

IN PREPARATION FOR READING *MOBY DICK*:

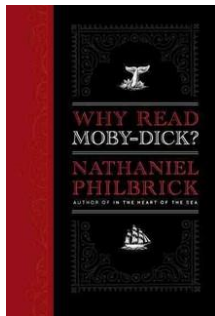
Look for the following ideas and concepts to find their way into this writing of Melville's novel:

- ✚ Allusions to *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and other tragedies
- ✚ Revenge/Mob mentality vs. Loyalty/ Extremism vs. Reason
- ✚ Shakespearean Jester/Fool and Truth telling: Sanity vs. Insanity
- ✚ Aristotelian tragic hero/Ahab as tragic hero/Ishmael as hero
- ✚ Biblical names and allusions

THEMES: This is a summary list of the basic themes that run through the novel, themes that find their way into and play out in pretty much all of the literature we'll read this year. It's all part of the discovery and the molding of a true and unique American voice in literature. While you don't have to keep a written record, one of the things you will most likely be asked to do is to provide quotes or scenes from the novel that illustrate these themes. Just a head's up ...

1. **Individualism**: A reliance on the self; a personal affirmation typically involving a resistance and struggle to retain one's identity and ideals in a mass society.
2. **The Search for a Voice**: An effort to abandon the imitation of British authors and transform the literary language into the raw and rich tones of truly American voices.
3. **Moral Struggle**: The struggle of evil (whether an embodied presence or a formidable inner force) vs. good (reformers, individual heroism, struggle against the "power of blackness").
4. **The Journey**: Although sometimes a literal quest, and sometimes a passage from innocence to maturity/wisdom, this expedition has come to represent the voyage of life itself, often reflecting the struggles, endurance, renewal of life.
5. **The Frontier**: This theme typically incorporates all the previous themes as it stresses dependence on and building of one's character, faced with new challenges and decisions, often with the only law being one's conscience.
6. **The American Dream/Nightmare**: The offer/promise of spiritual and material fulfillment, sometimes looking beyond the land to human nature itself as the key to a better world, occasionally incorporating the quest for freedom and equality – a "rags-to-riches" concept that often goes awry.
7. **Initiation**: Moving from innocence to maturity. May involve a new sense of identity and purpose, a deeper understanding or awareness, or a new vision; this may be gradual or come in an apocalyptic moment; stresses a new knowledge about being human.
8. **Conformity vs. Rebellion**: To go with the flow, or reject the predictable, mundane, already established lifestyle or design. Most closely tied to the Individualism and Quest themes.

Before reading the James Wood article on Melville's novel, check out the transcription of NPR's interview with Nathaniel Philbrick on "Why Read *Moby Dick*."



['Why Read Moby-Dick?': A Passionate Defense Of The 'American Bible'](#)

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Heard on "All Things Considered"

October 17, 2011 - MELISSA BLOCK, host: This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Melissa Block.

ROBERT SIEGEL, host: And I'm Robert Siegel.

Now a new, small book about a big old one. The old one is Herman Melville's "Moby-Dick," a book which I admit that I read for the first time just last year.

It's not that I didn't know the story. As a kid, I saw the movie with Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab. Later, I read the classic comic book. And in 1962, I was actually one of the very few people to see Orson Welles' stage adaptation on Broadway with Rod Steiger. It folded so fast - after only 13 performances - that they gave away free tickets at my high school.

My experience confirms what Nathaniel Philbrick writes in his slim new book, packed with insight, called "Why Read Moby-Dick?" Even people who haven't read it, know about the white whale and the obsessive Captain Ahab. The novel is much more than its plot. And much more than some of the simplistic summaries of what it's supposed to be about. Nathaniel Philbrick joins us, fittingly from Nantucket. Welcome to the program.

NATHANIEL PHILBRICK: It's great to be here.

SIEGEL: And, first, the answer to the question of your title. This book runs hundreds of pages, life is short, "Why Read Moby-Dick?"

PHILBRICK: Read "Moby-Dick" because I think it's as close to being our American Bible as we have. It's just full of great wisdom. But it also is just an amazing read. The level of the language is like none other. And it's a book I keep dipping into on a regular basis, almost on a daily basis.

SIEGEL: As you describe it, Herman Melville was already a successful writer when he wrote a novel about whaling, that would be more of an adventure story - I guess, then when it turned into - at a time when Americans actually associated adventure more with the Western frontier than with the seas. And he scrapped this book and he added all of the incredibly rich undertones and overtones that make it "Moby-Dick." Why? What happened?

