and scholars accordingly tried to overcome the Old Testament's perceived archaism by making accessible the emotional repertoire of its poetry. For instance, Robert Lowth sought to enliven his translation of *Isiah* (1778) by abandoning forced rhyme as a translational principle (Sheehan 149). As he strove to convey the poetic character of the original Hebrew, he injected creative license into his translation and effectively altered a text that was supposedly inviolable. Eventually, such practices "made the Old Testament into the gravitational center for the poetic Bible" (152). In this way, the Old Testament, and the Book of Job in particular, became lightning rods for literary interpretations. In the nineteenth century, both scholars and authors were thus drawn with renewed vigor to the Old Testament's meditations on the moral implications of divine justice and human integrity in the face of suffering.[5]

Moby-Dick, a Book of the Old Testament?

Biblical Job's heroic suffering appealed to romantic authors in both Europe and the United States because, as a literary character, he symbolized a humanist emancipatory rationalism that dared stand against divine bullying. In the biblical story, Job is a pious man and even a favorite in God's eyes, blessed with riches, health, and a thriving family. Incited by the Adversary (Satan) to test Job's piety, God allows Job to be stripped of his material possessions, family, and health.[6] As

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[4] Michael Lee observes that "in the *City Gazette* of Charleston, South Carolina, a pseudonymous letter to the editor, dated September 22, 1797, praised the publication of [Johann Jakob] Griesbach's New Testament in Europe. The author correctly contextualizes his work with Mill, Wettstein, Michaelis, and Marsh. At least one soul reading a South Carolina newspaper kept up with European textual criticism. Remarkably, he wrote his letter over a decade before [Jospeh] Buckminster published the American version" (133).

[5] Germany became the focus of this gravitational pull, and for a time saw a veritable "Job obsession" in its theological circles (Sheehan 162). Formally, The Book of Job is the most literary of the wisdom books. It contains a prologue, narrative, dialogic poetry, and epilogue; some of the dialogical voices that Job encounters in his friends seem to be interpolations added to an earlier version of the story; and in the Hebrew version, there are even overt stylistic contrasts between the prologue's prose and the poetic exchange between God and Job.

[6] Moshe Greenberg notes that the Adversary is translated incorrectly as "Satan" in the *King James Version*. In the Hebrew original, the Adversary, or Accuser, is "an angel whose task is to

Job laments his unwarranted suffering, he encounters four comforters who challenge his self-professed innocence. Job's friends, or comforters, here represent religious orthodoxy and tradition. They assert that Job should accept his guilt, even if he does not comprehend his crime. Eventually, Job receives an audience with God, who appears in the form of a whirlwind, i. e., an overwhelming show of force. A debate ensues, in which God strikes down Job's demand that divine justice correspond to causal consistency. He ridicules the limitations of human reason and asserts His prerogative of defining justice. In his encounter with the whirlwind, Job comes to recognize the presumptuousness of his moral complaint against divine reasoning and humbly concedes God's omnipotence and sovereignty. Importantly, Job never concedes his guilt nominally but merely admits that he had no right to challenge God's wisdom. He evolves from pious doubter to repentant believer. Eventually, God rewards this piety by returning to Job his worldly possessions. Still, God's behavior appears questionable by human rational standards because He ends the argument by force while simultaneously pointing towards exclusive yet secret knowledge that may help rationalize Job's suffering.

Literary romanticism, especially epic poetry, draws frequently on Joban biblical language and imagery. Examples include John Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost,* Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*, and Percy Bysshe Shelly's *Prometheus Unbound*. The Book of Job thus defines an aesthetic vocabulary for denouncing personal and communal victimization and for lionizing human perseverance. For Melville, this vocabulary drives a variety of critical discourses about the structuring principles of reality: divine justice, revealed knowledge, and empiricism, as well as the compensatory value of suffering. In his initial references to the biblical wisdom books in the chapter "Extracts," Melville credits "Mighty Job" as the first author of the Leviathan. He cites Job 41:32, a passage from a long catalog of descriptions that God delivers on the animal, in which God addresses the leviathan's ability to alter sense perception: "One would think the deep to be hoary." The whale's movements create the illusion of temporal as well as spacial depth; in the water, spectators may thus glimpse into the depth and mystery of creation. *Moby-Dick* makes much of this passage, more in fact than of the subsequent reference to Jonah 1:17, which merely states that God made the whale to swallow up Jonah. While "Jonah's whale" merely serves as an instrument of God's will, "Job's whale" connotes personal agency, characterized by power and, above all, secret knowledge. Melville reads the leviathan as a whale at a time in which exegetical practice commonly posited a crocodile as the referent for the term. More importantly, though, he also connotes that whale with the pursuit of knowledge. He finds in the Book of Job an exegetical tradition that engages God's paradox duality as both dispenser of unwarranted suffering and embodiment of benign power. For instance, the generic differences between the book's prose prologue

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roam the earth and expose human wrongdoing" as Greenberg pointedly summarizes (284). For the sake of consistency, I will refer to the Adversary as "Satan." I have not been able to verify whether Melville was aware of this difference. Certainly, he would have noticed the distinct hierarchy and command structure involving God and Satan that the prose frame of the Book of Job communicates.

and God's poetic remonstrations formally illustrate a paradigm of separate epistemological spheres—those of humanity and divinity. Nathalia Wright finds that two thirds of Melville's biblical references and allusions actually refer to the Old Testament (*Melville's Use* 10). Out of these, the majority is to the wisdom books (*Melville's Use* 94). The sheer number of references suggests that Melville engages Old Testament morality, specifically the Book of Job's version of the problem of theodicy, the idea that God cannot be both, all-good and all-powerful.

