

BIOLA UNIVERSITY

MELVILLE & BAUDRILLARD:  
THE PROBLEM OF EPISTEMIC ACCESS IN *MOBY DICK*

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## OUTLINE

*Thesis Statement:* A Baudrillardian approach to *Moby Dick* reveals a work deeply concerned with epistemic access, which questions the possibility of knowing truth with certainty. In addition to being rich with metaphors like Queequeg's tattoo, the text manifests uncertainty on multiple levels.

I. A Baudrillardian interpretation of *Moby Dick* is justified by the fact that many of the key scenes and characters can be better understood in light of his theory of the relation between signifier and signified.

A. According to Baudrillard, the knower inhabits a world of signs and symbols that may or may not manifest an underlying reality.

1. The Real itself is made accessible to the knower by signs.
2. These signs can become separated from the Real, resulting in the possibility of an undetectable absence of reference.
3. The knower can only access Reality via signs, but cannot confirm correspondence between the signifiers and the signified.

B. This sort of epistemic crisis is a recurrent theme in *Moby Dick*.

1. The main characters personify Baudrillard's defeated knowers, surrounded by signs that cut them off from Reality.
2. The language illustrates the inability of lingual signifiers to communicate the signified.
3. The novel as a whole is a performative instance of the disjunction between the sign and the signified.

## II. Epistemic defeat permeates the narrative of *Moby Dick*.

A. Melville obscures the reader's access to the text by leaving the identity of the protagonist ambiguous.

1. Narrative weight is roughly equal between Ishmael and Ahab, apparently opposing characters.

2. It is unclear which character is more nearly Melville's voice, as Ahab's speech resembles Melville's, but Ishmael narrates in the first person.

B. Ishmael and Ahab describe the whale as a sign concealing, but nevertheless providing the best chance of access to an ultimately inaccessible reality.

1. The strangeness of Ahab's behavior is a direct result of his obsession with truth and knowledge.

- a. He believes there is some Reality that motivates the behaviors of brute and inanimate beings, of which Moby Dick is the sign.

- b. His personal vendetta and epistemic crisis are rolled into a single obsession: to attain direct knowledge of truth, he must kill Moby Dick.

- c. He is ultimately defeated in his attempts for epistemic certainty, killed by the sign itself.

2. Ishmael reaffirms Ahab's perspective on the whale as the sign that gives the greatest possible connection to the real.

- a. Ishmael sees the world veiled by color, its true nature nearly revealed in the white whale, but concludes that reality itself is unknowable.

- b. He resigns himself to the inaccessibility of truth, arguing that the drive to know is both bound for defeat and self-destructive.

C. The language of the novel uses multiple voices to emphasize the inability of lingual signifiers to communicate fully the signified.

1. The cetological chapters provide a clear, scientific presentation of whales, but are criticized by the narrator for failing to convey the meanings of the things described.
2. Despite the textual heterogeneity of the novel, it cannot convey a real knowledge even of whales, which can be gained only through experience and is not transferable between persons.
3. The most useful forms of text are the experiential accounts of the mariners, which allow the reader to nearly bypass the signs, but still only approximate the signified.

III. The narrative structure turns the book back on itself, causing the reader simultaneously to doubt and trust the narrator, thus performatively re-creating the problem of epistemic access.

A. Contact with the sea affects rational capacity proportionate to exposure, usually detaching the individual from objective reason.

1. The sailors have a low level of near-constant exposure, and are consequently subject to superstitious beliefs rejected as irrational by unexposed persons.
2. After a brief but violent confrontation with the sea, Ahab develops a monomaniacal obsession with Moby Dick.
3. When Pip emerges from the sea, he appears irrational: his words no longer correspond to the events they describe.

B. Ishmael's own exposure suggests that his narration should be held suspect.

1. The book is written retrospectively, and shows that it is self-aware of Ishmael's ultimate exposure by predicting at various points that he, too, will suffer an orphaning like Pip's.