PHILBRICK: Well, he met Nathaniel Hawthorne and read some of his stories, and it was Hawthorne's power of blackness that forever changed Melville. Melville realized what he wanted to do with this novel was entirely different from his original aim, and he completely reinvented the book and invented Ahab and made it the classic it is today.

SIEGEL: Hawthorne is central here, but you also write about the Melville's mid-life encounter with the plays of Shakespeare and his ambition to outdo Shakespeare.

PHILBRICK: Yeah. Well, Melville came to Shakespeare quite late, which I think proves it's best to come to books like "Moby-Dick" and to Shakespeare after we've had some life experience. And reading Shakespeare just infused Melville's language, brought it to a level that is just unapproachable. And this combination of meeting Hawthorne, but having Shakespeare as a new launching pad, made for an incredible combination that made "Moby-Dick" possible.

SIEGEL: And you observe that it was characters like Iago in "Othello," complex characters that Melville really engaged with when he read Shakespeare.

PHILBRICK: Yeah, and they're all over "Moby-Dick." But what Melville did is he applied it to his own experiences whaling and also with what was going on in America, with the Civil War approaching. And so, it made this incredible stew of influences that made it a book that really will be relevant in all times.

SIEGEL: Speaking of stew, when you read "Moby-Dick," as I did fairly recently - and enjoyed it tremendously, I might say - there are chapters which will be devoted to a recipe for clam chowder. Or a long essay on the nature of whales - not the most current zoology that one might read, but interesting. Or these incredibly detailed descriptions of how a whale and vessel actually operated. It's not just the plot outline that we're talking about here.

PHILBRICK: No, the book is full of almost chapters that are side bars that go off on tangents, that can be kind of frustrating if you're trying to follow the plot. But which lead into wormholes of just metaphysical poetry that are truly revelatory. And so, reading "Moby-Dick," you have to have some patience, but it really is those little sidebars that take you in all sorts of directions that ultimately give it that great magisterial power.

SIEGEL: You write about the poetry of Melville's writing, and I wonder if you could read an example of that for us now.

PHILBRICK: Yeah. This is a passage from Chapter 51. And it's called "The Spirit Spout," and picks up with the Pequod just south of St. Helena.

(Reading) While gliding through these latter waves in at one serene and moonlit night, when all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver, and by their soft, suffusing seethings, made what seemed a silvery silence, not a solitude. On such a silent night, a silvery jet was seen far in advance of the white bubbles at the bow. Lit up by the moon, it looked celestial; seemed some plumed and glittering god uprising from the sea.

SIEGEL: Wow, when you read that, I can imagine the Melville reading it aloud as he was writing it. It sounds very much like elaborate spoken prose.

PHILBRICK: It is. And, you know, it's iambic pentameter at times. And the level of the writing is truly poetic, and yet he's telling this epic story. And so, the combination is really one that was built for the ages.

SIEGEL: The crew of the Pequod includes mostly whites, but blacks, Indians, Filipinos - I guess a very famous South Sea Islander, all of them sailing for a monomaniacal, revenge-seeking captain in search of a white whale that did him dirty. You say that we're reading an allegory here of mid-19th century America.

PHILBRICK: Yeah. When Melville was working on this in 1850 and '51, all the chaos that was about to become the Civil War in a decade was in there in the society. The fugitive slave law had just been passed and everyone knew that America was headed towards a cataclysm. And all of that is in the subtext of "Moby-Dick." And I think it means that in the future, whenever we will run into an eminent cataclysm, "Moby-Dick" will once again be relevant.

SIEGEL: It's not just that the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, as you write: Melville's father-in-law was the judge who upheld it, which meant that people in Free States were complicit in slavery. They were obliged to return slaves to their owners.

PHILBRICK: Yes. And this meant that slavery wasn't just a Southern issue. Everyone was involved in it. And Melville was involved in about as close as a way as you can. His father-in-law was right in the middle of it. And riots were breaking out in Boston, and Judge Shaw was the focal point of all this unrest. So, all of this played into everything that's going on with Ahab and Moby Dick, as it makes its way towards the white whale.

SIEGEL: So, here's the irony of Melville's "Moby-Dick," he'd already written books that sold well and "Moby-Dick" was neither a critical nor a commercial success. What happened? How did it achieve its current status?

PHILBRICK: Well, you know, "Moby-Dick" was a great disaster when it came to the critical reception. It did not sell well. And Melville would go on to write a number of books, but would really die a virtually unknown writer.

