DIVING DEEP FOR “THE UNGRASPABLE PHANTOM OF LIFE”:
MELVILLE’S PHILOSOPHICAL AND AESTHETIC INQUIRIES INTO HUMAN
POSSIBILITIES IN MOBY-DICK

DISSertation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of my dissertation is to illuminate the depth of Herman Melville’s philosophical and aesthetical inquiries into the fundamental questions about human existence and possibilities in his novel *Moby-Dick*. I investigate the ways in which the novel interrogates the basic tenets of Platonism and Christianity and explores a positive alternative to the limitations of the existing system of knowledge by reading the novel in relation to Arthur Schopenhauer’s and Friedrich Nietzsche’s revision of the traditional understanding of human will, epistemology, and religion of the West. In his views of human life and the world, Melville’s remarkable affinities with Schopenhauer have drawn much critical attention, but not many critics have paid attention to the import of the similarities between Melville and Nietzsche. My analysis of Melville’s intellectual relationship with these two German philosophers contributes to current scholarship not only by bringing to light Melville’s position in the larger intellectual tradition beyond his immediate cultural milieu, but also by exploring how *Moby-Dick* provides an answer to whether literature has a positive power especially when literature seems to undermine its own credibility and authority by questioning the validity of narrative and truth.
I contend that Schopenhauer’s differentiation between the veil of appearance and an inner reality of every natural phenomenon can elucidate Ahab’s investigation of the incongruities between seems and is, while the concept of will as “merely a blind, irresistible impulse” can throw light on Ahab’s “will determinate” and “madness maddened” in his pursuit of Moby Dick. Regarding Ahab’s rejection of conventional religious doctrines in his attempt to give meaning to his life, I argue that Ahab’s self-overcoming does not extend to examining the implications of his mad pursuit of Moby Dick, ultimately differentiating him from the Nietzschean Overman despite their similarities. My analysis of Ishmael’s philosophical journey in the novel draws on Schopenhauer’s negation of will to life, or egoism, through which Schopenhauer challenges the epistemological frame of the Western tradition. Through my comparison between Ishmael and the Schopenhauerian genius, I contend that Ishmael as a philosopher fails to grasp and represent the whiteness of the whale because of his refusal to lose his consciousness as a perceiving subject. Although Ishmael as a philosopher is led on “in barren mazes,” Ishmael as a tragic dramatist eventually grasps “the ungraspable phantom of life.” Drawing on Nietzsche’s notion of “becoming what one is,” which suggests that understanding and participating in the unending process of “becoming” is the only way to grasp any truth without falsifying life, I argue that Ishmael’s purposefully indeterminate rendering of the elusive thoughts which are “continually flitting through” our life is Melville’s attempt to present and contain through the manipulation of the dissimulatory power of language that which cannot be otherwise represented in any fixed or stabilized words.
This project has been a very long time in the making, and many people have offered me invaluable assistance and encouragement along the way. I am grateful to my adviser, Steven Fink, for his faith in my project and his extensive help conceptualizing how this project might work and for his invaluable advice on its various stages. I cannot imagine how I could have finished this long journey without his patience and encouragement. I thank Elizabeth Hewitt for her consistently perceptive feedback as well as her special interest in philosophical discourse through literary texts. I would like to thank Susan Williams not only for her careful reading of my drafts but also for her unusual interest in my progress throughout my graduate work at OSU. There is no way I can ever thank any of this wonderfully supportive committee enough.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “The Key to it All”: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on Egoism</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Schopenhauer’s Denial of Will to Life</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 “Become What Thou art!”: Nietzsche’s Acceptance of Egoism and</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebration of Life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Harpooning the Self: Ahab’s Egoism, Madness, and Will to Power</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 “That inscrutable thing”: Beyond Platonism and Christianity</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Ahab’s Egoism and Will to Madness</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 “thou all-destroying but unconquering whale”: Thus Spoke Ahab</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “Colorless, all-color” of egoism: A Young Philosopher’s Struggle in</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Barren Mazes”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 A Young Platonist’s Reveries in the “forbidden seas”: Ishmael on</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platonism and Christianity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Between Egoism and Madness: Ishmael’s Confrontation of “the</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>universal cannibalism of the sea”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 “Empty nothingness” or “a colourless all-colour” of Egoism?</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Representing the Nonrepresentational: A Tragic Dramatist’s Grasp of</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Ungraspable Phantom” of the Whale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 “Art saves him, and through art—life”: Nietzsche’s Aesthetic</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification of Human Existence and the Art of Becoming What One is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 “I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief!”: Ishmael’s</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic Representation of Ahab’s Tragic Vision as a Way of Making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his Fate his Own</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3 “those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it”: Ishmael’s Capturing of the Whale in Constant Flux

6. Conclusion

Bibliography
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Oh my soul! Do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible.¹
—Pindar
Pythian iii

“I love all men who dive” (3 March 1849), says Melville in his letter to his editor Evert Duyckinck, expressing his respect for those who strive at any cost to transcend limitations in human understanding and uncover the truth about the self and the universe rather than rest content within the existing value or belief system. Calling these fervent seekers of truth “thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began,” Melville continues, “Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more” (3 March 1849). The comparison between “the surface” and “down stairs five miles or more” makes it clear why Melville admires deep divers: while staying on the surface is easy and safe, diving deep is dangerous yet meaningful. Though it is only an analogy, it is telling that Melville mentions a whale here because the two main characters in his novel about a whaling voyage are pertinent examples of these “thought-divers” who embrace any risk in search of truth beyond the confines of existing human thoughts and beliefs.

¹ Although English translations of the Greek vary, the one based on Camus’ French translation best expresses the spirit of the novel’s tragic hero.
In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab travels the globe in pursuit of the white whale that snatched his leg. Faced with the ruthless and inscrutable power of Moby Dick, Ahab interrogates the existence and intention of God as the creator of the universe. For Ahab, *Moby Dick* signifies an existential challenge he needs to overcome in order to find out the ultimate meaning of life, the justice of the divine, and the order of the universe, and therefore he believes that he can obtain the power and knowledge beyond human capacity by killing the whale. Even though he is well aware of the destructive (and self-destructive) nature of his whaling voyage, Ahab does not relent in his pursuit of the elusive whale, making himself into “a great whale [who goes] down stairs five miles or more.”

The other deep diver in the novel is, of course, Ishmael. In the opening chapter of the novel, Ishmael reveals the nature of his voyage by stating that his primary motives for a whaling voyage involve “the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself” which “roused all my[his] curiosity” (16). Ishmael’s curiosity about “the great whale” and the metaphysical meaning of life symbolized by the whale is closely linked to his desire to fully examine the meaning of life. Reflecting on the contrast between the lives of seamen and those of landmen, Ishmael remarks, “For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life” (236). Just as Ahab agonizes over the mysteries of life beyond human intellectual power, Ishmael is deeply troubled by

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2 One of the most vexing questions that have confronted the readers of *Moby-Dick* is how to define the role of the persona who opens the narrative by declaring, “Call me Ishmael” (12). A tireless student of Melville, Charles Olson contends that Ishmael is “a chorus through whom Ahab’s tragedy is seen” and that Ishmael has a “cleansing ubiquity of the chorus in all drama, back to Greeks” (*Call Me Ishmael* 58).

3 Melville’s emphasis on intellectual “curiosity” as an intrinsic quality of Ishmael seems echo the fundamental epistemological premise Aristotle posits in the first sentence of *Metaphysics*: “All men by nature desire to know.”
human beings’ inability to move beyond empirical reality and argues that to the ambitious man who is willing to risk his own life for knowledge, the unpenetrated life is a greater terror than the perils of the sea.

The intensity of these characters’ shared desire to confront the existential challenge and grapple with the question of transcendental ideality beyond empirical reality explains why their relationship attracts so much scholarly attention. Specifically, whether understood as oppositional or complementary, the relationship between Ahab and Ishmael occupies a central position in the interpretation of the metaphysical vision of human life and its meaning presented in the novel. Shawn Thomson’s *The Romantic Architecture of Moby-Dick* (2000) provides an effective example. Comparing Ahab’s transcendental quest with Ishmael’s, Thomson contends that “the opposition of the allegorical force of Ahab’s confrontation with an evil Nature and Ishmael’s immersion into the dynamic natural system” is the key to comprehending the novel’s “exploration of universal questions of fate, destiny, and human nature” (25). The oppositional relationship between Ahab and Ishmael is also treated importantly in Michael T. Gilmore’s reading of *Moby-Dick* in *Surface and Depth* (2005). Describing Melville as both Ahab and Ishmael, Gilmore argues that while Melville affirms Ahab’s uncompromising devotion to truth, he eventually acknowledges the limits of human understanding through Ishmael who “undertakes a thorough investigation of some part of the whale’s anatomy or behavior only to reach the conclusion that reliable knowledge is impossible” (Gilmore 89).  

Similarly, Mark Edelman Boren’s “What’s Eating Ahab? The

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4 Although the discussion does not specifically concern the theme of an epistemological crisis, James Babin’s remark on the ending of *Moby-Dick* in “Eric Vogelin’s Recovery of the Remembering Story” bears a resemblance to Gilmore’s reading of the relationship between Ahab and Ishmael. By contrasting Ahab
Logic of Ingestion and the Performance of Meaning in *Moby-Dick*” (2002) understands Ahab and Ishmael as oppositional forces. Boren’s interpretation is different, however, in that it privileges Ahab’s voice, positing it as “the center of a highly developed epistemology that competes with and eludes the narrator’s comprehension” (3). Whether to privilege Ahab’s or Ishmael’s voice in reading the novel is a vexing question, especially because Ishmael refuses to take a clear position on the meaning of the pursuit of the great whale but remains suspended between belief and disbelief: “Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye” (314). Ishmael’s ambivalent position makes it difficult to draw a simple contrast between him and Ahab.

What further complicates the interpretation of the Ahab-Ishmael juxtaposition is the fact that Ishmael is not only a central character but also the narrator of the novel. Far from being a conventional first-person narrator with a clearly limited perspective, Ishmael is given the privilege of reading and commenting on the thoughts and feelings of other characters, especially those of Ahab. Moreover, in the course of the narration, Ishmael as a character virtually disappears. Notably, his disappearance roughly coincides with Ahab’s dramatic entrance in the narrative, while Ahab’s narrative comes to a close with Ishmael, who is unwilling to succumb to Ahab’s anger and grief, Babin suggests that the novel sides with Ishmael rather than with Ahab.

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5 In relation to this, Hawthorne, to whom Melville, in “admiration for [Hawthorne’s] genius,” inscribed the novel, appears to identify Ishmael’s qualms with Melville’s own conflict. In his journal entry of November 20, 1856, Hawthorne writes: “[Melville] can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature and better worth immortality than most of us” (163).
before Ishmael recovers his identity as a character. Ishmael’s double function as a character-narrator is thus closely related to the occasional collapse of the boundary between Ahab’s and Ishmael’s voices. The most prominent example of this collapse is found in the speech in “The Gilder” about the fate of human beings as foundlings, and the necessity of their quest for the origin of their life: “Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more? . . 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” (406). This passage has long baffled critics attempting to decide to whom this voice belongs. Whereas the ideas conveyed in the remark are quite reminiscent of Ahab’s accusation of a God who would create a man and then abandon him to his suffering, the absence of quotation marks implies that the speaker is Ishmael the narrator. This example illustrates that a close examination of Ishmael’s alternating role as character and narrator is imperative for a productive discussion of the relationship between Ishmael and Ahab.

As a matter of fact, Ishmael’s function as a character-narrator has received much critical attention. Harrison Hayford, for example, analyzes Melville’s development of the character of Ishmael through the investigation of Melville’s letter to Hawthorne, and maintains that the novel’s presentation of Ishmael’s consciousness as a narrator suggests that, in several instances, “Melville was writing in his own person, not Ishmael’s” (75). Matt Laufer’s “You Cannot Run and Read It: Melville’s Search for the Right Reader” is an even more thorough discussion of Ishmael’s role as narrator and character. Noticing the dramatic elements in “The Quarter-Deck,” Laufer insists that Ishmael’s alternating role reflects Melville’s wish to create a readership with an ability to practice both textual
disengagement and engagement. Despite the insights these critics offer on Ishmael’s narrative function, their readings do not extend to considering Ishmael’s role within the context of his relationship with Ahab.

More importantly, whether the focus is on Ishmael or Ahab or their relationship, because of the immense complexities of the novel, many critical approaches to the novel have ended up highlighting the elusiveness of the meaning of the novel. From the nineteenth-century reviews of the novel to recent critics, criticisms focusing on the philosophical and religious meaning of the novel have repeatedly pointed out the instability of meaning within the novel (and of the novel) as well as Ishmael’s unique and problematic position as the narrator who, without resorting to any external authority, offers his testimony from multiple perspectives. More recently, informed by Jacques Derrida, poststructuralist readings of the novel have also reiterated the undecidability, or indeterminacy, of meaning in *Moby-Dick* and viewed the novel as a discourse of deconstructing the premises of traditional metaphysics and ideology. Donald E. Pease, for example, contends in *Visionary Compacts* that “The fate befalling Ahab’s decisive conversion of words into deed determines Ishmael’s needs for a realm in which the indeterminate play of endless possible actions overdetermines his indecision,” which is a

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6 In his seminal lecture, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” delivered at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, Jaquie Derrida problematizes the concept of structure and explains the history of its “deferral” as follows: “... the entire history of the concept of structure, before the rupture of which we are speaking, must be thought of as a series of substitutions of centre for centre, as a linked chain of determinations of the centre. Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the centre receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix ... is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated an invariable presence—eidos, arché, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), alétheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth” (353). In the interviews collected in *Positions* (1972), Derrida further elaborates this point: “The problematic of writing is ... bound to the irreducible structure of ‘deferral’ in its relationships to consciousness, presence, science, history and the history of science, the disappearance or delay of the origin, etc.” (5).
source of Ishmael’s “pleasure” (273). In fact, much of the novel—especially in terms of the novel’s philosophical inquiry into traditional metaphysics and religion—completely corresponds to deconstructive reading, and deconstructionist strategies can illuminate the apparently self-contradictory rhetorical stances maintained by the two deep divers of the novel. As I will discuss later in my dissertation, Ishmael undermines his own reliability as an objective critic of epistemology by simultaneously appropriating and rejecting both transcendental idealism and empiricism. Likewise, Ahab’s invocation of God in his endeavor to challenge the Christian dogmas, along with his appropriation of the image of the savior of human beings, inevitably calls into question the legitimacy and validity of his own will to define the terms of his fate. It seems quite obvious then that, despite its (pre)modern aspects of the major characters’ romantic quests, *Moby-Dick* is loaded with numerous deconstructive and subversive elements that allow the novel to be read as an exemplary postmodernist text.

It does not, then, seem too much to say that Melville did not believe in “metanarratives,” a reference to any religious tradition or philosophical system that advocates a belief that all knowledge can be reduced to an absolute unified theory. If only to establish his own version of metaphysical truth, Ahab denounces through his encounter with Moby Dick the totalizing nature of “metanarratives,” which are characterized by a certain form of universal truth. Besides, a lack of coherent selfhood in Ishmael who refuses to commit himself to any version of absolute truth indicates that in the absence of

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7 Exposing and subverting this kind of apparent conflicts and oppositions between the internal logics of the novel coincide with the concept of deconstruction as is defined by Jonathan Culler in *On Deconstruction*: “to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise” (86).
an overarching metanarrative, the status of self and the legitimacy of knowledge become imperative for Melville’s interrogation of the existing knowledge and belief systems of the Western tradition. Not coincidentally, the concept of metanarratives is directly related to postmodernism. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” and asks “Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?” (xxiv, xxv) To this extent, the questions Melville grapples with in *Moby-Dick* clearly anticipate some of the questions raised by postmodern thinkers.

In assessing the direction of the current scholarship of *Moby-Dick*, it is noteworthy here that both poststructuralist and new historicist approaches have had great impact on the criticism of *Moby-Dick* for the past few decades. Besides the aforementioned discussion of the novel’s internally contradictory logics which eventually undermine the authority of the narrative, critics have also applied deconstructive strategies to the metacriticism of the novel. For example, Donald Pease’s essay “*Moby-Dick* and the Cold War” in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* deconstructs the ways in which Ahab is read in the context of the dominant ideology of nineteenth-century and mid-twentieth-century America. Pease contends that the history of *Moby-Dick* criticism reveals the operation of the persuasive ideology of each period, while itself working as “a most effective cultural apparatus” (151). Through the critical analysis of

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8 The question of where legitimacy of knowledge resides also occupies a central position in New Historicist criticism which is primarily concerned with the concepts of history and genealogy in all kinds of human endeavors. In a famous essay, “Nietzsche, History, Genealogy” (1971), Michel Foucault also points out the falsity of grand narratives by expounding on Nietzsche’s denunciation of traditional metaphysical and religious systems for promoting fiction that there is transcendental and essential truth: “However, if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (142).
the history of criticism of *Moby-Dick*, William V. Spanos, in his book *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies* (1995), agrees with New Historicists like Pease that the traditional humanist criticism of *Moby-Dick* “reflects, confirms, and enhances the hegemony of its pluralist ideology” (26-7). Thus, poststructuralists have attempted to examine the process through which *Moby-Dick* has become a means of reproducing the subsequent ideology of each new generation ever since the Melville revival of the 1920s led by Carl Van Doren and Raymond Weaver. Meanwhile, Michael Paul Rogin in *Subversive Genealogy* draws on New Historicism and posits that *Moby-Dick* is Melville’s representation of and response to the national crisis regarding the extension of slavery to the territories after America’s victory in the Mexican war. Contending that the novel diagnoses what he calls the idea of “the American 1848” (102), which itself is largely influenced by *Moby-Dick*, Rogin links Ahab’s assertiveness to American expansionism, his crew to the nonwhite labor covertly exploited by the expansionists, and the destruction of the *Pequod* to the national self-destruction that might be seen as the consequence of Manifest Destiny. Rogin’s reading of the novel best exemplifies what Louis Montrose sees in “Professing the Renaissance” as the New Historicist agenda of showing “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (20). To a certain extent, the deconstructive and genealogist approaches to *Moby-Dick* contribute to illuminating the relationship between the novel and its cultural matrix, and the two positive functions of New Historicism that Catherine Gallagher and

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9 Spanos also insists on “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” when he juxtaposes his criticism of *Moby-Dick* with his remark on American foreign affairs and suggests that America’s hegemonic value system which is manifested by Ahab’s quest has been effectively applied to justifying the legitimacy of American policies in ideological struggles such as the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and other recent American engagements in world affairs.
Stephen Greenblatt articulate in their Introduction to *Practicing New Historicism* indicate the importance of these approaches. According to these two leading practitioners of New Historicism, their approach can “suggest hidden links between high cultural texts [like Melville’s canonized works], apparently detached from any direct engagement with their immediate surroundings, and texts very much in and of their works, such as documents of social control or political subversion” (10). In addition, Gallagher and Greenblatt underscore that this approach “can highlight the process” by which such classic works of art as *Moby-Dick* “achieve both prominence and a certain partial independence” (10). In short, besides addressing the aforementioned postmodern implications of Melville’s thoughts, the deconstructive and New Historicist criticism of *Moby-Dick* illuminate the interaction between the novel and its culture important for understanding not only external factors determining its production but also the changing status of its reception.

However, these readings that emphasize only the postmodern aspects of the novel or the ideological contexts affecting its formation and reception do not fully appreciate the depth and significance of Melville’s aesthetic and philosophical enterprise in the novel. It is true that in the ensuing Americanist movement, *Moby-Dick* has served as an essential text due to the wide range of the topics it covers—the myth of the American frontier, individualism, capitalism, authorship, and democracy—and the revisionists offer insights into the relationship between the novel and American culture. Nonetheless, the New Americanists’ debate over canon formation regarding *Moby-Dick* does not reveal as much about *Moby-Dick* as a literary work as it does about how the novel has been exploited by critics according to their political interests. Of course, the irony is that the New Americanists themselves are not entirely free from this accusation. Aware of this
problem, Gallagher and Greenblatt pose the question of how to reconcile “the notion of ideology critique” and “the power of artistic representation” as a major challenge New Historicism should confront (11). They admit that although “this unsettling of the hierarchies”—that is, deconstructing the existing canonical order—“does feel democratizing,” there is a concern that “new historicism fosters the weakening of the aesthetic object” (11). Given that in the case of Moby-Dick, this “artistic representation” is inextricably related to the philosophical and religious questions Melville grapples with throughout his literary career, the cost of focusing exclusively on the political and cultural issues the novel only obliquely addresses seems too high.

As is evident in his view of literature and literary genius elaborated in “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” for Melville, “the great of Art” is inseparable from “Telling the Truth” (542). While Melville’s assertion in the same essay that “men not very much inferior to Shakespeare, are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio,” along with his reference to “republican progressiveness,” reveals his own literary ambition to contribute to the foundation of a national literature for Young America, Melville identifies “the intuitive Truth” and “the very axis of reality” as “the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare” (543, 541). That is, for Melville, “Truth” and “reality” are ultimately what constitute great literature. In “Herman Melville as an Existentialist: An Analysis of Typee, Mardi, and The Confidence-Man,” Saada Ishag reiterates the rigor and scrupulosity with which Melville pursues these issues in Moby-Dick by observing that “Rarely in the genre of the English novel, has so somber a philosophical theme of human finitude been integrated into the texture of a realistic prose” (19). By identifying Ahab’s “pride in his earthly existence as a man” as the cause of his “revolt and rebellion
against the inscrutable powers of nature that crush man’s insatiable longing for truth,”

Ishag further emphasizes the importance of the connection between “truth” and “existence” for Melville’s art (20). In this regard, it is clear that Melville is as thoroughly aware of the gravity of the aesthetic representation of ontological and existential questions as Ishmael is (561).

More importantly, this awareness leads to a series of questions regarding the relationship between literature and knowledge. How does literature—especially in the form of the *philosophical novel*10—and how do we, through literature, participate in systems of knowledge? How does literature construct, reinforce, and undermine the existing knowledge system? It seems inevitable that Melville has to admit that literature puts itself into question in this process, but can literature at the same time offer any alternative to an interpretative impasse and thereby leave room for any positive construction of the self, be it the self of the narrator or of the reader, as the legitimate basis of knowledge? Too often, critics use *Moby-Dick* as a pretext to articulate their own ideological standpoints or the theory of writing as différance, and otherwise overemphasize the incomprehensibility and elusiveness of the novel without thoroughly

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10 The complexity of the novel’s subject matter and style was immediately observed by Melville’s contemporary critics. For example, in his 1851 review of the novel, unable to decide whether he should classify the book “as fact, fiction, or essay,” Duyckink refers to *Moby-Dick* as “an intellectual chowder of romance, philosophy, natural history, fine writing, good feeling, bad sayings” (403). Borrowing David Masson’s concept, Sheila Post-Lauria in “Philosophy in Whales…: Mixed Form in *Moby-Dick*” (1990), identifies Melville’s novel as a “mixed form” of narrative or “metaphysical novel” that combines a Lockean positivistic worldview and a Kantian point of view. (304) Post-Lauria asserts that this form of narrative was a common strategy of mid-nineteenth century metaphysical writers, such as Emily Bronte and Charles Dickens, who wrote from an “a priori scheme,” to exhibit both positivism related with reason, experience, and a study of the natural laws, and idealism concerned with reflective, mystical, often visionary perspectives (305). While Post-Lauria is right in viewing *Moby-Dick* as “metaphysical novel,” or “philosophical novel,” her reading of the novel as “a mixed form” of narrative which merely points out the novel’s simultaneous utilization of positivism and idealism does not extend to the discussion of how the novel questions its own status along with the validity of the selfhood in grasping and representing truth, which I believe is the key to Melville’s struggle in the novel.
examining how to relate the backdrop of the philosophical inquiry and the theological torment of Melville to *Moby-Dick* as an aesthetic project to explore an alternative to the existing metanarratives.

In my dissertation, I contend that reading *Moby-Dick* in relation to Nietzsche’s philosophical and aesthetical theories is of utmost importance in comprehending the import of Melville’s inquiries into the thoughts of the Western tradition and his aesthetic endeavor to find a positive alternative to his initial epistemological skepticism and religious doubt. I do not intend to argue that there is a direct influential relationship between the two who were separated by time and place. Instead, by examining Melville’s thoughts in *Moby-Dick* in light of Nietzsche’s thoughts, I aim to offer a more positive way of understanding the apparently postmodern aspects of Melville’s thoughts explored in the novel. Nietzsche’s rejection of metaphysics, his perspectivism, and his uncompromising questioning of the process of conventional truth and the idea of selfhood allow both advocates and critics of postmodernism to regard him as the founding figure of Postmodernism. For example, in “The Disarticulation of the Self in Nietzsche,” J. Hillis Miller suggests that “Of all modern deconstructers of the idea of selfhood,” Nietzsche is the one who “presents the most systematic and cogent dismantling of the concept in its relation to the other metaphysical concepts with which it is necessarily related” (248). Also, it is commonly acknowledged that both Derrida and Foucault are greatly indebted to Nietzsche for the development of their respective thinking that has effected radical changes in the philosophical discourse and literary criticism of the twentieth century. As Ken Gemes perceptively points out in “Postmodernism’s Use and Abuse of Nietzsche,” however, while Nietzsche agrees with postmodernists that “the
received notion of the unified Cartesian subject is a myth,” he would not endorse their celebration of “the death of the subject,” because Nietzsche “rejects this valorization of disunity as a form of Nihilism and prescribes the creation of a genuine unified subjectivity to those few capable, and hence worthy, of such a goal” (339). Nietzsche does not attack dogmatic metaphysics for the sake of rejecting unity itself. Rather, his attack needs to be understood as “a call to engage in a purposive self creation under a unifying will, a will that possesses the strength to reinterpret history as a pathway to the problem that we are” (Kemes 339). Nietzsche can be seen at once as a deconstructionist and a reconstructionist insomuch as reinterpreting history inevitably entails the rejection of the established or a pre-given while a purposive creation of selfhood is the most artistic and creative performance of all human activities. Unlike Nietzsche, postmodernists, despite their claim that their practice is productive and affirmative in that it allows for a genealogical analysis of the formation of any given concepts including the subject, ultimately fail to offer any positive alternative to the metanarrative they reject. Given the revolutionary import of Nietzsche’s thoughts and their difference from postmodernists’, it is not an exaggeration to say that Nietzsche is the one who dives deepest in his questioning of the basic premises of the Western tradition. Even though frequently and wrongly accused of denying any possibility of knowledge and meaning and fostering extreme relativism and skepticism, Nietzsche, as I will show in my reading of him in connection with Melville’s thoughts in the following chapters, offers, or at least attempts to offer, a genuinely positive alternative to metanarratives through a blend of philosophical and aesthetic projects. It is in this context that reading Moby-Dick in conjunction with Nietzsche’s thoughts on art and philosophy can throw a new light on the
significance of Melville’s position as an artist who scrutinizes and (re)interprets, for a creative and therefore constructive purpose, almost every aspect of metaphysics and theology symbolized by the white whale.

In assessing the affinities between Melville and Nietzsche, however, there is another German philosopher whose thoughts need to be examined: Arthur Schopenhauer. Given that Schopenhauer was undeniably a major influence on Nietzsche’s philosophical development, the scope and direction of Nietzsche’s philosophical endeavors cannot be adequately understood without considering the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Although he does not accept the renunciation of the will to life suggested by Schopenhauer as the ultimate answer to confront the horror and absurdity of life, Nietzsche acknowledges Schopenhauer as the first major European philosopher who departs from traditional metaphysics that posits reason as the defining trait of human beings. Besides, examining Schopenhauer’s thoughts along with Nietzsche’s will bring us closer to the working of Melville’s mind, because the range of issues Schopenhauer examines—the status of the subject, free will, egoism, and madness—are related not only to Nietzsche’s thoughts but also to Melville’s in *Moby-Dick* as they are the most crucial concepts in defining the status of the self in the epistemological and theological discourse. In fact, as Merton M. Sealts, Jr. records in *Melville’s Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed*, toward the end of his life when he came across Schopenhauer’s works, Melville immediately recognized the immense congruities between the German philosopher and himself, and acquired personal copies of many of these works including *The World as Will and Idea*, *The Wisdom of Life*, *Studies in Pessimism*, and *Religion: A Dialogue and*
Other Essays and heavily marked and annotated them. Focusing on the fact that Melville read Schopenhauer’s works during his later years, especially while working on the leaves of *Billy Budd, Sailor*, a group of critics insists that Melville’s last novel should be read in relation to the Schopenhauerian notion of the negation of will to life or ascetic transcendence. For example, as early as in 1952 in his classical book, *Melville’s Quarrel with God*, Lawrence Thompson suggests that “To have such proof that Melville was reading widely... in Schopenhauer, during the exact years and month when he was writing... *Billy Budd*, should be of more than passing interest to anyone who honestly wishes to understand Melville’s meaning in *Billy Budd*” (350).

Other critics—although they were never numerous—suggest the possibility that Melville became conversant with Schopenhauer’s pessimism much earlier on in his life. In “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Parable of Pessimism,” for example, Daniel Stempel and Bruce M. Stillians state that “the fact that some months before the writing of *Bartleby*, the first summary of Schopenhauer’s philosophy in English was published in a periodical...

11 These are items 443 to 448 in Sealts’s *Melville’s Reading* (9). Sealts classifies Melville’s copies of Schopenhauer’s works as “marked,” except Religion, which he classifies as “annotated.” Also, according to *The Melville Log* by Jay Leyda, on 12 February 1891, Melville reads in *The World as Will and Idea, Vol III. Fourth Book*, chapter XLVI. “The Vanity and Suffering of Life” and “scores”: “... the insight to which [Voltaire] attained in three respects, and which prove the greater depth of his thinking: (1) the recognition of the preponderating magnitude of the evil and misery of existence with which he is deeply penetrated; (2) that of the strict necessity of the acts of will; (3) that of the truth of Locke’s principle, that what thinks may also be material... “ (832).

12 For a more recent example of the reading of the novel in relation to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, see John Haydock’s “Melville’s Seraphita: *Billy Budd, Sailor*.”

13 Referring to Thompson’s observation, in *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religion*, Arthur Versluis argues that “This should be a warning to those who have interpreted *Billy Budd* as the work of a man reconciled with orthodox Christianity, a man mellowed with age” (Versluis 125).
which was readily available to Melville forces them to consider” this possibility (269). Similarly, in his attempt to answer why toward the end of his life Melville “turned to Schopenhauer with such passion,” R.K. Gupta in his essay “Moby-Dick and Schopenhauer,” contends that Moby-Dick, is “shot through and through with Schopenhauerian images, ideas, and motifs” and posits that “Since the late 1840s Melville had been moving toward a Schopenhauerian view of human life and the world” (149). Nevertheless, we must admit that there is no evidence that Melville obtained the knowledge of Schopenhauer’s thoughts while he was writing Moby-Dick and it is impossible for him to have read the works of Nietzsche at that time. Even if he had read Schopenhauer by the time he was writing the novel, it cannot serve in itself as proof that he was influenced by Schopenhauer. It is equally important, however, that we should not underestimate the fact that there are already some strikingly congruent perspectives between Melville and Schopenhauer, and the examination of their thoughts in relation to each other as well as to Nietzsche’s will shed light upon our understanding of the novel and Melville’s development as an author deeply immersed in metaphysical and aesthetic questions throughout his life.

14 More specifically, Stempel and Stillians point out that “Iconoclasm in German Philosophy,” John Oxenford’s survey of Schopenhauer’s works was published on 1 April 1853 in the Westminster Review which “had printed a brief but favorable reference to Melville’s own work in 1852,” and, citing Sealts’s Melville’s Reading as evidence, argue that it was Melville’s “custom to go to the reading room of New York Society Library and scan the latest periodicals” (270). Consequently, they hold that “the evidence is [simply] so strong to rule out the possibility that he might have simply ignored the article” which “was destined to become one of the landmarks of the nineteenth-century intellectual history” (269, 270). In addition, these critics suggest that Melville could have learned about Schopenhauer’s thoughts through his traveling companion George J. Adler during his 1849 trip to Europe.

15 Although Gupta’s exposition of the Schopenhauerian position on human will, suffering, and religion illuminates Melville’s intellectual relationship with Schopenhauer, it mainly points out the “remarkable” affinities between their ideas without further examining the direction of their questioning. As I will demonstrate in my dissertation, however, it is not a mere coincidence that Melville’s interrogation of theological and epistemological premises of the Western tradition bears a resemblance to that of Schopenhauer.
Instead of merely pointing out how Melville’s thoughts resemble or differ from Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s, I aim to reach a more balanced and productive understanding of the complexities of Melville’s questioning and vision. I conclude that the similarities between Melville and these philosophers are not a mere coincidence but the inevitable result of their rigorous interrogation of the conventional view of metaphysical “Truth” and the conditions of human life, as offered by the traditions of Platonic Idealism and Christianity. Just as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche proffer fundamentally new paradigms for understanding human will, suffering, and religion, so does Melville interrogate the basic tenets of Platonism and Christianity and essentially explore a positive alternative philosophical premise. Thus, reading Melville in the context of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche would help bring to light Melville’s position in the larger intellectual tradition beyond his immediate cultural milieu.

My second chapter, “‘The Key to It All’: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on Egoism,” works to establish much of the philosophical background that is imperative for understanding the literary contexts of my dissertation. This chapter demonstrates how Schopenhauer’s theory of the world as will and representation revises both Platonic and Kantian views of the relationship between the perceiving subject and the object of knowledge and the Christian concept of incarnation. In questioning these basic premises of the Western philosophy and theology, Schopenhauer grapples with the same issue thatMelville explores through the story of Narcissus who plunges into water after his own ungraspable image: egoism both in its metaphysical and ethical sense of the word. This chapter also investigates the significance of Nietzsche’s concepts of “genealogy of morals,”
“perspectivism,” and “self-overcoming,” as they relate to my discussion of the subversive implications of Ahab’s and Ishmael’s metaphysical and ethical inquiries in the following chapters.

My third chapter, “Harpooning the Self: Ahab’s Egoism, Madness, and Will to Power,” focuses on how the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche illuminates the questions Ahab raises regarding the choices of human beings when confronting the problem of evil. Ahab’s investigation of the incongruities between seems and is can be elucidated by Schopenhauer’s differentiation between the veil of appearance (ideas) and an inner reality of every natural phenomenon (will). In particular, the concept of will as “merely a blind, irresistible impulse” can illuminate Ahab’s “will determinate” and “madness maddened” in his pursuit of Moby Dick. Exploring the import of Ahab’s attempts to give shape and meaning to his own life and defy conventional religious doctrines, I also contend that whereas the Nietzschean philosopher’s self-overcoming involves constant and rigorous examination of all concepts and values including his own, Ahab’s self-overcoming does not extend to examining the implications of his mad pursuit of Moby Dick, causing his subversive rhetoric to be sustained only by his postulation of metaphysical reality.

Chapter Four, “‘Colorless, All-color of’ Egoism: A Young Philosopher’s Struggle in ‘Barren Mazes,’” focuses on Ishmael’s concept of fate and free will and his view of “the whiteness of the whale” in relation to the German philosophers’ understanding of ethical and metaphysical egoism. My contention is that Schopenhauer’s paradoxical distinction between relative nothingness and absolute nothingness can help understand the meaning of Ishmael’s observation of “a colorless all-color of atheism” in the whale. Comparing Ishmael’s inability to think outside the frame of language constructed by Western empiricism and
Schopenhauer’s willingness to accept proto-linguistic concepts and pre-linguistic experiences, I also argue that Ishmael’s perspectivism can only “lead us on in barren mazes.” That is, as a “sunken-eyed young Platonist” who is constantly engaged in deconstructing his identity and blurring the distinction between his identity and others’, Ishmael is bound to fail in his philosophical endeavor to seek the absolute truth.

In Chapter Five, “Representing the Nonrepresentational: A Tragic Dramatist’s Grasp of ‘The Ungraspable Phantom of’ the Whale,” I argue that although Ishmael as a philosopher ends up “in barren mazes,” Ishmael as a tragic dramatist ultimately grasps “the ungraspable phantom of life.” Noting that Ishmael’s aesthetic enterprise as a tragic dramatist involves both witnessing Ahab’s pursuit of Moby-Dick and making his own endeavor to grasp the phantom of the whale, I particularly draw on two theories of tragedy developed by Nietzsche. In examining Ishmael’s experience of Ahab’s encounter with the whale as a tragic dramatist, I utilize Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy in Birth of Tragedy. For Ishmael’s own encounter with the whale, I employ Nietzsche’s notion of “becoming what one is,” which suggests that understanding and participating in the unending process of “becoming” is the only way to grasp any truth without falsifying life. Nietzsche’s earlier view that the true performative power of art resides in the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses is illuminating in understanding Ishmael’s rather dubious position on Ahab’s mad attempt to harpoon the whale, for what is most important for Ishmael as a tragic dramatist is the tension between Ahab’s life-affirming but at the same time self-destructive force and other characters’ life-rejecting tendency. Contending that the tension between the Dionysian and Apollonian impulses leads to Nietzsche’s later concept of “becoming what one is,” I argue that Ishmael’s purposefully indeterminate rendering of the whiteness of the
whale is Melville’s attempt to present and contain through the manipulation of the dissimulatory power of language that which cannot be otherwise represented in any fixed or stabilized words.
CHAPTER 2

“THE KEY TO IT ALL”: SCHOPENHAUER AND NIETZSCHE ON EGOISM

2.1. Schopenhauer’s Denial of Will to Life

In order to understand the affinities and differences between Melville and Schopenhauer in their questioning of the basic premises of platonic idealism, it is important to examine first how Kant draws on Plato’s belief in human beings’ capacity to obtain knowledge of truths in developing his own version of transcendental idealism, which was a major inspiration for Schopenhauer’s theory of the world as idea. Suggesting that Kant regarded Plato’s main concern as how to account for mathematical knowledge, Camilla Serck-Hanssen and Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson contend that Kant credited Plato with posing a question as to how synthetic \textit{a priori} knowledge is possible.\textsuperscript{16} Defined as knowledge of necessary and universal truths that are neither self-evident nor definitional, the notion of synthetic \textit{a priori} knowledge is significant because as Hanssen and Emilsson perceptively point out, it led both Plato and Kant to postulate “pure intuition in which necessary truths can somehow be ‘seen’” (74). That both Plato and Kant ground synthetic \textit{a priori} knowledge in pure intuition is crucial to understanding the rationalist side of Kantian philosophy. Just as Plato believes in the faculty of reason to supply

\textsuperscript{16} In \textit{Meno}, Plato poses the notion of synthetic \textit{a priori} knowledge by demonstrating how a slave boy without previous knowledge of geometry can decipher the length of a diagonal through his use of reason.
answers to metaphysical and other questions without the aid of experience, Kant recognizes the metaphysical importance of pure reason as a means through which humans obtain knowledge that is neither empirical nor analytic.

Despite this rationalist aspect, Kant’s metaphysics also reflects the influence of the empiricist philosophy. As a matter of fact, Kant synthesizes the rationalist tradition and the empiricist tradition, and he has generally been credited for his role in the shift in the focus of Western philosophy from metaphysics toward epistemology. Regarding his questioning of some of the fundamental principles of rationalism, Kant acknowledges that he was heavily influenced by the skepticism of Hume. Hume called into question the epistemological premise held by both the empiricist and the rationalist, the idea that there is always causality in the physical world and that our natural world is always law-abiding. Empiricists such as Locke argued that this premise could be proven by experience or induction, whereas rationalists such as Descartes assumed that the principle of universal causality is a self-evident truth. Questioning both the empiricist idea that sense experience serves as access to the knowledge of causality in the physical world and the rationalist idea that reason is the avenue of transcendental or spiritual knowledge, Hume posits that all we can be rationally certain of are ideas, either of sensation or reflection. Kant responds to Hume’s skeptical challenge by directing his philosophical attention to examining the limitations and scope of human intellect and to comprehending the relation between mental faculties and objects of knowledge. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant characterizes “the subjective pole of the distinction as the contentless transcendental unity of self-consciousness and the objective pole as the contentless transcendental object that corresponds to the concept of an object in general” (*CPR A*
Kant’s synthesis of empiricist and rationalist tradition can be understood in this context. Seeking a new way to show the compatibility of empirical reality and transcendental ideality, Kant finds his answer in an inner-mental structure which must be imposed on the world and posits that this mental structure, which is none other than noumena (“things-in-themselves”), allows us to perceive and understand the external world in much the same way that for people with rose-colored glasses, everything they see would be rose-colored. Thus, Kant does not deny the existence of an external reality, but at the same time holds that since our knowledge of an external reality is always filtered through our mental faculties, we can know only the world as our mind presents it to us.

This view that the only reality accessible to our knowledge is the reality of phenomena is one of the key differences between platonic and Kantian idealism. According to Hanssen and Emilsson, even though Kant agreed with Plato that synthetic a priori knowledge in mathematics is possible because “mathematics describes the properties of the very forms of sensibility, space and time, that are given to us a priori,” Kant believed Plato erred by failing to recognize that the synthetic a priori truths of mathematics are not grounded in “the intuition of reason into the things in themselves,” but “an intuition of sensibility presenting appearances” (74). Kant’s view of Plato’s mistakes brings us back to Kant’s redefinition of the role of metaphysics as a critique of pure reason. Although Kant retains Plato’s notion that there exists a separate order of “real” objects over and above the objects of the external world, he does not believe that

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17 For the parenthetical references to Kant’s texts, I will generally give their standard English-language acronyms: CPR = Critique of Pure Reason; GMM = The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals.
we can transcend the limitations of our perception, and therefore he concludes that platonic ideas—noumena in his terms—are inaccessible to human knowledge. In this regard, Kant moves away from the platonic discourse about what reality consists of toward an epistemological question about what we can know about reality and how we can know it.

Schopenhauer’s theory of the world as idea can be seen as the development of Kant’s view of the relationship between the perceiving subject and the object of knowledge. In his introduction to the section on the world as idea, Schopenhauer states, “this whole world—is only object in relation to the subject, perception of the perceiver—in a word, idea” (The World as Will and Representation 3). In declaring that the world is my idea, Schopenhauer is postulating the view that the reality of the whole sensible world lies in its appearing to a percipient subject—namely, the visible world is object for a subject. The correlative relation Schopenhauer sets up between subject and object is even more clearly given in the following passage:

In my system, on the other hand, matter and intellect are inseparable correlatives which exist only for each other, and so exist only relatively. Matter is the idea which intellect forms, and only in the idea formed by intellect does matter exist. Together these two constitute the world as idea, which is the very same as Kant’s phenomenon . . . (22)

Although Schopenhauer uses different terminology, his comment that “Matter is the idea which intellect forms, and only in the idea formed by intellect does matter exist” clearly echoes Kant’s view that the mind actively shapes our perception of reality rather than passively receives and registers information from the external world. Notably, neither

18 The book is alternately translated in English as The World as Will and Idea. Original German is Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung. Unless otherwise specified, all future references to Schopenhauer are to this book.
Kant nor Schopenhauer accepts the idealist belief that the world is composed primarily of mental ideas, not of physical things. Nor do they believe that ideas are more fundamental than things. Schopenhauer thus agrees with Kant in recognizing the necessity of revising platonic idealism which does not adequately acknowledge the power of human intellect to shape reality, but merely sees the external world as the shadow of the realm of Ideas.

