

THE WORDSWORTHIAN INHERITANCE OF MELVILLE'S POETICS

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It has become commonplace among both Melville and Wordsworth critics to recognize a basic ambiguity or contradictoriness in each artist's writing. In this project, I find the roots of that tension in each artist's concept of the imagination and the process of poetic creation. More importantly, I find that Melville's concept of art, as reflected in his magnum opus *Moby-Dick* and substantiated in his poetry, reveals a basic affinity with Wordsworth's Imagination.

Specifically, my project traces the lingering elements of Wordsworth's concept of the poetic process in Melville's writing, particularly focusing on two important and complex relationships in that creative process: 1) the implicit paradox of activity and passivity in a poetics that assumes at its heart inspiration, and Wordsworth's particular devotion to preserving rather than reconciling that paradox; and 2) the role of society in a creative process that seeks to privilege individual genius while ensuring the social efficacy of the workings of that genius. Here emerging at the center of my study—not surprisingly—is an engagement with *The Whale*, in which I offer a reading of *Moby-Dick* as a text that, at least in part, is occupied with the process and position of the artist.

In paying particular attention to the evidence of a close relationship with Wordsworth in Melville's conception of art, I am not as interested in the question of literary influence as I am in demonstrating that Melville struggled with many of the same questions regarding art and creation that are evident in Wordsworth's own writing. In seeking connections between

Melville's literature, particularly his poetry, and Wordsworth, my transcontinental project reveals a concern with the role of the artist in society—a question of the responsibility of the artist that is importantly enduring, despite the years and distance between the writers.

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PREFACE

This dissertation represents the culmination of years of thought and study, much coming under the direction of many encouraging and provoking professors. The germ of the study, ten years in the past, can be traced to my senior seminar work as an undergraduate under the direction of Professor Kenneth Mason, Jr., at Washington and Jefferson College. Since that time, I have been able to work through some of the pertinent issues discussed in this dissertation while taking classes directed by Professor Paul Bové, Professor Troy Boone, and Professor Jonathan Arac at the University of Pittsburgh—many thanks for their direction and encouragement. Also, I would like to thank Professor Virginia Jackson of Tufts University and Professor Tara Robbins Fee of Washington and Jefferson College for reading and commenting upon the work in progress.

I especially acknowledge my committee members for their constant encouragement and critical assistance—I am thankful to Professor Nancy Glazener and Professor Marah Gubar for their continued support. I also am deeply indebted to Professor Fred Evans, of Duquesne University, for answering a call and serving on my committee. And the work simply could not have been done without the unfaltering optimism and invaluable guidance of Professor Jonathan Arac—thank you immensely.

And most especially, to my wife, who not only makes my work possible but is my greatest source of inspiration—I dedicate this, with my love, to you, Erica.

1.0 'THE PURSUIT OF POETRY UNDER DIFFICULTIES': MELVILLE'S WORDSWORTHIAN HERITAGE

In 1977, Thomas F. Heffernan urged a critical examination of the relationship between Melville and Wordsworth by publishing the results of his study of Melville's annotations of Wordsworth's poetry.¹ Prior to this, only a handful of academics had offered arguments linking the two authors. This belatedness can be accounted for in several ways. When it comes to literary influences and predecessors, Melville scholars (rightly) concentrated on other, more visible figures, such as those directly connected to Melville by his own hand, like Shakespeare and Hawthorne,² or those logically inferred from his position in contemporary culture, such

¹ Thomas F. Heffernan, "Melville and Wordsworth," *American Literature* 49, no. 3 (1977). The edition Melville annotated was *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth Together With a Description of the Country of the Lakes in the North of England, Now First Published with His Works*, edited by Henry Reed (Philadelphia: James Kay, Jun. and Brother; Boston: James Munroe and Company; Pittsburgh, C.H. Kay & Co.; 1839). This volume follows Wordsworth's preference for his collected poetry in arranging the titles under categories such as "Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood," "Juvenile Pieces," "Poems Founded on the Affections," "Poems of the Fancy," and "Poems of the Imagination."

² I refer, of course, to Melville's review entitled "Hawthorne and His Mosses," which is perhaps the primary document outside of his fiction or poetry in which a student of Melville's may look to find some notion of his theory of art. In the commonly accepted lore of Melville scholarship, his review of Hawthorne is considered central not only by demonstrating his appreciation of Shakespeare and Hawthorne, and thereby providing a glimpse into his vision of art, but also by evidencing his own altered course as artist in the modified development of his magnum opus, *Moby-Dick*, as a consequence of his friendship with Hawthorne: see, for example, Leon Howard, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1951), 168-177; this view is challenged, however, by Jerome M. Loving, "Melville's Pardonable Sin," *The New England Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (June 1974). For *Moby-Dick's* indebtedness to Shakespeare, see Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (New York, : Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947).

as Emerson. But the late discovery of Melville's annotated edition of Wordsworth's poetry provided some concrete evidence on which to base scholarly conclusions—it pulled such academic work from the realm of mere “conjecture,”³ and provided scholars with a firmer footing to draw conclusions from their observations.⁴

Nonetheless, some conjecturing regarding the relationship between Melville and Wordsworth was natural, considering Wordsworth's prominence and reputation.⁵ Critics recognized, of course, the allusion to Wordsworth in *White-Jacket* (1850):

As may readily be imagined, the business of writing verse is a very different thing on the gun-deck of a frigate, from what the gentle and sequestered Wordsworth found it at placid Rydal Mount in Westmoreland. In a frigate, you can not sit down and meander off your sonnets, when the full heart prompts; but only, when more important duties permit: such as bracing round the yards, or reefing top-sails fore and aft.⁶

³ Heffernan, "Melville and Wordsworth," 338.

⁴ In 1973, a few years before Heffernan published his study, Maxine Moore lamented the lack of firm evidence linking Melville to Wordsworth: “That the name of one of England's most influential writers, William Wordsworth, does not figure prominently in Herman Melville's overt references prior to 1855 probably accounts for the fact that no study has been made of Wordsworth's influence on Melville,” Maxine Moore, "Melville's *Pierre* and Wordsworth: *Intimations of Immortality*," *New Letters* 39, no. Summer (1973): 89.

⁵ On the centrality of Wordsworth to the poetical reception in America, Christopher Durer states, “Following the 1820s, the English Romantic who became the new center of critical attention in the United States was Wordsworth,” Christopher S. Durer, *Herman Melville, Romantic and Prophet: A Study of His Romantic Sensibility and His Relationship to European Romantics* (Fredericton, N.B., Canada: York Press, 1996), 11. See also William Charvat, *The Origins of American Critical Thought, 1810-1835* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1936), 71-6.

⁶ Herman Melville, *White-Jacket; or, the World in a Man-of-War*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, *The Writings of Herman Melville*, (Evanston [Ill.]: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 40.

This seemingly offhand and harmless mention of England's Poet Laureate in a Chapter titled "The Pursuit of Poetry Under Difficulties" garners more attention than it might first appear to deserve simply from the fact that it is one of a relatively few overt references to Wordsworth in Melville's writing. For my purposes, it is fitting that Melville's first and most recognizable mention of Wordsworth pertains to "the business of writing verse" in the contexts of inspiration ("when the full heart prompts"), obligation ("when...duties permit") and society ("sequestered") and by bringing up the dualism of activity ("bracing") versus passivity ("placid").

Other critics, perhaps taking their cue from the casually dismissive tone of the reference in *White-Jacket*, imagine a relationship that is, on Melville's part, anywhere between slightly antagonistic to outright scornful and contemptuous. Indeed, the most prevalent critical narrative suggests that Melville's references to Wordsworth take the form of parody,⁷ generally mocking and dismissive, and establishes an image of the dark and gloomy Melville (a figure of Modernity) attacking the foolishly optimistic, rosy Wordsworth. Such an image, while probably not without some truth, nonetheless underestimates the complexity of both Melville and

⁷ For allusions to or readings of "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!" as parody of Wordsworth, see Leon Howard, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951); Edward H. Rosenberry, *Melville and the Comic Spirit* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 161-3; Heffernan, "Melville and Wordsworth," 340; Arnd Bohm, "Wordsworth in Melville's 'Cock-a-Doodle-Do,'" *Leviathan* 9, no. 1 (2007); Maryhelen C. Harmon, "Ideality, Reality, and Inspiration," in *Melville "Among the Nations": Proceedings of an International Conference, Volos, Greece, July 2-6, 1997*, ed. Sanford E. Marovitz and A.C. Christodoulou (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001), 109. For readings of *Pierre* as a parody of Wordsworth, see Jonathan Hall, "The Non-Correspondent Breeze: Melville's Rewriting of Wordsworth in *Pierre*," *ESQ* 39(1993); Moore, "Melville's *Pierre* and Wordsworth: *Intimations of Immortality*."

For a comprehensive summary of the standard critical reaction to Melville's use of Wordsworth, see Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross : American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 13-14.

Wordsworth, and tends to conceal the general ambivalence that lies at the heart of the writing of both men.

Further, such an oversimplification would conceal the extent to which echoes of Wordsworth may be found in Melville's writing. Indeed, a number of critics, mostly following Heffernan, have traced Melville's residual Wordsworthianism. In general terms, writers such as Leon Chai and Robert Weisbuch have described the indebtedness American Romantic writers owed to their European predecessors,⁸ and other critics have generally studied Melville's Romanticism,⁹ including R. P. Adams. In applying Morse Peckham's definition of romanticism, derived from a study of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle, to an American crop of writers, specifically Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman, Adams tenuously connects *The Prelude* and *Moby-Dick* by suggesting that both recorded a journey in which the author rejected an Enlightenment-

⁸ It is interesting to consider these two monumental works together in order to gain an appreciation for the complexity of the issue of Romantic influence. Chai focuses on the positive aspects of the legacy of Romantic philosophies and considers American authors to be willingly and seriously taking up the task of their predecessors, Leon Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 6. Weisbuch, on the other hand, starts from the assumption that the Americans chafed under the burden of their inheritance and sought distance and difference from their literary forbearers, Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross : American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson*. Robert A. Duggan, Jr., notices a similar dichotomy between Chai and Weisbuch, and suggests that a critic should aim somewhere between the two extremes, recognizing indebtedness or resistance where each is due. Robert A. Duggan, "'Sleep No More' Again: Melville's Rewriting of Book X of Wordsworth's *Prelude*," *Romanticism on the Net*, Nos. 38-39 (May 2005), <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/011671ar>.

⁹ See, for example, John J. Staud, "Moby-Dick and Melville's Vexed Romanticism," *ATQ* 6, no. 4 (1992); R. P. Adams, "Romanticism and the American Renaissance," *American Literature* 23, no. 4 (1952); Durer, *Herman Melville, Romantic and Prophet : A Study of His Romantic Sensibility and His Relationship to European Romantics*; Shawn Thomson, *The Romantic Architecture of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick* (Madison (NJ): Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001); Richard Fusco, "Wrestling with the Angel: Battle-Pieces as a Crucible for American Romantic Values," *Melville Society Extracts* 123 (July 2002).

era mechanistic view of the universe in place of something more “dynamic” and “organic.”¹⁰ However, recently critics have been recognizing a specific literary debt Melville owed to Wordsworth. Maxine Moore has recognized in *Pierre* evidence that Melville specifically had Wordsworth in mind when writing the book, based on not only biographical similarities in the plot but also in language and style issues.¹¹ Jonathan Hall takes this one step further, suggesting that in *Pierre* Melville specifically “attacks” aspects of Wordsworth’s Romanticism, especially his claim to poetic authority based on his relationship to Nature.¹² In examining Melville’s lecture “Statues in Rome,” Maryhelen C. Harmon suggests that Melville’s method of investigation displayed residual Wordsworthianism: “Melville’s program was first to describe objectively the particulars of the selected statues that he had viewed in ‘the bliss of solitude,’ then to ‘speculate upon the emotions and pleasures that appearance is apt to excite in the human breast.’”¹³ More recently, Robert A. Duggan, Jr., (2005) has suggested rather convincingly that Melville sought to re-write an important section of *The Prelude* in his first published book of

¹⁰ Adams, "Romanticism and the American Renaissance." Adams highlights the connection between *Moby-Dick* and *The Ancient Mariner*, a juxtaposition readily available because of the shared sea motif; he makes no specific connection between Melville and Wordsworth.

¹¹ Moore, "Melville's *Pierre* and Wordsworth: *Intimations of Immortality*."

¹² Hall, "The Non-Correspondent Breeze: Melville's Rewriting of Wordsworth in *Pierre*."; Duggan, "'Sleep No More' Again: Melville's Rewriting of Book X of Wordsworth's *Prelude*."

¹³ Harmon, "Ideality, Reality, and Inspiration," 109. Harmon elaborates: “What has received scant critical attention is the surprising extent that specific Wordsworthian images (the violet and the cloud, for example), Wordsworth’s central poetic theme of the correspondence of stimulation and deferred sensation (‘emotion recollected in tranquility’), his word choice (‘the language really used by men,’ ‘a man speaking to men’), as well as the British poet’s concept of artistic creation (‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’), all articulated in the “Preface” to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*—are embedded in Melville’s Italian journal and, in this same air of ‘tranquility,’ are presented in his subsequent annunciatory public recollections of his experiences in Rome” (109).

poetry, and Arnd Bohm (2008) has suggested that Melville's short story "Cock-A-Doodle-Do" should be read as a deliberate parody of Wordsworth.¹⁴

These critical assertions have anticipated Herschel Parker, writing for the latest installment of the Northwestern-Newberry series *The Writings of Herman Melville, Vol. 11, Published Poems*. In his thorough, biographically based discussion of Melville's development as a poet, Parker scrutinizes Melville's poetical reading in attempt to discover his preferences, influences, and, ultimately, his "aesthetic creed." In doing so, there is no poet that Parker emphasizes more than Wordsworth.¹⁵

According to Parker, Melville acquired the set of books called *Modern British Essayists* (1848), edited by Carey and Hart, in 1849, perhaps as early as March 3, and the "series played a significant role in Melville's self-education, particularly about British poetry."¹⁶ The book series, which contributed largely to Melville's knowledge of poetry and his development of a poetic aesthetic principle, to a great extent discussed Wordsworth, and may have prompted Melville to buy *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (1839),¹⁷ the annotated copy of which Heffernan based his study on after it surfaced in the 1970s

¹⁴ Duggan, "'Sleep No More' Again: Melville's Rewriting of Book X of Wordsworth's Prelude."; Bohm, "Wordsworth in Melville's 'Cock-a-Doodle-Do'."

¹⁵ Parker suggests that poets like Tennyson, Keats and Shelley were interesting to Melville, but "never as important to Melville as the less likable Wordsworth," *Melville: The Making of the Poet* 91.

¹⁶ Herschel Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 80-1.

Over the next several years, largely considered to be Melville's critical years as a writer, he was heavily engaged with Wordsworth in his reading, writing, and thinking about art¹⁸—even his place of residence echoed Wordsworth. Parker suggests that in sequestering himself in the Berkshires, Melville was, if not consciously copying Wordsworth, at least well aware of the parallels.¹⁹

Yet, as critics have recognized, Melville's impression of Wordsworth was not always wholly positive. In transcribing Melville's marginalia to Hazlitt's *Lectures*, Parker finds this direct reference to Wordsworth, regarding a favorable comment of Hazlitt's about Macpherson's supposed translation of the ancient Gaelic poet, Ossian: "I am rejoiced to see Hazlitt speak for Ossian. There is nothing more contemptible [sic] in that contemptible [sic] man (tho' good poet, in his department) Wordsworth, than his contempt of Ossian. And nothing that more raises my idea of Napoleon than his great admiration for [Ossian].—The loneliness of spirit of Ossian harmonized with the loneliness of the greatness of Napoleon."²⁰ The remarks Melville are referencing come from Wordsworth's "Essay Supplementary to the *Preface*" in his collected

¹⁸ Jonathan Hall has suggested that the evidence indicates "that Melville was reading extensively in Wordsworth during his most feverishly productive years, the years in which he wrote *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and "Bartleby," among others," Hall, "The Non-Correspondent Breeze: Melville's Rewriting of Wordsworth in *Pierre*," 12-3. Robert A. Duggan, Jr., considers Wordsworth to be "an essential (and almost frustratingly inescapable) influence upon Melville" Duggan, "'Sleep No More' Again: Melville's Rewriting of Book X of Wordsworth's Prelude."

¹⁹ Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, 92-3. Parker had argued much earlier for the importance of the Berkshires in influencing Melville's state of mind, suggesting that Melville's move to the mountainous recluse paralleled an "encroaching Wordsworthianism" in his thoughts and writings, Hershel Parker, "Melville and the Berkshires: Emotion-Laden Terrain, 'Reckless Sky-Assaulting Mood,' and Encroaching Wordsworthianism," in *American Literature: The New England Heritage*, ed. James Nagel and Richard Astro (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981).

²⁰ Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, 148.

poems, demonstrating Melville's close reading of Wordsworth, particularly where Wordsworth discusses his poetic vision.²¹

As demonstrated by Melville's own parenthetical qualification ["that contemptable man (tho good poet, in his department)], the evidence suggests that Melville's relationship to Wordsworth was ambivalent, clearly demonstrating a professional respect but also, at times, a volatile disagreeableness that cannot be ignored.²² Parker carefully traces a complex relationship with Wordsworth: an avid reader, especially of *The Excursion*, Melville found much to admire in Wordsworth, but he criticized Wordsworth's dedication to his theory of poetic diction and personally "came to resent Wordsworth's sense of superiority toward other writers."²³ Parker concludes, "Wordsworth was more and more the great modern poet against whom he was

²¹ Interestingly, John Robert Moore has argued that Wordsworth's avowed distaste for Ossian did not prevent Wordsworth from borrowing from him: "Although Wordsworth professed contempt for Macpherson's "translation" as a worthless forgery, it can be shown that he was familiar with the subject-matter, the spirit, and, in places, with the exact phraseology of Ossian; that he borrowed an Ossianic word or two when he needed it; that many of his poems deal with themes relating to the Ossianic poems, or present images or lines to which parallels may be found in Ossian; and that in his passionate love of the mountain wilderness he came very near the spirit of the blind bard of Selma," John Robert Moore, "Wordsworth's Unacknowledged Debt to Macpherson's Ossian," *PMLA* 40, no. 2 (1925): 362. It is interesting to speculate whether or not Melville, too, recognized Wordsworth's "contempt" as hypocritical—it would indeed be one way of accounting for his own contempt.

²² In fact, in examining Melville's relationship to many Romantic influences, Christopher Durer recognizes this ambivalence as the typical pattern for Melville. In discussing Melville's relationship to Coleridge, Durer asserts, "As for seeing Coleridge satirically, it should be remembered that Melville sees numerous "authoritative" figures ambivalently, on one hand pointing out their defects or ridiculing them in a gentle or harsher fashion, and on the other accepting creatively and intellectually their premises. In fact, the more Melville feels bound to a writer or philosopher, and the more he comes under his impact, the more likely he is to indulge in carping and ridicule, possible as a way of avoiding going overboard and keeping a steady hand," Durer, *Herman Melville, Romantic and Prophet : A Study of His Romantic Sensibility and His Relationship to European Romantics*, 10.

²³ Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, 94.

steadily defining himself,"²⁴ an assessment that reflects both Melville's indebtedness and ultimate unease with Wordsworth.

Through repeated examples, Parker paints a picture of a relationship in which Melville, although drawn to Wordsworth, recognizes in the older poet what Melville considers to be a flaw; indeed, the lightning rod of much of Melville's apparent frustration with Wordsworth seems to be centering around Wordsworth's overly optimistic vision of humanity resulting from too little attention paid to the evils and sufferings of the race.²⁵ Of course, Melville would have appreciated that Wordsworth's faith in humanity and in poetry did falter—indeed, Melville seemed to be particularly attracted to Wordsworth at these moments, with an extended comment on Wordsworth's "Initiations of Immortality" and possible re-workings of two other important moments, the poem "Resolution and Independence"²⁶ and Book X of *The Prelude*.²⁷ In reading Hazlitt, Melville marked the following section of the "Immortality Ode":

²⁴ Ibid., 181. Jonathan Hall similarly suggests a professional antagonism of the kind that young, up-and-coming writers typically feel toward the authority figures of the preceding generation (13), but also interestingly makes reference to a more fatherly ("Oedipal") sense of hostility, Hall, "The Non-Correspondent Breeze: Melville's Rewriting of Wordsworth in *Pierre*." I would humbly suggest the relationship is one of a precocious student toward a master, consisting of both a strong influence but also a hyperawareness of and sensitivity to the older man's faults; but, as I am less interested in exploring the nature of the writers' relationship than I am in discovering the shared ideas or tensions that drove their poetics, I shall press on.

²⁵ Parker pieces his argument together using many individual examples, including Melville's response to a section of Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" (176), his response to Hazlitt's criticism of poetry that is too caught up in the poet's self (174), his marginalia to a section of Emerson's "The Poet" (181), and his agreement with Matthew Arnold's assessment of Wordsworth (183). Too, Heffernan provides support for Parker's conclusion by piecing together this annotation on Wordsworth's "Laodamia": "Let *Observation* with extensive *view* / [Survey mankind from] China to Peru" Wordsworth's just [cri]ticism on Johnson's [laps(?)]es curiously [app]ly to his [own]," Heffernan, "Melville and Wordsworth," 343. I would suggest "verses" for Heffernan's "lapses," but the sense is apparent.

²⁶ See Bohm, "Wordsworth in Melville's 'Cock-a-Doodle-Do'." Also, see Marvin Fisher, *Going Under : Melville's Short Fiction and the American 1850s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 164.

I do not grieve, but rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy,
Which having been, must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In years that bring the philosophic mind!

Marking in particular the lines, “In the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering,” Parker reports that Melville added this comment: “A rigid analysis would make this sentiment appear in a different light from that which it is, probably, generally received. Its vagueness makes it susceptible of many interpretations; but Truth is susceptible of but one.”²⁸ Parker suggests that Melville would have disagreed that suffering brings “soothing thoughts,” but Melville’s remarks suggests that his problem lies in the “vagueness” and not in the sentiment. Perhaps what Melville had in mind is that it is unclear whether Wordsworth means that “soothing thoughts” are the recompense of our own suffering, or if, like in “Resolution and Independence,” “soothing thoughts” can be the result of the contemplation of the suffering of others. Or perhaps Melville simply wanted to know precisely which “soothing thoughts” Wordsworth is referring to.

Regardless, it seems important that Melville’s focus in his criticism of Wordsworth pertains to the validity of “the soothing thoughts,” their source and their “Truth.” Indeed, in my argument I am less interested in defining the specific nature of Melville’s relationship to

²⁷ See Duggan, ““Sleep No More” Again: Melville’s Rewriting of Book X of Wordsworth’s Prelude.”

²⁸ Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, 176.

Wordsworth than in recognizing that the common point of intersection between the two writers often and importantly hinges upon their poetics. One way to interpret Melville's moments of disappointment in Wordsworth might be to suggest that Melville could not as easily as Wordsworth overcome his doubts—Melville remained unable able to write anything but a “wicked book,” whereas Wordsworth could ease his doubts through recourse to his ultimate (though complicated) faith in the reliability and universality of art.

Much of the criticism discussing the relationship between Melville and Wordsworth that I have already mentioned speaks to issues of poetics, the creative moment, and representations of “Truth” in literature—so much so that this issue seems to be at the hub of any discussion linking Melville and Wordsworth.²⁹ Broadly speaking, Leon Chai provides insight into this observation; in defining “Romanticism” by breaking it down into its key components, Chai suggests that the Romantic understanding of “conscious” and the post-Kantian emergence of the concepts of “subjective” and “objective” signify “the possibility not only of apprehension, the connection or relation of things, but of creation, the formation of the external world through the formation of thought and consciousness.”³⁰ At the heart of my examination of Melville and Wordsworth is how each author responded to this new conception of artistic creation and its ramifications. In

²⁹ Even Melville's frustration over Wordsworth's criticism of Ossian that led to Melville to refer to the English bard as “contemptable” bears upon the topic of poetic creation. In her examination of Ossian's influence on Romanticism, Jennifer Davis Michael suggests, “This merging of the human with the natural points to, and even potentially resolves, a persistent contradiction in Romanticism: the relationship between nature and art. To the extent that ‘nature’ in its wild, raw state becomes more and more the aesthetic standard, the role of the human artist is called into question. Yet that same artist is celebrated as the Promethean champion of humanity, a priest of the imagination. By humanizing nature itself, Fingal and the other poems evoke a time when humanity was nature; hence the quest to unite with nature was unnecessary. The poems, while artificial themselves, thus suggest a bridge between nature and artifice,” Jennifer Davis Michael, “Ocean Meets Ossian: Staffa as Romantic Symbol,” *Romanticism* 13, no. 1 (2007): 1.

³⁰ Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*, 2.

the lines from Adams already quoted above, Melville seems to have followed Wordsworth and other Romantics in looking for a worldview less “mechanistic” and more “dynamic” and “organic,” but those very qualities, and the stress on ‘feeling’ rather than ‘reason,’ made the poetic process fluid, subjective, difficult to define, and filled with tensions. In his own writing, Melville both echoed and struggled with Wordsworth’s conception of art³¹: as Hall puts it, Wordsworth “stood as conspicuous representative of a problem that Melville was never quite able to resolve.”³²

Specifically, Melville seems both intrigued by yet critical of at least two of the components of Wordsworth’s concept of the imagination: firstly, the idea of a “solitary genius,” and secondly, but nonetheless closely related, the concept of inspiration and the claims to universality or Truth based on it.³³ The former I will come back to below; but it is the second of these, Melville’s skepticism about Wordsworth’s confidence in Nature’s guiding hand, that Hall notes in his article “The Non-correspondent Breeze: Melville’s Rewriting of Wordsworth in

³¹ Of course, these issues are largely Romantic issues in a broad sense, and Melville certainly and importantly encountered them in other writers, including Byron, Coleridge, Carlyle, Goethe, and Emerson, among others. But Wordsworth particularly seemed to resonate with Melville, as I hope to demonstrate in my discussion.

³² Hall, “The Non-Correspondent Breeze: Melville’s Rewriting of Wordsworth in *Pierre*,” 2.

³³ Jeffrey Steele has suggested on that Melville’s issue with the Romantic conception of inspiration is specifically a quarrel with Emerson: “He shared with Emerson a romantic model of creative expression, but that model began to break down for Melville precisely at the points where Emerson demanded faith in the divinity of the mind and in its correspondence to an analogous spirit found in Nature,” Jeffrey Steele, *The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 159. However, there seems to be as much evidence, if not more, suggesting a close engagement with Wordsworth as there is with Emerson—Merton M. Sealts, Jr. concluded, “After half a century of industrious scholarly work, there is still no consensus among students of Melville today about either the extent or the nature of his engagements with Emerson,” Merton M. Sealts, *Pursuing Melville, 1940-1980 : Chapters and Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 253. More important, I am more concerned with establishing that Melville’s concerns with poetic creation mirrored Wordsworth’s own preoccupations than I am with implying or proving influence.

Pierre.” Here, Hall recognizes Melville’s primary concern with the role of art and the position of the artist. In Hall’s argument, Melville anticipates modern era concerns about an indifferent universe through the image of an un-answering breeze. Specifically, Hall argues that while Wordsworth stabilizes the poet and solidifies the poetry by rooting it in unshifting Nature, Melville is critical of the step that links the poet to Nature.³⁴ In Hall’s argument, Melville is precisely concerned with issues of subjectivity and historicity, and questions the role of the artist in presenting anything as stabilizing as an absolute Truth. In his discussion of the presence of Wordsworth in *Pierre*, Hall suggests that Melville partly responded to the degree to which Wordsworth attributed activity to Nature in the creative process, or, at least, in the development of the artist.

While Hall’s reading is astute and useful, from my perspective, Melville did not so much deny the artist a stable platform on which to base his work—Nature—but rather, Melville actively questioned the sureness with which Wordsworth and other artists claimed access to that platform; that is, he expressed a nagging doubt over the process by which an artist claimed divine, transcendent, or natural inspiration, and speculated worriedly about false prophets erroneously claiming solidity while the ground underneath them trembles. For example, in *Moby-Dick* Ahab too securely relies on both the institution of captaincy and his own interpretation of the mystical predictions of Fedallah; in *Pierre*, the title character is too comfortable in his position as the Glendinning heir; in “The Bell Tower,” Bannadonna is too swept up by his own pride in his artistic abilities.

³⁴ For example, Hall argues that in *Pierre* “the intimate connection between Nature and self has been irrevocably broken,” Hall, “The Non-Correspondent Breeze: Melville’s Rewriting of Wordsworth in *Pierre*,” 3.

The point emphasizes a duality central to the Romantic conception of the artist, which represents both the activity and passivity of the poet; this duality, as Parker makes clear in his examination of Melville's attempts at making himself a poet, Melville clearly thought much about. For example, Parker's chapters that focus on the development of an "aesthetic credo" demonstrate Melville's intense interest in an artist's account of poetic creation, as evidenced by his reading and marking. Specifically, Melville's markings demonstrate a close attention to both artists' accounts of the laboriousness of the craft of writing and of the centrality of inspiration to the process. For example, Melville marked the following section from the Davenant's preface to *Gondibert*: "For the wise Poet, like a wise General, will not show his strengths till they are in exact Governance and order; which are not the postures of chance, but proceed from Vigilance and labor." Yet at the same time, in Emerson's "Merlin," Melville marked the lines indicating that a poet should not write "in 'weak, unhappy times' but should wait 'his returning strength.'"³⁵

Another critic recently addressed the other (and related) of Melville's objections to Wordsworth's creative process—his presentation of poetry as a solitary experience or process. Like Hall, Robert A. Duggan, Jr., describes an instance in which he finds Melville deliberately re-writing Wordsworth, and, once again, the thematic focus is on the source of creation or the moment of poetry. Specifically, in his article, "'Sleep No More' Again: Melville's Rewriting of Book X of Wordsworth's *Prelude*," Duggan suggests that Melville sought to constrain or situate the poet within the confines of guiding community. In Duggan's analysis, Melville seeks to use

³⁵ Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, 87, 109. For a fuller account of Melville's attention to this issue, see Chapter Ten, "His Verse Still Unpublished, Melville Defines Himself as Poet, 1861-2," 153-187.

historicity in order to give the poetry meaning (albeit a temporary one), rather than seeking to transcend history by linking poetry to a universal and absolute force, called Nature.

In making his argument, Duggan reveals how Wordsworth sought to escape the historicity of his moment by seeking the transcendence of the individual imagination.³⁶ Instead of following Wordsworth in this, according to Duggan's reading, Melville grounds his poetry not in the abstract realms of language or art but rather in the concrete moment. This move to embrace the historical moment is a move to embrace society; indeed, it is in precisely this manner that Duggan uses to turn his argument from a discussion of language to a discussion of society and its usage in one of Melville's poems.

Duggan's particular concentration on Melville's concern with language is also touched upon by Arnd Bohm, who argues in "Wordsworth in Melville's 'Cock-A-Doodle-Do'" that Melville objected to Wordsworth's claim to use "the language of ordinary men." But more than that, Bohm suggests that Melville objected to "Wordsworth's claim that his poetry had originated in direct contact with the world of ordinary people, out of his experiences with laborers and rural dwellers."³⁷ In reading Melville's short story "Cock-A-Doodle-Do" as a parody of Wordsworth's poem, "Resolution and Independence," Bohm is also suggesting that what Melville most objected to in Wordsworth is the presumed foundation, or inspiration, of his art.³⁸

³⁶ Duggan, "'Sleep No More' Again: Melville's Rewriting of Book X of Wordsworth's Prelude."

³⁷ Bohm, "Wordsworth in Melville's 'Cock-a-Doodle-Do,'" 1.

³⁸ But while Bohm chastises critics who, having failed to interpret "Cock-A-Doodle-Do" as satire, identify with the narrator, Bohm himself, in emphasizing Melville's critique of Wordsworth, risks failing to give due weight to Melville's engagement with the issues. After all, an unrecognized satire is an ineffective one, and Bohm himself, in alluding to the numbers of "prude" and "pedantic" critics who failed to read "Cock-A-Doodle-Do" as parody, either defines Melville's attempt at satire as a failure, or does not recognize the full weight and seriousness of the genre.

Bohm's article follows Hall's own exercise closely, in several respects, including this tendency to view Melville's engagement with Wordsworth as "parody." In my argument, I follow Duggan and others in examining this relationship as one of critical engagement; that is, I suggest that Melville's writing reflects a primary concern with several of the tensions that I find fuel Wordsworth's own writing, but that Melville's resolutions—when he has them—are not the same as Wordsworth's. I disagree, however, with any conclusion that Melville's vision of art is more complex or, because darker, more real than Wordsworth's "simple faith" in Nature; such a conclusion greatly underestimates the tension and ambiguities within Wordsworth's own verse. While Hall, Duggan, and Bohm provide convincing arguments at times suggesting that Melville sought to revise Wordsworth, I take such a move to be in keeping with Wordsworth's own self-examination.

Indeed, the Romantic Movement can only be considered as a whole if we allow for its continual self-revising and exploration of many of its key concerns.³⁹ I take Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to be just such a reevaluation of Romantic concerns—and therefore a useful and revealing stepping-stone between Wordsworth and Melville. Closing the gap between Wordsworth and *The Whale*, in Chapter 2 I examine the late-Romantic work of Mary Shelley in terms of its portrayal of the poetic process. I read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a novel which seeks to find its own answer to the question of the role of the poet in the creative process; furthermore, I suggest that Melville was partly engaging in a similar effort at self-location within, and revision of, a larger literary tradition.

³⁹ Durer much prefers to discuss various Romanticisms, and even suggests that individual authors can embody in their writing several different Romanticisms; indeed, he suggests, "Herman Melville is one of the most versatile, if not the most versatile, of the American Romantics..." Durer, *Herman Melville, Romantic and Prophet : A Study of His Romantic Sensibility and His Relationship to European Romantics*, 3.

Perhaps part of what makes Melville difficult to locate in terms of his poetic influences and place in the Romantic sphere is the very elusiveness of the British and American Romanticisms, and perhaps, too, the inherent tensions and paradoxes within even one Romantic writer's poetic philosophy. A small resurgence in Romantic-based criticism has turned a postmodern eye on Wordsworth and his contemporaries in hopes of gaining a fresh perspective.⁴⁰ Indeed, exploring Wordsworth's concept of the imagination has regained a certain critical currency recently, thanks to the work of Timothy Clark and Nancy Yousef, who examine Romantic notions of poetic creation in precisely the two ways that I have identified as central for Wordsworth and Melville, bringing light to bear on theories of inspiration (Clark) and on the idea of the "solitary genius" (Yousef).

Further, Clark's work reveals that the two concepts are interrelated. In *The Theory of Inspiration* (1997), Clark states that theories of inspiration "imply a form of individualism."⁴¹ Yet at the same time, he argues that, traditionally speaking, inspiration's roots in the art of rhetoric imply the social connection of a speaker to his audience, and this connection is maintained in Romantic understandings of inspiration: "To be inspired is, necessarily, to inspire others."⁴² In other words, at the heart of claims to inspiration is what Clark calls a "crisis of subjectivity"; paradoxically, the inspired poet is 'caught up' wholly in himself in a way that

⁴⁰ Jerome McGann has warned critics of the tendency to and dangers of viewing Romanticism critically from an essentially Romantic perspective, Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology : A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁴¹ Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 63.

⁴² Clark continues: "Inspiration may bear a peculiar transitivity, one that confounds distinctions between self and other. The writer may seem to be passively inspired, as if by some hidden agent, yet the same writer is said actively to inspire auditors or readers." *Ibid.*, 3.

denies his own self. Christopher Durer discusses this as the “ego-synthesis,” which he defines as “absorption of the nonego by the ego,” and traces its appearance in Melville’s fiction, culminating in *Mardi*.⁴³

Clark suggests that the Romantic conception of the ‘Imagination’ is the name given to the diverse and divergent forces at work in what he calls ‘the space of composition’; these forces, he argues, largely the result of the interplay between ‘self’ and ‘other’ inherently involved in composition, are internalized and idealized as the Imagination.⁴⁴ I suggest that Wordsworth, and in a way that Melville could not wholly follow, took for granted the role of the ‘other’ in the workings of the Imagination. For, the extent to which an artist recognized the ‘other’ in the poetic process is precisely the extent to which an artist could consider his work universal and Truthful, and this is the very point that Melville seems most to doubt in terms of the poetic process.

In addition to claims for universality, a concern for people outside the direct sphere of artistic creation serves other purposes, too. In speaking of the forces at work in what he calls ‘the space of composition,’ Clark suggests that an artist must be fluent in the codes of expression currently in use to ensure that his work has value for his readers.⁴⁵ Ironically, this formulation highlights precisely what Wordsworth is trying to do, or exactly what he seeks to avoid. If this is taken to mean that a poet must master and reproduce the current forms and styles of artistry, then

⁴³ Durer, *Herman Melville, Romantic and Prophet : A Study of His Romantic Sensibility and His Relationship to European Romantics*, 3-4.

⁴⁴ Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing*, Chapter 1, especially 27-8.

⁴⁵ “Familiarity with current codes of performance will be a necessary element of a writer’s competence if his or her work is to have a chance of seeming valuable to other readers,” *The Theory of Inspiration*, 21.

Wordsworth rejects this aspect of composition; however, if we consider that Wordsworth's 'project' is to reproduce in poetry the language of the common folk, then we see that his determination to use the language of men represents his hyper-concern with making his art valuable and understood.

This intense and necessary interest in humanity at large in the Romantic concept of the poetic creation belies the often invoked motif of the "solitary genius," but such a notion is persistent nonetheless—and for good reason. Romanticism continued to value solitude, both for its artists and for its characters. For example, W.H. Auden, in discussing Romantic imagery and symbolism, rightly notices several indications that the hero in Romantic literature underwent important changes, among them being the convention that the hero should be solitary (e.g., Childe Harold).⁴⁶ Indeed, it was persistent enough to lead Milton R. Stern to conclude in 1968 that Melville's departure from the typical Romantic pattern could be discovered in his qualified individualism: "Thematically, Melville was out of keeping with much of the mainstream of thought of his own times, which popularly and philosophically for the most part emphasized an untrammelled individualism, free from the restrictions of the past."⁴⁷

More recently, critics are recognizing an underlying concern for society at large in the seeming individualism of the romantic artist. In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams challenges the persistent image of a Romantic "solitary genius" by suggesting that the cultural desire to separate the public and private sphere did not occur until the end of the nineteenth century; it would be natural, he asserts, for Wordsworth and his peers not to distinguish between

⁴⁶ W. H. Auden, *The Enchaféd Flood, or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (New York: Random House, 1950), 108.

⁴⁷ Milton R. Stern, *The Fine Hammered Steel of Herman Melville* (Urbana,: University of Illinois Press, 1968), 4.

the “substantial spheres of natural beauty and personal feeling” and the more mundane and worldly social and political concerns.⁴⁸ At the same time, however, Williams argues that it was partly Romanticism’s own impulse, in partial reaction to the industrial revolution, that led to the creation of the image of the “solitary genius” who is separated from humanity. Jonathan Arac recognizes a similar rise in social concern as a response to the rapid changes of the day. Arac argues that mid-nineteenth century novelists, including Melville, adopted Wordsworth’s concept of artists as “commissioned spirits” who are charged with revealing Truth, not in direct opposition to the social, economic, and political changes of the tumultuous century, but as a way of “shaping” the “motion” of these changes.⁴⁹

In discussing “Solitude,” William Deresiewicz suggested that the Romantic impulse toward solitude merely continued and secularized a spiritual practice in which a few representatives—the seers or prophets—secluded themselves from society for a time in order to be in touch with the divine will. In romanticism, poets replaced prophets and Nature stood for God, but still the impulse toward solitude carried the implication of seeking truth for the benefit of all society. It is true that Romanticism turned away from urbanization and industrialization by emphasizing solitude in Nature, but such a move was not as anti-social as it seems: “But because Romanticism also inherited the 18th-century idea of social sympathy, Romantic solitude existed in a dialectical relationship with sociability—if less for Rousseau and still less for Thoreau, the

⁴⁸ “What were seen at the end of the nineteenth century as disparate interests, between which a man must choose and in the act of choice declare himself poet or sociologist, were, normally, at the beginning of the century, seen as interlocking interests: a conclusion about personal feeling became a conclusion about society, and an observation of natural beauty carried a necessary moral reference to the whole and unified life of man.” Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 30.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Arac, *Commissioned Spirits : The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle, Melville, and Hawthorne* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979).

most famous solitary of all, then certainly for Wordsworth, Melville, Whitman and many others.”⁵⁰

Nor did Melville’s contemporaries necessarily link the seclusion of the poet with an anti-socialism or isolationism; in reviewing *The Excursion* in 1849, the *Literary World* begins in homage to Wordsworth:

It is a fine thing to think of a man, in a *moral solitude*, swung away into a quiet eddy beside the rushing current of the world’s life, with a mind full of imagery, and drinking in new draughts from its loving contact with the beautiful earth; *full of profound and consoling thoughts upon human life and destiny*, the harvest of a serene and blameless spirit; with heart blessed in love of nature, and *busy in active sympathies for the miseries of humankind*; addressing himself to the labor of unfolding his inner mind, of sending forth his meditations, clad in the melody, and with all the adornments of noble verse, *for the profit and comfort of mankind* (emphasis mine).⁵¹

Here, the *Literary World* characterizes the poet’s seclusion as necessary for gaining a broader, more correct view of humanity—suggesting that from a distance humanity’s penchants for evil is obscured by its general goodness. Further, the poet’s task is not to escape or ignore the sufferings of humanity, but rather find a more appropriate place to contemplate it, and his duty is to write for the benefit of his fellow creatures. The difficulty, then is not that a poet should seek

⁵⁰ William Deresiewicz, "The End of Solitude," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 55, no. 21 (2009).