And it wasn't until the other side of World War I, with the ex-pats in Paris and others rediscovering the book, that people began to see that contained in "Moby-Dick" is sort of the genetic code of what's going on in America and throughout the world, when it comes to people dealing with issues of authority and

nature and all of this. And so, the irony is that Melville died in obscurity and yet resurfaced in the 20th century to become one of the great, renowned writers of our age.

SIEGEL: Well, Nathaniel Philbrick, thanks a lot for talking with us about, I guess, we can say your favorite book.

PHILBRICK: Yes, definitely my favorite book. Thank you.

SIEGEL: Nathaniel Philbrick, who is the author as well of "In The Heart Of The Sea," has now written a book called "Why Read Moby-Dick?"

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***Now read the James Wood article :**

The All of the If

by James Wood - published in *New Republic*, 03/17/97, Vol. 216, Issue 11

When it comes to language, all writers want to be billionaires. All long to possess so many words that using them is a fat charity. To be utterly free in language, to be absolute commander of what you do not own--this is the greatest desire of any writer. Even the deliberate paupers of style--Hemingway, Pavese, late Beckett--have secret longings for riches, and strive to make their reductions seem like bankruptcy after wealth rather than fraud before it: Pavese translated Moby-Dick into Italian. Realists may protest that it is life, not words, that draws them as writers; yet language at rush hour is like a busy city. Language is infinite, but it is also a system, and so it tempts us with the fantasy that it is closed, like a currency or an orchestra. What writer does not dream of touching every word in the lexicon once?

In Moby-Dick, Herman Melville nearly touched every word once, or so it seems. Language is pressed and consoled in that book with Shakespearean agility. No other nineteenth-century novelist writing in English lived in the city of words in which Melville lived; they were suburbanites by comparison. No other novelist of that age could swim in the poetry of "the warmly cool, clear, ringing, perfumed, overflowing, redundant days..." And so, despite the usual biographical lamentations, despite our knowledge that Moby-Dick went largely unappreciated, that in 1876 only two copies of the novel were bought in the United States, that in 1887 it went out of print with a total sale of 3,180 copies, that these and other neglects narrowed Melville into bitterness and savage daily obedience as a New York customs inspector--despite all this, one says lucky Melville, not poor Melville. For, in writing Moby-Dick, he wrote the novel that is every novelist's dream of freedom. It is as if he painted a patch of sky for the imprisoned.

It is one of the virtues of Hershel Parker's huge, puzzling semi-biography (it covers only the years up to Moby-Dick) that this great artistic achievement is always visible. It is a necessary virtue because there is so much else visible in Parker's account that Melville's books disappear a little.

Parker has spent his life in Melville-devotions. He is not a critic, he is a connoisseur of facts. He tells us in his introduction that he has spent many years working on the New Melville Log, a documentary account of Melville's movements, and that in writing this biography he simply moved chunks of the Log from one computer file to the other. His biography is a displaced log, complete with coordinates and tides. (Describing Melville's first whaling voyage, Parker does indeed fill an entire page with little chips of longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates.) "Hershel is a faucet," repeats Parker from an esteemed predecessor's note in his papers, apparently in self-congratulation. But he should not congratulate himself. Parker is superstitious about facts and throws them about like salt, apparently hoping that they will drive out the devil of interpretation.

The result is that Melville emerges as a very thick shadow. There is only a dim outline. All the moments in Melville's early life that might bear a little pressure--his increasing skepticism toward his inherited religion, his joyous discovery of radical metaphysics (an adventure that can be plotted as easily as his first sea-voyage), his growing infatuation with metaphor, an obsession that bursts into the love affair of Moby-Dick--are rubbed back into the mild pastels of "information." Parker quotes from almost every published contemporary review of Melville's novels--he fills twelve pages with reviews of *Omoo* (1847), Melville's second novel--but almost neglects to describe, let alone to interpret, the novels themselves. It is symptomatic of this book that it leads us to the brink of Moby-Dick, the novel that justifies Melville's life, and then ends, without describing that book or gathering its meanings. Parker's volume is in one sense a triumph of biography (it is buttressed by huge primary research, an astonishing amount of labor), but it also acts as argument against the tyranny of the form.