In this sense, egoism in the sense of metaphysics
does “the key to it all” (Moby-Dick 14) for Schopenhauer as it is for Melville. In positing a correlative relation between subject and object that implies that our perception of objects in the phenomenal world is inevitably filtered through our values and thoughts, Schopenhauer’s theory of the world as idea poses the same question that Melville raises through the story of Narcissus who plunges into water after his own ungraspable image: how can we overcome the limitations of our subjective perspectives and perception and grasp the ultimate, transcendent truth?

Despite the similarity between Kant and Schopenhauer in the understanding of the correlative relationship between intellect and matter—or subjective and objective poles in Kantian terms—Schopenhauer’s revision of platonic idealism diverges from Kant’s by positing the concept of the “will” as metaphenomenal reality, which is essentially

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19 It is imperative to draw a careful distinction between egoism in the metaphysical sense and egoism in the ethical sense of the word. According to Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, “sometime during the 19th century, solipsism was transformed from moral and practical egoism to theoretical (either epistemological or metaphysical) egoism, i.e. to the theory that I can know nothing but my ideas and that I and my ideas are all that exists” (679). Thus construed, metaphysical egoism is “an extreme species of idealism,” and commonly accepted as “the logical consequence of Berkley’s view,” but “[T]he distinction between practical and theoretical egoism is clearly made by Schopenhauer” (Religion and Ethics 679). In ethics, scholars have proposed various definitions of egoism, but the one offered by Edwards Regis in “What is Ethical Egoism?” seems most pertinent to the discussion of the ethical dimension of Ahab’s quest, and Regis defines ethical egoism as “the view which holds both that one ought to pursue one’s well-being and happiness, and that one has no unchosen obligation or duty to serve the interests of others” (61). In place of such confusing, albeit more precise, terms as theoretical egoism and moral or practical egoism, I hereby use metaphysical egoism and ethical egoism.
different from Kant’s noumena. For Kant, noumena exist independently of all human consciousness or experience. In spite of this mind-independent nature of noumena, Kant holds that noumena should be taken as the cause of our reflections and sensations, and Schopenhauer finds this position philosophically untenable. Unlike Kant, who argues that things-in-themselves are inaccessible to human beings, Schopenhauer seeks to identify the thing which lies behind the veil of appearance and asserts that we can gain some insight into metaphenomenal reality. Explaining how we can see beyond the veil of appearance, Schopenhauer emphasizes that “from without we can never arrive at the real nature of things” (31) but that it is possible through the investigation of how our living bodies operate. According to him, we experience our body in two different ways: first, we experience it objectively as ideas, as we experience the movement of other objects; second, we experience it more directly as the manifestation or expression of the reality that exists independently of our mind. Therefore, although both we and people around us can experience the action of our body simply by observing the movement of our body, it is we alone who can experience this action inwardly beyond the ordinary sense perception. Schopenhauer uses the term “will” to describe “the real nature of things” we arrive at through this process of inward reflections on our bodily movements. Thus, unlike Kant, Schopenhauer gives a clear answer to what is the “thing-in-itself”: the will.

What exactly is the will, however, and how does it work?

In the following passage, Schopenhauer offers some explanation of the nature of the will and the ways in which it is manifested in the phenomenal world:

All idea, of whatever kind it may be, all object, is phenomenon, but the will alone is thing-in-itself. As such it is emphatically not idea, all toto genere different from it; it is that of which all idea, all object, is the phenomenal
appearance, the visibility, the objectification. It is the inmost nature, the kernel, of every individual thing, and also of the whole. It is manifest in every force of nature that operates blindly, and it is manifest, too, in the deliberate action of man; and the great difference between these two is a matter only of degree of the manifestation, not in the nature of what is made manifest. (42)

Here, the relationship between will and idea is quite clearly drawn: idea is the phenomenal manifestation of the will. The will therefore is the key to understanding all experience in the sphere of phenomena. As Schopenhauer himself notes earlier in the book, the will alone gives a human being “the key to his phenomenal existence, reveals the meaning, shows him the inner working of his being, of his behavior, of his movements” (32). Notably, Schopenhauer does not confine the manifestation of the will to the “action of man,” but extends it even to the operation of force in inanimate objects although they are incapable of speculating on the representation of the will in their physical beings. In spite of the seeming distinction Schopenhauer draws between the will manifest in human action and the will manifest in natural force, Schopenhauer’s assertion that the will manifests in the blind operation of “every force of nature” is significant given the fact that despite their faculty of reason, human beings are also capable of exhibiting the will through irrational and impulsive action. As a matter of fact, later on in *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer explicitly states that the will is in its essence “an endless striving” devoid of “any goal and of any limits” (84), meaning the will is a blind urge or impulse rather than a force of rational or deliberate nature. Regarding what the will is and how it operates, Schopenhauer makes one more significant remark in the passage quoted above. Defining the will as “the inmost nature, the kernel, of” all beings, Schopenhauer states that the will is the reality not only of “every individual thing,” but also of “the whole.” In addition to reinforcing Schopenhauer’s belief that the will is the
thing-in-itself, this statement points to another unique aspect of Schopenhauer’s notion of transcendental reality. In stating that the will manifest in “every individual thing” is the same as the will manifest in “the whole,” Schopenhauer implies that though the will manifests itself in the multiple phenomena of experience, the will as metaphenomenal reality is the one individual Will. This accounts for why Schopenhauer is careful to use the singular rather than the plural when referring to the thing-in-itself.

The revolutionary import of this concept of the will can be made clear by considering its significance in Schopenhauer’s questioning of platonic or Kantian idealism. It is true that Schopenhauer’s system of philosophy draws on Plato’s and Kant’s idealism in its assertion that the world is our perception or presentation. Schopenhauer’s thesis that the will is the blind driving force of all beings, including human beings, however, radically challenges both platonic and Kantian idealism by rejecting their position that designates “thinking as that which is essential and primary in the so-called soul (i.e., in the inner or spiritual life of man)” (90). According to Schopenhauer, willing is not “a mere product of thinking” (90) but the most fundamental principle of existence and action.

Schopenhauer’s notion that the will as metaphenomenal reality is one individual Will also offers a serious revision of both platonic and Kantian idealism through its rejection of the position that a separate order of “real” objects beyond the objects of the phenomenal world, whether they could be intuited (Plato’s Ideas) or not (Kant’s noumena). Concerning Plato’s Ideas, Schopenhauer explicitly explains how they are related to the will by defining Plato’s Ideas as “different grades of the will’s objectification which are manifest in innumerable individuals, exist[ing] as their
unattained models or as the eternal forms of things, not themselves emerging into time and space” (60-61). In describing Plato’s Ideas as “unattained models” or “the eternal forms,” Schopenhauer acknowledges their transcendental and universal nature. The phrase “different grades of the will’s objectification,” however, intimates that Schopenhauer fundamentally regards Plato’s Ideas not as the thing-in-itself, but as something that belongs to the sphere of phenomena. That is, although Plato’s Ideas are not subjugated to the constrictions of time and space, they are not metaphenomenal reality in themselves for Schopenhauer. In a similar vein, Schopenhauer also denies that Kant’s noumena are metaphenomenal reality. According to Schopenhauer, in order for Kant to conceive of the thing-in-itself as metaphenomenal reality “free from all the forms attendant on knowing as such,” he “should have explicitly denied objective existence to his thing-in-itself” because “objective existence” of the thing-in-itself is made possible only in the realm of phenomena (98). Schopenhauer’s use of the singular in his reference to the will, therefore, can be viewed as his deliberate attempt to criticize Plato’s and Kant’s conceptualization of “the inner reality of the world” (98).

That said, the truly revolutionary significance of Schopenhauer’s concept of the will seems to consist in the way it turns platonic dualism on its head. In setting up the relation between the external world and metaphenomenal reality, platonic dualism postulates the concept of causality—while the external world is a shadow or copy of the world of Ideas, as Aristotle makes it clear in his critique of platonic idealism, “the world of Ideas is responsible for, or is the cause of, whatever order occurs in the material world” (82). Schopenhauer’s view that empirical reality is the objectification of the will rejects this notion of causality which inevitably entails the privileging of Ideas over
matter. Schopenhauer defines the relation between transcendental ideality and empirical reality not as “the relation of cause and effect” (33) but as the correlative relation without privileging one over the other. More importantly, Schopenhauer’s account of how the will is manifest in objects of the phenomenal world goes beyond platonic dualism through its affinity with the notion of incarnation. In the broad sense of the word, incarnation refers to the act or state of the objectification or manifestation of a nonphysical entity such as the soul, the spirit, the self, or the divine being in a physical entity, and Schopenhauer’s account that the will, while itself remains the one individual will on the metaphenomenal level, manifests in individual beings on the phenomenal level can be understood essentially as a version of incarnation.

Given the importance of the concept of incarnation in Christianity, a question might be raised as to how Schopenhauerian manifestation of the will in objects in the phenomenal realm is similar to, or different from, the incarnation of the divine Logos in the human flesh of Jesus Christ. One significant similarity is that both presuppose the union of a nonphysical entity and a physical entity that does not involve the loss of the identity of any party. Suggesting that the will as the thing-in-itself is not affected or changed by the process of its manifestation in phenomenon, Schopenhauer observes: “The will as a thing in itself is totally different from its phenomenon . . . Since the will enters into these forms only at the very moment when it manifests itself, they have to do only with its objectivity, and are alien to the will itself” (44). Just as Ahab’s personification of evil in Moby Dick ultimately calls for the revision of the system of Christianity, however, Schopenhauer’s notion of the will entering into bodily forms radically undermines the Christian concept of incarnation. As Schopenhauer emphasizes, the will manifests itself
in “all the forms of the phenomenal,” not just in any particular physical entity. On the other hand, in Christianity, the Logos is incarnated only in the person of Jesus Christ, the son of God. A more radical difference is found in the nature of the nonphysical entity personified. While what is manifested through incarnation is the Logos or the divine Reason in Christianity, in Schopenhauer’s system, what is manifested is the will, and Schopenhauer defines the will as something that is “without knowledge and merely a blind irresistible impulse,” which clearly contrasts with a Christian deity (176).

Schopenhauer’s replacement of the divine Logos incarnated only in the savior of the entire humankind with a blind and purposeless force manifest in “all the forms of the phenomenal” is indeed quite significant in understanding in what direction his critique both of Christianity and of Platonism ultimately drives his thoughts. Earlier, I discussed one of the fundamental differences between Platonism and Christianity as the platonic emphasis on one’s rational faculty for abstract reasoning, which Christianity replaced with one’s faith in the incarnation of the divine spirit in Jesus Christ. Despite this difference, Christianity seems closer to Platonism than to Schopenhauer’s philosophy in that both the divine Logos and Ideas are characterized by such attributes as order, harmony, and rationality. In contrast, Schopenhauer’s will, utterly devoid of reason and purpose, is a sheer impulse to gratify its own desire, and thus it lacks the said qualities of the Logos or Ideas. The will itself is in fact neither negative nor positive—as stated above, it is not even a cause—and for Schopenhauer, “the will” is simply “the will to life” because “what the will wills is always life” (Schopenhauer 176). In spite of this value-free nature of the will, the view that the will is “incarnated” in all beings of the phenomenal world takes a central position in Schopenhauer’s account of the world as a
site of conflict and suffering. Explaining why our world is full of “strife, conflict, and the fickleness of victory,” Schopenhauer states, “Every grade of the will’s objectification competes with others for matter, space, and time” (73-74). That is, the world is the field of discord and conflict because each individual being, as a manifestation of the one Will to live, seeks to assert its existence at the expense of other things: “every individual . . . makes itself the centre of the world, has regard for its own existence and well-being before everything else; indeed, from the natural standpoint, is ready to sacrifice everything else for this—is ready to annihilate the world in order to maintain its own self, this drop in the ocean, a little longer” (Schopenhauer 428). This view of the relationship among phenomenal objects based on the principle of systematic selfishness indicates that Schopenhauer is interested in egoism not only on the level of metaphysics but also on the level of ethics. Notably, Schopenhauer applies this concept of competition and conflict among phenomenal objects to the one individual Will and describes it as one tortured will: “Deceived by the knowledge bound to its service, the will fails to recognize itself here, and in promoting the wellbeing of one of its phenomena, produces great suffering in another. So in its passion it sinks its teeth into its own flesh, not knowing that it is injuring only itself” (219).

Schopenhauer finds this fundamentally egoistic nature of the will, both on the phenomenal and metaphenomenal levels, deeply problematic, and turns to asceticism or self-renunciation for an answer. Regarding how one can actually obtain freedom from the service of the will, Schopenhauer posits aesthetic perception of the natural object as one way of reaching this completely will-less stage. According to Schopenhauer, aesthetic perception makes possible the development of “the sense of the sublime,” which affords
us a moment of freedom from the subjection to the will by temporarily letting us forget about ourselves “as individual” and raising our “consciousness to the pure will-less, timeless, subject of knowledge, independent of all relations” (123). In clarifying the nature of this aesthetic pleasure, Schopenhauer maintains that only some gifted artists are endowed with this kind of aesthetic contemplation and that these artists alone can create for ordinary people works of art that evoke the sense of the sublime. In Schopenhauer’s view, most people are not strong enough to retain this will-less status, because as soon as they are conscious of their existence in time and space, they “relapse into” their subservient relation to the will (122). This mode of achieving freedom from the slavery of the will is not only transitory but also incomplete. Although it leads us to see through the illusion of the distinction between subject and object, it does not afford insights into the true nature of the will as thing-in-itself, the knowledge of which, according to Schopenhauer, is necessary for genuine liberation from the egoistic force of the will.

In the following passage, perceiving the subservience to the will to be the root of all suffering and evil, Schopenhauer offers another way of reaching a purely will-less state: the recognition and knowledge of the true nature of the Will, which only a few “exceptionally favoured individuals,” namely, some genii, can achieve (90):

The will to life cannot itself be suspended except through knowledge. Thus the only path to salvation is the one by which the will may appear without restriction, so that in this manifestation it may recognize and know its own nature. Only as the result of this knowledge can the will suspend and cancel itself, and thereby end the suffering inseparable from its manifestation. (253)

In discussing knowledge as the only method of suspending the will to life, Schopenhauer intimates that the servitude to the will to life is something to be overcome, and the reason why he thinks that the will to life needs to be suspended and canceled is clearly given
when he mentions the need to “end the suffering inseparable from its manifestation.” For him, the objectification of the will to life inevitably entails suffering and pain. Although Schopenhauer does not directly use terms like “asceticism” or “self-renunciation,” that the will “may recognize and know its own nature” in its manifestation is quite important in understanding why Schopenhauer suggests that “the denial and surrender of all volition” (259) of the self is the only way to “the redemption from a world whose whole existence presented itself to us as suffering” (259).

Interestingly, in explaining the importance of knowledge in the denial of the will, Schopenhauer emphasizes the will’s agency in the canceling of its own force: “as the result of this knowledge can the will suspend and cancel itself.” The implication of this statement is that we are unable to free ourselves from the servitude of the will on our own. On a related note, Schopenhauer states that “all knowledge and insight are as such independent of volition” (256). This does not mean, however, that our volition or free will does not play any part in the denial of will, for Schopenhauer says it “comes from the intimate relationship of knowing and volition in man” (256). Our volition, then, can at least accept the knowledge that leads to the suspension of the will. What is important here is that the denial of the will to life “comes suddenly, as if unbidden, from outside” us (256). In this sense, despite Schopenhauer’s complex account of the whole process, the realization of the true nature of the will and the cancellation of the will are some mysterious experience beyond human control.

Schopenhauer’s insistence on the denial of the will ultimately leads to nihilism, and the comparison between the Schopenhauerian and Christian concepts of original sin and salvation throws light on why nihilism is fundamentally the end point of
Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Offering that the doctrine of original sin and of salvation occupies the central position in Christianity, Schopenhauer compares “the affirmation of the will to life” to Adam’s original sin, and “the denial of the will” to “salvation in God incarnate” (257). Just as obedience to the self leads to eternal suffering and perdition in Christianity, the slavery of the will engenders all evil and suffering. In addition, as Schopenhauer himself notes, there are significant affinities between his theory of how “suspending of the will by the self comes from knowledge” (256) and the Christian notion of “the work of grace” (256). In Christianity, one’s redemption from original sin is a gift from God, and thus it comes “from outside him,” just as the freedom from the will does. Also, the way in which the effect of grace is dependent on “the acceptance of grace” (256) is evocative of “the intimate relationship of knowing and volition in man.” The consequence of the suspension or the cancellation of the will to life, however, is not exactly the same as that of the work of grace in Christianity. Unlike the work of grace that assumes the union of the self with God as absolute goodness, the Schopenhauerian negation of the will simply allows freedom from suffering and evil, nothing more. Hence Schopenhauer’s nihilism: “No will: no idea, no world” (261).

Schopenhauer does not push his nihilistic worldview, however, as far as denying the existence of justice or moral responsibility altogether. As a matter of fact, Schopenhauer claims, “Eternal justice reigns” (216). His notion of eternal justice is of course very different from the Platonic or Christian one, and what Schopenhauer means

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20 Notably, for Schopenhauer, Christianity is not the only religion whose followers could gain salvation through the denial of the will to life, and Schopenhauer makes this point clear when he states that this kind of mysterious experience can be found in “the enviable life of so many saints and great souls among Christians, and still more among Hindus and Buddhists, and also among the faithful of other religions” (241).
by eternal justice is elucidated in the following statement: “If we could lay all the world’s misery in one pan of the weighing-scales, and all the world’s guilt in the other, the pointer would certainly indicate that they are equally heavy” (216). For Schopenhauer, our existence is itself a crime, and we pay the penalty through misery and suffering. The world possesses a sense of moral responsibility in this regard, and this is what Schopenhauer means by “Eternal justice.” Concerning Schopenhauer’s concept of eternal justice, Susan Neiman makes quite a perceptive point in *Evil in Modern Thought*. Stating how Schopenhauer criticized his contemporaries’ attempts to hold onto an empty notion of deity, Neiman asserts, “Yet he never abandoned a notion of cosmic justice” (198).

Neiman’s critique that Schopenhauer’s revision of traditional theodicy (a division of theology and philosophy that attempts to affirm the benevolence and omnipotence of God and the reality of evil without contradiction) finally relapses into a theodicy of sorts provides great insights into the extent to which Schopenhauer revises the Platonic or Christian worldview.

Schopenhauer successfully challenged through his concept of the will the teleological worldview that postulates that the world is good for humanity despite the presence of suffering and evil, but he does not completely renounce the notion that there is justice or balance at least on a cosmic level, if not for individual or even for humanity as a whole. No matter how different the will is from Plato’s Ideas or Christian deity, Schopenhauer’s conception of the will as metaphenomenal reality makes him end up justifying the existence of suffering and evil in the world. As I will discuss later in the chapter, this is one of the most crucial differences between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who argues that the presence of evil in the world should not be justified in any way.
because it is not a real category at all and that we should penetrate the illusion of an order and justice that appears to be endorsed by any transcendental entity. This is why Schopenhauerian genius’s realization of the egoistic nature of the will does not extend to consideration of the questions of ethics and morality. Despite the interest in ethical egoism, the mainstay of Schopenhauer’s philosophy remains within the scope of metaphysical discourse.

2.2. “Become What Thou art!”: Nietzsche’s Acceptance of Egoism and Celebration of Life

At the beginning of his first published book, The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche offers an effective illustration of his view of human life by quoting an ancient anecdote of King Midas and the wise Silenus from Oedipus at Colonus by Sophocles. When asked by Midas “what was the best and most desirable of all things for man,” recounts Nietzsche, Silenus gives a truly dark and pessimistic view of human fate: “‘What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is—to die soon’” (BT 42). Although Nietzsche continues to develop and refine his thoughts throughout his career as a philosopher, Nietzsche’s primary concern lies consistently in examining the condition of life and human beings’ attitudes toward life, and the way he uses the anecdote of King Midas in The Birth of Tragedy indicates his understanding of the fundamental condition of human life. According to Nietzsche, the anecdote of King Midas shows how the Greeks saw through “the terror and horror of

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21 For the parenthetical references to Nietzsche’s texts, I will generally give their standard English-language acronyms: BGE = Beyond Good and Evil; BT = Birth of Tragedy; EH = Ecce Homo; GM = On the Genealogy of Morals; GS = Gay Science; RL = Rhetoric and Language; WP = Will to Power; “OTL” = “On Truth and Lies.” The only exception is Thus Spoke Zarathustra to which I refer by Z.
existence,” and Nietzsche praises the Greeks for their insight into the condition of human life which involves perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations.

(42). In this regard, Nietzsche shares Schopenhauer’s outlook on life.\(^{22}\)

It is important to note, however, that Nietzsche praises the Greeks not merely for their perception of the horror of existence, but for their acceptance of life as it is. Specifically, Nietzsche holds that while the Greeks learned from the wise Silenus in “[knowing] and [feeling] the terror and horror of existence,” they at the same time “[reverse] the wisdom of Silenus” and that their attitude toward life can be described as “‘to die soon is worst of all for them, the next worst—to die at all’” (\(B T\) 42, 43).\(^{23}\) In this regard, Nietzsche’s attitude toward life is by no means pessimistic. Defining himself as a “tragic philosopher,” as opposed to “a pessimistic philosopher,” Nietzsche extols the attitude of “‘Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems’” and explicitly denounces the pessimistic or nihilistic attitude toward life (\(E H\) 273). This is why, despite his acknowledgement of Schopenhauer’s confrontation of the horror of existence and his insight into how the will to life manifests itself through our existence, Nietzsche departs from the mainstay of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

\(^{22}\) It does not seem like a coincidence that Schopenhauer makes a strikingly similar remark on life in terms of imagery and diction. In The World as Will and Ideas, Schopenhauer maintains that the best we can expect in life is that we still have “something to wish for, and to strive after, to keep up the game whereby desire constantly passes into satisfaction, and satisfaction into new desire” (85), suggesting that our life is at best an endless cycle of desire, intermittent satisfaction, boredom, and new desire.

\(^{23}\) Nietzsche offers in this passage an elaborate account of the role religion and art play in the Greeks’ celebration of life despite its horror. Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy and art will be discussed in Chapter 5 in which I examine Ishmael’s role as “the tragic dramatist” (\(Moby-Dick\) 129) in relation to Nietzsche’s theories of art.
When Nietzsche expresses a total abhorrence of any branch of metaphysics that chooses negation of life as a way to salvation, he does not seek to revise Schopenhauer’s philosophy only, however. In his critique of metaphysical worldviews, Nietzsche exposes the falsity of any philosophical and religious tradition that denies this world by defining it in terms of a “real” world of eternal validity from which humans are necessarily severed. While rejecting the notion of transcendental reality advocated by Hinduism and Buddhism of the Eastern tradition, Nietzsche thinks of Platonism and the Judaeo-Christian belief as the two most pernicious examples of this tradition in the Western culture. Making an acerbic comment on Plato’s transcendental idealism, Nietzsche claims in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* that “Plato’s invention of the pure spirit and the good as such” is “the worst, most durable, and most dangerous of all errors so far” (193), for in Plato’s system, the value of the world of appearance is depreciated while humanity is fundamentally denied access to what is “pure” and “good.” As for the Christian morality, Nietzsche calls it “a will to negate life,” because it teaches “faith in ‘another’ or ‘better’ life” that fosters “hatred of ‘the world,’ condemnations of the passions, fear of beauty and sensuality” (*BT* 23). Despite their respective emphases on rational capacity and faith, Nietzsche asserts that in essence Platonism and Christianity are not different from each other: both branches of metaphysics induce people to privilege the transcendent world or ecclesiastical life over the present world of experience or corporeal reality. Therefore, pointing out the close affinity between Platonism and Christianity in term of their attitude towards life, Nietzsche pronounces that “Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people’” (*BGE* 193). In his attempt to replace this “life-denying” attitude of traditional philosophy and religion of the world, Nietzsche offers the “life-
affirming” attitude which can be encapsulated by his statement that “life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearance, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” (BT 59).24

The philosophical implication of this alternative approach to a pessimistic view of life is that Nietzsche turns the questions of metaphysics into questions of ethics, because in his system, the meaning of existence is evaluated not by any metaphysical truth or God’s will but by whether human beings are strong enough to create their moral values and act upon them. Also significant to note is that Nietzsche’s acceptance of life is none other than the acceptance of egoism. Earlier in the chapter, I proposed that two important predecessors of Nietzsche’s, Kant and Schopenhauer, recognize egoism as a crucial concept in constructing their philosophical systems. Kant’s belief in the inevitably subjective nature of our knowledge of an external reality can be seen as his acknowledgement of metaphysical egoism as the human condition. Schopenhauer, whose theory of the world as idea is heavily influenced by Kant’s transcendental idealism, sees metaphysical egoism as the most significant aspect of the human condition, and I

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24 Pointing out Nietzsche’s emphasis on a “life-affirming” attitude as an alternative to Schopenhauerian will to nothingness, Walter Kaufmann in the introduction to his English translation of The Birth of Tragedy, contends that despite the presence of Schopenhauer’s influence, “Nietzsche’s very first book, The Birth, constitutes a declaration of independence from Schopenhauer” (11). Thus, it is true that Nietzsche seeks to overcome Schopenhauer’s influence as early as he writes The Birth. This is not to underestimate, however, Nietzsche’s interest in the metaphysical worldview under the influence of Schopenhauer. In tracing the shift in Nietzsche’s position on the transcendental worldview, the observation Thomas H. Brobjer makes in “Nietzsche’s Reading about Eastern Philosophy” is quite helpful: “Following Schopenhauer, Nietzsche several times in The Birth of Tragedy (1872) refers to the ‘veil of maya’ as a useful expression for indicating that there exists something ‘beyond,’ but after 1874 he no longer refers to ‘maya’ at all, with the exception of a note from 1878 in which he completely rejects it” (12). According to the O.E.D., maya is a term originally used by Hindu and Buddhist philosophy to describe “the power by which the universe becomes manifest; the illusion or appearance of the phenomenal world.” It is evident, then, that although as he matures Nietzsche soon rejects the notion of any metaphenomenal reality, during his early years, Nietzsche did not completely rule out the possible existence of transcendental reality even while he was seeking an alternative perspective.
discussed how he shows interest in ethical egoism as well. Nevertheless, neither Kant nor Schopenhauer turns their attention away from metaphysics to ethics in the way Nietzsche does—at the heart of Nietzsche’s interest in ethical questions lies his celebration of egoism both in its metaphysical and ethical sense of the word. On this account, a closer look at Nietzsche’s thoughts on egoism and morality in comparison with those of Kant and Schopenhauer is necessary for apprehending the revolutionary import of Nietzsche’s philosophical discourse.²⁵

Despite Nietzsche’s rejection of some aspects of Kant’s philosophy, Kant’s ethical theory has a significant influence on Nietzsche’s conceptualization of moral agency. Specifically, Nietzsche draws on the concept of “the autonomy of the will” which Kant defines in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* as “the property of the will by which it is a law to itself” (47).²⁶ R. Kevin Hill provides a perceptive interpretation of Nietzsche’s employment of Kant’s definition of “the autonomy of the will.” According to Hill, Nietzsche “agrees with Kant’s characterization and high evaluation of the autonomous agent as self-legislating, unbound by laws of custom or normative laws of nature” (222). That is, just like Kant, Nietzsche posits the autonomous agent as the basis of his own moral philosophy which privileges personal authority, discipline, and resolution over conventional ideas of morality and the so-called natural law.

²⁵ There has been a vast corpus of criticism on how Nietzsche’s moral philosophy shakes the foundation of Western metaphysics as well as on how Nietzsche differs from Kant and Schopenhauer who also questioned some of the basic premises of Western metaphysics. Given my interest in Melville’s investment in the concept of egoism, I intend to look at Nietzsche’s questioning of Western metaphysics and ethics from the angle of egoism.

²⁶ Notably, Nietzsche’s notion of the will is not the same as Kant’s, and their differences will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.
That both Kant and Nietzsche esteem the autonomy of a moral agent has significant implications for their moral philosophies which conceive pity as a serious threat to one’s moral state. David E. Cartwright aptly summarizes the two harmful effects of pity for both Kant and Nietzsche. First, pity does not help to alleviate the pain of the suffering party, but leads to “a contagious and unwelcomed transmission of pain from the recipient of pity to the agent” (Cartwright 84). Second, in pity, “autonomy is usurped because it, like any emotion, is initiated by factors external to the agent, factors that overwhelm or ‘infect’ the agent” (Cartwright 86). Thus, in denying the value of pity as the foundation of morality, both Kant and Nietzsche deny the possibility of transcending the distinction between oneself and others.

Interestingly, however, Kant’s rejection of pity as a basis of ethics does not lead him to endorse ethical egoism as Nietzsche does. As Cartwright points out, Kant was aware of the opacity of motives of our actions and of the possibility that “an action we believed was performed out of respect for the moral law may have been performed out of self-love or some other inclination” (96). Kant’s opacity thesis is directly related to Nietzsche’s rejection of the distinction between selfless and selfish motives. Yet, unlike Nietzsche who uses Kant’s recognition of the epistemically unclear nature of our motives to examine the origin and validity of any theory of ethics which measures the moral value of human actions in terms of the agent’s motives and feelings, Kant stresses the importance of determining our motives, which is tied to his emphasis on duty and obligations. Specifically, Kant distinguishes between acts done from inclination and acts done from a sense of duty and claims that our action is moral only when it is done out of a sense of obligation, not out of feelings or inclinations. That Kant pays exclusive
attention to actions out of a sense of moral duty is crucial for his moral theory which must define the nature of morality and the criteria for moral actions without contradicting the foundation of his metaphysics and epistemology. Basically, Kant is asserting that human actions can be comprehended not through the examination of beliefs and desires but through the investigation of the agent’s reasoning for his or her action.

Thus, ratiocinative capacities of an agent occupy a central position in Kant’s moral philosophy, and in explicating these ratiocinative capacities, Kant proposes their two important components: the “empirical character” and “the intelligible character” (CPR B 566). According to Kant, if “an object of the senses” has a capacity to bring about changes in the world that is “intelligible” and “not an object of sensible intuition,” then, “the causality of this being [object] can be considered from two sides” (CPR B 566). Maintaining that such causality would consist of an intelligible character and an empirical character, Kant further articulates these two types of characters. Regarding an empirical character, Kant states, “Through this character, the subject’s actions, as appearances would throughout stand in connection with other appearances” in accordance with natural laws and order (CPR B 567). As for an intelligible character, Kant explains that it is a law of causality through which “the subject is indeed the cause of those actions as appearances, but the character itself is not subject to any conditions of sensibility and is not itself appearance” (CPR B 567). Kant postulates this distinction in order to consider how the agent’s capacity to follow understanding or reason without being constricted by spacio-temporal conditions can be compatible with the agent’s capacity to

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27 Kant explicitly associates an empirical character with phenomenon and an intelligible character with noumenon when he states “The first character could also be called the character of such a thing in (the realm of) appearance, the second the character of the thing in itself” (CPR B 567).
comply with the universal law of natural necessity that governs all events in the
phenomenal world. Through this compatibility, Kant seeks to account for the seemingly
contradictory formula of “the categorical imperative”: on the one hand, as the supreme
principle of morality, the categorical imperative is universally valid; on the other hand, as
an expression of each person’s own rational will, the categorical imperative derives its
moral legitimacy from the self-legislating capacity of human rational wills.

To Nietzsche, Kant’s moral system poses two crucial problems. First, Kant’s
notion of the categorical imperative presupposes a faculty to intuit a priori knowledge,
and this is problematic to Nietzsche because, as Catherine Zuckert puts it, Kant’s search
for truth and moral authority “culminates only in the ‘knowledge’ that we cannot know”
(213). In Nietzsche’s view, Kant’s dependence on the noumenal as the basis of moral
legitimacy explains why Kant’s moral philosophy fundamentally remains in the realm of
epistemology and falls short of properly engaging in ethical questions about human
actions. That is, Kant is more concerned with how we know what we know about the
operation of moral agency than with what is the origin of our moral values and how we
should evaluate existing moral systems, the central focus of Nietzsche’s moral
philosophy. Second, for Nietzsche, Kant’s dualistic system consisting of noumena and
phenomena itself presents a serious problem in positing a moral theory that acknowledges
the supremacy of the autonomous, self-legislating agent free from the laws of custom.

According to Robert B. Pippin, traditional interpretations of Kant’s moral philosophy found his dualist
idealism problematic because “Kant’s noumenal-phenomenal split” seemed to imply “a timeless noumenal
agency and a psychological determinism in heterogeneous action” (534). Recently, however, “‘double
aspect’ readings of Kant have made possible an account of agency not committed to the noumenal
metaphysics of timeless-decisions and have tried to side-step (as irrelevant) the problem of how noumenal
decisions can effect changes in the phenomenal world” on the ground that “We can understand human
actions not by investigating which desires and beliefs caused the action but by understanding the reasoning
(implicit or explicit) that justified (or must have justified) the action for the agent” (Pippin 534).
Criticizing the emptiness of Kant’s moral principle which practically can be summed up as “‘in this case everybody would have to act like this,’” Nietzsche claims that Kant’s system overlooks the fact that “there neither are nor can be actions that are the same; that every action that has ever been done was done in an altogether unique and irretrievable way, and that this will be equally true of every future action” (GS 335). According to Nietzsche, despite his attempt to establish the compatibility between the agent’s ability to follow reason given *a priori* and the agent’s ability to comply with laws of nature in the phenomenal world, Kant’s proposition of a maxim that can “have as object itself as a universal law” (Kant, *GMM* 52) does not really allow for the consideration of individuality and uniqueness of each moral agent, which Nietzsche sees as the most important factors in determining the value of moral actions. Hill pertinently summarizes Nietzsche’s reason for rejecting Kant’s attempt to establish self-legislating moral agency through the universal laws of practical reason: for Nietzsche, “The laws the self gives to itself must be unique and truly self-created; nor need they have egalitarian content” (Hill 222). In this regard, even though both Kant and Nietzsche emphasize the necessity of the shift in the moral criteria for human actions from the external (natural and conventional laws) to the internal (self-acknowledged law), what Kant eventually does is simply relocating the source of moral authority from one external world (the phenomenal) to another external world (the noumenal). This is why, in Nietzsche’s view, Kant ultimately evades the problem of egoism in spite of his recognition of the opacity of our motives for action.
While Kant sidesteps the problem of egoism, Schopenhauer, much to Nietzsche’s disappointment, practically sees ethical egoism as something to be overcome in endorsing sympathy or compassion as “the criterion of an action of moral worth” (On the Basis of Morality 140). In Basis, Schopenhauer holds that there are “three fundamental incentives of human actions,” and that they are “Egoism,” “Malice,” and “Compassion” (145). As Cartwright points out, for Schopenhauer, the first two motives—egoism and malice—cannot serve as the criterion for conferring moral value on actions because “the ethical significance of any action lies only ‘in reference to others’” (94). Schopenhauer’s investment in compassion accounts for why egoism is understood as an object of subjugation in Schopenhauer’s moral philosophy in spite of his view that the will to life, which is egoism in its essence, is neither morally good nor bad. For Schopenhauer, only the actions motivated by compassion have moral value, and compassion is possible only in “the absence of all egoistic motivation” (Basis 140) and of any desire for others’ misfortune. On this account, although egoism itself is essentially value free, it becomes something to be negated in Schopenhauer’s system, which Nietzsche finds deeply problematic.29

As stated earlier, Nietzsche seeks to collapse the distinction between a selfish desire and a selfless desire, claiming that there is no such thing as a purely unselfish desire for others’ well being. Offering an intense critique in the Preface to On the

29 Closely related to Schopenhauer’s ambivalent view of egoism is his assessment of the moral value of the will to life in the metaphenomenal and phenomenal world. As metaphenomenal reality, the will to life is free from moral judgment, but when “the will exhibits that self-affirmation of one’s own body in innumerable neighbouring individuals, it very easily extends in one individual, by virtue of the egoism characteristic of them all, beyond this affirmation to the denial of the same will manifest in another individual” (WW I 212). That is, when it manifests itself in the phenomenal world, it does so in the form of conflicts and struggles among individual beings.
Genealogy of Morals of the “overestimation of and predilection for pity” (19), which he understands as a modern phenomenon, Nietzsche makes it clear what is at stake with the “problem of the value of pity and of the morality of pity” (20): “the value of the ‘unegoistic,’ the instincts of pity, self-abnegation, self-sacrifice” becomes “‘value-in-itself’” (19) by hiding the necessity of “a critique of moral values, [when] the value of these values themselves must first be called in question” (20). Nietzsche’s critique of Schopenhauer’s “overestimation” of pity thus elucidates the significance of Nietzsche’s positive attitude toward ethical egoism. For Nietzsche, the acceptance of ethical egoism does not mean the celebration of selfish desires or the total rejection of all kinds of moral principles; instead, it is directly related to his questioning of “the origin of our moral prejudices” (GM 15), which occupies a central position in Nietzsche’s moral philosophy. Echoing the Socratic dictum that “The unexamined life is not worth living” (Apology 38a), Nietzsche begins his Preface to The Genealogy of the Morals by stating, “We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason” (15). Here, Nietzsche points out human beings’ tendency to take the existing value system for granted and remain ignorant of the origin of their beliefs and values.

Nietzsche’s discussion of the genealogy of our moral values illuminates why he objects so vehemently to the passive acceptance of externally imposed values and beliefs. After reiterating the necessity of evaluating values for a morally responsible and deliberate life, Nietzsche holds that historically considered, there have been “two opposing values”—namely, “good and bad” and “good and evil” (GM 52). According to Nietzsche, neither the concept of “good and bad” nor the concept of “good and evil” was given by an absolute being or deduced from a priori judgments, but both were invented
by humans—that is, these concepts have developed gradually in the process of the formation of society. Moreover, although the value of “good and evil” has been predominant for a long time, these two opposing values “have been engaged in a fearful struggle on earth for thousand years” (GM 52). Concerning the value of good and bad, Nietzsche claims that “the antithesis ‘good’ and ‘bad’” originates from “the protracted and domineering fundamental total feeling on the part of a higher ruling order in relation to a lower order, to a ‘below’” (GM 26). Elaborating on the idea that all the words designated for good “lead back to the same conceptual transformation” (GM 27), Nietzsche argues that “noble” and “aristocratic” were the basic concepts from which “good” developed. Things valued for their utility to the masters have become habitually accepted as the ultimate good, becoming a solid tradition of their own. By the same token, “‘common,’ ‘plebeian,’ and ‘low’ are finally transformed into the concept of ‘bad’” (GM 28). Regarding the specific value system of good and bad, Nietzsche introduces two terms: “master morality” and “slave morality.” Nietzsche maintains that in “master morality,” the strength, nobility, and courage of men play the central role, and these active and aggressive men “had at all times a freer eye, a better conscience on his [their] side” by virtue of these positive spirits (GM 75). In contrast, “slave morality” is characterized by reactiveness and “bad conscience” (GM 75), because in this value system, the sense of relative weakness and impotence of men plays the central role. In particular, Nietzsche associates “bad conscience” with “the spirit of ressentiment” which fosters “hatred, envy, jealousy, mistrust, rancor, and revenge” (GM 74).
Nietzsche then discusses an inversion of masterly good and bad to the slavish evil and good, namely a transvaluation of values. According to Nietzsche, as time went by, the masters or the leaders of strong tribes—also known as father-giants during the early stage of human history—came to be identified with gods and worshipped. Nietzsche also claims that besides the concepts of “good and bad,” mankind “inherited, along with the tribal and family divinities, the burden of still unpaid debts and of the desire to be relieved of them” (GM 90). Nietzsche explains the relationship between the powerful ancestors who were apotheosized and their descendents in terms of “the contractual relationship between creditor and debtor” (GM 63) and argue that the descendents were convinced that “it is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of the ancestors that the tribe exists—and that one has to pay them back with sacrifices and accomplishments” (GM 89). Pointing out that “the moral conceptual world of ‘guilt,’ ‘conscience,’ ‘duty,’ and ‘sacredness of duty’ had its origin” in the “sphere of legal obligations” (GM 65), Nietzsche claims that combined with the “bad conscience” and “ressentiment,” this “guilty feeling of indebtedness to the divinity” (GM 90), ultimately brought about “the slave revolt in morality.” This turning upside-down of conventional master morality then “invert[ed] the aristocratic value-equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved of God)” by making people believe that “the wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God” (GM 34). Despite the inversion of values and the master-slave relationship, Nietzsche believes that his theory of indebtedness is still relevant here. Contending that the morality of the warrior culture—the morality before the inversion—was a healthy one, Nietzsche asserts that the people in
the warrior culture did not completely subject human life to the worship of gods and that there was at least no sense of sheer self-denial. The inversion of moral values, however, brought about a feeling of guilt on the part of the former masters, who had to suffer from “self-tormenting,” since they “apprehend in ‘God’ the ultimate antithesis of [their] own ineluctable animal instincts, which they reinterpreted as a form of guilt before God (as hostility, rebellion, insurrection against the Lord, the father, the primal ancestor and origin of the world)” (GM 92). Nietzsche sees these former masters’ “denial of themselves, their nature, naturalness, and actuality” (GM 92) as “bad conscience” on the former masters’ part, calling it “the serious illness” (GM 84). Although Nietzsche finds master morality healthier than slave morality, he does not believe that it is desirable or even possible to go back to the ancient warrior culture. Instead, Nietzsche is emphatic about the need to go beyond “good and evil” and to realize the arbitrary nature of our of concepts of morality and truth.