⁵¹ *Literary World* (December 1, 1849). Parker notes that Melville was abroad when this was published, “but may well have skimmed the issues he missed” upon his return. Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, 92.

isolation and inspiration in nature; the problem is that the poet should remain balanced, not only in terms of isolation/society, but also other terms as well.⁵²

Wordsworth's particular theory of inspiration, then, paradoxically yet typically demonstrates a concern with the "general passions and thoughts and feelings of men" while emphasizing the solitariness of composition—it is possible to read "emotion recollected in tranquility" as 'emotion recollected in solitude.' Clark accounts for this by suggesting that Wordsworth's theory of inspiration and art follows the older patterns of oration: "Writing is an act of internalized oratory, the oral become the meditative, essential and potentially ubiquitous; populism become universalism" (86). Hence, to use Clark's term, Wordsworth's composition is always to and for a "fantasy crowd"; however, this idealized readership, Melville too came to recognize, was not necessarily contemporary.⁵³

Of course, the idea that in the process of poetic creation, Wordsworth's consideration of humanity at large could be summarized as the conjecture of a "fantasy crowd" might be precisely

⁵² Consider what Taylor suggests in his "The Life Poetic": "Nor can there well exist, at an early period of life, that rare a peculiar balance of all the faculties, which, even more perhaps than a peculiar force in any, constitutes a great poet:—the balance of reason with imagination, passion with self-possession, abundance with reserve, and inventive conception with executive ability." I am indebted for this argument to Parker, 157-62.

⁵³ Clark suggests that Wordsworth's removal to the Lake District signifies his own belief that his ideal readership would be posterity; see p. 103. And it is true that both Wordsworth and Melville lamented, at times, the conditions of the "literary market," which seemed to make the writer a slave to an uncomprehending readership; yet both maintained an sense of what Raymond Williams (and many current writers) called an "Ideal Reader," the theoretical "people" who could appreciate and benefit from the Truth. Wordsworth writes: "Still more lamentable in his error who can believe that there is anything of divine infallibility in the clamour of that small though loud portion of the community, ever governed by factitious influence, which, under the name of the PUBLIC, passes itself upon the unthinking, for the PEOPLE. Towards the Public, the Writer hopes that he feels as much deference as it is entitled to; but to the People, philosophically characterized, and to the embodied spirit of their knowledge...his devout respect, his reverence, is due." Raymond Williams argues that this response is part of a society-large reaction against the industrial revolution by locating within art and intellectualism (what would come to be called "culture") aspects of itself dissolving in the market community (36).

what Melville found objectionable; on the other hand, it was entirely consistent with Wordsworth's philosophy, parts of which Melville seemed to embrace. For example, in Wordsworth's creation, the poet, too, is idealized: "The arduous process of writing, self-reading, and revision is seen as one of self-refinement and self-appropriation, in which the writer attempts to assume the character of an essentialized figure whose efforts may transcend parochial limitations of time and space."⁵⁴ In other words, in the act of creation, the poet, according to Wordsworth's conception, first creates himself; or, perhaps more precisely, the poet finds his true or real self.⁵⁵ However, in Wordsworth's theory of composition, the idealized self must be formed only in relation to others—according to Clark, it is based on rhetorical models of composition that presume an action upon an audience (and a consequent reaction).⁵⁶ Further, such a concept is entirely consistent with what Wordsworth stated in his "Essay Supplementary to the Preface": "The appropriate business of poetry, (which, nevertheless, if genuine, is as permanent as pure science,) her appropriate employment, her privilege and her *duty*, is to treat of things not as they *are*, but as they *appear*; not as they exist in themselves, but as they *seem* to

⁵⁴ Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing*, 93.

⁵⁵ "Composition is not the representation of a subjectivity already there, but part of a process which institutes, sustains or enacts a higher self," Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, 94.

⁵⁶ "Genealogies of the Romantic imagination have focused mainly on philosophical issues. They trace the emergence of theories of mind opposed to Enlightenment models based on 'mechanistic' or narrowly associationist arguments. Against these the mind is seen as itself a principle of active synthesis in relation to sense-data, a free, creative and active agent, and not the merely calculable product of environmental factors. Coleridge, elaborating his version of post-Kantian idealism, characterizes the imagination as a faculty of intuitive rather than merely discursive reason. The importance to Wordsworth of these ultimately German ideas is indisputable. Nevertheless, Wordsworth's conception of inspiration cannot be wholly subsumed by this Romantic-idealist notion of the creative. Crucial aspects of it draw heavily on older and primarily rhetorical (as opposed to the philosophical) conceptions of poetic power – the focus is on enthusiasm, rhetorical affect and the contagiousness of passion as a transforming force upon a body of auditors or readers," Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, 94-5). Consequently, the poetic process depends upon a response from an imagined community of readers.

exist to the *senses* and to the *passions*.” This is a section which, according to Parker, “Melville had marked and taken to heart.”⁵⁷

In another recent critical engagement that sought to reveal the complexities and inherent tensions in the Romantic image of the “solitary genius,” Nancy Yousef depicted the tendency of Romantic philosophy to maintain the importance of society while still privileging the solitary individual. Yousef’s complex yet convincing argument suggests that it is not important that Wordsworth, Mary Shelley and the other authors that she deals with rejected Hobbes’s unconventional claim that humans did not need society, because to simply reject Hobbes would be upholding an axiom about our essential interdependence as humans; rather, she suggests that the way that each author ultimately embraced social ties reaffirms a Hobbesian respect for individual autonomy.⁵⁸ In specifically addressing Wordsworth, Yousef states:

Wordsworth’s *Prelude* (1805/1850) is both a splendid indulgence in the myth of a return to the state of nature and a definitive relegation of such an origin to the realm of lyric invention. The poet’s history of the “growth of the mind” ...recounts the enabling virtues and possibilities of imagining one’s self formed apart from others, but it does so even as it makes clear the inevitable factitiousness of the kind of life story it tells, enclosing the poet’s recollections within a narrative frame that insistently makes present the intersubjective context on which the poet’s imagination of autonomy depends.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, 200.

⁵⁸ Nancy Yousef, *Isolated Cases: The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 2-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

Yousef makes sense of the obvious paradox inherent in the *The Prelude* by suggesting that Wordsworth was indulging in and simultaneously rejecting a fantasy of autonomous growth. While I wholly agree with her conclusion—i.e., that the poet is grounded necessarily by the “weighty” concerns of humanity—and with the strength and attractiveness of her arguments, I make sense of the *The Prelude* by using a slightly different narrative construction. The romantic idealization of solitude and the autonomy—and power—that characterize the earlier books of *The Prelude* do not, as Yousef suggests, constitute an alternative, fanciful representation of childhood development; rather, as Wordsworth declares, *The Prelude* represents the growth of the “poet’s mind,” or the imagination. While the poem is clearly biographical in nature, it is also clearly more symbolic than factual, and the development of the poet that the epic presents, including the “spots of time,” reflect the growth of the poetic imagination. By suggesting this, I am not relieving at all the tension that exists in *The Prelude*; the logic of the poem suggests that the imagination needs to be nurtured in isolation, yet requires the roots of society to be properly “balanced.” Without the ties to society, the imagination cannot escape accusations of “madness.”

Such is the case for Victor Frankenstein and Captain Ahab. It is interesting to note that both *Frankenstein* and *Moby-Dick*, as first-person fictional texts, are examples of art and therefore testaments to the poetic potential, or partial or convoluted answers to tensions raised in Romantic thought. Likewise, both books address, and offer similar revisions to, the image of the “solitary genius.” For these and other similarities, I begin with *Frankenstein* as a way into a discussion linking Melville and Wordsworth in terms of poetic creation.

As a form of creation, *Frankenstein* seems aptly dark for a discussion of Melville, whose own ‘monstrous creations’ are apparent; however, I would resist concluding that Wordsworth’s

greater faith in his art provided him with an easier time. Indeed, it seems equally apparent that Wordsworth struggled with his own monster longer, and with less success—I allude, of course, to the unfinished creature, *The Recluse*. Too, Wordsworth’s extraordinary attention to his own poetic qualifications—*The Growth of a Poet’s Mind*—perhaps suggest a basic uncertainty which Melville could relate to.

On the first glance, Melville did not provide us with a comparable glimpse into his own mind; but that characterization might be deceiving. Often indeed, Melville’s thriving quest is not to penetrate the mysteries of Nature, but rather to “unfold” the layers within one’s own mind.⁶⁰ Writing was the process by which this was done. And again, Melville often described this process in metaphors of Nature—a flower unfolding itself to its bud, Ahab’s self-identification with the whale. Whether Melville is seeking answers to universal questions through the individual mind, or seeking to recognize the individual through metaphors of the universe, his process linked both the mind and Nature to the creative process.

Indeed, this concern with the interiority of man is really another manifestation of Wordsworth’s concern with Nature (a reading that owes a debt to Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism*); it is the finding of God within man that Melville finds most engaging. And his fear of finding nothing—of unfolding the mind like an onion and discovering naught at its center—was a persistent fear throughout much of his writing (it is, I think, what he meant when he lamented to Hawthorne that he could write nothing but a “wicked book”). However, his

⁶⁰ I am indebted for this part of my argument to John Bryant, who, in his Introduction to *Herman Melville: Tales, Poems, and Other Writings*, develops the metaphor of “unfolding,” which originates in a quote from a letter Melville penned to Hawthorne near the completion of *Moby-Dick*: “Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself.” Herman Melville and John Bryant, *Tales, Poems, and Other Writings*, 2001 Modern Library ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2001), xxii.

continued search reveals a conviction that there was some discernable thing to be discovered at bottom.

And, it is part of my argument that the something substantial that Melville turns to as both the target and source of his writing is companionship or a connection to society. To return briefly to Hall's argument, Melville does not find a "corresponding breeze" blowing in from Nature, but while suggesting, as I think Hall does, that Melville based his art in *society* might make his poetry more historically contingent, such a move is nonetheless an act of universalization. What I mean is that Melville's "corresponding breeze" might not be the winds of the English countryside, but rather the breath of man, and this humanism is an emendation of Wordsworth's Romanticism. Specifically, in the following pages I propose to examine to what extent and with what consequences Melville was captivated by similar questions of authority, creation, and art found in Wordsworth.

2.0 'THE COMPONENT PARTS OF A CREATURE': THE LEGACY OF INSPIRATION IN WORDSWORTH'S CONCEPT OF THE IMAGINATION

In the composition of *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Shelley betrayed an intense awareness of literary predecessors, borrowing her own novel's metaphor for creation to describe her literary process as one in which "the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth."⁶¹ *Frankenstein* can stand as a useful negotiating point for my examination of poetic inspiration as struggled with by Wordsworth and inherited by Melville. Mary Shelley, approximately a generation removed from Wordsworth and Melville on either side, emphasizes the fluidity and revisionism that I recognize as inherent to Romanticism by stressing the importance of outside influences in literary creation: "Every thing must have a beginning, to speak in Sanchean phrase; and that beginning must be linked to something that went before" (*F* 8). Later in the same paragraph of the Introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley expands upon her conception of the creative process:

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of the void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded; it can

⁶¹ Mary Shelley, "Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition," in *Frankenstein*, ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1992), 8. Further references to this Introduction or this text will be abbreviated in the paper as *F*.

give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. (F 8)

Indeed, when we speak of a Romantic movement as an entity, we generally indicate literary influence of some kind—collaboration, response, rebuttal—reflecting an intense awareness and negotiation with literary predecessors.⁶² Moreover, *Frankenstein* demonstrates the interplay of the forces at work in a Romantic conception of creation, exploring the ways in which reason, imagination, passion, solitude, and companionship combine in the creative process; in fact, *Frankenstein* highlights the two tensions that I find woven at the heart of Wordsworth's (and Melville's) art—the complex relationships between inspiration and labor on the one hand, and between society and poetry on the other.

Some critics dismiss Mary Shelley's allusions to influence in creation as nothing but self-effacement,⁶³ and point to the following sentence from the 1831 Introduction as another example of Mary Shelley's exorbitant modesty: "I thought and pondered—vainly. I felt the blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations" (F 8). Mary Shelley again strikes a passive pose in discussing her moment of inspiration for *Frankenstein*:

When I placed me head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think.

My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive

⁶² As I indicated in Chapter 1, Christopher Durer prefers to speak of "Romanticisms," indicating the multiplicity of the movement. Durer, *Herman Melville, Romantic and Prophet: A Study of His Romantic Sensibility and His Relationship to European Romantics*.

⁶³ Such, for example, is the character of the argument in Bette London, "Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, and the Spectacle of Masculinity." *PMLA* 108 (1993): 253-267.

images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. (F 9)

Rather than being coy, Mary Shelley is reenacting a central Wordsworthian motif, that of tracing the boundary between the active and passive roles inherent in the process of poetic creation; indeed, Wordsworth dedicated significant sections of his famous “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” (1802) to drawing that line.

Wordsworth, in a familiar verse of *The Prelude*, described the workings of imagination as “spots of time” when the mind, as “lord and master” of all “outward sense,” displays a “renovating Virtue” that allows us to “penetrate” the veil of reality and see the truths of the universe.⁶⁴ At these times, the mind is acted upon by an “efficacious spirit” “by which pleasure is enhanced, / That penetrates, enables us to mount, / When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen” (*Prelude* 565). Herein we find the dual nature of Wordsworth’s concept of the creation, in which the poet is both an active, penetrative force (“lord and master” of the world) and also subject to an invading, guiding “efficacious spirit,” an allusion which brings to mind religious experiences such as the Calvinistic conception of salvation, or the image of a divinely-inspired, truth-telling prophet (indeed, Wordsworth makes this comparison in *The Prelude*).⁶⁵

⁶⁴ William Wordsworth, “The Prelude,” in *William Wordsworth: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 565. Further references to text will be cited in the paper as *Prelude*.

⁶⁵ In this way, I think M.H. Abrams, in his excellent study *Natural Supernaturalism*, overemphasizes the absence or near-absence of God from Wordsworth’s poetry. Abrams draws an interesting comparison between similar passages in Augustine’s *Confessions* and Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* in order to assert that Augustine’s original formation of “the triad,” consisting of God, nature, and the soul, is transformed in Wordsworth to a dialectic (although Abrams rejects this word himself) between the mind and nature. Abrams bases his point on his observation that, while for Augustine God was the first of the three, the absolute power behind the interactions, in Wordsworth “God” plays no active role (this discussion appears on pages 88-94). While his point is worth noticing, I would argue that the original “triad” he claims to have noticed in Augustine is but illusory as well; that is, for Augustine, “nature” played no active role, and served only as an indicator of God. What I am suggesting here is that standard Christian

For this reason, while M.H. Abrams does a great deal to provide an informative philosophical history behind Wordsworth's poetry in *Natural Supernaturalism*, he does not convince me that Wordsworth celebrated and paid homage to the "power of the unaided mind of man."⁶⁶ The point that I think Abrams unfortunately underemphasizes is the extent to which Wordsworth's concept of the imagination involved influences outside of the self, whether they be (super)natural or take the shape of humanity. That is, Wordsworth considered the faculty of imagination to be working in conjunction with elements outside of the poet's self; consequently, when Abrams quotes from Wordsworth's notes a variant on *The Ruined Cottage*, I see evidence of an influence in creation coequal with the poet:

Thus disciplined

All things shall live in us and we shall live

In all things that surround us....

For thus the senses and the intellect

Shall each to each supply a mutual aid....

philosophy is dialectic as well, with the two principal actors being man (his "soul" according to Augustine; his "mind" to the Romantics) and God; the Romantic philosophers substitute the word "Nature" for "God." I do recognize that the difference is not merely linguistic, but I don't think the difference is as vast as Abrams suggests in his writing. It is true that God, when called Nature, is less embodied (and what I mean is less "personified"), and, consequently, appears to have less independent will, power, or authority. Yet, to suggest, as Abrams does, that "God" has no active role in *The Prelude* is almost to overlook the God-like activity of Nature, which not only appears to have an independent will and purpose, but also the ability to act in order to carry out that purpose. My argument is not meant to speak biographically about Wordsworth's beliefs—like Abrams, I am not interested in labeling Wordsworth a Christian or a pantheist—rather, I am simply suggesting that Abrams's study, which substitutes "Nature" for "God" as the principal interlocutor for man, doesn't appear to me to in any way increase the power of man. In short, I disagree with his conclusion that "it is the subject, mind or spirit which is the primary and takes over the initiative and the functions which had once been prerogatives of the deity" (91). Indeed, the poet's Mind, far from being the initiator, seems repeatedly characterized as the receiver in its exchange with nature.

⁶⁶ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, The Norton Library (New York: Norton, 1973), 120. Further references to this text will be abbreviated *NS*.

And forms and feelings acting thus, and thus
Reacting, they shall each acquire
A living spirit and a character
Till then unfelt. (NS 279)

Quoted in his subchapter titled “Wordsworth: The Long Journey Home,” Abrams uses this to illustrate his argument that Wordsworth and other Romantic thinkers used a Biblically established pattern of dissolution and return to unity to convey the spiritual journey of individual (as well as collective) man. However, to me it speaks more directly to the great extent to which the final, happy unity of the self is contingent upon the “mutual aid” of things “sense[d],” that is, things outside of “the intellect.” In short, I find in this section an adequate pronouncement of the way in which the ‘Mind’ in Wordsworth is not only “acting” but at least as equally “reacting” to influences in the outside world.

However, such an understanding as the one demonstrated above does indeed seem to be contradicted by the many instances in which Wordsworth demonstrates a very active role of the mind or reason. The most obvious of these, coming in the 1850 “Conclusion,” is when Wordsworth asserts that the “Imagination... / Is but another name for absolute power / And clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And Reason in her most exalted mood.”⁶⁷ Here, Wordsworth clearly comes down on the side that the creative process involves as its most active “power” reason (albeit, perhaps an inspired reason).

Wordsworth, then, portrays imagination as a dynamic process, where the poet’s simultaneous tendencies towards passivity and creativity combine vitally in the poet’s purpose.

⁶⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude : A Parallel Text*, The English Poets (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 521. Further references to this text will appear parenthetically and abbreviated PT.

Yet the dialectic never quite reaches a synthesis in Wordsworth's vision of poetics, as it does for Coleridge, who defines the Imagination as a resolution of opposing forces. In Wordsworth, rather, the dual tendencies provide a source of tension within the artistic process.⁶⁸

This conflict in Wordsworth traces its origins to the fountain of Western thought, Plato. Unlike his contemporary Percy Shelley, Wordsworth never framed a direct rebuttal to the Platonic disavowal of poets, but rather formed his response by reflecting or rejecting Plato's ideas. In fact, if Plato's writing about poetics can be divided into two categories, "*mimesis*" and "inspiration," as Penelope Murray suggests,⁶⁹ Wordsworth focuses almost entirely upon the latter. Wordsworth seems to accept implicitly Plato's views on the limitations of poetic "imitation," describing the poetic image as a mere "shadow" of the true, "unattainable" object, acknowledging the "general inferiority" of the representation.⁷⁰

Most of the lingering Platonism in Wordsworth, then, involves the concept of inspiration. In fact, Wordsworth's poetic vision so clearly demonstrates Platonic roots that a closer

⁶⁸ Jonathan Arac suggests that the contradictions could not be resolved, and he discusses Wordsworth's desire to maintain the paradoxical dedication to seemingly antagonistic ideas by pointing to Wordsworth's use of the "circle" in *The Prelude* and in his Preface to *The Excursion*. Arac insightfully demonstrates how the circle for Wordsworth expresses both the bounded nature of humanity—its finiteness—and its desire for "boundlessness," or infinity. Quoting from the Preface to *The Excursion*, Arac shows that for Wordsworth concepts which "seem opposite to each other" have "a finer connection than that of contrast. — It is a connection formed through the subtle progress by which...qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other." Reading this circularity as central to *The Prelude*, and to Wordsworth's inability to finish *The Recluse*, Arac suggests that for Wordsworth a poet encounters meaning not in completion (which is denied to the poet) but in the process, in writing and rewriting, vision and revision. Jonathan Arac, "Bounding Lines: The Prelude and Critical Revision," *boundary 2* 7, no. 3 (1979): 38.

⁶⁹ Penelope Murray, *Plato on Poetry*, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7. Further references will be cited parenthetically.

⁷⁰ William Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)," in *William Wordsworth: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Stephen Charles Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 604. Further references to this text will be abbreviated Preface.

examination of Plato seems justified. While Plato was certainly not the first to refer to poets as inspired beings—a tradition of invoking the Muse had been well established—Plato attacks the idea of the poet on this specific ground, transforming “the traditional notion of poetic inspiration by emphasizing the passivity of the poet and the irrational nature of the poetic process” (Murray 9).

For Plato, the poet is a passive conductor of an outside force or “madness”:

The third type of possession and madness comes from the Muses: taking a tender and virgin soul it rouses and excites it to Bacchic frenzy in lyric and other sorts of poetry, and by glorifying the countless deeds of the past it educates the coming generations.⁷¹

Two millennia later, Wordsworth retains much of this description of inspiration, dropping “Bacchic frenzy” and “madness” for a more transcendent version of the divine and exchanging “a tender and virgin soul” for a “more lively sensibility” (Preface 603). Yet, in *Phaedrus*, Plato continues in a direction that Wordsworth will not follow: “Whoever comes to the doors of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that he will be a good enough poet through skill, is himself unfulfilled, and the sane man’s poetry is eclipsed by that of the insane” (*Phaedrus* 237).⁷²

Plato’s insistence on “possession” or inspiration as the sole contributing factor to poetic production, then, becomes a source of tension in Wordsworth. The step is a logical and necessary one for Plato; in order to secure the expulsion of the poets from his Republic, he must

⁷¹ Plato, “Phaedrus,” in *Plato on Poetry*, ed. Penelope Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 237. Further references will be cited parenthetically.

⁷² As I alluded to in Chapter 1, when Melville turned to poetry he was very occupied with tracing the line between “inspiration” and “skill” in the crafting of poetry.

not only shun poetic *mimesis* as dangerous, but must also strictly deny the assertion that divine inspiration equals truth. In Book X of the *Republic*, Plato accuses the poet of indulging “the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less...—he is manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth.”⁷³

Plato rejects that ‘inspiration’ reveals truth because the process, he argues, does not involve reason. The necessity for such a rejection, of course, comes in part from the fact that, in *The Republic*, ‘reason’ is the domain of the philosopher; further, a foundational premise of the Republic is the absolute division of labor. In a poetically inclined philosopher, “the imaginative impulse would be guided by reason, that aspect of the soul that is capable of distinguishing truth from falsehood”;⁷⁴ yet, poetry is not the philosopher’s task in the State.

But Plato’s denial of reason to the poet extends beyond *The Republic*. In *Ion*, Socrates remarks to the rhapsode, “No one can fail to see that you speak of Homer without any art or knowledge.”⁷⁵ Further, Socrates develops his accusation so that there can be no doubt that it impinges the poet as well as the rhapsode:

The gift which you possess of speaking excellently about Homer is not an art, but, as I was just saying, an inspiration; there is a divinity moving you, like that contained in a stone which Euripides called a magnet, but which is commonly known as the stone of Heraclea. This stone not only attracts iron rings, but also

⁷³ Plato, "The Republic," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 35.

⁷⁴ Deanne Bogdan, *Re-Educating the Imagination : Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1992), 7.

⁷⁵ Plato, "Ion," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 11. Further references will be cited parenthetically.

imparts to them a similar power of attracting other rings; and sometimes you may see a number of pieces of iron and rings suspended from one another so as to form quite a long chain, and all of them derive their power of suspension from the original stone. In like manner the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration. For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. (*Ion* 11-2)

Plato continues at some length, comparing poets to “Corybantian revellers” and “Bacchic maidens” who dance and “draw milk and honey from the rivers” when they are not “in their right minds.” Plato specifically denies any “invention” in the poet “until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him” (*Ion* 12).

Wordsworth agrees with Plato in stating that poets are “impelled” to make poetry,⁷⁶ but diverges importantly from Plato in insisting that poets are not mere “translators,” not “oracles” or “ministers,” as Plato calls them (*Ion* 12). By emphasizing the passivity of the poetic process, Plato seeks not only to deny poets the title of artist, consequently denying them reason, but also to reject the idea of authorship, depriving poets of authority as well.

Plato strips poets of their “traditionally accorded” (Murray 10) authority by insisting that poetry is not an art, that it is not *techne*: “[F]or not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine” (*Ion* 12). Further, the point is significant enough for Plato to consistently emphasize it.

In the *Apology*, Plato writes:

⁷⁶ See, for example, from *Ion*, “[T]hey are simply inspired to utter that which the Muse impels them,” (*Ion* 12) and from *The Preface*, that a poet is a man “habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them” (Preface 603).

And I soon realized that the poets did not compose their poems through wisdom, but by nature, and that they were inspired like seers or soothsayers. For these say many fine things, but know nothing of what they say. It seemed to me that poets experienced something similar; at the same time I noticed that because of their poetry, they regarded themselves as the wisest of men in other respects also, which they were not.⁷⁷

The Romantic response to Plato's assertion of "madness" and ignorance would be to re-introduce reason as a necessary component to the poetic process,⁷⁸ but this would prove to be a difficult balance. A number of cultural and historical events combined to make this negotiation between inspiration and reason tenuous. For example, although I follow other critics—and Mary Shelley in the metaphor that introduced this chapter—in considering the Romantic movement to be a set of ideas inextricably connected to what had come before and not, as is tempting to view it from our perspective, occupying an inverse relationship to Enlightenment philosophies, nonetheless the Romantics were interested in deemphasizing the too mechanistic, emotionless view of life and art that gained prominence in the age of reason.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Plato, "Apology," in *Plato on Poetry*, ed. Penelope Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 235.

⁷⁸ According to Clark's examination of "Enthusiasm and Enlightenment" (Chapter 3), a "rational enthusiasm"^{*} was embraced by some artists as a means of getting the point across without relying on the arbitrariness of signs; that is, a writer, through passion, can connect emotionally with readers and convey a sentiment more clearly than words or phrases alone. Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing*, 65. Partly, in rejecting trite expressions and common poetical usages, Wordsworth was embracing this trend; however, in *Moby-Dick*, Captain Ahab plays the part of the demagogue, who stirs up the passions of the mob in subversion of reason.

*Quoting Voltaire: "Rational enthusiasm is the attribute of great poets," *Philosophical Dictionary* [1764], ed., trans., Theodore Besterman (London: Penguin, 1971). P. 188.

⁷⁹See, for example, Adams, "Romanticism and the American Renaissance."

Much of the Wordsworth's work, from his signature critical statement in "*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*" to his poetic monolith *The Prelude*, can be seen as engagement with this theme of poetic creation and the relationship between reason and inspiration in it. In his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)," Wordsworth offers his book as an "experiment" to "ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart" (Preface 595). Already this "experiment" takes into consideration two ideas that we have been discussing. First, the notion of "men in a state of vivid sensation" echoes Plato's image of poets both by suggesting an altered state of hypersensitivity, and also by implying poetry as a receptive, passive experience. However, the phrase "which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart" hints instead at an Aristotelian notion of *poetics* by suggesting goal-oriented, reason-guided construction. Whether we take Wordsworth's meaning in this instance to be that the poetic "endeavour" is undertaken rationally—that is, according to the principles of reason—or simply that the scope of such an endeavor is limited by what is reasonably accomplished, it is clear that Wordsworth accepts reason as part of the poetic process.

Further, the agency of the poet is clearly established by Wordsworth's description of his poetic method:

The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to [chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and,

further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting] by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature; chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. (Preface 506-7)

Clearly, Wordsworth dismisses the Platonic insistence on both the passivity and insanity of the poet. Here Wordsworth describes an active poet ('to chuse," "to throw," "to make") guided by a well-defined "object." Yet, even here, residues of Platonic inspiration still thrive, most clearly in the verbs "to relate or describe," which reflect Plato's limited role of the poet's activity, and in the continued interest in "a state of excitement." Wordsworth defines "excitement" as "an irregular and unusual state of mind" (Preface 609), a description which seems to invite a Platonic reading. However, Wordsworth anticipates an objection to his claim that reason can collaborate with feelings in the moment of poetic excitement, in which "ideas and feelings do not in that state succeed each other in accustomed order." In this aroused state, he claims, the "co-presence of something regular" is precisely what is needed to prevent the "danger that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds" (609). Thus, yet again Wordsworth embraces a Platonic description of "madness" only to restrict that image by suggesting that reason acts as a stabilizing and ordering force in the poetic imagination.

Yet, Wordsworth consistently returns to a starting point that stresses the primacy of inspiration. In fact, at times Wordsworth seems to borrow a Platonic vision of the poet. For example, according to Wordsworth, the poet embraces rural life "because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated" and also "because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (Preface

597). The role of the poet in this passage is Platonic, yet it is more complicated than Plato allows. The poet's task is to communicate man's "elementary feelings," which are "incorporated with" and revealed in "the beautiful and permanent forms of nature"—that is, Plato's ideal forms. Moreover, the vehicle for the poetic revelation is primarily "passion." Nonetheless, Wordsworth endows the poet with action ("forcibly communicated") and, more importantly, reason ("contemplated").

Later in the Preface, Wordsworth further illustrates the interesting dynamic that he presents by distinguishing his poems from his contemporaries' by the fact "that each of them has a worthy *purpose*" ("Preface" 598). Yet Wordsworth tempers his Aristotelianism by admitting, "Not that I mean to say, that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*" (Preface 598). Plato would have acquiesced to a description of the poet as he who, through strongly excited feelings, makes certain "descriptions" about the world to other men. Plato also might have accepted "meditation" as far as it relates to channeling, and would have agreed to the idea of "purpose" in poetry so long as it is understood that such purpose came *through* the poet and not from him. Yet, it is impossible to miss the Aristotelian underpinnings in Wordsworth's description of his poetic process. The concept of a "worthy *purpose*" that accompanies the writing of poetry reverberates loudly with Aristotle's "worthy and complete action,"⁸⁰ and to read "meditation" in this instance as implying a completely passive state ignores the reason-guided process required to form the proper "habits of meditation," or ways of thought.

⁸⁰ Aristotle, "Poetics," ed. Kenneth Alderman Telford (Chicago,: H. Regnery Co., 1961), 11.

Moreover, these sentences lead directly into the Preface's familiar, and revealing, definition of poetry: "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply" (Preface 598). Thus, the poet needed a strong sensibility, but also a strong faculty of reason. The connection Plato recognized between perception and feeling is still of vital importance to Wordsworth, but the poetic imagination is not complete without the guiding principle of long and deep thought. The point is so important to Wordsworth that he continues at some length to make it:

For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feeling will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature and in such connection with each other that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated. (Preface 598).

Here, Wordsworth is simply expanding upon his more succinct, and much more famous, statement, yet he not only emphasizes the importance of both reason and perception in the imagination, he also fleshes out how the two work together in the process. In this description,

feeling and experience are “modified and directed” by reason, and this faculty of reason, combined with a predisposition toward “much sensibility,” lead to the formation of habits that allow the poet to respond “spontaneously” in a way that is both enlightening and affecting to the reader. Thus, the Platonic model is preserved in part, so that the poet is indeed “obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses” he feels in order to “describe objects.” Yet, Wordsworth can respond to Plato’s condemnation of the poets by suggesting that reason intercedes in the process in two important ways. At a secondary level, reason is at work upon the listener, whose “understanding” is “enlightened” at the same time that his “affections” are “ameliorated.”⁸¹

But at a primary level, Wordsworth has a more compelling response to Plato in that reason plays an essential role within the poet as well as the listener. Wordsworth’s account depicts imagination as guided by reason, which orders the images and experiences the poet gains, “discovers” the meaning in these, and develops “habits” that benefit both the poet and the reader. The dependence of the poetic imagination upon reason suggests Kant, although, as I hope to show, Wordsworth seeks to strike a balance between Plato on the one hand and Kant on the other.

But it is true that Wordsworth benefited greatly from the tradition of Kant. Kant discusses the interplay of sensation, imagination, and reason as necessary components for

⁸¹ This idea goes back to the notion of the “ideal readers” or implicated ‘other’ of the creative process, as discussed in Chapter 1. Interestingly, however, it also anticipates the critical response of Walter Pater, one of the most important early critics of Wordsworth, who not only recognizes the presence of the “ideal readers” in Wordsworth’s poetry, but suggests that Wordsworth cultivates his own readers, ones particularly skilled at “reading between the lines.” He continues: “[Wordsworth] meets us with the promise that he has much, and something very peculiar, to give us, if we will follow a certain difficult way, and seems to have the secret of a special and privileged state of mind. And those who have undergone his influence, and followed this difficult way, are like people who have passed through some initiation, a *disciplina arcana*, by submitting to which they become able constantly to distinguish in art, speech, feeling, manners, that which is organic, animate, expressive, from that which is only conventional, derivative, inexpressive.” Walter Pater, “Wordsworth,” in *Essays on Literature and Art*, ed. Jennifer Uglow (London: J.M. Dent, 1990), 119.

encountering the “sublime”—a term Wordsworth uses only once in *The Preface*, yet the comparison is nonetheless warranted. In Kantian terms, the discord struck between “imagination and reason” supplies the pain/pleasure that accompany the sublime.⁸² Further, the act of encountering the sublime involves a faculty that is, in effect, the culmination of reason and the imagination: “That is, [imagination and reason] bring about a feeling that we possess pure self-subsistent reason, or a faculty for the estimation of magnitude, whose superiority can be intuitively evident only by the inadequacy of that faculty (imagination) which is itself unbounded in the presentation of magnitudes (of sensible objects)” (CJ 437).

Wordsworth possibly had this Kantian notion of a “supersensible faculty” (CJ 435) in mind when he defines a “Poet” as a man

endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. (Preface 603)

To begin with, Wordsworth again intermingles receptive and active qualities of the poet: he has both greater “sensibility” and “knowledge”; he has a “more comprehensive soul” (reminiscent of Kant’s “faculty for the estimation of magnitude”) and yet is “pleased with his own passions and volitions”; he ‘delights’ in the volitions of the Universe but also ‘creates’ volition where he

⁸² Immanuel Kant, “Critique of Judgment,” in *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 437. Further references will be abbreviated CJ.

cannot absorb them. Moreover, the act of imagination itself is an “impulse,” yet it is a “habitual” one, that is, an impulse cultivated by practice and perhaps influenced by reason. Clearly, this description borrows from Kant more directly than from Plato. The “spirit” Wordsworth here invokes is a Kantian notion of “spirit” as the “animating principle of the mind” (CJ 438).

Other aspects of Wordsworth’s philosophy also reflect a Kantian bent. For example, Wordsworth follows Kant in taking an interest in the extent to which the poetic experience occurs within the mind of the poet. For instance, Wordsworth describes the “purpose” of his poems as being “to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement” (Preface 598). Kant’s own emphasis on the mind is even more clearly established when he argues that “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the subject judging, not in the natural object” (CJ 436).

But the limitations of a strictly Kantian reading of Wordsworth become apparent in exploring Kant’s emphasis on reason and the mind. Precisely what is missing in Kant but prevalent in Plato is the notion of poetic surrender. Kant emphasizes the poetic process as strictly a process of reason; ultimately, the sublime is formed inside the mind. Wordsworth’s enlightenment is much more transcendent; consequently, Wordsworth is more interested in the *cooperation* of reason and imagination than the positivism of Kant seems to allow.

For example, toward the conclusion of his Preface, Wordsworth reiterated and expands upon an earlier observation: “I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind” (Preface 611). But, this “kindred” emotion, though it does “actually exist” in the mind of

the poet, is but a “shadow” of the previous emotion, and the language that the poet uses to describe it “must, in liveliness and truth, fall far short of that which is uttered by men in real life” (Preface 604). To combat this, the poet must “for short spaces of time...let himself slip into entire delusion,” modifying his language to that “which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose” (Preface 604). Here, once again Wordsworth reclaims to a certain extent the Platonic delusion as a necessary, contributing factor to the poetic experience.

Wordsworth rejects the Kantian synthesis, or more properly, the Kantian subversion, in order to retain a tension between the dipolar poetic tendencies. Wordsworth is very clear that the poet is *not* in the “situation of a translator, who deems himself justified when he substitutes excellences of another kind for those which are unattainable by him; and endeavours occasionally to surpass his original, in order to make some amends for the general inferiority to which he feels that he must submit” (Preface 604). Wordsworth, then, denies the poet the title of “translator,” then, both because its implications are too passive *and* too strong. First, to suggest that the poet *only* translated “would be to encourage idleness and unmanly despair” (Preface 604). Yet, Wordsworth does not grant to the poet a license to create freely in an attempt “to surpass his original.” The poet must work between and within these limits, must strive both to reveal the sublime by creating it.

This restricting and driving tension is clearly enacted in Wordsworth’s poetry, particularly in those “spots of time” within *The Prelude* which launched this examination. For example, consider this passage from Book One’s “bird-stealing” incident:

...Sometimes it befel

In these night-wanderings, that a strong desire

O'erpowered my better reason, and the bird
Which was captive of another's toils
Became my prey; and, when the deed was done
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod. (*Prelude* 383).

This passage reveals an underlying tension between the impulses of passion (“strong desire”) and the restricting hand of reason. The tension exists because one faculty is not obviously superior to the other; reason is temporarily “o’erpowered,” yet it comes back to reassert itself. Clearly, the “Low breathings” and “almost...silent” footfalls are the speaker’s own as he sneaks away from his mischievous deed, the manifestations of reason-imposed remorse or guilt.

Nor does the Platonic “impulse” imagery come only irregularly or metaphorically; throughout the long poem, Wordsworth refuses to abandon a Platonic vision of the moment of poetics. For example, in the well-known “Blessed the infant Babe” verse, Wordsworth almost exclusively uses images of passive reception to describe the early development of the poetic faculty. For example, the central metaphor in this passage is that of a nursing baby, representing the nourishment of the poetic mind as well as biological nourishment (*Prelude* 398). In this image, the “Babe...Doth gather passion” from without, as “feelings pass into his torpid life / Like an awakening breeze” (398). As the mind continues to grow, Wordsworth maintains passive language, describing a person with such a development as “An inmate of this active universe” whom “largely...receives” from Nature (399). But Wordsworth goes on to say such a

person who “largely receives” from nature also “largely gives again,” establishing the tension between “receiving” and “giving” even at this early point in the poem.

Still, the scope of poetic giving is restricted, and Wordsworth demonstrates the difficulties encountered by the poet when he endeavors to forcibly to achieve a creative moment. On these occasions, the narrator’s attempts to spark the imaginative process inevitably fail; rather, imagination comes spontaneously. For example, in the popular “Simplon Pass” episode, Wordsworth discusses his thwarted attempt to have a visionary experience at the precise moment he crosses the Alps. Wordsworth admits that he proceeded with a “stern mood” and “an under-thirst / Of vigour” guiding his steps, “climbing with eagerness” in anticipation that he would recognize a transcendent experience, or a moment when imagination leads to prophecy (*Prelude* 462-3). Of course, his zeal for an imaginative experience leads to “dejection” and “A deep and genuine sadness” when he learns from a peasant that he has taken a wrong turn and, indeed, already “had crossed the Alps” (462-3). However, after the peasant points out the correct course which Wordsworth had missed in his eagerness, the author discovers that nature had rewarded him with a moment of clarity after all, unexpected and therefore unsought:

...The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of water-falls,
And every where along the hollow rent
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side

As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last, and midst, and without end. (464)

Therefore, imagination eludes Wordsworth when actively sought; instead, the poet must be in a state to receive imagination, and listen “As if a voice were in [nature]” (464). Furthermore, at some points, imagination, to use Wordsworth’s own phrase, “thrusts forth upon” the poet (580). For example, in Book One’s “egg-stealing” episode, Wordsworth describes his childhood attempts to steal raven eggs by hanging “Above the raven’s nest, by knots of grass / And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock / But ill sustained” (383). In this precarious position, the speaker literally hangs vulnerable to the whims of nature. Wordsworth emphasizes his passive position by describing nature as completely active, even alive and purposeful. For example, Wordsworth says that while hanging from the cliff, he was “it seemed / Suspended by the blast which blew amain” (383), highlighting a picture of the poet as totally dependent. Also, describing one such time, the speaker noted: “With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind / Blow through my ears! the sky seemed not a sky / Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!” (383). Such a description reveals nature as a living entity. In such cases, the individual seems almost entirely at the mercy of nature, receptive and not active.

Yet, Wordsworth never completely surrenders to the Platonic conception of inspiration, and throughout *The Prelude*—indeed, in the very example of *The Prelude*, which represents Wordsworth’s poetic recapitulation of his philosophy—Wordsworth demonstrates the authority and influence of reason. For example, in the closing lines of Book XII, Wordsworth describes a particular time of imagination, contending:

...and I remember well
That in life’s every-day appearances
I seemed about this period to have sight
Of a new world, a world, too, that was fit
To be transmitted and made visible
To other eyes....(578)

The poet then, possessing more agency than a “translator,” is an interpreter of sorts, responsible for *making* visible another world, for not only sensing the sublime, but for re-creating it for the minds of others. Wordsworth states that this two-fold act requires a diachronically bent mind, insisting that it must be both receptive and creative. Wordsworth writes, “The Power.../ which Nature thus / Thrusts forth upon the senses, is the express / Resemblance,... / a genuine Counterpart / And Brother of the glorious faculty / Which higher minds bear with them as their own”; and that imaginative minds are “ever on the watch, / Willing to work and to be wrought upon (580-1); and also that “the external universe, / By striking upon what is found within, / had given me this conception” (506).

Wordsworth maintains the tension between passivity and creativity in order to reflect the balance between emotion and intellect needed in the imaginative process. For Wordsworth, the “heart” and “mind” were coequally important “inner faculties” (563). While creation is an intellectual process, what the poet actually creates is emotion. This is a true creation, the product of “grand / And simple Reason” (562).