Recently, theologians and Bible studies scholars have revived the debate about Melville's engagement with the textual history of the Bible and particularly Job.[7] The reading I propose here contradicts biographical, forensic analyses that have characterized Melville as a spiritually interior author who merely vociferates his own uncertainty. In contrast, I consider *Moby-Dick* in light of recent theological and historical scholarship on Job and the history of the Bible. The novel, I show below, moderates epistemological and ontological questions as they are articulated in the Book of Job. In doing so, Melville does not merely proffer skepticism and deal metaphysical cheap shots to credulous, sheepish readers but constructs a hermeneutics based on biblical wisdom. While he was keenly aware that he could never be "at all frank with his readers" concerning his personal religious views, it seems to me that his novel extends an open invitation to those able and willing to share in an aesthetic, critical theological vision (*Correspondence* 149).[8]

Pardes suggests that with *Moby-Dick*, Melville "ventured to fashion a grand new inverted Bible" while attempting to capture "every imaginable mode of biblical interpretation" (*Melville's Bibles* 1). She points out Melville's "strikingly broad [read: eclectic] conception of exegesis," yet she never defines in detail the means by which Melville accomplishes what she appealingly terms a "radical reconsideration of the politics of biblical reception" (1). On the side of literary scholarship, critics do not distinguish consistently between Melville's personal religious skepticism and the Bible's innate skepticism in the wisdom tradition. These difficulties may result from a bias towards Christology and New Testament hermeneutics in nineteenth-century literary studies. In addition, scholars may have underestimated, one, the degree to which the Old Testament itself contains a skeptical

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

[8] While composing *Moby-Dick* in the 1840s, Melville consulted John Kitto's *Popular Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature*, among other literary sources. Mark Heidman particularly notes Melville's interest and research into exegetical history (348). Wright, Pardes, and others have corroborated Melville's serious interest in the theological controversies of the time and demonstrated a diversified understanding of the Biblical source text that translates, I argue, into an equally discerning literary exegesis of said text. On Melville's marginalia on the New Testament, see especially Brian Yothers's "Introduction."

hermeneutics that eventually spawns other forms of critical inquiry and, two, how widely this innate skeptical tradition circulated in nineteenth-century America. Hence, there is a tendency to diagnose rewriting instead of scholarly engagement as Melville's motivation for referencing the Bible.

In this vein, Lawrence Buell characterizes *Moby-Dick* as "a sort of modern Book of Revelation, yet also a book that casts doubt on the possibility of revelation" (55). Hilton Obenzinger contests that "[t]he ironies, parodies, sly essays, and jokes work to undermine the seriousness of the book […] yet the hodgepodge of literary styles creates a new sense of lofty, even sacred, narrative" (189). Buell acknowledges that *Moby-Dick* "remains in some measure faithful to a biblical sense of God's elusiveness of human conception," yet he never sources these observations to Old Testament wisdom (55). The New Testament slant of his reading leads Buell to undervalue the stylistic and philosophical impact that the Book of Job has on the novel and to dimiss the connection between the two texts as mere resemblance in narrative structure (64). Nevertheless, Buell's claim that Melville's works operate well within the limits of Old Testament biblical hermeneutics, even when they seemingly subvert scriptural dogma, seems worth pursuing here (55). In *Moby-Dick*, I suggest, Melville splits the three primary dimensions of the Joban paradigm (victimization, defiance, repentance) and contemplates them in the form of three literary personae: Pip, Ahab, and Ishmael. Each Joban character performs a distinct function within the framework of Melville's aesthetic exegetic hermeneutics: Ishmael (repentant Job) engages in comparative historical readings of religious dogma; Ahab (defiant Job) challenges theodicy, the idea that God can be all-powerful and all-good; and Pip, the hapless victimized sufferer, symbolizes the hypothetical scenario of gaining insight into God's mind. This technique of splitting and juxtaposition allows Job's conflicting character traits to confront each other as distinct voices in a larger dialogue about the theological problem of theodicy.