In relation to his explication of “the origin of our moral prejudices” and their historical development, Nietzsche offers the doctrine of “perspectivism” as an alternative approach to any fixed notion of truth and moral values that has dominated the traditional understanding of the Western philosophy:

Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject”; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself”: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective “knowing”; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity,”
be. But to eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect, supposing we were capable of this -- what would that mean but to castrate the intellect? (GM 119)

Nietzsche’s objection to the “old conceptual fiction that posited a ‘pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject’” arises from his rejection of the belief in the existence and the knowability of truth free from subjective interpretation by individuals. Nietzsche dismisses “such contradictory concepts as ‘pure reason,’ ‘absolute spirituality,’ ‘knowledge in itself,’” because he believes that these concepts posit an “unthinkable” eye that makes impossible any kind of active engagement with and interpretation of objects. Obviously, Nietzsche is criticizing Kant’s concepts of a priori knowledge and things-in-themselves, which offset the insights Kant provides into the relation between subject and object. While critiquing the Kantian notion of metaphysical reality, Nietzsche at the same time attacks Schopenhauer’s denial of the will to life, again, for being contradictory. In Nietzsche’s view, Schopenhauer is being contradictory and incoherent not only in positing metaphysical reality just like Kant but also in attempting to “eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect,” which is none other than an attempt “to castrate the intellect.” Here, Nietzsche finds the contradictions in Kant’s concept of “‘intelligible character’” and Schopenhauer’s concept of “‘contemplation without interest’” (GM 119), because in positing metaphysical reality or substance through “pure reason,” Kant and Schopenhauer inevitably postulate that there is an unconditionally true perspective, an absolute standpoint independent of any single perspective, thereby effectively denying our idiosyncratic perceptual mechanisms.30 For Nietzsche, this

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30 Zuckert’s reading of Nietzsche’s critique of Platonic tradition elucidates why Nietzsche is so against metaphysics or otherworldly concepts: “If there is no incorporeal, eternal, unchanging ‘truth,’ as Nietzsche
position has serious ethical implications because its presumption of the absolute and eternal truth cannot but lead to an implicit acceptance of the existing system of value as well as knowledge. Seeking to reevaluate the validity of the view that human knowledge of truth is holistic and the idea of good and evil is universal and unchanging, Nietzsche asserts that “There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective ‘knowing’” and that for a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of things or concepts we must employ “more eyes, different eyes.”

Nietzsche’s perspectivism is not to be confused with relativism, however. Despite his rejection of the existence of the fixed, absolute good, Nietzsche does not say every perspective carries the same weight. As a matter of fact, Nietzsche privileges some perspectives over others, suggesting that the ultimate goal of his perspectivism is not so much the overthrow of all values as another transvaluation of values. At the same time, Nietzsche’s emphasis on human beings’ cognitive procedure based on each one’s interest and perspective, which is inextricably tied to his acceptance of egoism as a foundation of human knowledge and morality, leads him to bring in a whole new set of criteria for value judgment. Specifically, Nietzsche defines good and evil in the following manner: anything that justifies and enhances life is good, whereas anything that condemns and negates life is evil. For Nietzsche, even in the midst of harsh realization that life is full of misery and suffering on the surface, we should try to accept and embrace life as it is. On the other hand, when we feel guilty of our existence and deny our natural feelings and desire, we are succumbing to evil. Here, Nietzsche uses life as a criterion for value

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claims, all meaning, wholeness, or completeness must assume a particular, emphatically corporeal and historical form: That is, it occurs and can only occur in an individual human being” (213-14).
judgment, and what is remarkable about this new criterion is the flexibility of its notion. Unlike the conventional value systems, Nietzsche’s perspectivism leaves room for taking into account each individual’s unique perceptual mechanism while avoiding the pitfalls of nihilism or relativism.

Nietzsche’s elaborate formulation of the concept of the will to power, which he equates with life, thus needs to be understood as his attempt to provide a system of value judgment that is neither fixed nor empty. Nietzsche’s conceptualization of will is particularly important in comprehending his effort to establish a system that allows for comparative judgments of value without imposing one fixed notion of morality. It is important to note, however, that Nietzsche’s conception of the will is radically different from Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s. In Critique of Practical Reason, Kant defines the will as “that kind of causality attributed to living agents, in so far as they are possessed of reason” (45), and for him, the will as such is “nothing other than practical reason” (GME 24). Instead of understanding the will only as a faculty of the subject as Kant does, Nietzsche sees the will as something that also includes sensations, as evident from his statement that “in all willing there is, first, a plurality of sensations” (BGE 215). As for Schopenhauer, it is true that Nietzsche inherited Schopenhauer’s insistence on the primacy of the will, and his definition of the will to power as “the essence of life” (GM 79) seems to imply that Nietzsche also adopted the Schopenhauerian conceptualization of will as the thing-in-itself which is manifested in all beings in the phenomenal world. When he maintains that “in every act of the will there is a ruling thought” (BGE 215), however, Nietzsche dismisses Schopenhauer’s concept of the will essentially as irrational and blind driving forces. Furthermore, with respect to the epistemological assumption
behind Schopenhauerian understanding of the will, Nietzsche accuses Schopenhauer of misleading “us to understand that the will alone is really known to us, absolutely and completely known, without subtraction or addition” (BGE 215). To Nietzsche, this assumption about the will is problematic not only because it overlooks the complicated nature of the will but it also posits the idea of a metaphysical substance, which, as discussed above, inevitably leads to the postulation of an absolute, true perspective.

Emphasizing that “Willing [is] . . . something complicated, something that is a unit only as a word” (BGE 215), Nietzsche contends that in addition to being “a complex of sensation and thinking,” the will is “above all an affect, and specifically the affect of the command” (215). To Nietzsche, thus, the will is not a coherent unit or identity but a composite of various forces underlying all human thinking and activities that include nearly every facet of impulses, feelings, and mental capacities. Nietzsche’s provocative declaration that “There is no will” (WP sect. 715) needs to be understood in this context. Rather than positing an identifiable will, Nietzsche maintains that “there are treaty drafts of will that are constantly increasing or losing their power” (WP sect. 715).

Nietzsche revises the Schopenhauerian system not only through the notion of the will but also through the idea of power, and the transition from “will to life” to “will to power” essentially signifies Nietzsche’s acceptance of egoism. Nietzsche replaces Schopenhauer’s “will to life” with “will to power,” and Nietzsche’s reason for preferring the term “power” to “life” is clearly given when he states, “A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength—life itself is will to power; self-preservation is only one of the

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31 Sometimes, the phrase is translated as “there are fulgurations of the will,” or merely as “there are points of will.” In the translator’s footnote, Walter Kaufmann adds that “perhaps the point is that the will is not a single entity but more like a constantly shifting federation or alliance of drives.”
indirect and most frequent *results* (BGE 211). In contrast to Schopenhauer who views the will to life basically as an egoistic force of every creature to exist and survive, Nietzsche believes that “life itself is will to power” and that self-preservation is merely a by-product of a living thing’s attempt to “discharge its strength.” Unlike Schopenhauer’s “will to life” that needs to be suspended and cancelled, Nietzsche’s will to power bears more active and complex meanings for all living bodies. Despite his knowledge of the self-destructive potential of the will to life, Nietzsche embraces it and imparts positive meanings to it, turning it into the will to power. It is in this sense that Nietzsche’s acceptance of will to power is his endorsement of egoism not only on the level of metaphysics but also on the level of ethics.

This is not to say, however, that Nietzsche overlooks the moral implications of each being’s struggle for self-preservation and the conflict it causes. Interestingly, just as Schopenhauer insists that the will to life on the metaphenomenal level is neither morally good nor bad, Nietzsche refuses to relate the will to power directly to “any morality or immorality” (BT 393), complicating the ethical implications of his affirmation of egoism. Earlier, I argued that Nietzsche’s celebration of egoism is far from the endorsement of selfish desires, and the seemingly self-contradictory statement he makes about the self-overcoming nature of the will to power enlightens what he means by the affirmation of egoism or the will to life: “And life itself confided this secret to me [Zarathustra]: ‘Behold,’ it said, ‘I am that which must always overcome itself . . . Rather would I perish than forswear this; and verily, where there is perishing and a falling of leaves, behold, there life sacrifices itself—for power” (Z 115). Basically, through this statement made by Zarathustra, his fictional character, Nietzsche is asserting that one should accept and, at
the same time, overcome oneself. Although this sounds contradictory, Nietzsche carefully lays out his formula by suggesting that while life is essentially power, in order to increase power, life must continue to “overcome itself.”

As a matter of fact, self-overcoming, which Nietzsche sees as the most positive way of expressing will to power, has tremendous ethical significance in Nietzsche’s system. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, particularly in a section titled “On Self-Overcoming,” Nietzsche discusses reevaluation of values in terms of the notion of self-overcoming:

Verily, I say unto you: good and evil that are not transitory, do not exist. Driven on by themselves, they must overcome themselves again and again. With your values and words of good and evil you do violence when you value; and this is your hidden love and the splendor and trembling and overflowing of your soul. But a more violent force and a new overcoming grow out of your values and break egg and eggshell. . . . And whoever must be a creator in good and evil, verily, he must first be an annihilator and break values. (Z 116)

Here, Nietzsche rejects the absolute and fixed concept of values by asserting that every concept of good and evil is only “transitory.” What is remarkable about Nietzsche’s subsequent description of good and evil is that he discusses these concepts almost as if they have their own life and power, suggesting that as an expression of the will to power, good and evil have to go through the process of self-overcoming. Though good and evil are abstract concepts without real “life,” Nietzsche’s proposition that violence and overcoming are the integral part of the creation of new values illuminates the apparently contradictory statement he makes about the need to both accept and overcome the self. In stating that “you do violence when you value,” Nietzsche emphasizes that evaluation of values inevitably entails distortion and prejudice. To Nietzsche, what we should aspire to is an even more violent process of “break[ing] values,” and Nietzsche’s emphasis on “a more violent force and a new overcoming grow out of your values and break egg and
eggshell” indicates that what Nietzsche sees as the most important step to becoming “a creator in good and evil” is reevaluation of our own values. Just as reevaluation of values ultimately aims to come up with a new value system that adopts various perspectives in conflict with one another for a more objective and healthier understanding of reality, self-overcoming is an attempt to create values through rigorous and continuous self-examination. That is to say, in order to impart moral significance to our life anew every moment, we must fight not only with old values but also with our own values and prejudices “again and again.”

Nietzsche’s remark on the importance of self-overcoming also accounts for the seemingly contradictory position that Nietzsche takes on love and egoism. Although Nietzsche does not believe we should try to foster compassion for others, he does not entirely deny the ethical meaning of compassion or love for others, as indicated in his statement that in the process of self-overcoming, “You force all things to and into yourself so they may flow back out of your well as the gifts of your love” (Z 75). What is provocative about his notion of “a gift-giving love” is that he calls it “selfishness” (Z 75), while at the same time viewing it as love. It is “selfishness” in the sense that the truly powerful act out of an overflow and a fullness rather than their concern for others, but it is still love insomuch as it is an act of free giving without expecting anything in return on the part of the givers. Interestingly, Nietzsche points out the possibility of the overflow of power going the other direction and hurting others: “When your heart flows broad and full like a river, a blessing and a danger to those living near: there is the origin of your virtue” (Z 76). Hurting others is no more the intended effect of the exercise of the will than “a gift-giving love” is. As Kaufmann notes, if the powerful “hurt others, they do so
incidentally in the process of using their power creatively” (194). The moral significance of increasing the will to power does not lie in whether one intends to do good or harm to others but in whether or not one’s will to power is strong enough to overcome itself. One might raise a question here: if the intention does not determine the effects of the use of the will to power, then what does?

Nietzsche’s distinction between the two different types of selfishness, which are closely related to his concepts of the overman and the last man, illuminates this issue. In contrast to the kind of selfishness that arises from the process of self-overcoming, Nietzsche mentions another selfishness, which he calls “the selfishness of the sick” (Z 75). Nietzsche’s definition of “sick selfishness” as “such craving and invisible degeneration” motivated by the watchword, “Everything for me” (Z 75), coincides with his description of the last man. Earlier in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, the following statement is made about the last man: “One has one’s little pleasure for the day and one’s little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health” (18). Seeking petty pleasure, personal comfort, and security only, the last man is preoccupied with self-preservation and acts selfish for the sake of being selfish. Diametrically opposed to this kind of selfishness which prevents self-overcoming, the overman always seeks to recognize and embrace the notion of change as the basis of self-overcoming, and in the process, he develops such an overflowing sense of freedom and power that he cannot retain all this only within himself but pass it to other human beings, setting up an example of positive selfishness. Another comment Nietzsche makes on the last man further crystallizes this point: “Also, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the last man” (Z 17). Nietzsche’s comment on the
last man’s inability to “despise himself” once again makes it clear what distinguishes the overman from the last man: the will to examine and overcome oneself. The significance of one’s relationship to oneself in Nietzsche’s moral system helps to explain when the use of the will to power produces beneficial or harmful effects. When both of the parties in a relationship are focused on overcoming themselves, then they both can benefit from the overflow of positive passion and vitality from each other. When one party only pursues “sick selfishness” and is unable to carry out self-examination, however, the overman’s “gift-giving love” can be a danger. Although Nietzsche does not explicitly state in what sense the overman’s love/selfishness can serve as a danger to the last man, it can be inferred from his descriptions of the overman and the last man that the interaction between them might lead to the exposure of the last man’s need to examine and overcome himself, which the last man by definition fears the most and is incapable of. This is not to underestimate, however, the power of the overman’s “gift-giving love” to benefit humankind in the general sense by sharing with them his sense of freedom and wisdom for self-overcoming, for Nietzsche only mentions the possibility of the overflowing heart becoming “a blessing and a danger to those living near,” but not to those living far away.

It is important to notice here that when Nietzsche contrasts the last man and the overman, he does not simply aim to criticize the weakness of some humans or delineate the larger-than-life hero but wants to reconsider the possibility of human beings to improve themselves. The last man and the overman are two extremes of human nature, and as evident from his statement that “Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss” (Z 14), Nietzsche believes that human beings are given a choice
between degeneration and creation. Positing that to the overman, man is merely “a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment,” just as “the ape [is] to man,” Nietzsche exhorts people to “overcome man” rather than “go back to the beasts” (Z 12). Nietzsche’s vision of the future of the humankind evinced here is surprisingly optimistic. While lamenting that human beings have been “human, all-too-human,” Nietzsche never abandons his belief that “What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an overture and a going under” (Z 14-15). In this regard, Nietzsche’s contrast between the last man and the overman is intended to prevent people from falling into the hopeless state of the last man and encourage them to exercise their will to power to “create something beyond themselves” (Z 12).

Nietzsche’s optimistic view of human potential to “create something beyond themselves” brings us to another apparent contradiction crucial to understanding Nietzsche’s thoughts. If Nietzsche were to argue that humans have the choice between becoming the last man and developing into the overman and that they should use their will to choose the overman, it would make sense for him to argue for absolute freedom of the will. Nietzsche, however, clearly refutes the notion of “the freedom of the will” that posits “the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society” (BGE 218). To Nietzsche, this existentialist view of freedom is “a sort of rape and perversion of logic” as well as an expression of “the extravagant pride of man” (BGE 218). Nietzsche instead proposes freedom within constraints, and the insight he offers in the following passage into the hidden mechanism by which the illusory sense of “freedom of the will” is produced is quite useful for understanding true freedom Nietzsche seeks within constraints:
. . . insomuch as in the given circumstances we are at the same time the commanding and the obeying parties, and as the obeying party we know the sensations of constraint, impulsion, pressure, resistance, and motion, which usually begin immediately after the act of will; inasmuch as, on the other hand, we are accustomed to disregard this duality, and to deceive ourselves about it by means of the synthetic concept ‘I,’ a whole series of erroneous conclusions, and consequently of false evaluations of the will itself, has become attached to the act of willing—to such a degree that he who wills believes sincerely that willing suffices for action. . . . “Freedom of the will”—that is the expression for the complex state of delight of the person exercising volition, who commands and at the same time identifies himself with the executor of the order—who as such, enjoys also the triumph over obstacles, but thinks within himself that it was really his will that overcame them. (BGE 216)

Nietzsche begins to explain that there is no such thing as absolute freedom of the will by revealing the “duality” of “the act of willing”: “we are at the same time the commanding and the obeying parties.” He then points out that eager to enjoy the feelings of delight attached to the act of commanding, we refuse to recognize our role as an obeying party and “deceive ourselves” into believing that we have absolute command. Although Nietzsche does not explicitly discuss the moral implication of this self-deceptive belief in freedom of the will in this passage, his elaborate illustration of the complex mechanism of willing illuminates how our blind acceptance of the notion of freedom of the will can affect our view of morality. If we accept the complete autonomy of the self-legislating capacity of human rational wills, then it follows that we identify ourselves only with the commanding party who uses the freedom of the will to seek moral truth, while in reality either conforming to the concepts of morality accepted by our culture or cherishing “their [erroneous] belief in themselves” (BGE 219). For Nietzsche, then, this attitude to think of ourselves as “the causa sui [cause of itself]” (BGE 218) is problematic because its misguided belief in absolute freedom of the will ultimately takes away from us even the kind of freedom we can enjoy within constraints. Later, Nietzsche makes it clear that it is
equally detrimental to our pursuit of true freedom to neglect our role as a commanding
party and emphasize only our role as an obeying party. Characteristic of “fatalism of the
weak-willed,” it leads people to “seek to lay the blame for themselves somewhere else”
and accept “la religion de la souffrance humaine [the religion of human suffering]” (BGE
220). It is in this context that Nietzsche observes, “man would rather will nothingness
than not will” (GM 163). This means that humans are too weak to live independently, and
complete nothingness after this life is no less horrible than complete self-abnegation or
complete submission to external authority.

Nietzsche’s discussion of false freedom versus true freedom brings us back to his
notion of the overman, the individual with true freedom:

If we place ourselves at the end of this tremendous process [of examining the
genealogy of morals] . . . then we discover that the ripest fruit is the sovereign
individual, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom,
autonomous and supramoral (for ‘autonomous’ and ‘moral’ are mutually
exclusive), in short, the man who has his own independent, protracted will and
the right to make promises—and in him a proud consciousness, . . . a
consciousness of his own power and freedom, a sensation of mankind come to
completion. . . . The ‘free’ man, the possessor of a protracted and unbreakable
will, also possesses his measure of value. . . . The proud awareness of the
extraordinary privilege of responsibility, the consciousness of this rare freedom,
this power over oneself and over fate, has in his case penetrated to the
profoundest depth and become instinct, the dominating instinct. . . . this
sovereign man calls it his conscience. (GM 59-60)

Described as “the sovereign individual, like only to himself, liberated again from
morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral,” Nietzsche’s overman is not subject to
any sense of morality externally imposed upon him. What is important about Nietzsche’s
characterization of the overman in this passage is that the overman achieves “this rare
freedom” only through “a consciousness of his own power and freedom.” Though the
idea that we are both a commanding and an obeying party is not mentioned here,
Nietzsche’s emphasis on being constantly conscious of one’s “power and freedom” elucidates what Nietzsche means by self-overcoming. Earlier, I discussed the Nietzschean self-overcoming in terms of reevaluation of one’s own values. What Nietzsche suggests in this passage is that a consciousness of the potential as well as limitations of one’s own power and freedom is what makes reevaluation of one’s own values possible. The implication is that the overman is constantly thinking about in what sense he performs his role as a commanding or an obeying party. In this sense, it is not a coincidence that Nietzsche describes the overman’s “rare freedom” as “this power over oneself and over fate,” and it is no wonder that Nietzsche’s moral philosophy always boils down to how one should establish one’s relationship to one’s self and how one can “not merely bear what is necessary—but love it” (EH 258). For Nietzsche, the solution to this question lies in “how one becomes what one is” (EH 253). Arguing against both essentialist and constructionist theories of the self, Nietzsche posits the idea that the “true” self is something one has to “become,” but is also what one already “is.” In Nietzsche’s system, the pursuit of true freedom and true selfhood is thus an ongoing process of self-development and self-overcoming.

In this chapter, I have tried to establish much of the philosophical background of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche whose ideas will serve in the following chapters of my dissertation as the groundwork for the investigation of Melville’s questioning of the philosophical and religious premises of the Western tradition. Schopenhauer’s revision of both Platonic and Kantian view of the relationship between the perceiving subject and the object of knowledge and the Christian concept of incarnation will be particularly important in my discussion of Ahab’s investigation of the incongruities between seems
and is while Schopenhauer’s concept of will as “merely a blind, irresistible impulse” can elucidate Ahab’s “will determinate” and “madness maddened” in his pursuit of Moby Dick. Besides, Nietzsche’s concepts of “genealogy of morals,” “perspectivism,” and “self-overcoming” are pertinent to my discussion of both the subversive implications and the limitations of Ahab’s metaphysical and ethical inquiries. In addition to providing the philosophical contexts for my examination of Ahab’s ideas in Chapter 3, Schopenhauer’s paradoxical distinction between relative nothingness and absolute nothingness will allow me to examine the nature of Ishmael’s epistemological crisis caused by his encounter with “a colorless all-color of atheism” in the whale, which I discuss in Chapter 4. Finally, Nietzsche’s notion of “becoming what one is” will help me illuminate how Ishmael as a tragic dramatist finally grasps the “ungraspable phantom of life” in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 3

HARPOONING THE SELF: AHAB’S EGOISM, MADNESS, AND WILL TO POWER

3.1. “That inscrutable thing”: Beyond Platonism and Christianity

   Ahab’s speech in “The Quarter-deck,” in which he reveals the genuine purpose of his whaling voyage to the crew of the Pequod, attests to the extent to which the novel’s metaphysical questioning is grounded in the elements of platonic idealism. Expressing his resolution to decipher the symbolic meaning of Moby Dick, Ahab describes the white whale in unmistakably platonic terms:

   ‘Hark ye yet again,—the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. (144)

   Ahab’s definition of “All visible objects” as “pasteboard masks” indicates his desire to see through the material world and comprehend the inner reality invisible to humans. In so doing, Ahab evokes the platonic myth of the cave by using such words as “the prisoner” and “the wall.” As Michael E. Levin aptly sums up at the opening of his essay “Ahab as Socratic Philosopher: The Myth of the Cave Inverted,” Ahab’s envisioning of the human existence through the trope of imprisonment—the soul is imprisoned in the body—draws on platonic dualism which presupposes “a distinction between appearance
and reality, the idea that the blind forces of nature conceal a deeper mind-like reality” (61). Besides this obvious reference to platonic idealism, Ahab’s speech reveals another element of Platonism in positing “some unknown but still reasoning thing [that] puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask.” Here, Ahab’s use of the word “reasoning” is particularly significant because of its emphasis on the intellectual nature of the source of being, which is clearly related to Plato’s concept of “Demiurge,” a divine Craftsman who arranges the universe and its various parts not fortuitously, but deliberately and intellectually. Ahab’s description of the phenomenal world as “the unreasoning mask” suggests that he seeks to penetrate into the transcendent truth by uncovering the law of causality, just as a Platonic philosopher seeks to identify the intent of the Intellect and obtain a rational understanding of the underlying principle of causation.32

The platonic worldview, however, does not exactly fit into Ahab’s understanding of the relationship between body and soul, and Ahab’s conceptualization of evil in Moby Dick is particularly significant in understanding how Ahab departs from platonic dualism:

He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me. (144)

32 In reading Moby-Dick as “a fable about the passion to understand” (69), Levin also emphasizes the notion of causation as an important element of Platonism manifest in the novel. Levin’s discussion of Ahab’s “passion to understand,” however, offers an incomplete understanding of Ahab’s metaphysical journey, for it overlooks the importance of considering the issue also within the context of Christianity. Although Levin makes a passing remark on Melville’s interest in the intersection of platonic and Judeo-Christian perspectives on the source of reality and evil, his argument focuses almost exclusively on the platonic elements in the novel.
In this passage, Ahab explains the sources of his hatred for the white whale. What Ahab hates most about Moby Dick is its “inscrutable” nature, for it “tasks” and “heaps” him—that is, it frustrates his attempt to reason through the human existence and reach an understanding of the source of being. This elusiveness of the white whale is central to the idea of evil espoused by Ahab, who sees in the whale “outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it.” His remark that he would “strike the sun if it insulted [him]” makes it even clearer that he considers Moby Dick an evil force against which he needs to fight, and this notion of evil notably differs from the platonic understanding of evil. Focusing on Plato’s theory of reality which views the phenomenal world as a shadow of ideas, Harold Cherniss argues that “all phenomena [that fall] short of the reality of ideas” must “be something less than perfect” (24). According to Cherniss, this imperfect nature of the phenomenal world is what is construed as evil in the platonic system of thinking.\(^{33}\) Considering that Ahab defines Moby Dick as the “wall” of corporeal reality through which he has to “thrust” in order to grasp the transcendent truth, his idea of evil does seem to coincide with the platonic view of evil. Also, both Ahab and a platonic philosopher regard evil as something that needs to be overcome. The reason why Ahab imbues Moby Dick with evil intent, however, is not that it is imperfect but that it is “inscrutable,” which suggests that Ahab does not necessarily align the whale with corporeality only.\(^{34}\) That is, for Ahab, Moby Dick is both a physical being and a

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\(^{33}\) Notably, Cherniss’s position that fundamentally posits deficiency or imperfectness as the source of evil encompasses two dominant interpretations of the platonic concept of evil: while the first one finds the source of evil in corporeality or matter, the second one finds it in “soul or an irrational element in soul” (Cherniss 23), which is a close but still incomplete replica of the ideas.

\(^{34}\) The *O.E.D.*’s first definition of “inscrutable” is “That cannot be searched into or found out by searching; impenetrable or unfathomable to investigation; quite unintelligible, entirely mysterious,” and its second definition of the word is “Rarely of things physical, as an abyss: Impenetrable, unfathomable.” Given the
transcendental entity, and this double-sided nature of Moby Dick is closely related to the
fact that when Ahab says “That inscrutable thing,” it could mean either Moby Dick or its
“malice.” Ahab’s comment that he will “wreak that hate upon” the white whale
regardless of whether it is “agent” or “principal” can be understood in this regard. By
blurring the boundary between “the white whale agent” and “the white whale principal,”
Ahab moves away from platonic dualism based on a clear distinction between matter and
Ideas, hence the difference between Ahab’s and a platonic philosopher’s methods of
dealing with the presence of evil. Whereas a platonic philosopher draws only on the
reasoning faculty to overcome the imperfect nature of the phenomenal world, Ahab’s
confrontation with evil is not confined to the exercise of reason but also encompasses the
use of violent, physical force, which will ultimately be manifested in his harpooning of
the whale.

Ishmael’s account of “What the white whale was to Ahab” (163) in “Moby Dick”
offers further insights into the curious relationship between empirical reality and
transcendental ideality that Ahab sets up in ascribing an evil power to Moby Dick:

Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab’s leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the
field. No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with
more seeming malice. Small reason was there to doubt, then, that ever since that
almost fatal encounter, Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the
whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to
identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and
spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac
incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in
them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible
malignity which has been from the beginning; to whose dominion even the
modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of
the east reverenced in their statue devil;—Ahab did not fall down and worship it

circumstances in which “inscrutable” is used to refer to a physical entity, it is hard to assume that Moby
Dick is inscrutable in the way “cavities of the earth” (O.E.D) are inscrutable.
like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred White Whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. (160)

Ishmael begins the account of the relationship between Ahab and Moby Dick with the description of their physical encounter: Moby Dick exercises his physical power and “reap[s] away Ahab’s leg.” That is to say, at the most basic level, Ahab’s agony is physical, arising from the loss of his leg in the jaws of the white whale. As is demonstrated by Ahab’s conversation with Starbuck in “The Quarter-deck,” however, Moby Dick is not merely “a dumb brute” (144) to Ahab, and he attributes metaphysical, spiritual meanings to Moby Dick, identifying with the whale “not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations.” The white whale’s physical assault, through the pain it induces in both Ahab’s body and soul, poses him a task of accounting for the vexing situation in which an iniquitous force of the phenomenal world can infringe upon the metaphenomenal world. Ishmael then explains how Ahab transfers “intangible malignity”—that is, the idea of evil—to Moby Dick as a physical being, “[pitting] himself, all mutilated, against it.” Here, it is important to note that when Ahab is described as “all mutilated,” it refers to both his bodily and spiritual suffering. That is, Moby Dick has harmed not only Ahab’s body but also his intellect and spirit through his physical power. The term “incarnation” needs to be understood in this context. In seeing Moby Dick “as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies,” Ahab blurs the platonic distinction between body and soul. This is why Ahab believes that another
physical encounter with Moby Dick is needed to overcome the force of evil: “all evil, to crazy Ahab, [is] visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick” (Italics mine).

As noted in the previous chapter, the concept of incarnation is also important in orthodox Christianity. Interestingly, as Pierre Hadot points out in his discussion of the platonic influence on Christianity, Christianity shares with Platonism the basic understanding of the relation between corporeality and spirituality in believing that the key to salvation is “to turn away from sensible reality in order to contemplate God and spiritual reality” (251). According to Hadot, despite this crucial similarity, only Christianity has succeeded in attracting the masses, and it was through the orthodox Christian notion of incarnation which “has lowered the authority of divine Reason down to the human body” (251). Whereas salvation in Platonism can be achieved through an effort to recall a disincarnate, spiritual existence—that is, one’s intellectual capacity for philosophical and abstract thinking does matter—salvation in Christianity is given to anyone with faith in the incarnation of the spirit of God in Jesus Christ. This concept of incarnation that posits that two natures of Christ, divine and human, are joined in him in a personal unity without losing the identity of each thus illuminates exactly how Christianity differs from Platonism in understanding the relation between body and soul.\(^3\)

\(^3\) Although Hadot notes the popularity of Christianity as compared with Platonism, the main focus of his argument falls more on the elements of Platonism Christianity adopted and developed for its own purposes than on the differences between them.
Although Ahab’s view of Moby Dick as the personification of evil also assumes the union of a physical body and a nonphysical entity—for him, Moby Dick’s body and the evil spirit it symbolizes are one and the same—it cannot be adequately understood within the system of Christianity. Most importantly, Ahab’s concept of incarnation is the inversion of the Christian notion of incarnation in that while the Incarnation in Christianity refers to the act or state of assuming a physical body by divine spirit, Ahab’s thoughts mainly turn to the incarnation of evil spirit. This inversion is crucial to comprehending the novel’s questioning of the basic tenets of Christianity, for it provides quite a different answer to how to deal with the presence of evil and suffering in the cosmos. Specifically, in Christianity, the belief in the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is the only way to overcome the cosmic forces of evil, and it involves self-renunciation, for believing in Jesus as the divine Logos in the flesh assumes that humans are too corrupt to save themselves. That is, human beings are understood as innately depraved because of Adam’s fall from God’s grace. By attempting to confront the problems of evil and suffering without any recourse to divine power, Ahab defies this idea of original sin. Instead of accepting the Christian doctrine of self-renunciation, Ahab makes the White Whale into the incarnation of evil which he can physically assail and subdue.

The subversive implications of Ahab’s assertion of his own power in dealing with the presence of evil and suffering become even clearer when it is juxtaposed with Father Mapple’s preaching about the virtue of obedience to God in “The Sermon.” Even though Ahab plays no role in this chapter, Father Mapple’s interpretation of Jonah’s story in “The Sermon” aptly demonstrates the Christian doctrine Ahab problematizes in seeing
Moby Dick as the personification of evil. Defining the nature of Jonah’s sin as “his wilful[sic] disobedience of the command of God,” Father Mapple declares: “And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists” (45). The opposing relationship that Father Mapple sets up here between obedience to God and obedience to the self further clarifies why Ahab’s resolution personally to attack evil in the form of Moby Dick inevitably entails the questioning of the most fundamental principle of Christianity. In his pursuit of Moby Dick, Ahab is not simply rejecting the Christian way of overcoming evil but he is actively obeying his self and thus “disobeying” the Christian God who declared the entirety of humankind to be sinful because of Adam and Eve’s original sin.

Melville’s comment in his essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses” on the power the idea of original sin holds over the human mind adds another dimension to understanding the implications of Ahab’s definition of evil and his self-assertion. Complimenting Hawthorne’s literary genius, Melville notes, “this great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free” (540). Earlier, I argued that Moby Dick represents evil to Ahab because its inscrutableness keeps him from “thrusting through the wall” of phenomenal reality and reaching an understanding of ultimate truth. In light of the Christian notion of incarnation and Father Mapple’s equation of obedience to the self with disobedience to God, Ahab’s desire to go beyond human limitations and achieve transcendental knowledge would be seen as a manifestation of his “innate depravity.” Melville’s remark that any “deeply thinking mind” would struggle with the concepts of Innate Depravity and Original Sin
instead of passively accepting them, however, suggests that Ahab’s “disobedient” pursuit of truth is actually the indication of his “deeply thinking” capacity. It is therefore not a coincidence that Moby Dick for Ahab is described as the incarnation not simply of evil in a general sense but of “all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung” (Italics mine, 160). As one of the “deep men,” Ahab is bound to seek knowledge of truth beyond human limitations and therefore agonizes over the elusive White Whale and feels it “eating in” him.

Besides elucidating the subversive meaning of Ahab’s notion of evil, the connection between a capacity for deep thinking and “disobedience” to the Christian God explains why egoism constitutes a central theme in Moby-Dick. For a deep man like Ahab who aspires to grasp the objective and transcendent truth without reference to divine power or existing systems of knowledge, the premise that the self is the fundamental and only foundation of knowledge poses a serious problem. More specifically, since the quest of deep thinking men involves the interrogation of conventional perspectives on the relationship between the universe as the external object, whether phenomenal or transcendental, and the self as the conscious thinking subject, for deep divers, how to overcome the confines of subjective perspectives and perception becomes the most crucial and ultimate question to confront. The image of Narcissus on the water in the very first chapter of the novel can be understood in this context:

And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (14)
It is important here to note that in this passage the image of self is referred to as both the “phantom of life” and “the key to it all,” suggesting that to anyone engaged in the search for the meaning of life, egoism is the ultimate task to deal with. For deep divers who refuse to accept any theological or metaphysical doctrine that requires self-renunciation, however, this task is virtually impossible to fulfill because they have no choice but to grapple with the problem of egoism in the most egoistic manner. Given this paradoxical situation, one must ask: why then dive deep when drowning is all but certain? Here, the comparison between the myth of Narcissus in the original Greek version and Ishmael’s portrayal of Narcissus in this passage is illuminating. The Greek myth of Narcissus, according to which a beautiful young man falls in love with his own reflection in the fountain and pines to death, is the story of a vain youth whose name symbolizes extreme self-admiration and vanity. Narcissus in Melville’s passage, however, dives to uncover the truth about himself or herself even at the risk of being drowned. Along with the aforementioned remark by Melville on how much he admires “all men who dive,” this contrast between merely pining away and actively plunging into water clarifies the novel’s stance on deep divers’ almost futile and fatal attempt to grasp “the ungraspable phantom of life.” Plunging into water inevitably leads to drowning, but Narcissus in Greek Mythology cannot escape death no matter how far he stays away from water—that is, Narcissus in both stories ends up dying. It does not mean, however, that these two kinds of deaths carry the same weight of meaning. Unlike Narcissus in Greek mythology who does not even seek to act on his desire to seize his reflection, but merely chases after

36 I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that Ahab and Ishmael are the two deep divers in the novel, but Ahab’s case seems closer to Narcissus’s story, for Ishmael somehow survives his own deep diving in the end. The reasons for Ishmael’s survival and its meaning will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.
the shadow of his bodily being from a distance, Narcissus in the novel tries to grab his inner reality and achieves some sort of contact with the ungraspable image in his drowning.

The ultimate question for Melville, then, seems to be what is the significance of striving to contact “the image of the ungraspable phantom of life” even at the cost of life. It is true that when attempting to grasp the ungraspable image of the self, Melville’s Narcissus is grappling mainly with the question of metaphysical egoism. Yet, as I will discuss in the rest of the chapter, Ahab’s “plung[ing] into” water in the form of harpooning the whale concerns the question of ethical egoism as well as metaphysical egoism, for he chooses to follow his own desires when they are in conflict with others’.

In the next section, I examine the meaning of Ahab’s deep diving and drowning in relation to Schopenhauer’s position on the problem of egoism, which is inextricably connected to his concepts of will and ideas.

3.2. Ahab’s Egoism and Will to Madness

Let us then examine how Schopenhauer’s theory of the world as will and idea illuminates Ahab’s endeavor to deal with the question of evil and human suffering through his chase of Moby Dick. In the previous section, I argued that Melville’s rendering of Ahab’s relation to Moby Dick is very important in comprehending his revision of some fundamental principles of Platonism and Christianity, and here, I intend to investigate how an application of Schopenhauerian terms to Moby-Dick can further clarify the import of Ahab’s resolution to confront evil through his physical encounter with Moby Dick. Schopenhauer’s proposition that we can gain insight into the inner
reality of things—“the will” in his terms—by observing our bodily movements is particularly useful for apprehending the meaning Ahab attaches to his pursuit of Moby Dick. Moby Dick’s physical attack has harmed both Ahab’s body and soul, and Ahab’s “thrusting through the wall” (144) that keeps him from overcoming his limitations and grasping the truth about evil and suffering is possible only through his contact with the physical body of Moby Dick. Here, we can notice a close affinity between Schopenhauer’s view that our physical actions give us access to the thing-in-itself and Ahab’s belief that he can penetrate what lies behind the veil of appearance by physically assaulting Moby Dick in that both pose a serious challenge to Platonic dismissal of corporeality in obtaining the knowledge of Ideas or things-in-themselves. In addition, both Schopenhauer’s ideas as manifestations of the irrational will and Ahab’s personification of the evil in Moby Dick defy the Christian notion of incarnation which involves the personification of goodness only.

Interestingly enough, instead of observing the operation of his own body, Ahab wants to use Moby Dick’s body to engage in inward reflections on “the real nature of things” (WWI 31), and Schopenhauer’s theory of the world as idea is quite pertinent here. Through the notion that the phenomenal world is the idea formed by intellect, Schopenhauer revises the dualistic view of the relation between subject and object that does not fully recognize the power of a percipient subject to shape phenomenal object. Schopenhauer’s view that subject and object exist only through each other helps to explain Ahab’s insistence on the need to harpoon the whale himself. Revealing his intense rage at Moby Dick who took his leg, Ahab resolutely declares to himself in “Sunset”: “I will dismember my dismembreer” (147). This statement might be interpreted
simply as the expression of Ahab’s desire to wreak vengeance on Moby Dick by the
principle of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” Considering that Moby Dick signifies
“the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies” (160) for Ahab, however,
Ahab’s desire to dismember the whale can be read as an indication of his belief that
seeing through what lies behind the appearance of Moby Dick is essential to overcoming
his limitations and grasping the truth about evil and suffering. In Schopenhauerian terms,
Ahab aspires to go beyond the distinction between him and Moby Dick as subject and
object, because he believes that it can help him penetrate the illusion of appearance and
realize the inner reality of things. According to Schopenhauer’s theory of the world as
idea, anyone with ordinary sense perception can experience movements of human body
by simply observing them, but only the subjects of these movements can experience “the
real nature” of these actions. When Ahab desires to dismember Moby Dick, he refuses
merely to observe the movements of Moby Dick as a phenomenal object, but seeks to
experience them as if he himself were a perceiving subject of those movements.37

Ahab’s endeavor to harpoon the whale is inextricably connected to his need to
grapple with the problem of egoism, because this task poses the question as to how he
knows whether anything exists except his own mind. Specifically, Ahab’s hypothesis that
he can uncover the cause of suffering and evil by harpooning the whale presumes both
the existence of the ultimate truth about human suffering and evil and the possibility of

37 In this regard, James P. Grove’s interpretation of the symbolic meaning of Moby Dick in “Melville’s
Vision of Death in Moby-Dick” is a little too simplistic. According to Grove, “Whales, throughout,
symbolically embody the ‘ungraspable phantom of life’ (p. 14) as they surface out of the depth of the sea,
up from the mysteries of the dead which men only know through dying” (191). Although Grove is right in
pointing out that Melville refuses to accept “soothing dogmas” (195) of consolation literature in his
envisioning of death in the novel, Grove’s reading of Moby Dick does not fully explain the meaning that
the whale holds for Ahab.
obtaining this truth by transcending the distinction between subject and object on the phenomenal level. This hypothesis can thus be validated only by being liberated from metaphysical egoism, but the problem for Ahab is that he understands everything only as he reflects it, not as it is, only to evince his subordination to the fundamentally egoistic nature of his mind. In fact, there are numerous references to Ahab’s egoistic nature throughout the novel, and perhaps the most remarkable passage is the one given when Ahab reflects on the meaning of a doubloon, a Spanish gold coin that he nailed to the mainmast of the Pequot with a view to inducing the crew to participate in his mission to kill Moby Dick:

There’s something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here,—three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. Great pains, small gains for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself. (359)

In his reflection on the doubloon, Ahab first compares three pictures carved on the doubloon to “three peaks,” and claims that each of them is Ahab. Ahab then states that “all are Ahab.” It is not clear whether he is saying only these “three peaks as proud as Lucifer” are Ahab or suggesting “all other grand and lofty things” are Ahab as well. In either case, this statement shows that in everything he sees, Ahab sees only that which he values most and associates with his pride, attesting to his own egoistical tendency to understand the world only through his own perspective. As for the gold coin itself, he

Although Doran Larson’s deconstructive reading of the body in Moby-Dick employs quite different terminology, his argument that “Ahab’s project is precisely to reclaim that indistinguishably material and figural pre-seventeenth century body in which ‘the microcosmic metaphor of the body [came] to stand for the proper perception of one’s place in the cosmos’ (Barkan 14)” (20) can be seen as an attempt to grapple with the question similar to mine. Larson does not, however, pay attention to the meaning Ahab attaches to physically harpooning the whale as he undertakes his project of transcending “a leakage between figure and concept, between body and soul, between material sense and moral precept” (Larson 21).
sees it as a symbol of “therounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn mirrors back his own mysterious self.” Here, “the rounder globe” is none other than the world which Ahab states is capable of solving neither itself nor “those who ask the world to solve them.” The image of the world as “a magician’s glass” thus makes it clear what Ahab means when he says the world “cannot solve itself”: just as the creatures dwelling in it are stuck with their own images and therefore incapable of obtaining objective truth about one another, the world merely “mirrors back” the image of its inhabitants rather than the truth beyond the phenomenal realm. This generalization about the “ever egoistical” nature of individual creatures and the whole world accords very well with Schopenhauer’s comment that “while each individual is given to itself directly as the whole will and the whole subject of ideas, all the other individuals are given to him initially only as his ideas” (WWI 211). If the significance of Ahab’s pursuit of the truth and meaning of life is considered in the context of Schopenhauer’s view of egoism that our interpretation of phenomenal objects is a mere reflection of our values and thoughts, Ahab’s whaling voyage is after all a chase of “his own mysterious self,” because he understands the world only through his own perspective. Here again, the congruence between Melville and Schopenhauer in terms of their understanding of metaphysical egoism is clear.