2. Ishmael's exposure is sustained at a higher intensity for a longer period of time than that of any other character.
  3. He compares his exposure most directly to Pip's, whose experience cuts him off from events aboard the *Peaquot*.
    - a. Given Pip's increasing closeness to Ahab, it is difficult to separate the two voices, trusting one while disregarding the other.
    - b. Analysis of early manuscripts of *Moby Dick* suggests that Pip's continuing existence is a literary device to supplement Ahab's character.
    - c. Even if interpreted as divine enlightenment, Pip's exposure constitutes a communicative barrier between reality and his speech.
- C. We are performatively in Baudrillard's stance regarding our access to the overall novel, and particularly the reference of Ishmael's lingual signs.
1. If Ishmael's words correspond to reality, his narration is reliable, but establishes a pattern that indicates that he is rationally disconnected, and not a reliable narrator.
  2. If we distrust Ishmael's initial narration, it fails to establish the pattern that is the grounds for our mistrust.

Melville & Baudrillard:

The Problem of Epistemic Access in *Moby Dick*

Feverish and dying, Queequeg lies on the deck of the *Peaquot*, his body covered in hieroglyphic marks. Encoded in this intricate tattoo is “a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth;”<sup>1</sup> but no one remains who can read the marks and thereby understand the mysteries. The truth is present, but inaccessible; revealed, but incommunicative. This image of the tattoo is the simplest and most elegant of many articulations of the problem of epistemic access, the inability to know truth, in *Moby Dick*. Frustrated by this epistemic defeat, Ahab gives voice to the corporate exasperation of humanity as he cries “Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!”<sup>2</sup> A reader might well repeat Ahab’s expression throughout, and in response to, the entire novel: Queequeg’s tattoo is just a microcosm of the much larger dilemma. The images, characters, mixed styles of prose, and the overall narrative structure of the work repeatedly assert the uncertainty and inaccessibility of truth.

Though it would be anachronistic to suggest that Melville intentionally crafted an imaginative figuring of Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra & Simulations* (1981), the noetic positions and epistemic uncertainty manifested in the work do fit his model. Melville presents a view of the world in which we, ourselves, are in the position of Baudrillard’s knower: surrounded by signifiers, but deprived of the ability to confirm their actual reference to a real external meaning. On Baudrillard’s account, the knower inhabits a world composed of signs and symbols that typically signify and manifest reality. Though such signs are necessary to mediate the Real for the knower, bringing metaphysical reality close and making it accessible, it is possible for the

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1992), 691.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

signs to persist in the absence of the signified. There are three ways in which a sign can be detached from meaning: it can distort the signified, conceal the absence of a reality to be signified, or simulate a pseudo-real, signifying nothing more than itself and other signs.<sup>3</sup>

Because the knower's experience of the Real is entirely mediated by the signs, the possibility of these three states destroys epistemic certainty, assurance of access to truth. The knower cannot distinguish between a world in which signs manifest an actual reality, and a world in which they signify nothing beyond themselves. *Moby Dick* places the knower in jeopardy particularly of the second sort of disconnect, wherein the signs, the stuff of experience, conceal the absence of, rather than reveal, a greater reality.

This paper will examine some of the most interesting epistemic crises in *Moby Dick*, attempting to understand them by viewing them through Baudrillard's hypothesis. Baudrillard's theory of the signifier/signified disjunction is a helpful way to approach many significant moments in *Moby Dick*. I will not attempt to argue that Melville himself was a skeptic, or shared Baudrillard's philosophies; that project is beyond the scope of this paper, and has been well begun by other scholars.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I aim to present a Baudrillardian read of the text, explicating selected key moments and implications of the thesis at various levels of the work. I argue that such an approach to *Moby Dick* reveals a work deeply concerned with epistemic access, which questions the possibility of knowing truth with certainty. In addition to being rich with metaphors like Queequeg's tattoo, the text manifests uncertainty on at least three levels. First, the

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<sup>3</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulations*, (trans. Sheila Glaser, University of Michigan: 1995), 6.