Divine Taunting and Casuist Promises: Argumentative Stakes in the Book of Job and *Moby-Dick*

Abigail Pelham articulates the central conflict of the Book of Job as one between ontology and hermeneutics: "Job insists that the world-as-it-ought-to-be has been overthrown and replaced with a kind of anti-world, in which the opposite of everything that ought to be is true. Job's friends, by contrast, perceive no disruption of this status quo" (24). The text therefore can be read as a dialogical contest between Job and God, in which God unilaterally rejects all versions of the reality that had been previously presented by Job and his friends in their respective speeches (25). Both Job's complaint and God's ambivalent answer raise complex questions, which remain unresolved, about the entanglements of hermeneutics and ontology. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville comments on this dynamic by turning the whale's ability to navigate between the ocean's surface and the deep sea into a symbol. Moby Dick can sound the inaccessible secrets of the deep, where the Weaver God sits at the treadle of creation, and seemingly execute God's will by

wreaking havoc at the ocean surface. Ahab in particular believes that such knowledge of God is portable, objective, and hence can be wrested physically from the whale. In the chapter "The Chase–Second Day" Ishmael observes,

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

Like Ahab, Ishmael discerns a purposeful methodology in the whale's oscillations between surface and deep. Yet he remains unable to systematize these movements, for the human eye cannot apprehend the whale's "untraceable evolutions" as they entangle "in a thousand ways" both the whalers' fasting lines and Ishmael's attempts at interpretation (559). The image of the entangled lines illustrates the futility of human knowledge in the face of sublime natural phenomena. Human taxonomies, such as cetology, depend on finite, epistemic categories such as scope. In motion, the whale is privy to the secrets of the "wonder world" that Ishmael romanticizes in the chapter "Loomings," yet neither Ishmael nor Ahab is able to apprehend wholly the living whale's body or movements. Whatever the methodological means, only the dead whale may be dissected and studied.

Melville here does not merely reiterate pious claims about the inscrutability of the sublime. He interrogates the evidentialist epistemological methodologies of the time—the notion that only physical dissection and taxonomizing may produce new knowledge. Their respective failure illustrates the tragic flaw in human perception: It can only analyze mental and physical objects that are both stationary and limited in scope. The whale's movements indicate an ambiguous epistemology that is simultaneously opaque, in terms of its full scale, yet forcefully apparent, in terms of its incidental manifestations as violent attacks. Like God's admonition of Job, the whale's methodical movements signify immense complexity coupled with arbitrary power. The failure of their respective feeble piecemeal epistemologies drives Ishmael and Ahab back into the mythical language of the Bible.

Insofar as they make theological assertions, both *Moby-Dick* and the Book of Job depict the flaunting of secret yet unattainable knowledge as characteristic of God and His agents. Commenting on this dynamic in the Book of Job, Wesley Morriston observes that traditional readings of the Joban complaint against innocent suffering summarize God's argument as "Job does not know enough to call God into question" (351). The whirlwind poem, in which God reproaches Job, conceptually refutes the application of human epistemology to Providence; human fate cannot be gleaned by ratiocination. Rhetorically, however, God's scolding of Job disrupts the book's internal logic because it invalidates the casuist conditions for God's love, which He himself sets forth in the prologue:

> Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? *and still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movest me against him, to destroy him without cause*. (Job 2:3, emphasis added)

God's conversation with Satan clearly enlists the logic of causal distributive justice. Yet in the whirlwind poem, God disavows these principles as the basis of His ac-

tions.[9] Not only does God trap Job in a cycle of suffering, He also imprisons him semantically. Rather than marshaling the superior argument, God wins their debate by rejecting causality as an argumentative basis. He effectively argues from an unassailable rhetorical stance of supreme force. In other words, God avoids the argumentative terms Job proposes by asserting that he, Job, simply does not know enough to understand why he suffers. Job cannot discern his crime because his punishment seems arbitrary, and because causality is the only way for humans to correlate crime and punishment, he has no choice but to admit defeat. Human epistemology, which is naturally expansive, becomes inhibited arbitrarily by sheer divine force, which is detached from any observable causal relation and therefore appears amoral.

Moderation and Repentance: Ishmael's Contemplative Rationalism

Starting from the traditional binary of defiant versus repentant Job, Melville casts his moral argument about evil as a problem of reading and perceiving the world and its phenomena. On the flipside, this juxtaposition of two distinct hermeneutics illustrates the very didactic point the biblical text tries to convey: Evil and suffering are matters of perspective; they depend on the difference between knowing God through the letter of tradition or through personal experience. The Bible presents this dynamic through both content and literary form. Concurrently, Melville too contrasts a hermeneutics of transgression (Ahab) with one of moderation (Ishmael). The use of personae enables Melville to engage the Bible's formal and logical inconsistencies by allowing Job's three attitudes to confront each other in the same text as distinct philosophical positions. In embodying different strategies of reading the world, Melville's central characters also enact the Book of Job's stylistic fragmentation. That being said, Melville inverts the prose and lyrical sections of the stories with his incarnations of Job: Ahab, with his lyrical, bombastic rhetoric, represents skeptical Job, while Ishmael, wielding prosaic scientific taxonomy, represents repentant Job.