Melville is tied down by Parker's Lilliputian facts. But this book is at least a fine family chronicle, in which Melville moves and suffers. Parker sees that families wallow in detail--in letters, homes, arrangements, travels. For the Melvill family (as they spelled their name at the time of Herman's birth in 1819), money was the bulking detail. Herman's parents were the children of wealth, privilege and revolutionary courage. But Alan Melvill, Herman's father, was a deluxe Mr. Micawber, apparently importing French dry goods but actually threshing his way through the family inheritance. Parker reckons that, in all, he borrowed \$20,000 from his father and from his parents-in-law. Nobody knows what this money satisfied. When he died, abruptly, in 1832 (he seems to have suffered some kind of mental collapse), he left the family deep in debt. Melville was 12. He was removed from school and sent to work in a bank for \$150 a year.

Parker's narrative takes us through this bleak apprenticeship-to-nothing. Melville was a year and a half at the bank, and after the bank came work in his brother's store as a clerk, and school teaching, and his decision, at the age of 20, to join a whaling ship. In Polynesia, Melville jumped ship and spent time with a tribe of cannibals. His first book, *Typee* (1846), is an autobiographical account of his adventures, and it was taken as such by contemporary readers. Melville's unsympathetic view of the activity of Christian missionaries in Polynesia guaranteed hostile reviews from papers and journals associated with churches. Such critics would note all future examples of religious skepticism in Melville's writing. But the book was an international success. Largely owing to the unconventional sexual escapades described by a willing Melville, the young writer became what Parker calls "a contemporary sex symbol."

Parker is in love with Melville. He soothes the writer, pads his bitterness, lightens his burgeoning agonies of authorship. The book's pageant of detail drowns Melville's tremors. The writer is heroic: "Augusta was perceptive enough to recognize her brother as noble-souled." And a king must marry a queen: when Melville marries Elizabeth Shaw, Parker gallantly decides that "biographers have been led astray by an awkward early daguerreotype of Elizabeth Shaw...." She "must have been a handsome young woman," he smacks, although the unawkward daguerreotype shows an awkwardly plain woman, with a long, prudent face. But Parker becomes a happy courtier, stuttering mildnesses like Billy Budd: "Lizzie was not the greatest belle of Boston, but she was one of the most privileged--the only young woman that October to hear from the bearded lips of a brilliant, dark, muscular, handsome young man enthralling accounts of his adventures...."

It is in its oddly suave account of Melville's religious development that this book fails most tremendously. Although Parker deals with the occasional detail about Melville's churchgoing (or lack of it: Melville was a fitful attender) or about the stern Calvinism of his mother, Maria Melville, it is not until very late in his story that he considers Melville's abused relationship to his inherited faith, a relationship that is the absent, sunless center of all his greatest fiction, poetry and letters. Parker's comments do not suggest a very deep understanding of Melville's blockages. "Original Sin had not become an outmoded theological conceit in Maria Melville's house, and till his death her second son [Herman] had to resort to that concept, at times, to make sense of the world." But Melville could not make sense of the world--and partly because the idea of Original Sin had broken his world.

Melville burrowed in Montaigne's Essays and Pierre Bayle's Historical and Critical Dictionary in the period just before writing Moby-Dick. They were useful, breezes Parker, "for their worldly-wise skepticism, which braced him against the superficial pieties demanded by his time"--which is too worldly-wise an interpretation. Melville did not need to be braced against the pieties of his age, and they demanded little from him. He needed to be braced against the flickering horror of his refusal to believe, and then braced against the sour clarity of his refusal entirely to unbelieve.

Melville was born into the Calvinism of the Reformed Dutch Church. At his baptism, his parents were asked if they understood that all children are "conceived and born in sin, and therefore are subject to all miseries, yea to condemnation itself, yet that they are sanctified in Christ, and therefore as members of his Church ought to be baptised." It was a theology that stressed a quality of helplessness: we are predestined by God's free grace to be chosen, or not chosen, into the elect, but nothing we can do in the way of "good works" on earth will make any difference. We can be hired or sacked, but it is no good scheming for promotion.

In a typically glittering metaphor, Melville writes in *Pierre* (1852), the disastrous novel that followed Moby-Dick, that if our actions are "foreordained ... we are Russian serfs to Fate." *Pierre* is described as someone who is captured by "that most true Christian doctrine of the utter nothingness of good works," and is therefore inconsolable when tragedy overwhelms him. Melville's writing is shadowed by Calvinism, in the way that Nabokov's ape, when given a sheet of

paper, drew the bars of his cage. "But we that write & print," he joked to Evert Duyckinck in 1849, "have all our books predestinated--& for me, I shall write such things as the Great Publisher of Mankind ordained ages before he published 'The World'--this planet, I mean."