Ahab’s desire to penetrate the inner reality of Moby Dick through physical contact is not only “ever egotistical” but also self-destructive. Indeed, Ahab appears to sense that he is pursuing and being pursued by a self-made demon. In “Ahab and Starbuck in the Cabin,” when Ahab rejects Starbuck’s suggestion that they stop the boat because the whale oil is leaking, Starbuck responds: “Let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware
of thyself, old man!’” (394). Ishmael wonders whether Ahab’s decision to follow Starbuck’s suggestion is “a flash of honesty in him; or mere prudential policy” (394). Whether or not Ahab sincerely respects Starbuck’s opinion about stopping the boat, Ahab’s remark that “‘What’s that he said—Ahab beware of Ahab—there is something there!’” (394) reveals his consciousness that his foremost enemy is himself rather than the whale. This description of Ahab’s self as his worst enemy is quite evocative of Schopenhauer’s portrayal of the will that “sinks its teeth into its own flesh, not knowing that it is injuring itself” (219).

Given this affinity between Ahab’s self-destructive desire and the self-preying nature of the will, it is not surprising that Ahab’s contemplation on the meaning of his pursuit of the whale bears a striking semblance to Schopenhauer’s explication of the human condition. Just before the actual chase of the whale begins, Ahab confesses his weariness to Starbuck with a sense of profound sorrow and remorse:

‘Oh, Starbuck! It is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky. On such a day—very much such a sweetness as this—I struck my first whale—a boy-harpooner of eighteen! Forty—forty—forty years ago!—ago! Forty years of continual whaling! Forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! Forty years on the pitiless sea! . . . and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey—more a demon than a man! aye, aye! what a forty years’ fool—fool—old fool, has old Ahab been! Why this strife of the chases? . . . Oh, Starbuck! is it not hard, that with this weary load I bear, one poor leg should have been snatched from under me? . . . I feel deadly faint, bowed, and humped, as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the tired centuries since Paradise. (443–44)

Ahab’s emphasis on the mildness and “sweetness” of the sea on the first day of his harpooning intimates that Ahab began his whaling career with an understanding that his pursuit of whales would be conducted in an environment quite auspicious to him.
Contrary to his initial expectation, Ahab seems to have soon realized that life is full of “privation,” “peril,” and “storm-times,” and his realization of the terrible condition of human life corresponds with Schopenhauer’s view that life is filled with horror and agony. The terms Ahab employs in his explosion of anger against the utmost pain engendered by “a thousand lowerings” he has partaken—”the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow”—clearly echo the terms Schopenhauer uses in describing the irrational and impulsive forces under which humans strive blindly for their survival. Interestingly, in describing the weariness of his life, Ahab likens himself to Adam. Ahab’s statement that he feels “as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the tired centuries since Paradise” signifies his recognition of the common fate of human beings bound to feel “deadly faint, bowed, and humped.” Ahab’s comparison of his situation to Adam’s does more than simply giving a picture of Ahab’s suffering and pain, however. According to Schopenhauer, Adam is the one in whom “Christian theology symbolizes nature, the affirmation of will to life” (WWI 257). Schopenhauer’s remark that Adam’s Original Sin “bequeathed to us . . . makes us all partakers of suffering and eternal death” (257) succinctly expresses the view that human beings are subject to eternal perdition and endless suffering because of their affirmation of will to life, or in Christian terms, obedience to one’s self. Ahab’s statement that he feels “as though [he] were Adam,” then, suggests that for Ahab, his desire to pursue Moby Dick is the manifestation of his will to life, because it makes him a partaker of “suffering and eternal death.” Viewed in this light, Ahab’s question “Why this strife of the chases?” can be seen as his recognition of the problem with his servitude to his will to life, and one might be
tempted to see Ahab as a Schopenhauerian genius who recognizes the egoistic and self-preying nature of the most fundamental driving force of life—again, “the will” in Schopenhauerian terms—and acknowledges the need to suspend or cancel it.

Unlike a Schopenhauerian genius, however, Ahab refuses to deny his desire to pursue Moby Dick. Closely related to Ahab’s refusal to renounce his “will to life” is his paradoxical view of his relationship with Moby Dick. On the one hand, he wishes to transcend the distinction between him and Moby Dick as subject and object. On the other hand, Ahab does not want to consider the possibility that “the difference between the person who inflicts suffering and the one who must bear it is only phenomenon, and has no bearing on the thing-in-itself which is the will living in both” (WWI 219). If Ahab admitted that “The inflictor of suffering and the sufferer are one” (WWI 219) and that the difference between him and Moby Dick is only phenomenon, there would be no point of chasing after the whale. Not wanting to or being unable to accept this Schopenhauerian reading of the relationship between him and Moby Dick, Ahab affirms his “will to life” that drives him to pursue Moby Dick. On this account, Ahab’s endeavor to see through the illusion of appearance takes him neither to the level of Schopenhauerian sympathy that “because the will is the thing-in-itself of all phenomena, the misery both experienced by oneself and inflicted upon others . . . always affect the one and the same being” (WWI 219), nor to the belief that “Eternal justice reigns” (WWI 216) somehow on a cosmic level.

The question still remains as to why Ahab does not or cannot give up on his chase of Moby Dick when he is well aware that his attempt to overcome egoism through physical contact with Moby Dick is the most intense manifestation of his egoistic nature
and that his “will to life” will only bring about his demise. In answering this question, a close examination of the nature and significance of Ahab’s insanity is particularly necessary. Throughout the novel, Ishmael occasionally refers to Ahab as “crazy Ahab” or “the insane old man,” pointing out the unsound, deranged mentality of Ahab in a general sense. Ishmael attaches some special meaning to Ahab’s insanity, however. Defining Ahab’s blind pursuit of Moby Dick as “monomania,” Ishmael draws attention to the obsessive nature of Ahab’s desire to take revenge on Moby Dick. Ahab’s insanity is therefore differentiated from a mere loss of control of one’s mental faculties. Moreover, Ahab’s obsession with Moby Dick has significant symbolic meaning. As Ishmael notes, Ahab came to regard Moby Dick as a personification of “all evil” by “pile[ing] upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (160).

What then contributed to the development of this special kind of insanity? Regarding Ahab’s madness, Ishmael insinuates that it is a complex process of a gradual and deliberate development:

It is not probable that this monomania in him took its instant rise at the precise time of his bodily dismemberment. Then, in darting at the monster, knife in hand, he had but given loose to a sudden, passionate, corporal animosity; and when he received the stroke that tore him, he probably but felt the agonizing bodily laceration, but nothing more. Yet, when by this collision forced to turn towards home, and for long months of days and weeks, Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock, rounding in mid winter that dreary, howling Patagonian Cape; then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad. That it was only then, on the homeward voyage, after the encounter, that the final monomania seized him, seems all but certain from the fact that, at intervals during the passage, he was a raving lunatic. (160)
According to Ishmael’s conjecture, Ahab did not have any obsessive hatred in his initial encounter with Moby Dick except “a sudden, passionate, corporal animosity” which might be expected in any captain of a whaler upon the sight of an extraordinary sperm whale of enormous size. Even when he “received a stroke that tore him,” Ahab is believed not to have felt more than “the agonizing bodily laceration.” Indeed, this is a reaction that may be commonly found among harpooners with any types of physical loss by whales, from which most of them recover after a certain period of bodily agony without completely losing their former composure and common sense. For example, Captain Boomer, of the ship Samuel Enderby, was also attracted to Moby Dick only to have his arm bitten off by the whale, but he does not exhibit any kind of monomaniac vengeance, simply believing that Moby Dick is “best left alone” (368). In contrast, Ahab’s reaction to his physical loss is much more complicated and goes through several developmental stages, ultimately resulting in an unusual type of insanity. Describing how Ahab suffered from his bodily pain, Ishmael states, “Ahab and anguish lay stretched together.” The division of Ahab and “anguish” here is significant in that it highlights the power of Ahab’s mind. Unlike an ordinary person who can easily lose the conscious part of his or her mind in the face of excruciating physical pain, Ahab is capable of viewing his bodily pain as an object of perception. Despite his exceptional power of mind, during the initial stages of his madness, Ahab’s rational faculties do not function properly. According to Ishmael, a specific moment of the beginning of Ahab’s insanity can be identified, and it is when “his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another.”

39 Probably physical anguish, considering Ishmael’s emphasis that Ahab “felt the agonizing bodily laceration, but nothing more” up until this point.
Although Ishmael does not explicitly mention the Platonic account of the relationship among body, soul, and mind, Ishmael seems to draw on the Platonic view of the division of a human being in his description of how the interfusion of Ahab’s tormented body and soul “made him mad.” In Platonic metaphysics, the human soul is thought to guide and be guided by an immaterial mind (capable of knowing Forms) and a physical body (receiving sense impressions). More specifically, the soul is a directing agency and is caught between mind’s tendency to contemplate the realm of Ideas, or Forms, and body’s propensity to seek sensual pleasure. The integration of soul and body in Ahab’s case, then, signifies the loss of the balance between mind and body and consequently the improper operation of the rational power of mind. Hence the next stage of his insanity in which as “a raving lunatic,” Ahab is “mad” in a general sense and is seen as such to everyone. That said, there does not seem anything special about Ahab’s madness up to this point.

It turns out, however, that Ahab’s madness further develops and moves on to another stage, which accounts for Ishmael’s equivocal statement that “that the final monomania seized him, seems all but certain” (Italics mine). In the following passage, Ishmael explains an important change that occurs in Ahab’s madness:

And, when running into more sufferable latitudes, the ship, with mild stun’sails spread, floated across the tranquil tropics, and, to all appearances, the old man’s delirium seemed left behind him with the Cape Horn swells, . . . and his mates thanked God the direful madness was now gone; even then, Ahab, in his hidden self, raved on. (160)

Ahab finally seems to stop raving, and “to all appearances,” Ahab seems recovered. Contrary to his mates’ assumption that “the direful madness was now gone,” however, Ahab’s madness persists. Ishmael’s remark that “Ahab, in his hidden self, raved on”
makes it clear that his madness has never really left him, emphasizing that it has only changed its form. In spite of the fact that Ahab is still “a raving lunatic” deep inside, this little change in Ahab’s insanity is quite important in its implication that Ahab is actively using the rational power of his mind, which seemed almost absent during the initial stages of his insanity. The discrepancy between Ahab’s “normal” behavior and his madness inside thus challenges the common understanding of the oppositional relationship between lunacy and rationality.

What makes Ahab’s madness really “special,” however, is not the coexistence of insanity and intellect. Contemplating the changes in Ahab’s “full lunacy” even further, Ishmael states:

Human madness is oftentimes a cunning and most feline thing. When you think it fled, it may have but become transfigured into some still subtler form. Ahab’s full lunacy subsided not, but deepeningly contracted; like the unabated Hudson, when that noble Northman flows narrowly, but unfathomably through the Highland gorge. But, as in his narrow-flowing monomania, not one jot of Ahab’s broad madness had been left behind; so in that broad madness, not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished. That before living agent, now became the living instrument. If such a furious trope may stand, his special lunacy stormed his general sanity, and carried it, and turned all its concentrated cannon upon its own mad mark; (160-61)

Explaining how Ahab’s madness has never “fled” but simply “transfigured into some still subtler form,” Ishmael posits two kinds of lunacy: “broad madness” and “narrow-flowing monomania.” By likening Ahab’s lunacy to a river that changes its shape but not its essence, Ishmael explicates that these two kinds of lunacy of Ahab’s are merely different stages of the same thing and that Ahab’s “great natural intellect” has never been lost. This observation contradicts, again, the common notion that lunacy is the lack or absence of rationality. Yet, what is even more striking than the preservation of Ahab’s intellect in his
madness is the way in which Ahab uses his intellect after his madness. According to Ishmael, if Ahab’s intellect used to be the “living agent” for Ahab, it has now become “the living instrument.” Prior to madness, Ahab’s intellect had a certain extent of agency and some power to guide Ahab in the decision-making process, but Ahab’s lunacy has turned his intellect into a mere instrument. Ishmael’s “furious trope” in the next line illustrates for what purpose Ahab’s intellect has become “the living instrument.” In Ishmael’s statement that Ahab’s “special lunacy stormed his general sanity, and carried it, and turned all its concentrated cannon upon its own mad mark,” the “concentrated cannon” seems none other than Ahab’s “great natural intellect.” That the cannon is turned “upon its own mad mark,” then, suggests that Ahab’s rational capacity now exists to fulfill his irrational desire instead of suppressing it. In short, Ahab’s lunacy has overpowered the agency of his rational mind and pressed his intellect into the service of his monomaniac pursuit. Here lies the paradox of Ahab’s situation: he uses his rational power to stay irrational.40

This paradoxical situation of Ahab’s raises a question as to whether or not Ahab deliberately employs his rational thinking ability to reinforce his irrational object. In other words, is there any agency left in his “great natural intellect”? It apparently seems so, considering that Ahab is aware that his intellect is being used to intensify his mad purpose. Ishmael’s revelation of Ahab’s inner thought later in the same chapter provides a case in point: “Now, in his heart, Ahab had some glimpse of this, namely: all my means

40 Ahab’s madness, not surprisingly, has drawn attention from many scholars, and Henry Nash Smith is one of them. In his article, “The Madness of Ahab,” Smith understands Ahab’s madness as “his rejection of the slavish shore of order and sanity” and as “his mode of transcending the mediocrity of a culture that lacks all distinction, and worse still, is basically hypocritical” (32). While Smith’s essay supplies the cultural context of Ahab’s madness, it does not extend to revealing the paradoxical nature of Ahab’s madness and its significance.
are sane, my motive and my object mad” (161). Ahab’s comment on the sanity of his means as opposed to the insanity of his motive and object suggests that he is conscious of the paradoxical aspect of the way he uses his rational mind. Ahab’s self-conscious remark on the state of his mind in “Sunset” should be understood in this context:

“What I’ve dared, I’ve willed; and what I’ve willed, I’ll do! They think me mad—Starbuck does; but I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that’s only calm to comprehend itself! The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one.” (147)

Conscious of others’ view of his “mad” behavior, Ahab emphasizes that he is not simply mad, but “madness maddened.” The additional explanation that he provides in the following sentence clarifies its meaning. While the phrase “wild madness” implies that Ahab’s madness is mostly beyond control, the modifying phrase “that’s only calm to comprehend itself” indicates that it can be subjugated by Ahab’s self-reflexive power, become “calm,” and come under some kind of control. Significantly, this self-reflexive power of Ahab’s suggests that Ahab does have free will (or volition) in the matter of madness. Though his initial madness has begun regardless of his free will, after his seeming recovery, Ahab exercises his free will to “madden” his madness. Ahab’s repeated use of the word “will” both as a regular verb and as an auxiliary verb is therefore not a mere coincidence, as it clearly expresses his “will determinate” (161). Ahab’s “prophecy” that “I will dismember my dismemberer” is undeniably the indication of his madness, but his madness is the outcome of his exercise of free will, and thus his

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41 It might sound as if the self-reflexive power belongs to the madness, not to Ahab. Considering that Ahab says he is madness, however, “madness” refers to Ahab after all, and therefore it seems safe to assume that the agent of self-reflection is Ahab.
“prophecy” carries much more weight than that of a madman incapable of any kind of rational choices, for Ahab can at least make rational choices about how to stay in the state of irrationality. Noticeably, Ahab’s deliberate choice of madness does not make him any less mad. Despite the fact that “not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished” (160) in his insanity, Ahab has chosen to stay insane, and when he has chosen madness out of his free will, Ahab has essentially given up control over himself.

Why is it then that Ahab is intentionally and consciously “maddening” his madness when he is not without free will to recover from it? As a man with extraordinary power of reasoning, Ahab has the knowledge of the egoistic and self-destructive nature of his mad pursuit of Moby Dick, just as a Schopenhauerian genius is gifted with the knowledge of the will to life. Ahab’s knowledge does not, however, lead to the cancellation of his monomaniac desire. Concerning his intentional choice to stay insane, Ahab provides one reason when he explains why he never thinks but only feels: “Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels; that’s tingling enough for mortal man! to think’s audacity. God only has that right and privilege” (460). Though he does not draw an explicit connection between madness and feeling, Ahab’s statement that “Thinking is, or ought to be, a coolness and a calmness” (460) suggests that he aligns feeling with irrationality and lack of composure. According to Ahab, “he only feels” because “to think’s audacity”—that is, thinking is too much to handle for “mortal man.” For Ahab, then, madness protects us from the dangerous aspect of thinking for which “our poor

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42 Ahab uses the terms “God,” “the gods,” “the universe,” and “the heavens” almost interchangeably. This confusion will be further discussed later in the chapter. But for now, since there is little difference between God and the gods to Ahab, I will quote the terms as written in the book, instead of attempting to clarify each time to whom they refer.
hearts throb, and our poor brains beat too much” (460). Considering Ahab’s view that human life is full of pain and affliction, the object of thinking seems to be the meaning or significance of all the suffering in life. In a similar vein, Ahab says to Perth, the ship’s blacksmith, who has come aboard after making a foolish mistake resulting in the loss of his young wife and their three children as well as all his family’s possessions, “Thou should’st go mad, blacksmith; say, why dost thou not go mad? How can’st thou endure without being mad? Do the heavens yet hate thee, that thou can’st not go mad?” (403) Among Ahab’s questions, the question “How can’st thou endure without being mad?” is particularly significant in its implication that for Ahab, having to suffer all the pain and misery of human life “without being mad” is the worst of all pain. Here again, madness is being understood as some kind of protective device for human beings incapable of dealing with suffering and pain in a sober state of mind.

Besides helping Ahab endure all his pain and suffering by guarding him from the terrible power of thinking, madness performs another significant function for Ahab: it gives him strength to pursue his object. In his explication of the transformation of Ahab’s “broad madness” into “narrow-flowing monomania” (161), Ishmael states, “far from having lost his strength, Ahab, to that one end, did now possess a thousand fold more potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear upon any one reasonable object” (161). The reason why insanity is a much greater source of strength and power than sanity is found in the following passage which immediately precedes Ishmael’s comment quoted above: “his special lunacy stormed his general sanity, and carried it, and turned all its concentrated cannon upon its own mad mark” (161). As discussed earlier, this passage illustrates the way in which Ahab’s rational thinking power is used to reinforce his
insanity. It also illuminates how madness can provide Ahab with so much strength by insinuating that Ahab’s “special lunacy” led him to focus all his energy on his “mad mark.” If Ahab had regained “his general sanity,” his energy would have been distributed among various objects, and he would not have been able to pursue Moby Dick with such intensity and potency. Thanks to “his special lunacy,” however, Ahab is imbued with strength that makes it possible for him to persist in such a challenging task as chasing after a whale.

These two functions of madness—protecting Ahab from thinking and endowing him with great strength—are illuminating in understanding Ahab’s obsession with harpooning Moby Dick. Earlier, I stated that Ahab is either unwilling or unable to see the difference between him and Moby Dick only as phenomenon and that instead, Ahab strives to believe that Moby Dick as a physical entity holds the key to transcendent truth about the whole universe. Given his statements about the egoistical and self-destructive aspects of his chase of Moby Dick, Ahab seems conscious at a certain level that the object of his pursuit is not the actual whale but his own image. Ahab’s lunacy, however, allows him to avoid thinking about and accepting the possibility that he is merely pursuing his own reflection, and thereby leads him to believe that his attempt to obtain the ultimate truth through the physical assault on the whale is a viable one. In other words, Ahab’s madness creates an illusion for Ahab that protects him from questioning the meaning of his suicidal chase of Moby Dick. Once he began to think in a sober state of mind, he would start raising questions about the meaning he attaches to Moby Dick, and his belief that he could overcome the overwhelming power of suffering and pain of his life by killing the whale would collapse. This is why Ahab holds on to his initial
madness and maddens it even further. It helps him deceive himself into believing that the image of life he is plunging after is indeed graspable. Ahab’s denial of the fact that he is attempting to grasp “the ungraspable phantom of life” thus gives him strength to carry on with his voyage no matter what.

Interestingly, Ahab invokes “God” or “the heavens” in explaining why he cannot endure “without being mad” (460), as if he did not really have free will in his decision to madden his madness. That is, he did not choose to stay mad because he knew madness would help him deal with suffering and pain in the way described above. Just like his claim that thinking belongs only to God, his question about whether the heavens hate the blacksmith by not letting him go mad illustrates that Ahab posits some kind of divine being in explaining the “right” method of understanding human suffering. Whether Ahab genuinely believes in the existence of a divine being or not, Ahab’s comments on God or the heavens insinuate that even though he has free will to regain the sanity of his mind and stop his egoistic, self-destructive chase of Moby Dick, he at the same time does not:

“What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jammimg myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living, and not I. By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike. And all the time, lo! that smiling sky, and this unsounded sea! Look! see yon Albicore! who put it into him to chase and fang that flying-fish? Where do murderers go, man! Who’s to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?” (445)
In wondering what it is that makes him keep chasing after Moby Dick, Ahab uses heavily loaded terms that seem to point to his consciousness of the problematic nature of his whaling voyage. His statement that his pursuit of Moby Dick is “against all natural lovings and longings” particularly makes clear his negative view of his voyage through the assumption that it is against nature. Notably, while Ahab at first employs fairly neutral terms, such as “nameless, inscrutable, unearthly,” once he begins to deny his responsibility for his action, he uses strong words like “cozening, hidden” and “cruel, remorseless.” Ahab even asks “Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?” and attempts to hold a divine being accountable for all his actions and thoughts, paradoxically admitting to the fact that he does engage in thinking, which he claims to be God’s “right and privilege” (460). Even more paradoxical is the fact that Ahab’s thinking, which he insists God does for him, is used to question God’s absolute sovereignty. After expounding on how God has control over his heart beating, thinking, and living, Ahab asks, “Where do murderers go, man! Who’s to doom, when the judge himself is dragged to the bar?” If the judge can be understood as God, Ahab’s statement that “the judge himself is dragged to the bar” suggests that Ahab in fact does not believe God controls everything, orders everything, and rules over everything. In the end, Ahab’s paradoxical description of God makes Ahab responsible for all the “cozening, hidden” and “cruel, remorseless” things he does against his “proper, natural heart.” Why does Ahab presuppose God’s existence at all, then? I contend that Ahab’s need to posit God can be best understood through the comparison between Ahab and the Nietzschean overman who questions the basic premises of Platonism and Judaeo-Christian theology through the investigation of the genealogy of morals.
3.3. “thou all-destroying but unconquering whale”: Thus Spoke Ahab

“Who’s over me?” asks Ahab, as he dismisses Starbuck’s objection that it is “blasphemous” to wreak vengeance on “a dumb thing” (144). This question draws a connection between Ahab and Nietzsche’s Übermensch (or the overman) not simply because Ahab’s use of the word “over” is evocative of the German prefix “über” that connotes superiority, transcendence, abundance, excessiveness, outgrowth, activity, or intensity, but also because Ahab raises a fundamental question about the status of truths given from outside. The subversive implication of Ahab’s question is made clear by his next statement that “Truth hath no confines” (144). Just as the Nietzschean overman refuses to accept any kind of truth imposed upon him from outside and thus is “liberated . . . from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral” (GM 59), Ahab does not believe that there is such thing as one absolute truth that is true for every one and seeks to reject any kind of external authority. Ahab’s radical view of truth, along with his intense desire for independence, seems to contradict his evocation of God or some divine being, and by measuring Ahab’s questioning of the conventional notion of truth and morality against the Nietzschean overman’s position on truth and moral values, this section aims to reach a more comprehensive understanding of metaphysical and ethical dimensions of Ahab’s pursuit of Moby Dick.

One obvious link between Ahab and the Nietzschean philosopher43 is that both challenge the legitimacy of people’s belief in an omnipotent and benevolent creator which arises mainly from their desire to account for the existence of suffering and evil in

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43 Though the ultimate purpose is to compare Ahab with the Nietzschean overman, considering that the overman is “the ripest fruit” (GM 59) of the process of philosophical questioning of truth and morality for Nietzsche, I will compare Ahab with the Nietzschean philosopher.
life. Considering Ahab’s earlier statement about Moby Dick being either “the white whale agent, or . . . the white whale principal” (144), Ahab’s confession of his weariness right before his final chase can be read as an expression of his doubt about all-knowing and all-powerful God: “‘God! God! God!—crack my heart!—stave my brain!—mockery!—mockery! bitter, biting mockery of grey hairs, have I lived enough joy to wear ye?’” (444) The mockery he feels is two-fold. Young Ahab, enchanted by the mild and sweet sea, is imbued with the hope of becoming a lord of the ocean under the auspices of God and begins his career as a promising harpooner. But he soon finds that this business is nothing but a never-ending battle in which he must desperately “kill or be killed.” Life is not as favorable as it first appeared to be, but, instead, is full of agony. Ahab cannot but ask what is the meaning of this white whale who seems set on destroying him. If Moby-Dick is an agent of God, Ahab may well feel betrayed and fooled by God, who, instead of saving him, lets him suffer. On the other hand, if Moby-Dick is not God’s agent but acts independently of God’s will, this also is mockery. That is, God is either indifferent to human affairs or impotent to save man from unseemly agony.

Ahab’s questioning of the contradictory notion of omnipotent and benevolent God who allows evil and suffering to exist leads to an examination of the origin of people’s belief in gods and ultimately to an interrogation of “the origin of our moral prejudices” (GM 15), one of the most important tasks that the Nietzschean philosopher undertakes. When Ahab learns that Little Pip had plunged into the ocean from fear of whales, and that the feeling of being lost at sea had driven him insane, he finds fault with the irresponsibility of gods who are believed to have created human beings: “Oh, ye frozen
heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye
creative libertines” (428). In the same scene, Pip, even with his limited rational capacity,
appreciates Ahab for his kindness, and Ahab, touched by this innocent expression of
gratitude, points out to other crew members how prejudiced their moral views are in
believing that gods are perfectly-benevolent whereas human beings are to blame for all
ill: “Lo! ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill, lo you! see the omniscient
gods oblivious of suffering man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does,
yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude” (428). According to Ahab, it is
fallacious to ascribe “all goodness” to gods and “all ill” to human beings insomuch as the
former are “oblivious of suffering man” while the latter are full of such good things as
“love and gratitude.” Human beings’ desire to believe in “gods all goodness,” however,
makes them understand good and evil in simple opposition to each other and attribute
them respectively to gods and human beings, blinding them to the problematic nature of
the concept of “the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man.” Ahab’s account of the
origin of our moral prejudices corresponds with Nietzsche’s explication of how humans
become subject to bad conscience or guilty feelings. As discussed in the previous chapter,
for the Nietzschean philosopher, human beings are too weak to accept the possibility of
complete nothingness after this life, and their belief in some divine being has helped to
justify human suffering by making them see themselves as sinners.

Great as is the affinity between Ahab and the Nietzschean philosopher in tracing
the genealogy of human conceptions of morality, they are no less similar in
understanding the relationship between humans and gods in contractual terms. In the
following passage, through Ishmael’s narration, Ahab’s thoughts about the origin of suffering and sorrow are expressed, and the way in which gods are described is worthy of attention:

For, thought Ahab, . . . To trail the genealogies of these high mortal miseries, carries us at last among the sourceless primogenitures of the gods; so that, in the face of all the glad, hay-making suns, and soft cymballing, round harvest-moons, we must needs give in to this: that the gods themselves are not for ever glad. The ineffaceable, sad birth-mark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the signers. (386)

Here again, challenging the human tendency to attribute “all goodness” to gods, Ahab conceives gods as beings subject to sorrow and pain. It is not only that “the gods themselves are not for ever glad” but also that gods’ sorrow has been passed down on to humans. Importantly, in describing the gods as “the signers,” Ahab draws on the conventional understanding of the relationship between gods and humans as creditor and debtor. Ahab puts an interesting spin on this concept, however, by insinuating that what human beings owe to gods is sorrow and suffering. Along with his abhorrence of the view that sees suffering as divine punishment, Ahab’s emphasis on the notion of gods as the origin of sorrow and suffering rather than of human existence subtly challenges the belief that humans are indebted to gods. The Nietzschean philosopher similarly interrogates the origin of the “guilty feeling of indebtedness to the divinity” (GM 90). It does not seem to be a coincidence, then, that just like the Nietzschean philosopher, Ahab seeks to break human bondage to God, and to explore human capacity to its maximum extent by shaking off any sense of man as a sinner or a debtor, which explains his intense desire for independence and control.
Ahab’s aspiration to sovereignty of mind makes it possible to compare him directly with the Nietzschean overman, whose way of relating to others bears a significant similarity to Ahab’s. Just as the Nietzschean overman looks down on the herd who blindly follow “slave morality,” Ahab does not hide contempt for his men who are too weak to raise any objection to God about their suffering and believes that they deserve to be treated as slaves. This is why Ahab does not scorn wickedness and impertinence so much as he despises weakness and incapacity, as is expressed in his response to Starbuck’s concern about “‘Vengeance on a dumb brute!’”: “‘Take off thine eye! More intolerable than fiends’ glaring is a doltish stare!’” (144). Ahab’s position is that by not raising a question about their suffering, humans forfeit responsibility for their own lives, and, consequently, they are not entitled to enjoy the privileges of the sovereign individual. In spite of his overall contempt for the weakness of human beings, however, Ahab pays immediate attention to the suffering and danger of others. For example, when he learns about what happens to Pip, Ahab suggests that he should live in the Captain’s cabin with him from then on and holds the boy’s hand, which Pip regards as “a man-rope; something that weak souls may hold by” (428). On another occasion, when he hears the story of Perth, Ahab instantly expresses his sympathy, saying “‘In no Paradise myself, I am impatient of all misery’” (403). It is important to note here that when Ahab expresses what appears to be compassion or pity, it is not out of individual concern for them, but out of his deep-rooted consciousness of the general fate of human beings, who are fated to suffer meaninglessly. Ahab’s concern for others is nothing other than an expression of his pride as a sovereign individual who superimposes his own fate of abandonment onto mankind as a whole and wills to overcome it. That is, like Nietzsche’s overman who
rejects Schopenhauer’s insistence on overcoming our egoistic desires and seeking compassionate feelings for others, Ahab is free from the preoccupation with the need to sympathize with others. In this sense, Ahab embraces ethical egoism, which is not surprising considering his refusal to renounce his “will to life” manifested in his desire to harpoon Moby Dick.

When it comes to metaphysical egoism, however, Ahab apparently parts ways with the Nietzschean overman. As stated earlier, the premise that the self is the primary basis of knowledge is the starting point for both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as they construct their own systems of moral philosophy, and Ahab’s pursuit of the truth and meaning of life is based on the same premise. While Schopenhauer rejects egoism in both metaphysical and ethical senses, Nietzsche accepts egoism in both senses. Nietzsche does not believe that it is possible or even desirable to overcome metaphysical egoism, and his acceptance of metaphysical egoism is inextricably tied to his notion of perspectivism that denies the “old conceptual fiction that posited a ‘pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject’” (GM 119). Ahab’s case is more complicated. As discussed in the previous paragraph, Ahab embraces ethical egoism, but through his attempt to transcend the distinction between subject and object on the phenomenal level through physical contact with the whale, he refuses to accept metaphysical egoism. Ahab stakes his life on the possibility of grasping objective, transcendent truth, which in turn suggests that he has to believe in the existence of metaphysical reality. What this means is that Ahab needs to accept a dualistic view that posits two different kinds of reality: phenomenonal reality and metaphenomenal reality.
The intensity of Ahab’s physical suffering seems important in understanding his need to accept dualism, which leads to his curious position on egoism. It is true that it is hard to separate his bodily suffering from his spiritual agony, but the way in which Ahab physically suffers is unique in that it constantly reinforces his spiritual suffering by reminding him of his dependence on his body. At the first night watch, explaining to the ship’s carpenter how he can still feel sensations in his lost leg, Ahab says, “so, now, here is only one distinct leg to the eye, yet two to the soul” (391), and here, it seems that Ahab’s power of mind and soul is above his physical loss and ailing. Later in the same scene, however, when the carpenter tells Ahab that he needs to wait another hour for the artificial leg to be done, Ahab exclaims, “Oh, Life! Here I am, proud as a Greek god, and yet standing debtor to this blockhead for a bone to stand on! Cursed be that mortal interindebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air” (391-92). For Ahab, the thought of his reliance on the ivory leg made of the whale’s bone, and in turn, his reliance on the carpenter, is abominable, because it reminds him that despite his feeling that he is as free and independent as “a Greek god,” he is in fact a fragile human being who cannot help being affected by the loss of his body part. Ahab’s use of the term “debtor” is particularly significant within the context of his rejection of the account of the relationship between gods and humans as creditor and debtor. Even though Ahab ardently desires to erase the account of his debts to gods recorded in the “ledgers,” his indebtedness to the “blockhead for a bone to stand on,” which he calls the “moral interindebtedness,” “will not do away with ledgers.”

44 In “The Three-Stranded Allegory of Moby-Dick,” Allen Austin sees Ahab’s “transcendentalism, particularly his failure to accept the fundamental fact of man’s inter-indebtedness” (348) as the negative
to be the biggest obstacle to his pursuit of absolute independence and freedom, and in
order to overcome this particular obstacle, Ahab needs to posit and grasp metaphysical
reality that exists above the conditions of the phenomenal world, as evinced in the
meaning he attaches to the harpooning of the whale. Thus, it appears that unlike
Nietzsche’s overman who would deny not only the existence of gods, but also the
metaphysical world itself, Ahab, in basing his denial of one concept of gods on another
metaphysical concept, ultimately fails to break through the wall of metaphysics. In other
words, it seems that Ahab succeeds in freeing himself from the imposition of a given
concept of God or gods, but remains subject to metaphysics.

However, Ahab’s conceptualization of a divine entity in the form of a fire-god
makes his seeming acceptance of the dualistic worldview much more complicated. One
night when white flames appear at the top of the Pequod’s three main masts because of
the weird weather, Ahab addresses the “clear spirit of clear fire,” which he sees as the
personification of the fire-god:

“Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did
worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the
scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is
defiance. To neither love nor reverence wilt thou be kind; and e’en for hate thou
canst but kill; and all are killed. No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy
speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will
dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the
personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best;
whencesoe’er I came; wheresoe’er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly
personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights. But war is pain, and hate is
woe. Come in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee; but at thy
highest, come as mere supernal power; and though thou launchest navies of full-
freighted worlds, there’s that in here that still remains indifferent. Oh, thou clear
spirit, of thy fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to
thee. . . ” (416-17)
In this speech, Ahab assumes the role of a high priest by identifying himself as “Persian” who once “did worship” the fire-god, and expounds on his view of the “right worship” of the god. Contrary to a commonly accepted view of religious practices in which divine beings demand obedience and reverence from their worshippers, Ahab deems defiance to be the best form of worship for the fire-god. In order to explain this oxymoronic concept, Ahab elaborates on the continual fight between him and the fire-god’s “speechless, placeless power” that he claims he owns. Even though he owns the fire-god’s power, which is apparently hard for most people to acquire given its “speechless, placeless” qualities, it does not keep him in awe of the fire-god’s power or make him revere it; instead, it makes him fight its power. Then, Ahab demands that the fire-god should come to him in the form of love to be worshiped without being defied. If the fire-god exercises his power to the full, Ahab, as “a true child of fire,” will not relent but use the same power he inherited from the god to fight the power of the fire-god. Ahab’s use of the metaphor of back-fire is significant in that it showcases Ahab’s need for the idea of god in asserting his independent spirit. While Ahab breathes fire back to the fire-god, in order to defy the fire-god in this manner, he needs the fire-god who “of thy [his] fire . . . madest” Ahab in the first place.

Ahab’s description of the fire-god as his begetter leads to the following speech in which he offers his thoughts about the origin of the fire-god himself, and it proves quite important in comprehending why Ahab feels the need to worship the fire-god even in the form of defiance in his search of absolute independence or freedom:

“Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee! The javelins cease; open eyes; see, or not? There burn the flames! Oh, thou magnanimous! Now I do glory in my
Comparing his own origin with that of the fire-god, Ahab contends that he knows his father, but not his mother. Ahab’s “puzzle” is not only that he knows only his father but also that he does not know what his “fiery father” has “done with her.” Considering his depiction of the fire-god as his “fiery father” with scorching, burning, and blinding power, by “my sweet mother,” Ahab seems to mean the god with opposite qualities, such as caring, loving, and soothing power. Now that he knows that the fire-god with violent, cruel, and destructive power is his father, Ahab, satisfied with the knowledge of his origin, “glor[ies] in my[his] genealogy.” Though Ahab does not know his “sweet mother,” through his use of the term “mother,” he acknowledges that he is a descendant not only of the “fiery” god but also of the “sweet” god with benevolent qualities, which intimates that Ahab posits gods as the sources of both good and evil. Ahab’s rejection of the view that aligns gods only with good, coupled with his reference to fire worship, reveals the influence of the Zoroastrian religion, and in pointing out the link between Ahab’s fire-god and the Zoroastrian god, a number of critics have pointed out the echo of the Zoroastrian beliefs and practices in Moby-Dick.\textsuperscript{45} Aside from that, Ahab’s question

\textsuperscript{45} Charles C. Walcutt argues that Melville’s employment of Zoroastrianism, which sees the universe divided “between two equal forces [of good and evil] in ceaseless conflict,” helped him to “question the
“what hast thou done with her?”, which implies that he perceives the relationship between his “fiery father” and his “sweet mother” to be one of conflict, also draws on the belief of the Parsees or Indian Zoroastrians that there exists “a continual struggle between Ahura Mazda (literally ‘the Wise Lord’), All-Good represented by light and the opposing Ahriman, All-Evil represented by darkness” (Isani 387).

Yet, Ahab’s remark on the puzzle of the fire-god, which he claims to be “greater” than his own, makes it clear that Ahab does not passively accept the Zoroastrian conceptualization of God. The puzzle of Ahab’s fire-god is that he is “unbegotten” and “unbegun.” Orthodox worshippers of the Zoroastrian teachings would consider this to be the proof of the fire-god’s primacy and absoluteness, and Ahab holds that the fire-god can call himself “unbegotten” and “unbegun” only because he does not know his own origin and beginning. Ahab thus does not believe that the fire-god is the original creator of all things. This is why he calls the fire-god “foundling fire,” implying that the fire-god has his own begetter, which Ahab describes as “some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical.” In understanding the implications of Ahab’s irreverent attitude toward the fire-god, Mukhtar Ali Isani’s comparison between Fedallah and Ahab in light of the orthodox

orthodox Christian and Transcendental belief in the essential goodness of the universe and in the idea of progress” (305). While Walcutt does not acknowledge Melville’s indebtedness to Pierre Bayle, most critics dealing with Melville’s treatment of Zoroastrianism agree that Bayle’s An Historical and Critical Dictionary served as the most important source for Melville. Specifically, in a letter to Duyckinck of 5 April 1849, Melville expressed his excitement that he “bought a set of Bayle’s Dictionary the other day” and revealed his intention “to lay the great old folios side by side & go to sleep on them thro’ the summer.” Emphasizing Melville’s investment with the “symbols taken chiefly from Bayle’s important essay on Zoroaster,” Millicent Bell argues that “Ahab may not be Zoroaster, yet he inherits his qualities” (638, 639). For the most comprehensive discussion of Melville’s use of Bayle’s Dictionary, see Mukhtar Ali Isani’s “Zoroastrianism and the Fire Symbolism in Moby-Dick.”
Zoroastrianism is quite illuminating. Isani argues that Fedallah, the Parsee harpooner, “deceives and uses the rebel Ahab for his own orthodox religious ends” (388) of “aid[ing] Mazda through the destruction of the largest of Ahriman’s creatures” (387).

Specifically, Isani holds that whereas Ahab “searches in anger and defiance” after “what could be called supernatural ‘injury’” (387), Fedallah “continues to hunt the whale in ritual of devotion and sacrifice” (388). Isani’s interpretation of the contrast between Ahab and Fedallah explains how Ahab can fearlessly declare “I blow out the last fear!” (419) and extinguish the last flames of the corposant, when Fedallah shows his infinite deference to the corposant’s flames which, as a form of fire, symbolize the god of light and truth for the Parsees. In this regard, Ahab’s defiant worship of the fire-god is done in the form of the denial of the fire-god’s absoluteness and supremacy. One might argue that Ahab’s presupposition of “some unsuffusing thing beyond” the fire-god suggests that he still believes in the existence of a being whose eternity is indeed eternity and whose creativeness is creative and that Ahab’s defiant worship of the fire-god only leads to the search for the ultimate source of life and moral values. Ahab’s envisioning of his relationship with the fire-god, however, insinuates that he is interested less in finding out the fire-god’s begetter as a real object of worship than in rethinking the given notions of worship and defiance. Ahab’s statement that “Light though thou be, thou leapest out of

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46 Quoting from Bayle’s Dictionary, Isani explains that “The Zoroastrians ‘think that of Animals, such as Dogs, Fowls, and Urchins, belong to the Good [Principle], and Water Animals to the Bad; for which reason they account him happy that kills the most of them’ (387). “The largest of Ahriman’s creatures” in the novel, of course, is Moby Dick.