Ishmael in particular emblematizes the Joban qualities of repentance, moderation, and survival. In contrast to Ahab, his quest for transcendent knowledge includes discussions of moderation. Obenzinger sketches the problem of moderation in knowledge seeking as follows: "In *Moby-Dick* either one does not know enough or seeks to know too much" (185). In the novel, Ishmael navigates a fundamental epistemological paradox that is framed by the Book of Job: Knowledge production, by definition, is expansive and requires pushing the envelope of inquisitive methodology and ethics, yet such expansion presupposes at a minimum the continued existence of the inquirer. Ishmael embodies the Old Testament ideal of epistemological transformation—of knowing God by experience rather than by dogma—while fulfilling the most important communicative function of the whole human project of knowledge seeking, surviving to tell the tale.[10]

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[9] The Hebrew and Greek versions of the text even stylistically emphasize God's changing rationales by switching literary genres from prose to verse.

[10] Pardes sees Melville perform a similar balancing act in his writing. She claims that Melville "is always well aware of the limits of the power of literature and commentary" (*Melville's Bibles*

While Ahab and defiant Job assume an intrinsic morality operating behind the foil of the natural world, Ishmael and the repentant Job of the biblical epilogue ultimately forego the whole problem of evil in human experience and, as Wright argues, "describe a natural world that is neither good nor evil but *sheerly* marvelous" ("Jonah's" 193, emphasis added). Similarly, Cook points out that Ishmael "shares with Ahab a Joban sense of dispossession and a recurrent obsession with the problem of evil, but he ultimately comes to terms with evil as a natural, not a supernatural, phenomenon" (11). Nevertheless, Ishmael describes the natural world in terms that emphasize its ability to instantiate divine presence. His role as repentant Job therefore warrants closer examination as it may provide a template for Ishmael's self-moderation in his quest for knowledge.

In distinction to Ahab, Ishmael attempts to differentiate between the contingent forces operating in the world and his personal moral judgment about those forces and their effects. Yet unlike repenting Job, Ishmael does not dismiss his inquisitiveness in favor of equanimity or submission. While acknowledging his propensity for emotional responses to metaphysical questions, Ishmael shields himself from taking personal exception to his observations. He repeatedly frames this self-upbraiding as professional advice to ship owners looking to hire young, dreamy-eyed sailors: "Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditativeness; and who offers to ship with the *Phaedo* instead of Bowditch in his head" (135). The *Phaedo*, Plato's dialogical discussion of the immortality of the soul, here contrasts Nathaniel Bowditch's pragmatic nautical *Almanac*. Both offer advice to the sailor on how to carry himself and his epistemological faculties aboard a ship. Ishmael does not discredit metaphysical contemplation but bemoans his tendency to fall into reverie at inopportune moments, i. e., when he should be concentrating on his work as a sailor. He repeatedly stresses the positive, disciplining effects of rationalism on his disposition.[11]

Rationalism, then, becomes auto-therapeutic and even vital for Ishmael, as he uses it to combat the dangerous effects of his contemplativeness. In one instance, the mesmerizing vistas of the "infinite series of the sea" threaten to dissolve Ishmael's mind "into languor" to the point that he almost tumbles from the masthead to his doom (159). Still, these liminal moments carry utility because they translate phenomenal into metaphysical knowledge: "[T]he blending cadence of waves with thoughts" lures Ishmael into staking his identity and physical existence to achieve a direct bond with the natural world (159). Later, when manning the helm, Ishmael finds himself mesmerized yet again by the light of the try-works and resumes

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114). Yet she characterizes Melville's moderation of these two impulses as an "insatiable passion to fathom the stubborn vitality of interpretive endeavors" without expounding on the ways in which Melville breaks the confines of historical versions of Joban exegesis ("Remapping" 135). Concerning Ishmael's role as narrator, Wright and others have observed this defining characteristic of Ishmael as taking up the mantle of Job's servant (Wright, *Melville's Bibles* 51).

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

his earlier sermon against giving in to daydreaming at sea while warning other prospective young sailors to "[n]ever dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly" (424). Although Melville does not consistently valorize the ability of technology to counteract the illusory trappings of human fancy, the nautical compass, in this moment, symbolizes the sobering and civilizing effect of technology and empiricism.

Their use of technology puts into relief Ahab's and Ishmael's distinct methodologies of knowledge production. When Ahab, in a fit of rage, discards the quadrant, he derides it as a "babies' plaything of haughty admirals" because it cannot furnish him with the exact whereabouts of the white whale (501). In the chapter "The Needle," Ahab proceeds to create a new compass after a storm had magnetized his, thus asserting his masterhood over "the level loadstone" and thus the Newtonian universe itself (518). The fundamental contrast between Ahab's and Ishmael's epistemologies is visible in their invocation of technology as providing prophetic and empirical knowledge, respectively. Whereas Ishmael expects the compass to anchor him in reality, Ahab's demands are rooted in what today would be called the theory of special relativity, in that he expects his tools to help him predict his enemy's future whereabouts relative to his own spectator position. Ishmael, meanwhile, admonishes himself against straying from the method of linear, rational inquiry. He thus projects an objective persona that grounds him in Descartes's mechanical universe while strategically shielding him from Ahab's (quantum-mechanical) obsession. In the Book of Job, the whirlwind poem fulfills a similarly didactic function: It warns believers against extending their personal cosmology onto the natural world and misreading that cosmology as universal.