<sup>4</sup> This project has been undertaken with considerable skill by Andrew Delbanco (*Melville: His World and Work*, 2005), and Robert Greenberg (*Splintered Worlds: Fragmentation and the Ideal of Diversity in the works of Emerson, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson*, 1993).

characters of Ishmael and Ahab personify Baudrillard's defeated knowers, surrounded by signs that seem to cut them off from, rather than connect them to, greater reality. Second, the very language employed by Ishmael as narration laments and illustrates the inability of lingual signifiers to manifest the full reality of the signified. Finally, the novel as a whole presents itself as a performative instance of the problem: the careful reader finds herself excluded from knowledge of the text *through* a careful reading.

### **The Characters and Epistemic Uncertainty**

Even before the reader is able to evaluate the epistemic positions of Ahab and Ishmael, Melville obscures her access to the text by leaving the identity of the protagonist ambiguous. In the first several chapters of the novel, the reader identifies most closely with Ishmael, an association initiated by the familiar command to "call me Ishmael."<sup>5</sup> The narrative comes from his perspective, and no other character is consistently present. Once aboard the *Peaquot*, however, things begin to shift. Ahab figures prominently in a number of scenes where Ishmael is absent, or present only as the transcendent narrator.<sup>6</sup> As Ahab's character develops and the captain gains emotional depth, he begins to take on the identity of the tragic hero, and though one is never strongly tempted to view Pip as a solo protagonist, his close relationship with Ahab in the final chapters of the novel suggests that the duo function as a conglomerate protagonist.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> From Ahab's first scene Ishmael melts into the background, absent even as just an observing character. Though Ishmael continues to figure prominently in other scenes, Ahab dominates any scene in which he is featured, at times even to the exclusion of the Narrator, as in Chapter CVIII, 'Ahab and the Carpenter'. (Melville, 674-680)

<sup>7</sup> James Barbour, "The Composition of Moby-Dick," *American Literature* 47 (Nov., 1975), 355, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2925337> (accessed October 1, 2008).

Yet Ishmael does not recede as an actor when Ahab gains prominence, and so the reader finds her allegiance split between apparently opposing character groups. She both wants Ahab to succeed in this final pursuit of the whale, and sympathizes with Ishmael's concerns about the wisdom of such a wish. This ambiguity blocks the reader's ability to judge the value of actions by their impact on the protagonist. Our inability to identify the protagonist translates into uncertainty as to which character the author endorses or commends to us for imitation. Ahab and Ishmael operate at cross-purposes, and differ radically in their attitudes concerning truth. Melville never resolves this tension; the reader is left uncertain of the answer to the most basic question of her approach to the text.

Even our attempts to guess which character is more nearly Melville's voice are defeated: while it is true that Ishmael's voice is privileged with first-person narration, there is good reason to believe that Ahab is more truly Melville. In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville explains that he is drawn to "dark characters" because through them an author "insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them."<sup>8</sup> Ahab certainly fits the description of a 'dark character', and speaks things in *Moby Dick* that Melville elsewhere seems to hint but not explicitly state. Ultimately this, too, remains ambiguous, and therefore cannot be of help in discovering the identity of the protagonist. Short of deciding whether to trust the text at all, this indeterminacy is the broadest articulation of uncertainty with which the reader must wrestle. Forced by ambiguity to approach both Ahab and Ishmael as protagonists, we gain a new interest in each character's epistemic stance.

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<sup>8</sup> Melville, 1849, Letter to Hawthorne. In Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work*, 2005, 131.