47 On this account, Thornton Y. Booth’s reading of Ahab’s rebellion against God’s authority needs some revision. As Booth claims, it is true that Ahab’s examination of the following problems is an important part of his spiritual journey: “the question of the basis of ultimate morality, of whether there are standards which may be applied even to a god, to see whether he is worthy to be worshiped; and the question of how
darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee” needs to be understood in this context. If Ahab were interested in tracing the origin of the fire-god, he would throw questions about the “darkness” out of which the fire-god leaps. Instead, Ahab draws attention to how the fire-god’s origin affects the understanding of his own origin, describing himself as “darkness leaping out of” the fire-god. By accentuating the similarity between his relationship to the fire-god and the fire-god’s relationship to his own begetter, Ahab subtly blurs the distinctions between light and darkness, worship and defiance, and consequently good and evil.\footnote{In this regard, Ahab is not necessarily being paradoxical when he baptizes the harpoon in the name of the devil, while invoking God at other times without any qualms. Ahab professes to be a worshipper of the devil when he orders the blacksmith to forge the harpoon with which he will kill Moby Dick. He asks the three pagan harpooners to present their blood for tempering the barb, and shrieks, “Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!” (404), which means “I do not baptize you [the harpoon] in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil.” For Ahab, the distinction between God and the devil is not absolute. It is also noteworthy that Melville ends his letter to Hawthorne on 29 June 1851 by writing: “Shall I send you a fin of the Whale by way of a specimen mouthful? . . . This is the book’s motto (the secret one).—Ego non baptizo te in nomine—make out the rest yourself.” Since the Latin sentence was part of Melville’s note labeled “Devil as Quaker,” which Melville jotted down in volume 7 of his set of Shakespeare, this Satanic invocation had long been thought to be Melville’s own creation. It turned out, however, most of the sentences of this note were extracted from Sir Francis Palgrave’s “Superstition and Knowledge” published in 1823. For the discussion of the original source and critical history of this note, see Geoffrey Sanborn’s essay, “The Name of the Devil: Melville’s Other ‘Extracts’ for Moby-Dick.”}

The revolutionary import of Ahab’s defiant worship of the fire-god can be further clarified when it is read in relation to Nietzsche’s comment on Zarathustra’s “most calamitous error, morality”:

\[F\]or what constitutes the tremendous historical uniqueness of that Persian is just the opposite of this. Zarathustra was the first to consider the fight of good and evil the very wheel in the machinery of things: the transposition of morality into the metaphysical realm, as a force, cause, and end in itself, is his work. But this question itself is at bottom its own answer. Zarathustra created this most calamitous error, morality; consequently, he must also be the first to recognize it. Not only has he more experience in this matter, for a longer time, than any

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much man is, and how much God is, responsible for the evils that befall man” (43). Booth, however, fails to read how far Ahab actually goes in his questioning of God’s sovereignty.
other thinker—after all, the whole of history is the refutation by experiment of the principle of the so-called “moral world order”—what is more important is that Zarathustra is more truthful than any other thinker. . . . The self-overcoming of morality, out of truthfulness; the self-overcoming of the moralist, into his opposite—into me—that is what the name of Zarathustra means in my mouth. (Ecce Homo 327-28)

In this passage from Ecce Homo (1898), Nietzsche’s review of his earlier works and life, Nietzsche’s evaluation of Zarathustra’s treatment of the moral concepts of good and evil is a mixture of commendation and rebuke. Nietzsche praises the Persian prophet for bestowing on evil the status and power equivalent to good by “consider[ing] the fight of good and evil the very wheel in the machinery of things” and for providing an appropriate alternative to any religious view that associates good alone to a deity, as exemplified in Christianity. Nietzsche holds Zarathustra responsible, however, for bringing the ethical discourse “into the metaphysical realm, as a force, cause, and end in itself.” “[T]he transposition of morality into the metaphysical realm” is problematic for Nietzsche because as shown in the example of Schopenhauer’s moral philosophy, it ultimately leads to an acceptance of some kind of illusion of justice and order. Nietzsche does not merely denounce Zarathustra for having “created this most calamitous error, morality” on the level of metaphysics, however. Instead, Nietzsche maintains that as the creator of this error, Zarathustra “must also be the first to recognize it” and achieve “[t]he self-overcoming of morality.” It then turns out Nietzsche is “the first to recognize it,” the first to carry out this so-called “self-overcoming” on behalf of Zarathustra. Specifically,

49 For the discussion of Nietzsche’s sources on Zarathustra and other branches of Eastern philosophy, see Thomas H. Brobjer’s “Nietzsche’s Reading About Eastern Philosophy.” In particular, Brobjer gives an account of how Nietzsche first learned about Zarathustra: “In 1881 Nietzsche found and picked up the figure of Zarathustra as his spokesperson while reading the cultural historian and anthropologist Friedrich von Hellwald’s 839-page Culturgeschichte in ihrer natürlichen Entstehung bis zur Gegenwart (Augsburg, 1874; 2d ed., 1875)” (13).
presenting himself as the embodiment of the morality “opposite” to the one represented by Zarathustra, Nietzsche emphasizes how he was ironically able to accomplish what the original Zarathustra was supposed to accomplish through overcoming Zarathustra’s “most calamitous error.” The way in which Nietzsche appropriates the qualities of his predecessor to achieve his predecessor’s self-overcoming bears a significant resemblance to Ahab’s conceptualization of his relationship to the fire-god. Even though sired by the fire-god, who is “light,” Ahab is “darkness.” At the same time, however, Ahab’s darkness is more than the absence of light, because he has important qualities of light by owning the “speechless, placeless” power of the fire-god. Thus construed, when Ahab “defyingly” worships the fire-god with his power of darkness, he does not simply invert the relationship between light and darkness. Rather, just like Nietzsche’s rhetorical exploitation of Zarathustra’s questioning of the supremacy of good over evil for his own purpose, Ahab’s worship of the fire-god’s rebellious power eventually achieves defiance, which is essential to the penetration of the illusion of morality.

The congruence between Ahab and Nietzsche in terms of their view of Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) helps us to understand the centrality of the notion of God or metaphysical reality in Ahab’s overthrowing of the traditional system of metaphysics and ethics. Ahab presupposes God’s existence, but that does not necessarily mean that he believes in God’s existence or metaphysical reality. Likewise, even when Ahab takes the whale’s brow for the wall he has to break through to obtain freedom from God’s constraints upon him, he ponders the possibility that there might not be any force behind the whale, as is illustrated in the following statement: “‘Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond’” (144). In fact, there is a possibility that not only is there nothing beyond the
wall, but the wall itself does not exist. Ahab, however, immediately adds “‘But ’tis enough’” (144). Ahab is quite conscious that he has created an imaginary foe within himself and that he is actually chasing himself, yoked to the very idea he is chasing. This knowledge does not make him stop his pursuit, however, because, whether imaginary or real, the idea of metaphysical reality represented by the whale gives him an object of pursuit. Ahab’s comments on a life-buoy also illustrate another example of him using the idea of God or metaphysical reality without necessarily believing in it. Right before the final chase, when he looks at the ship’s new life-buoy that is made from a coffin, Ahab once again contemplates the significance of his quest. Trying to decide whether the symbolic meaning upon this life-buoy can be related to any religious hope for redemption, Ahab asks: “‘A life-buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver! I will think of that’” (433). The “life-buoy of a coffin” may be a symbol of Christ’s death and resurrection which brings redemption (“immortality”) to the believer, and by saying “I will think of that,” Ahab appears to be genuinely interested in engaging in the question of immortal life. But Ahab quickly adds, “‘But no. So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me’” (433). The implication of this statement is that Ahab feels he is “[s]o far gone” in pursuing his very mortal purpose that regardless of the possibility of its existence, metaphenomenal reality does not have any substantial bearing on the meaning of his life except as a point of reference—in order for Ahab to know how far he is gone “‘in the dark side of earth,’” he needs the “‘other side, the theoretic bright one.’”

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50 This coffin is made at Queequeg’s request when he senses that his death is imminent. But later he recovers, and when the ship’s own life-buoy is lost, this coffin is converted to a life-buoy in its place.
Considering Ahab’s radical view of God or metaphysical reality, it seems that there is hardly any difference between Ahab and the Nietzschean overman. The truth of the matter is that they draw quite different conclusions about how life should be led. Whereas the Nietzschean overman’s self-overcoming involves constant and rigorous examination of all concepts and values including his own, Ahab’s self-overcoming does not extend to examining the implications of his mad pursuit of Moby Dick. The image of Narcissus plunging into water after his own reflection which I discussed earlier in the chapter clarifies this critical difference between the Nietzschean overman and Ahab. While Ahab, regardless of his belief in metaphysical reality, seeks to penetrate the veil of appearance and acts like Narcissus who “plunged into” (14) water, the overman, averse to disregarding the fact that nothing exists behind the reflection of the self, would not attempt to make contact with the image on the water. Admittedly, the Nietzschean overman would not deny the attraction of the “tormenting, mild image” of his self, unlike the Schopenhauerian genius who would attempt to cut off all kinds of desire or longing for the image of the self and walk away from the image on the water. The Nietzschean overman, however, would not think of diving into the water not only because he does not believe in the existence of anything behind the image of the self but also because he is able to think about the meaning of his self-love from a distanced position without negating its significance or power. In Ahab’s case, in spite of all his consciousness of the craziness of his attempt to grasp transcendent reality through killing Moby Dick—seriously, he does not even believe in transcendent reality—his madness does not allow him to undertake self-overcoming that would lead him finally to give up on his futile project.
Once again, it all boils down to his “madness maddened” (147) by none but himself. Now that we know why Ahab must presuppose the existence of God or metaphysical reality without believing in it, we are back to the question of whether or not he has free will in overcoming his madness. The following comment Ishmael makes on Ahab’s single-minded quest for Moby Dick is quite enlightening in considering this matter: “‘[I]t must have been that, in Ahab’s case, yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own’” (175). Ishmael first remarks on how all of Ahab’s “thoughts and fancies” are focused on “his one supreme purpose” of chasing Moby Dick. He then describes the process by which Ahab loses control over his “one supreme purpose,” which “by its own sheer inveteracy of will” becomes a being independent of Ahab. This comment on how Ahab’s “one supreme purpose” develops into “a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own” indicates that although Ahab has free will in staying mad after the initial madness, once he uses his free will to lose his free will, he no longer has free will because his mad purpose assumes life of its own that defies Ahab’s control.

Here lies the significance of Ishmael’s invocation of the image of Prometheus. At the end of the same chapter, Ishmael exclaims, “God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates” (175). Ishmael’s remark on Ahab’s “thoughts” and “intense thinking” apparently seems to contradict Ahab’s statement that he never thinks: “Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels; that’s tingling enough for mortal man! to think’s audacity. God only
has that right and privilege” (460). As discussed above, this statement reveals Ahab’s belief that thinking involves so much suffering and pain that it belongs only to God, and I argued that Ahab uses his madness to protect him from the excruciating pain that arises from thinking. Considering the earlier statement that all of Ahab’s “thoughts and fancies” have been yielded up “to his one supreme purpose,” Ishmael is referring to Ahab’s thoughts before Ahab has maddened his madness—that is, before he loses control over his thoughts, before his “thoughts have created a creature in” Ahab—and thus his comment about Ahab’s thinking does not necessarily contradict Ahab’s claim that he “never thinks.” More importantly, Ishmael’s comment offers insights into the real function of Ahab’s madness that Ahab believes should guard him from the painful effects of thinking. Ahab has yielded all his thoughts up to his “one supreme” and mad purpose of pursuing Moby Dick so that his “madness maddened” by himself can protect him from the suffering and pain generated by thinking. The image of Prometheus who is tortured by the “vulture the very creature he creates,” however, insinuates that Ahab’s “madness maddened” intensifies his suffering even further rather than protects him from pain.51

51 Temira Pachmuss’ essay, “Prometheus and Job Reincarnated: Melville and Dostoevskij,” also reads Ahab as a Promethean figure, aruing that in his “conscious choice to defy God and exalt his selfhood, though such action rejects the path to salvation,” Ahab shows the essence of the Promethean spirit which concurs with the Hellenistic view of Fate’s decree that “human development be given infinite potentialities” (26-27). In spite of the insights into the rebellious spirit of Ahab as a modern Prometheus, Pachmuss’ essay loses sight of the context in which Prometheus is mentioned in the novel. Thus, Thomas Woodson’s “Ahab’s Greatness: Prometheus as Narcissus” offers a more perceptive reading of the reference to Prometheus in the novel. Woodson maintains that “Ahab is Prometheus, not stealing fire from the gods, but suffering the agony of an internal vulture” (361). Woodson even connects Ahab’s self-consuming agony to “the haunting phantom of a tormented Narcissus” (362). In this regard, Woodson’s reading of Ahab seems to bear a close resemblance to mine, but Woodson does not consider the process by which Ahab becomes a Promethean figure.
Overwhelmed and controlled by the creature of his own thinking, Ahab has no choice but to keep being driven by his purpose even though he knows it means the destruction of himself.

It is in this context that Ahab’s concept of fate should be interpreted. On the second day of the final chase, Ahab explains to Starbuck why he cannot be persuaded by Starbuck’s urgent request to stop the hunt:

“Starbuck, of late I’ve felt strangely moved to thee; ever since that hour we both saw—thou know’st what, in one another’s eyes. But in this matter of the whale, be the front of thy face to me as the palm of this hand—a lipless, unfeatured blank. Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. This whole act’s immutably decreed. ’Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates’ lieutenant; I act under orders. Look thou, underling! That thou obeyest mine.—Stand round me, men. (459).

Beseeching Starbuck to make “the front of thy face” into “a lipless, unfeatured blank,” Ahab essentially asks Starbuck to give up on thinking just as he did. Ahab’s stated reason for continuing the hunt is that “[t]his whole act’s immutably decreed,” meaning he does not have power to stop the chase. Ahab further emphasizes his lack of control over the whole situation by invoking the idea of fate, calling himself “the Fates’ lieutenant” who acts “under orders.” For Ahab, it is imperative to follow the orders of his fate, because it is what makes Ahab Ahab. The image of Starbuck and Ahab rehearsing the whole act “a billion years before this ocean rolled” seems to suggest through its reference to time that Ahab’s “fate” has been in existence from the beginning of time and that Ahab is buying into determinism in adopting this view of fate. Noticeably, however, Ahab imposes his fate onto Starbuck, who he claims is ordained to “obey mine,” by requesting him to give up his thinking to his own “one supreme purpose.” Considering the aforementioned process by which Ahab’s voluntary loss of the capacity for thinking along with his free
will leads to the creation of the creature that overpowers and controls him, Ahab’s fate can be seen as Ahab’s own creation which indeed has complete control of Ahab, as he claims. Ahab thus ironically reveals the power of his mind and will by creating his own fate, which eventually takes away his free will.
“COLORLESS, ALL-COLOR” OF EGOISM: A YOUNG PHILOSOPHER’S STRUGGLE IN “BARREN MAZES”

“For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away.”

SWOONING swim to less and less
Aspirant to nothingness!
Sobs of the worlds, and dole of kinds
That dumb endurers be-
Nirvana! absorb us in your skies,
Annul us into thee.

– “BUDDHA” from Timoleon, 1891

In “The Albatross,” Ahab cries, “Up helm! Keep her off round the world!”

Although Ishmael admits that Ahab’s exhortation inspires “proud feelings” (204), he adds that we must also ponder the following question: “whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct?” Ishmael then makes a rather ominous comment on the possible consequences of human beings’ attempt to reach beyond the limits imposed upon them: “But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed” (204).

Ishmael believes that the outcome of a “pursuit of those far mysteries,” or a “tormented chase of that demon phantom,” is anything but promising or encouraging, for it is either falling into “barren mazes” or being “midway . . . whelmed.” Given the conclusion of the
novel in which Ahab’s ship *Pequod* is “whelmed” in Ahab’s futile attempt to harpoon Moby Dick, being “midway . . . whelmed” can be seen as a reference to Ahab’s situation. It then remains to answer who is led on “in barren mazes,” and it seems possible to see Ishmael in this light as he is the only member of the crew who survives. Although Ishmael offers this remark on two different destinations of the whaling journey in the middle of the novel rather than at the end, considering that Ishmael recounts the story of his voyage after his survival, his comment on his own fate ultimately to be led on “in barren mazes” carries significant weight.

One might argue that both Ahab and Ishmael fall into “barren mazes” and are “whelmed” in the end—that is, they both die without resolving the “mysteries,” or capturing the “demon phantom”—and that it is not really a question of which character will be “whelmed” and which is led on in “barren mazes” so much as which of these two inevitable conditions applies to any character at any given moment. I still think, however, that although there is no way one can ultimately escape being led on in “barren mazes” or being “whelmed,” Ishmael is led on to “barren mazes” in a way no other character is in the novel.

In this chapter, I contend that the metaphor of “barren mazes” very aptly describes the end point of Ishmael’s philosophical journey during which Ishmael is constantly engaged in deconstructing his identity and blurring the distinction between his identity and others’. In analyzing Ishmael’s journey as a philosopher, I mainly focus on his view of the relation between subject and object along with his view of free will and fate. Through my discussion of Ishmael’s philosophical journey in this chapter, I argue that it is his attempt to encompass all perspectives that ultimately leads him on to “barren mazes.” Unlike Ahab who endeavors to overcome the barrier between subject and object by physically harpooning Moby Dick,
Ishmael attempts to transcend the distinction between his own subject position and other perspectives by merging his perspective with others while at the same time constantly distancing himself from other perspectives. On this account, Ishmael as a philosopher virtually identifies with almost every important philosopher of the Western tradition, and at the same time he cannot be identified with any single philosopher because he ultimately distances himself from what he initially identifies with. In the first section of this chapter, I examine Ishmael’s stance on Platonism and Christianity. As I already noted in the previous chapter, Platonism and Christianity laid the foundation of Western thinking, and that alone seems a legitimate reason to explore Ishmael’s philosophical position in relation to Platonism and Christianity whose transcendental idealism privileges soul over body. More importantly, however, Platonic dualism and the Christian concept of incarnation are quite significant in understanding why Ishmael attempts later in the novel to identify with and distance himself from such philosophers as Kant or Locke who contributed to the shift of the focus in the Western philosophy from metaphysics to epistemology. By looking at Ishmael’s simultaneous reassertion of Platonism and Christianity and renunciation of them, I contend that Ishmael can neither affirm the self nor negate it as the center of human cognition. I then turn my attention to Schopenhauer, because I believe Schopenhauer is the first major European philosopher who sought seriously to challenge and find an alternative to the essential tenets of Western philosophy, such as the dualism between subject and object, and the dualism between being and nothingness. Ishmael, however, does not find a refuge in Schopenhauer’s method of transcending the dualism through the renunciation of the self, because even when questioning the validity of the coherent selfhood as the knowing subject, Ishmael does not want to lose consciousness. Nevertheless, examining Ishmael’s
philosophical journey in light of Schopenhauer’s philosophy will bring us to closer to the workings of Melville’s mind. Comparing Ishmael’s observation of “a colorless all-color of atheism” in the whale with Schopenhauer’s paradoxical distinction between relative nothingness and absolute nothingness can help understand the direction and significance of Melville’s interrogation of the epistemological and metaphysical premises of the West. Also, examining Ishmael’s inability to think outside the frame of language constructed by Western empiricism in relation to Schopenhauer’s willingness to accept proto-linguistic concepts and pre-linguistic experiences will further illuminate why Ishmael’s perspectivism premised upon the Western epistemology can only “lead us on in barren mazes.”

4.1. A Young Platonist’s Reveries in the “forbidden seas”: Ishmael on Platonism and Christianity

Throughout the novel, Ishmael makes frequent references to Platonic philosophy and endorses its basic tenets without much reservation. In “The Mast-Head,” for example, elaborating on how his preoccupation with Platonic idealism made him keep “but sorry guard,” and why “those young Platonists,” who read “the Phaedon instead of Bowditch,” fail to show “sufficient ‘interest’ in the voyage” to capture whales, Ishmael reveals his disregard for the material world, one of the key aspects of Platonic idealism (139). Furthermore, when he suggests that “those young Platonists” believe they are “short-sighted,” Ishmael alludes to another important tenet of Platonic idealism (139). Ishmael’s point is that an imperfect vision is a precondition for meditation because a
perfect physical vision would hinder the process of meditation in his whaling voyage. Thus, Ishmael emphasizes the Platonic view that empirical vision does not help us see metaphenomenal reality.

Besides his direct reference to Plato’s writing and Platonic dualism that distinguishes empirical and transcendental reality, Ishmael’s meditation on the composition of his self is also heavily replete with Platonic overtones. Near the beginning of his voyage, Ishmael reveals his view of the relationship between body and soul as he explains the obstacles human beings face in understanding spiritual truth:

Ishmael’s refutation of the common belief that our “true substance” is our body rather than our soul is already indicative of his acceptance of Platonic dualism, which privileges soul over body. Ishmael even goes as far as to deny the value of his body completely and says that anyone can take his body, which is “the lees of my [his] better being,” because “it is not me [him].” Also, by proudly stating that “Jove himself cannot” break up his soul, Ishmael reaffirms another key concept in Platonism: the belief in the immortality of the soul. Most importantly, through the metaphor of “oysters observing the sun through the water,” Ishmael offers his own version of the allegory of the cave. In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato illustrates that when they are released from the chain and ascend to the

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52 It must be admitted that Ishmael’s view regarding the relationship between body and soul is as Christian as it is Platonic. Here, I would like to reuse Nietzsche’s statement that “Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people’” (*BGE* 193), which I quoted in Chapter 2. That is, Ishmael’s comment in this passage reveals the close affinity between Christianity and Platonism.
upper world, the prisoners, who were formerly chained deep down in an underground den and forced to see only the shadows of the images, will grow accustomed to the reflections of various objects including the reflection of the sun in the water before they can finally see the sun itself. Admittedly, unlike Plato’s escaped prisoners who would look at the reflection of the sun in the water, Ishmael’s oysters must see the sun through the water. But Ishmael’s metaphor of oysters can be interpreted as another version of the allegory of the cave in that both accentuate the difficulty of seeing the truth of things without being hindered by their reflections. By likening human beings who are “looking at things spiritual” to Plato’s escaped prisoners, Ishmael reiterates the Platonic contention that we are all prisoners living in a cave of the phenomenal world and that in order to obtain the absolute truth, we must escape from empirical reality and ascend into the light of true reality.  

Ishmael’s endorsement of platonic idealism is particularly significant in understanding his character. Although he will eventually distance himself from platonic idealism, Ishmael wholeheartedly privileges soul over body (idealism over empiricism) at least until he finds an alternative because it serves as a starting point in his questioning of the validity of the frame of knowledge constructed by Western epistemology. That is, even though he is aware of the limitations of the existing system of knowledge in offering access to absolute knowledge, as a scrupulous deep diver of truth, Ishmael cannot completely abandon his faith in obtaining transcendental knowledge and therefore considers the possibility of finding transcendent truth through the existing system of

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53 Merton Sealts relates this passage to the oyster passage from Plato’s Phaedo, the particular Platonic dialogue mentioned by Ishmael. Sealts specifically points out the similarities between Plato’s and Ishmael’s metaphoric use of the oyster, but his reading of Ishmael’s passage does not fully address the possibility of obtaining truth by human beings as escaped prisoners.
knowledge as far as he could: “would I could mount that whale and leap the topmost skies, to see whether the fabled heavens with all their countless tents really lie encamped beyond my mortal sight!” (234)

What complicates Ishmael’s stance on Platonic idealism, however, is the fact that in his whaling voyage, Ishmael cannot but recognize the centrality of the whale’s body to his desire to determine whether there is the ultimate truth and reality beyond the empirical experience. True to the Platonist doctrine, Ishmael is not interested in his own body. Nevertheless, although in a way quite different from Ahab’s obsession with the body of Moby Dick, Ishmael is obsessed with the whale’s body, and this obsession turns his narrative into an anatomy of some sort which investigates practically every single part of the whale’s body and attaches symbolic meaning to it. This is why, despite Ishmael’s apparent acceptance of the Platonic privileging of soul over body, the distinction between the empirical and metaphysical significance of the whale gets blurred in his narrative.

Regarding Ishmael’s oscillating position on Platonism, Merton Sealts suggests that whenever Ishmael forgets his oath to participate in Ahab’s hunt of Moby Dick, he “draws apart from Ahab as well as from his own earlier Platonism” (309). For example, in “A Squeeze of the Hand,” Ishmael recounts how the euphoria of commingling with other crew members while squeezing the lumps of sperm whale’s body into fluid has made him forget “all about our [their] horrible oath” and led him to reconsider the values of these various items of the empirical world as a way to attain the exalted life (348). Ishmael confesses that while washing his “hands” and “heart” in spermaceti, he “felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever” (348). Ishmael’s
contemplation on the philosophical implications of this euphoria in the same chapter further reveals his compounded view of the Platonic distinction between the physical and the metaphysical:

For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti (349).

In the midst of his serious project of pursuing transcendent truth, Ishmael realizes that “attainable felicity” as opposed to the unattainable phantom he pursues can be attained not through “the intellect or the fancy” but through familiar people or things one experiences in the realm of empirical existence and domestic life, such as “the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country.” Sealts is right, therefore, when he points out that Ishmael’s focus shifts “from the realm of intellect to the realm of tangible entities,” and this shift is “a repudiation of the Platonic scale of values and the idealistic assumption” (310).

The real complexity of Ishmael’s philosophical stance on Platonism, however, does not lie in the fact that it simply repudiates Platonism, because Ishmael claims that not only in certain cases, but “in all cases” (Italics mine), “man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity.” Ishmael’s dilemma is that unless he is willing to “lower” or “shift” his notion of “attainable felicity,” his desire cannot be quenched while his genuine “felicity”—he is pursing the ultimate truth, something completely transcendental—is by definition something that cannot be lowered or shifted.
Ishmael’s repudiation of Platonism and its basic assumptions needs to be understood as a part of his narrative structure in which he ultimately undermines all philosophical premises he has previously posited.54

Just as he simultaneously accepts and undermines the Platonic premises, Ishmael displays an ambivalent attitude toward Christianity. The Christian influence on Ishmael’s understanding of the whale’s body and its spiritual meaning is shown when Ishmael describes the albatross and “the White Steed of the Prairies” whose bodies are clothed with the same whiteness as Moby Dick (165). Addressing “the spiritual whiteness” of “the White Steed,” that “clothes him with divineness,” Ishmael asserts that although at times the divineness evoked by the horse’s whiteness “enforces a certain nameless terror,” it also commands “worship” (166). In his description of the mystic white bird, Ishmael claims that Coleridge is not the one who “first threw that spell; but God’s great, unflattering laureate, Nature” (164-5). In his note to this sentence, Ishmael adds that when he first saw an albatross, he felt that “in the wondrous bodily whiteness of the bird chiefly lurks the secret of the spell,” and “through its inexpressible, strange eyes, methought I peeped to secrets which took hold of God” (165). Ishmael confesses that he bowed himself to the bird, “as Abraham before the angels” (165). In this regards, Ishmael

54 Although her main concern is to show how Ishmael collapses the dualities the novel presents in order to help the reader understand the falsity of the very concept of duality, Rachela Permenter’s observation on the novel’s narrative pattern sheds light on Ishmael’s seeming inconsistency: “According to Moby-Dick’s narrative pattern, we cannot deny those rare appearances nor can we rely on them. Ishmael’s narrative can lead the reader to glimpses of nonduality by (1) presenting dualities, (2) blurring the distinctions between those dualities, (3) forcing the reader to choose a ‘side’ as a temporary configuration of truth, and (4) shaking a buffalos robe of some kind to lead the reader to question that choice” (147).
not only acknowledges the Christian notion of incarnation which refers to the act or state of assuming a physical body by divine spirit but also partakes in the worship of the divinity incarnated in the whiteness of these wondrous physical entities.

Ishmael being Ishmael, however, he also refutes some of the key tenets of Christianity. At the same time, however, he heavily draws on Christian imagery and concepts in his account of his philosophical and spiritual quest. Prior to his departure for Nantucket to find a whaler, for example, Ishmael confesses that he is “tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote,” and he loves to “sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts” (16). The biblical resonance in this statement is unmistakable. That Ishmael defines his quest as something that is “forbidden” implies that in embarking on his whaling journey, he feels he is overstepping the boundary established by some absolute authority or God. By evoking the biblical book of Genesis, according to which the first man is to be eternally banished from the Garden of Eden for having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, Ishmael suggests that even though he is aware that he is stepping over the boundary, his “everlasting itch for things remote” torments him so much so that he cannot but obey his own desire to seek knowledge—even if this amounts to disobeying the commandment not to seek it.

The real significance of the biblical resonance in Ishmael’s description of his quest as a “forbidden” voyage is that it sheds light on Ishmael’s understanding of egoism, which is almost diametrically opposed to Christian teachings on the relationship between the self and God. While recounting Father Mapple’s sermon about the difficulty of obeying God, Ishmael not only makes an allusion to Christian theology that postulates human beings are essentially selfish but also comments on the Christian notion of
obedience and disobedience to the self. According to Christian theology which commands human beings to obey God and love other human beings, the only kind of egoism that is permissible would be to obey one’s desire to live by the message and teachings of Jesus Christ. From the Christian perspective, then, Ishmael’s attempt to grasp the secret of life cannot but be seen as disobedience to God because it involves a kind of egoism which contradicts the will of God. Admittedly, at times, Ishmael seems prepared to renounce both the quest and the egoism and settle for “attainable felicity” of the circumscribed domestic sphere or in the communal identity of squeezing sperm oil with his fellow creatures. Nevertheless, Ishmael cannot help obeying himself to disobey God because for him, his “everlasting itch for things remote” is simply uncontrollable. This is why Ishmael is as obsessed with the pursuit of “forbidden” truth as Ahab. In both of them, the desire to seek their own tree of knowledge is inherent, presenting to both of them egoism as the most fundamental issue to grapple with. This does not mean, of course, that we can underestimate the difference between Ahab and Ishmael in their respective attempt to deal with the problem of egoism. Above all, their understanding of the significance of disobedience is quite different from each other. Ishmael is no doubt aware that his participation in the whaling voyage is a form of disobedience as is evidenced in his description of his quest as a forbidden sail. On the contrary, Ahab does not relate his own pursuit to the idea of disobedience or anything that is forbidden. He declares that he is acting under orders, which are, in fact, authorized by no other than Ahab himself. To Ahab, his quest is merely an expression of his own will to assert his power independent of any form of external authorities.
While Ishmael’s description of the forbidden sail belies his awareness of the Christian perspective on his “egoistic” quest, Ishmael’s concept of boundary illustrated through the contrast between the lives of seamen and those of landsmen suggests that he is not merely conscious of the Christian stance on his journey but actually keenly interested in undermining it. In “Brit,” reflecting on the contrast between the land and the sea, Ishmael remarks:

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return! (236)

Ishmael’s description of “one insular Tahiti full of peace and joy” once again evokes the image of the Garden of Eden separated from the violence and terror of life. Ishmael’s problem is that in order to live in this “insular Tahiti” protected from the strife and struggle of life, human beings must accept the terms according to which they are allowed only half knowledge of their life. In particular, Ishmael’s reference to “all the horrors of the half known life” encompassing this “Tahiti” suggests that to the genuine seekers of truth who are willing to risk their own life for knowledge, the unpenetrated life is a greater terror than the perils of the sea. Thus, contradicting his own warning to his readers not to push “off from that isle,” Ishmael chooses to sail away from this isolated heaven even though it means he can “never return.” It is in this context that Ishmael undermines the Christian virtue of living a life full of “peace and joy” that can only be obtained by residing in the blissful shelter designated by God. In this regard, Ishmael
shares Ahab’s agony over the mysteries of life beyond human intellectual power, and Ishmael’s desire to grapple with the question of transcendental ideality is as subversive as Ahab’s.

That said, Ishmael’s concept of the boundary between the land and the sea is quite different from Ahab’s concept of the wall he wants to transcend, and understanding this difference can further illuminate the attributes of their respective quests. When Ishmael mentions the boundary between “the verdant land” and the “appalling ocean,” he states that it is analogous to “something in yourself.” That is, Ishmael posits the boundary “in the soul of man” as well, not simply one between the self and the outside as Ahab does, pointing to the fact that his quest for truth is performed not only between the self and others but also within his self on the level of meditation. In the case of Ahab who endeavors to free himself from metaphysical egoism which posits that the self and its ideas are all that exists, what he needs to overcome is the wall that stands between subject and object. This is why Ahab feels that he must physically capture Moby Dick which he believes represents the malicious forces of external reality. In this sense, what Ahab seeks to go beyond is not a boundary within oneself but a division between the self and the outside world. In his egoistic quest for truth beyond his cognitive capacity, Ahab is chasing after the image he has created, but his subjective perspective does not allow him to acknowledge this paradox, hence Ahab’s futile attempt to overcome metaphysical egoism in the most egoistic manner. In contrast, Ishmael’s emphasis on the boundary existing within his own soul indicates that the greatest drama of life for Ishmael is cerebral rather than emotional and physical, and consequently, Ishmael’s quest takes a form of meditation rather than a physical activity to fight against external forces. More
specifically, Ishmael is engaged in meditation on multiple types of boundaries: meditation on “far mysteries” including the idea of the whale, meditation on the meaning of Ahab’s pursuit of Moby Dick, and meditation on the significance of his own meditation.

That Ishmael’s meditation is on these multiple types of boundaries is important in understanding why Ishmael is not “whelmed” in the middle of his voyage as Ahab is. As discussed earlier, Ishmael’s quest is similar to Ahab’s in that they both disobey external authority to obey themselves. However, whereas Ahab engages in a monomaniac pursuit of the whale, Ishmael seeks to distance himself from the objects of his pursuit and constantly reflects on the implications of his quest. Furthermore, the self-reflexivity of Ishmael’s all-encompassing perspective impels him simultaneously to absorb and interrogate the premises of Western thinking without being subsumed by any dominant branch of philosophy or religion. Although Ishmael as a young Platonist accepts some foundational principles of Platonism and various branches of rationalism and empiricism that derive from it, he sees them not only as guiding principles but also as objects of his own philosophical investigation. Likening the head of the right whale to “Locke’s head,” and the sperm whale’s head to “Kant’s” and exhorting seekers of truth to throw these heads overboard in “A Right Whale Killed,” for example, Ishmael suggests that in order to keep a balanced perspective in this kind of philosophical investigation, one should guard against excessive dependence on those giant figures of Western philosophy: “So, when on one side you hoist in Locke’s head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant’s and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds for ever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard,
and then you will float light and right” (277). The implication of Ishmael’s statement is that for the purpose of undertaking an all-comprehensive and unconstrained philosophical investigation, one should be aware of the importance of developing one’s own critical perspective instead of taking anything for granted. What needs to be emphasized here is that Ishmael does not simply suggest that one should entirely do away with any philosophical investigation that draws on “these thunder-heads” whose thoughts have great impacts on Western thinking. As evident in his subsequent question of where one can “obtain a better chance to study practical cetology than” the deck of the Pequod from whose side “a head of each” is hanging, Ishmael accentuates the importance of probing into various thoughts of Western tradition as well as engaging in an independent philosophical inquiry itself (278). Rather than simply dismissing or subscribing to any traditional branch of philosophy, Ishmael is underscoring the necessity of utilizing his whaling voyage as an opportunity to undertake a critical inquiry which interrogates the validity of the premises put forward by the Western tradition.

Ishmael’s reference to Locke and Kant in his study of “cetology” adds another dimension to the understanding of Melville’s stance on empiricist and rationalist tradition of the Western philosophy. Although no records exist of Melville’s having read Kant, there is sufficient evidence to show that by the time he was writing Moby-Dick he had obtained some basic knowledge of the ideas of these eminent philosophers. A number of

55 In “Platonic Tradition,” Sealts reads the reference as an allusion to the contemporary conflict between “adherents of John Locke’s empirical philosophy . . . and the so-called Transcendentalists of New England” (318).
critics have noted the influence of Locke’s philosophy on Melville’s works, but in examining the scope and direction of Melville’s thought, especially in *Moby-Dick*, it is much more important to consider his knowledge of Kant than that of Locke. It is commonly known that Melville’s understanding of Kant and German metaphysics was filtered through George J. Adler who, according to Melville’s journal entry, was “full of the German metaphysics, & discourses of Kant, Swedenborg, &c” (4). Melville got acquainted with Adler prior to his trip to England in 1849 through Duyckinck’s introduction, and during the voyage, Melville continually talked of “‘Fixed Fate, Free-will, fore-knowledge absolute’” with this German-English lexicographer (*Journal 5*).

Melville records that Adler, despite his acceptance of “the Scriptures as divine,” does not believe that “the Bible is absolutely infallible” but holds that “there are things out of God and independent of him,” things “such as that two & two make four” (*Journal 5*). Given Melville’s lifelong interest in religious and philosophical questions, it is not difficult to imagine that Melville took a keen interest in Adler’s position. In particular, Adler’s stance on the role of God and human beings’ agency in human knowledge is quite similar to the Kantian notion of synthetic *a priori* judgment that incorporates both traditional empiricist and rationalist position on epistemology while posing a question with regard to

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56 In discussing Melville’s religious background and influences in *Melville’s Religious Thought*, for example, William Braswell notes that in such works as *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Billy Budd*, Melville “mentioned Locke familiarly,” and commented “on his well-known theory about the human mind at birth” (14). Braswell contends that “The influence of such empirical philosophers as Hobbes, Locke, and Hume is also reflected in Melville’s representation of the spiritual faculty as held captive by the body” (91). Also, while examining the philosophical backgrounds of Melville’s memory, Bryan C. Short suggests that Melville’s understanding of Locke and Hume is not only present in his works, but it “can be inferred from his references to them, their ubiquity, and discussions of their and related views in works acquired by Melville or in his possession before 1851” (301).

57 Suggesting that Melville appears to have had access to Kant’s thought by way of Coleridge, John Wenke points out that on 8 February 1848, Melville purchased a copy of “Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* . . . which devotes part of Chapter IX to Kantian philosophy” (“Ontological Heroics,” 569).
God’s complete regulation of every branch of human knowledge. When exposed to one of the most controversial views of epistemology, Melville, who never ceased to grapple with metaphysics, may well have sought his own response to this ongoing discussion on the limits and possibilities of human knowledge and human beings’ religious faith. In this context, Ishmael’s comparison of heads of whales to Locke’s and Kant’s in the novel can be read as Melville’s conscious efforts to interrogate the thoughts represented by these philosophers. It is no wonder, then, that Melville’s quest has a strong affinity with the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, because as I discussed in Chapter 2, Schopenhauer critically accepts Kant’s view of the relationship between the perceiving subject and the object of knowledge, and Nietzsche in his turn simultaneously admires and rejects Schopenhauer’s view. In the next section, I examine Ishmael’s concept of fate and free will and his view of “the whiteness of the whale” in relation to Schopenhauer’s understanding of ethical and metaphysical egoism in order to further illuminate the direction and import of Melville’s philosophical inquiry.

58 In *Melville’s Art of Democracy*, Nancy Fredricks suggests that Melville may have been using the “conceit of the two whale’s heads” as a way to declare “his independence from both Locke in New York [of the empiricist tradition] and Kant in New England [of the transcendentalist movement].” Fredricks argues, however, that “by situating himself in opposition to both empiricism and a tradition of idealism that he associates with Plato, Melville places himself in line with Kant’s actual philosophy” (18). In this regard, Fredricks’s emphasis on Kant’s critique of Lockean empiricism and Platonic idealism in understanding Melville’s thoughts is similar to my position, but she does not extend her argument to discuss how Melville’s examination of empiricism and rationalism evolves and resembles the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, both of whom developed their ideas partially in response to Kant’s philosophy.
4.2. Between Egoism and Madness: Ishmael’s Confrontation of “the universal
cannibalism of the sea”

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Schopenhauer subscribes to the Plato-Kantian dualist
idealism that splits the world into the phenomenal and the metaphenomenal, and portrays
existence as endless conflicts and struggle among creatures. In stating that “Columbus
sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his one superficial western one”
because the sea is “an everlasting terra incognita,” Ishmael also acknowledges the
distinction posited by the traditional idealists between the “superficial” world and the true
world that lies beyond ordinary human beings’ cognitive faculty (235). Besides this
dualistic worldview between the noumenal and the phenomena, vividly recalling
Schopenhauer’s view of life, Ishmael portrays the sea as a place of “universal
cannibalism”:

But not only is the sea such a foe to man who is an alien to it, but it is also a
fiend to its own offspring; . . . the sea dashes even the mightiest whales against
the rocks, and leaves them there side by side with the split wrecks of ships. No
mercy, no power but its own controls it. . . . the universal cannibalism of the sea;
all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the
world began. (235)

Despite his emphasis on the inextricable connection between water and meditation, to
Ishmael, the sea is more than a locus of meditation, because the sea also symbolizes the
source of power that indiscriminately destroys all of the creatures in it. In addition,
Ishmael does not simply suggest that the sea has a tremendous power to kill even the
largest creature in it; the power of the sea is also arbitrary because the sea has a tendency
to destroy any creatures regardless of whether they are “alien to it” or they are “its own
offspring.” Ishmael’s view that the sea is absolutely indifferent to the volition and
wellbeing of any creature is very much akin to Schopenhauer’s postulation of the relationship between Will and representations. Both Schopenhauer’s concept of the Will and Ishmael’s view of the sea suggest that human beings are completely subject to the relentless force of the universe. Ishmael’s statement that all creatures of the sea “prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war” is even more striking because it echoes the Schopenhauerian explanation of how the Will, through the conflicts among different grades of its manifestation, “sinks its teeth into its own flesh, not knowing that it is injuring itself” (WWI 219). Just like Schopenhauer’s world, Ishmael’s sea is not only an arena of war of all against all but also a self-destructive force in itself.

Considering that Schopenhauer’s recognition of the “horror of existence” inevitably leads to the question of how much freedom human beings can exercise in their struggle to come to terms with the moral order of the universe, the affinity between Schopenhauer and Ishmael regarding their view of life makes it necessary to examine Ishmael’s stance on free will. Ishmael’s view of the relationship between free will and fate is far more complex than that of Ahab, who simply claims to have overridden the legitimacy of any external forces by evoking “Fates” and their “order” created and decreed by himself. In particular, Ishmael does not believe that human beings are absolutely free, and his concept of external forces that affect free will involves the concept of necessity as well as chance. In “The Mat-Maker,” Ishmael uses an extended metaphor of mat weaving to offer a complex view of the relationship among different determinants of the course of human life:

. . . that it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging
vibration, and that vibration merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending of other threads with its own. This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg’s impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric; this savage’s sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance—aye, chance, free will, and necessity—nowise incompatible—all interweavably working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course—its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events. (Italics mine, 185)

While weaving a “sword-mat” with Queequeg, Ishmael sketches a frame for “chance, free will, and necessity” to explain the operating mechanism of “Fates” in “Time.” Illustrating “the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration,” Ishmael compares the warp to “necessity” and underscores its fixity. Ishmael does not see necessity as the only force to affect events in human life, however. When Ishmael notes that he thought, “with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads,” his statement leaves room for a certain degree of human agency in life—even though the scope and direction of human life is “unalterable,” or limited by necessity. After thus pointing out the importance of both necessity and free will in determining his destiny, Ishmael refers to “Queequeg’s impulsive, indifferent sword” as “chance,” and labels it as “the concluding blow.” When he maintains that even though “prescribed” by both necessity and free will, chance “rules either,” Ishmael emphasizes that despite its contingency on circumstances—it is “restrained” by necessity and “directed” by free will—chance has certain power over
them, “producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric” of life. At the end of his meditation on fate in this passage, however, Ishmael once again accentuates the immutability of necessity and the autonomy of free will. That is, even though chance rendered by the actions or fortunes of others “has the last featuring blow at events,” “necessity” is “not to be swerved from its ultimate course” while “free will [is] still free to ply her shuttle between given threads.” In this context, Ishmael claims that “chance, free will, and necessity” are “nowise incompatible” and “all interweavingly working together.” The compatibility of “chance, free will, and necessity” postulated by Ishmael here raises an important question regarding human autonomy in life: what is the specific function of each factor in relation to one another? In particular, if the ultimate course of life is already determined, what kind of “free will” is allowed to human beings and to what extent are they free? To further complicate the matter, it is not entirely clear whether or not this is Ishmael’s final stance on free will, and as a matter of fact, Ishmael uses the phrase, “thought I,” twice, insinuating that in this passage he is simply recounting what he was thinking about fate and free will while weaving the sword mat with Queequeg, not what he learned as a result of the voyage.59

59 In his classic essay “Moby-Dick: Work of Art,” Walter Bezanson clearly distinguishes between two Ishmaels: “In Moby-Dick there are two Ishmaels, not one. The first Ishmael is the unfolding sensibility of the novel, the hand that writes the tale, the imagination through which all matters of the book pass. He is the narrator... The second Ishmael is... forecastle Ishmael or the younger Ishmael of ‘some years ago.’... Narrator Ishmael is merely young Ishmael grown older. He is the man who has already experienced all that we watch forecastle Ishmael going through as the story is told” (36-37). In particular, Bezanson points out the significance of shifts of tense in the narrative voice to explain the seeming discrepancies in Ishmael’s perspectives: “we are reminded by shifts of tense from time to time that while forecastle Ishmael is busy hunting whales narrator Ishmael is sifting memory and imagination in search of the many meanings of the dark adventure he has experienced” (38).
In “Loomings,” where he makes a retrospective comment regarding his free will and “the Fates,” Ishmael appears to deny the freedom of will by stating that human beings are supposed to perform the roles assigned by “the Fates” (16). Ishmael confesses that he belatedly realized that the course of action he had followed during the voyage had already been determined. More specifically, while reflecting on how he came to embark on the journey, Ishmael employs the trope of “the Fates” as the “stage managers” and speculates about the power of fate over his free will:

Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voyage, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces—though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment. (16)

Ishmael’s view of “the Fates” as “stage managers” and himself as someone who was to perform the part “set down” by those managers clearly indicates that at this point he believes his role in this whaling voyage was predetermined. What is truly interesting about Ishmael’s remark on the relationship between fate and free will, however, is not simply that he believes the course of actions he performed had been predetermined. Ishmael’s statement that the Fates *cajoled* him “into the delusion”—namely, a false idea that human beings have free will to make a choice—is indicative of his new realization that his volition and reasoning capacity themselves are the rendering of the Fates. That is, Ishmael is suggesting the possibility that earlier he thought his free will was “unbiased” and his judgment “discriminating,” only because the Fates coaxed him into believing so.
By advancing this view, Ishmael is practically endorsing determinism, which, if taken literally, cannot but contradict the compatibility of “free will, chance, and necessity” he posits in “The Mat-Maker.”