Several critics have noted that in his cetology Ishmael heeds the expressly Joban lesson of restraint and moderation of natural impulses. Wright argues that his cetology "seems calculated to save him [Ishmael] from a fate similar to Ahab's by persuading him of the purely physical nature albeit the endlessly marvelous complexity of the universe;" yet the "mood of wonder, exhilaration, even jocundity, pervading these chapters [those dealing with cetology] is in pointed contrast to the horror accompanying Ishmael's periods of metaphysical speculation and introspection" ("Jonah's" 194). Cetology is thus not only a mode of inquiry but also a survival strategy. Still, Ishmael does not always heed his own advice, and his assertions about philosophical restraint do not save him from being morally implicated in Ahab's hunt. For one thing, experiencing wonder and awe only seems possible by abandoning safety and delving headfirst into sublime natural phenomena. For instance, consistently adopting restraint as an epistemological strategy would render the task of measuring the Arsacidian whale temple moot, because such a strategy would bar a priori all comparative theological readings. Melville thus also subverts Ishmael's role as repentant Job by having him argue for an epistemology grounded in reason while disavowing a rationalism that suffocates emotional responses to curiosity. Ishmael's cetology teeters precariously on the precipice of obsessive compulsion. At the same time, he doubles as narrator and framer of a circular narrative plot. The parallax perspective that turns the beginning of the novel into the end, and vice-versa, impacts both readers and the

narrator. At the end of the tale stands a literal reference to a minor character in the Book of Job, a servant who brings Job news of the destruction of his family and home. To reduce Ishmael to a mere rational chronicler of events, therefore, is to discard the very paradoxical dynamic that constitutes his function as narrator and Joban exegetical commentator.[12]

Pip as Victimized Job

In the chapter "The Mat-Maker" Ishmael postulates a three-pronged logic of the universe as a synergy of "chance, free will, and necessity—nowise incompatible—all interweavingly working together" (215). Each of Melville's Jobs here is tied to one of these fundamental creative forces: Ahab seeks to assert his free will, while Ishmael seeks to investigate and delineate necessity. Pip falls victim to chance, the most random and destructive of the three principles, which "by turns rules either [of the others], and has the last featuring blow at events" (215). Ishmael here again displays the uneasy alliance between biblical language and the scientific-empiricist frame of reference that Abrams gestures towards. Using Joban personae, Melville problematizes these cosmological forces and explores their implications and contingencies on the character level.[13]

By introducing the motif of suffering in this manner, Melville explores the connection between suffering and utility. His sufferers are victims who themselves get utilized by one or several other characters. Joban suffering explicates this dynamic because it contains a distinctly materialist dimension. The sufferer's body becomes problematic to the community as it makes visible the contingency of divine justice. One of the most explicit examples of such physical recalcitrance is the character Pip. His encounter with the Weaver God below the sea leads to the complete dissolution of his individuality. Pip finds himself subsequently transformed into pure material utility, as he becomes Ahab's metaphysical compass. This reading also extends earlier studies on Melville's discussion of race in his major novels. For instance, Samuel Otter points out that Pip's conjugation of the verb "to see" emblematizes the "nineteenth-century mania to secure bodily boundaries" (171). Otter argues that "corporeal fascinations in *Typee*, *White-Jacket*, and *Moby-Dick* are charged by nineteenth-century efforts to know the racial body. In these texts,

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[12] Obenzinger notes provocatively that because Ishmael addresses the reader directly in the persona of Job's servant, he forces upon his audience a stake in Job's cosmic tragedy: "[…] the reader has become implicated, has become a character, a stand-in for Job, and we can now differentiate between two readers, as we can between two Ishmaels: the Ishmael we read for the first time and the second Ishmael we reread, knowing the full import of his ultimate questions, along with the first reader who has not been given a 'last revelation' and the second reader who has" (189).

[13] Although Maurice Lee does not address Pip as a special victim and avatar of contingency, Lee points out the implicit atheist gesture towards David Hume's essay on miracles that Melville performs by having Ishmael postulate chance as a major creative force in the universe: "[…] Melville understood the etiological implications of the miracles controversy, as well as the fact that the argument from design—a foundation of faith in Melville's time—ultimately rested on probabilistic ground" (63).

Melville examines how the parts of the body […] became invested with world historical meanings" (3). In my discussion below, I explore one instance of such investment in Otter's sense. As Ahab seeks the physical encounter with the whale and Ishmael investigates dogma as man-made imitation of divine prohibitions, the fate of the black cabin boy Pip exemplifies the Book of Job's epistemology of victimization as the transformation of subject- to objecthood.