The character of Captain Ahab looms imposingly enigmatic. Viewed without reference to his struggle with epistemic access, the captain appears to be a dark, “monomaniacal” man: brooding, manipulative, and irrationally bent on destroying a particular whale. However, to view him thus is to miss all that is compelling about Ahab the tragic hero. The strangeness of the captain’s behavior is a direct result of his obsession with truth and knowledge. An intensely thoughtful character, he was given to “brooding”<sup>9</sup> even before his first violent encounter with the whale, before the book begins. The imagery of the fateful encounter is rich and revealing. As the whale destroyed the boat that had lowered for him, and remained impervious to harpoons, Ahab lunged desperately at Moby Dick, “blindly seeking with a six inch blade to reach the fathom-deep life of the whale.”<sup>10</sup> While he impotently stabbed the whale’s blubber, Moby Dick sheared off Ahab’s leg. Defeated both in the physical attempt to slay the whale and the epistemic effort to understand reality, Ahab’s feverish mind combined the frustrations, projecting them onto the whale, until “he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations.”<sup>11</sup> Moby Dick became for him the symbol of all metaphysical reality and the only means of accessing truth, the “incarnation of all those malicious agencies”<sup>12</sup> behind the physical world. The whale was at last a physical target that could be seen and fought, rather than another shifting and vague “tantalization.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 270.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 691.

The reason for Ahab's morbid fascination with the whale is articulated in his first address on the topic to the crew. Responding to Starbuck's accusation that he is madly pursuing "vengeance on a dumb brute,"<sup>14</sup> Ahab asserts that there is some rational force behind all natural actions,<sup>15</sup> that the physical world by which he is surrounded obscures, rather than reveals, the true nature of things. To him, physical objects are just so many "pasteboard masks,"<sup>16</sup> signs that may or may not reference truths or realities beyond themselves. Though he acknowledges the possibility that "there's naught beyond,"<sup>17</sup> Ahab believes there *is* some Reality—some intelligent, malignant animating force—that motivates the behaviors of brute and inanimate beings. It is this malicious force that has struck Ahab through Moby Dick, and "be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal,"<sup>18</sup> it is the point of contact between Ahab and the Real. Equating epistemic uncertainty to a prison, he queries, "how can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me."<sup>19</sup>

Ahab's personal vendetta and his epistemic crisis are rolled into a single obsession: to attain to knowledge of truth, he must win a direct, physical conflict with the whale—he must kill Moby Dick. His pursuit of the whale is a pursuit of truth, of epistemic certainty that he at least *hopes* is possible. The madness of his obsession stems from his very dedication to the task: he pursues the whale with an "infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsunderable

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<sup>14</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 236.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

willfulness.”<sup>20</sup> Truth and the whale are Ahab’s only concerns; citing the justification that “truth hath no confines,” he brushes aside charges of “blasphemy,” and declares “I’d strike the sun if it insulted me.”<sup>21</sup> This total dedication, fiery strength of character, “fixed and fearless”<sup>22</sup> aspect of Ahab is both mad and heroic. Yet Ahab is ultimately destined to illustrate the peril, not the heroism, of total dedication to epistemic certainty. As if to reassert the inaccessibility of truth, Melville does not permit Ahab to finally achieve his ends. Rather than triumphing over the whale and thereby ‘thrusting through the wall’ of signs into the signified, Ahab is killed, ultimately defeated, by the sign itself.

In the dual role of character and narrator, Ishmael affirms Ahab’s perspective on the whale as the sign that gives the greatest possible connection to the Real. He furthermore affirms the Captain’s distrust of the rest of the physical world. In a chapter specifically prefaced as “what, at times, [the whale] was to me,”<sup>23</sup> Ishmael writes that all the colored substances in the world are “but subtle deceits... so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot... pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper,”<sup>24</sup> a world of signs detached from their meanings. The very whiteness, color-absence of the whale, is what compels Ishmael to seek it as the most trustworthy means of accessing truth. However, while Ahab submits his whole fate to the quest for truth, Ishmael acknowledges both the impossibility and the risk of such a move. He describes the temptation to obsessively pursue truth as akin to the folly of “the willful

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<sup>20</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 178.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

travelers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes,” with the perilous consequence that “the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him.”<sup>25</sup> Ishmael finds the quest for truth desperately attractive, but notes the peril of too determined a pursuit. It is a quest that simultaneously seduces and threatens to consume and destroy the seeker, as it ultimately does Ahab. Ishmael escapes both the initial condemnation of being dubbed ‘mad’ and the final destruction by recognizing the actual inaccessibility of truth, and consenting to give up the chase, to rest in his epistemic uncertainty and wear the ‘colored glasses.’