Hawthorne best described Melville's struggle with belief. In 1856, Melville was briefly in England, to visit Hawthorne in Liverpool. The two sat on the beach at Southport and continued the unequal marriage of the last six years: Hawthorne silent and tidy, Melville messy with metaphysics. At this time, wrote Hawthorne, Melville said that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated." He added: "It is strange how he persists ... in wandering to and fro over these deserts.... He 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."

In his relation to belief, Melville was like the last guest who cannot leave the party; he was always returning to see if he had left his hat and gloves. And yet he did not want to be at the party, either. It is just that he had nowhere else to be and would rather be with people than be alone. He was tormented by God's "inscrutable" silence--this is clear from the work. Moby Dick, who is both God and Devil, flaunts his unhelpful silence as God does to Job: "Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?" In the chapter "The Tail," Ishmael admits that if he cannot really comprehend the whale's rear, then he can hardly see his face: "Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen," an appropriation of the verse in Exodus in which God tells Moses that "thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen."

In 1857, while traveling through Egypt, he visited the Pyramids, and he was gripped by the torment of their possible emptiness. "It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah," he writes. In Moby-Dick, we are brought to the "pyramidal silence" of the whale. In Pierre, he will not leave alone this torment and fingers it like a wounded rosary, which is partly why the book is so impacted. "Silence is the only Voice of our God," he writes there. He jibes at God: "doth not Scripture intimate, that He holdeth all of us in the hollow of His hand?--a Hollow, truly!" Perhaps, he proposes, our searches are like this:

By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room;
with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid--and no body is there!--appallingly
vacant as vast is the soul of a man!

More than this, Melville saw that the world did not look like God's world, and that we cannot behave like God's children because His standards are cruelly impossible. He has Plotinus Plinlimmon say as much in his sermon in Pierre. Though "the earthly wisdom of man be heavenly folly to God; so also, conversely, is the heavenly wisdom of God an earthly folly," muses Plinlimmon. And who has not been struck, continues the sermon, by "a sort of infidel idea, that whatever other worlds God may be Lord of, he is not the Lord of this; for else this world would seem to give the lie to Him; so utterly repugnant seem its ways to the instinctively known ways of Heaven."

We can get a sense of the violent bevel on which Melville's faith quivered--half on and half off--if we compare him to two Christians who were writing thoughts very like Plotinus Plinlimmon's exactly at this moment in the middle of the nineteenth century. In Denmark, Kierkegaard strengthened Christianity (as he saw it) by reminding us, like Plinlimmon, that Christianity is a "folly" for humans, that "one must be quite literally a lunatic to become a Christian." And, in England, Cardinal Newman looked at the world, in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, and almost agreed with Melville:

I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress. The world seems simply to give the lie to that great truth, of which my whole being is so full.... I look into this living busy world, and see no reflexion of its Creator. This is, to me, one of those great difficulties of this absolute primary truth, to which I referred just now. Were it not for this voice, speaking so clearly in my conscience and my heart, I should be an atheist, or a pantheist, or a polytheist when I looked into the world.

Kierkegaard and Newman suffered like Melville, and suffered eloquently, feeling the lack of what Newman beautifully calls "the tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design." But both could hear the voice of God, however thick its accent. They were full of it. For Melville, however, it was "Silence." In his trip to Egypt and to Jerusalem in 1857, God is an "idea," a malign "conception" that cannot be unconceived. God is never a voice.

So Melville slapped at God. He could not help playing the infidel: he was one of the most delvingly sacrilegious writers who ever existed. For him, metaphysics could not stop like a day-trip at some calm watering-place. Dialectic was always an elastic solitude stretching into the desert. In his letters to Hawthorne--a writer he self-describingly praised as one who "says No! in thunder," for "all men who say yes lie"--he churns himself into atheistical taunting, using Hawthorne's reticence as a stand-in for God's. Nobody can bear truth, he says. He whirls around, magnificently, in "atmospheric skepticisms." He liked to indulge in philosophical "ripping" in these letters. Why is it, he asks in a letter written in April 1851, that "in the last stages of metaphysics a fellow always falls to swearing so? I could rip an hour." (Parker's white comment: "he could `rip' for an hour, but he did not"--this, about a letter in which Melville has already been ripping for an hour.)

Most people, he tells Hawthorne, "fear God, and at bottom dislike Him ... because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch." Then he adds an elevated sneer: "You perceive I employ a capital initial in the pronoun referring to the Deity; don't you think there is a slight dash of flunkeyism in that usage?" He slapped at God; but, in some way, he could not do without the idea of being slapped by God in return.