In the poem's climactic image, Wordsworth stumbles across a predawn mountain scene and imagines it the perfect "symbol" of "Imagination" (580). The image depicts a river cutting through a chasm between hills enveloped in fog; this is the perfect example for the duality of creativity and passivity. A river is naturally active and inactive simultaneously, continuously moving yet always digging roots, constantly pouring out yet always receiving, given to sudden floods yet returning always to a precisely controlled course.

The vestiges of Plato that reveal themselves in Wordsworth, then, have undergone a significant change. In delivering a paper *On the Platonism of Wordsworth*, J.H. Shorthouse admits the incursion of reason in speaking of the poetic moment as "a state of abiding and gracious calm, in which [the poet] is at last able to recognize the eternal unity which pervades all things, the synthesis of thought and matter, the clear dawning of the perfect intellectual day."⁸³ But though the "Bacchic frenzy" yields to "an abiding calm," Wordsworth's version of the poetic process is not more relaxed but rather much more contentious, in which the poem is the "metaphysic result" of a poetic encounter with an idea, called by Shorthouse "invariable Law" (7-8). For Wordsworth, the encounter is the necessary spur for the imaginative process.

Thus far, I have spent some time demonstrating how *The Prelude* exhibits a dual consideration of the creative process as something that is both fueled by inspiration and reason. However, perhaps the example is better made by turning to the revised 1850 edition of the text, which is the result of further reflection on the part of Wordsworth, and serves to remind us that

⁸³ J. H. Shorthouse, *On the Platonism of Wordsworth : A Paper Read to the Wordsworth Society, July 19th, 1881* (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Library Editions, 1976), 6. In striving for a "resolution," Shorthouse precedes M.H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* in finding in *The Prelude* a harmonious resolution of its divergent characteristics. In this paper, I follow neither Abrams nor Geoffrey Hartman at the other extreme, who sees the contradictions in Wordsworth's poetry as debilitating. Rather, I follow Jonathan Arac in reading Wordsworth's paradoxes as productive. Arac, "Bounding Lines: The Prelude and Critical Revision."

for Wordsworth creation was a continual process. Rather than revealing a mechanical process of reshaping or polishing, the revised text suggests true re-vision—the poet is indebted to inspiration at this second instance of creation as at the first. For example, in the introductory pages to *The Prelude*, Wordsworth revised the original lines 31-54 (condensed to lines 31-45) in a way that seems to heighten the dual nature of the creative process. Here is the revised text:

Dear Liberty! Yet what would it avail
But for a gift that consecrates joy?
For I, methought, while the breath of heaven
Was blowing on my body, felt within
A correspondent breeze, that gently moved
With quickening virtue, but is now become
A tempest, a redundant energy,
Vexing its own creation. Thanks to both,
and their congenial powers, that, while they join
In breaking up a long-continued frost,
Bring with them the vernal promises, the hope
Of active days urged on by flying hours, —
Days of sweet leisure, taxed with patient thought
Abstruse, nor wanting punctual service high,
Matins and vespers, or harmonious verse! (PT 37)

Here, the verbs “vexing” and “taxed” seem to indicate some level of tension, yet this version of the text provides more collaborative words and phrases, such as “correspondent,” “redundant,” “both,” “congenial,” “join,” and “them.” All together, the sense of this passage

tells of a creative moment that is a combination of two forces or “powers,” one working from without—nature—and the other working “within.” Both of these breezes need to combine to form the “tempest” that is the creative moment.

And “tempest,” whether it evoke images from Biblical creation stories (“chaos of waters”), Shakespeare’s play, or Melville’s “The Lee Shore,” recalls Plato’s warning against inspiration as “madness.” Interestingly, Walter Pater, notices Wordsworth’s essential “duality” and makes sense of it by suggesting that Wordsworth’s best moments come when he is most taken by “a power not altogether his own.”⁸⁴ It is not surprising, then, that Wordsworth spent so much of his career inside his own head, tracing *The Growth of a Poet’s Mind* in attempt to demonstrate not insanity but sensibility. At the same time, it is little wonder that in Wordsworth’s determination to hold onto a precarious balance between inspiration and reason that he was so susceptible among his peers to the opposite charge—not of being “mad” but simply egocentric.

Indeed, looking at Wordsworth from this distance it is healthy to be reminded by critics such as Jacqueline M. Labbe of Wordsworth’s reputation in his era as personifying the Romantic ego, the solitary genius, the sequestered poet.⁸⁵ In a letter dated 17 October 1818 (the same year

⁸⁴ To give the quote in full: “He who thought that in all creative work the larger part was given *passively*, to the recipient mind, who waited so dutifully upon the gift, to whom so large a measure was sometimes given, had his times also of desertion and relapse; and he has permitted the impress of these too to remain in his work. And this duality there—the fitfulness with which the higher qualities manifest in it, gives the effect in his poetry of a power not altogether his own, or under his control, which comes and goes when it will, lifting or lowering a matter, poor in itself; so that that old fancy which made the poet’s art an enthusiasm, a form of divine possession, seems almost literally true of him.” Pater, “Wordsworth,” 118. “That old fancy which made the poet’s art an enthusiasm” is, of course, Plato’s.

⁸⁵ In her recent reexamination of the “Egotistical Sublime” in the process of associating Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith, Labbe challenges Keats’ identification of Wordsworth as an egoist by arguing that Wordsworth’s poetry enables him to construct a “self” that is “simultaneously self and other.” Jacqueline M. Labbe, “Revisiting the Egotistical Sublime: Smith, Wordsworth, and the Dramatic Monologue,” in *Fellow Romantics: Male and Female British Writers, 1790-1835*, ed. Beth Lau, *Nineteenth Century*

Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein*), Keats demonstrated what the next generation of Romantics thought by referring to the “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime.” Contemporary critic William Hazlitt also reflected the idea that Wordsworth was too focused on his own interiority:

He does not present the reader with a lively succession of images or incidents, but paints the outgoings of his own heart, the shapings of his own fancy. He may be said to create his own materials; his thoughts are his real subject. His understanding broods over that which is “without form and void,” and “makes it pregnant.” He sees all things in himself.⁸⁶

And in his 1818 article “On the Living Poets,” Hazlitt turns the discussion back to madness by reflecting, “His egotism is in some respects madness, for he scorns even the admiration of himself.”⁸⁷ Further, the belief in Wordsworth’s egotism endured throughout his lifetime; when Melville came across Hazlitt’s “On Shakespeare and Milton,” the following disparagement put Melville in mind of Wordsworth:

They [the modern school of poetry] are even debarred from the last poor, paltry consolation of unmanly triumph over fallen greatness; for their minds reject, with

(Farnham, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 17-8. Labbe’s convincing attempt to demonstrate the social element of Wordsworth’s poetry, and to chisel away at the image of the particularly “Male Romantic Ego,” are in accord with my own studies.

⁸⁶ William Hazlitt, "Observations on Mr. Wordsworth's Poem, "The Excursion"," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1930), 112.

⁸⁷ "On the Living Poets," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1930), 163.

a convulsive effort and intolerable loathing, the very idea that there ever was, or was thought to be, anything superior to themselves.⁸⁸

Yet, by 1874, Walter Pater was able to praise Wordsworth for his ability to disappear from the poem beneath a mask of inspiration that was “like a form of divine possession,” and referred to the “earnest preoccupation with man” in his poetry.⁸⁹ Far from marking on a consuming egoism, Mathew Arnold stated, “And when we come across a poet like Wordsworth...[w]e say, for brevity’s sake, that he deals with *life*, because he deals with that in which life really consists.”⁹⁰

Accounting for this discrepancy in the critical reception of Wordsworth brings us back to the paradox in Wordsworth himself.⁹¹ But several things are worth specifically noting. First, as I tried to indicate above and will say more on below, Wordsworth preserves a tension by insisting upon the importance of outside inspiration in his poetic process. In the introduction to

⁸⁸ As quoted by Herschel Parker, who records that Melville here noted: “Wordsworth was in the writer’s mind here, very likely.” Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, 174. Whether the description itself seemed a just characterization of Wordsworth, or whether Melville simply recognized the general flavor of Hazlitt’s criticism of the poet, is pure conjecture.

⁸⁹ Pater, “Wordsworth,” 118, 23.

⁹⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 146-7.

⁹¹ Of course, it also benefits us to be reminded by Joel Pace and Matthew Scott in their “Introduction” to their examination of Wordsworth in American culture that the multiple interpretations of Wordsworth reflect the presence of multiple “Wordsworths”; that is, his work and his figure were exploited or transfigured for unique and divergent cultural agendas. However, they do argue that over time a particular image of Wordsworth had been codified, “lionized” and sold for profit: “This sense of pervasive influence [in American culture] is the result of the high profile enjoyed by Wordsworth’s reputation by virtue of his marketability. However, the very strength of his literary reputation transcends this, and the human themes to which he addresses himself as a writer are themselves universals that have become embedded in the American cultural consciousness.” Joel Pace and Matthew Scott, *Wordsworth in American Literary Culture* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15.

his excellent study of inspiration, Timothy Clark points out the inherent paradox of a theory of creation (which suggests action) that centralizes inspiration. Clark explains:

At first sight the association of inspiration with the romantic idealization of personal creativity seems a paradox. In both the Platonic and biblical traditions inspiration described the supposed possession of an individual voice by some transcendent authority. The muse speaks, and the poet is only her mouthpiece and servant; or in the medieval Christian tradition the human *scriptor* has authority only as a scribe of divine truth. Both notions actually negate individual creativity.⁹²

Perhaps what Wordsworth's initial readers were responding to as a domineering individualism was an overcompensation for the absence of the individual in a theory of creation that insists upon inspiration.⁹³

In addition to poetics, there are also cultural and sociological pressures that lead to this image of the "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime." Jonathan Arac, partially supported by the work of Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*, usefully describes the set of circumstances which forced Wordsworth "into true individuality." In discussing Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," Arac summarizes:

He specifies political agitation of the period of the French Revolution, the growth of cities and new work routines, and quick news as the interacting determinants of

⁹² Clark, Timothy. *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997. 2.

⁹³ Ironically, Pater considers Wordsworth to be at his most individual when he is the most inspired. When Walter Pater declares, "For nowhere is there so perplexed a mixture as in Wordsworth's own poetry," the mixture he is speaking of is Wordsworth's originality and his occasional conventionality, and by these he means moments of "inspiration" versus moments of craftsmanship. Pater, "Wordsworth," 17.

this new state. Conurbation and mechanization create crowds, news then galvanizes those crowds into mobs, and they perform the acts and agitation that provide the stuff for more news. This destructive and absurd situation, in which “communication” serves not a community but an “accumulation of men”...is intolerable....[T]he pressures of mass society demand in response a strongly assertive constitution of individuality, which may permit a later reconstitution of community. One defers to the community in the principle but differs from it in fact and must defer its reality to the future.⁹⁴

The suggestion of a deferred community of readers recalls Timothy Clark’s notion of a “fantasy crowd” implicit in Wordsworth’s poetry, as discussed in my first chapter,⁹⁵ and also anticipates Jacqueline Labbe’s basis for challenging Keats’ identification of Wordsworth as an egoist by arguing that Wordsworth’s poetry enables him to construct a “self” that is “simultaneously self and other.”⁹⁶ Arac also echoes W.H. Auden’s distinction between a “community” and a “society” in *The Enchafed Flood*.⁹⁷

Raymond Williams suggests other economic and social reasons for Wordsworth’s image as an isolated genius. In describing the evolving notion of “culture,” Williams traces five

⁹⁴ Jonathan Arac, "Romanticism, the Self, and the City: The Secret Agent in Literary History," *boundary 2* 9, no. 1 (1980): 77-8.

⁹⁵ Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing*.

⁹⁶ Labbe, "Revisiting the Egotistical Sublime: Smith, Wordsworth, and the Dramatic Monologue," 17-8.

⁹⁷ In discussing *Moby-Dick*, Auden states, “What has happened, in fact, is the disappearance of a true community, i.e., a group of rational beings associated on the basis of a common love. Societies still exist, i.e., organizations of talents for the sake of a given function....If a community so dissolves, the societies, which remain so long as human beings wish to remain alive, must, left to themselves, grow more and more mechanical.”Auden, *The Enchafed Flood, or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, 31, 35.

significant changes in the role of art and the artist in society, among which a couple of seemingly disparate developments seem pertinent. Williams suggests that as “the production of art was coming to be regarded as one of a number of specialized kinds of production,” the artist’s relationship to the public necessarily took on aspects of a producer to the consumer; but at the same time, as “a theory of the ‘super reality’ of art, as the seat of imaginative truth, was receiving increasing emphasis,” the notion of the “independent creative writer”—the solitary genius—gained solvency.⁹⁸

In addition to these reasons, I think that Wordsworth’s particular dedication to an imperfect, imbalanced and apparently paradoxical theory of poetic creation contributed as well to his image as an egocentric poet. The point perhaps can be demonstrated by a brief comparison to some of Wordsworth’s fellow Romantic poets in order to suggest that in fleeing from Plato’s accusations of “madness” while adhering to a notion of universal truth, Wordsworth both went farther than many of his contemporaries—into seclusion in the Lake District—and, ironically, not far enough. What I mean is that most of his fellow Romantic poets espoused theories of creativity that required no elaborate self-justification or exploratory prelude; they were less contradictory and more contained—bounded, to use a term suggested by Blake’s poetry and Arac’s criticism. Coleridge, for example, was invested in the concepts of harmony, union and integration, and defined the imagination as the unification of opposing forces. For Coleridge, the poetic mind is clearly the dominant force in poetic creation; he states in his *Biographia Literaria* that “It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially

⁹⁸ Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, 32.

vital....”⁹⁹ This preoccupation with combining or balancing is evident in Coleridge’s poetry as well. For instance, in both *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and in *Christabel*, essential action occurs at the times or spaces between boundaries, at high noon when the sun stands right above the mast in the *Mariner*, or at the stroke of midnight in the beginning of *Christabel*. Similarly, in the *Mariner* there is a conscious attention called to the equator as a central “line,” the crossing of which represents a blurring or breaking down of boundaries.

William Blake, in the process of demonizing reason (literally, in the form of Satan) characterizes reason in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as that which is passive, restrained / restraining, and, though named “good” by humans, opposed to “life” and “Eternal Delight.” But nonetheless, in his poetic terms the reason is the Boundary line, which plays an important (albeit limiting) role by checking the imagination—something much more evident in Blake’s art when reading from the illustrated version of his texts.¹⁰⁰

His poems demonstrate Blake’s belief in the infallibility of the imagination, asserted mostly directly in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel confirm that “a firm perswasion that a thing is so” makes it so, attesting to the power of the Imagination to move mountains. The power of the Poetic Genius derives its force from the fact that it is inspired, and therefore divine; but what importantly marks Blake as distinct from, say,

⁹⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, eds. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 304. Interestingly, however, at the same time, in defending the poetic genius from the charge of “irritability” (Plato’s “madness”) Coleridge asserts that genius implies a necessary tranquility or calmness of mind, as distinguished from too much “passion” and too little “sensibility” (9). Victor Frankenstein and Captain Ahab, as we will see, are victims of too much “passion.”

¹⁰⁰ Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry* is an intense and rewarding engagement with Blake’s general philosophy and his poetry, and importantly reveals the centrality of Blake’s anti-Lockian theory of knowledge. With this in mind, it is possible to read Blake’s apparent denunciations of “reason” while at the same time incorporating reason into his poetic process.

Milton or Wordsworth, is that Blake believes that the inspiration comes from *within* the mind and not from without.

Nevertheless, Blake parallels Wordsworth in several ways: both present enormous conceptions of the imagination that are luminous and powerful, but with something perhaps too leviathan about them. Indeed, it seems striking that both Blake and Wordsworth conceived of imaginations too monstrously big to be contained, if it is any indication that both artists envisioned penning massive epics that were never finally realized. And Blake especially was subject to the two criticisms that lie at the center of my discussion of Wordsworth—that his imagination is too egotistical and too exclusionary—accusations that we might consider raised by Mary Shelley’s interpretative response to Romanticism, *Frankenstein*. Indeed, Victor follows his imagination with no restraint by either his reason (he is not bounded) or by society, and the monster that he creates, while beautiful to his blind imagination, is ultimately too much for Victor to handle.

Another work that bears upon this discussion is one of Lord Byron’s most important works, the dramatic piece “Manfred.” There is not much plot development in the short play, but the back-story that emerges is strikingly reminiscent of the *Frankenstein* narrative (incidentally, both were written in 1816). Manfred insists that he is “naturally” of a different sort than man, and, rather than rejoicing in the company of his fellow men, shuns the species in favor of solitary communion with nature.¹⁰¹ Also, the dogged pursuit of mythical knowledge of the spirit world, which Manfred says the species had at one time, when mortal and spirit used to walk on the earth as equals, is exactly that of Victor Frankenstein’s. Manfred possesses the knowledge to

¹⁰¹ George Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron*, The Wordsworth Poetry Library (Hertfordshire, Eng.: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 387. Further references will be done in text and abbreviated Manfred.

command this spirit world, but the play remains surprisingly ambiguous as to whether it condemns or applauds Manfred's dangerous knowledge; the warnings of the Abbot, along with general allusions to terrible crimes and sins in his past, combine with Manfred's general unhappiness to suggest that he, like Victor Frankenstein, has cause to regret his desperate pursuit of the knowledge beyond material life. Yet, the unclear ending (Manfred dies, but does his soul go to heaven or hell?) along with the general sense that he is an admirable character contribute to the ambiguity of the play.

Also, the setting of the play—high in the Alps—seems fittingly Romantic, and the scenes often take place on the borders of things—on the edges of high mountains, in the bottom of valleys, at sunset, at midnight, certainly calling attention to the boundary between physical and immaterial.

Combined with this emphasis on boundaries is an important and enduring theme of searching / looking / hunting / seeing; the poem raises the question of what constitutes seeing / knowing too much. Manfred suggests that he should not fear or feel less than the spirits, because he has been granted a spirit, too (the same argument that gives Don Juan the courage to face the ghost of the black friar at the end of that epic). Yet, Manfred's failed attempt to grasp the image of (presumably) Astarte near the end of Act I, Scene 1 suggests that, for all his knowledge and control over the spirit world, he remains unable to grasp the whole truth. Further, the play suggests that Manfred is not better off because of his knowledge; indeed, Manfred says that he is "madden'd" by the beauty of nature, and "took refuge in her mysteries," seeking to "pierce / To the abodes of those who govern her." (Manfred 386).

This "mad" pursuit of nature is exactly parallel with Victor Frankenstein's, and anticipatory of Captain Ahab's. In fact, the idea of "tranquility" is an oft-used motif in

Frankenstein, and the emphasis serves as a critique of Victor, who seeks to create not in “tranquility,” but rather in the throws of passion. In this way, *Frankenstein* follows Wordsworth in associating reason and reflection with calmness, a peace that is often imbibed from nature; but Mary Shelley’s critique of Romantic creation appeals also to the second of our two areas of focus by locating reason, this controlling force or bounding line, at least partially within society. For Mary Shelley, the creative process does not happen in an isolated environment, but rather is properly, and necessarily, interactive. This takes two forms in Mary Shelley’s novel: first, like other Romantics, Mary Shelley implies an obligation on the part of the poet to be beneficial to society.¹⁰² But Mary Shelley goes beyond this, and, secondly, her novel indicates the extent to which society must influence the poet as well, not only as a source of inspiration, but also as a restraint on individual passion. The second characteristic of Mary Shelley’s Romanticism that can be seen in *Frankenstein*, then, is the valuation of companionship over solitude, a trait that distances Mary Shelley from the Romantic image of the solitary genius.¹⁰³

The novel opens by linking the ideas of “imagination” and ‘zealousness’ in the ambitious Captain Walton, whose desperate and “fervent” quest to find the Northwest Passage threatens to consume him. It is easy to draw comparisons between this introductory character and the title character. Walton’s devotion to his naval studies certainly parallels Frankenstein’s own

¹⁰² For example, Mary Shelley praises her husband in her “Preface By Mrs. Mary Shelley To First Collected Edition, 1839,” of Percy’s poems by emphasizing his attachment to society, citing “the eagerness and ardour with which he was attached to the cause of human happiness and improvement,” vii.

¹⁰³ Robert Kiely recognizes the important theme of companionship, citing the “moral” of the novel as “man discovers and fulfills himself through others and destroys himself alone”; yet, Kiely insisted that this clear theme was in tension with what he saw as a strain valuing the “divine right” of the isolated genius. See Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), Chapter VIII, especially page 172. Of course, my own argument is that Mary Shelley’s valuing of companionship is directly opposed to a vision of the isolated creative genius.

enthusiasm for study—he inured his “body to hardship” by “voluntarily” enduring “cold, famine, thirst, and want of sleep”; he “often worked harder than the common sailors during the day,” and at night studied “mathematics, the theory of medicine, and those branches of physical science from which a naval adventure might derive the greatest practical advantage” (*F* 17). Also like Frankenstein, what Walton sacrifices in his education is more than a life “passed in ease and luxury,” but also the companionship of family and friends.

Most importantly, Walton’s purpose also reflects Frankenstein’s—both like to imagine the benefits that their quests will bequeath to humankind: Walton writes to his sister of the “inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation” (*F* 16). Indeed, for both Walton and Frankenstein the practical advantages of their actions are constantly in the forefront of their thoughts. According to Mary Shelley, part of the poet’s responsibility is to benefit mankind in some way, even if that involves only elevating the soul.¹⁰⁴ The poet’s task, as stated by Walton, is to “raise the spirits of others” as well as “sometimes to sustain my own, when theirs are failing” (*F* 17). In part, *Moby-Dick* will ask what happens when a man, a captain, completely sets aside these concerns.

Yet, Walton differs from Frankenstein in several important ways. First, as we have already seen, Walton considers his purpose with “an intellectual eye,” a point that, as I will demonstrate below, cannot be applied to Frankenstein equally. It is true that Walton is at times as driven by his passion as Frankenstein; he variously cites his “passionate enthusiasm” (*F* 22), his “ardent desire” (*F* 23), his “determined heart and resolved will” (*F* 24), his “burning ardour” and his willingness to sacrifice “[his] fortune, [his] existence, [his] every hope, to the furtherance

¹⁰⁴ For a detailed discussion of Mary Shelley’s notion of responsibility in creativity, see Harriet Hustis “Responsible Creativity and the ‘Modernity’ of Mary Shelley’s Prometheus,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 43 (2003): 845-860.

of [his] enterprise” (*F* 29). Yet, Walton is not controlled by his passion, and he promises his sister not to act “rashly” but rather to “be cool, preserving and prudent” (*F* 23). It is Walton’s recourse to reason that preserves him from Frankenstein’s fate. After all, although it might first appear otherwise, Frankenstein is not seeking to influence Walton, by telling his grim story, to abandon his quest—rather, Frankenstein remained the voice of unbridled passion until his death.

A second essential difference between the two poet figures centers on the notion of solitude. Walton reveals that he deeply feels “the want of a friend,” not only to have a companion to share in the joys of triumph or to provide consolation in defeat, but also to “repair the faults” of one man by combining the best of two (*F* 19). Walton takes to Frankenstein almost immediately as a “brother of [the] heart” (*F* 28); yet, Frankenstein cannot find time for friendship, cannot place brotherhood above his quest. Frankenstein claims to recognize the value of friendship, and, ironically, he speaks eloquently about the need for society: “[W]e are unfashioned creatures, but half made up, if one wiser, better, dearer than ourselves—such a friend ought to be—do not lend his aid to perfectionate our weak and faulty natures” (*F* 30). Yet, Frankenstein trades “hope” for “despair,” and rejects the potential salvation of friendship—“But I—I have lost every thing and cannot begin life anew” (*F* 30).

Frankenstein, like Walton, is initially described as a poet, both in terms of his speech [“when he speaks, although his words are culled with the choicest art, yet they flow with rapidity and unparalleled eloquence” (*F* 29)] and in terms of his sensibility and responsiveness to nature. Walton proclaims that, “broken in spirit as he is, no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature” (*F* 30). Further, Walton states, when Frankenstein combines this sensibility with reason, his “intuitive discernment” and “quick but never-failing power of judgment” allow

for his “penetration into the causes of things, unequalled for clearness and precision” and serves to elevate “his soul from the earth” (*F* 30).

But Frankenstein’s sensibilities are dangerously unchecked by earthly things, allowing Frankenstein to escape from the world “into himself,” exchanging his humanity for a “celestial...halo” and, in abandoning “grief or folly,” dismissing vitality.

Further, Frankenstein recognizes—and “despises”—that he is a “slave of passion” and a prisoner to “the violence of [his] feelings” (*F* 29), but he steadfastly denies any responsibility for his condition. The aggressive, unreasonable nature of his passion is reflected in his description: “The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine. Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture, as they were unfolded to me, are among the earliest sensations I can remember” (*F* 38). Here, nature is not presented as a “sublime” companion, but as a challenge to be overcome (*F* 38).

Further, Frankenstein narrates his youth with descriptions such as “violent” tempers and “passions vehement,” directing an “eager desire to learn” focused on “the metaphysical, or in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world” (*F* 39). As a marker of comparison, Clerval demonstrates more of a desire to remain in touch with humanity than Victor, choosing for his “theme” the “moral relations of things” and “the busy stage of life, the virtues of heroes, and the actions of men” (*F* 39).

Frankenstein paints childhood as a happier time before “misfortune had tainted [his] mind,” changing “bright visions of extensive usefulness into gloomy and narrow reflections upon the self” (*F* 40). Frankenstein refuses, however, accountability for this change of mind, this turn from considerations of human utility to self-centeredness, attributing it instead to “misfortune” and “destiny” (*F* 185-6) or “fate” (*F* 195).

Upon departing for Ingolstadt, Frankenstein claims to be eager to take his “station among other human beings”; yet, upon arriving, Frankenstein instead withdraws into isolation (*F* 46).

The description of the onset of Frankenstein’s obsessive enthusiasm is important in revealing Frankenstein’s failings. Frankenstein discusses the “Natural philosophy” of Cornelius Agrippa as almost magical, and Victor hints that his father objected to it on the grounds that it was merely “chimerical...[and not] real and practical.”

Yet, Frankenstein’s imagination was stoked in such a way that it became his dominant faculty and passion; he describes the moment variously as a “train,” a “fatal impulse,” an “intense labour” and “fervent longing” to “penetrate the secrets of nature” (*F* 41). Too, it is clear that Frankenstein’s guiding “ardent imagination” did not leave room for anything but “childish reasoning.” (*F* 42).

Further, when Frankenstein’s “lords of...imagination” are dethroned by an explanation of modern science, Victor still does not pursue this more reasonable science, but, driven by the “caprices of the mind,” abandons natural science “as a deformed and abortive creation” (anticipating his desertion of his own “deformed” work).

The explanation for Frankenstein’s disinclination to exchange the ancient, magical sciences for the modern ones is, at bottom, a central question. Frankenstein preferred lofty, intangible “dreams of forgotten alchemists” over the mundane aspirations of the modern “enquirer,” despite the fact that only the latter was based in reality. Moreover, the modern empiricist’s rugged devotion to reality (and to reason) threatened Frankenstein’s more intangible ideals: “The ambition of the enquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions on which my interest in science was chiefly founded. I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth” (*F* 48).

At this point, a step aside from the close reading of *Frankenstein* might reveal important nuances within this issue. Frankenstein's implied preference for "chimeras of boundless grandeur" over "realities of little worth" reflects in part an important divergence between the poetic visions of Mary Shelley and her husband, Percy. As P.D. Fleck points out in his discussion of Mary Shelley's notes to her husband's collected poems, Mary Shelley did not favor what she saw as Percy's purely "imaginative poems," preferring instead those based on emotions "common to us all" and "sentiments inspired by natural objects."¹⁰⁵ Further, Fleck quotes Mary Shelley, who said of Percy that he "shrunk instinctively from portraying human passion, with its mixture of good and evil, of disappointment and disquiet...[H]e loved to shelter himself in the airiest flights of fancy" (Fleck 233). Mary Shelley's own poetic ideal, of course, fully embraced humanity in all its conditions, and preferred the creative process to be situated on these firmer foundations rather than upon airy 'flights of fancy.' However, this important distinction between Mary Shelley and her husband serves only to refine her Romanticism, and marks an important revision to the Romantic poet—any further distancing would not be consistent with Mary Shelley's own allowance for a wider role for the imagination.¹⁰⁶ More important than the fact of the disagreement is the reason for it; Mary Shelley considered "purely imaginative" poems, in their disconnectedness, to be too far removed from the "calmer" poetry of reflection (Fleck 232).

¹⁰⁵ Mary Shelley, "Preface By Mrs. Mary Shelley To First Collected Edition, 1839," in *The Complete Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley, With Notes By Mary Shelley*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), viii. Fleck's discussion of this text can be found in "Mary Shelley's Notes to Shelley's Poems and *Frankenstein*" *Studies in Romanticism* 6 (1966), 226-54.

¹⁰⁶ In her 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein*, for example, Mary Shelley mentions that her favorite childhood pleasure was "the formation of castles in the air," and suggests that much of the enjoyment derived from her imaginings came precisely because these "creations" were personal and private: "but my dreams were all my own; I accounted for them to nobody; they were my refuge when annoyed—my dearest pleasure when free" (5).

Frankenstein, in this instance, reflects Percy Shelley's preference for the fanciful. What finally wins Frankenstein over, of course, is not a plea to reason, but an appeal to his very desire for "boundless grandeur." Frankenstein attends a lecture on chemistry by "M. Waldman," an enthusiastic professor who delivered his lecture "with fervour" and in the "sweetest" voice Victor "had ever heard" (*F* 48). Waldman suggests that while modern chemists seem "to dabble in dirt," they really exercise "unlimited powers" over nature. Waldman offers Frankenstein everything he desired in precisely his own terms: "They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and show how she works in her hiding-places" (*F* 49). Despite its apparent ties to the earth ("dabble in dirt'), modern chemistry proved suitable, after all, as a way to "ascend to the heavens."

In deciding to renew his commitment to science, the "unusual tranquility and gladness of soul" which descended upon Frankenstein upon rejecting natural science quickly deserted him upon the renewal of his passion, and, in its place, came a "state of insurrection and turmoil" over which Frankenstein had "no power" (*F* 49).

Frankenstein admits that his passion "soon became so ardent and eager, that the stars often disappeared in the light of morning whilst I was yet engaged in my laboratory" (*F* 51). He was "solely wrapt up in" his studies so that he neglected his family, failing to leave Ingolstadt in two years, during which time he "was engaged, heart and soul, in the pursuit of some discoveries" (*F* 51). "Heart and soul," yes, but not mind—in neglecting the society of his family, Frankenstein fails to invite the temperance of reason into his studies.

Indeed, Frankenstein claims to have had a "supernatural enthusiasm" that blinded him from the "irksome," "almost intolerable"—and quite morbid—reality of his gruesome studies (*F* 52). Frankenstein's break with reality leads necessarily, under the logic of Mary Shelley's Romanticism, to a break with reason, so that his epiphanic moment does not leave Frankenstein

enlightened but “dizzy” (*F* 53). Frankenstein feels certain that his discovery was the result of “distinct and probable” stages, yet the result seemed such like a “miracle” to him that “all the steps by which I had been progressively led were obliterated,” leaving “only the result” (*F* 53). This description is not of a thinking creator, but rather of a being driven blindly by passion.

By his own language, reason exerts little influence over Frankenstein’s process of creation. He admits that his “imagination” dictated that he attempt in his first experiment the creation of a man (*F* 54), and the work was carried on by a “resistless, almost frantic impulse” that was like a thoughtless “trance” (*F* 55).

Clearly, Mary Shelley is criticizing the faculty of imagination when divorced wholly from reason: “A human being in perfection ought to always preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility” (*F* 56). For instance, the inappropriateness of Frankenstein’s actions in abandoning his creation stems from the same roots that made his act of invention a folly—he is swept away by passion (“breathless horror and disgust filled my heart”) that made him “unable to compose [his] mind” (*F* 58-9). Frankenstein’s attempts to purposefully ignore contemplation, to throw himself into “forgetfulness,” surrender him to the whims of his “wildest dreams” (*F* 59).

Interestingly, Frankenstein’s ‘success’ is described in similar terms as his hopes—he desired to reveal “nature [in] her hiding-places,” and the creature, the symbol of nature’s secrets, had “yellow skin” that made visible “the work of muscles and arteries beneath” (*F* 58). He describes his moment of epiphany as a “sudden light” that broke into his “darkness” (*F* 53), which is recreated symbolically again by the creature, who pulls back the “curtain of the bed” to reveal “the dim and yellow light of the moon” (*F* 59).

But, after penetrating the shadows of nature, Frankenstein is unable to bend his reason to examining clearly what he has revealed. His panic renders him unable to interpret the creature's gestures ("one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me") or attempts at communications ["he muttered some inarticulate sounds"; "he might have spoken, but I did not hear" (*F* 59)]. In "greatest agitation," Frankenstein is unable to think clearly, so that he judged the product of his meticulous work "a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived" (*F* 59). The allusion to a poet famous for his imaginative foray into hell is important, but the comparison does not do Frankenstein justice. The poet is able to contemplate what he sees and to render it clearly; Frankenstein's depiction of his creature is poor—so poor that a reader is likely to question what is particularly repulsive in his description—because it is something that for him cannot be "conceived."

Significantly, it is the arrival of Clerval who brings Frankenstein back to his senses. Upon seeing his best friend, Frankenstein is able finally to compose his thoughts, which turn immediately to his family. Further, this reclamation of society allows him once again tranquility: "I felt suddenly, and for the first time in many months, calm and serene joy" (*F* 61).

Frankenstein recognizes the healing influence of Clerval, and it allows him to partially regain his form. Along with this renewed acquaintance with humanity, Frankenstein also felt once again the Romantic response to nature: "happy, inanimate nature had the power of bestowing on me the most delightful sensations" (*F* 71).

Soon, reason becomes entirely a secondary faculty. After catching a glimpse of a "figure" of "gigantic stature" around his home, Frankenstein fingers his creation as the murderer of his brother: "No sooner did the idea cross my imagination, than I became convinced of its truth....I could not doubt it. The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact"

(*F* 77-8). For Frankenstein, the imagination is completely without its boundary line, reason. Not incidentally, about this time Frankenstein begins earnestly referring to himself as (mono)maniacal (“madman,” *F* 83; “ravings of insanity,” *F* 79; “mad,” *F* 87; “madman,” *F* 90; “madness,” *F* 158; “mad enthusiasm,” *F* 188).

Frankenstein’s father calls attention to the excessiveness of his passion, chastising him for his “immoderate grief” (*F* 94) and, pointedly, reminding Frankenstein of his need to be of “daily usefulness” to society (*F* 94). But Frankenstein regards himself as beyond his father’s reproach, believing his suffering to be unfathomable to the rest of humankind, thereby justifying—or requiring—his detachment from the race. Frankenstein flees into the solitary mountains, on a collision course for the creature.

Even the creature, in his confrontation with Frankenstein, has to be the voice of reason out of the two, trying to calm his creator’s desperate passions (102; 147; 148).

Nonetheless, Frankenstein was continually susceptible to “fits” of “devouring blackness” which induced him once again to retreat to the “most perfect solitude” (155). At such times, Frankenstein envisions himself the victim of a disease, the plague perhaps, which erects an imaginary but “insurmountable barrier...between [him] and [his] fellow-men” (163). Similarly, Frankenstein adopts the image of a lightning bolt striking the heart of a tree to describe his detachment from nature, rendering him unmoved by “the sight of what is beautiful in nature” (165).

The transformation is complete, and Frankenstein is not only the antithesis of a Romantic poet, but is also a mirror image of his creature/creation. Even the creature begins as Frankenstein had begun—by feeling the instinctive compulsion to be useful in society (130). But both the creature and creator come in time to identify with animals more than humans, and

both curse the ‘sensibilities’ beyond basic animal impulses that distinguish man from beast (100; 123). Even the “cloudy eyes” of the creature come to be replicated by Frankenstein in his uttermost grief (“a film covered my eyes”), symbolically demonstrating that Frankenstein is blind to reason. Frankenstein’s resemblance to the creature is so great at the end that it seems either one could have delivered this speech:¹⁰⁷

I abhorred the face of man. Oh, not abhorred! They were my brethren, my fellow beings, and I felt attracted even to the most repulsive among them, as to creatures of an angelic nature and celestial mechanism. But I felt that I had no right to share their intercourse. (189).

Even Frankenstein’s attempts at redemption are unguided by reason. In tearing up his second creature, Frankenstein’s act of destruction is accomplished in the same state of “madness” that accompanied his prior act of creation, and Frankenstein, “trembling with passion, tore [the thing] to pieces” (171). Upon yielding to his passion once again in defiance of the creature, Frankenstein can never once again feel “calm” (174), and purposefully forsakes reason as well: “I had resolved in my own mind, that to create another like the fiend I had first made would be an act of the basest and most atrocious selfishness; *and I banished from my mind every thought that could lead to a different conclusion*” (emphasis mine) (175). Further, in vowing vengeance upon his creature, Frankenstein confesses that his thirst for revenge is “the devouring and only passion of my soul” (204). Moreover, Frankenstein’s lack of reason leads him to think his fury heroic, rather than base, even though he recognizes that “this elevation of mind had much the appearance of madness” (204).

¹⁰⁷ Cantor makes a similar argument in *Creature and Creator*, Chapter 4, 107.

Fury and revenge provide Frankenstein with an extremity of focus that occasionally allows him some semblance of calculation (205), but it is the fleeting nature of passion to be an improper foundation of action, and, when Frankenstein's beautiful rage deserts him, his lack of reason is revealed:

At such moments vengeance, that burned within me, died in my heart, and I pursued the path toward the destruction of the daemon, more...as the mechanical impulse of some of which I was unconscious, than as an ardent desire of my soul.
(208)

Frankenstein, even more than the product of his labor, is reduced to a mere machine.

And, despite the pretence of telling his story in order to prevent Walton from following in his mistake, Frankenstein cannot contain himself from chastising the crew for wanting to abandon their quest in order to save their lives:

Oh! be men, or be more than men. Be steady to your purposes, and firm as a rock. This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable, and cannot withstand you, if you say that it shall not. (217)

But passion is at least as mutable as ice—Frankenstein himself noted earlier the fickleness of feeling [“How mutable are our feelings!” (177) and “The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature” (58)]. Passion, therefore, cannot form a bedrock as strong as reason to support creation.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ As another example, Beth Lau asserts that *Frankenstein* paralleled Coleridge's “Kubla Khan” in that it “presents a vision of the artist as a godlike being who draws inspiration from dark forces in the lower depths of consciousness as well as from the sunnier regions of rationality.” See “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Frankenstein,” in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 219.

In the end, Walton remains the poetic figure who does not abandon reason, and determines, despite his palpable disappointment, to consent to his crew's wishes to take the first opportunity to return home. In doing so, Walton provides a compelling illustration of Mary Shelley's theme—he allows his passions to be checked by reason and by the presence of others. Frankenstein refuses, even at the last, to abandon his quest (219), and only death comes between him and his passion.

It is true that the novel is not titled *Walton*, and the sea Captain is not as gripping a poet as Frankenstein. Yet Jessica Richard provides a convincing argument that demonstrates that Mary Shelley considered her frame narrative to represent a process of Romantic creation equal to Frankenstein's own; Richard calls Walton's voyage "a romance of polar exploration no less an enterprise of creation than Walton's beloved poetry."¹⁰⁹ Further, Walton is responsible for the only potentially beneficial work of creation in the text—that is, of course, the novel itself.

In dedicating so much attention to *Frankenstein*, I hope to prepare the way for an examination of Melville, through *Moby-Dick*, which reveals these same issues at work. But I am also offering concluding remarks on Wordsworth by demonstrating how his complex and dynamic concept of the poetic process is dramatically enacted in the novel.

In *Isolated Cases*, Nancy Yousef asks: "Is it possible for a single text to function as both paradigm and counter-paradigm of a given idea, for it to be understood in its own time or in our

¹⁰⁹ Jessica Richard, "'A Paradise of My Own Creation': Frankenstein and the Improbable Romance of Polar Exploration." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 25 (2003), 296. Richard's conclusion, however, that Mary Shelley's portrayal of Walton entails an attack on that Romantic vision of creation arises directly from her following of Poovey's similar assertion about the novel in general, and, of course, is an example of the critical positioning that I am arguing against here.

time as the expression of two mutually exclusive ideas?”¹¹⁰ This is precisely how I read Wordsworth, and any attempts to resolve the internal conflict—even his own—inevitably offer an incomplete image of Wordsworth.

Wordsworth’s demonstration of the imagination in *The Prelude* requires both a centrality of the mind—“lord and master”—and of an outside force, nature. Without the assertion of reason as governing the poetic process, claims of madness are too ready—as is demonstrated in *Frankenstein*, *Moby-Dick*, and, for that matter, *Wieland*. For this reason, Wordsworth perhaps overemphasizes the poet’s mind; he tries to capitulate in the final moments of *The Prelude* by suggesting all comes back to “love,”¹¹¹ but as Arac has pointed out, the “love” itself comes from the imagination.¹¹²

Indeed, Arac summarizes the point nicely when he suggests that “compromises determine the major intellectual issue of *The Prelude*.” He continues:

A pure naturalism would be as untenable as engulfment in the “ravenous sea,” and a pure assertion of imagination as impossible as dwelling in the “blind cavern.” So the mind is proclaimed “lord and master” (XII, I.222) and countered with the claim “From Nature doth emotion come” (XIII, I.1) and the formula of “ennobling interchange” attempts to harmonize them. Such a resolution of

¹¹⁰ Yousef, *Isolated Cases: The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature*, 7.

¹¹¹ Raymond Williams puts it into perspective in terms of the impact of the industrial revolution and the societal changes it implied by suggesting, “The emphasis on love and relationship was necessary not only within the immediate suffering but against the aggressive individualism and the primarily economic relationships which the new society embodied.” Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, 42.