In fact, Melville contemplates the relationship between fate and free will in his other works, and in discussing Ishmael’s concepts of determinism and free will elaborated in Moby-Dick, Melville’s later work, “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” can offer useful insight. In the story, the attorney-narrator makes a comment on “‘Edwards on the Will’” and “‘Priestley on Necessity.’” Focusing on Melville’s juxtaposition of “will and necessity” in “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” W.R. Patrick in his article “Melville’s Bartleby and the Doctrine of Necessity” elaborates on the concept of limited free will advocated by Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Priestley as follows: “A central postulate of the

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60 This apparent contradiction between Ishmael’s views of free will presented in “Loomings” and “The Mat-Maker” warrants a further examination. It is plausible, as Bezanson’s two Ishmael hypothesis implies, that Ishmael learns a lesson from his whaling voyage, especially after he was rescued by the Rachael at the end of the voyage, and develops a view that contradicts the view he cherished earlier. In relation to Bezanson’s argument, a question Harrison Hayford raises regarding Ishmael’s development in the course of the narrative merits serious discussion. Focusing on the composition of the novel in “Is Moby-Dick a Botch?” Hayford puts it as follows: “A major question for criticism, but one never directly confronted, so far as I know, is this: does Ishmael, or does he not, undergo any development or change in the course of, or as a result of, his voyage on the Pequod? If so, what is this change? And how is it established?” (76-77) In fact, Hayford comes up with his own answer to this question: “I wish here merely to assert—dogmatically—that from the state in which Melville left the text ‘unelaborated’ it is impossible to give answers to these questions . . . You have only to examine the critical record of Moby-Dick to see the divergent answers. You have only to examine the text to discover the reason: Melville did not ‘elaborate’ the book in this dimension” (77). Applied to the issue at hand, Hayford’s view can offer an interesting suggestion. Since Ishmael makes a specific statement in the present tense about the “delusion” of his “freewill” after his whaling voyage, it can be assumed that Ishmael does not find free will to be a valid notion any longer and accepts determinism, thereby undergoing a fundamental change in his opinion on free will. But if by “free will” in “The Mat-Maker” Ishmael simply meant freedom to do as one pleases, his view does not seem to stand in direct conflict with “determinism,” and therefore, we cannot decide whether or not Ishmael changes his view regarding this matter by simply looking at shifts of tense in the novel. Another possible explanation for this seeming contradiction is that despite his apparent endorsement of determinism in “Loomings,” Ishmael does not actually change his viewpoint but holds free will still compatible with determinism somehow. Of course, in this case, his concepts of “free will” and “determinism” cannot be taken in their absolute senses, either. The significance of Ishmael’s his radical concepts of free will and fate will be dealt with in Chapter 5 in relation to Nietzsche’s notion of “Amor fati,” or the love of fate.
necessitarian doctrine was that of necessity, operating as prior causes and motives, determined the will, acts of willing in substance being acts of choosing or preferring, even a negation representing a choice ‘of the absence of the thing refused’” (39). Patrick relates these concepts of free will and necessity to those in “The Mat-Maker” and suggests that Ishmael’s postulation of free will as compatible with necessity can be understood as “the concept of limited free will,” which posits that “every volitional cause has a prior cause or motive just as the one before it had a cause or motive and so on back and back in an endless chain, the first link of which rests in God’s hand” (40). Just like Ishmael, the narrator in “Bartleby” confesses that he was gradually persuaded that “these troubles of mine . . . had been all predestinated from eternity,” and “Bartleby was billeted upon me from mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom” (548). The immediate implication of this view is that human beings are subject to fixed fate and completely powerless to alter the course of their life. This version of determinism further illuminates the nature of freedom granted to human beings. As Patrick argues, both Edwards and Priestley hold that “individuals have freedom to do as they will, to act in accordance with their preferences” (44), but they do not have freedom to change the patterns of their “volitional determinations or preferences” (42), because the patterns of these preferences are already determined by the Author of Nature. Consequently, people are “cajoled” into believing that they are free—they feel that they can act freely as their inclination or disposition appears to direct them—but they in fact do not have any autonomy over their inclination. In short, in explaining the compatibility of free will and necessity, the necessitarians define free will as liberty or freedom to do as one pleases, not as a power to control one’s own
preferences or determinations. If Ishmael’s concepts of free will and determinism coincide with those of the necessitarians, there does not seem any contradiction in his view of free will presented throughout his narrative. This hypothesis suggests that prior to or during his voyage, Ishmael felt he had free will, but his experiences during the voyage made him realize that everything, including his disposition and preferences, was predetermined.

Nonetheless, it is hard to conclude that Ishmael accepts the version of determinism advocated by the necessitarians, because the weight he attaches to the whaling voyage itself calls into question the sincerity of his claim that fate has set him down for this “shabby part.” Asserting that his whaling voyage was “formed part of grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago,” Ishmael notes that it “came in as a sort of brief interlude and solo between more extensive performances,” and provides an interesting example of the bill whose list includes his own voyage:

“Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United State.
WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL.
BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN.” (16)

Compared with the other two massive public events, Ishmael’s voyage indeed looks like a “shabby” performance carried out by a nonentity. Nonetheless, the way Ishmael presents his voyage is anything but casual. No matter how “shabby” it may be, his part is introduced along with these grandiose “performances.” Also, unlike these nominally “extensive” performances, which do not even carry any individual participant’s name in them, Ishmael’s individual endeavor, in spite of—or rather, precisely because of—the singularly unembellished phrase, “WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL,” seems far more conspicuous and intensive. In the same vein, despite his dismissal of the importance of
his whaling voyage in this passage, the extent to which Ishmael endeavours to attest the honor and dignity of whaling belies the unassuming manner he adopts in describing his own voyage. Ishmael even inserts a chapter titled “The Honor and Glory of Whaling,” where he “dive[s] into this matter of whaling” and reveals how greatly he was “transported with the reflection” that he himself belongs to “so emblazoned a fraternity” of “so many great demi-gods and heroes, prophets of all sorts” by participating in whaling (304). Also, in a “six-inch chapter” of “the stoneless grave of Bulkington,” Ishmael asserts that the life of a serious and passionate whaler is an expression of the earnest endeavor of human beings to find their own version of truth even at the cost of their own lives. Specifically, Ishmael posits that Bulkington glimpses the “mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore” (97). When he sympathizes with Bulkington’s acceptance of this “mortally intolerable truth,” Ishmael is essentially vindicating the most positive qualities of his own as a pursuer of truth. At the end of “The Advocate,” Ishmael even explicitly reveals his personal aspiration to “repute in that small but high hushed world which I might not be unreasonably ambitious of” and associates it with whaling: “if, at my death, my executors, or more properly my creditors, find any precious MSS. in my desk, then here I prospectively ascribe all the honor and the glory to whaling; for a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard” (101). Here again, there is a strong sense of pride in exploring the “forbidden territory”—that is, he is pursuing his will to transcend the boundary set up by some external force, be it “Fates” or “Providence”—on “a whale-ship” in lieu of studying metaphysics or theology at college.
Given Ishmael’s immense pride and ambition that derive from his engagement in the whaling voyage, his labeling of his own part as a shabby performance predetermined by “Providence” needs to be understood as a rhetorical ruse. Therefore, Ishmael’s endorsement of determinism cannot be taken at face value. As a matter of fact, the rhetorical strategy employed by Ishmael in “Loomings” sounds strikingly similar to Ahab’s claim that as “the Fates’ lieutenant,” he is acting “under orders” which are “immutably decreed” by Fates (459). At first glance, Ishmael’s quest and his rhetoric do not sound as powerful as Ahab’s, but the ramifications of Ishmael’s own appropriation of “Providence” or “Fates” are no less subversive than those of Ahab’s, because it is highly probable that just like Ahab, Ishmael evokes fate only to vindicate the choices he makes.

It is thus clear that Ishmael is not a kind of character who can readily succumb to the power of fate, and this brings us back to the question of why Ishmael is making these apparently contradictory statements with regard to free will and fate. Here it helps to look into the affinity between Schopenhauer and Ishmael in their understanding of fate and freedom, because Schopenhauer’s elaboration of this matter sheds light on how Ishmael’s view both resembles and departs from the necessitarians’ view. In particular, Schopenhauer’s elaboration of the seeming discrepancy between *a priori* and *a posteriori* perception of human freedom can elucidate Ishmael’s reference to determinism in “Loomings”:

> Hence the strange fact that everyone regards himself as *a priori* perfectly free, even in his individual actions, and believes that at any moment he could embark upon a different path in life, which would mean his becoming a different person. But *a posteriori*, through experience, he finds to his astonishment that he is not free, but subject to necessity; that in spite of all his resolutions and reflections he
does not alter his conduct, and that from the beginning of this life to the end of it, he must continue to play the very role which he himself condemns, and, as it were, play to the end the part he has undertaken. (*WWI* 46)

Schopenhauer’s view of the relationship between necessity and freedom is strikingly similar to Ishmael’s view of the false sense of freedom and the role of fate in determining human destinies. Just as Ishmael contends that fate “induced me to set about performing the part I did,” Schopenhauer maintains that “subject to necessity,” human beings “must continue to play” their role “to the end” regardless of their “resolutions and reflections.” Besides, when Schopenhauer suggests that one cannot “embark upon a different path in life,” unless one becomes “a different person,” he insinuates that individual human beings’ dispositions as well as intellectual and emotional capacities cannot be altered, either.61 Schopenhauer’s theory offers a philosophical explanation for why human beings have *a priori* sense of freedom, but *a posteriori* they learn through experience that they are not free at all, as is illustrated in Ishmael’s meditation upon whether free will and necessity are compatible or incompatible. Ishmael’s view of the compatibility in “The Mat-Maker” and his reference to the illusion of free will in “Loomings” is in accord with Schopenhauer’s explanation of human beings’ false sense of freedom and their belated realization of its illusory nature, and this similarity in their views intimates that the seeming discrepancies in Ishmael’s account can be understood not so much a change of view on his part as the registration of his reflections on the inevitable situation in which human beings’ cognitive capacity operates in the empirical world. In this regard, both

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61 In the same vein, Schopenhauer maintains that necessity is the unfolding of one’s character.
Schopenhauer and Ishmael seem to agree with the necessitarians that the course of human life is already determined and that human beings cannot alter it no matter how vehemently they resist against their fate.

As I discussed earlier, however, despite his consciousness of the power of fate, Ishmael does not accept the necessitarian view of determinism without any qualification, and, in fact, neither Ishmael nor Schopenhauer completely embraces the deterministic worldview put forth by necessitarians. In particular, Schopenhauer’s appropriation of Kant’s distinction between “intelligible” and “empirical” character in developing his own view of fate and free can help elucidate in what specific ways Ishmael’s and Schopenhauer’s views differ from the necessitarian view. Adhering to the distinction made by Kant between “intelligible and empirical character,” Schopenhauer contends that the intelligible character is “the will as thing-in-itself in so far as it appears in a definite individual in a definite grade,” whereas the empirical character is “this phenomenon itself as it exhibits itself according to time in the mode of action, and according to space in the physical structure” (190). For Schopenhauer, although the subject as the empirical character is phenomenal objects contingent on necessity that regulates all forms of the principle of sufficient reasons, the subject as the intelligible character is to be regarded as “an act of will outside time,” perfectly free from the constraints of time and space and causality (190). It is Schopenhauer’s understanding of the subject as the intelligible character that allows him to consider the possibility of using free will to overcome the bondage to fate (or to use Schopenhauer’s term, Will), and here

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62 In Chapter 2, I argued that for Kant, this distinction allows him to consider how the agent’s capacity to follow understanding or reason without being constricted by spacio-temporal conditions can be compatible with the agent’s capacity to comply with the universal law of natural necessity that governs all events in the phenomenal world.
lies the real affinity between Schopenhauer and Ishmael in their response to determinism. Like necessitarians, both Schopenhauer and Ishmael are conscious of how human beings are being manipulated by fate or Will. Unlike necessitarians who do not consider the import of human beings’ awareness of the discrepancy between a priori and a posteriori consciousness, however, they both try to exert their free will to overcome metaphysical egoism or to go beyond the boundary between subject and object.

The question, of course, is how to transcend the boundary between subject and object, and Schopenhauer and Ishmael finally go separate ways in this matter. As for Schopenhauer, the consciousness of the gap between a priori and a posteriori consciousness leads him to use his free will to renounce his free will which is only a slave to Will. In other words, Schopenhauer allows for free will, which enables one to break free from the operation of the Will, but one can obtain this kind of absolute freedom only through the recognition of the Will’s full force and its modus operandi. To Schopenhauer, the ultimate purpose of exercising free will is to renounce one’s will to life, thereby entering the world of transcendence. Ishmael, on the contrary, attempts to transcend the distinction between subject and object without abnegating his free will, which is inherently a paradoxical project. His wish to merge his identity with others’ while keeping the contour of his own identity intact is quite closely tied to the all-encompassing perspective he adopts on everything. On the one hand, Ishmael seeks to experience everything that other characters experience from their subject positions by collapsing the boundary between their identities. On the other hand, the self-reflexive side of his character does not allow him completely to merge himself with the objects of his observation.
One of the most prominent examples of Ishmael’s attempt to erase the boundary between subject and object is given in the famous scene in which he squeezes the sperm from a whale with his fellow crew members. In “A Squeeze of the Hand,” Ishmael contemplates the metaphysical significance of squeezing the sperm with other beings as follows:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness (348-9).

In this passage, which has often been discussed in terms of homoeroticism, Ishmael uses the metaphor of “squeezing” to collapse the distinction between human bodies. While there is an unmistakably sensual resonance in Ishmael’s language—especially in such phrases as “squeezing,” “the gentle globules,” and “sperm”—his metaphor also communicates his desire to merge his own identity with that of other human beings. Moreover, Ishmael’s account that he looked into the eyes of his fellow seamen “sentimentally” suggests that his motivation to “squeeze into” them derives not so much from his sensual desire as from his recognition of the value of sympathy and solidarity among human beings who, with no exception, are constantly struggling against their own fate in this perilous universe. Then, “the very milk and sperm of kindness” into which he
“almost melted” can be seen as the reflection of Ishmael’s wish to do away with “social acerbitities” and “ill-humor or envy,” which are nothing but different modes of manifesting egoism.

If Ishmael and his “dear fellow beings” could succeed in squeezing themselves “into each other” as he wishes, he might overcome egoism, thereby obtaining the kind of salvation a Schopenhauerian genius seeks to achieve. Ishmael is well aware, however, that this is a task next to impossible for ordinary human beings who reside in the realm of empirical existence. Ishmael’s lament that “Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever!” succinctly expresses his realization that he cannot maintain this kind of euphoria and equanimity as a Schopenhauerian genius could (348). Whereas a Schopenhauerian genius does accept the falsity of the distinction between subject and object and deny egoism, Ishmael can only wish to collapse this distinction, but to no avail. As I discussed earlier in the chapter, Ishmael examines alternatives to obtaining metaphenomenal truth available to ordinary people by shifting his focus from the genuine “felicity” to the “attainable felicity,” which can be obtained by lowering or shifting his notion of felicity. This, however, does not quench Ishmael’s own desire to obtain transcendent truth, because even though he is unable to free himself from the constraints of the phenomenal world, or in Schopenhauer’s words, to penetrate “the veil of Maya,” what Ishmael is pursuing is truth not on the phenomenal level, but on the metaphenomenal level.

Although Ishmael fails to merge his identity with those of other crew members, his efforts to identify with Ahab are worthy of investigation in that Ahab also endeavors to transcend the distinction between subject and object. Ishmael first hears about Captain
Ahab thorough his conversation with Captain Peleg, a co-owner of the *Pequod* who is in charge of recruiting the crew for the voyage. According to Peleg, Ahab is “a grand, ungodly, god-like man,” who has “been in colleges, as well as ‘mong the cannibals” (76). In addition, Peleg reveals that “ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale,” he has been “a kind of moody,” but “Ahab has his humanities!” (77). Peleg remarks on this extraordinary captain leave Ishmael “full of thoughtfulness” as he walks away from the ship:

> what had been incidentally revealed to me of Captain Ahab, filled me with a certain wild vagueness of painfulness concerning him. And somehow, at the same time, I felt a sympathy and a sorrow for him, but for I don’t know what, unless it was the cruel loss of his leg. And yet I also felt a strange awe of him; but that sort of awe, which I cannot at all describe, was not exactly awe; I do not know what it was. But I felt it; and it did not disincline me towards him; though I felt impatience at what seemed like mystery in him, so imperfectly as he was known to me then. (77)

This passage suggests that even at the beginning Ishmael had mixed feelings toward this larger than life figure who suffered from the loss of his leg by a monstrous whale. Even though he had only second-hand and “imperfect” knowledge of Ahab at this time, Ishmael was already intrigued by Ahab’s life, as evident from his statement that he “felt impatience at what seemed like mystery in him.” Just like the idea of whale itself, the name of Ahab is for Ishmael an object of mystery. More specifically, along with “a certain wild vagueness of painfulness,” Ishmael confesses that he felt “a sympathy” for Ahab, if it is only for “the cruel loss of his leg.” Interestingly, Ishmael seems to downplay his emotional investment in Ahab. For example, immediately after admitting that he also “felt a strange awe of him,” Ishmael adds that it was not exactly awe. Ishmael then makes an additional statement that even though he did not know the exact nature of this feeling,
he “felt it.” In this regard, what is remarkable about Ishmael’s relationship with Ahab is that even prior to his actual encounter with Ahab, Ishmael was willing to extend the boundary of his own self to appreciate and share Ahab’s experiences and feelings. With the mixed feelings of curiosity, sympathy, and awe, Ishmael impatiently awaits his encounter with Ahab, and in “Quarterdeck,” it becomes quite clear that Ishmael superimposes parts of his own questions about life and existence onto those of Ahab. Identifying himself as one of the crew who committed themselves to Ahab’s oath to hunt Moby Dick to the end, Ishmael once again acknowledges his sympathy for Ahab: “and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine” (155). At this point, Ishmael’s own endeavor in the expedition becomes bound to Ahab’s pursuit, and Ishmael relates its meaning to what happens to Ahab. Furthermore, Ishmael suggests that his quest is subject to Ahab’s by stating that in this voyage with the crew that consists of “mongrels, renegades, and cannibals,” he himself is “a savage, owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals” (232). With his typically oscillating attitude toward life and people in general, however, Ishmael ensures that his pledge to render his service to the lord of the ship is not without qualification by adding that he is “ready at any moment to rebel against him” (232). Simultaneously admitting his attachment to Ahab and distancing himself from Ahab, Ishmael thus constantly complicates his relationship with Ahab. Ahab’s feelings of revenge “seemed,” but never actually were, Ishmael’s, and yet, Ishmael’s sympathy for Ahab’s quest is an essential part of Ishmael’s own quest.
That Ishmael’s attempt to merge his own quest with Ahab’s is a crucial part of his transcendental journey is further illustrated in his intense interest in, if not identification with, Ahab’s insanity, which he acknowledges as a vital source of Ahab’s greatness. One night, while others are engaged in boiling the blubber and extracting the oil from it with the try-works, a set of pots and furnaces planted in the deck, Ishmael stands at the tiller and becomes completely disoriented by the hellish fire and smoke from the kiln. In the midst of “a stark, bewildered feeling, as of death came over him,” Ishmael feels that “the tiller was, somehow, in some enchanted way, inverted” (354). Realizing that in his “brief sleep,” he “turned himself about,” Ishmael comes back to his senses just in time to avoid “capsizing” the ship (354). Grateful that he is relieved “from this unnatural hallucination of the night,” Ishmael cautions his audience against believing in “the artificial fire,” which he seems to associate with the fiendish pursuit of the whale by the crew, and shouts that “Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man!” (354). Ishmael then claims that as opposed to “the artificial fire,” whose “redness makes all things look ghastly,” “glorious, golden, glad sun” is “the only true lamp” (354). Apparently, Ishmael is repudiating Ahab’s monomaniac quest in which all the crew took an oath to participate. Ishmael does not overlook the importance of looking into the presence of darkness in human life and uncovering its causes, however. For he posits that “Nevertheless, the sun . . . hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth” (354). Furthermore, contending that “mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true—not true, or undeveloped,” Ishmael asserts that “the truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon’s, and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. ‘All is vanity.’ ALL”
Observing that “this willful world hath not got hold of unchristian Solomon’s wisdom yet,” Ishmael holds that a man who spends “a care-free lifetime” is not fitted to grasp the unfathomable wonders of Solomon (354). Ishmael further complicates the correlation between “wisdom” and “madness” as follows:

But even Solomon, he says, “the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain” (i.e. even while living) “in the congregation of the dead.” Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar. (354-5)

In this much quoted passage, Ishmael recognizes the danger of the pursuit of knowledge to its extremity by referring to Solomon’s injunction that “wandering out of the way of understanding”—whether it means human beings’ attempt to go beyond the boundary of rational thinking or to penetrate the veil of Maya—borders upon the realm of death. In the same vein, Ishmael warns his audience once again that they should not give themselves up to fire unless they want to be consumed by its relentless power. Here, the way Ishmael connects wisdom with woe, and woe with madness is particularly significant, because it illuminates his complex and ambivalent position on the impact of fire on the soul. Ishmael’s suggestion is that in some cases, wisdom can only be obtained in the form of madness and that wisdom as such can only lead to the profound sense of grief or suffering. Likening Ahab to “a Catskill eagle” who “can alike dive down into the blackest gorges” and who “even in his lowest swoop . . . is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar,” Ishmael insinuates that this kind of wisdom achieved through madness is still closer to truth than the wisdom conceived of by
ordinary people who choose to avoid confronting the reality of life for fear that they be “inverted,” or “deadened.”\textsuperscript{63} Ishmael’s belief is that Ahab’s deep diving may lead him to insanity and destruction, but owing to the greatness of his soul as a “mountain eagle,” he is privileged with the “higher” or nobler plain of existence than the dull existence granted to the mediocre people of uninquisitive mind.

Interestingly, despite his ardent wish to merge his quest with Ahab’s, Ishmael’s all-encompassing perspective does not let him be content with acknowledging the benefits of “madness” for Ahab’s soul but leads him also to ponder another type of insanity and the wisdom gained thorough it. Regarding Pip’s insanity, Ishmael points out that when Pip plunged into the ocean and was left alone, Pip “saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad” (347).

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\item Whether Ishmael compares “a Catskill eagle” to Ahab or himself is not entirely clear in this passage. A number of critics have identified Ahab as the “Catskill eagle” Ishmael describes in the novel. Positing that “higher here may mean nobler or even closer to truth; so the ‘woe that is madness’ may be justified by the nature of reality,” for example, Charles C. Walcutt argues that Ishmael thinks of Ahab as “a Catskill eagle” who is capable of “diving into the blackest gorges” which stands for the darkest truth (113). Leo Marx also suggests that insomuch as Ishmael concludes “the true man is . . . the man of sorrows, the truest book, Ecclesiastes,” it is clear that “Ahab is a truer man than the Ishmael who dwelled upon ‘watery pastures’ and ‘muskly meadows’” (309). Some critics, however, have believed that the features of “a Catskill eagle” described in this passage refer to Ishmael. Kim Paffenroth, for one, contends that unlike Ahab with whom “this confrontation with human wretchedness will lead to madness and death,” Ishmael “is able to incorporate all the ‘vanity’ and ‘woe’ of God’s world into a life that finds meaning and fulfillment in both the most joyous and the most painful experiences” (208). Paffenroth maintains that “Ahab clearly has an eagle in his soul, but he has plunged forever into the gorge, or perhaps, Icarus-like, has soared too high and destroyed himself,” suggesting that Ahab is not the true “Catskill eagle” mentioned in this passage (208). Paffenroth is correct in taking into account the significance of Ahab’s tragic death, but quite contrary to his claim, Ahab’s attitude toward his own doom—Ahab accepts his life even in its most tragic form—genuinely reflects the spirit of “a Catskill eagle.” Also, Ishmael does not find his life meaningful and fulfilling precisely because he is unable to incorporate the world of God into the world of human beings. Besides, the narrator Ishmael who has “a sympathy and a sorrow” as well as some sort of “awe” for Ahab, his tragic hero with such extraordinary might and nobility, cannot possibly present himself to be superior to his hero. Germaine to his comparison of Ahab to “a Catskill eagle,” who would not be afraid of the power of the fire which “inverts” and “deaden” ordinary people, Ishmael offers in “The Needle” an apt illustration of how Ahab actually triumphs over the natural forces that invert the nautical instruments of the Pequod. When the crew, scared by the ship’s inverted compasses, interpret this turning as an omen against Ahab’s vengeful quest, Ahab asserts that they were simply turned by thunder over the night and fashions his own compass, hammering a new needle and chanting over it, “Look ye, for yourselves, if Ahab be not lord of the level loadstone! The Sun is East, and that compass swears it!” (425).
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Although Ishmael does not literally believe Pip’s encounter with God, he also admits that the loss of sanity or rational capacity is prerequisite to gaining some sort of transcendent truth. In fact, equating “man’s insanity” with “heaven’s sense,” Ishmael reiterates how heavenly wisdom is beyond “all mortal reason,” and how human beings think of “celestial thought” as “absurd and frantic” (347). The nature of Pip’s wisdom is further revealed in “The Doubloon,” one of the theatrical scenes, where various characters attempt to assign symbolic meaning to the doubloon in accordance with their own values and interest. Left alone on the deck, Pip makes an interesting comment on both the symbolic meaning of the doubloon and the significance of Ahab’s nailing the doubloon onto the ship’s mainmast. Referring to their futile conjecture to “unscrew” the doubloon, or “the ship’s navel,” Pip insinuates that “the consequence” of their unscrewing it would lead to the falling off of the bottom of the Pequod, resulting in the sinking of the ship (363). Shifting then into a prophetic tone, Pip announces with skeptical laughs that “the White Whale” will “nail” Ahab contrary to Ahab’s intention (363). Finally, the picture of God Pip illustrates as someone who “goes ‘mong the worlds blackberrying” is quite telling with regard to what kind of heavenly truth is revealed to Pip (363). Just as people pick or gather blackberries, God is described to pick the dead bodies of Ahab and his crew nailed by Moby Dick. The sound of “hish,” the rushing or whishing noise of a scythe, adds a cold and bleak reality to the image of God who is indifferent to human misery and affliction. To the extent that Pip accurately predicts what will happen to Ahab and his crew, Ishmael cannot but give credit to this somber picture of God’s ruthless treatment of human beings and thus acknowledge the benefits of Pip’s madness.
Significantly, Ishmael’s contemplation of Pip’s insanity serves to differentiate his journey from Ahab’s, for Ishmael’s all-encompassing attitude ultimately leads him to sympathize or identify with neither Ahab’s nor Pip’s insanity, no matter the gains. It is true that there are some noticeable similarities between Ahab’s and Pip’s madness. First of all, despite their different means of accessing truth—Ahab accesses it by means of “intense thinking,” and Pip by means of losing his thinking capacity—both cases can be seen as a form of madness. Also, given that Pip’s prophecy illuminates the general woe and futility of human life, this kind of truth presented by Pip seems to concur with the sentiments Ishmael assigns to Ahab and “the truest of all men” who is “the Man of Sorrows”: all is vain and sorrowful. In this regard, it is clear that although Ahab and Pip gain their wisdom in different manners, both seem to accept the pessimistic view of life. That said, there are some crucial differences between the two. When Pip foresees the abysmal death lying before the Pequod’s crew by the jaw of Moby Dick reflected in the doubloon, he accurately relates what will happen to them, but he does not act as a rational individual who speaks his own wisdom. Rather, Pip acts as if he were an agent through whom truth or some sort of spirit speaks. Although Pip predicts Ahab’s doom with such authority and accuracy, his insight into the reality of the matter can only be obtained through self-effacement, because supposedly he conveys the word of God as a result of his encounter with “God’s foot.” On the contrary, Ahab’s intense thinking does not accompany any kind of self-effacement. Instead, Ahab’s intense thinking leads him to create his own version of truth. For Ishmael, who is deeply interested in the issue of egoism and madness, the contrast between Ahab’s and Pip’s madness is quite significant. As shown in the passage I quoted elsewhere, Ishmael is aware that the potential harm of
Ahab’s “deep diving” is as great as its nobility and grandeur: “God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates” (175). Ahab’s deep diving is most likely to lead him to insanity and self-destruction. Nevertheless, Ahab’s deep diving is not the result of losing his identity, and Ahab intentionally attempts to control his insanity. In other words, Ahab does not choose to stay insane merely because his madness gives him strength to pursue his object. Ahab must stay insane because of what his “thoughts have created” in him: “a creature,” or something that has life and value of its own. To Ahab, then, madness is a device which makes him believe in a version of truth or illusion created by himself, and it is this fictionality of madness that grants him his reason of being without making him forfeit his self. Ishmael, on his part, does not profess to dive into the blackest gorges, even when he participates in deep diving by covertly observing other deep divers and superimposing his own quest upon theirs. Nor does he seek to follow in Pip’s footsteps and obtain the “celestial thought” through insanity. Ishmael observes both kinds of madness from a distance and contemplates their implications in terms of truth, rational capacity, and egoism. Where then does Ishmael position himself between Ahab’s self-created truth obtained through intense thinking at the cost of sanity and Pip’s “celestial thought” obtained at the cost of self-identity?

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64 Just like Pip who was left alone in the ocean, Ishmael floats upon the ocean for three days before he was rescued by the Rachel. One may wonder, therefore, whether Ishmael sees God’s foot and speaks it like Pip in his narrative, but Ishmael’s story cannot be read like Pip’s prophecy for two obvious reasons: first, unlike Pip, Ishmael does not experience self-effacement and obtain any “celestial thought” through his encounter with God; next, Ishmael does not prophesize what will happen to the crew but simply relates the story—what has already happened—to his audience. Besides, Ishmael is both a deep diver engaged in his own philosophical inquiries and the narrator of the tragic drama whose hero actively rebels against the unjust order of the universe.
Crucial to understanding Ishmael’s ambiguous attitude toward these two powerful, yet destructive modes of obtaining truth is how to measure the distance by which Ishmael experiments with the boundary of his consciousness. As a matter of fact, Ishmael confesses that he experienced “a strange sort of insanity,” as his identity merges with other sailors when they were all squeezing the sperm of the whale. This “sort of insanity” appears to resemble Pip’s insanity in that it makes him oblivious of his identity, but Ishmael’s insanity differs from Pip’s in two aspects. First, as I argued earlier, this kind of liberation from the bondage to egoism does not help him find the ultimate truth, because this way of expanding one’s self to encompass or merge with others’ can only be temporary in the empirical world. More importantly, even when experiencing this kind of insanity, Ishmael cannot bring himself to be one with the force which makes him feel merged with others. Unlike Pip who loses himself in his encounter with the absolute truth, Ishmael distances himself from his own experiences by turning them into objects of reflection. Ishmael thus does not lose his consciousness even in the midst of his sympathetic identification with others and is thoroughly aware of the implications and limits of his experiences. Ishmael’s insanity is different also from Ahab’s madness, because Ishmael merely approaches the state of insanity without ever actually succumbing to the destructive power of insanity as Ahab does. Again, Ishmael’s distance, or self-reflexivity, keeps him from creating his own version of truth that can easily result in self-destruction. It is clear then that Ishmael’s distance and his awareness of it are what distinguish his approach to truth from both Ahab’s and Pip’s. While his distance allows him to peep into these two different versions of truth and seek an alternative to
them—because this distance protects him from either completely losing his own identity or overreaching himself—this distance serves not only as an opportunity but as an obstacle for Ishmael’s quest when he appears to glimpse a certain kind of truth.

4.3 “Empty nothingness” or “a colourless all-colour” of Egoism?

Ishmael’s all-encompassing attitude through which he seeks to experience and, at the same time, maintain distance from everything that he observes presents a troublesome ambiguity, and this ambiguity is most plainly shown in his vision of the whale. In “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael addresses the symbolic meaning of the whiteness of the whale, stating that “what the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid” (163). Ishmael then claims that no matter how inscrutable and inexplicable it may be, “explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught,” suggesting that his own view of the symbolic meaning of the white whale is as indispensable as Ahab’s in relating the significance of their quests to his audience (164). After cataloguing various objects of “sweet,” “honorable,” and “sublime” associated with whiteness, Ishmael asserts that “there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood” (164). Characteristic of Ishmael’s observations that are often full of ambiguity and ambivalence, Ishmael’s statement on the meaning of the white hue associated with the whale’s skin exploits the language of indeterminacy and mixed feelings. Contrasting “love” in which “this visible world seems formed” with “fright” in which “the invisible spheres were formed,” Ishmael further contemplates the contradictory ideas he observes in the whiteness of the whale:
But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul; and more strange and far more portentous—why, as we have seen, it is at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian’s Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind. (169)

Ishmael states that he sees both the divineness of the Christian God and a mysterious and indefinable terror in the whale’s whiteness. The question is what makes him see not just “the very veil of the Christian’s Deity” but some sort of “agent in things the most appalling to mankind”? Why does the hue that evokes the thing which is most “spiritual” simultaneously emerge to Ishmael as the thing which is most “appalling”? Also, what does this seemingly contradictory view reveal about Ishmael’s own stance on truth and faith in terms of egoism?

Ishmael’s contemplation of the whiteness of the whale is related to the way in which Melville juxtaposes his grappling with metaphysics with his epistemological inquiry. In the same chapter, Ishmael elaborates on why this particular hue of the whale is “appalling,” and Ishmael’s reference to “atheism” provides a key to understanding the real import of his contemplation of this indefinable hue:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink? . . . and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colourless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like willful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear coloured and colouring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel
gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt? (169-70)

In this passage, Ishmael considers the possibility that the “indefiniteness” of the whale’s whiteness might betray the falsity of our trust in something absolute and eternal by reminding us of “the heartless voids and immensities of the universe” which leads to “the thought of annihilation.” Relating “the immensities of the universe,” a quality Christians commonly associate with the incomprehensible might of God, to “the heartless voids,” a concept that connotes the vacancy of any power, value, and authority, including God’s, Ishmael basically turns the conventional Christian rhetoric upside down. Further, when he speaks of “the visible absence of color, and at the same time, the concrete of all colors, . . . a double blankness, full of meaning” (169), Ishmael implies that divineness and nothingness cohabit in this colorless color, which in turn can at once contain the hue of everything and nothing, evoking both devotion and terror. This perplexing coexistence of conflicting elements might be understood as a synthesis that perhaps encompasses everything. As a young philosopher seeking absolute truth from a rationalistic and dualistic perspective, however, Ishmael finds it difficult to reconcile himself with this holistic concept which appears to embrace the Judeo-Christian belief only to reject its incontestable doctrine of worshipping Jehovah as the only creator of the universe. Ishmael is frightened to find in the whiteness of the whale “the palsied universe [lying] before us a leper.” This is frightening to Ishmael because compared to “a leper,” “the palsied universe” does not merely symbolize an indifferent passivity deprived of any energy or power of action. To Ishmael, “the palsied universe” imbued with the “blank tinge” is also a symbol of a relentless force—which might be compared to Schopenhauer’s Will—that
absorbs and assimilates everything indiscriminately without itself being affected by other objects. The religious and epistemological import of this observation is not simply that Ishmael’s view of the whiteness of the whale undermines human beings’ belief in God; his view also calls into question the status of the self as the center of knowledge that imposes meaning upon life, because confronted with this hue, the self itself may well be subsumed by it. In this context, Ishmael’s reference to himself as “the wretched infidel” who “gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him” does not merely convey the religious connotation. When exposed to this particular hue, Ishmael seems to think of himself as an “infidel” in yet another sense, because he cannot but lose faith in his self as a cognitive subject who can lend a determinate character to the world which lacks any inherent form. Just as “the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself or operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects . . . with its own blank tinge,” the whiteness of the whale can assign any meaning or value to “all objects while it itself remains “indeterminate.” Ultimately, therefore, human beings can bring their own values to the reading of the whiteness, but they cannot obtain objective and definitive knowledge of what the whiteness means. Their failure to obtain this knowledge can at best lead them to recognize that they cannot even tell what they know, what they do not know, and who they are, since this kind of epistemological impasse ultimately calls into question the basis of their own knowledge system and their belief in their own status as knowing subjects. Thus construed, this indeterminacy of whiteness of the whale might be seen as
the symbolic representation of the most esoteric realm of the universe which transcends all human understanding and exists even beyond the Providence of God; however, it can only pose a crisis of epistemology to Ishmael.  

Here, it seems imperative to compare this concept of “a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink” with Schopenhauer’s concept of “nothingness” for it might shed light on why the Schopenhauerian self-abnegation cannot be an answer for Ishmael. Just as Schopenhauer holds that the kind of nothingness he conceptualizes looks “empty” (WWR I, 409), in portraying the whiteness, Ishmael uses such negative terms as “voids,” “annihilation,” “absence,” “blankness,” and “atheism.” For Schopenhauer, however, despite its negative connotations, this “nothingness” is not a negative term at all, and seeking to “banish the dark impression of that nothingness” (411) in the final section of The World As Will and Representation, Schopenhauer first contends that “the concept of nothing is essentially relative, and always refers to a definite something that it negates” (409). According to Schopenhauer, the concept of nothing has been known (especially by Kant) to be the nihil privativum indicated by -- in contrast to +” in that this “negative sign (--) from the opposite point of view might become +,” and in contrast

65 Notably, Ishmael’s view of the whiteness of the whale is akin to the Buddhist concept of “Nirvana”: “Nirvana is like an empty mirror—no good, no bad, no color, no form, no anything. But when yellow comes, the mirror reflects yellow; when red comes the mirror becomes red” (Ashes 26). At the same time, however, the fact that Ishmael is deeply puzzled by this observation points to the limitations of his dualistic thinking. In light of the Buddhist view of “each and every phenomena” as “a momentary flash of existence,” as explicated by Richard Shrobe, the implication of Ishmael’s perplexity caused by his encounter with “a dumb blankness, full of meaning” becomes more evident: “Sometimes all the various senses are referred to as dust. What this means is, if you relate to seeing or hearing or sensing and feeling in a dualistic way—subject is here, object is over there—that is creating dust. But if subject and object, inside and outside, all—pitch!—come together, then that is complete seeing, complete sensing. Sometimes the whole world is referred to as a ‘dust world’” (Don’t Know Mind 20-21). While Buddhists seek and accept this level of truth beyond all knowledge as the ultimate truth, Ishmael cannot but be horrified by the prospect of abandoning all the knowledge system he has acquired so far for a new possibility that suggests our self—both body and soul—is no more than a product of our thinking and is to be annihilated in this immense universe which itself is nothing but “voids” or “blank.”
to this relative nothing “the nihil negativum has been set up, which would in every aspect
be nothing” (409). Rejecting this traditional distinction between the relative nothing and
absolute nothing, Schopenhauer argues that “every nihil negativum or absolute nothing, if
subordinated to a higher concept, will appear as a mere nihil privativum or relative
nothing, which can always change signs with what it negates, so that that would then be
thought of as negation, but it itself as affirmation” (409). When he states that “what is
universally assumed as positive, what we call being, the negation of which is expressed
by the concept of nothing in its most general significance, is exactly the world as
representation, which I have shown to the be objectivity, the mirror, of the will,”
Schopenhauer blurs the distinction between “being” and “nothing” by pointing out that
the distinction between positive and negative itself is valid only on the phenomenal level
(409-10). This is the ground on which Schopenhauer contends that “the denial and
surrender of all willing, and thus a deliverance from a world whose whole existence
presented itself to us as suffering” may appear “to us [who are still full of the will] as a
transition into empty nothingness” (408-9), but “to those in whom the will has turned and
denied itself” the distinction between subject and object itself no longer exists (412). This
is why Schopenhauer encourages people to confront this nothingness. As discussed
above, however, Ishmael cannot but “shrink” from this “atheism” and identify himself
with “the wretched infidel” who loses his faith in both God and his self. This leads us to
consider what Ishmael’s failure to embrace “being” and “nothing” simultaneously reveals
about his stance on egoism.