Between 1847 and 1850, Melville majestically discovered three things: metaphor, metaphysics and Shakespeare. These were the years in which he grew into the labor of writing *Moby-Dick* (which was written between the winter of 1850 and the summer of 1851). *Mardi* (1849), his third novel

but the first in which he indulged in philosophical "ripping," had been poorly received. Quickly, disdainfully, he turned out two hotcakes for money, *Redburn* (1849) and *White Jacket* (1850). Intellectually, his mind was abroad.

His reading, which had been eager but arbitrary, now took on a systematic wildness. Here, Parker, with his dribbling data, is useful. In 1847 and 1848, he bought or borrowed an edition of Shakespeare, a volume of Montaigne, a volume of Rabelais. In March, he read Sir Thomas Browne and Seneca; in June, Dante. In 1849 he bought Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, a book that delights in exposing the rationalist hollows of theological thinking. In the same year, he noted in his new edition of Milton that Milton had wandered in his religious belief: "I doubt not that darker doubts crossed Milton's soul, than ever disturbed Voltair [sic]. And he was more of what is called an Infidel."

But it was Shakespeare who furrowed his soul. He could not believe, he wrote to Evert Duyckinck in February 1849, that he had lived so long without properly reading Shakespeare, who now seemed to him like Jesus: "Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired. I fancy that this moment Shakespeare [sic] in heaven ranks with Gabriel Raphael and Michael. And if another Messiah ever comes twill be in Shakespeare's [sic] person." He was especially interested in madness and dark truth in Shakespeare.

In the summer of 1850, he met Hawthorne. His letters begin to sway somewhat maniacally. He assures Hawthorne that "I am not mad, most noble Festus!" In another: "This is rather a crazy letter in some respects, I apprehend." It is simply that he is growing: "Lord, when shall we be done growing?" he asks. Between 1849 and 1852, he is in a creative temper, flinging around words and ideas. In these letters he turns over, obsessively, the silence of God, and the sense that to speak truthfully in America demands a fit of secrecy. "Truth is ridiculous to men."

While he is busy seeing a world stripped of God's presence, he is busy theologizing literature. God has disappeared only to speak as literature. If the Messiah comes again, it will be as Shakespeare. But the Messiah has come again, and he is called Melville. It is Melville who, in *Moby-Dick*, will follow "Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth." Here in America, Shakespeares are being born, Christ-like creatures who will be crucified for telling the truth: "Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter," writes Melville in June 1851. Five months later, in November, he is groaning, fretting, racing: "Appreciation! Recognition! Is Jove appreciated?" In the same letter, he whistles, Whitman-like: "I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the supper, and that we are the pieces." Literature is the new church, and *Moby-Dick* its bible. He is building what he calls (in that novel) "Noah Webster's ark," a dictionary-ship, a bible-boat.

We hear, in these letters, the hymning, the fattened hysteria of *Moby-Dick*, its leaping exultations. But we also hear the self-pity and the self-absorption that make *Pierre* so intensely unlikable a book. In that novel, allegory points only to itself and is thus a continual self-advertisement. The

book is an allegory supposed to remind us that such a book cannot exist in America. Pierre is a kind of Calvinist self-mutilation at the literary, rather than the theological, level. It is as if Melville says, in this book: well, if good works really do get you nowhere, here is a good work--this book--that will get me nowhere, because no one will acknowledge it as a good work. Writing becomes an unthanked charity.

During the time that Melville wrote Moby-Dick, he underwent a kind of insanity of metaphor. It was Melville's love of metaphor that drew him ever further into "Infidel-ideas." Metaphor, quite literally, bred metaphysics for Melville. His metaphor has a life of its own; it is not only Melville that is "growing," it is also his language. Melville is the most naturally metaphorical of writers, and one of the very greatest. He saw the inside of the whale's mouth covered with "a glistening white membrane, glossy as bridal satins"; the spouting jet of the whale made him look like "a portly burgher smoking his pipe of a warm afternoon;" and almost every page of Moby-Dick carries something like this. Melville drew on the example of late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century poetry and prose as naturally as if he were of that age and not a nineteenth-century American. He saw how metaphor domesticates and localizes (the whale as burgher) even as it enlarges. For with metaphor, as Sir Thomas Browne put it in *Religio Medici* (1642), "there is all Africa and her prodigies in us."