¹¹² Arac, “Bounding Lines: The Prelude and Critical Revision,” 33.

radically dissonant elements, however, decomposes constantly: the resultant is resolved back into its component forces.¹¹³

Melville, as I hope to show, in his engagement with a Wordsworthian sense of poetic creation attempts both sides of the extreme: he pitches Captain Ahab headlong into the “ravenous seas” (my Chapter 3) and sets Clarel meekly down in the darkness of the “blind cavern” (my Chapter 5).

¹¹³ Ibid.: 40.

3.0 THE PURSUIT OF THE WHALE: THE WORDSWORTHIAN POET IN *MOBY-DICK*

With its focus on symbol, *The Scarlet Letter* is, at least, a text demonstrating Hawthorne's exploration of one of the most important elements in Romantic literature.¹¹⁴ But it is also no exaggeration to say that Hawthorne was preeminently interested in the role of the artist: after all, the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, "The Custom House," begins by addressing in a lengthy paragraph the proper relationship between writer and reader. Also of note, while "The Custom House" exhibits a familiar move in romance writing in testifying to the accuracy of the events to be described, it is interesting how this claim to "authenticity" is combined with a disavowal of authority—that is, Hawthorne, like Mary Shelley before him, downplays his role of author and creator:

It will be seen, likewise, that this Custom-House sketch has a certain propriety, of a kind always recognized in literature, as explaining how a large portion of the following pages came into my possession, and as offering proofs of the authenticity of a narrative therein contained. This, in fact,—a desire to put myself

¹¹⁴ F.O. Matthiessen discusses the turn from allegory to symbol as an important characteristic of the American Renaissance. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance; Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968). Leon Chai also discusses symbolism as part of the nineteenth century American authors' Romantic inheritance. Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*.

in my true position as editor, or very little more, of the most prolix of the tales that make up my volume,—this, and no other, is my true reason for assuming a personal relationship with the public.¹¹⁵

Hawthorne establishes the custom house as a place devoid of thought, feeling, and poetic sensibility. Hawthorne describes the people, the attitudes, and the (in)actions of the custom house as preserving a quality of sleepy non-existence. Playing with two definitions of “custom,” Hawthorne describes the atmosphere as one both of thoughtless, mundane repetition and base materialism. In claiming that the inhabitants of the custom house, and especially the “patriarch,” lacked any “power of thought, “depth of feelings,” or normal “sensibilities,” Hawthorne portrays his new associates as nearly “walking on all fours” (SL 19).

In short, the custom house was antithetical to poetry and poetics, and Hawthorne, while present, suffered under its debilitating influence:

Nature,—except it were human nature,—the nature that is developed in earth and sky, was, in one sense, hidden from me; and all imaginative delight, wherewith it had been spiritualized, passed away out of my mind. A gift, a faculty, if it had not departed, was suspended and inanimate within me. (SL 27)

Here, Hawthorne suggests that the custom house is inhospitable to the poetic imagination, that special “gift” or “faculty” which corresponds to outward “Nature.” Interestingly, Hawthorne here is not echoing *White-Jacket*’s complaint about writing “poetry under difficult

¹¹⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 8. Further references to this edition will be cited in text as SL.

circumstances,” since it is not labor that gets in the way of poetic creation¹¹⁶—there seems to be little activity in the custom house—but mere “human nature.” This would suggest interesting questions about the role of others in the poetic process; however, I am reminded of Nancy Yousef’s examination of “isolation” in the Romantic imagination. In analyzing Descartes, Yousef suggests that his interest in isolation as integral to the discovering of truth did not presuppose an autonomous beginning; rather, it is precisely in the move *from* society *to* isolation that enables the discovery of truth.¹¹⁷ In other words, in describing his custom house experience Hawthorne is representing the centrality of society to the creative process; while an artist might be weighed down by the heavy materialism of daily life, it is a necessary first step in a creative process.

After all, “The Custom House” as a prelude to *The Scarlet Letter* performs the interesting, if quite familiar, task of distancing the author from his imaginative work by representing it as a ‘found’ object, rooted in the normal if mundane realities of existence. Consider the “discovery” of the scarlet letter (the actual letter, and a manuscript, which would, according to Hawthorne, be transformed into *The Scarlet Letter*). Hawthorne recounts,

But, one idle and rainy day, it was my fortune to make a discovery of some little interest. Poking and burrowing into the heaped-up rubbish in the corner; unfolding one and another document, and reading the names of vessels that had long ago foundered at sea or rotted at the wharves, and those of merchants, never

¹¹⁶ Although Hawthorne would have Miles Coverdale suggest that very thing in *The Blithedale Romance*: “Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amount of bodily exercise.” Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 66; see also 81-2.

¹¹⁷ Yousef, *Isolated Cases: The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature*, 4.

heard of now on 'Change, nor readily decipherable on their mossy tombstones; glancing at such matters with the saddened, weary, half-reluctant interest which we bestow on the corpse of dead activity.— and exerting my fancy, sluggish with little use, to raise up from these dry bones an image of the old town's brighter aspect, when India was a new region, and only Salem knew the way thither,—I chanced to lay my hand on a small package.... (SL 29-30)

Interestingly, the word “little” here, of course, means to convey its opposite, emphasizing not only the importance of the discovery but also its specialness as a spur to imagination. Indeed, while he uses some words characterizing an active mind (“poking,” “burrowing,” “unfolding,” “decipherable,” “exerting,” “raise up”) these actions are characterized by sadness, weariness, reluctance, lifelessness, and sluggishness. Indeed, the oxymoronic phrases “half-reluctant” and “dead activity” indicate the in-betweenness of the poetic mind in society, and emphasize the necessity of an outward pull, a “chance” encounter reminiscent of Wordsworth chance discovery after his original disappointment on the Simplon Pass. And it is this sense of “chance,” of happenstance, rather than deliberation, that pervades much of the language that Hawthorne uses to describe his imaginative process. For example, Hawthorne writes, “an instinctive curiosity...made me undo the faded red tape, that tied up the package, with a sense that a treasure would here be brought to light” (SL 30). Here is a picture of an imaginative unveiling presented doubly passive, both in the fact that Hawthorne felt driven (“made me”) and also buried within the sense of distance built into the passive construction of “would here be brought,” but belied by the action inherent in ‘undoing.’

The most compelling item in the found treasure is, of course, the scarlet letter itself, which gained the status of symbol—and a devilishly ambiguous symbol it is. Originally

intended as the initial of Hester Prynne's shame, by the end of the novel it becomes, for some, the standard of her sainthood. Consider, too, what the same symbol means when seen in the sky. On the scaffold at night, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, directed by his intense guilt and suffering, reads in the sky the outward symbol and manifestation of his untold sin. The townsfolk, guided by more beneficent leanings, see in the same sign a token of the merciful and kind Providence. In this way, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* demonstrates not only the power of symbol, but also its susceptibility to skewing, bias, and interpretation (SL 136). It is no surprise, then, that in dedicating *Moby-Dick* to Hawthorne's genius, Herman Melville should adopt a similar theme, on a much broader scale. Melville's central symbol, the White Whale, is likewise subject to disputed meaning and multiple interpretation, and, in emphasizing this detail, I hope to demonstrate how it is merely one of the characteristics of the novel that contribute to an overall exploration of the romantic imagination and the process of artistic creation.

My project traces the lingering elements of Wordsworth's concept of the poetic process in Melville's writing, particularly focusing on two important and complex relationships in that creative process: 1) the implicit paradox of activity and passivity in a poetics that assumes at its heart inspiration, and Wordsworth's particular devotion to preserving rather than reconciling that paradox; and 2) the role of society in a creative process that seeks to privilege individual genius while ensuring the social efficacy of the workings of that genius. Here emerging at the center of my study—not surprisingly—is an engagement with *The Whale*, in which I offer a reading of *Moby-Dick* as a text that, at least in part, is occupied with the process and position of the artist.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ It is true that *Moby-Dick* does not specifically address inspiration; as Richard Chase points out, Ishmael “does not accredit [the book] by saying that the Muse told it to him.” Richard Chase, “Melville and *Moby-Dick*,” in *Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Chase (Englewood Cliffs, NJ:

Moby-Dick is not, obviously, a story *about* creation in the same way that *Frankenstein* is; however, like many first-person narratives, it offers a special insight into the moment of creation by providing us with direct access to its author as it is being written. But more importantly, in my reading Ishmael's narrative asks three questions that are central to what I have been discussing in this project as the romantic imagination: 1) How is truth conveyed? Subsidiary to this general question are questions about how understanding takes place, the reliability of human knowledge or reason, and the levels of understanding; 2) How are boundaries drawn? Under this umbrella are concerns about distinguishing the physical from the spiritual, the good from the evil, the noble from the base, etc.; and 3) What is the intersection of fate and will in human action? Where this last question intersects with the concerns of the previous two questions is precisely the space in which my project is working; in other words, I believe that the extent to which the book questions how an artist comes to distinguish truth—the question of inspiration and creation—can be traced as far as the novel is preoccupied with the three concerns listed above (fate/will, reason, and liminal spaces).

All three of these concerns are visible in the narrative's opening pages. The first few paragraphs also prepare the reader for the importance of symbol, as Ishmael distinguishes the "lath and plaster" of the everyday life against the "magic" of the sea.¹¹⁹ It is interesting that at the heart of this comparison is not a distinction between earth and sea, or between land and

Prentice-Hall, 1962), 55. Nonetheless, Jonathan Arac's characterization of the book "as a satire of human impotence," coupled with Ishmael's own disavowal of authority in "Cetology" and the novel's general questioning of the source of knowledge reveal that the novel engages with the issues of passivity versus activity and poetics in new but related ways. Jonathan Arac, "'A Romantic Book': *Moby-Dick* and Novel Agency," *boundary 2* 17, no. 2 (1990): 45.

¹¹⁹ Herman Melville et al., *Moby-Dick, or, the Whale*, The Writings of Herman Melville (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press; Newberry Library, 1988), 12. Further references to this text will appear parenthetically as MD.

water, but rather between the merely, mundanely physical or material realm and the spiritual or ideal realm. In lamenting upon the droll existences of men—the custom-house lives of the Hawthorne’s of the world—Ishmael rhetorically proclaims, “How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?” (MD 12). Interestingly, then, Ishmael does not exclusively reserve the world of nature to the sea, but appeals also to the “green fields” of Natty Bumppo, or, perhaps, to the woody recluse of Thoreau. Of course, for Ishmael, the ultimate symbol of the longing in men’s souls for communion with nature is the sea, and is to the sea that Ishmael turns for spiritual renewal.¹²⁰

But, what is it about the sea that makes it the realm of the ideal? Quite clearly, the sea is not idyllic, although it may take on that attribute for a time. Rather, the sea becomes a specific symbol of man’s desire or longing to *know* or *understand*. Indeed, the sea is only comparable to Eden as far as it is where man can best commune with the divine; but if it is material ease or physical comfort that you seek, Ishmael warns you to stay on land. In this way, the narrative both yearns for the land (consider Starbuck’s pleas to Ahab in “The Symphony” or Ishmael’s lament for the unburied dead in “The Chapel,”) or, quite paradoxically, scorns it, such as in the chapter, “The Lee Shore.” Ishmael calls the short chapter “the stoneless grave of Bulkington,” a name mentioned twice in the novel’s opening 107 pages and then never referred to again (a fact that some critics point to in order to argue that *Moby-Dick* is a spliced, fragmented work). But

¹²⁰ On the one hand, the sea can be a way to escape society. Ahab, for instance, hopes to lose his human ties by going out to sea: Auden suggests of the Romantic sea and the desert that “the individual in either is free from both the evils and the responsibilities of communal life” Auden, *The Enchaféd Flood, or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, 16. On the other hand, Auden recognizes that the ship can be the perfect example of a “community” (66), a group of people bonded for a shared purpose. Ahab’s first step in his quest is to form this bond by convincing the crew to take up his dark purpose, but his interests are never really theirs, and Auden cautions that in Romantic iconography the ship “is only used as a metaphor for society in danger from within or without” (8).

the critical disappointment over the disappearance of Bulkington¹²¹ is a bit surprising, since it is clear in “The Lee Shore” that Bulkington is not so much a character as he is a symbol, a pre-figuration of Ahab. Ishmael says of Bulkington,

I looked with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon the man, who in midwinter just landed from a four years’ dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term. The land seemed scorching to his feet!

(MD 106).

Here, Bulkington seems suggestive of Ahab in two ways: first, Ahab, too, was unable to remain ashore for any length of time, confessing to Starbuck near the end of the book that in the forty years since he took up whaling he had only spent three years ashore (MD 544). Bulkington, too, seems to share with Ahab a nameless quality that is attractive to the men around him, a quality that simultaneously inspires “awe and fearfulness,” but nonetheless makes Bulkington “a huge favorite” with his shipmates (MD 16) and grants Ahab the power to control his crew’s souls (for example, for Ahab’s control over the crew see MD 167; for his control over Starbuck, see MD 169; for his control over Ishmael, see MD 179).¹²²

¹²¹ Richard Chase, for one, sees Bulkington’s early disappearance as evidence of the book’s basic affinity with the genre of romance and its commitment to fanciful chaos and unbridled imagination as opposed to the more orderly and restrained expectations of a novel. Richard Chase, ed. *Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 6-7. While I disagree with the basic assertion that Bulkington’s fate is evidence that Melville the author was inattentive to details, unconcerned with ‘loose ends,’ or otherwise flippant in his construction of *Moby-Dick*, I find Chase’s instinct to turn to questions of genre or artistic creation revealing, and his discussion of the difference between the romance and the novel echoes the discussion of reason as a limiting or bounding faculty accompanying the imagination.

¹²² Unlike Bulkington, who never speaks, Ahab’s power over people is clearly related to his characteristics as a demagogue, who, through the passion of his speech, is able to subvert their reason, a clear echo of Plato’s cautions against the “madness” inherent in inspiration. For further discussion of the relationship between inspiration and madness, see Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing*, especially Chapter 1.

But whether or not Bulkington prefigures Ahab, it is at least clear from “The Lee Shore” that his importance to the book is purely symbolic. Ishmael compares him to a “storm-tossed ship, the miserably drives along the leeward land”:

The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that’s kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship’s direst jeopardy.... (MD 106)

Here, the apparently double metaphor of the land is explained. Yes, indeed, land does offer “succor” to mortal bodies, but for the philosophically minded souls, “in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God” (MD 107). To such minds bent on truth, the comforts on land are disdainfully neglected as obstacles or distractions, a loud echo of “The Custom House.” In “The Lee Shore,” to give up the shore for the pursuit of the “indefinite” is described as tragic, full of pathos and nobility.

And these qualities—pathos, nobility, and even indefiniteness—lead into a discussion of the narrative’s tragic hero, Ahab. From our first introduction, we are left with not only the awe and nobility of Ahab, but also a certain mysteriousness about his character. Of course, the aura of mystery surrounding Ahab relates, in part, to his unusual absence from the preliminary matters of sailing; but it seems, too, that there is something inexplicable pertaining to his character, as well. Captain Peleg’s initial description of him is full of contradictions and ambiguities (“In fact, he ain’t sick; but no, he isn’t well, either”; “He’s a queer man, Captain Ahab—so some think—but a good one”) (MD 78-9). But Peleg recognizes that “there is a good deal more” to Ahab without being able to identify what it is, apart from describing the seeming paradoxes of his personality.

It becomes apparent that Ahab is a paradox; his being is *contrast* personified, and his physical body shows the mark of his split being (MD 123-4; 458). And because of this, it is no easier for the readers to figure out Ahab than it is for the characters. He is inscrutable, as inscrutable as the whale he hunts, and this is hardly the only characteristic he bears along with the whale. Consider the enigmatic prophet Elijah's portrait of Ahab: "But you must jump when he gives an order. Step and growl; growl and go—that's the word with Captain Ahab" (MD 92). And no doubt Elijah's reckoning is justified; look at, for example, Ahab's rough handling of Stubb in Chapter 29, or his drawing of the musket upon Starbuck in Chapter 109. At such times, Ahab himself, with tyranny of the captaincy behind him and his twisted, revengeful use of that authority, is the embodiment of "outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it" (MD 164).

Further, the character of Ahab remains in the book as firm and steadfast as his indomitable will; however, in one sense we can trace a sort of progression—or deterioration—in the Captain. And this involves the steady loss of his humanity.

Our introduction to the captain comes in the chapter called "Ahab," and, at this early juncture, the rugged Ahab can as yet be moved by the "playful allurings of that girlish air." However, even this allowance is checked, and the narrator adds, "More than once did he put forth the faint blossom of a look, which, in any other man, would have blossomed out in a smile" (MD 125). Two chapters later, Ahab throws away his pipe, finding that he is no longer able to take any pleasure from "mild white vapors" of the smoke (MD 129). This event symbolizes Ahab's growing divorce from merely physical pleasures, an event that has important consequences for not only Ahab's future actions but also his beliefs (more on the latter below).

The dehumanization of Ahab reaches its crux, naturally, as the book nears its conclusion. In “Ahab and the Carpenter,” Ahab presents his version of the perfect man, and, in the same way that Victor’s creature mirrors himself, Ahab’s mechanical man is a reflection of his mental state—along with “legs with roots to ‘em, to stay in one place” and “a brass forehead,” he gives the man “no heart at all” (MD 470). By Chapter 127, “The Deck,” Ahab recognizes, “So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretical bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me” (MD 528). To underscore that this turning to the dark represents a withdrawing into the self, in the very next chapter Ahab, with the same “icy” indifference that he perceives in the whale, coolly rejects the impassioned pleas of the Captain of the Rachel to help in the search for her missing boat (MD 532). On the heels of that, Ahab rejects the proffered hand of Pip. This is important enough to linger on for a bit. While Pip was considered insane, Ahab extended to him the hand of friendship and support; yet, when his concern for Pip threatens to interfere with his task, Ahab throws him off: “ ‘If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab’s purpose keels up in him. I tell thee no; it cannot be’” (MD 534). This battle of Ahab over his own lingering humanity reaches its climax in “The Symphony,” where Starbuck makes his last and best appeal to derail the iron will of his captain, only to be brushed aside.¹²³

¹²³ John J. Staud makes sense of *Moby-Dick*’s inherent paradoxical nature by suggesting that the book launches a two-pronged attack on the two-headed monster that is Romanticism. Specifically, Staud argues that Melville criticizes two different strains in Romantic thought—or rather, though opposites, two branches of the same root—which hold that the artist must either yield himself entirely to a greater force, presumably Nature (succumbing to the “all” feeling, Staud calls it, using Melville’s own words in response to Goethe), or else embrace the “radical self-assertion” that is Ahab. Most pertinent to my thesis is Staud’s argument that both forms of Romanticism involve an alienation of or turning away from humanity—in Ahab’s version, “human beings are objectified as phenomena,” or are considered as machinery, cogs to be turned by some greater cog.” At the other end of the spectrum is what Staud identifies as a “flight from the social to the natural world, advocated by Wordsworth and later practiced by Thoreau.” Staud, “Moby-Dick and Melville’s Vexed Romanticism,” 294.

In both respects, Staud suggests that Melville is specifically attacking the anti-social element of Romanticism: “Both entail debilitating isolation from the human community, as Melville criticizes Romantic self-fashioning in fundamentally moral and *social* terms” (emphasis mine). While I agree with

Ironically, through this process of divorce or separation, Ahab comes to resemble what he despises, at two ends of the spectrum. At the high or philosophic end, his icy indifference mirrors what he calls the cold malignity of Nature / God, and its figurehead, The Whale. Simultaneously, Ahab's iron will casts him in the mold of the unthinking mass of "mechanical" humanity, represented most clearly on board his ship by Flask and the Carpenter. You will find humanity, apparently, in between these two extremes—the unreasoning being and indifferent force—and here, cozening in the middle as usual, we find Ishmael.

To illustrate what I mean, early in the book, in "The Counterpane," Ishmael describes how the touch of a fellow human being is a necessary brace when encountering the strange or unexplained. Ishmael describes waking up with the unexpected but comforting arm of Queequeg embracing him, and compares this experience to a similar memory from his childhood, in which he recounts awaking surprisingly in the night and feeling the invisible hand of a "supernatural" presence holding his own. In both instances, Ishmael is at first perplexed, a feeling heightened the second time by the fact that Queequeg's tattooed arm is nearly indistinguishable from the checkered pattern on the counterpane. But the important difference between these two instances is the overwhelming fear that accompanied his "supernatural" visitation, as opposed to the reassuring warmth felt under the weight of Queequeg's arm. This illustrates how important the

the tendency of Staud's central argument, I suggest that it underestimates Wordsworth's own awareness of the dangers of isolation in the production of art, as I have tried to demonstrate in Chapter 2. I also believe that he is stretching his argument in suggesting that the crew (including, for a time, Ishmael) represents the "living in the all" faction of Romanticism simply because their wills are overpowered by the force of Ahab's monomania. After all, as his own argument suggests, Ahab does not represent the "all" of Nature, but only himself, so that in surrendering to Ahab, the crew is partaking in his selfish obsession.

touch of humanity is when confronting the mysterious.¹²⁴ This touch of humanity is precisely what Ahab denies himself in rejecting the redeeming hand of Pip (MD 534), and refusing, in the matter of the whale at least, to recognize anything in Starbuck's face but "the lipless, unfeatured blank" of his own hand (MD 561).

In Ahab's turning away from humanity, I am again reminded of Victor Frankenstein; indeed, there are striking similarities between the two novels' monomaniacal central figures. Although neither is precisely a poet (Frankenstein, at least, is a creator) both do exhibit traits of the "egotistical sublime" interpretation of the Romantic artist: for one, both confess to a singular "sensibility," an awareness of the layers of nature that Wordsworth defines as the central characteristic of all poets. Captain Walton, for example, says of Victor Frankenstein, "Even broken in spirit as he is, no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature."¹²⁵ Similarly, in the chapter called "Sunset" (XXXVII), Ahab proclaims of himself, "Gifted with high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power...." (MD 167).

Further, both characters let a single, unappeasable passion take control of their lives, a passion that will lead both to their deaths and the deaths of those around them. Moreover, their passions are strikingly similar. Both men are consumed partly by a desire to penetrate the veil of nature, to uncover the mysteries that lurk beneath the surface; further, for both men this passion

¹²⁴ The relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg is an interesting one that has received much deserved critical attention. I only add the following quote from Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," which I find interestingly applicable: "He is the rock of defense for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time."

¹²⁵ Mary Shelley, "Frankenstein," ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1992), 30. Future references to this book will be abbreviated F.

dissolves into a thirst for vengeance. In Shelley's novel, Frankenstein's single passion takes two, intricately connected forms: first, the young student Frankenstein is infected with a "fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature" (F 41). Frankenstein exclaims, "The world was a secret to me which I desired to divine" (F 38). This compulsion to discover causes in him "a resistless, and almost frantic impulse" (F 55) to create the creature. However, by the end of the novel, Frankenstein confesses that the "devouring and only passion of [his] soul" is dedicated to finding and destroying this creature.

In *Moby-Dick*, the main difference is that Ahab's thirsts for the secret knowledge of nature and also for revenge are inextricably linked from the beginning. In the chapter "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab reveals his two-pronged passion in responding to Starbuck, who accuses the Captain of merely seeking "vengeance on a dumb brute" (MD 163). "[T]he little lower layer," Ahab replies, urging Starbuck to dig deeper, to find the greater significance:

'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 a man must 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. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough....I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate....(MD157)

Here is the complicated formula of Ahab's monomania. It takes shape primarily as a determination to penetrate the surface to the "lower layer," to engage with the "thing" only just discernible, the puppeteer behind the "mask." But for Ahab, this is necessarily a violent

encounter. Ahab initially alludes to the “inscrutable malice” of the whale, but, in restating it, “inscrutable malice” becomes “inscrutable thing,” perhaps suggesting that the perceived “malice” is not the primary quality that arouses the hatred in Ahab.

Indeed, although it is fueled by his perception of the whale’s “malice,” revenge does not trigger Ahab’s monomania. Ahab’s desire to penetrate to the heart of the whale precedes his need for revenge, but it does not precede his perception of the whale as an intelligent “agent.” In narrating Ahab’s first encounter with the White Whale in the chapter “Moby Dick,” we are told first of the creature’s “unexampled, intelligent malignity,” which is strikingly presented as a sort of deceitfulness: part of the Whale’s strategy, we are told, is to feign panic, swimming away in “treacherous retreats,” only to turn “suddenly” and violently upon his attackers. In contrast, Ishmael earlier describes the typical behavior of a frightened sperm whale; in the chapter “The Grand Armada,” Ishmael illustrates “that strange perplexity of inert irresolution” that is discerned when a whale is “gallied,” or confused or paralyzed by panic and indecision (MD 384). Against this notion of a gallied whale, the perception of strategy and cunning, so unexpected, leads Moby Dick’s victims to contemplate “the White Whale’s infernal aforethought of ferocity” (MD 174). But Ishmael further elaborates:

Judge, then, to what pitches of inflamed, distracted fury the minds of his more desperate hunters were impelled, when amid the chips of chewed boats, and the sinking limbs of torn comrades, they swam out of the white curds of the whale’s direful wrath into the serene, exasperating sunlight, that smiled on, as if at a birth or a bridal. (MD 184)

Although unnamed, here, of course, Ishmael is speculating directly on Ahab. This is demonstrated in the next paragraph, where Ishmael takes up the story of “one captain,” who, in

the fit of this “inflamed, distracted fury,” had seized “the line-knife from his broken prow, [and] had dashed at the whale, as an Arkansas duelist at his foe, blindly seeking with a six inch blade to reach the fathom-deep life of the whale” (MD 184). The root of Ahab’s monomania, therefore, has something to do with the Whale’s perceived intelligence; but more accurately, Ahab’s obsession begins with a contrast that he perceives in the natural world, or several contrasts, that are without explanation. Ishmael’s account assumes that Ahab, by the time of his encounter with Moby Dick, is already a “desperate hunter,” a description validated by Ahab’s forty-years of experience in chasing whales. But this nearly half-century of expertise works against Ahab here; where he expects to find dumb confusion, he instead finds (or thinks he does) order and forethought; where he expects docility, he finds terror and chaos. The “serene, exasperating sunlight” stands as a stark antithesis to this chaos, and refuses to shed any light on the situation for Ahab. It is exactly this divide between knowledge and life, between fact and truth, between the expected and the unknown, that infuriates Ahab, and his desperate plunge with the knife is at heart an attempt to make sense of it all.¹²⁶

Then, Ahab comes to hate the whale not out of spite but out of his ignorance. Ishmael has already given us the formula for this; in describing his meeting with Queequeg in “The Spouter-Inn,” Ishmael outlines the first step in developing hatred in man by suggesting, “Ignorance is the parent of fear...” (MD 21). The formula here is only partly formed out, but we can easily complete it:

Ignorance ⇒ Fear ⇒ Hatred

¹²⁶ Ahab literally tries to penetrate the skin or blubber of the whale, other where represented as “hieroglyphics,” (“The Blanket,” MD 306) to reach the “fathom-deep life of the whale.” The pun on the word “fathom” in this instance is also important in reading this as an attempt at ‘knowing’ or ‘understanding.’

Moreover, adding injury to ignorance, the whale takes Ahab's leg, an act that he immediately infuses with "malice"—the first step in his coming to "identify with [the whale], not only all his bodily woes, but all of his intellectual and spiritual exasperations" (MD 175). This act of figuring the whale serves two important and only slightly different functions: first, the act of personifying "all evil" in the form of the whale gives substance to a thing "inscrutable," making the unknown tangible, "practically assailable," and, consequently, knowable. Secondly, it is important to note that the form the White Whale takes is directly derived from Ahab himself¹²⁷; that is, Ahab takes the "inscrutable" part of himself and directs it to the whale:

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;...—Ahab did not fall down and worship it...; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. (MD 184)

Ahab irrationally ascribes "malice" to the whale because that is the unknowable part of himself that he strives to understand, to reconcile, to recover or resolve. He is "mutilated" not primarily because of his lost limb, but because of that part of himself that he has transferred to the whale in order to give tangible battle to it.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ This is hinted at with the verb "identify" in the phrase, "he at last came to identify with him...all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations" (MD 175). David Simpson also sketches a case for the doubling of Ahab and Moby Dick, David Simpson, "Herman Melville: Chasing the Whale," in *Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Chelsea House, 1986), 60-1.

¹²⁸ Of course, in this initial duality I am not suggesting that Ahab is unique among mankind in Melville's philosophy, but representative. His uniqueness comes in trying to separate and attack that part of himself that is evil, and in this we can and do recognize a type of nobility, despite Harold Bloom's lament that "there is a serious disproportion between the reader's awe of, and admiration for, Ahab, and the moral

That being said, it is important to remember here that what initially and primarily incites Ahab is not the whale's malice, but his uncommon behavior (read by Ahab as both deceitful and malicious), his inscrutability. Similarly, his attempt to exorcise his inner demons, so to speak, is firstly an attempt to know himself by transcribing part of himself to another object. Ahab does a similar thing in considering the doubloon ("The Doubloon"). Here, Ahab is able to give the gold coin meaning by recognizing himself in its imagery:

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. (MD 431).

Ahab seeks to order the world, then, by finding in it a part of himself. But, this 'recognition' is never passive, but rather is wholly violent—he seeks, through an act of will, to represent the world in relation to himself. Ahab's failure, then, is interestingly one that parallels the criticism of the "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime," the 'solitary genius'—he is arrogant, prideful, individualistic, and masculine. In short, Ahab's failings parallel those of Victor Frankenstein, and he can be seen to have metaphorically 'created' Moby Dick just as Frankenstein literally created his creature, only to join Frankenstein in seeking to destroy his creation. Similarly, it can be seen how the malice that each perceives in his creature proceeds from himself.

dismissal of the monomaniacal hero by many scholarly critics. Ahab seems to provoke academic critics rather more even than Milton's Satan" Harold Bloom, *Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*, Modern Critical Interpretations (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 7.

However, both *Frankenstein* and *Moby-Dick* do provide narrators that offer alternative visions of the poetic process, Captain Walton and Ishmael, respectively. Shelley opens her novel with a sea captain by occupation (who is nonetheless a self-proclaimed poet) on his own voyage to penetrate the secrets of nature by discovering a Northwest Passage. Walton's exploration into the arctic seas is a metaphorical delving into the unknown: "There is something at work in my soul which I don't understand....[T]here is a love for the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous, intertwined in all my projects, which hurries me out of the common pathways of man, even to the wild sea and the unvisited regions I am about to explore" (F 22).

Ishmael, too, is a poet who shares a similar attraction to the sea for similar reasons. Unquestionably a writer, Ishmael is also a philosopher, and a naturalist, all of which describe his own insatiable desire to know and to discover. Further, Ishmael, like Ahab, recognizes a conscious entity working behind the scenes, an "unknown but still reasoning thing" behind the masks. Consider, for example, Ishmael's tangent in the chapter "A Bower in the Arsacides," in which he purports to examine the interior, "unconditional skeleton" of the Sperm Whale (MD 450). Here, Ishmael describes the world as a weave and the sun as the shuttle, and he calls out to it:

Oh, busy weaver! unseen weaver!—pause!—one word!—whither flows the fabric? what palace may it deck? wherefore all these ceaseless toilings? Speak, weaver!—stay thy hand!—but one single word with thee! Nay—the shuttle flies—the figures float from forth the loom; the freshet-rushing carpet forever slides away. (MD 450)¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Compare this apostrophe to Ahab's questioning of the decapitated head of a sperm whale: "'Speak, thou vast and venerable head,' muttered Ahab...; 'speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee'" (MD "The Sphynx" LXX, 291).

This philosophical moment is fittingly buried within a series of chapters in which Ishmael devotes a lot of time to examining the whale—chapters titled “Measurement of the Whale’s Skeleton,” “The Fossil Whale,” and “Does the Whale’s Magnitude Diminish? Will he Perish?” These chapters represent a recognizable part of Ishmael’s narration in which he establishes himself as a quasi-scientist seeking to answer questions systematically and with a conscientious awareness of evidence. Moreover, his calling out to the weaver for answers comes in the middle of a chapter dealing with the inside of the whale—illustrating nicely that Ishmael, somewhat like his deranged Captain, has come to locate within the sperm whale the symbol of life.

And of course, Ishmael provides the reader with many reasons why the sperm whale is an appropriately potent symbol. In the chapter “The Sermon” (IX), Father Mapple reminds us of the story of Jonah in which God used a whale as a vehicle in His effort to “preach the Truth in the face of Falsehood!” (MD 48). Further, from a zoological standpoint, the sperm whale is a blank slate: there is an “Impenetrable veil covering our knowledge of the cetacea.” (MD 134). Ishmael suggests, in short, that the sperm whale remains “unwritten,” and “incomplete in any literature,” either “scientific or poetic” (MD 135). This narrative can be read, then, as Ishmael’s attempt to (re)present the sperm whale, or “Macrocephalus of the Long Words,” poetically (MD 137-8).

Doubtless, Ishmael shares many of his Captain’s perceptions regarding the sea and what it represents, including a tendency to recognize “malice” in it, or at least divine opposition to human will (“The Lee Shore,” in representing the sea as belligerently trying to drive man away from the “truth,” is a good example). But, Ishmael is fundamentally and importantly different from Ahab as well. It is true that Ishmael, spurred by Ahab’s fiery speech, initially promises to

follow Ahab in his pursuit of the White Whale. But Ishmael refuses to become consumed by Ahab's passion, which (like Frankenstein's), threatens to consume his "reason." It is important to realize here that this "reason" that Ahab denies is the Coleridgean Reason, which is distinguished from mere human "Understanding" because it is divinely inspired. For example, Ahab, in breaking his quadrant, curses science as a "vain toy" *precisely because* it derives its truth from the stars: "Curse thee, thou vain toy; and cursed be all the things that cast man's eyes aloft to that heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him, as these old eyes are even now scorched with thy light, O sun!" (MD 501). Ahab vows to guide his "earthly way" (MD 501) by earthly tools alone—his "error-abounding log" and line (MD 514).

Therefore, Ahab, as rightly stated by Starbuck, is beyond "reasoning" (MD 515) as far as reason admits of an inspired or divinely wrought component. Ahab, then, is content for the most part to rely on human knowledge (logs, charts), and trusts to his own animal instincts:

'[B]ut 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. Thinking is, or ought to be, a coolness and a calmness, and our poor hearts throb, and our poor brains beat too much for that. And yet, I've sometimes thought my brain was very calm—frozen calm, this old skull cracks so, like a glass in which the contents turn to ice, and shiver it.' (MD 563).¹³⁰

¹³⁰ This domination of passion over reason is visible in Frankenstein, as well, especially in his first prolonged encounter with the creature, in which it is the creature who insists on being the voice of reason. For example, towards the end of Chapter II the creature begs of Frankenstein, " 'Be calm! I entreat you to hear me, before you give vent to your hatred on my devoted head'" (F 101), and, early in Chapter IX, the creature says, " 'I intended to reason. This passion is detrimental to me....'" (F 148).

I have said that Ahab is paradox personified; here is another example. His disavowal of the divine prerogative (thinking) is matched on the other side by a coldness relating, I think (although the evidence for it is elsewhere) to his coolness toward humanity.

But if Ahab is presented as a paradoxical combination of fire and ice, it might be because Ishmael, who seems to dwell on the boundary lines in many of his descriptions, makes him that way. Perhaps Ishmael's most remarkable quality is his ability to handle contrasts. For Ishmael, the White Whale does not figure 'malice,' but rather a "dumb blankness, full of meaning," and his narrative represents both an attempt to come to that meaning and a recognition that earthly understanding can only ever fall short of it. His attempt not at resolving contrasts but preserving them in order to approximate or approach a true understanding of things makes him, in my reading, a Wordsworthian poet.¹³¹

As referred to above, Ishmael is in many ways strikingly similar to Ahab. Ishmael, too, allowed himself to be swept up in the torrent of Ahab's feelings; he confesses, "A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (MD 179).¹³² Ishmael surrenders to a passion, but Ishmael never abandons a divine faith (although he is quite skeptical

¹³¹ Although his article is primarily focused on fetishism, David Simpson offers a reading of *Moby-Dick* that accommodates my own, even to the comparison to Wordsworth. In describing the pursuit of knowledge as represented in *Moby-Dick*, Simpson states: "Ahab goes too far....It is at least open to question, however, whether Ishmael goes far enough; for at times it seems close to the heart of Melville's ethic that we cannot live without significant action and the risks of transgression it involves. This deploying of active consciousness always exists in a state of tension for the Romantic and post-Romantic mind....The theory of knowledge in which this situation is contained insists on the presence of delirium at both ends of its spectrum. At one, there looms the prospect of monomania and fixation; at the other, random sensibility whose items are unconnected by *any* principle of succession or coherence. The Romantic ethic, as it appears in Wordsworth's idea of the imagination, and in Schiller's of the aesthetic, insists in return on the mobile occupation of the middle ground between." Simpson, "Herman Melville: Chasing the Whale," 67.

¹³² This "sympathetical feeling" is reminiscent of Wordsworth's "corresponding breeze," although Ahab has supplanted the place of Nature.

of “orthodoxy,” or human institutions in general, as a means for revealing the divine), and soon regrets, if not renounces, his “impious” oath.¹³³ In the chapter “The Try-Works,” Ishmael warns, “Give thyself not up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me” (MD 392). Literally talking about being hypnotized and turned around by the try-works while at the helm, Ishmael is metaphorically talking about his brief mesmerizing by Ahab’s fiery passion. Similarly, Walton, too, is momentarily carried away by Frankenstein’s zealousness; but he, too, manages to save himself and his crew by letting go and, unlike Ahab, granting his crew’s desire to turn around and head for home.

Ishmael is not naïve, and, like Ahab, he recognizes evil both inside himself and humanity in general (after all, he decides to ship to prevent himself “from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off”), and also in the White Whale. But Ishmael’s major qualification is that, for him, nature is only “judiciously malicious” (MD 206), a phrase that perhaps calls to mind the wrathful justice of the Old Testament Yahweh (the prevalence of Old Testament names in the book is no coincidence, I think). In this light, Warner Berthoff misses the point of the Town-Ho’s story when he argues that it is not really a “proper story” at all because Steerkilt’s revenge, which ought to have been the climax of the tale, never comes, but is instead “arbitrarily” taken by Moby Dick.¹³⁴ Berthoff’s reading fails to recognize that Moby Dick’s triumphant and final act of judgment is precisely how any story about the

¹³³ Richard Adams suggests that the reason that Ishmael is ultimately able to resist Ahab is because “he has known better things, notably in his relations with the tolerant and tolerable savage Queequeg.” Adams, “Romanticism and the American Renaissance,” 423. This reflects my discussion above of the centrality of human companionship to Ishmael.

¹³⁴ Warner Berthoff, The Example of Melville (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962).

White Whale will end, and the Town-Ho's story, like so many of the stories in the book, is indeed a story about the Whale.

Moby-Dick, or The Whale, then, is a work of art that seeks to uncover the meaning of the Whale while recognizing the fallibility of human forms of understanding. Although the narrative tells us that Ishmael participated in other whaling voyages, indicating that his yearning for the supernatural "Unshored" (MD 445) did not cease, he nonetheless seems resigned to his role: "But clear Truth is a thing for salamander giants only to encounter; how small the chances for the provincials then? What befell the weakling youth lifting the dread goddess's veil at Sais?" (MD 315).

Yet, Ishmael strikes a balance that enables him to seek to re(present) "Truth" without fully grasping it. Ishmael's particular method is perhaps illustrated in several key moments in *Moby-Dick*, including the chapter "A Squeeze of the Hand" (XCIV). Here, Ishmael writes of his duty to squeeze hardened lumps of spermaceti back into liquid:

As I sat there at my case, cross-legged on the deck; after the bitter exertion at the windlass; under a blue tranquil sky; the ship under indolent sail, and gliding so serenely along; as I bathed my hands among those soft, gentle globules of infiltrated tissues, woven almost within the hour; as they richly broke to my fingers, and discharged all their opulence, like fully ripe grapes their wine; as I snuffed up that uncontaminated aroma,—literally and truly, like the smell of spring violets; I declare to you, that for a time I lives as in a musky meadow; I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it; I almost began to credit that old Paraclesan superstition that sperm is of rare virtue in allaying the heat of anger: while bathing in that bath, I

felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever.
(MD 384-5).

This episode takes place under a “blue tranquil sky” in a calm ocean, indicating that this is a moment in which nature is receptive rather than antagonistic to man’s penetrating hands. Further, there is something of a corresponding meekness in Ishmael as well, at least as far as it is contrasted to the intense labor (“bitter exertion”) “at the windlass.” Nevertheless, this moment is still a variation on Ahab’s attempt to “strike through the mask,” as indicated by the adjective “infiltrated” and the central image of ‘breaking’ the “globules.” But this version is recognizably less antagonistic: although the ship continues to push through the waves, it does so under a lazy sail, and is not resisted by the wind; although the spermaceti, violently taken, is actively squeezed, Ishmael does so without “malice” and, without malice, the globules yield “their opulence.”

This moment is precisely why Ishmael goes to sea—to feel “divinely free.” In illustrating this scene, Ishmael is providing a convoluted answer to the tension exhibited in Wordsworth’s poetics—the necessity of being both receptive and active in the process of poetic creation. In part, this answer, as demonstrated in *Frankenstein*, involves the necessary presence of other people, both as spurs and reigns to the imagination: “Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us squeeze ourselves into each other....” (MD 384). Also in part, the creative process involves a unique give-and-take from the poet: “Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it....” (MD 384). Lastly, in part, poetry involves recognizing that the whole truth can never be transcribed—the “sperm” remains ultimately “inexpressible,” reserved, as Ishmael is quoted above, for “salamander giants.”