### **Linguistic Signifiers and Communicative Defeat**

Ishmael faces similar defeat as a narrator, but this time in his ability to represent to the reader his own knowledge of whaling and the nature of whales. A substantial portion of the book is comprised of Cetological chapters, describing the whale in ‘purely’ scientific terms. Ishmael makes a point of apologizing for the inadequacy of scientific knowledge in conveying the reality of whales; in doing so, he simultaneously justifies the significance and establishes the elusive nature of the Whale in the novel.<sup>26</sup> Beyond his critique of scientific description, Ishmael employs radically divergent methods of speaking about the subject of whales without transition or comment, presumably in an attempt to communicate a full-bodied understanding, rather than a perspectively bound notion of whaling.

Here, too, the reader senses the inadequacy of language to embody reality. Critic Robert Greenberg comments on the uneasy juxtaposition of narrative styles in *Moby Dick* that:

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<sup>25</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 283.

<sup>26</sup> J. A. Ward, “The Function of the Cetological Chapters in *Moby-Dick*,” *American Literature* 28, (May, 1956): 173, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2922047> (accessed October 1, 2008).

Some of these approaches to knowledge, such as the empirical and the symbolic, are reconcilable: the symbolist needs a foundation in factual reality. But most other approaches are mutually exclusive. In any case, all are in turn unsatisfying and incomplete; and they are intended to speak of an epistemological disarray in the face of complex and discordant planes of experience.<sup>27</sup>

In essence, the lingual signifiers employed in narration are subject to the very limitation they describe. Ishmael as narrator, or perhaps Melville if there is no significant difference,<sup>28</sup> goes to great lengths trying to communicate the experience of whaling through lingual signifiers. However, despite the textual heterogeneity of the novel, it cannot convey a real knowledge even of whales, which can be gained only through experience and cannot be transferred between persons via language.<sup>29</sup> The attempt results in a compelling drama, but nevertheless one that fails to convey the gritty experience of actually going whaling.

Ishmael's efforts are thwarted at an even more fundamental level: despite describing them in terms of legend, anthropological history, scientific description, market value, and nautical folklore, he finds himself unable to *meaningfully* signify the particular existence of a Sperm whale. Even the artists to whom he turns for assistance fail; ultimately he simply writes that "one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness."<sup>30</sup> In this defeat, paralleling his defeat as a character in search

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Greenberg, "Multiplicity and Uncertainty in Melville's *Moby-Dick*," in *Splintered Worlds: Fragmentation and the Ideal of Diversity in the works of Emerson, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson*, (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 85.

<sup>28</sup> I argue later in this paper that there may be an important distinction to be drawn between the voices of Melville and Ishmael the Narrator, but it does not appear to impact this portion of the argument substantially.

<sup>29</sup> John Rathbun, "Moby-Dick: Ishmael's Fiction of Ahab's Romantic Insurgency," *Modern Language Studies* 21 (Summer, 1991), 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3195083> (accessed October 1, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 385.

of truth, Ishmael acknowledges that the Real is inaccessible, and pursuit of it treacherous. He apologetically comments,

There is *no earthly way of finding out* precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan (emphasis mine).<sup>31</sup>

He not only admits his own defeat, but suggests that the reader mirror his response and not pursue certain knowledge. Importantly, however, Ishmael does not thoroughly abandon the search for truth. As a character, he still seeks *Moby Dick* as a means of confronting ‘whiteness’; as a narrator, he still uses whatever language he can in order to hint at as much of the Real as possible.