Soaked in theology, Melville was alert to the Puritan habit of seeing the world allegorically, that is, metaphorically. The world was a place of signs and wonders which could always yield up its meaning like secret ink. Melville did a certain amount of this sign-gazing himself. Writing to Evert Duyckinck in August 1850, he mentioned that he was writing on an old heirloom, a desk of his uncle's. "Upon dragging it out to day light, I found that it was covered with the marks of fowls ... eggs had been laid in it--think of that!--Is it not typical of those other eggs that authors may be said to lay in their desks...."

Melville had a way of following metaphor and seeing where it led him. He wrote to Duyckinck, offering *Mardi* for his library, in the hope that it

may possibly--by some miracle, that is--flower like the aloe, a hundred years hence--or not flower at all, which is more likely by far, for some aloes never flower.

A year later, writing to Hawthorne, he used an image which has become celebrated:

I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, it developed itself, grew to greenness, and then fell to mould. So I. Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life.

Both similes force Melville into dialectic. Having embarked on them, he must follow their life and then their death. His book is like an aloe; but some aloes never flower, and since he has mentioned

the flowering of the aloe, he must also mention the aloe's failure to flower. The second image is more striking, because Melville made this comparison at the very height of his creative fever, while writing *Moby-Dick*. At this pinnacle, he foresees falling into decline. And why? Because, having likened himself to one of the seeds from the Pyramids, he must follow his own metaphor, and record that these seeds "grew to greenness, and then fell to mould."

No one is actually forced by metaphor, except a madman. Melville chooses the metaphors that then squeeze their return from him. He knows that the seeds from the Pyramids were not like other seeds, and that they "fell to mould." But, of all writers, he understood the independent, generative life that comes from likening something to something else. Keats spoke of how language "yeasts and works itself up"--works itself. This was everything to Melville. Pondering Goethe's advice that one must "Live in the all, and then you will be happy," he writes: "This `all' feeling... You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the all feeling." What Melville is crediting here is our power to create new life, a life that exists independently from us. And this is the life of metaphor. You live "in the all" when you feel metaphorical, when you feel that your hair is not your hair but has become leaves, your legs not your legs but growing shoots. And, once they are growing, who can stop them?

The theological implications of Melville's ravishment by metaphor are immense. Metaphor carries something over, it changes. In his letters and in his fiction, Melville thinks through metaphor, uses it to sway his thought. He ends one letter by saying that he began his letter in a small way, yet "here I have landed in Africa." Metaphor transports him, and is then called upon to give image to that very transportation. In his note on Milton's "wanderings in religious belief," Melville wrote that "he who thinks for himself can never remain of the same mind"--Melville wanders, via metaphor, out of "the same mind" into a different mind, out of sameness into likeness or difference.

His love of metaphor leads Melville marvelously astray, theologically. His "wandering" love of language breaks up his God, and he encourages this; his love of language bribes him against that rival, the Original Author. An example: in Judea, in 1857, Melville was put into a cold trance by the rockiness of the landscape. "Is the desolation of the land the result of the fatal embrace of the Deity?" he asks in his journal. The land, he feels, must have produced the religion: "As the sight of haunted Haddon Hall suggested to Mrs Radcliffe her curdling romances, so I have little doubt, the diabolical landscapes [sic] great part of Judea must have suggested to the Jewish prophets, their terrific theology." What is terrific is the almost casual blasphemy of the metaphor. Ann Radcliffe wrote Gothic romances. Yet it is because Melville cannot resist the impulse of likeness that he is drawn into comparing biblical theology to a Gothic romance.

Moby-Dick represents the triumph of this atheism of metaphor. Or, perhaps, this polytheism of metaphor. For it is a book in which allegory explodes into a thousand metaphors; a book in which the Puritan habit of reading signs and seeing stable meanings behind them is mocked by an almost grotesque abundance of metaphor. In this book, meaning is mashed up like a pudding. The Godhead is indeed broken into pieces. Truth is kaleidoscopically affronted. The whale, which poor Ahab chases, is likened to everything under the sun, and everything under the moon, too--a portly

burgher, an Ottoman, a book, a language, a script, a nation, the Sphinx, the Pyramids. The whale is also Satan and God. The whale is "inscrutable." It is so full of meanings that it threatens to have no meaning at all, which is the fear that Ishmael confesses to in the celebrated chapter called "The Whiteness of The Whale." Critics who persist in seeing in Melville an American Gnostic do so because the whale is a demiurge, a bad god. But what, Melville asks, if the whale means nothing? What if, at the very heart of the sarcophagus, there is absolutely nothing?