After having discussed the importance of truth and understanding, and after having discussed Ishmael as an artist concerned with boundary lines as a means of exploring such concepts, it remains for us to examine how the novel's prevailing concern with fate likewise reflects a Romantic concern. From the very first chapter, called "Loomings" and anticipating Ishmael's discussion of the Loom of Time, Ishmael is preoccupied with the interplay of fate, will, and chance. Ishmael's narrative abounds with allusions to fate, and is especially concerned with how it intersects with will. Even Ishmael's very choice of the Pequod as the whaler for him—a one in three chance—is called into question by the "judgment and surprising forecast" of Yojo, Queequeg's wooden god, whose good intentions ("benevolent designs") did not always work according to plan (MD 69).

It is easy to see why Ishmael is preoccupied with fate. If, indeed, he was destined to sail with Ahab, he was also destined to survive it; and, in one sense, Ishmael's writing of the book could be seen as his attempt to figure out why. Furthermore, at the end of the very first chapter, Ishmael caps his discussion of what brought him to sea by alluding to fate:

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.

Chief among those motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. (MD 7)

It seems to me that this discussion can be read in two ways, depending on whether we consider Ishmael to referring to whales in general of *The Whale* in particular. Even in a general sense, it is clear that in the book the whale takes on an important symbolic function. But if Ishmael is suggesting here that the White Whale is identical with the “grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air” which “floated into [his] inmost soul” and compelled him to take “*this*” voyage (emphasis mine), then it is clear that Ishmael has reason for differing from Ahab in his understanding of what *The Whale* represents (MD 7). After all, *The Whale* did not lead him to be boat to die, but rather to live, and, perhaps secondarily, to write.¹³⁵

Ahab, of course, has a much more complicated relationship with fate. Just before the climatic third day of the chase, Ahab says to Starbuck,

Ahab is forever 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. (MD 561)

As I read it, the dynamic of Ahab’s statement is interesting; he is simultaneously making an assertion of independence and proclaiming his slavery.¹³⁶ Of course, I only read the sentence

¹³⁵ In discussing the sea as an image in Shakespeare’s later plays, W.H. Auden argues, “The sea becomes the place of purgatorial suffering: through separation and apparent loss, the characters disordered by passion are brought to their senses and the world of music and marriage is made possible” Auden, *The Enchaféd Flood, or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, 12. *Moby-Dick*, although occasionally funny, is no comedy, but in place of “music and marriage” we have at the end the text, the book itself, which is at heart a reach for order from a “disordered” soul.

¹³⁶ Jonathan Arac, in exploring the problem of agency in *Moby-Dick*, not only demonstrates Ahab’s impotence but also questions the critical perception of Ahab’s individualism by exploring his basic divided nature as represented by Ishmael. Arac, “‘A Romantic Book’: *Moby-Dick* and Novel Agency,” 45; 51-2.

“Ahab is forever Ahab, man” as a claim to independence as far as it is an answer to his earlier question, “Is Ahab, Ahab?” (MD 545). In proclaiming that Ahab *is indeed* Ahab, even if a subordinate to fate, the captain blurs the lines between fate and will so that they become inseparable; is Ahab actively embracing his fate or making it? Ironically, Ahab’s claim to know his fate is a claim to omniscience that undermines the seeming humbleness or passiveness that accepting his fate seems to imply. It precisely mirrors the Romantic artist’s claim to divine truth.

Perhaps we can better understand this dynamic between fate and will in Ahab by examining an earlier moment. When, in “Sunset,” Ahab suggests, “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run,” it might be reckoned that while Ahab “fixed” his path, it is not Ahab that “grooved his soul” (MD 168). How much then, can Ahab say, “What I’ve dared, I’ve willed; and what I’ve willed, I’ll do!” (MD 168) if the will that seemingly governs his actions is created or controlled by a higher force?

Fate interestingly represents the tension I have been tracing in Romantic considerations of inspiration, particularly as fate is seen not to be dominating but intermixing with will and chance in Ishmael’s metaphor of the Mat. Ishmael conceives of man as at the same time assertive and active in his will but also governed by the hand of fate. In the drama Ishmael is creating/recounting, this is evidently clear in Ahab, who seems both destined to his path and aggressively pursuing it.

Again, in this matter Ahab is represented as a contradiction, and, perhaps, is driven all the more by the self-recognized contradiction within himself. For example, in “The Symphony” Ahab seems filled with the desire to distinguish lines that have been blurred into harmonies. The chapter begins with by describing the “transparently pure and soft...feminine air” as contrasted

by “strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea” (MD 542). The apparent contrast between these two elements—“only in shades and shadows”—is mirrored in Ahab himself, who feels the stirrings of Starbuck’s passionate appeals to abandoned the chase and return to the comforts of home and hearth enough to order Starbuck not to participate in the lowering for Moby-Dick. But Ahab is too much of the sea—too full of “strong, troubled, murderous thinkings”—to ever agree to “worm-like...craven crawl to land” (MD 107). But interestingly, what prevents Ahab is continuously identified in this chapter as the apparent tranquility of the sea, and, implicitly, the contrast that Ahab feels between what is apparent and what is just below the surface:

‘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 jamming 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?...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? But it is a mild, mild wind, and a mild looking sky...(MD 545).

Here, like in the encounter with Moby Dick, Ahab is inflamed by the juxtaposition of the seemingly “mild” nature and his knowledge of the inner turmoil and malice girding the tranquil scene. It is another reflection of Ishmael’s image at the end of the chapter called “Brit,” in which

he describes the soul of man as “full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life” (MD 274). Further inciting Ahab is the idea that he is potentially not in control of himself. But, while seemingly yielding to the idea of fate, it is suggested elsewhere in the book that it is something that he cannot submit to. In “The Quarter-Deck,” this relationship among fate, will, and chance is addressed again:

Ah, ye admonitions and warning! Why say ye not when ye come? But rather are ye predictions than warnings, ye shadows! Yet not so much predictions from without, as verifications of the foregoing things within. For with little external to constrain us, the innermost necessities in our being, these still drive us on. (MD 165)

Here, “predictions”—the omens, prophecies, and predestinations that populate the narrative—are given the weight and quality of mere “shadows,” that is, mere reflections of the weightier “innermost necessities.” Yet, even here the inner will is only allowed as much play as “external” forces allow, and these external forces are presumably chance.

The combined inter-workings of fate, will, and chance are most fully and clearly imaged by Ishmael in the chapter called “The Mat-Maker.” This chapter spells out directly the overarching metaphor of the book, from “Loomings” to the Epilogue, of a mat-maker, or weaver, at work upon “the Loom of Time” in which “chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly work together” (MD 214-5). In this image, Ishmael plies the “shuttle” (free will) within the given constraints of the warp (necessity)—paralleling imagination’s free play within the bounding line of reason in the Wordsworthian imagination.

But Ahab, maddened by contrast and uncertainty, rushes to a certain doom, and it is Ishmael who survives to write the narrative. In the Epilogue, Ishmael claims, “It so chanced, that

after the Parsee's disappearance, I was he whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab's bowsman..." (MD 573). If fate and chance combined to save Ishmael, his will is apparently evidenced in the shape of the very book we are now concluding. Ishmael's success reflects an ability to accept the tension that I have argued previously in this project as a Wordsworthian one—the tension between activity and passivity, reason and inspiration, in a work of art. As Ishmael asks, "Who ain't a slave?"

But, while Ishmael's ability to occupy the space between two poles allows him the freedom to write, but the result of his creativity is hard to decipher. Part of the meaning of *Moby-Dick* seems to question the reliability or possibility of meanings.¹³⁷ At least, a reading of contemporary critical reviews will seem to indicate as much. Considering the initial reaction, the book seemed to confuse more than anything else. Far from seeing any truth, the London morning *Chronicle* on December 20, 1851, labeled *Moby-Dick* "a perfect muck throughout...soaring into absolute clouds of phantasmal unreason."¹³⁸ On November 15, 1851, the Boston *Daily Traveler* described the book as "a sort of hermaphrodite craft—half-fact, half

¹³⁷ In a reading very much in line with my own, and which I have been suggesting has its roots in a Wordsworthian imagination, Richard Chase calls *Moby-Dick* "the supreme instance of the dialectical novel—a novel of tension without resolution." Chase, ed. *Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 9. More recently, Jonathan Arac's discussion of the ambiguity and contradictions implicit in the language of *Moby-Dick*, and paralleling other Romantic writing such as Percy Shelley's "Mont Blanc," is fascinating and suggestive of the inherent instability of Romantic writing. Further, in his discussion Arac calls upon William Empson's seventh type of ambiguity, in which "radical contradictions...gain strength through the force of opposition," a description that Arac finds particularly apt for *Moby-Dick* and I find highly suggestive of Wordsworth. Arac, "'A Romantic Book': *Moby-Dick* and Novel Agency," 47-8; William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Meridian Books (New York: Noonday Press, 1955), 230.

¹³⁸ Hugh W. Hetherington, *Melville's Reviewers, British and American, 1846-1891* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 200.

fiction” where truth becomes indiscernible.¹³⁹ Even more interesting is where critics disagreed with each other. For example, Henry Chorley, writing in the *Athenaeum* offered this critique:

An ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter of fact. The rant and electrical verb might have been permitted if not interrupted by the "facts of Scoresby and figures of Crocker."¹⁴⁰

Basically, Chorley wanted Melville to make up his mind. Horace Greeley, however, writing for the New York *Tribune* on November 22 of that same year, had a much clearer view of what *Moby-Dick* was and what was good about it:

The intensity of the plot is happily relieved by minute descriptions of the homely processes of the whale fishery. We have occasional touches of subtle mysticism...but it is mixed with so many tangible and odorous realities that we safely alight from an excursion through mid-air upon the deck of the ship. We are recalled to this world by fumes of “oil and blubber,” and are made to think more of the contents of barrels than of allegories.¹⁴¹

Greeley obviously appreciated the portrayal of whaling life—so much so that we might wonder if he missed half of the book!

Perhaps the unique structure of the book also suggests that *Moby-Dick* primarily reflects the elusiveness of understanding. Edgar Dryden noticed that Ishmael’s account of the Pequod is never presented realistically or historically so much as it assumes the form of a “tragic drama,”

¹³⁹ Ibid., 205.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 196.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 211.

complete, of course, with occasional stage directions and soliloquies.¹⁴² Ishmael even makes ambiguous the line between the verb and the noun. In several instances, he invents nouns out of verbs—e.g., “regardings,” “allurings,” “intercedings,” “wanings,” and “coincidings.”¹⁴³ Melville also occasionally creates abstract nouns, either by pluralizing words (e.g., “unfulfillments”) or adding the suffix -ness (“landlessness”) or -ism (“vultureism”).¹⁴⁴ By announcing itself as fiction in such ways, the novel questions the sharp lines that we draw on the world. The book declares that ‘whatever seems stable’ in the world is so only because we think it is so. *Moby-Dick* takes the things from which we draw security and shows them to be “passing fables.”¹⁴⁵

But in showing the weaknesses of forms, structures, and sciences in conveying meaning, Ishmael at the same time emphasizes the role of art as a way to suggest truth. The novel is as filled with stories as it is with philosophic interludes, and many of these stories carry a great deal of weight. For example, let’s take just a small story from early in the book—Ishmael’s take on the “meaning of that story of Narcissus.” It is a tale, according to Ishmael, of a man “who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drown” (MD 13). The verbs here represent actions of pursuit, or of striving (“grasp”) and also of immersion—Ishmael reads the myth of Narcissus as a fatal tale of a man who kills

¹⁴² Edgar A. Dryden, *Melville's Thematics of Form; the Great Art of Telling the Truth* (Baltimore,: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), 83-4.

¹⁴³ Newton Arvin, "Metaphor and Language in *Moby-Dick*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Moby-Dick : A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Michael T. Gilmore (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 84.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 84-5.

¹⁴⁵ Dryden, *Melville's Thematics of Form; the Great Art of Telling the Truth*, 83.

himself in trying to understand (one possible reading of “grasp”), or possibly in trying to take hold of what appears to be mere illusion, but is suggestive of more.

Also, consider the important way in which the image that plagued (and delighted, perhaps) Narcissus is portrayed: it is the “tormenting, mild image” (MD 13). Is the image tormenting and mild, or is it tormenting *because* mild (again, compare this to the description of Ahab after his first encounter with Moby Dick). Or, is the source of its torment related to its apparent mildness; perhaps it is only the mild reflection of a tormented soul. In my reading, this brief allusion in the early pages of the book is our first glimpse into Ishmael’s understanding of the character of Ahab. Note the other similarities: both are men of ego (or, in Greek, perhaps men of pride), both commit a type of suicide in striving to touch what is beyond their grasp, and for both the object of their pursuit is a version of themselves.

Of course, the image that led Narcissus into the pool, and the one that led Ahab to chase the whale, is much more than a self-reflection; as Ishmael goes on to say, “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” (MD 13). What is “the key to it all?” If “the ungraspable phantom of life” is some reflection of ourselves, could it be that Ishmael is referring to the book he is writing? This conceit of an “ungraspable...key to it all” is repeated in the image of the “long, limber, portentous, black mass of something hovering in the center of the picture” of the painting in “The Spouter-Inn,” which is said to hold the key for its successful interpretation. The book seems centrally concerned with the ability or inability to discover meanings.

Considering this, Ishmael’s remark that if we do not properly understand the whale, we might interpret his tale as a “hideous allegory” might be more than humor, irony, or flippancy; rather, it is an important statement about Ishmael’s conception of art, specifically in terms of

how symbol differs from allegory. Primarily, Ishmael is concerned that we have a true and accurate description or understanding of nature. In the chapter “The Funeral,” Ishmael paints a picture of how a misinterpreted event can govern men’s wrong courses of actions for generations to come simply out of inherited habit or custom (a similar dislike of “custom” as defined above is working within Hawthorne’s “The Custom-House,” especially as we read it as a preface to *The Scarlet Letter*). It is important for Ishmael that his readers understand the true thing, to grasp the whale in its real form. And of course, *Moby Dick* cannot be an allegory because in an allegory everything has a one-to-one relationship with what it represents, whereas in this story it is not clear even what the Whale, the largest conceit, represents—and this ambiguity, or deficiency of human understanding, might be Ishmael’s most important point.

For example, the end of Chapter 93, “The Castaway,” addresses the limitations of human “reason” against divine or spiritual revelation. The chapter details the misadventures in Stubb’s whaleboat of Pip, the “little negro” who is branded a coward and an “idiot” after having been stranded in the “dead calm” of the sea for leaping out of the whaleboat. In telling of the incident, Ishmael says nothing of the potential physical dangers that might confront Pip; in fact, he emphasizes the comparative physical safety of Pip by describing the sea as “calm” three times in the span of two paragraphs (“the spangled sea calm and cool”; “in calm weather”; “in a dead calm”) and suggesting that “to swim in the open ocean is as easy to the practiced swimmer as to rife in a spring-carriage” (MD 413). Against this physical safety, Ishmael emphasizes the spiritual anxiety of Pip: “But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?” Pip can tell it, but his communications are judged “mad” (again the Platonic accusation emerges); and, of course, so can Ishmael tell of it, a fact that is emphasized by the final words of the chapter, which foretell of

Ishmael's "like abandonment" in the climax of the book. The following paragraph, then, while on the surface describing the condition of Pip, will probably more accurately be attributed to Ishmael himself:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (MD 414)

Literally, this paragraph juxtaposes the "finite" with the "infinite," the "body" with the "soul," and from these literal dualisms we can detect more: "the unwarped primal world" has as its unnamed opposite the distorted, secondary world—that is, the visible, material world. The "revealed" secrets of the sublime¹⁴⁶ world are contrasted with "mortal reason," and this reason is again contrasted, I think, with "feels," establishing the close, Romantic connection between 'feeling' and 'revelation' that is elicited in Coleridge's Reason (as opposed to Understanding) and Wordsworth's Imagination, both of which seek to avoid the Platonic association with madness alluded to in this passage.

¹⁴⁶ Sublime of course, because it is below the "line," of sea level; the term is not used here, but I think it is implied not only by the physical description of "carried down" but also by the dialectic sense of "beauty" and "terror" evoked in the parings of the phrase "joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities."

Also, here again is the paradox at the center of Ishmael's vision of the divine, as symbolized by the White Whale. The encounter with the divine is "heartless" but also joyous; indeed, in this description, the heartlessness is akin to "indifference" and not "malice." As implied in the story of Ahab's first tragic encounter with the White Whale, man can too readily mistake this indifference for malice—a sort of 'if you're not for us then you're against us' mentality.¹⁴⁷

Of course, in suggesting that Ishmael did not see "malice" in the Whale (or saw *more* than the malice in the Whale, and rightly recognized it as indifference), I do not mean to imply that Ishmael's philosophy finally reaches an acceptable resolution, nor am I suggesting that *Moby-Dick* can be seen to have a happy ending. Rather, as this passage is doing, Ishmael is implicitly asking the question, what does it mean for man to be (or at least to "feel") as "indifferent as his God?" If this fierce individualism, this separateness from the species, is a necessary consequence of feeling "uncompromised,"—which I am reading both as "unspoiled" but also "unconnected"—if this "awful lonesomeness" is the immediate response to revelation, then what? Is man better for his glimpse into the divine? Can this be taken as Ishmael critiquing Thoreau's impulse to take to the woods?

Indeed, the whole chapter is a criticism of man's unfeeling nature towards his fellow men, as evidence in the crew's abandonment of Pip. And again, Ahab, who seems to sympathize with Pip, nonetheless re-enacts the same selfish neglect of his fellow creature in his unreasonable pursuit of the Whale. Like Victor, who shuts out his fellow creatures in his pursuit of the secrets

¹⁴⁷ Such a response is explored, for example, in Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," which also uses the sea as its primary symbol.

of nature, Ahab, in attempting to strike at the malice in man, embodies more visibly than the whale that very thing which he seeks to destroy.

To suggest a sort of wrapping up, I will, as I did in the beginning, turn briefly to a comparison with an important contemporary, and to some degree influential, work. In the year before writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville read and wrote a (mostly positive) review of James Fenimore Cooper's final sea narrative, *The Sea Lions*. Considered by critics to be Cooper's most "symbolic" work, it is worthwhile to this discussion to examine the texts together. And there are unmistakable similarities, although some are admittedly minor. For example, in *Moby-Dick* Captain Bildad is the symbolic incarnation of the hypocrisy of religious orthodoxy when combined with capitalist interests, and to this degree he is the minor and facetious answer to a question that is of main importance in Cooper's *The Sea Lions*. In Cooper's sea narrative, which is of a length (but not depth) to rival *Moby-Dick*, a sealing voyage to a secret and utopic isle of plenty in the undiscovered Antarctic is financed by the impious Deacon Pratt, whose greed is a major concern for his spiritual and tender-hearted niece. A lighter but recognizable Deacon Pratt, Captain Bildad gives a farewell speech on leaving the Pequod that is a hilarious mixture of spiritual and material concerns:

"God bless ye, and have ye in His holy keeping, men" murmured old Bildad, almost incoherently..."Don't stave the boats needlessly, ye harpooneers; good white cedar plank is raised full three per cent. within the year. Don't forget your prayers, either. Mr. Starbuck, mind that cooper don't waste the spar staves...Don't whale it too much on the Lord's days, men; but don't miss a fair chance, either, that's rejecting Heaven's good gifts." (105)

And so on. Incidentally, this last injunction—not to whale *too* much on Sundays—is a central concern in *The Sea Lions*, whose honest but skeptical young Captain learns over the many trials of his voyage, and with the guidance of a untutored but worldly-wise old salt, to appreciate the True Faith.

While Melville relegates this central concern of *The Sea Lions* to a funny and insignificant character, there is another way in which *The Sea Lions* is perhaps relevant to a reading of *Moby-Dick*. The main story in *The Sea Lions* involves the spiritual journey of the noble Captain Gardiner, whose reason prevents him from accepting the divinity of Christ and consequently withholds from him the hand in marriage of the devout Mary Pratt. (It is probably not important that Starbuck's wife bears the same name, but, then again, they likely share the name for the same spiritual connotations). Hired by the greedy Deacon Pratt for a sealing expedition to an uncharted land (and also to recover buried pirate treasure to boot!) Captain Gardiner, commander of the Sea Lion, suffers the unfortunate fate of being trapped by the freezing seas into wintering on the Antarctic island, an experience that proves fatal to nearly the entire crew of a competing vessel (also dubbed the Sea Lion, hence the book's plural title). But, enlightened by his many trials and tests, and also constantly reminded of the grandeur and sublimity of vast nature,¹⁴⁸ Captain Gardiner comes to recognize the humble limits of human reason when compared to the infinity of the divine, and, recognizing the hand of providence in his salvation (literal and spiritual), he comes to accept the divinity of Christ as revealed truth, and thereby earns the outright devotion of good Mary.

¹⁴⁸ It might be useful at this point to notice Richard Gravil's argument that Cooper's writings are more and more Wordsworthian as his long literary career continues. Richard Gravil, "The Wordsworthian Metamorphosis of Natty Bumppo," in *Wordsworth in American Literary Culture*, ed. Joel Pace (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). *The Sea Lions*, written late in Cooper's career, would reveal Cooper at his most Wordsworthian.

Among the many parallels this basic outline shares with *Moby-Dick* is Ishmael's refutation of fallible human reason in the chapter, "Jonah Historically Regarded." In this chapter, Ishmael dismisses a seaman skeptic's doubts about the literality of the biblical story of Jonah as the "foolish pride of reason—a thing still more reprehensible in him, seeing that he had but little learning except what he had picked up from the sun and the sea" (MD 365). Here, Ishmael is clearly privileging a Romantic idea of nature as the true teacher and revealer of wisdom, an idea that is closely related to the Coleridgean division of Understanding and (revealed) Reason and Wordsworth's oft-noted distinction between knowledge learned from "books" and truth derived from nature.. Further, this chapter is reinforced almost immediately by the chapter called "The Fountain," in which Ishmael attests that it is quite impossible from a purely observational or scientific standpoint to determine whether the whale's spout ("The Fountain") is comprised of water or simply vapor. The spout elsewhere holds important symbolic significance (consider the chapter "The Spirit-Spout," or the descriptions of a whale spouting blood as a dying act), and in this chapter Ishmael reinforces its symbolic power by declaring,

And how nobly it raised our conceit of the mighty, misty monster, to behold him solemnly sailing through a calm and tropical sea; his vast mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapor—as you will sometimes see it—glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts. For, d'ye see, rainbows do not visit the clear air; they only irradiate vapor. And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but

doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. 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 an equal eye.
(MD 374)

Here, like many individual passages in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael crams into a paragraph several of the most important themes of the novel. But for my immediate purposes, it illustrates how the whale, and in this case the whale spout specifically, is a symbol or token of the divine. It is significant that Ishmael argues that the spout is vapor and not water, for vapor—neither water nor air but both at once—becomes a metaphor for inspiration (“intuition”), which intermixes two elements (the physical body and a spiritual bestowal) so that it is impossible to draw the line between where one (body; will; reason) stops and another (spirit; fate; inspiration) starts. This metaphor of commingling is carried on in this passage by the discussion of the doubting reason versus revealed intuition; importantly, for Ishmael this blurring of the boundaries does not dissolve into a crisis, but rather is considered to be the wiser, profounder, more productive (if this narrative can be read as a grand production) state of being.

Combined, these two chapters, “Jonah Historically Regarded” and “The Fountain,” illustrate the inadequacy of human knowledge or reason when compared to divine revelation, an idea touched upon at greater length elsewhere in this paper. But, to return briefly to *The Sea Lions*, in so doing *Moby-Dick* reenacts a central concern in Cooper’s novel. And, this time, Melville’s handling of the Cooperian motif is much more than flippant; indeed, while Ishmael (at least apparently) follows Captain Gardiner in rejecting the “foolish, impious pride” of reason, Captain Ahab, of course, does not.

My reading of *Moby-Dick*, then, attempts to demonstrate the ways in which Melville practically engages with—by providing suitable scope (the vast ocean) and character (Ahab, Ishmael, Queequeg, the Whale itself)—the themes that Wordsworth developed in considering the Growth of the Poet’s Mind. Undeniably, *Moby-Dick* seems to demand multiple interpretations and can be engaged rewardingly from various perspectives, as the rich critical history centering on the book demonstrates; however, many critics seem to recognize that the pursuit of Moby Dick is, to some degree, the pursuit of knowledge or truth, and the book’s complex ideas about the knowability of truth put it in line with other Romantic quests. I hope to add that this particular Romantic engagement specifically reflects concerns found in Wordsworth, the interrelated concepts that I have elsewhere summarized as the question of inspiration and the role of others in the creative process. In *Moby-Dick*, as in *Frankenstein*, we see reemerging the Platonic possibility of ‘madness’ in the pursuit of truth; moreover, issues of activity versus passivity are interestingly altered into questions of fate and free will, and the need for human companionship, solved early for Ishmael by his friendship with Queequeg, is probed more fully in Ahab, whose strength in his (seeming) individualism can be at once admired and faulted. Of course, the novel reaches no definite conclusion as to the proper resolution of these questions,¹⁴⁹ but that, too, is Wordsworthian. Ishmael says: “For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught.”

¹⁴⁹ Alfred Kazin asserts: “For Ishmael there are no satisfactorily conclusions to anything; no final philosophy is ever possible.” Alfred Kazin, “Introduction” To *Moby-Dick*,” in *Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Chase, *Twentieth Century Views* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 42. Richard Chase, in differentiating the book from Greek and Christian forms of tragedy, adds: “For Melville there is little promise of renewal and reward after suffering. There is no transcendent ground where the painful contradictions of the human dilemma are reconciled. There is no life *through* death.” Chase, “Melville and *Moby-Dick*,” 58. I would suggest, however, that there is the book itself.

(MD 145) Wordsworth, too, with multiple drafts of *The Prelude*, none published in his lifetime, and his unfinished *The Recluse*, found his “grand,” “true” erections unable to be completed.

4.0 MEANING FROM DISUNITY: POETIC CREATION FOR MELVILLE

Wordsworth's epic poem, *The Prelude*, is an autobiographical account of the development of the poet, and, hence, directly and concretely about poetry and poetry-making; unfortunately, Melville does not conveniently provide such a large-scale, clear-cut statement of his poetic principles. Nevertheless, whether we are discussing his fiction or his verse, Melville's art is to a large extent self-reflexive.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, short statements about his poetics do exist, such as his truncated sonnet entitled "Art,"¹⁵¹ collected in *Timoleon, Etc.* (1891):

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; 5
Sad patience—joyous energies;

¹⁵⁰ In one of the first important studies of Melville's poetry, Laurence Barrett noted, "Much of Melville's poetry is about poetry; it illuminates itself." Laurence Barrett, "The Differences in Melville's Poetry," *PMLA* 70, no. 4 (1955): 607.

¹⁵¹ John Bryant suggests in his commentary on the various versions of "Art," "But in structure, it is more of a 'truncated sonnet....' Although its sound, development, and startling final couplet make it sonnet-like, its deliberately imperfect rhyme and only eleven four-beat lines make it shorter in all dimensions than the traditional pentameter sonnet." John Bryant, ed. *Herman Melville: Tales, Poems, and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 537-41. Further references to this text will be done parenthetically.

Humility—yet pride and scorn;
Instinct and study; love and hate;
Audacity—reverence; these must mate—
With much of mystic Jacob’s heart, 10
To wrestle with that angel—Art. (Bryant 541)

In this poem, Melville suggests that the composition of poetry involves the interaction of distinct and opposing ideas, but that the benefit comes not from a resulting synthesis but from the process itself—the act of wrestling. This conception of poetry bears more than a passing resemblance to Wordsworthian principles.¹⁵² First, the opening couplet of the poem recalls the Wordsworthian phrase, “emotion recollected in tranquility” (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) by indicating that poetry begins in the “placid” consideration of ideas, emotions, memories (“many a brave unbodied scheme”). But to give these ephemeral things body—to give the creature life—requires the union of two spheres (“What unlike things must meet and mate”). In order to accomplish this—in order to wrestle with an angel—a poet must be able to interact with both planes at once; he must possess the poetic sensibility (“mystic Jacob’s heart”) and the ability to give what he senses body (“form to lend”). Poetic creation requires, then, both passion (“a flame to melt”) and reason (“a wind to freeze), and the poet needs to be both passive (patient, humble, instinctive, reverent) and active (energetic, proud, studious, and audacious).

This dualism between passivity and activity in poetic creation is precisely part of the Wordsworthian inheritance that I am suggesting appears in Melville. Furthermore, the various

¹⁵² William H. Shurr makes a similar observation, although he suggests that the “echo” of Wordsworth ends with the first two lines. William Shurr, *The Mystery of Iniquity; Melville as Poet, 1857-1891* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 242.

versions of “Art”—both Robert Penn Warren’s slightly different final version,¹⁵³ and the manuscript versions which Bryant makes available and which provide the opportunity to witness Melville’s poetic principles in action—reveal this dualism more clearly. In Warren’s version of the poem, the final three lines read: “These must mate, / And fuse with Jacob’s mystic heart, / To wrestle with the angel—Art” (Warren 335). In this version, the verb “fuse” emphasizes joining, reconciliation, whereas in Bryant’s version, “with much of mystic Jacob’s heart” seems to call attention to the separateness or distinctness that the process involves (“with much,” but not with all).

Bryant’s research brings to bear other, earlier versions of the poem as well. In its earliest form “Art” was one of two epigrams:

Hard to grapple and upsweep
One dripping trophy from the deep.

In him who would evoke—create,
Contraries must meet and mate;

Flames that burn, and winds that freeze; (Bryant 538)

The first couplet—which describes a grappling hook but might have suggested to Melville the biblical story of Jacob wrestling (“grapple”) the angel of God that would become the concluding image in “Art”—hints at the inherent difficulty of poetic creation, which involves grasping the sublime and pulling it into reality.¹⁵⁴ The next three lines, of course, would evolve into “Art.” In

¹⁵³ Robert Penn Warren, ed. *Selected Poems of Herman Melville* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1970), 335. This version contains only minor variations aside from the one I note above, mostly in punctuation. Further references to this edition will be done parenthetically.

¹⁵⁴ Melville reworked this couplet into the central image of the poem, “In a Garret”: “Gems and jewels let them heap— / Wax sumptuous as the Sophi: / For me, to grapple from Art’s deep / One dripping trophy!”

its initial stage, the central motif—that of the merging of opposites—is already expressed, along with the first pair of contraries, representing the passion and calculation involved in poetic creation. Of course, Melville would add many more “contraries,” (in lieu, perhaps, of finishing his original couplet) as well as the final image; however, the most significant *subtraction* from the early version is the deletion of the first line, which, in the use of its double verbs, signified quite clearly the dual role of the poet in creation—both to “evoke” and to “create,” to represent what is already found and to make new.¹⁵⁵ Given this vision of art rooted in the union of conflicting ideas, it is unsurprising that Melville’s first published poetry should be about war.

Despite all of the factors that made the publication of *Battle-Pieces* novel or unexpected—e.g., Melville had not previously published a volume of poetry, and had not published anything at all in a decade—there are other reasons to consider Melville’s poetic response to the U.S. Civil War unsurprising. Artistically speaking, it may be true that Melville, up until *Battle-Pieces*, had very little to say on the most important political issue of his day, slavery¹⁵⁶; nevertheless the Civil War raised issues about the nature of humanity that transcended mere politics in a way that compelled Melville the artist to respond¹⁵⁷—he admits as much in his

(Bryant 535). Along with the revised “Art,” this poem expresses the Romantic transcendental quality still dominating Melville’s conception of art.

¹⁵⁵ Bryant suggests that the revised opening is intentionally more “Wordsworthian” in its “placidity of inspiration” in order to contrast the strongly active phrasing of the rest of the poem; while I suggest that the initial paring of “evoke—create,” including that clever dash that shows the two distinct verbs as two sides of the same coin, also suggests this contrast, Bryant and I essentially agree that Melville is recognizing the twofold and paradoxical nature of poetic creation.

¹⁵⁶ Mason Lowance suggested that the most likely place to find Melville’s views on slavery, his short story *Benito Cereno*, was more concerned with exploring the darkness of humanity than with making any coherent statements about slavery. Mason I. Lowance, *A House Divided : The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America, 1776-1865* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 157.

¹⁵⁷ In his Introduction to his edited *Battle-Pieces*, Hennig Cohen writes, “Melville saw that in the great stream of history the Civil War was merely another war. But he was no less aware that it was likewise a projection of the suffering and internal conflict of all men, an interruption of the orderly progress of his

prefatory prose statement by suggesting that the poems “originated in an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond.” The Civil War symbolically represented many of the themes that had preoccupied Melville throughout his writing, such as internal strife, the essential duality of humanity, the question of social responsibility, and the division between reason (in this volume, often represented by law) and passion.

Not only is it fitting, then, to expect Melville to have been drawn to the Civil War as theme, but it is also possible to see *Battle-Pieces* as appropriate considering Melville’s progression as an artist. In *After the Whale* (1995), for example, Clark Davis traces in Melville’s genre-shifting from novels-to-short fiction-to- poetry an increasing preoccupation with fragmentation in form that follows, Davis suggests, a movement away from the solid “body” and toward the disembodied imagination.¹⁵⁸ I, too, find in Melville’s writing the important dualism between the material and the ephemeral, and I also follow Davis in seeking for an explanation, rooted in Melville’s aesthetics, that will adequately account for his switch from prose to verse. In 1979, Nina Baym echoed and expanded upon a long-held critical assertion that following *The Confidence-Man* Melville’s “withdrawal” from writing fiction reflected “Melville’s sense of the absurdity of the universe, the meaninglessness of language, and, hence, the absurdity of writing.”¹⁵⁹ Baym suggests that turning to poetry was a withdrawal from the public, and therefore an opportunity “to attend only to his own voice, without obligation to serve either the

own country, a battle in the endless struggle between powers of light and darkness.” Hennig Cohen, ed. *The Battle-Pieces of Herman Melville* (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1963), 22. Further references to this text will be marked parenthetically.

¹⁵⁸ Clark Davis, *After the Whale : Melville in the Wake of Moby-Dick* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 107. It is also interesting to note that Davis finds this concern with what he calls fragmentation a Romantic characteristic inherited by Melville.

¹⁵⁹ Nina Baym, "Melville's Quarrel with Fiction," *PMLA* 94(1979): 909. Further references will be parenthetically cited in the text.

eternal verities or the populace” (Baym 921). Of course, I am suggesting that this assessment is only half right; throughout his writing, Melville never abandoned what Baym aptly termed his “quest for truth,” and, while it is certain that Melville no longer expected his poetry to achieve popular success, I suggest he nonetheless had in mind a future audience, a “fantasy crowd” to use the term Timothy Clark uses in discussing Wordsworth, who would appreciate his poetry.

We must, therefore, seek other explanations for Melville’s turn to poetry. Some critics cite Melville’s declining health; Douglas Robillard, for instance, seems to attribute his taking up poetry as a way “to comfort himself” from the rigors and stress of fiction.¹⁶⁰ Most critics who focus on aesthetic principles, however, find less distinction between Melville’s lyrical prose and his prose-ful lyrics. In examining Melville as poet, Hershel Parker suggests, “In Melville’s usages, the ‘poet’ and the ‘poetic’ are not associated with the metrical activity of verse-making but evoke the Romantic writer’s liberated consciousness in bold pursuit of the wild, the strange, the exotic. Romance and poetry were synonymous—they were imaginative, not factual and not commonplace, and they were associated in Melville’s mind with a higher form of literature than factual (and partially fictionalized) travel and adventure narrative.”¹⁶¹ Too, Agnes D. Cannon, in studying Melville’s aesthetics, suggests that reading Melville’s turn to poetry as a departure is inconsistent with Melville’s own definition of poetry,¹⁶² and I would add that the many critics of *Moby-Dick* who have recognized its lyricism tacitly agree.

Nor should poetry seem such an odd choice to a 19th century artist. Perhaps in some ways Melville’s commitment to poetry, from our vantage point, seems inconsistent with what we

¹⁶⁰ Douglas Robillard, ““I Laud the Inhuman Sea”: Melville as Poet in the 1880s,” *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 5(July 1976): 201.

¹⁶¹ Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*, 14.

¹⁶² Agnes D. Cannon, “Melville’s Concept of the Poet and Poetry,” *Arizona Quarterly* 31(1975): 315.

recognize as his more modern artistic conceptions. For example, in giving us a picture of Melville's aestheticism, Cannon suggests that Melville's commitment to truth as revealed by poetry reflects a relative, pluralistic view of truth, and she points to the symbolism of the doubloon in *Moby-Dick* as representative moment in Melville's art. I agree that Melville seemed awed and perhaps uneasy about the poet's position as interpreter of truth—stemming from doubts about “inspiration” and madness, the individual and society that I have been tracing in previous chapters. But at the same time Cannon recognizes that a firm belief in the role of the poet as interpreter or revealer of truth was a consistent part of Melville's artistic creed, and she concludes her insightful essay by recognizing that Melville, too, subscribed to Keats's tautology of Beauty and Truth.¹⁶³ When Melville expresses doubt about the poet, his concerns usually take the form of an over-eager pursuer of the Ideal who detaches himself from the stabilizing weight of humanity—such as the monomaniacal Ahab and Bannadonna, or the immature and overly idealistic Pierre.

Furthermore, Melville's poetry also reflects his aesthetic tendency toward experimentation in form or style. It has been customary, from the earliest favorable accounts of Melville's poetry by critics like Robert Penn Warren¹⁶⁴ and Barrett, to consider the poetry in terms of its “differences,” to use the term from Barrett's title. At the center of Melville's art is a commitment to duality, the bringing together of opposites not to force a unity but in order to yield a meaning. Such, too, was the aim and scope of *Battle-Pieces*.

Perhaps a bit ironically, Wordsworth, lacking not the opportunity, avoided writing war poetry largely because, following Milton, he wanted to write an epic poem grander (due to a

¹⁶³ Ibid.: 338-9.

¹⁶⁴ Robert Penn Warren, "Melville the Poet," *Kenyon Review* 8(1946).

nobler theme) than the traditional treatment of battles and warriors.¹⁶⁵ But the war attracted Melville not because it was politically or culturally significant, but rather because it so closely mirrored what was preoccupying Melville as an artist. Indeed, one possible way to read the trajectory of Melville's career following *Moby-Dick* is to trace a steady withdrawal into the self.¹⁶⁶ In his first book of poetry, for example, Melville is fulfilling the social responsibility of the poet/prophet to his people. From then, Melville's poetry turned inward; for example, *Clarel* (1876), which I will discuss in the next chapter, is often read as a spiritual autobiography. By his final unpublished volume, "Weeds and Wildings Chiefly, With a Rose or Two," perhaps never intended for distribution, Melville was, in part, writing an intimate volume of love poetry for his wife.¹⁶⁷

But his initial foray into poetics involved the composition and arrangement of individual snapshots of the war into a unified statement, not in celebration of victory or commemoration of heroes, but rather as a warning against the divided nature of mankind. The Civil War, and especially the victory for the Union, represented for Melville both the potential threat and the potential greatness of humanity. War, especially civil war, is the ultimate demonstration of conflict, tension, and contradiction; but at the same time it provides the opportunity for the display of many of the species's most time-honored traits—resolution, courage, and strength, the

¹⁶⁵ See Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, 21-2.

¹⁶⁶ Shurr suggests, "The Poems are the attempt of a painfully isolated man...to engage his world and probe its meaning." Shurr, *The Mystery of Iniquity; Melville as Poet, 1857-1891*, 8. Robillard refers to Melville as an "isolato," and suggests, reading John Marr as biographically representing Melville, that both "had become aware of the inadequacies of human relations and had rejected them," an interpretation which I find impossible to accept of John Marr and difficult to accept of Melville. Robillard, "'I Laud the Inhuman Sea': Melville as Poet in the 1880s," 194, 97.

¹⁶⁷ See Shurr, *The Mystery of Iniquity; Melville as Poet, 1857-1891*, 183.

by-products of conflict. The collection also clearly privileges reintegration over division, and rather than celebrate victory, pleads for re-unity.¹⁶⁸

In this manner, as evident by several of his poems, the Civil War coaxed Melville into revisiting and re-exploring his most dynamic and powerful poetic figure—Captain Ahab, the ultimate representative of the potential of humanity to be divided. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, Starbuck, the reader, and perhaps even Melville himself, are torn between admiring the proud, relentless Ahab and condemning him. Similarly, throughout *Battle-Pieces*, Melville, while repeatedly and directly denouncing the Confederate cause as “Wrong,” still maintains a sympathetic admiration for their individual acts of nobility and self-sacrifice. The two poems that commemorate Stonewall Jackson, for example, not only demonstrate ambivalence in terms of their appraisal of the man, but they also reflect upon a man divided in himself. Consider the shorter of the two, “Stonewall Jackson”:

The Man who fiercest charged in fight,
Whose sword and prayer were long—
Stonewall!
Even him who stoutly stood for Wrong,
How can we praise? Yet coming days 5
Shall not forget him with this song.

Dead is the Man whose Cause is Dead,
Vainly he died, and set his seal—

¹⁶⁸ In addition to the prose Supplement, the following poems speak on the themes of unity or reconciliation: “The Conflict of Convictions,” “Donelson,” “Dupont’s Round Fight,” “Shiloh,” “Battle of Stone River, Tennessee,” “The Armies of the Wilderness,” “The Swamp Angel,” “Rebel Color-bearers at Shiloh,” “The Muster,” “Magnanimity Baffled,” “The Scout toward Aldie,” and “A Meditation.”

Stonewall!

Earnest in error, as we feel; 10

True to the thing he deemed was due,

True as John Brown or steel.