The most informative of these texts on whaling in *Moby Dick* are the descriptions given by seamen, speaking to each other of whales generally, or of the whale specifically. These are texts of experience rather than of removed observation or dissection. They speak to how one *thinks* about the thing represented; they are simultaneously the most truthful, in that they communicate the impressions one receives with most force upon seeing a whale, and the least “true,” in that they are the least objective, and cannot easily be translated into impersonal, universal observations of the nature of things. Texts evoking experience allow the reader to access the meaning on “a little lower layer,”<sup>32</sup> nearly bypassing the signs; nearly grasping the signified. Greenberg draws out Ishmael’s reliance on language that simulates experience, writing that though “he may not be able to penetrate to the first cause of this world, ... Ishmael’s imaginative rendering of it is intended to evoke material and spiritual realities beyond those

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<sup>31</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 385.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

heretofore described.”<sup>33</sup> Though precise, or even tolerable expression of Truth is impossible, Ishmael contents himself with approximating communication as best he can. To that end, he is constantly shifting modes of expression: now poetic, now analytic, now anthropological, now scientific, the plentitude of voices he adopts indicate the multifarious nature of the reality he attempts to describe.

### **Accessing The Text: The Performative Turn**

The images, characters, and language of the work, then, can be understood in terms of a Baudrillardian dilemma, but what of *Moby Dick* as a whole? Melville’s chosen narrative structure turns the book back on itself, forcing the reader to simultaneously doubt and trust the narrator; forcing her to *experience* the dilemma of epistemic uncertainty. This dilemma is set up throughout the narrative, but is not revealed until the end, where, in the epilogue, Ishmael relates the tale of his “own abandonment.”<sup>34</sup> To understand the puzzle, we must review it in a similar fashion.

The early portions of the book are particularly concerned with the rational mind, how it operates, and how it is affected by exposure to the sea. As one analyzes the effects of the sea on the sailors, Ahab, and Pip, it appears that the impact on rationality is proportionate to the degree of exposure. The key question is whether Melville presents the sea as having a corrective or a distorting impact on human reason. If he endorses it, and exposure results in a more accurate understanding of reality, we can trust Ishmael’s voice as narrator and must reevaluate our view of Ahab’s monomania. If, however, it distorts the intellect, causing a form of madness, we can

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<sup>33</sup> Greenberg, *Splintered Worlds: Fragmentation and the Ideal of Diversity*, 85.

<sup>34</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 599.

justifiably condemn Ahab as insane, but must also be suspicious of our access to the story at all, since our narrator is a madman, and, given his level of exposure, possibly the maddest of them all.

Initially, it appears that the characters are more rational before an encounter with the sea than after it. This impression arises from the apparent correlation between the degree of exposure to the sea and the level of insanity afterward reached by the individual. While Ahab, Pip, and Ishmael are the most obvious cases of natural exposure, Melville develops the theme in a number of groups of minor characters. He takes great pains to articulate the various superstitious beliefs held by the sailors concerning the White Whale. Some of the beliefs are simple and understandable enough, consisting simply in personification of the whale, such as the ascription to him of intent to deceive, lure, and destroy whaling ships. But Melville insists that some of the whalers “go still further in their superstitions; declaring Moby Dick not only ubiquitous, but immortal... that though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks, he would still swim away unharmed.”<sup>35</sup> His apology for the sailor’s credulity is just that a vast host of ‘absurd beliefs’ appear reasonable to men who spend so much of their time removed from human society, surrounded only by an ever-expansive sea. For the sailors, then, constant low-level natural exposure has distorted their view of reality, allowing or compelling them to formulate inaccurate ideas concerning the nature and identity of the whale.

Ahab, who as a sailor proved relatively resistant to such superstition, was nonetheless altered by a more extreme episode of natural exposure that occurs some time before the novel begins, on a previous voyage. After his first encounter with Moby Dick, Ahab spends the

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<sup>35</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 264.

several months convalescing, acting at intervals as a “raving lunatic”,<sup>36</sup> trapped in his own feverish mind. During this time he descends into a personal, vindictive monomania, “intent on an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge”<sup>37</sup> against the white whale. Here in its more intense form, the irrationality induced by exposure to the sea manifests itself as a deranged or obsessive search for truth. Whatever he says to his shiphands, Ahab himself chases the whale because he is the place where the “some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask,”<sup>38</sup> where the signs of reality come closest to collapsing into the signified. In developing his monomania, Ahab does not become unintelligible. All of his natural intellect is warped and focused on pursuit of the whale; intelligence remains but rationality is lost.<sup>39</sup> Doubtless if Ahab were our narrator, we, like several of his shipmates, would find no obvious reason to question his sanity<sup>40</sup>—he remains articulate, persuasive, self-aware, and internally consistent, though narrowly focused.