66 Here, echoing the Buddhist philosophy, Schopenhauer’s thought clearly anticipates the post-Structuralist
rejection of the binary oppositions and the hierarchy within the pairs.
In understanding the significance of Ishmael’s limitation as “a young Platonist” who cannot go behind the linguistic and categorical structures of the mind, it is helpful to consider the similarities and differences between Ishmael’s disoriented state of mind caused by his encounter with the whiteness of the whale and Schopenhauer’s willingness to accept pre-linguistic concepts and pre-linguistic experiences. Elaborating on the nature of “denial of the will” as a pre-linguistic experience, Schopenhauer posits that this kind of experience is akin to such esoteric moments as “ecstasy, rapture, illumination, union with God” (410). Schopenhauer admits that from the positivist point of view, “such a state cannot really be called knowledge, since it no longer has the form of subject and object” (410). In fact, Ishmael’s purported encounter with “the heartless voids and immensities of the universe” in the whiteness of the whale is quite similar to this kind of experience in that it “cannot [even] be further communicated” (410). Unlike Ishmael who is completely puzzled by what he observes, however, Schopenhauer is willing to embrace this sort of proto-linguistic experiences. Maintaining that every absolute nothing is ultimately relative nothing, Schopenhauer posits that absence is not the absolute void of things or concepts but a form of affirmation on a higher dimension. Therefore, Schopenhauer contends that those who surrender their will to life “must be satisfied here with negative knowledge, content to have reached the final landmark of the positive” (410). In other words, “with the free denial, the surrender, of the will” not only “all those phenomena”—which are only “the objectivity of the will”—but “time and space” and “subject and object” are all “abolished” (411). Hence, Schopenhauer’s famous conclusion: “No will: no representation, no world” (411). For Schopenhauer, the entrance into the apparent “empty nothingness” must be seen as a necessary step to obtain the
complete affirmation of one’s being beyond time and place. According to
Schopenhauer’s view, therefore, the indeterminate whiteness of the whale Ishmael
observes might be seen as the most secret realm of the universe, and this indeterminate,
impersonal realm can define the principle by which mankind must attempt to escape the
suffering of the world and achieve Nirvana through the complete negation of individual
identity and personality.67 But to Ishmael, this way of accepting nothingness amounts to
the negation of his self, and this self-contradictory vision of reality aggravates rather than

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67 It is commonly known that in developing his philosophical system, Schopenhauer is indebted to the
Buddhist philosophy which embraces a dynamic coexistence of contradictory factors to surpass all the
dualistic distinction conceived by the rationalist tradition of the West. Whether intentionally or not,
however, in posting the concept of “complete nothingness” beyond all knowledge, Schopenhauer fails to
elaborate on the more complex relationship among thinking, knowledge, and liberation put forward by
Buddhism. Reflecting on the Buddhist view of these concepts in light of different levels of I or self can
illuminate not only the significance of Schopenhauer’s view of nothingness but also the extent to which
Melville investigates the epistemology developed by the Western tradition. Here, Zen Master, Seung
Sahn’s exposition of the different phases of human cognition is quite pertinent. Seung Sahn explains Zen
by means of a circle on which five points are marked: zero degrees representing Small I attached to name
and form), ninety degrees representing Karma I attached to thinking (form is emptiness, emptiness is form),
one-hundred-eighty degrees representing Nothing I attached to emptiness (no form, no emptiness), two-
hundred-seventy degrees representing Freedom I attached to freedom, and three-hundred-sixty degrees
(exactly the same point as zero degrees) representing Big I which is no attachment thinking (form is form,
emptiness is emptiness. The truth is just like this.) In this regard, when he states that “We must not even
 evade it [nothingness], as the Indians do, by myths and meaningless words, such as reabsorption in
Brahman, or the Nirvana of the Buddhists” (411), Schopenhauer does not seem to grasp the full scope of
the Buddhist philosophy, because he assumes that the end point of Buddhist realization is what Seung Sahn
identifies as 180° where “there is no thinking at all. This is the experience of true emptiness. Before
thinking, there are no words and no speech. So there are no mountains, no rivers, no God, no Buddha,
nothing at all. There is only . . .” (Seung Sahn, Ashes 5). In fact, after thus articulating the Buddhist view of
different levels of I, the Zen Master even points out the impossibility of attaining this kind of wisdom
through words and letters by simply adding that “The circle is just a Zen teaching device. It doesn’t really
exist. We use it to simplify thinking and to test a student’s understanding” (Ashes 7). Melville does not
seem conversant with the philosophical and ethical implication of Buddhism in its entirety, either, but
Ishmael’s observation of the whiteness of the whale (“a colourless, all-colour of atheism”), when viewed in
light of Seng Sahn’s Zen Circle, suggests that in his interrogation of a range of metaphysical and
epistemological questions in Moby-Dick, Melville entertains a system of knowledge which has a very high
degree of natural fit with certain aspects of Buddhism (especially, “no form, no emptiness”) that
emphasizes the vanity of human attachment to name and form and the ineffability of truth beyond all
knowledge and thinking. For a more general discussion of Melville’s knowledge of Buddhism and Eastern
teachings, see Arthur Versluis’s American Transcendentalism and Asian Religion. According to Versluis,
“during the 1840’s and 1850’s, popular magazines were filled with piously horrified descriptions of
Buddhism,” and the “peculiar nineteenth-century version of Buddhism” in Europe and America wrongly
equated “annihilation” as the “end” of Buddhism (125, 126). Versluis argues that “the pattern—toward a
strange nihilistic amalgam of misinterpreted Buddhism and heretic Gnosticism—is clear from Melville’s
letter, stories, novels, and perhaps his life itself” (128).
solves his epistemological crisis. In order to accept this paradox, one should make a leap beyond conceptual thought to another level of understanding. Owing to his rational mind, however, Ishmael can neither accept this paradox nor remain comfortable with what he observes in the whiteness of the whale. Thus, Ishmael’s refusal to accept this paradoxical coexistence of being and nothingness suggests that in contrast to Schopenhauer who develops a system that transcends the linguistic and epistemological constraints of the Western tradition, even while engaged in an exceptionally rigorous examination of the basic premises of traditional philosophy and religion of the West, Ishmael can forfeit neither dualism nor egoism which serves as a basis of the Western thought. Unable to find a way to overcome metaphysical egoism, Ishmael remains suspended between belief and disbelief. It is in this context that Ishmael makes a perplexing statement that the combination of “doubts of all things earthly and intuitions of some things heavenly” “makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye” (314). In other words, Ishmael attempts to identify with both Ahab’s quest that utilizes human beings’ rational capacity to its extremity and Pip’s celestial thought which is intuitive or his own observation of the whiteness of the

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68 In a theological context, this sort of leap is often required in various religions, including Christianity, and as I discussed in Chapter 2, Schopenhauer also suggests that the idea of the freedom of the will-in-itself to deny itself to enter into nothingness does not contradict the Christian dogma which emphasizes self-renunciation as a prerequisite for the reception of Grace and salvation. In Christianity, this view is perhaps best exemplified in Kierkegaard’s idea of the leap of faith. Kierkegaard believed that without risk there is no faith and that faith is a passionate commitment beyond reason to the kind of truth which can be grasped in no other way. It should be noted, however, that if Ishmael makes a leap, his leap would not lead to his acceptance of Christianity, because even if Ishmael succeeds in bringing himself to make a leap and thus accepts the coexistence of the “veil of Christian’s Deity” and “atheism” in the whiteness of the whale, it would put him in a situation where he must deal with the contradiction of accepting belief in God and atheism at the same time. In this regard, the consequence of the leap lying before Ishmael seems closer to the instant enlightenment of Buddhism which posits a system of knowledge allowing for the existence of being and nothingness simultaneously than to the Kierkegaardian leap of faith which coincides with the Christian dogma.
whale, but either way, Ishmael cannot obtain the ultimate truth. This is a voice from someone who in the midst of his earnest pursuit of truth and the meaning of life confesses that he cannot completely affirm or negate metaphysical egoism, feeling trapped by the epistemological limitations he accepts as a foundation of his inquiry. In Ishmael’s statement, we hear the voice of Melville as a man who finds himself in a similar bind, in a sort of metaphysical vacuum: as “a deep thinker,” he must either hold onto rational understanding which can lead him nowhere in the realm of proto-linguistic experiences or make a leap which requires him to abandon the basis of his epistemological inquiry. If Ishmael succeeds in making a leap of faith or renouncing his self as the center of his consciousness as Schopenhauer suggests, all the binary oppositions set up in epistemology such as “subject/object,” “inside/outside,” and “being/nothingness” might come together and he could realize that the distinctions are not definitive. Just as there is “No will: no representation, no world” for Schopenhauer, so might there be no Ego for Ishmael (WWR I, 411). But Ishmael’s distance—that is, as a philosopher, he is attached to thinking, and his rational capacity creates distance between subject and object—not only preserves him from losing his sanity, but it also prevents him from making this leap. This is why even when he seems to grasp the paradox of “empty nothingness” by observing both “the very veil of the Christian’s Deity” and “a colourless, all-colour of atheism,” he feels appalled rather than liberated. Consequently, Ishmael presents himself

69 Insomuch as Ishmael’s quest is essentially to interrogate the basis of the Western knowledge system of which religion constitutes only a part, the term, “leap” needs to be understood no less in the context of epistemology than in the context of religion.

70 Ishmael fails to make a leap and retains his own identity only as a philosopher. In Chapter 5, I contend that as “a tragic dramatist,” Ishmael succeeds in experiencing and representing reality and he does so only on condition of a certain kind of loss of self.
as a seeker of truth who ends up “in barren mazes,” and Ishmael’s case demonstrates the limits of “deep thinking” constricted by the epistemological convention of the West (204).

It should be emphasized here, however, that Ishmael’s failure as a philosopher to obtain the ultimate truth does not mean the failure of Melville’s endeavor. For in portraying Ishmael’s conundrum, Melville does not necessarily privilege the Schopenhauerian leap, either religious or epistemological, over “deep thinking.” Rather, Ishmael’s boundary situation registers the rigor and scope of Melville’s interrogation of basic premise of the Western metaphysics and epistemology. As I will discuss in the following chapter, anticipating the Nietzschean participation in life and exemplification of reality as a way to the affirmation of existence, Melville, through the aesthetic portrayal of Ishmael’s conscious efforts as “a tragic dramatist” to represent the nonrepresentational, offers an alternative way of justifying human existence and turns the questions of metaphysics and epistemology into the questions of ethics and aesthetics. And this alternative is neither Christian nor Buddhist.
CHAPTER 5

REPRESENTING THE NONREPRESENTATIONAL: A TRAGIC DRAMATIST'S GRASP OF “THE UNGRAPABLE PHANTOM” OF THE WHALE

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.\(^7\)

–Heraclitus of Ephesus

As a character of flesh and blood, Ishmael virtually disappears and occasionally enters into other characters and speaks out of these characters. As a narrative voice of the tragic dramatist, however, Ishmael is present throughout the voyage and endeavors to grasp “the ungraspable phantom of life.” At the opening of “The Whiteness of the Whale,” when he expresses his desire to present his thoughts and feelings regarding the elusiveness of the white whale to his audience, Ishmael reveals his frustration about creative activity caused by his compulsion to represent the nonrepresentational:

. . . there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.

(163)

\(^7\) Fragment 41, quoted by Plato in *Cratylus*. 
In this passage, Ishmael suggests that what he hopes to represent is almost impossible to represent because it is “so mystical and well nigh ineffable.” Interestingly, however, Ishmael’s statement that he “almost despair[s] of putting it in a comprehensible form” does not simply point out the difficulty of representing this mysterious hue. This statement also indicates that even though Ishmael feels that there is “almost” no hope of representing this “ineffable” thing in a cogent manner, he does not completely give up on the idea of representing it. In fact, Ishmael’s awareness of the difficulty of representing “the whiteness of the whale” seems to make him all the more anxious to represent it to his audience, because Ishmael adds immediately that “and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.” At the same time, this passage insinuates that Ishmael at least “in some dim, random way” succeeds in capturing the whale and presenting it to his audience.

In Chapter 4, based on the close reading of the significance of “the whiteness of the whale” to Ishmael who is seeking rational explanation of things, I suggested that “a colourless, all-colour of atheism” Ishmael perceives in the white whale eventually leads him as a philosopher to an epistemological impasse, in other words, “a barren maze.” In this chapter, I contend that although Ishmael as a philosopher fails to grasp the white whale, Ishmael as a tragic dramatist manages to grasp the phantom of the whale albeit in “some dim, random way.” In understanding the mechanism of Ishmael’s aesthetic endeavor, it is crucial to bear in mind the two-folded nature of Ishmael’s aesthetic enterprise as a tragic dramatist: first, Ishmael witnesses and experiences Ahab’s pursuit of Moby-Dick; second, Ishmael attempts to grasp the phantom of the whale in his own way. In examining how Ishmael as a tragic dramatist sees Ahab’s encounter with the
whale, I will draw on Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy elaborated in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For Ishmael’s own encounter with the whale, I will draw on the concept of “becoming what one is,” which Nietzsche posits in his later works.

5.1. “Art saves him, and through art—life”: Nietzsche’s Aesthetic Justification of Human Existence and the Art of Becoming What One is

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche examines the origin and the significance of Greek tragedy which, he believes, enables human beings to embrace and celebrate life as it is including all its horror and absurdity. According to Nietzsche, before the influence of Dionysus, the Homeric world was primarily concerned with “mere appearances,” and developed its art “under the sway of the Apollonian impulse to beauty” (*BT* 34, 47). In this art conception which is best exemplified in sculptures, the observers of art can have the immediate understanding of figures, but they can never truly immerse themselves in art and life, because still “wrapped in the veil of maya,” they remain pure knowing subjects, or disinterested observers, rather than becoming active participants in art (*BT* 35). Later, this “naïve splendor” of the Homeric Greek was “overwhelmed by the influx of the Dionysian” primordial power (*BT* 47). As opposed to the Apollonian art symbolizing measure, restraint, and harmony, the Dionysian art symbolizes ecstasy, intoxication, and excess, and it forces the observers first to “look into the terrors of the individual existence,” and then tears them “momentarily from the bustle of the chaining figures,” eventually transforming them into “primordial being itself” (*BT* 104, 105). For Nietzsche, the Apollonian state of measured restraint separates the observers from the illusions and emotions that threaten them, whereas the Dionysian state of intoxication
allows them to break through those walls. Apollo and Dionysus thus represent two opposite impulses of the world of art, but they are not spoken of by Nietzsche in antagonistic terms. Even though the Dionysian “predominates in the total effect of tragedy,” they are both indispensable in the creation of tragedy, because the essence of Dionysus can be revealed only through the filtering and distorting agency of Apollo’s visionary appearances (BT 130).

Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy grounded in the artistic tension between the mere appearances and the primordial unity both resembles and differs from the basic concepts and structure of Schopenhauer’s view of tragedy based on the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. The operation of the Apollonian restraint is akin to Schopenhauer’s conception of the beautiful in which “pure knowledge has gained the upper hand without a struggle” (WWR 202). Although Schopenhauer does not believe this pure knowledge necessarily represents the world of illusion, an important similarity is found between Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s theories of tragedy: in both aesthetic experiences of the beautiful and the Apollonian, the distance between the subject and the object is maintained. Nietzsche’s view that the Dionysian ecstasy is the essence of tragic vision also resembles the notion of the sublime feelings described by Schopenhauer who posits that with the sublime “a free exaltation” is obtained and this exaltation is at the core of tragedy (WWR 202). In particular, Nietzsche’s elaboration of the Dionysian transformation of observers into “primordial being itself” can be understood as a development of Schopenhauer’s explanation of how in the process of obtaining this “free exaltation,” the individual willing merges into the universal human willing. The “free exaltation,” according to Schopenhauer, “must not only be won with consciousness, but
also be maintained, and it is therefore accompanied by a constant recollection of the will, yet not of single individual willing, such as fear or desire, but of human willing in general” (WWR 202). It seems clear then that in developing his concept of Dionysian art in which despite fear and pity, we become “the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose creative joy we are united,” Nietzsche basically accepts Schopenhauer’s concept of One Will (BT 105).

When it comes to the question of how to account for the state of the consciousness during the exalted experience, however, Nietzsche departs from Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer suggests that although the only thing that distinguishes the feeling of the sublime from that of the beautiful is the “addition” of “the exaltation beyond the known hostile relation of the contemplated object to the will in general,” this addition results in “several degrees of the sublime,” which are “in fact transitions from the beautiful to the sublime” according to the intensity of this addition (Italics mine, WWR 202). For Schopenhauer, the experience of the sublime that leads to the negation of will to life is completely separated from that of the beautiful, because while experiencing the sublime, the subject retains consciousness. On the other hand, for Nietzsche, the Dionysian is the feeling of a complete loss of the self while the consciousness is nonetheless maintained somehow. Specifically, during the aesthetic experiences the

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72 Taking an example of the way in which we confront “the infinite greatness of the universe in space and time,” Schopenhauer explains this process as follows: At first, the immensity of sublime objects makes us feel that we are “reduced to nothing,” but “against such a ghost of our consciousness,” “there arises the immediate consciousness that all these worlds exist only in our representations, only as modifications of the eternal subject of pure knowing. This we find ourselves to be, as soon as we forget individuality.” Previously, “the vastness of the world” disturbed “our peace of mind,” but “our dependence on it is now annulled by its dependence on us,” and we feel that in a sense, “we are one with the world, and are therefore not oppressed but exalted by its immensity” (WWI 205).
Apollonian and the Dionysian constantly interact with each other—they are “necessarily interdependent”—and while the Dionysian intoxication involves the loss of self, the subject’s consciousness can be preserved through the Apollonian restraint (*BT* 4).

Nietzsche revises the moral implications of Schopenhauer’s theory of art as well. Nietzsche’s emphasis on the importance of the unconscious and the irrational side of the human mind strongly echoes Schopenhauer’s view that the aesthetic perspective can serve as an alternative to rationalistic endeavor to obtain the ultimate knowledge of life. More specifically, reiterating Schopenhauer’s position that the aesthetic perspective can serve as an antidote to the Socratic obsession with ultimate trust in reason, Nietzsche asserts that only through the Dionysian ecstasy and intoxication can we expect to encounter the real nature of life and overcome the constraints of a rationalistic system which harness the passions and energy released from artistic experiences in the service of morality. Despite his endorsement of the importance of the unconscious suggested by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauer’s view of the purpose of tragedy.

Schopenhauer recognizes tragedy as “the summit of poetic art” as Nietzsche does, but he asserts that “the complete knowledge of the real nature of the world” gained through tragedy acts as “a quieter of the will” and “produces resignation” of “the whole will-to-live itself” (253). When Nietzsche declares that “every true tragedy leaves us—that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructible powerful

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73 Nietzsche makes this assertion more clearly and straightforwardly than Schopenhauer, however. For example, in *Ecce Homo*, anticipating Freud, Nietzsche makes an anti-Cartesian statement that “consciousness *is* a surface” (*EH*, Why I Am So Clever 9). Although Freud refused to admit that he was directly influenced by Nietzsche for developing his psychoanalytic theory, his tributes to Nietzsche for his insight into human psychology testify to Nietzsche’s role in illuminating the importance of the unconscious and the irrational: “The degree of introspection achieved by Nietzsche had never been achieved by anyone, nor is it likely to be reached again” (*Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society* II, 31-32).
and pleasurable” (BT 59), he wholeheartedly rejects Schopenhauer’s idea that the knowledge of tragic heroes is “purified and enhanced by suffering itself,” and this knowledge “sees through the form of the phenomenon” until “the egoism resting on this expires with it” (WWR 253).

Above all, Nietzsche’s vision of tragedy is far more complex and genuinely subversive, especially in terms of the value of art and the status of subjectivity. Nietzsche states that “we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author” of art and “we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified’ (BT 52). This famous dictum addresses two important issues which call for a fundamental revision of the traditional views of art and the status of subjectivity in art. First, Nietzsche’s assertion that only art can save “existence and the world” is tantamount to declaring that art replaces the role of god in life. In fact, Nietzsche equates the world of Greek gods with the world of art by referring to the Greek theological system as “the Olympian middle world of art” (BT 42). Nietzsche presumes that the Greeks were “so sensitive, so vehement in its desires, so singularly capable of suffering” that in order to endure existence, they had to create a world of beauty for their gods, whose “higher glory” could transform existence and suffering into something “desirable in itself” (BT 43). Nietzsche concludes that this way of aesthetic justification of life is “the only satisfactory theodicy!” (BT 43) The implication of this view is that theodicy is unconceivable in any religion which believes in a deity as the authentic creator of the universe. Second, Nietzsche’s perspective that human beings are “works of art” rather than artists suggests that life itself is a form of art and that in performing this art, the subjectivity of human
beings is to be seen as the product rather than a source. Given that the purpose of art for Nietzsche is not to induce a state of selflessness but to realize the self, Nietzsche’s belief in the justification of existence as an aesthetic phenomenon which necessitates a certain loss of subjectivity, or selfhood, seems quite self-contradictory. In order to understand the radical implications of this apparently paradoxical formula which states that the loss of self is a necessary condition for the self-realization in the Nietzschean aesthetic phenomena, we must examine some of the concepts Nietzsche elaborates in his later works.

The most critical concept Nietzsche develops in relation to his theory of tragedy is “becoming what one is,” a phrase that appears in *Gay Science* and in *Ecce Homo*. Nietzsche postulates this conjunction to offer a dynamic view of selfhood as a foundation of reevaluating both moral and aesthetic values of life. Since this conjunction encompasses the concepts of both becoming (freedom) and being (fate, destiny, necessity), “becoming what one is” is crucial to understanding how Nietzsche revises the view of the relationship between freedom and necessity posited by his German predecessors. According to David Owen, while Kant resolves the antinomy of becoming and being simultaneously by positing “the noumenal realm of freedom and the phenomenal realm of necessity,” Nietzsche transforms this antinomy “by locating the relationship of freedom and necessity as a temporal relationship” (66). Owen’s account of the Kantian justification of the antinomy can also be applied to Schopenhauer’s

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74 Notably, in *Gay Science*, Nietzsche poses this notion as opposed to the doctrine of the bad conscience, a sense of guilt shared by the mass who are false to the genuine feelings of their existence and the value of morality: “*What does your conscience say?*—You shall become who you are” (270). For Nietzsche, as David Owen points out, this idea expresses “the overcoming of [the] separation of the agent and action—the reification of consciousness—thereby signifying the abolition of the conditions of the possibility of the idea of guilt” (66).
acceptance of the dualistic understanding of the noumenal and the phenomenal, respectively the locus of freedom and necessity. It is in this context that Nietzsche’s aphorism of “becoming who one is” offers a positive alternative to both the Kantian and Schopenhauerian antinomy of freedom and necessity. Interestingly, however, Nietzsche takes this notion of the temporal relationship between freedom and necessity a step further when he claims that in order to become what one is, “one must not have the faintest notion what one is” (EH “Why I Am So Clever,” 9). Nietzsche appears to reject the “willing” of the self by offering a seemingly contradictory view that one just becomes what one is as if this were the acceptance of one’s fate or destiny rather than making a conscious choice to become what one desires to be.

Besides illuminating the moral implications of his reevaluation of the status of self, Nietzsche’s idea of the mutability of selfhood conceived of in the notion of “becoming what one is” sheds light on his view of the relationship between art and life. While the validity and authority of a peculiarly aesthetic notion of truthfulness envisioned by Nietzsche is contingent upon the status of self, the self itself is indeterminate, and this indeterminacy of self is at the core of the Nietzschean schema of artistic experiences. Both the subject of knowing (self) and the object of knowing (truth) can only be perceived as a facet or fragment of the totality of consciousness and events in the trajectory of one’s entire life, because the self as the subject who experiences and represents life is always fleeting through one’s consciousness which is unstable itself. Thus construed, Nietzsche’s conceptualization of the self which is always-already in
progress has undoubtedly enormous implications—not only moral and theological but also epistemological and aesthetic. But the question is how the artistic excitement of such a self might be experienced and communicated?

For Nietzsche, experiencing artistic excitement is inseparable from a process of destruction and recreation, and above all, this experience is made possible through the loss of self-possession and the union with the primordial being itself. Nietzsche clarifies this point when he suggests that the completeness of nature’s art impulses “is not dependent upon the intellectual attitude or the artistic culture of any single being,” while as “intoxicated reality,” it seeks to “destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness” (BT 38). Even though artistic energies “burst from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist,” the entire dramatic experience necessitates the active—or, more precisely, enraptured—involvement of the dramatist, actors, and spectators, the distinctions among whom eventually collapse in the course of their performing this art (BT 38). Viewing the original chorus of proto-tragedy as the image of the Dionysian man, Nietzsche explains that “in song and in dance” of this satyr-play, the Dionysian man “expresses himself as walking about enchanted, in ecstasy, like the gods he saw walking in his dreams” and “feels himself a god” (BT 37). At this point, entranced by “the artistic power of all nature” that “reveals itself to the highest gratification of the primordial unity,” the Dionysian man “is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art” (BT 37). Thus, according to Nietzsche, the artist, who is no other than the satyric chorus, can experience this kind of ecstasy and transformation only through participation in his own existence as a performance. With regard to the role of a dramatist, Nietzsche holds that a dramatist is not the one who creates all these experiences. Rather, suggesting
that the dramatist is merely a conduit through whom the Dionysian chorus discharges itself, he defines a dramatist as a man who has the artistic gift to “behold continually a vivid play and to live constantly surrounded by hosts of spirits,” and feels “the urge to transform himself and to speak out of other bodies and souls” (*BT* 64). Rejecting the common belief that the ideal spectator “must always remain conscious that he was viewing a work of art, and not an empirical reality,” Nietzsche firmly states that the spectators of the Greek tragedy were “forced to recognize real beings in the figures on the stage” (57). In the presence of the satyric chorus who represented the real truth of nature and existence as opposed to the lie of culture, the Greek man of culture “felt himself nullified” and yielded to “an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature” (*BT* 57, 59). While the chorus, acting as a “living wall” constructed around tragedy, closes it off “from the world of reality” and preserves “its ideal domain and its poetical freedom,” the peculiar structure of the Greek theater—“the terraced structure of concentric arcs” which “recalls a lonely valley in the mountains”—made every spectator “actually overlook the whole world of culture around him,” and “imagine in absorbed contemplation,” himself to be “a chorist” (*BT* 63). This way, the dramatist awakens those spirits which inhabit all human beings and presents the dynamic forces of existence without mediation, allowing the spectators to see and participate in the embodiment of their united consciousness on the stage. It is in this context that Nietzsche states that “Here we have a surrender of individuality and a way of entering into another character. And this phenomenon is encountered epidemically” (*BT* 64).
In this regard, the most important factors which make the tragic experience possible are the unique roles of the chorus and music. As illustrated above, in this proto-tragedy, which is dithyramb, or a vehement and wild choric hymn performed in honor of Dionysus, the artistic impulses of the chorus were easily communicated to the audience, because unlike other arts, music is “not a copy of the phenomenon, but an immediate copy of the will itself” (BT 100). More specifically, Nietzsche believes that music alone represents pre-linguistic experiences and that songs and dances allow the spectators to understand the joy involved in the annihilation of the individual and feel the urge to transform themselves into a being more exalted than their worldly ego. In this art conception, the spectators surrender themselves to the free flow of life and become dancers, and while dancing to the song of the primordial unity, the dancers become one with music, each of which manifests itself through the other, erasing the boundary between the subject and the object as well as the one between art and life. In such a creative act of “giv[ing] a birth to a dancing star,” what is inside and individual, and what is outside and universal, become one (Z, Prologue, part 5). Thus, music facilitates the destruction of individuality and the creation of the rejuvenated life out of chaos and disorder. However, as Nietzsche’s assumption that music is the most ideal language of the tragic art suggests, this kind of experience seems quite inconceivable in an ordinary language which communicates feelings and ideas relying on human beings’ reasoning capacities and logical conventions, raising a question about the limits of our powers to represent the sublime and the primordial in language.\(^{75}\)

\(^{75}\) Although the subtle differences between the sublime and the Dionysian could be further clarified, in Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy, they have almost the same connotations. Hereafter, when I refer to the Dionysian, I assume that the connotations of this term include the sublime.
In fact, throughout his career, Nietzsche examines the validity of language in representation, and the most important concept he posits in this endeavor is dissimulation as truth. In “On Truth and Lies,” Nietzsche discusses “linguistic conventions” and asks, “Are designations congruent with things? Is language the adequate expression of reality?” (“OTL” 81). Nietzsche’s question here does not presuppose a transcendental reality or things-in-themselves which can be represented by means of language. Rather, he raises this question as a way to reevaluate the value of the truthfulness attached to language as a medium to express reality conceived and imposed by society. Echoing his methods of investigating the genealogy of morals, Nietzsche relates the origin of the truthfulness of language to the construction of society, and suggests that society cannot exist without ignoring truth in favor of the value of truthfulness. In explaining the utility of truthfulness in society, Nietzsche introduces a term, “dissimulation,” an act of making oneself appear what one is not, and holds that the intellect of weak animals like human beings “unfolds its principle powers in dissimulation” in order to “preserve themselves” (“OTL” 84). Although dissimulation is based on false presentation of one’s identity, once it is accepted by society as “truthfulness,” it can serve for the preservation of society. That is, insofar as the society can prevent its own member from using this art of dissimulation against each other, this way of deceiving the value of existence within the herd can help them get “deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images,” resulting in their “wearing a mask, hiding behind convention, playing a role for others and for

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76 In the remainder of my discussion of Nietzsche’s theory of dissimulation, I am indebted to Fiona Jenkins’s “Performative identity: Nietzsche on the force of art and language” in Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts (pp. 212-38).
oneself” (“OTL” 84). In his later note, which is included in *Will to Power*, Nietzsche further elaborates on the herd’s “morality of truthfulness” and why the truthful representation of selfhood is imperative in this society:

Morality of truthfulness in the herd: “You shall be knowable, express your inner nature by clear and constant signs—otherwise, you are dangerous: and if you are evil, your ability to dissimulate is the worst thing for the herd. . . . you must consider yourself knowable, you may not be concealed from yourself, you may not believe that you change.” Thus: the demand for truthfulness presupposes the knowability and stability of the person. In fact, it is the object of education to create in the herd member a definite faith concerning the nature of man: it first invents the faith and then demands “truthfulness.” (*WP* 158)

The doctrine of “morality of truthfulness” in society is premised on its “definite faith concerning the nature of man,” and as Jenkins rightly puts it, this faith dictates that there is an essence of things—and by extension, an essence of man—and that it is possible to capture in language this essence. This logic of the necessity of constructing and maintaining a stable identity requires, in Jenkins’s words, “the sublimation of dynamic performance into static representation” (229). In this society, dissimulation—that is, as opposed to truthfulness—is to be seen as the worst threat to the stability of society and to its demand for “the knowability and stability” of each other’s essence. Therefore, when Nietzsche maintains that such truthfulness derives from the “duty to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone,” he suggests that society effectively converts this art of dissimulation into the utility of truthfulness (“OTL” 84). In this regard, Nietzsche’s explication of the construction of a fixed identity in this society offers a penetrating insight into the way in which the essentialist view of selfhood and identity has been *constructed*. 
It is more important to understand, however, that dissimulation is a crucial term for Nietzsche not merely because it is useful in his examination of the genealogy of the linguistic representation of identity. Dissimulation, as Jenkins aptly points out, comes to denote “lying” only when it is possible to distinguish “reality” or “truth” from mere “appearance” of the dissimulator, but “understood in a performative sense,” this term implies “the power of some being to transform itself which is fully part of ‘what’ that being is” (230). Jenkins then suggests that such transformation is premised upon self-presentation, and when this self-presentation is conducted in a certain form of linguistic performance, the character of language plays a central role in constituting subjectivity and its representation. The same performative power of language can be found in artistic representation. As opposed to static representations, the transfigurative qualities of art lie at the center of the creative power of the language exercised by the dissimulator—namely, the poet—who desires to grasp the meaning of new ideas or experiences and communicate them to others. According to Nietzsche, “it is not the things that pass over into consciousness, but the manner in which we stand toward them, the pithanon [power of persuasion (plausibility; also a thing producing illusion)]” and “the full essence of things will never be grasped,” because our perception and representation of things “takes in only a sign” (RL 23). In Nietzsche’s view, word is nothing but “the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus” and this “totally subjective stimulation” inevitably results in “arbitrary assignments” (“OTL” 86). Nietzsche’s assertion that “thing in itself” is “something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for” suggests that neither poetic language nor nonimitative language can capture the “thing in itself” and represent it (“OTL” 86). Even though the poet “only designates the
relations of things to men,” however, he can “express these relations” in “the boldest metaphors” (“OTL” 86). The most significant implication of this statement is that, in Jenkins’s words, common mode of speech “entails a falsification of existence, insofar as it is judged by the standards of the intelligible order of representations,” whereas the poetic mode of speech “transfigures existence, and in doing so exemplifies that performative force,” which occupies a central position in Nietzsche’s view of existence itself (235). For Nietzsche, the reality of life is irreducible to subjectivity, because existence is always-already in flux, an ongoing process of “becoming.” This is why the artistic representation of existence, which is conceived as “a purely dissimulatory power” to capture the process of transformation of things rather than their beings, or fixed identities, is “the more ‘truthful’ expression” (Jenkins 235). This power reveals rather than conceals reality which only impresses us by eluding our conceptual grasp, and this is the power Nietzsche attaches to the necessary interaction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian of Greek tragedy when it exemplifies the vitality of existence and the jubilation of life.

Combined with Nietzsche’s account of tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*, then, these complex concepts of “becoming what one is” and “dissimulation” can elucidate the two-folded structure of Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy and the impacts of tragedy on the spectators. Through the description of the Dionysian intoxication of the tragic hero, the dramatist not only evokes the feelings of terror and exaltation but exemplifies the indestructible power of life. At the same time, the dramatist can also exemplify the performative forces of existence through the art of dissimulation to appropriate the Apollonian consciousness which registers the subject’s constant transformation, or the
process of becoming what one is. According to Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy, a tragic hero does not overcome the unjust and absurd conditions of life by getting rid of all the oppressive forces and obstacles in his life. Instead, the hero undergoes a certain kind of realization about his existence by participating in life, and inevitably, accepts the common fate of human beings and absurdity of life. But his acceptance of fate should not be taken as a token of his submission to fate. On the contrary, it is an expression of the strength of his will to power, because upon the realization of the force of fate, the tragic hero does not seek to avoid his fate; rather, he makes it his own by fighting it. In other words, he makes his fate meaningful by accepting it as a facilitator of exhausting the limits of his existence. He cannot avoid being defeated. But in his defeat, the tragic hero also triumphs, because his life exemplifies the highest sense of nobility and dignity of human beings. A true dramatist, on his part, does not capture the absolute truth but grasps the elusiveness of truth and the vitality of life and shows them to his audience, evoking in them the corresponding intuition and impulses. In addition, inspired by the actors, the dramatist actively participates in the drama he recounts by entering into other characters and speaking through them. In this regard, he is a storyteller, an actor, and a spectator all at once. Just as the Dionysian ecstasy allows the participants of tragedy to encounter the reality of their existence and the Apollonian retains their consciousness, so does the dramatist “show life in an unpremeditated performance” without declaiming his reasons (Jenkins 223). At the same time, the dramatist’s openness to the experience of life can only be manifested rhetorically, because the kind of truth he desires to represent is beyond linguistic representation. Representing the nonrepresentational involves both dispossession of self and dissimulation, as is insinuated by Nietzsche statement that
“language is rhetoric, because it desires to convey only a doxa [opinion], not an episteme [knowledge]” (RL 23). The dramatist presents various perspectives as a way to discover truth and communicate it, but in the midst of losing his subjectivity through the participation in life, he becomes a persona through whom life speaks. This way, the dramatist becomes a conduit of life. Successfully performed, therefore, tragedy allows all of its participants, including the spectators, to open themselves to the experience of life, whose intense and revitalizing power finds its expression only by embracing existence as it is.

5. 2. “I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief!”: Ishmael’s Dramatic Representation of Ahab’s Tragic Vision as a Way of Making his Fate his Own

In Moby-Dick, the artistic sensitivity of Ishmael is dominated by the tension between the beautiful and the sublime, which is akin to the creative tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian which Nietzsche describes in The Birth of Tragedy. That is, Ishmael displays the aspiration both to “the beautiful illusion of the dream worlds” just like an Apollonian artist as well as to “the tremendous terror” and “the blissful ecstasy” that flows from the primordial power of man and nature just like an a Dionysian artist (BT 34, 36). At the beginning of the voyage, just like a naïve artist described by Nietzsche, Ishmael is absorbed in the beauty of appearances, or the promise of unity and harmony. For example, his Platonic desire to “mount that whale and leap the topmost skies” to peep into the transcendental reality beyond his “mortal sight” betrays his primal desire for illusion that there is transcendent truth available to human understanding (233). With the growing appreciation of the terrors of existence and the vitality of life embedded
in the feelings of the sublime, Ishmael’s disillusionment with a brief promise of happiness becomes more obvious. Later on, in recounting their arrival in the Pacific, Ishmael says, “Were it not for other things, I could have greeted my dear Pacific with uncounted thanks, for now the long supplication of my youth was answered” (399). Namely, his adoration for eternity has not been satisfied, because his quest for absolute truth and knowledge had led him to observe “other things,” and of course, these are none other than the whiteness of the whale and Ahab’s encounter with Moby Dick. The confrontation of these “other things” and the feelings of the sublime caused by them, however, turn Ishmael into a Dionysian man whose artistic impulses alone can lead him to experience the reality of existence and communicate this insight to his spectators.

In examining the extent to which Ishmael succeeds in utilizing the language of art for communicating truth and the import of his transfiguring the theological and epistemological project into an aesthetic one, it is imperative to take seriously Ishmael’s statement that he is playing the role of the dramatist. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Ishmael refers to himself as “a sunken-eyed young Platonist,” and the philosopher Ishmael mainly raises a myriad of metaphysical questions and contemplates on them in the context of the rational discourse developed by the West (139). But he fails to represent his thoughts to the audience because of the constraints of the language based on empirical or logical concepts. It is true that only a thin line divides Ishmael’s role as a philosopher and his role as a dramatist, especially because either as a philosopher or a dramatist Ishmael never ceases to make observations on everything he perceives and relate it to certain aspects of the whale and life. Also, even though Ishmael identifies himself as “the tragic dramatist” who depicts Ahab’s quest, his role as the tragic
dramatist is not only confined to his portrayal of Ahab insofar as the objects of Ishmael’s dramatic representation include the exhaustive illustration of multifarious features of the whale as well as the significance of his own observation of Ahab’s pursuit of the white whale. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind, as we shall see later in the chapter, that when Ishmael succeeds in offering insight into that which is always hidden from an empirical point of view, he can do so only by employing the language of art.

In “The Specksynder,” Ishmael makes an allusion to Ahab’s “certain sultanism” which “became incarnate in an irresistible dictatorship” and identifies himself as “the tragic dramatist who would depict mortal indomitableness in its fullest sweep and direct swing” and who would never “forget a hint, incidentally so important in his art, as the one now alluded to” (129, 130). Here, Ishmael’s statement clearly suggests that he is a “dramatist” with Ahab being his tragic hero and that he will employ the language of “art” with a purpose of depicting “mortal indomitableness,” which is the strength of Ahab’s will to power in the face of the suffering and absurdity of life. As he describes Ahab’s indomitable spirit that exemplifies the force of life, Ishmael practically disappears from the scene and remains on the stage only as a voice in this narrative before his final return in the “Epilogue.” The relationship between Ishmael and Ahab in this context is already indicative of the relationship between a dramatist and the actors described by Nietzsche. While Ahab’s role resembles the Nietzschean tragic hero who experiences the Dionysian ecstasy, Ishmael’s role as a dramatist who, inspired by his tragic hero, feels the strong impulses to enter into another character and evoke in his audience the same intuition, coincides with the role of the dramatist expounded in The Birth of Tragedy.
From the aesthetic perspective, the quest of Ahab as a tragic hero can be seen as a rather obvious representation of Dionysian intoxication. Ahab’s “madness maddened,” for example, resembles the Dionysian man’s expression of the initial horror at the sight of the absurdity and agony of life. Besides, Ahab’s desire to “dismember” his “dismemberer” by harpooning the whale shows a strong affinity with the Dionysian man’s impulse to transform himself into “primordial being itself” which ultimately allows him to transcend individuality and experience the subjective experience of the object. At the beginning of the voyage, Ishmael’s description of Ahab’s experience of the terrors and absurdity of existence suggests a strong similarity between the sensitivity of Ahab and that of the Nietzschean tragic hero. Just as the “terrors of individual existence” stir the sensitivity of the Dionysian man, Ahab’s exposure to the indiscriminate forces of nature through his encounter with Moby Dick who “reaps away” his leg leads him first to lament the fate of human beings, born in struggle, living in anxiety, and dying in pain. Being a man of “an infinity of firmest fortitude, determinate, unsurrenderable willfulness,” however, Ahab cannot passively accept suffering and violence which appear to fall upon human beings randomly (111). Unlike the Dionysian man, Ahab initially protests against God, wondering how there can be any order and justice in the universe under such circumstances, and if there is a personal God, how he can be indifferent to a man faced with such horror. But when he finally asks “‘Who’s over me?’” and declares that he is “demoniac,” Ahab proves that he is imbued with the primordial power of man in nature, a power most dramatically manifested by the Dionysian man (144, 147). The intensity of Ahab’s will power and single-mindedness is reiterated once again in Ishmael’s observation that Ahab “is consumed with one unachieved revengeful desire,
and sleeps with clenched hands; and wakes with his own bloody nails in his palms” (175). No doubt, for Ahab, the only way to overcome the suffering is to harpoon the whale which represents to him “outrageous strength” and “an inscrutable malice” (144).

In understanding Ishmael’s presentation of Ahab’s tragedy as a tragic drama, it is important to note here that Ishmael employs theatrical language and conventions in relating Ahab’s interaction with his crew and his exercise of a certain contagious power over them. Immediately after announcing Ahab’s first entrance on the “stage,” Ishmael describes how Ahab begins his quest with a symbolic ceremony on the Pequod’s quarter-deck, and the entire scene bears a strong resemblance to a Dionysian orgy. When he shows himself for the first time to the crew, Ahab nails a doubloon to the mainmast of the Pequod, with the promise to give it to anyone who first sights the whale: “‘Whosoever of ye raises me a white-headed whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw; . . . he shall have this gold ounce, my boys!’” (142). Ahab’s action of nailing the gold coin to the mast and promising an award for sighting the whale elicits great excitement and enthusiastic response from the crew, who cries “‘Huzza! huzza!’” with “swinging tarpaulins” (142). Here Ahab effectively evokes in his crew strong impulses regarding Moby Dick and succeeds in winning them over to his deadly pursuit of Moby Dick. Through his unrestrained wild feelings and firmness of will to chase Moby Dick, Ahab first incites the crew’s sympathy and awe. In particular, Ahab’s description of how Moby Dick “dismasted” and “brought” him to the “dead stump,” accompanied by such “a terrific, loud, animal sob, like that of a heart-stricken moose” sounds dramatic enough to awaken the crew’s sense of the common mortality and perils of existence and make them take Ahab’s excruciating pain and agony for their own (143). In order to turn these feelings
into an oath to wreak vengeance upon the whale, Ahab performs a role of a high priest—he tosses “both arms” and utters “measureless imprecations”—and reveals his purpose in the voyage, which is nothing but to chase Moby Dick “round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition’s flames before I give him up” (143). By commending their bravery, Ahab induces the crew to swear to participate in his mission: “What say ye, men, will ye splice hands on it, now? I think ye do look brave” (143). To this, just like the spectators of the Greek tragedy as the worshippers of Dionysus, the crew shouts “Aye, aye!” and expresses their willingness to join his task by running “closer to the excited old man” and chanting, “A sharp eye for the White Whale; a sharp lance for Moby Dick!” (143)

Ahab’s promise of award and the crew’s empathy with his pain conveyed in a dramatic presentation is not what brings about the crew’s state of intoxication, however. A subsequent dialogue between Ahab and Starbuck clearly shows that at the bottom of this intoxication are the undomesticated forces of primordial nature of the crew Ahab senses among them. Ahab points this out to Starbuck who tries to reason with Ahab and stop this “blasphemous” chase:

But look ye, Starbuck . . . There are men from whom warm words are small indignity. I meant not to incense thee. Let it go. Look! see yonder Turkish cheeks of spotted tawn—living, breathing pictures painted by the sun. The Pagan leopards—the unrecking and unworshipping things, that live; and seek, and give no reasons for the torrid life they feel! The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale? See Stubb! he laughs! See yonder Chilian! he snorts to think of it. (Italics mine, 144)

As Ahab can see it, the Pequod’s crew are not rational beings who are concerned with any conventions of civilized society, such as gentility, conformity, and the worship of God. They are described as the embodiment of “living, breathing” figures nourished by
the sun, and while they are “unrecking and unworshipping,” they are “things, that live.”