Relentlessly he routed us;

But *we* relent, for he is low—

Stonewall! 15

Justly his fame we outlaw; so

We drop a tear on the bold Virginian's bier,

Because no wreath we owe.¹⁶⁹ (85)

The poem begins with the words “The Man,” and the capitalization of the phrase raises the possibility that Stonewall (who, incidentally, is attributed no other name in the poem than this metaphorical moniker) stands, aptly, the representative “Man.” Line two touches upon his dual nature (“Whose sword and prayer were long—“), fitting him for physical battle or spiritual warfare; but in the rest of the poem, it seems to be posterity who is divided. Stonewall is, as his name suggests, solid to a fault, and, like prideful Ahab, he “stoutly stood for Wrong.” Part of what seems admirable about Stonewall, indeed, is his rigid stance for a “Cause”—a firmness the poet himself seems unable to muster. In stanza two, the poem links “earnest” and “error”—a familiar move, as I will illustrate below—yet he also seems unable to stand as firm in his resolution condemning Stonewall, qualifying his judgment with the phrase, “as we feel.” Too, the logic of the poem, as well as the meter, seems at least mildly inconsistent—it promises that

¹⁶⁹ The poems cited from *Battle-Pieces* come from Cohen, ed. *The Battle-Pieces of Herman Melville*. References will be cited parenthetically in text.

“coming days / Shall not forget him with his song,” and yet maintains, “Justly his fame we outlaw.” In this way, war itself comes to represent for Melville the conflicting and contradictory nature of humanity—noble and depraved, heroic and pathetic, exalted and degenerate—and poetry recreates this essential duality at the core of humanity.

Furthermore, Melville seems to recognize the tantalizingly close connection between the destruction inherent in war and the possibility of creation in the poetic sense—as if each were separated only by the thin edge of a coin—and I am recalled to Blake’s consideration of reason, by definition destructive, but rescued to purposefulness in the form of a bounding line. Indeed, form plays an interesting role in *Battle-Pieces*; it occasionally figures as the subject of the poem, as we will see, but it also acts as a way to control or countermand the chaos of war. Bertrand Mathieu claims as Melville’s greatest success in *Battle-Pieces* his ability to regulate “raw feeling” in the confines of form by using appropriate symbols to convey meaning.¹⁷⁰

There is such a close connection between war and poetry partly because war is inherently metaphorical—you are fighting for something, presumably, intangible and of a higher value than physical life—while at the same time being disturbingly, sometimes shockingly, real. Not surprisingly then, several of his poems reference making poetry (more below). What’s more, the soldier in this volume occasionally becomes a metaphor for the poet. From one perspective, Melville’s compulsion to take up the pen parallels the soldier’s dutiful assumption of the musket. In his prefatory note, it is stunning how closely Melville’s passive disavowal of individual,

¹⁷⁰ Bertrand Mathieu, ““Plain Mechanic Power”: Melville’s Earliest Poems, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War*,” *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 5(July 1976): 124. Mathieu states: “For the purposes of art, of course, raw feeling is mere lack of organization. Only when emotions are truly experienced and embodied effectively in corresponding objects or images do they succeed in finding acutely meaningful utterance.”

creative effort reflects the Romantic preoccupation with inspiration. Indeed, he evokes the Romantic's favorite musical instrument, the Aeolian harp¹⁷¹:

The aspects which the strife as a memory assumes are as manifold as are the moods of involuntary meditation—moods variable, and at times widely at variance. Yielding instinctively, one after another, to feelings not inspired from any one source exclusively, and unmindful, without purposing to be, of consistency, I seem, in most of these verses, to have but placed a harp in a window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings. (Cohen 33)

Here, Melville continues the conceit that the poems “originated in an impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond,” and that Melville consciously did little in either the forming or the arranging of the pieces. Melville depicts writing as something that is “involuntary” and done “instinctively,” a process divorced from the mind (“unmindful”) and from conscious purpose (“without purposing”). In so doing, Melville seems to be more than employing a rhetorical device; he seems to be remarking upon the insubstantiality of the individual. Here, Melville the author seems to all but disappear; the only reference to the self is the meek interjection, “I seem,” and the harp, played upon by the “wayward” and variant breeze, is of course a metaphor for the poet.

Melville draws parallels between the soldiers and poets in several instances. For example, the opening conceit of “The Battle for Mississippi” makes a connection between a soldier's divinely granted victory, and the poetic muse through which the victory is commemorated in song: “So the strong wing to the muse is given / In victory's roar” (Cohen 72).

¹⁷¹ Much later, in *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1885), Melville will re-use the image in a short poem entitled “Aeolian Harp”—here again is the thin line separating creation from destruction.

Melville makes a connection between soldiers and poets, too, in the poem “On Sherman’s Men”:
“They say that Fame her clarion dropped / Because great deeds were done no more.../ But battle
can heroes and bards restore” (Cohen 156). These occasional but deliberate comparisons allow
us, I would argue, to read the many poems in *Battle-Pieces*—albeit mostly peripherally rather
than primarily—as metaphors for poetic creation. Indeed, Melville seems to have in mind at
least in a few instances that part of the ambivalence of war is located in its ability to be a source
of creation as well as destruction. A poem such as “The Cumberland,” for example, attests to the
power of song and “story” to transcend mere physical existence, and values a relationship
between sound and meaning that demonstrates a terrific faith in language and symbol: “Some
names there are of telling sound, / Whose voweled syllables free / Are pledge that they shall ever
live renowned; / Such seems to be / A Frigate’s name (by present glory spanned)— / The
Cumberland” (Cohen 63).

Further, the following poem in the volume, “In the Turret,” provides an interesting
glimpse into one of the ways in which battle, and some of the numerous themes and motifs
associated with it, becomes intricately connected with writing. On the surface level, the poem
celebrates the courage and fortitude of Lieutenant John Worden, captain of the ironclad *Monitor*,
which gave battle to the Confederate’s own ship of iron, the *Merrimac* a day after the *Merrimac*
sank the *Cumberland* (Cohen 222). The poem both offers a low grumbling about the dangers of
technology, and admires Worden’s old-fashioned courage in using technology for noble
purposes.¹⁷² On another level, the poem references poetry-making in a manner that is consistent,
and quite interesting. Consider the poem’s first stanza:

¹⁷² Cohen suggests the poem avoids seeming contradictory because “Worden’s heroism is possible
because he neither misuses nor is used by technology” (224).

climatic image in Book 13 of *The Prelude*, for instance). Too, the final four lines of the stanza, as well as the final three lines of the poem, center around the poet's ability to accurately, or at perhaps adequately, represent the true spirit of nobility described in the actions. To do so, the poem suggests, would require an "interblend[ing]" of "daring" and "calm" on the part of the poet that would equal those qualities on display by the sailor.

The metaphor of diving was an important one, found in Melville's fiction but central to the dual concerns of the poetry. According to Barrett, poetry was for Melville an attempt to both dive and skim—to plumb the depths of philosophy while attending to the aesthetic superficialities of poetry—to combine the head and the heart.¹⁷⁴ In his description, Melville's turn to poetry was a deliberate turn to form as a necessary bounding line for his fluid and feverish imagination. Likewise, Bryan C. Short suggests in his study of the poems in *Mardi* (1849) that Melville's poetics balance between the opposing poles of "a momentary beauty and a pervasive soul," between an aesthetically pleasing arrangement of words and the pursuit of universal truth.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, Short asserts that Melville finds a "synthesis" in the *Mardi* poems that is demonstrable even in his late poetry: "Melville asks an art of aesthetic effects to sanction the transcendental dive."¹⁷⁶

The precise form of this dialectic is a familiar one too, centering on the poet's need for companionship in creation. In examining the poems in *Mardi*, Short recognizes the basic dilemma in Melville between requiring poems to "dive" into the depths of universal truth but

¹⁷⁴ Barrett, "The Differences in Melville's Poetry," 608-9.

¹⁷⁵ Bryan C. Short, "'The Redness of the Rose': The *Mardi* Poems and Melville's Artistic Compromise," *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 15(July 1976): 100.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*: 105-6.

style” line 11 above) and knowledge (“forewarning” line 25). Given this, the final three lines of the stanza can sustain a secondary meaning, not only “forewarning” of the dangers of technology, but also implicating the other “plot-work,” involved—the creative work itself, recalling, perhaps, Victor Frankenstein’s own “monstrous error.”

“In the Turret,” of course, also continues another consistent theme in *Battle-Pieces*, presenting a dualism that can take many variations in the poems: modernity vs. classicism, new vs. old-fashioned, technology vs. tradition. And in many of these cases, like the sentimental poem “The Stone Fleet,” Melville is not valuing the old and the traditional for its own sake but rather for what it has come to mean, or symbolize. In that respect, Melville’s esteem for tradition and romanticizing the past perhaps provides another clue as to Melville’s valuation of poetry.

“In the Turret” places the emphasis on the strangeness and potential danger of the new, whereas commonly, as it is in the following poem, “The Temeraire,” the poem emphasizes the benefits of the old. In apostrophizing the legendary ship of the line—the embodiment of the “poetic ideal,” according to Melville’s note (Cohen 225)—the poem adopts a nostalgic yet resigned tone, mourning the passing of the old while yet distrustful of the new:

The rivets clinch the iron-clads,
Men learn a deadlier lore;
But Fame has nailed your battle-flags—
Your ghost it sails before:
O, the navies old and oaken,
O, the Temeraire no more! (Cohen 69)

The poem is not simply a dirge for an old ship, however; it grieves what the ship represented, the pomp and implied nobility of the traditionally associated with war:

The gloomy hulls, in armor grim,
Like clouds o'er moors have met,
And prove that oak, and iron, and man
Are tough in fibre yet.

But Splendors wane. The sea-fight yields 5
No front of old display;
The garniture, emblazonment,
And heraldry all decay. (Cohen 68)

The “gloomy” and “grim” facades of the new iron maidens, though retaining the grit of battle, lack the luster of the “old display.” Here, too, the poetic form fits the subject nicely: Melville maintains a traditional ballad style, until the extra syllable of the anapest in line 8 disrupts the smooth rhythmic pattern, and puts into action the line’s literal meaning.

Following the opening two quatrains, the regularity of the meter breaks down, and it is fitting, too, of course, that a poem celebrating the *HMS Temeraire* should be, like most of Melville’s poetry in the volume, irregular in form and meter, both given the name of the ship’s literal meaning in French, and given that what Melville seems to value most in the legendary ship is its very quality of recklessness: “Lunging out her lightnings” (line 15), “Impulsive in the van” (line 22). Indeed, the difference between the *Temeraire* here, and the *Monitor* in the following poem, recalls the tension found throughout the volume between passion and order, and the (sometimes contradictory) valuation of both.

Immediately following “The Temeraire” and two poems after “In the Turret” is another poem on the subject of the *Monitor*, one that expressly makes a connection between the creative

action of the artist and the destructive tendency of war. In “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Fight,” the poem begins by suggesting that there must be a relationship between the poem and the subject it describes:

Plain be the phrase, yet apt the verse,
More ponderous than nimble;
For since grimed War here laid aside
His Orient pomp, ’twould ill befit
Overmuch to ply 5
The rhyme’s barbaric cymbal. (Cohen 69)

In one sense, what Melville expresses here recalls Wordsworth’s claim to use “a selection of language really used by men,” in that both recognize the propriety of having form correlate with subject: since war has evolved into a technological affair devoid of “barbaric” (i.e., lacking reason) “pomp,” the poem should reflect that change.¹⁷⁸ And, it is true, the poem denies itself the advantage of rhyme, aside from the rhyme at the second and sixth lines of each stanza. The poem is stripped too of the soothing pattern of predictable meter, which, on the surface at least, works to support the poem’s claim to “plain mechanic power” (line 9). However, the lack of precision in meter seems to deny the poem the very quality that it claims to “hail” in the *Monitor’s* battle with the *Merrimack*: “No passion; all went by crank, / Pivot, and screw, / And calculations of caloric” (Cohen 70). The apparent contradiction highlights the tension throughout the pieces between passion and “calm” reason; or rather, this poem, especially in

¹⁷⁸ Ironically, one criticism of Melville’s verse is again an echo of Wordsworth; his use of archaic words and inversions is seen as “traditional” and “imitative,” precisely the charge that Wordsworth strove (not wholly successfully) to avoid in his own poetry. Mathieu, ““Plain Mechanic Power”: Melville’s Earliest Poems, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War*,” 115.

conjunction with the previous two poems reflecting upon the *Monitor's* titanic clash, demonstrates the union of both lawless passion and calm calculation, in battle and in poetry as well.

In fact, “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Fight” seems to be suggesting, in part, that poetry cannot happen without the proper blending of both passion and reason; this poem, claiming to represent a thing of uninspired work—it belongs “Among the trades and artisans” (line 12)—cannot accurately convey, by itself, the true sense of the story behind the words:

Needless to dwell; the story’s known.

The ringing of those plates on plates

Still ringeth round the world—

The clangor of the blacksmith’s fray.

The anvil-din

Resounds this message from the Fates: (Cohen 71)

Interestingly, although the poem denies itself the responsibility of telling the story, it suggests that the story is being sung by the “clangor” of the “anvil-din,” implying that in the cacophony of the “blacksmith’s fray” lies the truth of the story, just as, in the final line of “In the Turret,” it is the mindless work of the “wind and wave that keep the rites of glory” (line 44). In the two poems, the phrases “rites of glory” and “Resounds this message from the Fates” reveal the special ability some types of work—the work of nature, and the work of some forms of labor—have in the recognition and revelation of truth. In his short story, “The Artist of the Beautiful,” Nathaniel Hawthorne makes a distinction between the mechanical yet inspired work of the Artist of the Beautiful and the mere labor of the blacksmith; here, I think Melville is touching upon a similar distinction between the careful work of the poet that nonetheless, because infused with

spirit, lives, and the “plain mechanic power” that produces nothing but the destruction inherent in war: “War yet shall be, but warriors / Are now but operatives; War’s made / Less grand than Peace, / And a single runs through lace and feather.”

Further, Melville seems to be at least wary of the impulse that seems to guide both poets and soldiers when, in passion, it overruns. In one of the many poems playing upon a theme of duality, “Apathy and Enthusiasm,” Melville, early in the collection, warns of the likelihood of misreading “enthusiasm” for inspiration. In “Misgivings,” Melville speaks of nature’s omens as easily discernible (“A child may read the moody brow / Of yon black mountain lone”), but here in “Apathy and Enthusiasm” Melville suggests that such reading is more difficult. Like the title, the poem is divided into the two parts; the first, representing apathy, paints an image of a winter landscape. With words and phrases such as “cold,” “white and dead,” “terror dumb with stupor,” “sheet of lead,” “horror of the calm,” “paralysis of arm,” and “hollowness and dearth,” the poem establishes nature as impersonal, cold, indifferent, and lacking meaning. Yet the second stanza is dominated by metaphors of springtime of resurrection, borrowing heavily from Easter terminology to suggest not only a reawakened nature but more precisely divinely sanctioned hope. Yet the poem’s final six lines warns against the inclination of the young, enthusiastic men to interpret these natural signs as endorsing the coming war. Indeed, the final couplet (which Hennig Cohen suggests carries the weight of prophecy, with “old saw” suggesting foresee, following so closely upon “foreboding,”) contrasts the “elders”—experience, wisdom, collected thought—with the “striplings”—inexperience, rashness, enthusiasm. The poem may be suggesting that nature cannot be reliably interpreted, as suggested in *Pierre*, but it seems primarily to be suggesting that mankind can too easily mistake its own ardor (enthusiasm) for

something like inspiration.¹⁷⁹ Many poems also present an indifferent nature,¹⁸⁰ a theme carried over in *John Marr*; but the truth is that nature, operating upon laws, inhabits another plane from passionate man, who make the mistake of looking on nature for sympathy. For instance, “Malvern Hill” tells that nature, while heedful of both human bravery and tragedy, nonetheless operates according to laws of necessity (“must”), not the varying circumstances of mankind:

We elms of Malvern Hill

Remember every thing;

But sap the twig will fill:

Wag the world how it will,

Leaves must be green in Spring. (Cohen 76)

It is this very detachment from mankind, combined with mankind’s egocentric expectation that nature must be a reflection of itself, that puzzles Ishmael and infuriates Ahab in *Moby-Dick*. Mankind, Melville warns, often makes the mistake of attempting to justify its subjective and contingent actions by immutable laws of nature.

In fact, the way that each cause can be so readily justified and rationalized in the human minds—which, of course, parallels the way in which each side in the long, public fight over the morality of slavery invoked the authority of the Bible as being on their side—possibly resonated with Melville’s questioning of poetic inspiration. But that is not, of course, to suggest that Melville is completely against passion throughout the volume. The poem that follows “Apathy and Enthusiasm,” “The March into Virginia” continues the theme of youthful ardor, but with an

¹⁷⁹ Several other poems in the volume continue this theme, often associating “youth” with “passion,” and warning of its potential abuse; see for example “Ball’s Bluff,” “Donelson,” “The Housetop,” “On the Slain Collegians,” “America,” and “Commemorative of a Naval Victory.”

¹⁸⁰ For example, see “Misgivings,” “The Conflict of Convictions,” “Donelson,” “Shiloh,” “The Battle for Mississippi,” “Look-out Mountain,” “The Stone Fleet,” and “Running the Batteries,” among others.

important addition; here, Melville recognizes that “ignorant, impulsive” youth is not only a necessary stage of development (“Stimulants to the power mature”), but also necessary for the larger plans of “fate.” Also, as I will discuss more fully below when talking about “At the Cannon’s Mouth,” Melville distinguishes between different types of passion in his poems.

Some of these poem’s that discuss “passion” bring in for balance its opposite, “law.” And in the poem “Dupont’s Round Fight,” Melville comments directly on the similarities between battle and poetry by paralleling mathematical and social law with principles of poetry. Cohen argues, “The poem is one of several which concerns Melville’s literary theory and philosophical assumptions on which it is based....Melville sees a fundamental unity of esthetics (“Art whose aim is sure”) and nature (“stars divine”), both subject to a like discipline” (217). The poem, which concerns a Union naval victory achieved with mathematical coordination and precise execution, makes the comparison between war and art by suggesting that each is governed by regular and unavoidable laws. It is possible that Melville makes the connection by comparing each to a third variable—nature—suggesting that both war and poetry derive organically (“Evolving”) from nature.

Moreover, this poem points to the importance in the volume of both Law and Right. Law is often, but not always, the counterpoint of passion. The joint regularity and chaos of war must have appealed to Melville’s sensibility and awareness of duality, and the sea, his favorite symbol, crops up occasionally in the poems of battle and will come to be the dominant image in *John Marr*.¹⁸¹ Likewise, Melville’s overemphasis of the legal and moral superiority of the

¹⁸¹ For example, consider the last stanza in “Commemorative of a Naval Victory,” with its memorable final image (“Elate he never can be; / He feels that spirits which glad had hailed his worth, / Sleep in oblivion.— The shark / Glides white through the phosphorous sea” (Cohen 160). Or, consider the opening stanza to “The Battle for the Bay,” which suggests that the “mysterious seas” have acted on the “noble hearts” of man “And chastened them to aptness for / Devotion and deeds of war” (106).

Federal cause—Right versus Wrong¹⁸²—is predictable, but, considering Melville’s larger preoccupation with the complex nature of humanity, such a reading seems incomplete. But when we consider Melville’s overriding concern with reconciliation and reunification, it becomes clear that Melville is not writing poetry about Right *versus* Wrong, but more correctly about right *and* wrong existing simultaneously and side-by-side within the larger political entity.

For example, consider the poem “Inscription.” Meant to stand in place of grave markers for Union soldiers, the poem begins:

Let none misgive we died amiss
When here we strove in furious fight;
Furious it was; nathless was this
Better than tranquil plight,
And tame surrender of the Cause
Hallowed by hearts and by the laws. (Cohen 149)

The poem, speaking on behalf of the Union soldiers, avowals that it was not unbridled passion that led them to war, but rather they yielded to a passionate fight only on behalf of cause recognized both by the heart and “the laws.” Further, while in Melville’s writing calmness is often valued as an outward marker of reason, here it is demonstrated that tranquility alone is not valued when it is at the expense of a greater “Cause.” In other words, while passion must always be checked by society (and a sense of cultural tradition is certainly implied in the phrase “Cause /

¹⁸² Consider, for example, “The Armies of the Wilderness”: “Ah, forward kin! so brave amiss— / The zealots of the Wrong.” (95); or “Look-out Mountain”: “The clouds resound the clangor, / Of the war of Wrong and Right.” (91); or “The Fall of Richmond”: “But God is in Heaven, and Grant in the Town, / And Right through might is Law, / God’s way adore,” (125) among others.

Hallowed by hearts”) and by reason (“laws”), it is also true that reason must at times give way to passion.

A later poem brings both ideas previously discussed—the use of passion and of poetry in the *Battle-Pieces*—together. “At the Cannon’s Mouth” records the selfless bravery of twenty-one year-old Lt. William Cushing, who led a volunteer crew of fifteen men in a successful effort to sink the Confederate war ship *Albamarle* by ramming it with a torpedo attached to the spar of their boat. In the first part, the poem marvels at not only Cushing’s “martyr-passion,” but also at his near-miraculous survival. This poem, like several others, attributes to “youth” an over-zealousness (“mad dash at death”) that is certainly inexplicable yet still powerfully alluring. The poem maintains a somewhat critical description of Cushing and his actions. The reference to Cushing as a “Boy” recalls earlier unfavorable comparisons between rash, zealous youth and calm, collected age. Also, phrases such as “Disdain the Paradise” and “Fling disrespect on life,” point, at least on one hand, to a critical interpretation of such imprudence that chooses battle (Adonis’s boar hunt) over the “beauty” of life. Further, the term “imps” in the phrase “What imps these eagles then,” in addition to the double-duty that Cohen calls attention to (meaning both “boys” as a noun, and, as a verb used in falconry, referring to feathers that contribute to a powerful flight), can also, in the context, carry the suggestion of “impious” (“proud way”; “unblest”).

Yet, at the same time that the poem offers a rough criticism of youthful passion, it clearly also honors, and even valorizes the action of the poem. The poem achieves this mostly by reestablishing, in the final six or eight lines of the poem, another important motif in the collection—the connection between soldiers and poets. Here, the transition begins in lines 23-5: “What imps these eagles then, that they / Fling disrespect on life by that proud way / In which

they soar above our lower clay.” Despite the negative logic of the verb phrase “Fling disrespect on life by that proud way,” the image of an eagle soaring above the “lower clay” suggests transcendence, and perhaps even divine blessing—particularly given the association of the eagle with the Union army (see “The Eagle of the Blue”). This more positive reading is perhaps enhanced by the lack of a question mark, which enables the reader to hear amazement (“wonderment”) in place of criticism. But the thrust of the change comes in lines 26-31, which invokes the comparison between soldiers and poets: “In Cushing’s eager deed was shown / A spirit which brave poets own— / The scorn of life which earns life crown.” Here, we get the sense that what bonds the soldier and the poet has something to do with an abandonment of self in favor of something larger, here characterized as a guiding “spirit” that urges the soldier / poet to “scorn” the materialistic aspects of life in favor of something more profound (“life’s crown”). In this way, we can perhaps show what separates this example of youthful enthusiasm from other examples throughout the volume—in this instance, the soldier’s actions represent a complete sacrificing of self to a larger cause, where elsewhere, youthful ardor is shown as the ignorant pursuit of idealized glory. Compare to “The March into Virginia”:

Into that leafy neighborhood
In Bacchic glee they file toward Fate,
Moloch’s uninitiate;
Expectancy, and glad surmise
Of battle’s unknown mysteries.
All they feel is this: ’tis glory,
A rapture sharp, though transitory,
Yet lasting in belauled story.

So they gaily go to fight,
Chatting left and laughing right.

Here, the situation of the youthful soldiers is importantly reversed from Cushing's. The young soldiers above are quitting the known comforts of life (reflected in the "Bacchic glee" which characterizes their march) for the unknown, and potentially better, "mysteries" of war and expected "glory," which suggests that they are naïve ("Moloch's uninitiated") and foolhardy. On the contrary, Cushing is rushing from the as-yet untasted, greater "mysteries" of life for (what seems to be) certain doom, making his selflessness better deserving of the reward (in this case, the reward is, ironically, life).

Cohen rightly calls attention to the irony of lines 28-9, "A spirit which brave poets own— / That scorn of life which earns life's crown," by suggesting, "Only those prepared to reject without certainty of reward the good things which life offers can hope to obtain its greatest gift" (Cohen 257). In the context of this poem, especially with its references to "martyr-passion," "crown," and "nativity," one cannot help but be reminded by Cohen's statement of Jesus' promise in Luke 17:33, "Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it." Such a comparison only more strongly emphasizes the interpretation that the yielding of self to a larger impulse or cause is a trait of all "brave poets"; however, such selfless nobility is not, as Melville wholeheartedly knows, always recognized or justly rewarded—after all, for every Cushing there are many unknown, unnamed dead.

The nature of battle itself is necessarily complex, needing for success both cool thinking in both tactical and strategic terms, and the passion requisite to charge, and to seize advantages. These, as demonstrated in "Art," are the tools of the poet as well. It is perhaps fitting, then, that one of the poems that perhaps demonstrates the reconciliation of contradictory forces, "Shiloh,"

also receives the most attention as one of the most aesthetically pleasing poems in the volume. Perhaps, too, it deserves recognition not only for its moving use of imagery, or for its memorable use of rhythm and rhyme, but also because it encapsulates in nineteen pleasing lines one of the most central and consistent themes of the volume—the tragic fate of divided humanity, and the necessity (but difficulty) of reconciliation or unification. The poem employs imagery from both nature and religion—often the sources of inspiration or assurance for humanity—in order to demonstrate the isolation separateness or division creates:

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over the field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh—
Over the field where April rain 5
Solaced the parched ones stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
Around the church at Shiloh—
The church so lone, the log-built one, 10
That echoed to many a parting groan
And natural prayer
Of dying foeman mingled there—
Foeman at morn, but friends at eve—
Fame or country least their care: 15
(What like a bullet can undeceive!)

But now they lie low,
While over them the swallows skim
And all is hushed at Shiloh. (Cohen 71-2)

Here, at first glance, both nature (“the swallows”) and the church seem, if not indifferent to the dying soldiers, at least incapable of providing comfort; certainly the low-flying swallows—which anticipate “The Haglets” in *John Marr*—can do no more than circle (demonstrated both by their “wheeling” and by the cyclical form of the poem, which both begins and ends with the encircling swallows), and the church can only throw back the cries and “groan[s]” of the soon-departed (another form of circling). And yet, “solace” is to be found, in the quenching “April rain,” a traditional poetic image of renewal or rebirth. All together, then, the consistent image of the circle, the renewing rain, and the traditional association of both the swallow and the church with redemption or rebirth¹⁸³ combine to make the hush at Shiloh a quiet that is pregnant with meaning or expectation. This atmosphere, then, perfectly reflects the action of the poem—the deathbed reconciliation of the soldiers on the dying field. But there is no doubt that such a resolution comes at a cost, and the poem mourns the foolish things that divide mankind (“fame”; “country”).

“Shiloh” also anticipates another poem later in the volume, called “Magnanimity Baffled,” which ponders the possibility of reunification following the war. In this brief poem, a victorious soldier attempts to shake hands with a former enemy, who lies on a cot facing away from him. After repeated attempts to make peace and make light of former disagreements, the victorious soldier, stubbornly persistent, forcefully grabs the hand of the other soldier only to

¹⁸³ Coehn reports in his notes, “From his acquaintance with Renaissance painting, Melville may have known that the swallow appears as a symbol of the Incarnation in Annunciation and Nativity scenes. But more pertinent is the association with the Resurrection because of the belief that the swallow hibernated in the mud, from which it was reborn each spring” (229).

discover that he is dead. The messages of such a simple poem are surprisingly complex. First, the poem negates “honor” as a reason for war because it comes at too high a price. But secondly, the poem reproduces the pattern by which pride, stubborn and unyielding, leads to violent action.

Another of the most familiar, because most anthologized, poems from *Battle-Pieces*, continues the exploration of the interaction of reason (law) and passion in human society. “The Housetop” presents the contradiction between the Protestant ethic, which takes as its center the innate depravity of mankind, and the democratic ideal, which hinges on the natural goodness of the people (Cohen 90). But more than that, the poem suggests that laws and codes, religious and secular, are attempts to restrain the inborn animalistic passions of mankind:

All civil charms

And priestly spells which late held hearts in awe—

Fear-bound, subjected to a better sway

Than sway of self; these like a dream dissolve,

And man rebounds whole æons back in nature. (Cohen 89)

Here, the tension is between the civil and the natural, or reason (laws) and passion.

Just two poems later in the volume, however, “Chattanooga” demonstrates how passion, when balanced with the calming influence of reason, can be (quite literally) uplifting rather than debasing. The opening stanza brings both ends of the spectrum into play:

A kindling impulse seized the host

Inspired by heaven’s elastic air,

Their hearts outran their General’s plan,

Though Grant commanded there—

Grant, who without reserve can dare;

And, "Well, go on and do your will,"

He said, and measured the mountain then:

So master-riders fling the rein—

But you must know your men. (Cohen 91)

Here, as in the "The Temeraire," impulse is recognized as positive in that it is akin to instinct; certainly here the soldier's actions are guided, or at least confirmed, by nature ("Inspired by heaven's elastic air"). In an author's note to the poem, Melville expands upon this theme:

Although the month was November, the day was in character an October one—
cool, clear, bright, intoxicatingly invigorating; one of those days peculiar to the
ripest hours of our American autumn. This weather must have had much to do
with the spontaneous enthusiasm which seized the troops... (Cohen 242-3)

In addition to being inspired by "heaven's elastic air," the soldier's, too, are buttressed by the calming demeanor of Grant, who "measured" not only "the mountain," but the character and quality of his men, as well ("So master-riders fling the rein—/ But you must know your men"). In other words, Grant surveyed the scene, reflected upon his experience and knowledge of his soldiers, and then the man "who without reserve [could] dare," took a calculated risk. The character of Grant as here described incorporates both the tendency to recklessness and an appropriate cautiousness, then—and his dual character is further indicated in the following image of the general: "Grant stood on cliffs whence all was plain, / And smoked as one who feels no cares; / But mastered nervousness intense / Alone such calmness wears" (lines 15-18). In other words, Grant is able to appear calm because he is not; and his men are able to succeed in their daring "impulse," partly, because it was "measured."

Moreover, the fact that the soldiers seem, at least partially, to be moved or motivated by something outside of themselves—that is, not vain thoughts of individual glory, or trite expressions of patriotism—makes even the deaths of those who fell a victory:

But some who gained the envied Alp,
And—eager, ardent, earnest there—
Dropped into Death’s wide-open arms,
Quelled on the wing like eagles struck in air—
Forever they slumber young and fair,
The smile upon them as they died;
Their end attained, that end a height:
Life was to these a dream fulfilled,
And death a starry night. (93-4)

In this regard, the ending to “Chattanooga,” which justifies and even valorizes the soldiers’ deaths, seems to contradict other pieces in the volume—such as “Shiloh,” for example—in which the soldier’s life is esteemed higher than causes such as “fame or country.” The distinction is, of course, the reason for their deaths. Here, it is presented as if in the headlong charge up the mountain, the mountain itself—“height”—is the goal. That is because the mountain is not simply another piece of land being fought over by squabbling men, but rather the symbol of something more—the “envied Alp” of poetic lore. In other words, the soldier’s “eager, ardent, earnest” struggle is an attempt at transcendence, an effort to break the plain of a higher realm (“heaven’s elastic air”), which inspires the heart of the “host” of men to strive for it. And this is important, too—that it is not an individual’s attempt at single glory, but a unified and

joint “host” acting in communion, with each other and with nature, in a manner that is carefree.¹⁸⁴

And these very themes of harmony within a community, and with nature, become the dominant subjects of Melville’s second volume of poetry, *John Marr and Other Sailors, With Some Sea Pieces*. The title poem from that collection displays this idea well. Too, “John Marr,” consisting of a prose introduction and a verse piece, reflects many Wordsworthian themes. For example, the exceptional longing for lost companions touches upon an element found in Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems.¹⁸⁵ And, like many Romantic heroes, including Ahab, John Marr possesses exceptional sensitivity. But where Ahab’s awareness of the deeper mysteries of nature drives him apart from humanity, John Marr’s own exceptionality draws him closer to his kin:

With an honest stillness in his general mien—swarthy and black-browed, with eyes that could soften or flash, but never harden, yet disclosing at times a melancholy depth—this kinless man had affections which, once placed, not readily could be dislodged or resigned to a substituted object.¹⁸⁶ (277-8)

The sense of loyalty is related to the “honest stillness in his general mien”—both imply an artlessness that admits of no feigned expression or emotion; however, neither quality is especially rare. Rather, John Marr is exceptional, perhaps, partly for the “melancholy depth” which his expression sometimes achieves, suggesting an Ahab-like awareness of the darker side

¹⁸⁴ In this manner, these men are contrasted with the image of Grant, who traces the progress of his men from afar: “While in solicitude his back / Heaps slowly to a hump” (lines 44-5). These lines, naturally, recall Ahab: “He heaps me.”

¹⁸⁵ While true to some extent in “John Marr,” I think this connection is especially noticeable in “Monody,” a short work later in the collection.

¹⁸⁶ Douglas Robillard, ed. *The Poems of Herman Melville* (Kent, Oh: Kent State University Press, 2000), 277-8. Further references will be cited parenthetically in text, as JM.

of nature or humanity; but mostly he is exceptional for his unique—here, rendered ironically as “kinless”—attachment to humanity. This “swarthy” man is, in one sense, firmly of the earth, and attached to his earthly connections.

But tragically, John Marr is literally “kinless” in that the close companionship for which he so desperately yearns is denied him; his young wife and child die from sickness, and, circumstances, with “nobody to blame,” prevent John Marr from reestablishing the close connection to human beings which has been stripped from him (JM 278).

Furthermore, in several subtle ways, the sea, or perhaps more to the point, the ship on the sea, comes to represent both joy and companionship, suggesting, I argue, that the two are inextricably linked for Melville. Upon the death of his wife, John Marr seeks to substitute for his lost connection “by cultivating social relations yet nearer than before with a people whose lot he purposes sharing to the end” (JM 278)—that is, for John Marr a relationship with a people that is forged through a common purpose, a common destination,¹⁸⁷ can supersede even that God-provided closeness offered to man by woman. However, John Marr is refused his sought-after connection by the people because, despite vowing to share their future—to be in the same boat with them, to speak colloquially but to the point for Marr—he does not share their past:

But the past of John Marr was not the past of these pioneers. Their hands had rested on the plow-tail, his upon the ship’s helm. They knew but their own kind and their own usages; to him had been revealed something of the checkered globe. So limited unavoidably was the mental reach, and by consequence the range of sympathy, in this particularly band of domestic emigrants, hereditary tillers of the soil, that the ocean, but a hearsay to their fathers, had now through yet deeper

¹⁸⁷ This fits W.H. Auden’s definition of a “community,” as opposed to “society,” that I cited in an earlier chapter. Auden, *The Enchaféd Flood, or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea*.

inland removal become to themselves little more than a rumor traditional and vague. (JM 278)

They cannot sympathize with Marr, in part, because they were denied the revelations of the sea; their short “mental reach” parallels their lack of physical movement, and their lack of a sense of connection to their fellow beings (“limited...range of sympathy”) follows their self-imposed physical isolation. What’s more, their inability to sympathize or engage with anything beyond their immediate experience is reflected in their complete lack of joy; they wanted, we are told, “geniality, the flower of life springing from some sense of joy in it” (JM 279). In other words, the farmers, like Ahab, lack “the low, enjoying power,” without being offset by possessing Ahab’s or Marr’s sensitivity. Further, for both Ahab and the tillers, their inability to find joy in life relates, to some extent, to some deficiency in fraternity, since specifically here and suggested other where, joy is connected to “geniality,” implying a close connection to other humans.

Furthermore, to supply this lost quality of joy, John Marr turns to the sea, which is in itself linked with idea of storytelling: when Marr seeks to bring joy to an otherwise somber holiday, he “naturally enough would slide into some marine story or picture, but would soon recoil upon himself and be silent, finding no encouragement to proceed” (JM 279). And when driven by the apathy of the townspeople to seek companionship, or at least solace, elsewhere, he finds none in the bleak, un-stirring “Nature” of the prairie, which strikes Marr as a lifeless, depthless, barren sea:

Blank stillness would for hours reign unbroken on this prairie. “It is the bed of a dried-up sea,” said the companionless sailor—no geologist—to himself, musing at twilight upon the fixed undulations of that immense alluvial expanse bounded

only by the horizon, and missing there the stir that, to alert eyes and ears,
animates at all times the apparent solitudes of the deep. (JM 280)

Here, and at certain moments that Jonathan Hall traces in *Pierre*,¹⁸⁸ Melville's protagonist makes a Wordsworthian turn to nature only to be met with apparent indifference; in searching for an answering response from nature on the prairie, Marr greets instead seeming lifelessness, and Melville chooses words to emphasize the lack of movement: "stillness," "unbroken," and "fixed." What Marr misses, clearly, is the liveliness, the activity of the sea, the omnipresent sense, ascertainable to those who are "alert," of things hidden; he finds the "blank stillness" of the prairie a poor substitute for this restless sea, which even at its stillest contains an ungraspable depth that belies the "apparent solitudes." It seems apparent, then, that nature, in the undulations of the sea, does in fact correspond with, and perhaps even elicits, a quickening of the sailor's mind, so that Marr, although "companionless" on the prairie, is never lonely on the sea.

But what is more, even though Marr finds nothing on the prairie directly responsive to his "musing at twilight," he does find for an answer an echo of the sea—indeed, as a shell contains within itself the memory of the ocean, Marr carries the sea within himself, and recognizes it (projects it?) even in the prairie: "But a scene quite at variance with one's antecedents may yet prove suggestive of them. Hooped round by a level rim, the prairie was to John Marr a reminder of the ocean" (JM 280). Certainly there is something like the unpeopled ocean in the as-yet uninhabited prairie, and Marr sees in the pathless ways, requiring "navigation" by the stars, and in the occasional sighting of a distant wagon like a "sail at sea," the memory of his past life.

¹⁸⁸ Hall, "The Non-Correspondent Breeze: Melville's Rewriting of Wordsworth in *Pierre*." Here, Hall argues that Melville criticizes the Wordsworthian "attempt to root his sense of poetic mission in the ongoing dialogue between a gently whispering Nature and his attentively reverential self" (2) by denying Nature's participation in the poetic process.

The move, then, is distinctly reminiscent of Wordsworth; just as the English poet rejoices in the recollection of the of the field of dancing daffodils, Marr seeks for joy in recalling the dancing waves, with the added qualification that, for Marr, companions are necessary to feel joy, as if joy, like love, must be shared to be truly felt.¹⁸⁹ And, indeed, the sea for Marr implies companionship, for who is ever alone upon the sea? Indeed, Melville indicates that such a condition, if ever achieved, would be enough to drive man mad—witness poor Pip. Moreover, while it is clear that Marr “misses” something in the prairie, something that inspires the soul, yet perhaps it is not meaningless that it is only on the prairie, where the ocean is to all others “little more than rumor traditional and vague” and to Marr a memory that his inspiration turns to creation. After all, both the narrators of *Moby-Dick* and *White Jacket* suggests that the sea is no place for philosophical reflection or poetic composition¹⁹⁰; both Ishmael and Marr need time and reflection to create.

And this is not the only way in which “John Marr” recalls Wordsworth. I suggest that Marr’s vision of companions, spurred by his “imaginative heart,” is reminiscent of the Boy of Winander episode in *The Prelude* as far as Marr is unable ultimately to determine whether the images, like the “echoes loud, redoubled and redoubled” in Wordsworth, originated from himself, or were perceived from without. Indeed, Marr’s relationship with his visionary shipmates reflects the complex Romantic formulation of creation which I am tracing: we are told

¹⁸⁹ Wordsworth’s joy is clearly felt in conjunction with his implied readership.

¹⁹⁰ In *Moby-Dick*, see Ishmael’s warnings against philosophizing on a whale ship in “The Mast-Head” and “The Try-Works”; in *White-Jacket*, the narrator suggests in the chapter “The Pursuit of Poetry Under Difficulties,” “As may readily be imagined, the business of writing verse is a very different thing on the gun-deck of a frigate, from what the gentle and sequestered Wordsworth found it at placid Rydal Mount in Westmoreland. In a frigate, you cannot sit down and meander off your sonnets, when the full heart prompts; but only, when more important duties permit: such as bracing round the yards, or reefing top-sails fore and aft.”

that it is Marr's "growing sense of his environment" which "threw him more and more upon retrospective musings" that ultimately gave shape and "a dim semblance of mute life" to "his spiritual companions," the "phantoms" of his former shipmates (JM 282). Here, the gradual filling out of Marr's visions into lifelike forms involves the inter-working of "environment" and "retrospective musings," so that Marr is both responding to nature and to memory.

The curious subject matter of "John Marr" itself bears resemblance to a Wordsworthian theme; indeed, the embodiment of "phantoms" in visible form recalls an early moment from *The Prelude* in which the poet discusses his desire to create:

But speedily an earnest longing rose
To brace myself to some determined aim,
Reading or thinking, either to lay up
New stores, or rescue from decay the old
By timely interference: and therewith
Came hopes still higher, that with outward life
I might endue some airy phantasies
That had been floating loose about for years,
And to such beings temperately deal forth
The many feelings that oppressed my heart. (1850, Book I, 114-23)

I provide the lines from the 1850 edition because that would have been the only edition available to Melville during his lifetime; however, for the sake of comparison only, the lines from the 1805-6 version are even more striking:

I had hopes
Still higher, that with a frame of outward life

I might endue, might fix in a visible home
Some portion of those phantoms of conceit
That had been floating loose about so long,
And to such beings temperately deal forth

The many feelings that oppressed my heart. (1805-6, Book I, 127-33).

By providing Wordsworth as a comparison to “John Marr,” it is easier to recognize Marr as a poet figure, able to create not only a few lines of verse but also to “fix in a visible home / Some portion of those phantoms of conceit” which has long been dwelling on his mind. Furthermore, by giving “frame” to his “subjects of meditation,” Marr provides for the “reunion” for “which [his] imaginative heart passionately yearns,” allowing him the opportunity to “get into verbal communion with them” (JM 267)—or, to borrow Wordsworth’s terms, it enables him to “deal forth / the many feelings that oppressed [his] heart.”