Pip suffers the most extreme exposure to the sea, and, correspondingly, has the most severe reaction. Whereas the sailors’ exposure takes place over several years, and Ahab’s over a few months, Pip’s is compressed into twenty-four hours of lonely isolation in nature. Jovial and merry though a bit superstitious before the incident, Pip emerges as a quiet, morbid sage. The actual event is not nearly as traumatic as Ahab’s exposure: Pip is simply alone in the sea for hours. He is not attacked by sharks or whales, has no difficulty swimming, and does not suffer a

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<sup>36</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 268.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

fever. His exposure is severe just because of the awful loneliness of one small boy in the vast ocean. As the narrator, Ishmael concludes that Pip has perished, in a manner of speaking; that “the sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul.”<sup>41</sup> His sentences are still arranged in ways that make grammatical sense, but they are disconnected from the world in which he lives, and do not accurately report events on the ship. Though each utterance is meaningful and understandable, Pip’s speech is so detached from the events on the *Peaquot* that he appears totally insane. Whatever the actual effect on Pip’s mind, we are taught by the actions of the crew to view him as almost entirely insane or deranged after his exposure.

If in these three cases the intensity of exposure is directly correlated to the distortion of the character’s rational faculties, one must inquire what affect Ishmael’s own exposure had on his rationality. His experience combines each of the three previous instances: as a shiphand, the sea works on his imagination; like Ahab, he is plunged into the sea as a result of a violent encounter with Moby Dick; and, though he sustains no physical injuries from the whale, he floats for days in a situation that greatly resembles Pip’s encounter. Ishmael compares himself most directly to Pip, commenting at the conclusion of Pip’s isolation that he would undergo a similar abandonment.<sup>42</sup>

This holds problematic implications for our access to the narrative. We seem to think the sailors questionable in their superstitions, describe Ahab as ‘mad’, and pity Pip for having lost his mind. Yet Ishmael’s exposure is sustained at a higher intensity for a longer period of time than any other character; if we mistrust Ahab or Pip’s descriptions of events, can we trust Ishmael’s narration? Given the effect of similar, less severe exposure on Ahab and Pip, it is not

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<sup>41</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 599.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

unreasonable to conclude that Ishmael's consciousness has also been altered by his encounter with the sea. However, one cannot settle this question simply by decreeing Ishmael untrustworthy: it is his testimony that establishes the case for his own irrationality. To condemn him, then, is to tacitly accept him as a trustworthy rational agent, while explicitly declaring him untrustworthy.

One might still hope to resolve the issue by more careful analysis of the workings of natural exposure on the epistemic and rational processes of the characters. The narrative does not give any explicit indication of how exactly Ishmael has been affected by his orphaning, so to make progress we should revisit the closest corollary, Pip's isolation. Melville does offer an alternate understanding of Pip's apparent unhinging, writing that he "saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad."<sup>43</sup> It is possible, then, that Pip is not mad, but has simply accessed Divine reason. If we accept this interpretation of Pip's experience, we should consider him the most, or the only, sane person on the *Peaquad*. But for this to work as an endorsement of natural exposure's positive impact on rationality, Pip's post-exposure role in the story should be somewhat central, as he would be the key to understanding Ishmael's own rationality.

Here two problems arise: first, the closer they draw to the final conflict, the more Pip becomes an extension of Ahab. While the text does refer to Pip's experience as a brush with divine reason, it bestows no such comment on Ahab's exposure. He must remain a monomaniac, and consequently his word must be held in suspicion. Given Pip's increasing closeness to Ahab towards the end of the narrative, it is difficult to separate the two voices, trusting one while disregarding the other. As the climax draws near, Ahab and Pip fuse into a dramatic duo,

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<sup>43</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 599.

asserted in Ahab's remark, "Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings."<sup>44</sup> Their comments complement and inform each other; without Ahab's comments, Pip's are without context, while without Pip's quips, Ahab's are unexplained.