Pip goes overboard during one of the lowerings after the whale, only to emerge traumatized and unable to perform cohesive speech acts. Insofar as he falls prey to overwhelming elemental forces, Pip is an innocent victim. Although Pardes considers Pip mainly a castaway Jonah, she fleetingly acknowledges that he is "a Job of sorts, an innocent sufferer who is unwilling to accept the blows that have been inflicted upon him" (*Melville's Bibles* 69). As far as this episode interlocks with the Book of Job's lessons on epistemology, the cabin boy's encounter with the "unwarped primal world" illustrates the devastating effect the sudden withdrawal of the veil of epistemological cohesion has on the human mind (*MD* 412).[14] The world of the Weaver God is too raw and unrefined, too akin to the original, dynamic, constitutive force of the universe, for a rational mind to compute. The "primal world" Pip falls into precedes human comprehension and can therefore never be part of any epistemology. Direct contact with this force instantly lifts God's protective spell that makes the world cohere to the human mind. Pip's mind consequently becomes unhinged, forcing the cabin boy to perceive the world outside the protective (grammatical) framework of personal reference.[15]

As a victimized Job, Pip also figures as the residue of the discourse between divine and human notions of justice. He contributes to Melville's hermeneutic project by enacting the communication gap between divine and human knowledge. His fragmented speech symbolizes the frailty and contingency of human understanding and communication. He effectively mocks rationalism and the Cartesian ideals of the unified subject. Moreover, Pip's utterances appear as ominous cyphers to the crew because they resist comprehension based on English grammatical rules. To his shipmates he is an unpleasant reminder of the horrors that lurk below the sea's surface. The narrator notes that "[b]y the *merest chance* the ship itself at last rescued" the cabin boy (414, emphasis added). Melville again contrasts the cosmologies of empirical science and metaphysics to demonstrate how the randomness of Pip's fate contradicts Calvinist determinism. According to Ishmael's assessment, "[t]he intense concentration of self in the middle of such

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

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

heartless immensity [i. e., the ocean]" causes Pip to go insane (414). At the same time, he frames Pip's calamity as a meeting with "the miser-merman, Wisdom" who grants Pip a glimpse into the inner workings of the godhead (414). Physically unharmed but mentally deranged, Pip henceforth serves as a reminder of the artificiality of all cohesive human epistemology and hints at the incomprehensible divine knowledge. As Ishmael concludes, "So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God" (414).

In the first instance, his utterings make transparent the contrived character of human edifices, including social institutions such as language. For example, his interpretation of the doubloon which Ahab had nailed to the masthead as a boon for slaying Moby Dick appears as a cacophony of personal pronouns: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (434). The point here is not that interpretation is a communal effort but that interpretation is always multiple and multidirectional.[16] Pip here performs what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman terms the "anomaly coinciding with semantic ambiguity" (111): His scattered comments retroactively unsettle the other characters' possessive assertions about the certainty of the coin's symbolic meaning down to the grammatical level. He therefore becomes unsettling to all except Ahab. Bauman terms such recalcitrant, unwelcome presences the incongruence, or the slimy, an "indestructible ambivalent entity that sits on top of an embattled barricade (or rather, a substance that is poured over it from above to make both sides slippery), that blurs boundaries" (104, my translation). The slimy, Bauman argues, interferes with society's efforts to create socio-cultural cohesion by complicating and blurring the boundaries between epistemological categories. Pip becomes precisely such a mediating presence in the novel in the aftermath of his accident: Surviving both the contentious forces of accident and even the direct encounter with God, he emerges from the ocean with the ability to see the metaphysical realm, but in turn he surrenders his ability to communicate and impart his knowledge. Melville compounds Pip's skin color—which proponents of slavery already considered a religious mark of racial exclusion—with mental insanity as a secondary sign of dejection.[17] He thus turns Pip into the quintessential outcast: Victimized by man, God, and even chance, he is spat back into the world to enact physically the futility of human reason.

However, Melville does more than merely restate the incompatibility of human and divine knowledge or illustrate the ambiguities produced by those like Pip, whose perception has been altered by liminal experiences. Ahab sees utility in Pip's altered state of mind: "There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health" (534). Ahab, channeling Hippocrates, perceives Pip's unique ability to blur the binary of human rational categories (knowable/unknowable) and thus

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[16] For an opposing reading, see Otter 170.

[17] Contemporary proslavery sentiments saw the institution of slavery as consummating Noah's curse of Ham's son Canaan (Gen. XI:25).

grant him (Ahab) access to the divine. To him, Pip's condition is not one of utter madness but rather one of utter objectification. Pip is transformed into pure utility and henceforth coerced to Ahab's venture of obliterating and redrawing those boundaries that Pip has already made slippery through his antics. Both Pip's and Job's victimization consist respectively in the loss of material goods and mental faculties and also in their objectification. Like Leviathan, they become playthings in God's (and Ahab's) hand. As their subjective agency is annihilated, they become the object of another.