But in discussing “John Marr” in relation to Wordsworth, there are differences to consider. Although Wordsworth, in the “Excursion” and in other poems, recognizes that humans are by nature social creatures who need to be functioning members of a society to exist fully, Wordsworth nonetheless values independence and solitary communion with nature in a way absent from “John Marr.” Marr is successful, after all, at giving form to his thoughts; but it is not enough that his memories are made visible, when he longs to hear them audible. “A dim semblance of mute life” is a poor substitute for the give-and-take of true companionship, and “John Marr” emphasizes the necessity of the artist—of all human beings—to work in “communion” with others. By returning briefly to Wordsworth’s Boy of Winander episode, it is again possible to trace this distinction: for Wordsworth, while the boy could derive joy from the “concourse wild / Of jocund din” that he would sometimes elicit from Nature, it was only the

moments of “silence,” when his efforts were seemingly frustrated, that he was put into true communication with Nature:

[I]n that silence while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind.... (1850, Book V, 381-5)

For Wordsworth, then, “silence” is not truly silence, but rather the precursor to communion with nature. However, Marr longs for something missing or unprovided.

Consider also the following prose introduction to the verse lines composed by John Marr: “He invokes these visionary ones,—striving, as it were, to get into verbal communion with them, or, under yet stronger illusion, reproaching them for their silence:—“ (282). This interestingly worded introduction parallels a traditional call to the muse—another type of “invoking”—in the sense that the poet is “striving” for the means of achieving communication, with the notable difference that, whereas a poet usually calls upon the muse to aid his own work, here Marr would hear the words of others. Indeed, the adjective “visionary” takes on an interesting double-meaning, implying perhaps both that the sailors are like visions but also visionaries, possessing or seeming to possess an ability to see that is unmatched but longed for by the poet, John Marr (“Do yet your gangway lanterns, streaming, / Vainly strive to pierce below, / When, tilted from the slant plank gleaming, / A brother you see to darkness go?”) (JM 283-4). This reading brings to mind a similar moment in *Moby-Dick*, in which Ahab calls upon the severed head of a sperm whale to reveal its secrets from beneath the waters (“The Sphinx”); both Captain Ahab and John Marr fail in their attempts to entice speech from their hearers. Yet, to go back to an earlier point,

John Marr's striving is distinct from Ahab's monomaniacal quest because Marr "yearns" not for anything abstract or intangible, such as knowledge or vengeance, but for companionship.

In general, then, Melville's poetry attempts to represent mankind as a contrary species striving between opposing forces. Unsurprisingly, most critical engagements with Melville's poetic aestheticism address some notion of the dialectics at work in Melville's art. Juana Celia Djelal discusses Melville's use of the chiasmus in his poetry to reflect "a seeming self-contradiction that finds resolution in a truth that reconciles conflicting opposites" without reaching "judgments" or "conclusions": "the tension that adheres in the interpenetration of contraries forgoes antithetical relationships."¹⁹¹ Furthermore, Djelal reminds us that while "Melville's passion for analysis yearns for a synthesizing power arrived at through imagination," synthesis "does not necessarily imply harmony or resolution."¹⁹² In examining *John Marr and Other Sailors*, Bryan C. Short finds that Melville's central concern with "suspension" and "in-between" spaces goes hand-in-hand with his theory of art as demonstrated throughout his writings and reinforced in *John Marr*: "Melville delights in situating meaning in an in-between situation which may be out of touch with either extreme...blend the two...or involve a passage from one to the other."¹⁹³ And Agnes D. Cannon finds all of the Romantic parallels that I have been examining, concluding that Melville's poetics, as revealed in his writing and his reading, can be summed up in these several traits: a sensitivity, especially to nature; a "deep love for humanity" balanced by a "probing intellect"; a commitment to truth and artistic integrity; the

¹⁹¹ Juana Celia Djelal, "All in All: Melville's Poetics of Unity," *ESQ* 41(1995): 226.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*: 220.

¹⁹³ Short, "'The Redness of the Rose': The *Mardi* Poems and Melville's Artistic Compromise," 33.

need for a balance between fellowship and solitude; and a faith in the power and efficacy of poetic utterance.¹⁹⁴

While all of these characteristics which Cannon suggests constitute Melville's poetics are central to Wordsworth's art as well, in my project, I am interested in discussing primarily how Melville's art reflects two Wordsworthian concerns. In describing the central momentum in *Battle-Pieces* as toward the reunification or conflation of disparate or competing elements, I have been tracing the first of these concerns—the paradoxical alignment of competing forces or tensions in poetic creation. The collection of poems reflects this by attempting to present in the perusal of separate and distinct "Aspects" a whole picture of the human condition. Furthermore, *Battle-Pieces*, as I hope to have demonstrated, has much to say about the role of poetics in occupying the in-between space of so many dichotomies. In discussing *John Marr*, I took up the second of my overarching themes: the need for companionship in the vision of poetic process. In doing so, I did not mean to suggest that these themes are segregated or distinct in the books of poetry; rather, the particular Romantic inheritance that I see at the center of Melville's art is pervasive and enduring, and it would be worth our time to trace in *John Marr* and *Timoleon* many of the themes that I have pointed to in *Battle-Pieces*. Also, while I demonstrated some points in which Melville's ideas of companionship seems to expand upon or differ from Wordsworth's, in the following chapter, I examine the two poet's most important poetic works published during their lifetimes—*Clarel* and *The Excursion*—in order to demonstrate how this theme develops.

Clearly for Melville the poetic process attempts to find meaning in the bringing together of disparate ideas—passion and reason, the physical and the ideal, inspiration and labor. In his

¹⁹⁴ Cannon, "Melville's Concept of the Poet and Poetry," 316-20.

poetry particularly, the imagination is importantly bounded within form or reason, but Melville's novel approach to form gives the imagination plenty of free play. Indeed, from the earliest engagements with Melville's poetry, critics have noted the intentional disorder or choppiness of his poetry. Newton Arvin made sense of it by describing Melville's poetry as following a trend in poetics away from "musicality" toward "the prosaic, the anti-poetic, the ironical."¹⁹⁵ Modern critics intent on rescuing Melville's poetry from the periphery have, for the most part, fulfilled Laurence Barrett's prediction that "we may find many of the violences deliberate for Melville and, once understood, effective for his readers."¹⁹⁶ I suggest that perhaps Melville was calling attention to his craft in the same way that most poets try to conceal it—that is, rather than seamless that appears effortless, Melville pronounced his poetry as work. I submit that the rugged earthiness of the poems that are, according to custom and Melville's explicit avowal, inspired, formally echoes what he thematically addresses—the union of baseness and divinity that Melville finds at the heart of the Civil War, and ultimately at the heart of humanity.

¹⁹⁵ Newton Arvin, "Melville's Shorter Poems," *Partisan Review* 16(October 1949): 1035.

¹⁹⁶ Barrett, "The Differences in Melville's Poetry," 606.

5.0 CLAREL AS SPIRITUAL “EXCURSION” AND POETIC TEXT

While modern readers of Wordsworth might think of *The Prelude* (1850) as his magnum opus, his contemporaries and those of the following generation would have thought otherwise. As a text examining the mind of the poet and the process of poetic creation, *The Prelude* is certainly indispensable to my discussion, and that is why I devote Chapter Two of this study to examining it. However, its rather late publication (not until after his death in 1850) and its self-declared prefatory nature—he considered it a preamble to his real work, *The Recluse*, a three-part philosophical poem of which he only finished the second part, “The Excursion” (1814)—renders *The Prelude* secondary when considered from the perspective of his peers.¹⁹⁷ And while there is some evidence that Melville had a chance to read *The Prelude* early enough, perhaps, to influence his thinking and writing during his diverse and prolific years following *Moby-Dick* (1851),¹⁹⁸ it is doubtless that “The Excursion” more profoundly and directly impacted Melville’s writing, particularly, it seems, in the composition of his own verse epic, *Clarel* (1876).

¹⁹⁷ David Simpson, for example, argues that “The Excursion” “must be central to any coherent understanding of Wordsworth, and to any scrupulous account of what Wordsworth meant to his contemporaries.” David Simpson, *Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 185. See also Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹⁹⁸ According to Hershel Parker, in visiting Pittsfield in August of 1850 Evert Duyckinck, editor of the *Literary World*, “brought along proof sheets of Appleton’s edition of Wordsworth’s posthumous poem, *The Prelude*....” Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville : A Biography*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 742. Although there is no real evidence that Melville read *The Prelude* at this early juncture, it seems plausible.

There are other reasons inviting a closer examination of “The Excursion.” “The Excursion” differs from *The Prelude* (though not from some other pieces of Wordsworth’s poetry) in that, to quote Wordsworth’s own words in his Preface to *The Recluse* “the intervention of characters speaking is employed, and something of a dramatic form adopted.”¹⁹⁹ More importantly, in “The Excursion” Wordsworth moves beyond an examination of the poet’s self to the poet’s relationships to “Man, Nature, and Society,”²⁰⁰ and in so doing Wordsworth addresses the sorts of questions that would preoccupy Melville. For example, in what Wordsworth intends to stand as a “*Prospectus*” for *The Recluse*, Wordsworth establishes the motivation for his theme:

On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life,
Musing in solitude, I oft perceive
Fair trains of imagery before me rise,
Accompanied by feelings of delight
Pure, or with no unpleasing sadness mixed;
And I am conscious of affecting thoughts
And dear remembrances, whose presence soothes
Or elevates the Mind, intent to weigh
The good or evil of our mortal state.
- To these emotions, whencesoe’er they come,

¹⁹⁹ John O. Hayden, ed. *William Wordsworth: The Poems*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (London; New York: Penguin, 1989), 37. All further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by line number.

²⁰⁰ Nigel Alderman discusses in his essay how “The Excursion” represents Wordsworth’s attempt “to generate in public and social terms what the *Prelude* does in private and personal ones: it seeks to display not only how a poet is produced, but also how he can be reproduced and, even, more importantly, how his labor can be useful.” Nigel Alderman, “Unity Sublime: “The Excursion’s” Social Self,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 1 (2005): 21-2.

Whether from the breath of outward circumstance,
Or from the Soul – an impulse to herself –
I would give utterance in numerous verse. (lines 1-13)

In these lines we find some familiar Wordsworthian turns—the reference to solitary musing, the central role of memory and the subsequent elevation of the Mind. And yet the main thrust of the argument of the poem, at least as here described—“to weigh / The good or evil of our moral state”—would be the quintessential question which drove Melville’s work. Furthermore, it should not be surprising that this question should be so closely, albeit rather casually, followed by another—one concerning the source of the “emotions” and thoughts which guide the “Mind” in its process. Although Wordsworth here does not distinguish between external inspiration (“the breath of outward circumstance”) and internal “impulse,” it would be centrally important to Ahab, who would disguise his own tendency toward evil beneath a mask of Fate—that is, he could avoid questioning his own morality by suggesting that his impulses are governed by “outward circumstances.”

In “The Excursion,” in examining the mind of man, Wordsworth clearly posits an interchange between the inner faculties and outside influences, but the extent to which the mind is dependent upon nature is far from clearly worked out. Wordsworth suggests that the creation of beauty which surpasses the idealized images of beauty that come from art (“Beauty – a living Presence of the earth, / Surpassing the most fair ideal Forms / Which craft of delicate Spirits hath composed”) awaits the “discerning intellect of Man, / When wedded to this goodly universe” (lines 42-4). Furthermore, Wordsworth seems to suggest that creation involves the perfect union of the mind and of nature: “my voice proclaims / How exquisitely the individual Mind /...to the external World / Is fitted: - and how exquisitely, too - / Theme this but little heard of among men

- / The external World is fitted to the Mind” (lines 62-8). While this expression of codependency seemingly provides the individual with at least partial agency in “creation (by no lower name / Can it be called)” (lines 69-70), it also legitimizes the individual by giving him universal scope.

Nonetheless, this formulation of the relationship between the individual mind and external nature is refreshingly relevant in “The Excursion” because here, unlike in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth does not focus on how the individual mind is fitted to nature (i.e., the growth of a poet’s mind through the influence of Nature) but rather how the world—including both Nature and society, the world of mankind—is fitted to the individual mind. This reversal of emphasis allows Wordsworth to explore not only what the poet derives from the world but also what he owes to it, including to his fellow men.²⁰¹ By posing as a question what an individual can give to (rather than simply get from) the world, Wordsworth necessarily delves into the nature of mankind—that is, he asks what a human is, intrinsically, that he can offer to other men.

It is, then, this question—what is the nature of man?—that is the essence of “The Excursion.” Of course, the fact that this metaphorical excursion into the heart of man takes the form of a literal foray into the pastoral countryside (considerably lighter than Conrad’s primeval jungle a hundred years later) demonstrates the interweaving of individual man and external nature that is central to the poet’s project. Nevertheless, by so directly addressing the inherent goodness or badness of man, and, subsequently, by discussing man’s responsibilities to his fellow men, Wordsworth’s “Excursion” serves as a preliminary text to many of Melville’s important works.

²⁰¹ Alderman argues that in “The Excursion” Wordsworth attempted “to construct a model of the social self that guarantees the usefulness of poetic labor.” In order to make the work of the poet socially useful, Alderman goes on to argue, the poet must derive his inspiration, partially, from the people. *Ibid.*: 22; 37.

Book I of “The Excursion” begins with the poet’s account of the Wanderer, who, in the course of the poem, plays a role that anticipates, to some extent, the character of Nehemiah in Melville’s *Clarel*. The Wanderer and Nehemiah share many traits: they are wise with age, calm, and, most notably, assured, and they both act as a foil, or alternatively as a sounding board, for the doubts posed by other characters. But while Nehemiah is often depicted as a fool for his blind faith and un-worldliness, the Wanderer is much more acquainted with the ways—and the people—of the world.

In short, whereas Nehemiah seems, at times, absurdly spiritual or unearthly, the Wanderer, as demonstrated with the accounts of his early childhood, imbibes a true sense of the “terror” intermingled with the sublime (Book I, line 133). Moreover, the poet claims that it is the Wanderer’s openness to and acknowledgment of this “Fear” that prepares him for the “Love” he receives from Nature.

Early had he learned
To reverence the volume that displays
The mystery, the life which cannot die;
But in the mountains did he *feel* his faith. (lines 223-6)

Wordsworth seems to be suggesting that it is only in feeling the “terror” that is part of life, and a part of God, that one can rightly and wholeheartedly place his faith in Him.

In the same way that the poem presents poetic creation as a unity of activity and passivity, “The Excursion” demonstrates an ambiguity—or perhaps it is better to say a deliberate intermingling—when discussing the social role of man. On the one hand, all three main characters in “The Excursion”—the Author, the Wanderer, and the Solitary—take delight, to some extent or another, in isolated pursuit of nature, or detachment from mankind. Yet, there is

a clear distinction between the Solitary's deliberate turning away from society and the Wanderer's circumnavigation of it.

Moreover, both the Solitary's and the Wanderer's relationships with mankind differ dramatically from Nehemiah's disconnect with the worldly ways of men: the Wanderer especially, we are told, is well-acquainted with the hearts of men:

From his native hills
He wandered far; much did he see of men,
Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits,
Their passions and their feelings; chiefly those
Essential and eternal in the heart....(lines 340-4)

Furthermore, the Wanderer was not only well-acquainted with the heart of man, but he was also well-attuned to it, especially adapted, through his intercourse with nature and his solitary maturation, to bond with his fellow men:

In the woods,
A lone Enthusiast, and among the fields,
Itinerant in his labour, he had passed
The better portion of his time; and there
Spontaneously had his affections thriven
Amid the bounties of the year, the peace
And liberty of nature; there he kept
In solitude and solitary thought
His mind in a just equipoise of love.
Serene it was, unclouded by the cares

Of ordinary life; unvexed, unwarped
By partial bondage. In his steady course,
No piteous revolutions had he felt,
No wild varieties of joy and grief.
Unoccupied by sorrow of his own,
His heart lay open; and by nature tuned
And constant disposition of his thoughts
To sympathy with man, he was alive
To all that was enjoyed where'er he went,
And all that was endured; for, in himself
Happy, and quiet in his cheerfulness,
He had no painful pressure from within
That made him turn aside from wretchedness
With coward fears. He could afford to suffer
With those whom he saw suffer. (lines 347-371)

Communion with nature, then, taught the Wanderer not only conformability and happiness in himself, but also allowed him to better commune with his fellow men; his solitary habits prepared him to be sociable, and his itinerant and vagrant ways made him a ready part of any and all communities. Ishmael, too, exemplifies this; he flees to the sea partially in attempt to escape his “partial bondage” to “Ordinary life,” but also to re-find his love for his fellow humans—in lieu of “deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off.”

Partly, the Wanderer's extraordinary capacity to know and love his fellow men is due to the simplicity of his pastoral existence; it is a repeated, and perhaps not superficially surprising, theme in "The Excursion" that simplicity in life is the root of happiness. And yet, it seems at variance in a work that attempts to grasp the complicated and often contradictory motifs in human life—art, faith, passion, love, self, community—to try to emphasize simplicity as a root virtue.

But by the native vigour of his mind,
By his habitual wanderings out of doors,
By loneliness, and goodness, and kind works,
Whate'er, in docile childhood or in youth,
He had imbibed of fear or darker thought
Was melted all away; so true was this,
That sometimes his religion seemed to me
Self-taught, as of a dreamer in the woods;
Who to the model of his own pure heart
Shaped his belief, as grace divine inspired,
And human reason dictated with awe. (lines 403-13)

At the center of "The Excursion," there seems to be a repeated move toward the reconciliation of extremes. In discussing the important themes of poetic creation, the social role of man, and even in the innate goodness or badness of man, the poem seems to suggest that what appear to be polar opposites are really interrelated, and even interdependent, concepts. That is, it is not so much the case that in creation a poet needs to be both passive *and* active as it is that a poet needs to be passive *in order to be* appropriately active; similarly, a man must be apart from

men in order to sympathize with them, and a man must recognize the dark materials from which he is built in order to comprehend his essential lightness.

I find precisely this reach toward interrelatedness, stopping shy of synthesis, as a necessary condition of vital art echoed in Melville's own epic verse. Melville's *Clarel* is a third-person, fictional pilgrimage through doubt and faith backdropped by the Holy Land, as well as a flood of secondary and tertiary characters. Certainly, Melville's poem is not a manifesto of his poetic principles (unlike, for example, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*), and should not be read as such.²⁰² Nevertheless, many of the issues and questions that Wordsworth raises in addressing poetry-making also plague Melville in his own monstrous creation. In much the same way that Wordsworth's attempt to reveal his poetic process bounces back and forth between Reason and Imagination, the Mind and Nature, activity and passivity on the poet's part, *Clarel's* case study of faith versus doubt poses similar dichotomies—science versus faith, reason versus emotion, and others. While it is certain that Melville adopts his own theme, stemming from his own personal dilemma—religious doubt—his poem, I suggest, can be read as a different manifestation of Wordsworth's central question: how do we know truth? Wordsworth sought to address the question by demonstrating *how* a poet has access to truth; but Melville, in a sense, takes a half-step back by focusing more on whether or not truth exists, or is knowable. Putting it another way, Melville brings to the forefront the spiritual / religious questions that critics have long identified in Wordsworth's poetry—discussions that center around the level of

²⁰² Nevertheless, Shirley M. Dettlaff finds in *Clarel* a discussion of art as a theme that is only apparently "scattered and undeveloped" but actually contains "an underlying scheme which is coherent and partially classical." Shirley M. Dettlaff, "Ionian Form and Esau's Waste: Melville's View of Art in *Clarel*," *American Literature* 54, no. 2 (May 1982): 212.

Wordsworth's relative (and perhaps shifting) relationship toward orthodoxy—by addressing how or if an individual can *know* faith (if the expression is not oxymoronic).²⁰³

Further, *Clarel* itself suggests a comparison to Wordsworth. Thomas Heffernan, in his enticing study of Melville's annotations of Wordsworth's poetry, concludes his preliminary and summary characterization of Wordsworth's influence on Melville by describing the apparent link between Melville's epic *Clarel* and Wordsworth's "The Excursion":

Studied, [Melville's annotations of Wordsworth] send scattered rays of light through the whole body of Melville's work and in the case of one of Melville's works promise a considerable illumination. That work is *Clarel*, and it is especially what is marked in "The Excursion" that bears upon it. The similarity of moral and religious concerns, the patience with characters' long and thorough definitions of themselves, the awareness of immensity around the central drama, and even the diction and meter (though *Clarel's* lines are tetrameter) argue that the long Wordsworth poem stayed in Melville's mind....²⁰⁴

Clearly, *Clarel* echoes "The Excursion" both thematically and formally; also, both poems are excursions involving solitary figures who are drawn into the company of others as they tackle spiritual questions.

Not only is "The Excursion" thematically related to Melville, it is also clear that *Clarel* is formally evocative of Romantic poetry—a comparison that goes beyond the similarity in verse and structure. From the start, *Clarel* identifies itself as a Romantic epic through its emphasis on

²⁰³ I do not mean to suggest, by the way, that Wordsworth himself or Romantic writing in general held *a priori* and unquestioned an assumption about the attainability of truth; rather, I am suggesting that Melville, in *Clarel* specifically, re-phrases a Romantic question concerning how truth can be known.

²⁰⁴ Thomas F. Heffernan, "Melville and Wordsworth," *American Literature* 49, no. 3 (1977): 351.

a quest—specifically, a quest to know truth. In a way that is reminiscent of Wordsworth, the opening lines outline the tension that will manifest itself in the poem between different ways of knowing. As the poem opens, we find Clarel, Christ-like in his “chamber...like a tomb new-cut in stone,”²⁰⁵ suggesting death or lowness²⁰⁶ but also teasing of the possibility of resurrection or rebirth—in his room, Clarel “broods alone” (1:1:6). His proclivity to silent brooding quickly comes to be Clarel’s defining characteristic, a curiously ambiguous response situated somewhere between action and inaction; after all, to brood is to think, and to think aggressively, yet to brood is to be necessarily internal, separated from the world, and not acting upon it. For example, Clarel is repeatedly said “to brood,” or, even more often, “to muse”²⁰⁷; yet he is surprisingly and relatively absent from much of the poem’s dialogue, despite being the hero and title character.²⁰⁸ He does, however, recall the narrator of “The Excursion”: “On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life, / Musing in solitude, I oft perceive....”

Although Clarel partakes in a Romantic quest, he falls short, in many ways, of the typical Romantic hero. Clarel is passive, vacillating, unsure—the antithesis of the Byronic model.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Herman Melville and Harrison Hayford, *Clarel : A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, Northwestern-Newberry ed., The Writings of Herman Melville (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press; Newberry Library, 1991), 1:1:3. Further references are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically by line number.

²⁰⁶ I mentioned in a previous chapter Melville’s repeated use of the term “low” as suggesting death in *Battle-Pieces*; however, it also is suggestive of dirt, contamination, and moral degradation.

²⁰⁷ Incidentally, the word “muse” is ironically fitting for my project, given that it can both refer to “inspiration,” emphasizing the passive role of a poet in creating, and to “thinking,” implying an active, reasoning agent.

²⁰⁸ Walter E. Bezanson refers to *Clarel* as “the Journey of the Hero and his Guides.” Walter E. Bezanson, “Melville’s Clarel: The Complex Passion,” *ELH* 21, no. 2 (June 1954): 151.

²⁰⁹ Others in the text—Ungar, perhaps, the cynical and malcontented soldier for hire—more closely fit the pattern of a Byronic hero.

Indeed, rather than the self-imposed and prideful self-isolation of Manfred, Clarel's disposition highlights a central motif of the poem—the desire for interaction. From the very beginning, Clarel, despairing in his doubt, pines for companionship: “Disturbed and troubled in estate, / Longing for solacement of mate...” (1:2:11-2). Clarel's longing goes beyond timidity or passivity; as I hope to demonstrate, Clarel's individual reason is informed and guided by his companions in the same way that, for Wordsworth, the mind of the poet is informed and guided by an active Nature. Indeed, Clarel avoids the risk of the Romantic ego by recognizing from the beginning the necessity of tempering your thoughts by close engagement with others; one of the most notable characteristics of Clarel is his desire for fraternal communion.²¹⁰

The very opening of the book establishes a pattern that the rest of the book pushes against: “A student sits, and broods alone” (1:1:6). Throughout the long poem, the characters given to serious thinking (Clarel, Celio, Mortmain, Ungar, Vine) also are prone to moments of isolation characterized by moody uncertainty, whereas the characters emphasizing a preference for groups demonstrate an easy jocularly (Derwent, Glaucon, the Lesbian). This pattern anticipates another connection that is routinely emphasized throughout the poem: the assumption that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is a serious, even somber, theme, opposed to anything that is fun, light-hearted, and frivolous. Book 1, Canto 3 asserts of the mixed “human God,” Christ, that he “Who dwelt among us, made abode / With us, and was of woman born; / Partook our bread, and thought no scorn / To share the humblest, homeliest earth, / Shared all of man except the sin and *mirth*” (7-11) (emphasis mine). This characterization of a

²¹⁰ In some lines discussed below, it is clear that for Clarel true understanding is inseparable from engagement with another: “could *I* but meet / Some stranger of a lore replete, / Who... / Would question me, expound and prove” (1:7:46-50).

dour savior, from the narrative perspective, previews continued references throughout the poem, by several speakers, of Christianity or religion as the antithesis of laughter, revelry, and joy.²¹¹

This, I suggest, is part of the complicated expression of the poem, which presents at odds things of the earth (material) and things not of the earth (immaterial). In this context, spiritual seeking is akin to philosophic reasoning in that each is concerned with immaterial concerns rather than earthly matters—that is, they dive rather than skim. The caveat in this logic of the poem, however, is that earthly things, for the very reason that they are disdained by many characters—they are easy, apparent, and simple—are ultimately more comforting and comfortable, establishing a lose-lose choice for the characters that echoes Ishmael’s proposal in “The Lee Shore”—be ignorant and happy (skim the surface) or dive and be unhappy.

However, the poem does not leave us there; it is, I suggest, part of the long process of the poem to salvage spiritual seeking and reason from the realm of intense somberness. Of course, moments of true levity are infrequent, and the climactic and much foreshadowed death of Ruth makes it impossible to suggest that the poem ever reaches consolation—however, the poem may achieve reconciliation. It does so, partly, by merging multiple and occasionally disparate points of view, not into a unified and coherent synthesis, but still into a collaborative response to the question of certainty and doubt. In this manner, Melville emphasizes not the romantic ego of *The Prelude*, but rather the move toward the romantic collective exhibited in “The Excursion,” to suggest that the way to truth involves the bringing together of multiple people or perspectives.

From the beginning, it is clear that Clarel is looking to something external to validate or supplement his internal exertion of reason. What Clarel was hoping to find on his trek to the

²¹¹ See, for example: 1:3:95-8.

Holy Land—enlightenment, theophany²¹²—is reminiscent of a Worthsworthian experience with nature:

Other cheer
Than that anticipated here,
By me the learner, now I find.
Theology, art thou so blind?
What means this naturalistic knell
In lieu of Siloh's oracle,
Which here should murmur? (1:1:19-25)

Here, as we can see, Clarel expected revelation, albeit perhaps low and vague (“murmur”) but nonetheless direct access to truth (“oracle”); instead, however, he finds an ominous unresponsiveness, or, at best, a resounding indifference (“naturalistic knell”). What is interesting here is that Clarel, expecting to be guided out of his doubt by a directing (super)nature, never considers the possibility that what he is finding is emanating from himself; that, in other words, the insensitivity, the blindness, is his own.

Clarel, in his doubt and guilt, imagines the devout chants of the varied religious sects around him contain a hidden accusation directed at himself: “We know thee, thou standing there mute. / Out, out—begone! try Nature's reign, / Who deem'st the super-nature vain” (1:7:25-7). But Nature, of course, provides no solace in itself, and Clarel rejects the soft “pantheism” available to Romantic and transcendental poets of his time (“Not hearsed He is. But hath ghost home / Dispersed in soil, in sea, in air? / False Pantheism, false though fair!”) (1:5:41-3). In fact, throughout much of *Clarel* nature is represented as “blank,” uncommunicative, desert. The point

²¹² Clarel opens on the eve of the “Vigil of Epiphany,” and it is clear that Clarel expects to find his own epiphany.

is that nature in the poem is not a way of signaling or corresponding with the divine. Indeed, nature seems to reflect, as the worshippers' chants do for Clarel, the characters' own doubts ("As if the scene confirmed some thought / Which in heart's lonelier hour was lent")²¹³—or, in Nehemiah's case, his own assurance (his taste of the river Jordan brings the response, "As sugar sweet!" even though the text reveals it as otherwise) (2:24:70-1). This mirroring quality is precisely what makes the characters distrustful of faith, since there is no external way of confirming or validating belief. But at the same time, their reluctance to accept evidence that cannot be corroborated by their own reason demonstrates their central weakness, or, at least, one of the central tensions in the poem—pride versus humility. In my interpretation, one of the major movements of the poem is to bring together seeming antipathies.

What is more, the opening scenes echo at least two moments in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. First, they parallel to some extent one of the best known moments in Wordsworth's poem, the crossing of the Alps at Simplon Pass. In that instance, too, the narrator and his companion carried with them an expectation of revelation as they trekked across the Alps, and anticipated that the spiritually symbolic journey that they expected would bring with it

²¹³ The quote comes from Book 1, Canto 36, lines 47-8. This section features the trip taken by Clarel, Nehemiah, Vine and Rolfe to the tower on Mt. Olivet, near the place rumored to mark the ascension of Christ, and offering a view overlooking Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. In a place that should symbolize the ultimate hope of the faith through the resurrection, Rolfe, Vine, and, through them, Clarel, feel only the despair captured by the Dead Sea: "Hope's hill descries the pit Despair." In the Discussions in the Northwestern-Newberry Edition of *Clarel*, the editors recognize this moments as central in the poem: "The fundamental allegory of the poem—geographical, theological, psychological—here emerges in Bunyan-like terms. From the traditional site of the Ascension and Second Coming, the pilgrims have turned east and for the first time looked down across the Judah wilderness to the dull, narrow gleam of the Dead Sea (line 40). Rolfe's instantaneous response to its baleful quality and Vine's "wordless look intent" (line 46) anticipate what lies ahead. Clarel is caught by their mood. Only Nehemiah, in his dreamworld of the New Jerusalem, fails to see; his proposed journey to Bethany (line 59), the pastoral town of Jesus a mile east of Jerusalem, marks his inability to share the sea's ominous forewarning, though he will die in it" (754-5). Although this is well-noted and stated, I suggest that to read Nehemiah as blind here is, perhaps, to give too much credit to Rolfe's and Vine's melancholy reactions, which proceed at least partly from within themselves, either from reason's seat (Rolfe) or from the "heart" (Vine).

refreshment, if not truth, only to be disappointed when, after losing their way, they find that they had unknowingly already passed their moment of transcendence (the revelation, of course, comes when they are no longer looking for it, and proceeds, one could argue, from their surrender rather than their activity).

Clarel's situation to start the book also reminds the reader of Wordsworth's narrator returning to the countryside after studying in Cambridge; while that narrator rejoices in his rediscovery of nature as a more adequate teacher than schools and books, Clarel, too, seeks to refresh his spirit from "bookish vapors" only to find no inviting call from Jerusalem; while Wordsworth's narrator is spontaneously refreshed, Clarel's anticipated and sought after revelation is unfound.

However, where nature and the supernatural seemingly fall silent, Clarel finds himself turning to other human beings; his meeting of Nehemiah seems exactly like the fulfillment of expectation:

Sudden it came in random play
"Here to Emmaus is the way,"
And Luke's narration straight recurred,
How the two falterers' hearts were stirred
Meeting the Arisen (then unknown)
And listening to his lucid word
As here in place they traveled on.
That scene, in Clarel's temper, bred
A novel sympathy, which said—
I too, I too; could *I* but meet

Some stranger of a lore replete,
Who, marking how my looks betray
The dumb thoughts clogging here my feet,
Would question me, expound and prove,
And make my heart to burn with love—
Emmaus were no dream to-day! (1:7:37-52).

Here we have in play many elements that are going to be important to my discussion of the poem. Despairing and alone, Clarel hears spoken a “sudden” and “random” phrase that carries the weight of inspiration and triggers in Clarel the memory that seems particularly poignant. Like the two men in “Luke’s narration,” Clarel is a “falterer” in desperate need of something to stir his “heart”—a Thomas needing proof. It is not simply an emotional response that Clarel is after, but rather, primarily, an intellectual one—he yearns to encounter the “lucid word” of “Some stranger of a lore replete” who would be able to “expound and prove.” Only the certainty of clear reason, Clarel suspects, will allow him the freedom of a full emotional response—it would “make” his “heart to burn with love.” Clearly at work here is the intermixing of reason and emotion, and Clarel, favoring reason as the higher faculty, feels distrustful of emotion and, as we see below, of the imagination. In other words, Clarel will not accept a faith that is not proved, and therefore denies himself the emotional response (“burn with love”) and comfort that faith can bring, fearing that it is merely a “dream.”²¹⁴

²¹⁴ In an insightful but perhaps stretched analysis, Nina Baym suggests that Clarel ultimately is unable to embrace Ruth, and female love in general, out of sexual confusion; in my analysis, his inability to engage fully in an emotional response (such as sexual love) is related to his need for certainty. In other words, I take Clarel at his word when he suggests that his spiritual confusion and his relationship with Ruth are intricately related (“The Erotic Motif in Melville’s *Clarel*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, XVI (Summer 1974), 315-328.

Interestingly, his spiritual quagmire not only stunts his emotional thoughts and clouds his reason (“dumb thoughts”), but it also “clogs his feet,” which could simultaneously image his general confusion and lack of direction, and subtly make a statement about the creation and formation of poetry. Certainly, the reference of “feet” in a poem invites the metaphoric interpretation, particularly in a poem with tendencies toward meta-poetic moments and narrative intrusions.²¹⁵ The poem shies away from directly commenting on poetry-making, but nonetheless manages to make statements about the nature and formation of poetry. It does, for example, seem to be clear that *Clarel* pays close attention to the union of form and meaning—a characteristic of Melville’s poetry in general that critics have recognized at least since Newton Arvin.²¹⁶ To speak simply, moments of ‘bad’ or rough poetry seem to be intentionally rough. For example, Book 2, Canto 10, “A Halt,” begins in this halting way:

In divers ways which vary it
Stones mention find in hallowed Writ:
Stones rolled from well-mouths, altar stones,
Idols of stone, memorial ones,
Sling-stones, stone tables; Bethel high
Saw Jacob, under starry sky,
On stones his head lay—desert bones;
Stones sealed the sepulchers—huge cones
Heaved there in bulk; death too by stones
The law decreed for crime; in spite

²¹⁵ See, for example, Book 1, Canto 32 for a lengthy narrative aside; for others, consider 1:34:75-9, 2:13:112, and 2:35.

²¹⁶ Newton Arvin, "Melville's Shorter Poems," *Partisan Review* 16 (October 1949).

As well, for taunt, or type of ban,
The same at place were cast, or man;
Or piled upon the pits of fight
Reproached or even denounced the slain:
So in the wood of Ephraim, some
Laid the great heap over Absalom. (1:10-1-16)

Beginning with the opening line and the dangling pronoun “it,” this verse is unusually clumsy, a sense that begins with the forced and backward diction and emphasized by the repetition of the word “stones” and the long “o” sound in general, which lends a groaning quality to the verse. Line two inverts the typical phrase “Stones find mention” into “Stones mention find” to provide an archaic sound, perhaps, that fits the ancient theme, but the meter throughout is as varied and rough hewn as the subject, and stressed syllables at times are heaped as stones (line 5, for example, contains as many as six stressed syllables in a line of only eight syllables).

At other times, however, Melville’s verse strikes me as wonderfully readable and refreshing, as in the following section pulled from Book 2, Canto 23:

At this, some riders feel that awe
Which comes of sense of absent law,
And irreligious human kind,
Relapsed, remanded, reassigned
To chaos and brute passions blind. 55

But is it Jordan, Jordan dear,
That doth that evil bound define
Which borders on the barbarous sphere—

Jordan, even Jordan, stream divine?

In Clarel ran such revery here. (51-60)

These ten lines are tightly compact and self-contained, and the meter, for the most part, is effortlessly regular, the iambic tetrameter broken occasionally, as in the line “To chaos and brute passions blind” for emphasis of meaning. Too, assonance plays a central role in unifying the stanzas, so that the lines “That doth that evil bound define” and “Jordan, Jordan, stream divine?” seem to provide an answer to the assertion in the first stanza. The overall meaning of the poem, of course, speaks to the role of “law” for “human kind,” implying not only reason but also, per context of the poem, Godliness as curbs on the innate and evil “passions” of humans. The concept of bounding lines (“bound define”) is, as I’ve attempted to demonstrate earlier, central to the ongoing questions of poetic creation, and importantly Wordsworthian as well as directly reminiscent of Blake. In this discussion of the role of “law” in regulating human passion,²¹⁷ the controlled, classical form is echoing and reaffirming the sense of the poem by demonstrating the beautiful effect of law when applied to passion.

In such ways, *Clarel* speaks indirectly to the making of poetry. Of course, Clarel is not exactly the representative poet, but his shortcomings are those which would be significant failings in a poet. His attempts at communication are stifled: when striving to break his spiritual paralysis by turning to prayer, he finds his words stopped²¹⁸; as well, his attempts to engage Celio are unsuccessful (see the discussion below). And, of course, Clarel cannot ultimately

²¹⁷ In a similar manner, Law is a central theme in *Battle-Pieces*, too, as I have attempted to demonstrate in Chapter 4.

²¹⁸ “Dropping thereat upon the knee, / His lips he parted; but the word / Against the utterance demurred / And failed him” (1:1:121-4).

accept Nehemiah, who appears “as in answer to the prayer,” in the suggestive and highly imaginative terms his introduction implies:

He lifts his eyes, and, outlined there,
Saw, as in answer to the prayer,
A man who silent came and slow
Just over the intervening brow
Of a high slope. Nearer he drew
Revealed against clear skies of blue;
And—in that Syrian air of charm—
He seemed, illusion such was given,
Emerging from the level heaven,
And vested with its liquid calm. (1:7:53-62)

Nehemiah is presented as the image of divine revelation, descending from the heavens and suggestive of prophetic truth. Most interestingly, Nehemiah possess the “liquid calm” the narrator attributes to “level heaven,” which certainly provides a foil for many of the other characters given to passionate debate and fierce yearnings.²¹⁹ In this way, characters such as Rolfe, Ungar, and Mortmain, in their passionate, prideful exercise of reason, echo Victor Frankenstein and Captain Ahab, whereas the calm, meek Nehemiah remains constant, steadfast, assured.²²⁰ But the metaphor implied in “liquid calm” is somewhat ironic, since Melville

²¹⁹ Yearning is demonstrated in this poem as defining the natural human condition: “There, still sensitive, / Our human nature, deep inured / In voiceless visagelessness, yearned. (1:26:6-8) or “For, human still, I yearn, I yearn” (3:19:78).

²²⁰ For an example of the spiritual advantage of meekness, consider the following: “Dismounting high, / The horsed through the needles eye, / That small and narrow gate, they lead. / But while low ducks each lofty steed, / Behold how through the crucial pass / Slips unabased the humble ass” (3:10:60-5).

continues in *Clarel* his habit of invoking imagery of the sea to reflect a character's inner turmoil and confusion: "At sea, in brig which swings no boat, / To founder is to sink" (1:12:68-9) and "Blue lights sent up by ship forlorn / Are answered oft but by the glare / Of rockets from another, torn / In the same gale's inclusive snare" (1:13:1-4). The desert, too, takes on certain qualities of the sea, especially its vast emptiness, blankness, and lack of humanity.²²¹

As it does in *Moby-Dick*, the sea becomes a metaphor for the dangerous and yet admirable pursuit of reason. To push off from the lee shore, in *Clarel*, is to spurn the uncertain comfort of faith for the striving for certain knowledge. Yet, at the same time that many of the poem's most vibrant and vital characters strive after knowledge, there is nonetheless a recurring Ecclesiastical sense that the pursuit of knowledge is vanity and sorrow.²²² It is true that both Nehemiah and Nathan are considered to have abandoned reason in their dedication to faith,²²³ yet other, more admirable characters in the poem also spurn the turmoil of a restless sea in favor of a "liquid calm": both the Druze and Vine prefer silence to idle, philosophizing chatter, the former comfortable in what he cannot know and the latter resigned to not being able to know through reason. The Druze's calm, self-control, opposed to both the pride of reason and passionate yearning, reflects his acceptance of the ultimate unknowability of God, signified by his

²²¹ In this, too, *Clarel* recalls *John Marr*; consider, for example, lines like "The prairie in her swimming swell / Of undulation," (1:17:29-30) which parallels the description of the prairie in "John Marr." See also W. H. Auden, *The Enchaféd Flood, or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (New York: Random House, 1950), especially 16-25.

²²² Ecclesiastes 1:16-18: "I thought to myself, 'Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.' Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."

²²³ "Faith, ravished, followed Fancy's path" (1:27:65).

only comment on religious matters throughout the entire poem: “ ‘ No God there is but God’ ” (3:15:115).

Further, nature seems to mimic their reserve: “While unperturbed over deserts riven, / Stretched the clear vault of hollow heaven” (3:5:203-4). Derwent, too, openly associates “reason” with “pride,” and “faith” with the “heart”: “ ‘Oft I’ve said / That never, never would I be led / Into their maze of vanity. / Behead me—rid me of pride’s part / And let me live but by the heart!’ ” (3:6:65-9). Derwent (a Wordsworthian place name) is a failed poet (3:8:76-80) who seeks to embrace his fellow humans in “charity”; yet his devotion to the heart too easily turns to an overvaluation of pleasure. The following lines, spoken by Rolfe concerning the Lesbian, can be equally applied to Derwent: “Holding to *now*, swearing by *here*, / His course conducting by no keen / Observance of the stellar sphere— / He coasteth under sail lateen: / Then let him laugh, enjoy his dinner, / He’s an excusable poor sinner” (3:13:40-5).