Second, analysis of the early manuscripts of *Moby Dick* suggests that Pip's continuing existence functions as an afterthought, or at least as just a literary device to supplement Ahab's central role. Analyzing the apparent evolution from the early drafts to the final form of *Moby Dick*, James Barbour concludes that Ahab, rather than Pip, plays a central role in the final half of the book. Both Ahab and Pip were substantially altered in the final re-working; Ahab became a Shakespearean tragic hero, while Pip came back from the dead: "In the early narrative Pip was to have preceded the others into death; perhaps he was drowned in the first version of "the Castaway" and was resurrected in the revision so that he might play the fool to Ahab's Lear."<sup>45</sup> Consistent with the role of a Shakespearean fool, Pip makes a number of insightful, though off-beat comments, but does not receive additional emphasis.

One could still tenably re-interpret Pip's baptism then as an enlightenment, but even that conclusion does not allow us to trust his reports of events: as readers, we operate exclusively according to 'mortal reason'. An enlightenment like Pip's necessarily severs communication, since "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."<sup>46</sup> It may well be that Pip now understands things as they *really* are, but he seems no longer able to understand things as they

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<sup>44</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 747.

<sup>45</sup> Barbour, "The Composition of *Moby-Dick*," 359.

<sup>46</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 599.

appear to us. Were we to depend on Pip as a narrator, the tale would be interesting, but bear little resemblance to the events occurring. If we extend to Ishmael the same amount of trust extended to Pip—a questionable decision, given the comparative severity of exposure—then we are once again unsure how much of the tale is to be understood as accurately reporting events, and how much is interpretation. Inability to make this distinction translates into an inability to *know* how far to trust Ishmael’s testimony concerning his *own* trustworthiness.

### **Experiencing the Baudrillardian Dilemma**

It does not appear that this is a puzzle given to us to be solved; rather, it usefully highlights the theme of epistemic access present in multiple aspects of the text. We may do well to emulate Ishmael’s own example by acknowledging the Baudrillardian dilemma, and resting in it. After multiple attempts to access the text from various vantage points, we find ourselves still defeated, unable to assure ourselves of the meaning of Ishmael’s linguistic signs. Our position is not unlike that of Ahab surveying Queequeg’s tattoo. To search for certainty, to grasp after a single ‘obviously right’ way of reading or accessing the text, is likely to be an empty effort that parallels man’s fruitless search for himself recorded early in the book. In his biography of Melville, Andrew Delbanco notes that the author was evidently fascinated by the image of a “man driving himself through an arduous quest only to discover at the climactic moment that in fact there is nothing to be unearthed—nothing but more mud, rock, and dust—and that the self, like the universe, is devoid of meaning except for the meanings we project into it for the sake of reassuring ourselves.”<sup>47</sup> This is possibly the position of the various knowers in *Moby Dick*, and it is the pathetic revelation we risk in asking too insistently for the ‘truth’ of the matter. The only

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<sup>47</sup> Delbanco, *Melville*, 14.

protection against finding oneself trapped in such a world of empty signifiers is to mirror Ishmael's resignation, accepting his advice to not be "too fastidious in our curiosity."<sup>48</sup>

This resignation is certainly consistent with Melville's reflections concerning the parallels that the characters bear to the everyday human experience. Ishmael delivers the line that could be said to epitomize the tension present throughout the novel: "where is the foundling's father hidden? Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it."<sup>49</sup> Pip and Ishmael are not the only men who experience abandonment, who find themselves orphans. By both describing and providing experiential knowledge of the problem of epistemic access, Melville compels his readers to see ourselves as orphans, whose knowledge of truth cannot be secured in this world. He thus makes the reader experience Baudrillard's epistemic crisis, leaving us like Ahab facing Queequeg's tattoo: confronted with symbols, but unable to confirm their meanings.

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<sup>48</sup> Melville, *Moby Dick*, 385.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 705.

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