Not a Rebel After all: Ahab as Defiant Job

With Ahab and Pip, Melville constructs an expanded version of the Joban inquiry into God's moral authority. Ahab, in the role of Joban inquirer, defiantly sustains his plea for innocence in the face of external challenge and eventually turns his complaint into an accusation. His famous bombastic proclamations that present his pursuitof the whale as driven by a kind of purposeful madness have been read as evidence of his monomania. What has garnered less critical attention is the fact that Ahab switches theological allegiances just when he is about to fulfill his self-professed purpose. During his reverie in the chapter "The Symphony," Ahab reconceives his opposition to God and the whale as part and parcel of Providence, just as the final confrontation with the deity's agent is imminent. In this moment, Ahab regresses into the very dogmatism the Book of Job critiques. Meanwhile, Job performs a diametrically opposed switch across the hermeneutic barrier: The debate with God ultimately shatters his dogmatic perception of history and transforms his abstract knowledge of divine power into one of personal experience. Job concludes this paradigm shift by facing the whirlwind, exhaustedly admitting, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent because of dust and ashes" (42:5, 6). For Ahab, the prospect of an encounter with the divine portents no such transformative quality, arguably because his thirst is for vengeance, not justice. He seeks not only restoration of an imaginary causal balance but also reparation for injuries he sustained when said balance was violated. This purpose causes him to construct a moral scenario that would let him avenge himself by subjecting the sublime entity to its own violence. Comparing Ahab with Job here illuminates the moral rationale behind his tragic death. Ahab ultimately does not accept the wisdom literature's call to intellectual integrity when he disavows the possibility of God's absence or even nonexistence.

Thompson calls Ahab, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "that self-pitying and tragic hero which was the darling of the romantics" (179). Meanwhile, Janis Stout maintains that Ahab is the only true Job in *Moby-Dick*, not for his suffering but for his determination to get to the bottom of the systemic significance of suffering in human life (77). What speaks against such clear-cut identifications is Ahab's last-minute disavowal of personal agency, which, within the logic of biblical wisdom, eliminates the possibility to be overwhelmed by encountering the sublime. Ahab foregoes this central moment in Job's transcendence, the moment in which

all expectations for distributive justice are nullified.[18] He therefore fails to develop an experience-based relation to God by choosing self-annihilation over the intellectual and moral rigors of epistemological challenge. Ahab's final relinquishing of his defiance connotes the advice Job's wife gives to her husband when he despairs of his fate: "[C]urse God and die" (Job 2:9). His obsession with detecting injury and outrage, rather than trying to unravel the mystery of the whale's agency, is what really constitutes Ahab's monomania and ultimately motivates his intellectual retreat into fatalism. In indignant rage he discards the "[f]oolish toy[s]" of nautical science and lashes out against "all the things that cast man's eyes aloft to that heaven[,] whose live vividness but scorches him" (501). Yet when Ahab, in the chapter "The Chase—Second Day," lectures Starbuck that their roles in the tragic events about to unfold were "'rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders,'" he abandons his independent motivation in favor of Calvinist dogmatic comfort (561). A defiant Job no longer, Ahab arrives at a fatalism that whimsically converts his rage into utility and begins to rationalize his madness as divine errand.[19]

Ahab's tragic flaw, then, does not consist in his monomania but rather in his abandoning intellectual integrity for mental comfort. His agenda is not exploration but confirmation bias. Therefore, in the final instance, his quest is much more tacit than critics have given him credit for. He does not investigate earnestly the existence of an entity behind the veil of reality but rather wants to ensure that the assumed entity fits his imagination. Indeed, Ahab "would strike the sun if it insulted" him (164). Yet his overriding motivation consists in filling the potential void behind the mask for "fear that there is naught beyond" (164). Ahab's ideological change of heart feeds back into the very dogmatism he seeks to annihilate. He does not mobilize against all boundaries but rather seeks to achieve the authority to determine boundaries, in the same way he considers himself the "lord of the level loadstone," i. e., over the laws of physics (518).

While nominally failing to pass the standards of intellectual integrity set forth in the Book of Job, Melville extends Ahab's defiant request to take God to court by an important dimension: the secular dread of an atheistic universe. While Job also has his bombastic rhetorical moments, he has the benefit of receiving direct divine communication. His strife is fenced in by his pious acknowledgement of the distance between him and God:

> *I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause*:
> Which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number:
> Who giveth rain upon the earth, and sendeth waters upon the fields:

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

[19] Ahab's turn to fatalism calls up the theological argument between John Calvin and Jacob Arminius on free will: While Calvin maintained that the Covenant of Grace supersedes the Covenant of Works, Arminius retorted that Providence would assign the creation of sin to God, contradicting His alleged universal benignity.