Yet, the answer Nehemiah offers to Clarel in appearing before him bearing a Bible seems too simple, too orthodox, or perhaps too earthly to be conclusively divine for Clarel.²²⁴ Even before Clarel recognizes the Bible that Nehemiah is offering to him, Clarel views the text in hopeless terms:

From man to book in startled way
The youth his eyes bent. Book how gray
And weather-stained in woeful plight—
Much like that scroll left bare to blight,
Which poet pale, when hope was low,
Bade one who into Libya went,

²²⁴ “Thought Clarel: Pray, and what wouldst prove? / Thy faith an over-easy glove” (2:22:148-9).

Fling to the wasteful element,

Yes, leave it there, let wither so. (1:8:80-7)

The allusion is to John Keats, who, according to Benjamin Robert Hayden, on his deathbed elicited a promise from Joseph Ritchie, who was preparing to undertake a journey to the Sudan in 1819, to take a copy of Keats's *Endymion* and throw it in the middle of the Sahara desert.²²⁵ Keats's act, as described here, is one of despair ("when hope was low"), and the comparison, perhaps, suggests the pointlessness of both art and religion as guides through life. But more than the assertion of their uselessness is the apparent reason for it: their capacity for (and certainty of) disintegration: "how gray / And weather-stained in woeful plight." That is, since books are of the earth, and therefore liable to stain and "blight," they can offer no proof against "the wasteful element," whether it proceeds from without, or from within.

Of course, readers familiar with the opening of Keats' *Endymion* recognize the greater irony of this anecdote; Keats's poem begins, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever: / Its loveliness increases, it will never pass into nothingness; / but still will keep / A bower quiet for us, and a sleep / Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing."²²⁶

There is a second irony here: if Nehemiah's proposed guide, the Bible, is too mundane to be a suitable an answer for Clarel, the man himself is too unearthly. From the moment of his introduction, Nehemiah is discussed in terms of his relationship between two planes of existence—the physical and the spiritual. Identifying himself as "the sinner," Nehemiah humbly

²²⁵ Harrison Hayford, et al., "Discussions," in *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern University Press; Newberry Library, 1991), 724. All future references to the "Discussions" will be noted parenthetically.

²²⁶ Elizabeth Cook, ed. *John Keats: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 60.

disclaims the title that the narrator chooses for him, “the saint.” But it is clear that Nehemiah occupies a sphere of existence that separates him from mankind: having left his home, he lived alone, dedicating his life to bringing about the fulfillment of the millennial prophecies, in which the separate realms of heaven and earth would be brought together. His intense spirituality often marks Nehemiah as detached from reality (“In absent-mindedness afloat / And dreaming of his fairy-land”²²⁷) and reason.²²⁸ While at first Clarel seems intrigued by, and partially seduced by, Nehemiah’s otherworldliness (“Struck by his fantasy and his frame / Clarel regarded him for time”), his absent-minded detachment leaves Clarel unsatisfied:

A dream, and like a dream it blurred
The sense—faded, and was forgot.
Moved by some mystic impulse, far
From motive known or regular,
The saint would thus his lore unfold,
Though inconclusive; yes, half told
The theme he’d leave, then nod, drop, doze—
Start up and prattle—sigh, and close. (1:10:94-103)

The characterization here, of course, is that of a doddering old fool, with only one foot in reality. Nehemiah’s seeming unconcern with reason, proof and planning, with the ultimate undiscoverability and, in fact, from an earthly point of view, impossibility of his scheming (for instance, Nehemiah attempts to literally fulfill the command “prepare the way of the Lord; make

²²⁷ *Clarel* 2:6:39-40. See also 1:8:44-55: “Deep read he was in seers devout, / The which forecast Christ’s second prime, / And on his slate would cipher out / The mystic days and dates sublime, / And “*Time and times and half a time*” / Expound he could; and more reveal; / Yet frequent would he feebly steal / Close to one’s side, asking, in way / Of weary age –the hour of the day.”

²²⁸ *Clarel* 2:9:71-80.

straight his paths” by removing individual rocks from the road), make Nehemiah un-relatable to Clarel and the others.

Ironically, Nehemiah, in preparation for the Second Coming, is concerned with saving the souls of every stranger he encounters, but is not interested in forming any real attachment with anybody on earth. It could be this isolationist tendency, perhaps even more than his absolute faith, that strikes others as crazy or foolish. And of course, Nehemiah is ultimately too focused on the end-times to be wholly respected as a character. His attempts to bring about the fulfillment of biblical prophecy seems misguided, at best.

Yet, despite the obvious flaws of Nehemiah, his character nonetheless is redeemed from meaninglessness by repeated and surprising moments. For example, when Nehemiah and Clarel encounter a leper outside the gates of Jerusalem, Clarel shrinks from him, unable to recognize him as a fellow human (“And he, is *he* of human rank?”) (1:26: 63); Nehemiah, in his unconcern with the flesh, embraces him as a brother. Too, Nehemiah alone shows consideration and respect for his donkey, offering him water and shade. These moments demonstrate that Nehemiah is more in touch with the physical needs of his fellow creatures than his philosophical companions.

In the end, Clarel agrees to follow Nehemiah, despite his spiritual aloofness, both because he is captivated by Nehemiah’s “primal faith” and because he provides a link to humanity (“grateful for the human claim”) (1:9:43-4).

Nehemiah is not the only one of Clarel’s companions stuck between two realms. As in the Simplon Pass episode, *Clarel* is often concerned with the sublime, and the liminal spaces between two worlds, like a ship on an open sea. Often, the philosophical meanderings of Melville’s characters lead directly to that between-space, as in the following lines pertaining to the minor yet important character Celio:

Since love, arms, courts, abjure—why then
Remaineth to me what? the pen?
Dead feather of an ethereal life!
Nor efficacious much, save when
It makes some fallacy more rife....
This world clean fails me: still I yearn.
Me then it surely does concern
Some other world to find. But where?
In creed? I do not find it there.
That said, and is the emprise o'er?
Negation, is there nothing more?
This side the dark and hollowed bound
Lies there no unexplored rich ground?
Some other world: well, there's the New—
Ah, joyless and ironic too! (I:12:86-104)

Here, Celio rejects the normal and normative pursuits of this world (“love, arms, courts, abjure”) only to find nothing else to pursue. Poetry is considered—and, by Celio at least, quickly rejected—as a suitable vehicle for exploring beyond the boundaries of the accepted world, but dismissed as archaic (“dead feather”), insubstantial (“ethereal”) and not socially useful (“efficacious”).²²⁹ In these respects and in this moment of the poem, poetry is aligned with faith, opposed to reason (the use of the words “efficacious” and “fallacy” in the rejection of poetry point toward reason, or at least logic); however, it is a romanticized reason, as suggested by the

²²⁹ If we are called to reject Celio’s consideration of poetry—and I suggest the logic and movement of the poem demands that we do—then we are at least implicitly affirming the social usefulness of poetry.

use of the term “emprise,” as well as the hyperbole in describing the known world as “dark [i.e., without light] and hollowed” [i.e., without fulfillment].

In the above excerpt, then, we can see some of the important dichotomies that are developed in *Clarel*: the material world versus the immaterial; reason versus faith; the traditional or old versus the new or young. Further, throughout the poem these dualisms are also interlinked, and not always in consistent or reliable ways. For example, in speaking of “child-like faith,” aside from referencing Christ, Celio is also distinguishing between reason and faith and linking faith to a state of natural innocence (1:13:25). Yet Celio’s diatribe against Christ not only reveals an image of man divided, but reverses his implied suggestion as to which side of man is most “natural”:

Upbraider! We upbraid again;
Thee we upbraid; our pangs constrain
Pathos itself to cruelty.
Ere yet thy day no pledge was given
Of homes and mansions in heaven—
Paternal homes reserved for us;
Heart hoped it not, but lived content—
Content with life’s own discontent,
Nor deemed that fate ere swerved for us:
The natural law men let prevail;
Then reason disallowed the state
Of instinct’s variance with fate. (1:13:48-59)

Celio blames Christ for inspiring an unnatural “hope” in the “heart” of man at odds with man’s “reason” and with his “instinct,” suggesting that both reason and instinct are at variance with the heavenward “fate” offered by Christ. In other words, faith and hope are unnatural conditions of man, at odds with his baser instincts. This hints of the dual nature of man, divided between his physical being, represented by “reason” and “instinct” but also by “discontent,” and his spiritual possibilities, characterized by his “heart” and providing “hope.” The irony—the pathos that devolves into cruelty—for Celio and other characters concerned with this split is that the physical world is tangible in a way that the spiritual world is not, and, consequently carries a reality that cannot be matched by the metaphysical, which often contributes to the characters’ doubt.

In striking ways, the presentation of the past in the poem demonstrates this concern with the divergence between the material and immaterial worlds—something hinted at in the in the allusion to Keats’ *Endymion*. The past is something that is both undeniably real—we can see and touch what has been left behind—and yet ultimately ethereal and dreamlike, like mythology. Many characters reach toward the past as something firm and rooting, seeking to solidify the stories that have been passed down. Indeed, throughout the long poem, the valuation of the old and traditional is constant, especially by characters (Celio, Rolfe, Vine) who earnestly seek assurance of faith in the church’s long history. At times tradition is explicitly linked to that other enduring theme—social fraternity: “Traditions beautiful and old / Which with maternal arms enfold / Millions, else orphaned and made poor” (2:1:85-7). Here, “traditions” (the context implies particularly religious ones) are presented as necessary to a rich life. Later, Rolfe laments the loss of the ancient worlds of Greece and Eden as if they were alike golden ages of mankind—

Melville develops a similar theme in the poem “Antonines” (2:8:30-7).²³⁰ This tendency highlights another division, and that is between those characters who look toward the past (Celio, Rolfe, Vine), those who look toward the future (Nehemiah), and those who merely are caught up in the present (Derwent, the Lesbian). These differing perspectives account a good deal for the character’s various levels of hope or despair; for example, at the appropriate place in their journey, Nehemiah recounts the story of the Good Samaritan, making the point that mankind would demonstrate such kindness and generosity nowadays as the Samaritan did then; Vine reminds Nehemiah of the fact that “There was a Levite and a priest” who did not help, but Nehemiah passes over this.

If Nehemiah is too optimistic about the future, other characters might over-idealize the past. Both Rolfe and Celio are “enamored of the spell / Of rituals olden” (2:24:21-2; see also 2:8:30-7). One of the greatest ironies of the poem, however, is the way in which the valuation of the past includes the religious tradition, as well. In *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War*, a romanticized tradition is often linked with aesthetics; here in *Clarel*, traditional religion at various points and in several ways becomes linked with poetry. Indeed, Rolfe suggests that subject matter now deemed religious and holy by the Church of Rome will become fodder for poets: “ ‘When much that sours the sects is gone, / Like Dorian myths the bards shall own— / Yes, prove the poet’s second mine’ ” (2:26:91-3). Indeed, the point of many of the occasions in which Hellenistic culture is compared to Judeo-Christian culture that critics have noted²³¹ might

²³⁰ Shirley Dettlaff and other critics have pointed out the convergence of the Greek or Hellenistic tradition with the Hebrew. Dettlaff, “Ionian Form and Esau’s Waste: Melville’s View of Art in *Clarel*.” This comparison serves, in part, to heighten the points of contrast in several other areas—the worldly versus the spiritual, the seat of western philosophy (reason) versus the foundation of western (and some eastern) religion (faith). At the same time, it demonstrates the valuation of the old, the traditional.

be to link the poetic tradition Western culture inherited from the Greeks with the spiritual culture it inherited from the Hebrews.

This becomes the theme of the Canto called “The Dominican,” which not only suggests that traditional religious rites are necessary for human happiness and fulfillment, but also implicitly links spiritual practice with “art” in general. Consider the following lines from the Dominican:

Crafty is Rome, you deem? Her art
Is simple, quarried from the heart.
Rough marbles, rudiments of worth
Ye win from ledges under earth;
Ye trim them, fit them, make them shine
In structures of a fair design.
Well, fervors as obscure in birth—
Precious, though fleeting in their dates—
Rome culls, adapts, perpetrates
In ordered rites. 'Tis these supply
Means to the mass to beautify
The rude emotion; lend meet voice
To organs which would fain rejoice
But lack the song; and oft present

²³¹ Shirley Dettlaff, in her unpublished dissertation “Hebraism and Hellenism in Melville’s *Clarel*,” for example. Her argument is to suggest the influence of Mathew Arnold on Melville, and therefore adopts Arnoldian terms. Laurence Barrett sees the combined influence of Greek and Hebrew elements in Melville’s poetry in terms of “form” (Greek) and “passion” (Hebrew), and suggests that both were necessary in Melville’s art. Laurence Barrett, “The Differences in Melville’s Poetry,” *PMLA* 70, no. 4 (Sept. 1955): 615-6.

To sorrow bound, an instrument
Which liberates. Each hope, each fear
Between the christening and bier
Still Rome provides for, and with grace
And tact which hardly find a place
In uninspired design. (2:25:35-54)

Here, the Dominican priest refutes Rolfe's accusation that the Catholic Church sought with guile to lull the public into complacent, thoughtless religion through the use of ritual by insisting that ritual and tradition were necessary and instinctive in mankind ("quarried from the heart"). The Dominican suggests that the "ordered rites" of the church simply refine the feelings and thoughts innately held and spontaneously felt by humankind—they provide purposeful form for the expressions of feelings. What is more, these forms, according to the Dominican, are inspired design. Clearly, this formulation is suggestive of poetry, and particularly reminiscent of Wordsworth's conception of poetry as spontaneous overflow of emotion recollected in tranquility, and ordered by a rational mind. I suggest that the form of Melville's own verse reflects this twofold conception of poetry as intense feeling ("fervors") refined by order and logic; his verse, while not neglecting to be innovative in form²³², is nonetheless surprisingly formal, at least when compared to two of his more prolific contemporaries, Walt Whitman (who pioneered free verse) and Emily Dickinson (who took great liberty with punctuation and style).

²³² While *Clarel* is often fairly regular in meter, its unpredictable rhyme scheme provides an interesting twist on the iambic tetrameter familiar in Byron. Walter E. Bezanson summarizes nicely when he suggests, "At the successful center there is a curious mixture of the archaic and the contemporary both in language and materials." Walter E. Bezanson, "Historical and Critical Note," in *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, ed. Harrison Hayford, et al., *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston; Chicago: Northwestern; Newberry, 1991), 567.

But while it is true that statements about poetry-making remain marginal and implicit, for the most part, in *Clarel*, the poem is centrally and explicitly concerned with the question of knowing that precedes the act of writing. Clarel's crisis is a crisis of faith, which is to suggest that it hinges upon knowing. The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty; in mankind's pride, reason appears to be able to provide the surety that traditionally came from faith, yet most of the characters recognize that individual reason, to be convincing, should be substantiated or corroborated by the same faculty in others. Yet to trust anything beyond the self—other people, tradition—is a leap of faith, seemingly. The prevailing question haunting most of the main characters centers around whether or not faith is incompatible with reason. At times, faith is represented as childlike, innocent, or ignorant (“Unvexed by Europe's grieving doubt / Which asks *And can the Father be?* / Those children of the climes devout / On festival on fane installed, / Happily ignorant, make glee / Like orphans in the play-ground walled” (1:3:135-40)).²³³ Still at other times, as in the case of Nehemiah, devout faith is represented as simplicity, blindness, or insanity.

Interestingly, this discussion bears directly on another Biblical passage pertaining to the limits of knowledge, the oft-quoted words of Paul writing to the Corinthians concerning “Love.” Melville, who was very familiar with the Bible and whose works abound with allusions, certainly knew of I Corinthians: in the beginning of *The Confidence-Man*, Melville's title character quotes (and misquotes) parts of I Corinthians 13 to chastise the crowd for their presumed lack of

²³³ Or, a bit later, Clarel wonders, “For how might break / Upon those simple natures true, / the complex passion?” (1:6:215-7).

charity.²³⁴ Although he was artistically speaking drawn toward the Old Testament as a rule, it seems plausible that he had Paul's discussion of the interworking of love and reason in mind when writing specific parts of *Clarel*. At points in the poem, faith and hope both seem opposed to knowing²³⁵: in describing Nehemiah, the narrator asserts, "In wasted strength he seemed upheld / Invisibly by faith serene— / Paul's evidence of things not seen" (1:7:66-8).²³⁶ Certainly, faith, hope and love are all relevant and circulating themes in *Clarel*, and given that Paul's discussion of the three to a large extent bears upon the subject of knowledge and how it can be obtained, it seems justified to quote extensively from the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians here:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing...Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For

²³⁴ For example, he revises the biblical phrase, charity "does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth" to "Charity thinketh no evil," a simplification that conveniently implies that Christian love must *always* be trusting, and also disassociates love from "truth."

²³⁵ To some extent, Melville anticipates the coming generation and the 'postmodern angst' in precisely this regard.

²³⁶ "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen" (Hebrews 11:1).

we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (I Corinthians 13)

Here, Paul suggests that the full knowledge of the mysteries of nature would be valueless if you did not also possess the love of mankind needed to direct and apply that knowledge, a statement which could serve as a brief gloss on the central problem of *Frankenstein*. In examining the attributes or characteristics of love that Paul lists, it seems clear what they have in common is at root a type of selflessness; in other words, love, according to Paul, can most succinctly be defined as a suppression of the individual. That this most specifically refers to individual reason cannot only be inferred (Socrates, at least, considered the ability to reason as the defining trait of being) but also made clear by what follows, which is a discussion on the limits of reason and ways of knowing truth. The conclusion, which bears directly upon this discussion, from Paul's sermon on love is that the love of mankind (the King James translation makes the operative word not "love" but "charity," emphasizing that the love being discussed here is not specifically romantic love (eros) but includes humanity as a whole) is a necessary corrective or inhibitor to the faculty of reason.

Moreover, love, as demonstrated in the poem, proceeds from the same faculty as faith, and these are invariably linked:

Bonds sympathetic bind these three—

Faith, Reverence, and Charity.

If faith once fail, the faltering mood

Affects—needs must—the sisterhood. (1:25:92-5)

The implications in the poem are dramatic; a loss of faith directly leads to a lack of love in mankind. One of the major themes presented in the book revolves around the difficulty of loving mankind; an important point of distraction for several characters (Mortmain and Ungar in particular, who both recognize and mourn the depraved state of mankind) involves the nature of man—whether man in his own right is wicked, or, perhaps more legitimately, how it is that he harbors simultaneously a tendency toward villainy and nobility (see 1:4:7). This, of course, is an important theme in Melville at large, and also, as I have mentioned, one that concerned Wordsworth in “The Excursion.” Melville’s examination of the question here, in *Clarel*, follows Wordsworth in that he ties the question to an examination of man’s spirituality, and in his relationship to other men. Both ask, for example, what the appropriate response should be to the discovery of wickedness in mankind, and also if the impossibility of perfecting the species provides an insurmountable critique on religion. What this latter question, which points to the apparent hypocrisy of religion in a fallen world, overlooks, of course, is the possibility that man is not to be redeemed in this world, but only in the next—and the inability of many of the characters in *Clarel* to see this points to another characteristic of *Clarel*, the tendency to focus on the past rather than on the future, a perspective which suggests the illusion of decline (or descent) of man. This is evident in the characters’ reactions to the deaths that occur in the poem, or, perhaps more to the point, in their inability to separate the sorrowful deaths (Celio, Nathan, Ruth) from those which might bear hope (Nehemiah and Mortmain). Nehemiah’s and Mortmain’s deaths demonstrate the crusader’s central problem: their insistence on seeing these

deaths—both of which come at moments of spiritual revelation—as only tragic demonstrates their inability to focus on the hope offered in Christianity.²³⁷ But of course, the narration offers the readers, too, the choice to read the deaths as tragic, by focusing on the body after death and the companion’s sadness, but also, interestingly, leaving open-ended the possibility of supernatural influences in the deaths. We can, for instance, pause in celebrating the glorious and much awaited homecoming of Nehemiah if we consider that his dream might only have been that—the foolish dreamings of a monomaniac madman.²³⁸ Too, we can rationally explain Mortmain’s death as a disease of the brain rather than see it as a moment of spiritual surrender and relief.

Indeed, Rolfe’s view of death is something devoid of meaning and significance, a thing of “small hope”: “Ah, own! to moderns death is drear, / So drear: we die, we make no sign, / We acquiesce in any cheer— / No rite we seek, no rite decline. / Is’t nonchalance of languid sense, / Or the last, last indifference” (1:40:53-8).

While the sense of depravity in mankind leads some, like Mortmain and Ungar, to despise or despair his fellow kind, others, following in the example of Wordsworth’s Recluse, withdraw. The chapter introducing Vine as a character is titled “The Recluse,” which may be a

²³⁷ I am reminded of these lines from George Herbert’s poem to “Death”:

We looked on this side of thee, shooting short;
Where we did find
The shells of fledged souls left behind,
Dry dust, which sheds no tears, but may extort.

But since our Savior’s death did put some blood
Into thy face,
Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
Much in request, much sought for as a good.

²³⁸ This is certainly the view that Walter Bezanson takes in an argument which emphasizes the imagery of death in the poem. Bezanson, “Melville’s Clarel: The Complex Passion,” 153.

direct reference to Wordsworth. Vine is a recluse in the sense that he turns away from the world, recognizing its inability to satisfy; nonetheless, he still sees in nature a beauty that he admires (which is, again, reminiscent of Wordsworth's character). Yet Vine never relinquishes the basic human traits as defined in the poem—he retains his pride, and his sense of yearning (1:29:31-43).

Clarel, too, is defined by his yearning, and also by his pride. Of course, we recognize the impossibility of Clarel's desire to have demonstrable evidence verifying his faith—faith, by definition, avoids being proved—and, further, it seems clear that Clarel's spiritual crisis indicates a general tendency to be overly reliant on his reason. The phrase “dumb thoughts” in the lines discussed above (“could *I* but meet / Some stranger of a lore replete, / Who, marking how my looks betray / The dumb thoughts clogging here my feet, / Would question me, expound and prove, / And make my heart to burn with love”) might indicate that Clarel's thinking is too unresponsive to outside influences; in other words, his dependence on reason leaves him too insensitive to subtle indications. This over-reliance on reason, of course, is recognizably the sin of pride, much evidenced in both the Bible and in Clarel, and the oft-noted hallmark of Romantic heroes—Victor Frankenstein, for example.

But over-reliance on reason is not to be countered by blind faith or indiscriminate hope, but by love or “Charity” (the greatest of these, according to Paul), which in its truest form does not replace the love of self with the love of another (such as in romantic love), but by the merging that accompanies fellowship, in which the individual is qualified, supported, shaped, developed, or supplemented. In other words, happiness that is not associated with ignorance can only be obtained by combining faith and knowledge, heart and head, imagination and reason. And the character in *Clarel* that most succeeds in exhibiting these opposites is Rolfe.

The earliest description of Rolfe marks him as a person characterized by competing tendencies; his personality encompasses both the head and the heart (“A genial heart, a brain austere”) (1:31:14), both knowledge gained from books and wisdom acquired from a union with nature (“Though given to study... / But supplemented Plato’s theme / With dædal life in boats and tents, / A messmate of the elements”) (1:31 16-21). He is “sensitive” but also “kind” (1:31:23). Opposites are brought together not only in his character, but also in his thinking; for example, he sees a possible reconciliation in science and religion (1:31:189-93). Although Rolfe’s attempts are perhaps ultimately demonstrated as impossible, nonetheless he is not branded a fool for trying, as is Nehemiah, but is respected, and valued: he is “Sterling—yes, / Despite illogical wild range / Of brain and heart’s impulsive counterchange” (2:21:132-4). Too, as Bezanson points out, Book 1, canto 32, “Of Rama,” a narrative intrusion that discusses a character as a noble mixture of the divine and the human, probably has Rolfe in mind, (although it might include Vine, the Recluse, as well).

Rolfe, then, is easily the most complete character in the poem; his earnest striving for knowledge is balanced by his easy camaraderie with different and varied personality types. Other characters fail to reach a balance. The description of Celio, for example, suggests his disconnect with earthly and material concerns that seems reflected in his anti-social personality, and even raises the possibility of a link between physical deformity and spiritual unease or doubt.²³⁹ The monk that hosts the reclusive Italian does indeed suggest that Celio’s spiritual despair is related to his physical deformity, but the narrator does not encourage this connection. Rather, the inner sign of Celio’s deformity is rather his isolation, spurred on by his pride. Twice Clarel, although recognizing a brother in Celio, fails to make a connection; in the second

²³⁹ *Clarel*, 1:12:35-8.

instance, Clarel hesitates because of his characteristic uncertainty, waffling, but Celio, perhaps overly sensitive, takes Clarel's hesitancy as insult, and in his wounded pride he turns away. In this instance, Celio, referred to by Bezanson as the first in a cycle of four monomaniacal characters, resembles Ahab—indeed, his hump might be a physical rendering of a psychological or spiritual condition (“He heaps me”), just as Ahab's scar is a physical manifestation of his divided self.

Celio's valuation of the past (tradition) also provides an interesting perspective. Although only in the poem for a brief period, and although denied the opportunity to speak to Clarel, Celio is nonetheless an important and active influence both upon the poem and upon Clarel himself. Possessed of an “earnest mind” that scorned too easy faith yet refused the easy material comforts available to him in a life without faith, Celio desperately sought something to cling to, something to provide meaning and purpose to life. Abandoning as unsuitable or unavailable to him romantic love, idle occupation and frivolity, Celio turns to the two sources of meaning claimed by the Romantic poet—writing and nature—only to reject the first as frivolous (“Since love, arms, courts, abjure—why then / Remaineth to me what? the pen? / Dead feather of ethereal life! / Nor efficacious much, save when / It makes some fallacy more rife”) (1:12:85-9) and the second as indifferent (“Now expectation grows and grows; / Yet vain the pageant, idle still: / When one would get at Nature's will— / To be put off by purfled shows!”) (1:15:2-5).

Celio, too, remains central because his situation sets the stage for the characters to follow; that is, his brief introduction serves to bring into early focus many of the central dilemmas and themes of the book. In addition to the reason / faith dichotomy, Celio also underscores the important division between the “head” and the “heart,” with the heart, as is always possible in the dualism, perhaps standing in for the faculty of the imagination. According to Celio's

depiction, Christ was a sort of Romanic poet who inspired confidence and hope in people, but that his death put into doubt the wisdom and veracity of his teachings. In his view, humanity was far better in its primitive state in which reason ruled and the heart hoped for nothing more than “life’s own discontentment” (1:13:55); with the inception of the “dream” of Christ (1:15:13), mankind has been divided, with the hopeful belief of the heart yearning despite reason’s protestations (1:12:145-50). Later, the narration seems to confirm Celio’s delineation when it questions, “Does the intellect assert a claim / Against the heart, her yielding kin?” (1:36:9-10).

Celio, comparing himself to “that bad Jew” (1:13:112) who taunted Christ on the cross, seems to acknowledge the possibility that the demand for proof, as opposed to the “instinctive” following of the heart, is the sin of blasphemy; yet, at the same time, the narrative seems to ask the readers to accept his impulsive yearning to know as no sin in itself, but rather related to the zeal demanded by the Old Testament God and evidenced in the martyrs of the faith. Yet his presentation of a man divided within himself also paves the way for the larger theme of the divided nature of mankind, which species contains within itself both the capacity for faith and despair, love and evil.²⁴⁰

Celio’s most important role, however, comes in his inability to make a connection with Clarel, despite the immediate recognition of a kinship felt by both:

But what’s evoked in Clarel’s mien—

What look, responsive is seen

In Celio, as together there

²⁴⁰ See, for example, the beginning of Book 1, Canto 15, “The Wall of Wail,” in which a discussion of the subterranean caverns under Jerusalem symbolize the unknown depths hidden in the heart of a man. See also *Moby-Dick*.

They pause? Can these a climax share?

...

Howbeit that Celio knew his mate,
Again, as down in Gihon late,
He hovered with his overture—
An overture that scorned debate.
But in experienced, shy, unsure—
Challenged abrupt, or yea or nay,
Again did Clarel hesitate;
When quick the proud one with a look
Which might recoil of heart betray,
And which the other scarce might brook
In recollection, turned away. (1:15:51-3; 68-79)

It is his connection with Clarel that is most essential. Through his relationship with Celio (and, of course, later with Ruth and Vine), we recognize that Clarel is as equally interested in the possibility of a connection with other human beings as he is concerned with the divine. Indeed, Clarel's relationship with Celio never consists entirely of exchanged glances and surmises that carry the force of communication, and therefore recall inspiration. The first meeting, for instance, bears many of the qualities of poetic influence:

The stranger, downward wending there,
Who marking Clarel, instant knew—
At least so might his start declare—
A brother that he well might own

In tie of spirit.

...

Mutely for moment, face meant face,

But more perchance between the two

Was interchanged than e'en may pass

In many a worded interview. (1:11:40-4; 53-6)

Here, the inspiration and instinctive knowledge is taken not in a cue from nature, but from another human being, one that is connected “In ties of spirit.” The spontaneous and mutually recognized connection between Clarel and Celio seems to promise comfort, if not assurance. And it seems to me quite possible that the potential benefit in this friendship is related to its spontaneous nature—that is, the attraction or affiliation that the two feel toward each other is not based on reason but on emotion (“spirit”; “recoil of heart”). Such a thing cannot be rationalized or explained; mere “words” cannot describe it. The same, too, upon Celio’s death, which Clarel recognizes, though not present, as if by instinct:

Such passion!—But have hearts forgot

That ties may form where words be not?

The spiritual sympathy

Transcends the social. (1:19:1-4)

Clarel’s relationship with Ruth, too, is cast in terms familiar to poetic inspiration. From his first sight of her, Clarel is captivated by her physical appearance, which “expressed such truth unfeigned, / And harmonies inlinked,” a uniting of truth and beauty that instantly recalls Keats. Ruth, according to Clarel, possesses the “grace / of Nature’s dawn” and suggests the possibility of Paradise. It is no wonder, then, that Clarel quickly intermingles his desire for Ruth with his

spiritual yearning: she becomes for him the symbol of salvation, the mercy and “grace” that he cannot accept from faith. It is yet another proof that Clarel seeks to find truth not in a relationship with Nature, but with a relationship with another person—in a bringing together and merging of different personalities (“harmonies inlinked”).

Furthermore, it is clear from the text that Clarel tempers his reason through those around him; that is, he seeks confirmation or direction from his companions, and either filters his thought processes through his friends, or leans heavily on their insights to color or shape his own. Many times, Clarel looks to Vine to inform his judgment. For example, during one of Rolfe’s discourse, Clarel turns to Vine:

Clarel gave ear, albeit his glance
Diffident skimmed Vine’s countenance
As mainly here he interest took
In all the fervid speaker said,
Reflected in the mute one’s look;
A face indeed quite overlaid
With tremulous meanings, which evade
Or shun regard, nay, hardly brook
Fraternal scanning. (1:33:69-77)

In seeking to filter Rolfe’s words through the countenance of Vine, Clarel tempers the “fervid” passion of Rolfe with the calm demeanor of Vine’s (“the mute one’s”) look. Of course, Vine here mimics nature elsewhere in Melville’s writing; although clearly “quite overlaid / With tremulous meanings,” Vine’s calm countenance is as inscrutable as nature can be. Nonetheless, Clarel continues the practice of adjusting his viewpoints based on clues from his companions: a

“hint” from Rolfe adjusts Clarel’s perception of Nehemiah (1:38:1-4); an expression from Vine causes him to reevaluate Derwent (2:22:18-20).²⁴¹

Of course, this culminates in *Clarel* with the realization that companionship, that a close relationship with another person, is ultimately more important than philosophical argument or reason. Clarel’s attempts to decipher the meaning of “Vine’s countenance” ultimately transforms into an attempt to know Vine himself, to be close to him in a personal relationship:

Pure as rain
Which diamondeth with lucid grain,
The white swan in the April hours
Floating between two sunny showers
Upon the lake, while buds unroll;
So pure, so virginal in shrine
Of true unworldiness looked Vine.
Ah, clear sweet ether of soul
(Mused Clarel), holding him in view.
Prior advances unreturned
Not here he recked of, while he yearned—
O, now but for communion true
And close; let go each alien theme;
Give me thyself! (2:27:58-70)

²⁴¹ Similarly, Clarel often waffles in his viewpoint, depending upon the most recent conversation (see 2:14:49-52) or is entirely dependent on another’s argument, without any insight of his own (see 4:26:179-185).

Clearly, the sexual imagery is undeniable, but, given the context and the movement of the poem as a whole, it makes more sense to read Clarel's yearnings for Vine metaphorically as yet another attempt at knowledge—that is, Melville seems to be playing with the biblical notion of “knowing” in order to emphasize the necessity of others in the process of discovering truth. For, far from his physical being emphasized in a sexual love, it seems to be precisely Vine's (apparent) “unworldliness” that attracts Clarel—as depicted here, Vine is clearly a substitute for or representation of Nature in a Wordsworthian sense. Indeed, Vine's rejection of Clarel's attempts to know him seem to be based on the fact that it is indeed impossible to separate the merely physical from the spiritual in any human attempt, meaning that a union of the “virginal” soul will always be hampered or prevented by the flawed, material being: “But for thy fonder dream of love / In man toward man—the soul's caress— / The negatives of flesh should prove / Analogies of non-cordialness / In spirit” (2:27:124-8).

Most of the characters in the poem have personalities that encompass, to some degree, both physical and spiritual dimensions: for example, consider Derwent, the priest whose abiding faith in Christian orthodoxy is matched by his preoccupation with the material luxuries of the earth. But a couple of characters occupy one extreme of the continuum—but not, perhaps, to their benefit. On the one hand, consider Margoth, an apostate Jewish geologist who dismisses religion as “myth” and “fable,” insisting that only in solid rocks can truth be known (2:20:47-59). At the other extreme is Nehemiah, often referred to simply as “the Saint,” whose mild but stalwart spirituality leaves him disconnected from the realities of the world.

The basic distinction between the material and the immaterial takes very different manifestations throughout the long poem, but one of the most important is the distinction between earthly reason and unearthly faith. For example, the story of Nathan, Ruth's father,

confirms the unreasonableness of religious faith by linking belief to enthusiasm, zeal, and passion (including passion directed at a person, that is, love). Nathan is a Christian whose faith is first tested by his encounters with a bleak, inhuman, and sublime Nature, and his continued recollections of his encounters (“Had not such things sufficed / To touch the young pure heart with awe, / Memory’s mint could move him more.”)²⁴², in which the “terror” originally perceived seems to grow; a Wordsworthian touch that inspires Nathan not to hope, as is the case with the Wanderer in his early exposure to the terrors of Nature, but to its opposite. Nathan’s path from faith is furthered when he happens to encounter Deist literature; although the specific book is unnamed (presumed by the editors to be Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason*), no doubt its systematic and rationalistic format enhanced Nathan’s instinctual proclivities to view nature as an impersonal, indifferent mechanism. However, if reason helped strip away Nathan’s faith, it provided nothing to replace it, leaving Nathan searching for something to hold on to. What he finds to replace his mother’s Christianity is passion—literally, love, which transforms into religious enthusiasm.

The catalyst for Nathan’s transformation is his chance meeting with Azar,

A Jewess who about him threw
Else than Nerea’s amorous net
And dubious wile. ‘Twas Miriam’s race:
A sibyl breathed in Agar’s grace—
A sibyl, but a woman too.... (1:17:202-206).

²⁴² *Clarel* 1:17:75-7. The phrase “memory’s mint” is used also in *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War*. Bryan C. Short, “Memory’s Mint: Melville’s Parable of the Imagination in *John Marr and Other Sailors*,” *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 15 (June 1986). The image of a “pure heart” in cooperation with “memory’s mint” echoes Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility.”

As Hayford and the other editors of *Clarel* point out, “Not sexual wiles, as of this Greek sea-nymph (Nerea), attracted Nathan, but rather the prophetess-like quality of a Miriam...” (735). Indeed, but while Miriam, as a “sibyl,” offered Nathan a graspable truth, she also provides something else for which he dearly yearns—a narrative, a tradition, a discernable story with more weight than the personal and disconnected “rank fable[s]” to which other’s cling after rejecting the “rite and creed sublime” of common religion. Nathan’s love for Agar spurs his conversion to Judaism, but it is only in conjunction with his already-present desire for the “adamant,” because ancient, foundation of “Zion’s story.” What’s more, Nathan’s acceptance is couched in poetic terms:

Still as she dwelt on Zion’s story
He felt the glamour, caught the gleam;
All things but these seemed transitory—
Love, and his love’s Jerusalem.
And interest in a mitred race,
With awe to which the fame belongs,
These in receptive heart found place
When Agar chanted David’s songs. (1:17:219-26)

From this description, it is apparent that Nathan fell in love as much with “Zion’s story” and “David’s songs” as with Agar, their narrator. Further, while it is clear that Nathan at least partly yearns for the storied past, the bedrock of tradition (“All things but these seem transitory”), it is also clear that Nathan responded to what was romantic about the stories—their “glamour” and “gleam,” and the “awe” to which a “mitred race” inspired resonated with Nathan’s “receptive heart,” bypassing his reasoning head.

This contrast is further emphasized by the dramatic and mad ends to which Nathan pursues his passion—not for Agar, but for the legendary “Jerusalem.” By a natural proclivity of his heart which seems at odds with Agar’s more stoic faith, Nathan’s conversion is marked by a “passion,” and “earnestness,” and a “zeal” which “Might yet overpass that limit due / Observed by [Agar]” (1:17:241-4). His Frankensteinian over-zealousness not only leads him to Jerusalem itself in order “to utilize the mystic glow” which inspired him. His uncontrollable passion not only separated him from his reason, but also from the connections with which love is supposed to inspire; he isolates himself from Agar and his daughter Ruth, despite their desperate urgings to renounce his mission in the Holy Land: “She plead. But tho’ his heart could feel, / ’Twas mastered by inveterate zeal” (1:17:327-8). Nathan’s story leads the readers to equate love with passion, passion with zeal, and zeal with faith, all of which stand out odds with reason, with worldly considerations, including personal relationships.

Nathan’s relatively brief story gains importance not only from its powerful theme, but also due to the character’s central relationship to Clarel—Nathan is Ruth’s father, and his love for a Jewess is foreshadowing of Clarel’s own love for Ruth. Just as Agar filled the void emptied by reason in Nathan, Ruth is for Clarel an answer to his religious doubt. But, in the same way that Agar provided Nathan not with faith but with a tradition, Clarel’s love for Ruth answers his need for truth. Consider Clarel’s first sighting of Ruth:

Among the maids those rites detained,
One he perceived, as it befell,
Whose air expressed such truth unfeigned,
And harmonies inlinked which dwell
In pledges born of record pure—

She looked a legate to insure
That Paradise is possible
Now as hereafter. (1:16:158-65)

Clarel finds in Ruth's beauty a truth that he can be sure of, falls in love with her as a foretaste of "Paradise." This formation remains unchanged throughout the poem; Ruth continues to stand as a symbol of truth, or perhaps the path towards truth, so that later in the book the narrator relates:

All distant through that afternoon
The student kept, nor might attune
His heart to any steadfast thought
But Ruth—still Ruth, yet strange involved
With every mystery unresolved
In time and fate. In cloud thus caught,
Her image labored like a star
Fitful revealed in midnight heaven
When inland from the sea-coast far
The storm-rack and dark scud are driven.
Words scarce might tell his frame, in sooth:
'Twas Ruth, and oh, much more than Ruth. (3:30:1-12).

The indefinable "much more" that Ruth represents is truly what Clarel is seeking throughout the poem. But, just as Nathan's story leads us to connect knowledge with unhappiness, since his coming to find reason leads to unfulfillment—the narrative explicitly as well as implicitly refers to Eden (1:17:140), inviting us to remember what happened when Eve plucked an apple from the

Tree of Knowledge—so too is Clarel’s resolution to embrace Ruth and end his quest unsatisfactorily resolved upon his discovery of her death.

However, the poem suggests that Clarel’s decision to embrace Ruth (mercy), if done for the wrong reasons, was not a wrong decision; the poem’s final stanza emphasizes the importance of the “heart”:

Then keep thy heart, though yet but ill-resigned—
Clarel, thy heart, the issues there but mind;
That like the crocus budding through the snow—
That like a swimmer rising from the deep—
That like a burning secret which doth go
Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep;
Emerge though mayest from the last whelming sea,
And prove that death but routs life into victory. (4:35:27-34)

The word “mind” brings to bear the old dichotomy between the “heart” and “mind,” but in doing so the lines clearly demonstrate a preference for the heart that echoes Ishmael. Nonetheless, it is clear that the “heart” is to be used not in place of the head, but in conjunction with it—explicitly, the heart is the buoy to the mind, as indicated by the reversal of Melville’s important metaphor of deep-diving, here characterized as “rising from the deep.”

Further, one of the assumptions underlying my argument is that truth in the Romantic sense is identifiable with God in the religious sense; hence, the quest to know Truth is a pilgrimage to know God. In that respect, Melville’s *Clarel* and Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* are offshoots of the same root, the root being the question of how truth is knowable and translatable—and this is a question of great importance for art and the artist. In this respect,

Melville's spiritual pilgrimage has everything in the world to do with art. In concluding that knowing ultimately must utilize the heart (imagination) as well as the head (reason), the text suggests that either independently is unsatisfactory or even dangerous. Moreover, if the way to truth is multiple and varying, then art itself, if it is to be meaningful, must also contain multitudes.

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