By late summer, 1851, it was over. The book was done. Parker is right to call Moby-Dick "the most daring and prolonged aesthetic adventure that had ever been conducted in the hemisphere in the English language." Melville had asked the question: How does an American writer make tragedy worthy of Shakespeare's without setting the story in the remote past? He answered it by making his novel a historical novel whose epoch is the whale--thousands of years old. As Walter Scott filled his novels with the dust of medieval France or Scotland, with clothes, dates, battles, so Melville filled his book with the clothes, dates and battles of the whale. The whale is a country and an age.

How easily it might not have worked! The power is all verbal. Without the language, the metaphysics would be just grain. Although one remembers the rhapsodies of poetry, one forgets how precise, how grounded, is the language, with what vernacular swing it moves. Melville Americanizes Shakespeare, gives it tilt. Where Shakespeare has an Antony like a dolphin, showing its back above the element it lived in, Melville has a democracy of porpoises, tossing their backs to heaven "like caps in a Fourth of July crowd." Queequeg, the cannibal, can go anywhere: "Transported to the Indies, his live blood would not spoil like bottled ale." Not for nothing does Ishmael pray to "the great democratic God."

Again and again one is thrilled by the teeter of metaphor, watching it almost fail, and then take like a skin graft. There is a mad persistence to this metaphorizing, a fiery pedantry. There is the noise the whale makes, "an enormous wallowing sound as of fifty elephants stirring in their litter"; the harpooners turning their harpoons in the very quick of the beast, and yet delicately, "as if cautiously seeking to feel after some gold watch that the whale might have swallowed." There is Pip, the little Negro boy, who falls into the water "like a traveler's trunk.... Bobbing up and down in the sea, Pip's ebon head showed like a head of cloves." There is Ahab's soul, "a centipede, that moves upon a hundred legs." And at last, the final chase, the whale sliding like metaphor itself through its fluid of meanings: "on each bright side, the whale shed off enticings."

This carnival comes to a chill rest in the chapter called "The Whiteness of The Whale." Here Ishmael asks if it is the whiteness of the whale that torments. For whiteness may signify many things (sanctity, purity, superiority) or it may signify nothing. It "stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation.... Whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour, and at the same time the concrete of all colours ... a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink...." Here, in whiteness, is the end of allegory, and therefore the end of metaphor, and therefore the end of language. It is silence, and it sits in the book like some unnamed sea, ready to suck down all who come upon it.

Moby-Dick is the great dream of mastery over language. But it also represents a terrible struggle with language. For if the terror of the whale, the terror of God, is his inscrutability, then it is language that has partly made him so. Language does not console, is not another religion. It is Melville's abundance of words that is constantly filling everything with meaning, and emptying it out, too. Language breaks up God, releases us from the one meaning of the predestinating God, but merely makes that God differently inscrutable by flooding it with thousands of meanings. Metaphor insists on relationship, but to compare one thing with another is also to suggest non-relationship, for nothing is ever like anything else. Melville's metaphors resemble the medieval preference for describing God by His attributes, by indirection. But, when you have done this, you have described God but you have not exactly known Him, and perhaps you have only aggravated the difficulty. Language is a voice that does not help us get any nearer to the silence of God; it is its own voice.

Moby-Dick is, then, a Messianic text, and Melville may have become another Messiah in writing it. Master of meaning, he is the real "great democratic God" to which Ishmael is pledged and by whom he is predestined. But to be a literary God is not to get closer to an actual God, and Melville, who could not entirely release the monitor of God from his life, surely knew this. He certainly knew that language is one of the veils of theology, not one of the clarities: "As soon as you say Me, a God, a Nature, so soon you jump off from your stool and hang from the beam," he wrote to Hawthorne. "Yes, that word is the hangman. Take God out of the dictionary, and you would have Him in the street."

No more than anyone else did Melville manage to get God into the street. He went, tidally, between belief and unbelief. Melville has Ishmael argue that life is always a ceaseless tide:

There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:--through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence, doubt ... then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again: and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. Where lies the final harbour, whence we unmoor no more?

Theologically, Melville lived his life in an eternal If, which his love of metaphor only encouraged. Linguistically, in the gorgeous play of metaphor, he lived his life in an eternal All--which was at the same time an eternal If, because it could not console, could not banish the If, and in some way only deepened it. A god of a thousand meanings may be as absent as the God of one meaning. Ahab's monomaniacal hunt of the whale is not so far from Ishmael's multiple tolerance of it. Any true life is a blasphemously exhaustive hunt, and Melville lived a true life. Poor Melville, lucky Melville!