> To set up on high those that be low; that those which mourn may be exalted to safety. (Job 5:9-11, emphasis added)

The biblical author of Job, it seems safe to assume, occludes the possibility of an atheistic universe. That being said, wisdom literature is expressly concerned with God's hiddenness and the paradox of his presence in absence. Experiencing divine presence directly, therefore, constitutes a liminal experience. The biblical text emphasizes that epistemological epiphany depends on a willingness to be overwhelmed and humbled by dread. The awe that Job experiences in facing the whirlwind is forever unavailable to Ahab, because he does not confront his dread of naught beyond. In the terms of the biblical book, Ahab is unwilling to plead his case in court and accept all possible outcomes. Job wishes to appear before God as a defendant to plead his case and potentially be proven wrong. He puts his beliefs in jeopardy in the pursuit of truth. Meantime, secularist dread has needled Ahab to pre-establish legal transgression and seek appeasement by a higher power. In legal terms, Ahab's plea is not for personal innocence in the face of material injury but on entitlement to compensation for perceived spiritual injury.

In the end, we may deem Ahab iconoclastic and monomaniacal only insofar as he embraces his purpose to affix all meaning by eliminating symbolic variety. Yet his perspective is historically and exegetically regressive, as he foregoes the intellectual challenge of facing the threatening prospect of "naught beyond": Ahab's adoption of fatalism is simultaneously his "topmost greatness" and "topmost grief" because this strategy absolves him from confronting unsettling meanings in favor of pre-fabricated ones (410). In this way, the Joban binary of defiance and repentance is recreated in the twice-crossed character lines of Ahab and Ishmael. Melville modifies the Joban archetypes by transforming the skeptic into a critical analyst and a would-be radical blasphemer into a religiously orthodox fatalist.[20]

Conclusion

My goal here has been to show how *Moby-Dick* digs up grainier theological soil than critics concerned with Melville and religion have previously assumed. The novel's primary aim, I have argued, consists in making accessible the moral touchstone of biblical language as literary language. This endeavor must be contextualized in biblical wisdom, which allows for both skepticism and humor as viable modes of spiritual inquiry. Such intellectually ambitious techniques incited the ire of religiously orthodox reviewers, who in turn were often entangled in the emerging doctrinal strife among the powerful evangelical denominations and publishers (see Gunther Brown 35). These readers preferred straightforward as-

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[20] In a contrary reading, T. Walter Herbert asserts that experience operates as a supra-ideological force in Melville's writing. "What Melville centrally conveys," Herbert says, "is the confrontation with that depth of experience which is always beyond all systems" (19). Concerning Ahab's ideological steadfastness, Wright more convincingly evokes the biblical genealogy of Ahab's name: "Like the captain of the *Pequod*, King Ahab attempted to compromise in an uncompromising realm" (*Melville's Use* 63).

sertions of piety over what may at first glance seem like subversive irreverence. The critical reception that authors who pondered in their writing unorthodox, skeptical, or merely ambivalent religious positions faced frequently even led them to consider their own works in the binary terms of pious and impious.[21] Therefore, fully evaluating the reciprocal lines of communication between Melville and the Bible requires scholars to consider the fluent lines of communication between expert discourses on the Bible, laymen interpretations (often fostered by private groups and free-thinker societies), and the literary market place.

Herman Melville wrote in an increasingly complex local spectrum of piety and theological free inquiry that had begun to manifest in the New York area since the early 1830s. Publishers, such as A. W. Matsell, circulated skeptical accounts by deist commentators such as Thomas Paine and Thiry d'Holbach. *Moby-Dick* productively investigates this murky intermediary religious atmosphere by conceiving of it as productive space in which to develop a symbolic language, which is based on antiquated, historical notions of typology and biblical exegetical methodology.[22] In *Moby-Dick*, then, Melville does more than subversively recant Job's complaint about the arbitrary limits of human epistemology. He explores the fault lines that run out from OT Joban epistemology. By conceiving of Job as a divisible tripartite persona (victimized, defiant, repentant), he examines and moderates the exegetic trajectory of the Old Testament wisdom text for nineteenth-century American audiences. The multiplicity of perspectives the novel evinces must be understood as part of an original hermeneutics of contemplation. The Book of Job enables Melville to express historical and theological complexities which neither religious dogma nor secular skepticism can tolerate. Literary fiction, then, does not need to pass through the needle's eye of postmodernism to get to postsecularism. We need look no further than the American Renaissance to find authors of fiction who assert the epistemological utility of religious texts while at the same time wrestling with their diminished authority.

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[21] Melville famously writes to Hawthorne about having produced a wicked book and yet feeling spotless as a lamb (*Correspondence* 212). Reynolds argues rather pessimistically that Melville's "dark subversive" style eventually disintegrates under this psychological tension (152). I would add that there is a discernible contrast between the persona Melville puts forth in his letter to Hawthorne and the complex hermeneutical operations displayed in *Moby-Dick*.

[22] See also Brumm's *American Thought* (16-18), as well as Reynold's *Beneath* (455) and *Faith* (6).

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