Being the men of zeal and vigor rather than of reasoning and discernment, they are eager to release their primordial energies and inherent cruelty through the bloody and relentless battles with the whales. Thus, Ahab’s observation that the crew does not have to find any “reasons for the torrid life they feel” but simply “laughs” and “snorts to think of it” is accurate. Paradoxically, however, Ahab’s suggestion and encouragement are actually what gives the crew “reasons for the torrid life they feel,” because by providing them with something they can pursue in life, something they can strive for more intensely, Ahab’s quest urges them to be fully immersed in the unmediated force of life. Just like Nietzsche’s Dionysian man, Ahab appeals to the black and dark impulses deeply rooted in the crew’s hearts, and exhorts them to release these instinctive drives by yielding themselves to the primordial unity in ecstasy. Ahab is keenly aware that the crew share with him all these primitive desires for life, and this is why Ahab can say with confidence that now “in this matter of the whale,” the crew are “one and all with Ahab.” Making best use of the power of performance in eliciting the unconscious desire of human beings and binding them together, Ahab commands the three harpooners to produce their weapons, and the three mates to cross their lances before him, and solemnly declares that “I appoint ye three cup-bearers to my three pagan kinsmen” (146). Ahab then orders the crew to form a circle around the capstan, and each to take a drink from the cup that is passed around. This way Ahab revives a noble custom of the past, once again emphasizing his “kinsmanship” with the crew and spurring them on to intoxication.
In fact, one of the most important effects of the Dionysian intoxication comes from its power to cause the spectators to surrender their individuality and return to the primordial unity. Although Ishmael does not emphasize the oneness of the crew very often, sometimes he reminds the audience of the force of the primordial unity in this drama. Most significantly, the final description of the image of the crew’s oneness aboard the Pequod attests to the fact that the same image of the primordial unity is carried over to the end of the voyage:

They were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things—oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and hemp—yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull, which shot on its way, both balanced and directed by the long central keel; even so, all the individualities of the crew, this man’s valor, that man’s fear; guilt and guiltiness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to. (455)

Ishmael’s description of the merging of the crew in this passage coincides with Nietzsche description how the hero affects his fellow actors, who are the most immediate spectators of the drama. According to Nietzsche, under the influence of the tragic hero, “these Dionysian emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness” (BT 36). Despite the apparent insinuation of their destruction—namely, the reference to “that fatal goal”—the crew who acts as “one man” gains access to the current of universal will, because “all the individualities” and “all varieties were welded into oneness” here. Moreover, whether destructive or constructive, there is a clear sense of direction, and this sense of universal will and unified direction is what makes these individuals overcome the sufferings and constraints of individual

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77 Ishmael goes so far as to note that even the Pequod, which he describes as a “noble but somehow a most melancholic” craft, is “plunging into that blackness of darkness, [seeming] the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul” (68, 354).
existence including “man’s fear” and “guiltiness,” and rejoice at the ecstasy and the overflow of indestructibly powerful feelings of life itself, or in Ishmael’s own term, “tragic graces” (105).

As already noted in Chapter 3, as a Platonist, Ishmael has obvious limitations in his understanding of Ahab’s intoxication, and despite, or rather because of, his attempt to encompass everything, Ishmael inevitably detaches himself from Ahab’s monomaniac pursuit and ends up in “a barren maze.” As a tragic dramatist, however, Ishmael experiences something different, and under the influence of Ahab’s contagious power, he can also participate as a performer in Ahab’s tragic performance to capture the whale. At the beginning of “Moby Dick,” Ishmael reveals his feelings about Ahab’s “quenchless feud” and the crew’s intoxication:

I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge. (155)

Ishmael’s confession that he was “one of that crew” makes it clear that when he states, “They were one man, not thirty” in the passage quoted above, just like the Nietzschean dramatist, Ishmael sees himself as one of the thirty who transform themselves into “primordial being itself.” When he recalls that his oath was “welded with” the others’ and he felt “Ahab’s quenchless feud” to be his own, Ishmael essentially admits that like a Dionysian chorist, his individuality was “nullified.” In the same vein, Ishmael’s “wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling” and the “dread” he senses in his soul can be seen as the effects of “an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature” (BT
It is clear then that, just like Nietzsche’s dramatist, Ishmael has the ability to “behold continually a vivid play and to live constantly surrounded by hosts of spirits,” and experience a desire to be a part of this primordial unity (BT 64). Moreover, as is evident in his frequent representation of other characters’ thoughts performed in the frankly dramatic episodes, where he retreats behind these characters, Ishmael seems to exhibit the Dionysian dramatist’s “urge to transform himself and speak out of other bodies and souls” (BT 64).

While Nietzsche’s dramatist, entering into other characters, sings and dances with them as one being to celebrate the pure ecstasy and joy of returning to the primordial unity, Ishmael is simultaneously immersed in and detached from Ahab’s Dionysian performance. We have already seen that seeking a rational understanding of things, the philosopher Ishmael makes direct comments on Ahab’s quest and expresses doubts and cautions, and his desire for rational explanation constantly intervenes and prevents him from being completely immersed in Ahab’s power.78 Just like the Dionysian dramatist, however, Ishmael, as the tragic dramatist who speaks out of Ahab and other crew members, experiences and represents the unmediated forces of existence hailed in the Dionysian art world. Interestingly, however, even as a dramatist—that is, in the obviously

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78 For example, when he exclaims, “God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus,” Ishmael does not seem to make this comment on Ahab’s quest as the Dionysian dramatist (175). Again, Ishmael’s objective observation that Ahab “was now both chasing and being chased to his deadly end” does not come across as a remark by an intoxicated dramatist (321). These observations may well be seen as comments either from the consciousness of the philosopher Ishmael or from the Apollonian consciousness which protects the dramatist from being completely lost. To further complicate the situation, even when Ishmael remains on the scene as a character, he often considers himself the dramatist, making it difficult to decide whether he is speaking as a philosopher or a dramatist. For one, as we have seen above, “The Specksynder” in which Ishmael reveals his ambition as the tragic dramatist itself does not take a form of dramatic episode. Granted, when Ishmael gives the theatrical presentation of other characters, it is safe to assume that he transforms into these characters and speaks out of them.
dramatic chapter with dialogues and stage directions—Ishmael occasionally enters into other characters who represent the Apollonian art world as well. Most notably, Ishmael’s theatrical presentation of Starbuck in “Dusk,” a chapter which immediately follows Ishmael’s presentation of Ahab’s soliloquy about his “madness maddened” in “Sunset,” can be read as Ishmael’s Apollonian voice coming out of Starbuck’s body and soul:

Oh, God! to sail with such a heathen crew that have small touch of human mothers in them! Whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea. The white whale is their demigorgon. Hark! the infernal orgies! That revelry is forward! mark the unaltering silence aft! Methinks it pictures life. Foremost through the sparkling sea shoots on the gay, embattled, bantering bow, but only to drag dark Ahab after it, where he broods within his sternward cabin, builded over the dead water of the wake, and further on, hunted by its wolfish gurglings. The long howl thrills me through! Peace! ye revellers, and set the watch! Oh, life! ‘tis in an hour like this, with soul beat down and held to knowledge,—as wild, untutored things are forced to feed—Oh, life! ‘tis now that I do feel the latent horror in thee! but ‘tis not me! that horror’s out of me! and with the soft feeling of the human in me, yet will I try to fight ye, ye grim, phantom futures! Stand by me, hold me, bind me, O ye blessed influences! (148)

Inspired by what is happening on the stage, or the quarter-deck, Ishmael feels the urge to enter into other characters, but on this occasion, Ishmael does not speak out of his tragic hero or other crew who are subsumed by him, but out of Starbuck, who represents the rational mind of the Quaker seaman of mid-nineteenth century Nantucket. While recounting Starbuck’s observation about “A burst of revelry from the forecastle,” which continued after Ahab’s performance of the aforementioned ritual, Ishmael represents the voice of the Apollonian man of “measured restraint”—that is, the Apollonian man before his interaction with the Dionysian man, and, therefore, confined to the promise of “knowledge” and “appearances.” Quite naturally, while watching “the infernal orgies” of “such a heathen crew,” Starbuck is deeply disturbed and seeks to overcome “the latent horror” he feels in life. What is interesting about Starbuck’s response to the revelry is that
even though he cannot reconcile himself with this kind of “horror” in life, he can still feel it. Instead of trying to accept and celebrate it as the Dionysian man, however, Starbuck actively denies the presence of primordial darkness and cruelty within him by shouting, “but ‘tis not me! that horror’s out of me!” His remark that “with the soft feeling of the human in me, yet will I try to fight ye, ye grim, phantom futures!” points to his role as an Apollonian voice within the text that serves as a bulwark against the chaos of Ahab’s Dionysian madness, and through the utilization of dramatic techniques, Ishmael makes it clear that he as a tragic dramatist encompasses this Apollonian voice as well.

Ishmael’s embrace of both Dionysian and Apollonian voices as a tragic dramatist is in fact another significant point of similarity between Melville and Nietzsche. When Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of being liberated from the Socratic obsession with rationality and being immersed in the Dionysian essence of Primordial Unity, he seems to privilege the Dionysian impulse over the Apollonian impulse, Apollo obviously being related to the idea of “measured restraint.” Nietzsche does not, however, present the Apollonian illusion merely as a state that needs to be negated through Dionysian intoxication. Instead, Nietzsche sees Dionysus and Apollo paradoxically interdependent and stresses the utter importance of the constant battle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses. For Nietzsche, this tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses does not lead to a static middle ground, but in an incessant push and pull, and this constant battle is precisely where the life affirming power of art resides. By a similar token, Ishmael apparently seems to endorse Ahab’s Dionysian madness much more than Starbuck’s Apollonian restraint that goes against Ahab’s affirmation of life. Simply put, Ishmael’s tragic hero is Ahab, not Starbuck, and Ishmael’s adoration of
Ahab’s affirmation of life is obvious throughout the novel. For example, the tone in which Ishmael describes Ahab’s last moment is full of admiration, something Ishmael never shows toward such a character as Starbuck. In his last moment, Ahab expresses his final realization as he addresses the Pequod: “—death-glorious ship! must ye then perish, and without me? . . . Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief” (468). Here, although his physical being may be destroyed by the whale, Ahab demonstrates the essence of tragedy, which is, in Robert Corrigan’s words, “not quietistic,” but “a grappling spirit” (9). More importantly, it is the realization of defeat that spurs him on. Ahab scorns his fate and converts his “topmost grief” into his “topmost greatness,” making his fate his own. Ishmael’s description of Ahab’s final encounter with Moby Dick clearly echoes Nietzsche’s elaboration of “the wonderful phenomenon of the Dionysian,” which is “a formula for the highest affirmation, born of fullness, of overfullness, a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence” (EH, “Birth of Tragedy,” 728). Nevertheless, as I repeatedly pointed out, Ishmael neither wholeheartedly identifies with Ahab’s vision of life nor presents it as the only important one. It is not that Ishmael presents Starbuck’s Apollonian view as an alternative to Ahab’s Dionysian madness. As a matter of fact, Ishmael finds in Starbuck a certain kind of impoverishment of life and emphasizes it throughout the novel by drawing attention to Starbuck’s cowardice and mercantile motivations. What is important for Ishmael as a tragic dramatist, however, is the tension between the “overfullness of life” (GS 219) exemplified by Ahab and the

79 In Ecce Homo, while evaluating The Birth of Tragedy and his other earlier works, Nietzsche claims that he is entitled to calling himself “the first tragic philosopher” who has first comprehended this formula.
“impoverishment of life” represented by Starbuck. However heroically Ahab affirms life, Ahab’s Dionysian madness cannot grasp life in flux—after all, Ahab fails to capture Moby Dick—and Ishmael’s oscillating position corresponds to Nietzsche’s view that the true performative, transformative power of art can be found in the constant push and pull between the two opposing artistic impulses. My argument is that this tension between the Dionysian and Apollonian impulses is the concept of “becoming what one is” which Nietzsche develops in his later works. 80

5.3 “those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it”: Ishmael’s Capturing of the Whale in Constant Flux

In his artistic representation of “the ungraspable phantom of life,” the most distinctive and effective strategy Ishmael employs is (dis)simulation, and this strategy is best exemplified in “The Town-Ho’s Story,” where Ishmael narrates a story about another Nantucket whaler, the Town-Ho. The story mainly concerns a conflict between Radney, a mate from Martha’s Vineyard, and Steelkilt, a sailor from Buffalo, who are aboard the Town-Ho. The harsh treatment and brutal overbearing of Radney causes Steelkilt to assault Radney after being provoked and start a mutiny. After the mutiny is subdued, Steelkilt, along with other mutineers, is captured and flogged before his release. Steelkilt plans to kill Radney, because he is the one who flogged him when the captain would not. In the meantime, the Town-Ho spots Moby Dick and engages in a chase

80 Looking back on The Birth of Tragedy in his later life, Nietzsche said in a supplementary preface that “Today I find it an impossible book: I consider it badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness, very convinced and therefore disdainful of proof, mistrustful even of the propriety of proof, a book for initiates...” (BT, “Attempt at a Self-criticism” 3). However, Nietzsche emphasized in the preface that the questions he raised in The Birth of Tragedy were still pertinent and significant for him.
during which Radney is “tossed over into the sea” and the whale seizes “the swimmer between his jaws” (222). What is noticeable about this story is the way Ishmael deceives his readers and thereby directs their attention toward the performative presentation of dynamic reality rather than to the mimetic promotion of fixed reality. Specifically, the way Ishmael frames this story demonstrates the power of simulation, which is to make use of a surface resemblance. At the beginning of this chapter, Ishmael announces that for his “humor’s sake,” he “shall preserve the style” in which he “once narrated it” at the Golden Inn at Lima “to a lounging circle” of his “Spanish friends” (208). Upon the completion of Ishmael’s story, the Spanish sailors found the story “so passing wonderful,” but would not believe it until Ishmael swore on “the Holy Book” that the story he told was “in substance and its great items, true” and that he had “seen and talked with” one of the central figures of the story (208, 224). This frame helps Ishmael’s current audience (the reader of Moby-Dick) to believe the story more easily by identifying themselves with Ishmael’s previous audience (his Spanish friends at Lima) who overcame their initial doubt about the story’s verity and understood the underlying theme of the divine justice operating through Moby Dick. Moreover, a surface resemblance between the Town-Ho’s story and the Pequod’s story facilitates the effects

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81 Nietzsche would probably say that simulation is after all another way of dissimulation in that the power of simulation also comes through the manipulation of people’s assumptions about appearances and signs.

82 Interestingly, the theme itself is not as clear as it sounds, and there is little agreement among critics as to how the episode should be read. In Melville’s Quarrel with God, Lawrence Thompson offers quite an opposite interpretation of the episode, claiming that the story serves as an “epitome” of the novel’s depiction of a wicked God against whom Ahab (and Melville) fights (207). But when they ask Ishmael to swear on the Bible for the truthfulness of the story in Moby-Dick, his audience also seem to accept Ishmael’s intimation that “a circumstance of the Town-Ho’s story... seemed obscurely to involve with the whale a certain wondrous, inverted visitation of one of those so called judgments of God” (208). As noted above, critics like Paul endorse this reading of the episode.
of simulation on the reader. That is, once Ishmael’s reliability is thus established, it becomes easier for Melville to deceive his reader who is persuaded to accept the verity of “The Town-Ho’s Story” into believing that they can draw an analogy between the theme of this story and that of the entire novel. While encouraging his readers to have confidence in their ability to decipher the underlying themes and meaning of both narratives, Melville does not offer to the readers any rational or definitive explanation of the meaning of the white whale, leaving to them the constant contemplation as the only option available. Melville can thus disillusion his readers who tend to take for granted the presence of “truth” behind Ishmael’s seemingly repetitive presentation of the same story and awaken them to the falsity of the mimetic and static—as opposed to performative and dynamic—promotion of reality.

The most powerful use of the strategy of dissimulation in “The Town-Ho’s Story,” however, is evinced in the curious interaction between Steelkit and the Captain. This part of the story is in fact what captivates Ishmael’s audience the most in this chapter. Specifically, the audience shows intense interest in why the Captain changes his mind and will not flog Steelkilt after all his firm expression of his determination to bring justice to the mastermind behind the mutiny. When the Captain gives an order to remove the gag from Steelkilt so that they can hear what he can say for himself, Steelkilt warns him that if he flogs him, he will “murder” him. Undaunted, the Captain responds, “‘Say ye so? Then see how ye frighten me,’” and is about to strike him with a rope (219).

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83 It must be noted though that the importance of this point often goes unnoticed by a majority of critics. Instead, they have attempted to read the thematic relationship between this chapter and the novel as a whole without considering the effects of Ishmael’s concealment of the cause of the captain’s sudden change in his plan to flog Steelkilt. See also Sherman Paul and others critics such as Don Geiger and Edward J. Rose.
In response, Steelkilt “hissed,” saying “‘Best not,’” which again provokes the captain who once again shows his intention to flog him by insisting, “‘But I must’” (219). Ishmael then puts the very curious transaction that occurs between Steelkilt and the Captain as follows:

“Steelkilt here hissed out something, inaudible to all but the Captain; who, to the amazement of all hands, started back, paced the deck rapidly two or three times, and then suddenly throwing down his rope, said, ‘I won’t do it—let him go—cut him down: d’ye hear?’” (219)

While reading this passage, the reader cannot but wonder about what it is that Steelkilt said to the Captain to change the Captain’s mind. What Steelkilt “hissed out” here is never specified or even hinted at in Ishmael’s narration. No matter how hard one may speculate, it is fundamentally impossible to figure out what Steelkilt actually “hissed out,” especially when the narrative makes it clear that even the threat of murder did not frighten the captain at all.\footnote{In “Melville’s ‘The Town-Ho’s Story,’” Sherman Paul suggests that Steelkilt’s “hiss” reminds of what old Ushant in White-Jacket says after being flogged,—“‘tis no dishonor when he who would dishonor you, only dishonors himself” (White-Jacket 366)—and argues that “The captain, apparently recognizing in this defiance Steelkilt’s inviolability ordered him to be cut down” (215). Like most essays dealing with “The Town-Ho’s Story,” Paul’s essay focuses mainly on the thematic parallel between this story and Moby-Dick, and contends that the episode crystallizes “the dramatic focus of Ahab’s monomania,” because in Steelkilt’s triumph, God’s decision, “by means of Moby-Dick, between Steelkilt and Radney” becomes manifested (212, 216).} I argue that this is exactly Melville’s intention, making this story a perfect example of his manipulation of the dissimulatory power of language in the novel. The narrative does not allow the audience to dismiss the fact that a certain idea was conveyed to the captain, because the text ensures that even though it was “inaudible to all,” Steelkilt “hissed out something,” and it was audible at least to the Captain. The problem is that there is no way for the audience to figure out exactly what it is that Steelkilt said. In fact, if it is possible at all, the effects of horror of this scene would not be the same. What makes Steelkilt’s utterance so powerful and horrible to the audience is
the very fact that it is permanently a mystery to them. The effect of dissimulation arises from the narrator’s ability to convince the audience that the narrative conceals a “real” thing when the only thing it conceals is the very fact that there is nothing to conceal.

Even though the audience are aware that what Steelkilt “hissed out” is a blank, the very process of wondering about what more horrible things than the threat of murder could have been said, which they are not free to give up on even if they want to, only intensifies their sense of horror. The Town-Ho’s story thus exemplifies the dissimulatory power of language to represent almost non-representational feelings and thoughts through its absence. In this regard, this episode perfectly corresponds to the Nietzschean concept of dissimulation in its performative sense of the word: the power of language does not come from “the things that passes over into consciousness,” but from “the manner in which we stand toward” these things (RL 23).

Another example of the novel’s use of the transformative, performative power of language is found in Ishmael’s description of a very large oil painting hung on a wall of the Spouter-Inn:

On one side hung a very large oil-painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal crosslights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose. Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched. But by dint of much and earnest contemplation, and oft repeated ponderings, and especially by throwing open the little window towards the back of the entry, you at last come to the conclusion that such an idea, however wild, might not be altogether unwarranted. (20)
Any sensible readers, as they read the remainder of the novel, will come to recognize that all the tactics mentioned in this passage—“diligent study,” “a series of systematic visits,” “careful inquiry of the neighbors,” accompanied by “much and earnest contemplation,” “oft repeated ponderings,” and some additional light obtained by “throwing open the little window”—are actually employed by Ishmael in his endeavor to understand what the white whale means and delineate it to the audience. That is, this description of the oil painting is a condensed version of Ishmael’s various attempts to grasp the phantom of the whale in the entire novel.

After suggesting that this picture is an attempt to portray “chaos bewitched” by “some ambitious young artist,” Ishmael soon points to an object of inexplicable qualities in the picture:

But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant. Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through.—It’s the Black Sea in a midnight gale.—It’s the unnatural combat of the four primal elements.—It’s a blasted heath.—It’s a Hyperborean winter scene.—It’s the breaking-up of the icebound stream of Time. But at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture’s midst. THAT once found out, and all the rest were plain. But stop; does it not bear a faint resemblance to a gigantic fish? even the great leviathan himself? (20)

Reading the painting as the emblem of the whole novel, Richards S. Moore provides an incisive interpretation of the process by which Ishmael comes to the conclusion that the painting is ultimately a rendering of “the great leviathan himself.” According to Moore, “such a groping, impressionistic critique as Ishmael’s could not conceivably be evoked
by the sharply delineated forms, merely decorative use of color, baldness of subject matter, and ineptly static rendering of movement characteristic of primitive American art” (125-26). Moore’s use of such words as “groping” and “impressionistic” indicates that the visual images in the painting are deliberately obscure and that Ishmael’s task is to process these “groping, impressionistic” pieces and bits of the visual rendering of the whale in order to finally obtain the entire vision of the whale. As far as the visual images in the painting go, Moore’s reading is quite illuminating, but it does not fully explain in what sense this painting is the emblem of the book. It is true that Ishmael finally “[f]inds out” the whale at the end of his contemplation and ponderings, but it is hard to say that Ishmael obtains a visual impression of the whale. Ishmael begins by sensing a presence of “a long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the centre of the picture.” Here, the word “hovering” suggests that what he senses is not necessarily \textit{painted} in the painting. Besides, his comment that there was “a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it” intimates that what he “sees” is not simply “groping, impressionistic” as Moore argues but in fact non-representational through visual images. Just as the effects of horror are best presented through the absence, or more precisely, dissimulation of language in “The Town-Ho’s Story,” the “great leviathan” is rendered to the viewer through its absence. Here lies the significance of “a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea” that darts him through. Just as the audience of the \textit{Town-Ho’s} story cannot help trying to wonder about what Steelkilt “hissed out,” the viewers of the painting are frozen to the painting “till you[they] involuntarily took an oath with yourself[themselves] to find out what that marvellous painting meant.” Ishmael goes over

\footnote{Moore suggests that in his rendering of Ishmael’s critique of the picture in this chapter, Melville was probably influenced by J.M.W. Turner and John Ruskin.}
all kinds of possibilities—from “the Black Sea in a midnight gale” to “the unnatural combat of the four primal elements” to “a blasted heath” to “a Hyperborean winter scene”—but what really leads Ishmael to conclude that the painting represents the whale is not located in the painting itself but in the tension among these different possibilities.

The famous debate about Ishmael’s “pantheistic” experience in “The Mast-head” cannot be adequately explained without applying this concept of (dis)simulation. Toward the end of “The Mast-head,” where he describes his duty of watching for whales, Ishmael contemplates the loss of one’s identity as a way of grasping the “the embodiments of those elusive thoughts”:

. . . but lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Crammer’s sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over.

In this passage, Ishmael describes the absent-minded youth’s “vacant, unconscious reverie” in which he experiences the loss and diffusion of his identity. The critical interpretation of this passage that has often been informed by Melville’s letter to Hawthorne has read the passage as Melville’s expression of his objection to the pantheistic philosophy which advocates “all feeling” that transcends the boundaries of individual perception and consciousness, focusing on Ishmael’s detachment from the absent-minded youth. In his letter to Hawthorne, Melville reveals his critical view of pantheistic philosophy, saying “What nonsense! . . . This ‘all’ feeling, though, there is
some truth in. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer’s day . . .

But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion” (Letters, pp. 130-31). Admittedly, it is hard completely to identify Ishmael with the absent-minded youth engaged in “vacant, unconscious reverie.” The use of the third person pronoun itself signifies that Ishmael is consciously distancing himself from the absent-minded youth. It is equally simplistic, however, to assume that Ishmael and this absent-minded youth are two separate entities. Not to mention the fact that Ishmael encompasses all perspectives and can enter into all characters’ consciousness, Ishmael clearly presents himself within the same chapter as one of the absent-minded young Platonists who keep “but sorry guard” because of “the problem of the universe revolving” in them (139). It is thus quite difficult to decide what is the position Ishmael takes on the loss of one’s identity.

The problem is that Ishmael does not in fact have much of an identity to lose in the first place. Just like Steelkilt’s utterance in the Town-Ho’s story or the whale in the oil painting, Ishmael’s identity is fundamentally blank. The very first sentence of the novel, “Call me Ishmael,” makes it quite clear (12). This line, which is arguably the most famous opening sentence in American literature, complicates Ishmael’s identity from the

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86 In “Melville and the Sublime in Moby-Dick,” Barbara Glenn suggests that “The pantheistic experience at the masthead is a temporary feeling. Insisting on the constant and continuous truth of that temporary feeling as the sure apprehension of the Supreme being in nature, the advocates of the sublime quest were mischievous indeed” (181). In Melville’s Later Novels, William B. Dillingham contends that Melville is strongly opposed to the all feeling, because “it seduces one into a loss of consciousness whereas what he seeks most intensely is a heightened consciousness,” ultimately leading to the loss of “individual identity” which Melville “so highly prizes” (13). Dillingham acknowledges that Melville “does not deny the reality of the experience,” but reiterates the “fundamental” difference by pointing out that “Melville’s deep diving is into self with the goal of discovering at the center a hidden but powerful and sublime identity; transcendental or mystical experience takes one without and merges individual identity with the whole” (13-14).
beginning by drawing attention to the fact that this first person narrator who wants to be
called Ishmael is standing behind a mask. It is almost as if this narrator has arbitrarily
chosen a name to go by, and the reader has no choice but to call him by this name with
the knowledge that the name “Ishmael” is essentially a mask. This seems deeply
problematic, given the fact that all throughout my dissertation, I based my reading of
Melville’s philosophical and aesthetic enterprise more or less on various identities that
Ishmael assumes. The truth of the matter, however, is that this blankness of Ishmael’s
identity is precisely what empowers him in his quest for the whale and enables him
ultimately to grasp “the ungraspable phantom of life.” Just as in “The Town-Ho’s Story”
and the oil-painting in “The Spouter-Inn,” through the dissimulatory power of language,
Melville offers Ishmael’s identity only as a blank, but the quality of indefiniteness and
indeterminacy attached to this blankness captivates the reader. Although aware of the
fictitiousness of all the identities he assumes in the novel, the reader cannot help
wondering about Ishmael’s “true” identity, and the amount of scholarly attention given to
his identity is no coincidence. As a result, Ishmael’s identity itself becomes the
embodiment of the transformative, performative power of language. The passage quoted
in the previous paragraph, for example, allows the reader to see the absent-minded youth,
or a Pantheist, as Ishmael himself, but this identification becomes quite meaningless as
soon as the reader recalls that ultimately Ishmael’s own identity is void. At the same
time, as I argued above, the reader has to see the absent-minded youth as part of
Ishmael’s identity. The tension between the elusiveness of Ishmael’s identity and the
reader’s desire to pin down his identity contributes to the performative power of the
novel, and this is directly related to Ishmael’s view of how the truth can be captured at all
when he reveals that “the embodiment of those elusive thoughts” can “people the soul [only] by continually flitting through it.” With this penetrating insight, Ishmael illuminates the concept of “flux” in experiencing the truth of our life. That is, life does not exist as a fixed reality, but is always already in process, and so is one’s identity, and therefore, understanding and participating in this unending process of “becoming” is the only way to grasp any truth without falsifying life.

All this discussion about the dissimulatory power of language in the novel after all makes it necessary to revisit “The Whiteness of the Whale.” In the previous chapter I argued that all the attempts Ishmael makes to render the whiteness of the whale as a philosopher lead him to a “barren maze,” but the idea of dissimulation as a performative power sheds a completely different light on Ishmael’s rendering of the white whale:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink? . . . (169)

Here it might seem that Ishmael’s representation of the whale through such terms as “indefiniteness,” “the heartless voids,” “immensities of the universe,” and “the thought of annihilation” perfectly expresses all the fascinating qualities of this wonderful creature, eliciting corresponding feelings of the sublime and horror in the heart of his readers. In this regard, Ishmael’s endeavor to convey in language the ideas represented by the white whale seems quite successful. As we have seen, however, despite the use of these impressionistic terms, Ishmael’s additional reference to negative terms, such as “the visible absence of colour,” “such a dumb blankness,” and “a colorless . . . atheism,” does
not indicate that Ishmael himself has ever grasped the true meaning of the whale and the significance of its whiteness. In understanding the real significance of this passage in terms of Ishmael’s performative use of language, it is important to note that all these statements are made in the form of a question, which is an indication that Ishmael is not committed to any ideas or words he uses here. Also, the oxymoronic phrases, such as “the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors,” “such a dumb blankness, full of meaning,” and “a colorless, all-color of atheism,” show that Ishmael is actually negating his statement as soon as he makes it. Viewed in this light, it is clear that the whiteness of the whale is not located in any images or words in this passage. Given that, one might argue that Melville’s use of language in this passage resembles to a certain extent the “indefinite deference of meaning,” but the truth is that Melville is not necessarily expressing a deconstructionist view of language, either. On the contrary, just like the other two episodes I examined earlier in this section, Melville’s “The Whiteness of the Whale” exemplifies the most powerful and positive use of language.

Just as the whiteness itself is absent in this passage, the whale is not contained in any passage or any single part of the novel. Nonetheless, it is imperative to understand that the whale is somehow contained and rendered in the book, because Melville seeks to make the white whale “people the soul by continually flitting through it.” Here, through the performative and dissimulatory use of language, Melville creates some sort of space through which the white whale is “continually flitting” and communicated to his readers. And Ishmael’s purposefully indeterminate rendering of the whiteness of the whale in language contributes to enhancing the dynamic and performative presentation of that which cannot be otherwise represented in any fixed or stabilized words. Just like
Nietzsche who asserts that there is only interpretation, and no final text is available to us, Melville is conscious that the elusiveness of reality can be represented only through an unending series of dynamic performance of language.

Not surprisingly, the recognition of the positive power of art and language makes Melville and Nietzsche develop a similar attitude toward their life and their own works, and this attitude can be characterized by its gaiety and cheerfulness. In “The Hyena,” a little after he describes the whiteness of the whale, Ishmael explicates “desperado philosophy” and claims that in the middle of his narrative, he began to develop this philosophy of a desperate and reckless man:

There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody’s expense but his own. However, nothing dispirits, and nothing seems worth while disputing. He bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible, never mind how knobby; as an ostrich of potent digestion gobbles down bullets and gun flints. And as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker. That odd sort of wayward mood I am speaking of, comes over a man only in some time of extreme tribulation; it comes in the very midst of his earnestness, so that what just before might have seemed to him a thing most momentous, now seems but a part of the general joke. There is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy; and with it I now regarded this whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object. (196)

The general attitude that Ishmael takes toward life which in his words is “strange mixed affairs” is characterized by his eagerness to absorb and digest “all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible.” This attitude coincides with Ishmael’s relentless pursuit and interrogation of all the various thoughts and ideas of the Western tradition even at the risk of being lost in “a barren maze.” Then, Ishmael

210
suggests that “in the very midst of his earnestness,” he is suddenly struck by the
realization that everything that seemed “most momentous, now seems but a part of the
general joke,” and feels that all the perils of life, including “death itself,” are but “only
sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and
unaccountable old joker.” This sudden change in his attitude naturally raises a series of
questions regarding what is meant by Ishmael’s “desperado philosophy” and what makes
him develop this odd view that “the whole universe” is “a vast practical joke.” By
adopting “desperado philosophy,” does Ishmael simply attempt to avoid the confrontation
with the horrible? Or does he believe that this is the only way to live on in the midst of
the imminent peril? Or, rather paradoxically, is this Ishmael’s defense mechanism that
helps him to confront the intolerable truth and shield him from any blow that might strike
him during his whaling voyage? But if we take seriously Ishmael’s final description
about this philosophy—that is, it is “free and easy sort of genial, desperado”—we begin
to sense that there is a certain degree of freedom and cheerfulness in Ishmael’s
postulation of this philosophy. Ishmael’s cheerful attitude evinced in desperado
philosophy does not seem too different from Nietzsche’s attitude toward life expressed
through his self-reflexive remark on laugh and knowledge through the voice of
Zarathustra. On his right to experiencing exaltation and freedom simultaneously,
Zarathustra asks and declares: “Who among you can laugh and be elevated at the same
time? Whoever climbs the highest mountains laughs at all tragic plays and tragic
seriousness” (Z 41). Further explaining the relationship between knowledge and gaiety,
Zarathustra offers an additional clue to the nature and significance of his pursuit of
knowledge: “With knowledge, the body purifies itself; making experiments with
knowledge, it elevates itself; in the lover of knowledge all instincts become holy; in the elevated, the soul becomes gay” (Z 77). For Nietzsche, knowledge itself is not something static or fixed, but dynamic and eternally in the process of being created and reinterpreted as in experiments, and the realization of this frees the pursuer of the knowledge from all dualistic thinking and elevates the pursuer’s sense of human integrity and freedom. This perhaps explains the mystery of Ishmael’s survival. Ishmael in the end achieves freedom from dualistic thinking and thus escapes being destroyed by Moby Dick, and we share in his sense of joy in becoming, “that joy which includes even joy in destroying” (EH, “Birth of Tragedy,” 729), despite the inevitable awareness of the blankness of his identity as well as the emptiness of the white whale.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In placid hours well-pleased we dream
Of many a brave unbodied scheme.
But form to lend, pulsed life create,
What unlike things must meet and mate:
A flame to melt—a wind to freeze;
Sad patience—joyous energies;
Humility—yet pride and scorn;
Instinct and study; love and hate;
Audacity—reverence. These must mate,
And fuse with Jacob’s mystic heart,
To wrestle with the angel—Art.

—“Art” from Timoleon, 1891

In the introduction to Literature, Disaster, and the Enigma of Power: A Reading of Moby-Dick (2003), positing that “our period is one of an intense problematization and putting into question the traditional status and function of literature” (3), Eyal Peretz argues that Moby-Dick demands “us to rethink what literature might mean for our times” (1). Taking the same question as a point of departure, I tried throughout my dissertation

87 In his examination of “the nature of Moby-Dick’s challenge to, or even wounding of, our traditional conception of literature” (3) as different critical schools such as deconstructionism and New Historicism, and Post-Colonial studies participate in “various extraliterary discourses” (2), Peretz suggests that there must be a different way to think about literature: “Literature, understood now as the taking place, the witnessing, and the ‘performance’ of this possible white disaster, thus becomes, or perhaps is discovered to have always been, the fabulous opening of language before truth or falsity, that which puts into question and problematizes the logic of authority and the legal conceptualization that comes with it . . .” (115). While Peretz’s approach to the issue at hand is strikingly similar to mine in that he examines the possibility of reading Moby-Dick as “the taking place” and “performance,” his overall theoretical framework is quite different from mine, because he is more concerned with “the witnessing” and “disaster,” terms he borrows from Antonin Artaud, who “castigates the European conception of art as corrupt and dead-ending and challenges the authority of its historical monuments and the values they represent under the slogan ‘no more masterpieces’” (2).
to shed light on the significance of Melville’s interrogation of the foundational premises of metaphysics and religion which have dominated the Western tradition since Plato by reading *Moby-Dick* in relation to the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic theories developed by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Through my discussion, I demonstrated the significant affinities between Melville and these two German philosophers not only in their ideas but in the extent to which they push their inquiries. Schopenhauer’s revision of the premises of Platonic dualism and the Christian notion of incarnation through his view of the world as Will and its manifestations elucidates Melville’s revision of the Narcissus myth and the significance of Ahab’s pursuit of the white whale and his motivation to harpoon the corporeal body of the whale. At the same time, Melville’s rendering of the process by which Ishmael grasps “the ungraspable phantom of life” bears an astounding similarity to Nietzsche’s theory of art based on the concept of dispossession and dissimulation.

By pointing out these similarities between Melville and the two German philosophers who have radically changed the course of the epistemological and theological discourse of the Western tradition which had been centered around the ensuing interaction between idealism and empiricism, my dissertation responds to an ongoing call in Melville studies to locate Melville beyond his immediate cultural context. As I suggested in the Introduction, the purpose of reading Melville in relation

88 For example, in his 1992 essay, “Melville in the 80’s,” Andrew Delbanco investigates the direction of Melville studies and poses as an important question: “whether Melville was able to think outside the constricting categories of his culture” (710). While calling for a more rigorous criticism of Melville’s poetry in “Melville’s Poems: the Late Agenda,” William H. Shurr proposes a related but more specific agenda by accentuating the importance of finding Melville’s place in the history of ideas as follows: “I also attempted to suggest Melville’s running dialogue, in his poems, with some of the major intellectual figures of the period—with Karl Marx who was widely published in America, with Darwin, and with Schopenhauer whose works began to appear in English late in Melville’s writing career but in whom he
to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche does not lie in unraveling the influential relationship between the American novelist and the German philosophers. Instead, my dissertation illustrates the possibility that though distanced by time and place, these writers’ relentless interrogations of the basic principles of Western metaphysics inevitably lead to a similar end point, which is to utilize art as a mode of transcendence from the horror and absurdity of existence.

More significantly, the similarities between Melville and Nietzsche especially in terms of their conceptualization of art as an alternative to theodicy in the absence of God—especially after what Nietzsche describes as “the murder of god” by people—paradoxically reveal the rich possibilities of literature as compared with philosophy. That is to say, my analysis of *Moby-Dick* in light of Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s moral and aesthetic philosophy is far from based on the assumption that *Moby-Dick* is less a literary, artistic text than it is a philosophical enterprise. Rather, my investigation of the affinities between Melville and Nietzsche in their belief in the life-affirming power of art, or aesthetic justification of life, highlights the literary, artistic nature of *Moby-Dick* by insinuating that Melville was able to achieve, albeit “in some dim, random way” (163), what Nietzsche was only able to theorize in more abstract terms. Simply put, nowhere in Nietzsche’s books is rendered or contained “the ungraspable phantom of life,” which I contend is somehow grasped within or around *Moby-Dick*.

Seems to have found a kindred spirit and confirmation for some of his own most deeply held opinions. A great deal of very interesting work remains to be done on this subject—Melville among the Intellectuals. Melville is the most intellectual and philosophical of our canonical writers, and he responds to the writings of the great thinkers not only in his fiction but also in his poetry” (354).
That said, I do not intend to argue that literature is superior to philosophy. Those are of course two different modes of thinking, and it would be extremely presumptuous to claim that literature is a better means of grasping the truth than philosophy is. Instead, my examination of the richness and complexities of *Moby-Dick* as a literary endeavor to question the traditional methods of reaching the truth about human life raises important issues to consider regarding the prevalent approaches to literary criticism in academia nowadays. In the Introduction, I discussed some of the premises of postmodern thoughts and ideological criticism, and pointed out their problematic situations. Deconstructionists excel at undermining the authority of the existing systems of knowledge by collapsing the binary and hierarchical concepts, but they fail to offer any solution to replace the existing metanarratives, because their exclusive emphasis on the indeterminacy or an indefinite deferral of meaning does not allow them to establish any authority or legitimacy for their own philosophical and aesthetic project. Unable to conduct a meaningful and constructive reading of any given texts, therefore, the deconstructionist project comes to a dead end. Meanwhile, in their attempt to subvert cultural hegemony through the literary discourse, New Historicists tend to subject literature to culture and ideology, and as a result of privileging and fostering certain methods and norms of literary criticism, they run the risk of becoming no less elitist and authoritarian than those they criticize for having been elitist or canonical. New Historicists’ success in gaining ascendancy in literary criticism through their subversive reading practices poses two crucial challenges for them: while seeking to unsettle hierarchy, they cannot but reiterate this hierarchy, because as long as they participate in the system of literary criticism, they must compete with others over
dominancy in the literary marketplace and academia; also, they must find out how to fulfill their task as literary critics to evaluate the aesthetic power of literary works, which is often hard to reconcile with the assessment of their cultural significance.

Not unlike these postmodern thinkers, Melville was keenly aware that literature is an integral part of culture, be it politics or economy, and that literary products do not exist outside culture. At the same time, however, as he reveals in a letter to Richard H. Dana, Jr. that “tho’ you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen tree. . . . Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing,” Melville also understood that his life as a writer could only be justified through the refusal to subject his art to culture (1 May 1850). As discussed in my dissertation, through a creative and artistic use of an unending series of dynamic performances of language, Melville’s novel offers an alternative way to explore the relation of the self to the elusiveness of reality without being arbitrarily or dogmatically constituted by traditional faith in reason. If it is not enough to “redeem” literature, Melville’s “great Art of Telling the Truth” at least gives us a reason to keep asking whether literature has a positive power that cannot be captured by postmodern or ideological criticism. It at least encourages us to attempt to “exhaust the limits of the possible” (Pindar qtd. in Camus 2) by inviting our participation in indestructibly powerful experiences of life which is always-already “becoming.”
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