

GRACE IN THE ARTS:
**HERMAN MELVILLE: AN AUTHOR
IN THE ANGST OF AMBIGUITY**

JAMES A. TOWNSEND

Elgin, Illinois

I. INTRODUCTION

If one were to poll high school and college literature teachers for a Top Ten list among novels in the English-speaking world, hardly any such list would be complete without Herman Melville's classic *Moby-Dick*, which initially was pretty much a failure in terms of sales ratings.

Lawrance Thompson of Princeton University authored a book entitled *Melville's Quarrel with God*. Melville's quarrel eventuated in *Moby-Dick*. Hardly one in ten thousand modern readers would ever think to call *Moby-Dick* a "wicked book," yet Melville himself called it that. If we take his assessment at face value, then we see Melville's quest to find the meaning of the universe as analogous to Captain Ahab's quest to find the great white whale.

Right after Melville penned *Moby-Dick*, he wrote another novel entitled *Pierre: or the Ambiguities*. Certainly angst and ambiguity are rife in *Moby-Dick*, as demonstrated by the wide variety of interpretations later literary analysts have foisted upon the symbolism of Melville's masterpiece. Also, Melville's friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, indicated in a famous quote that Melville was tortured by the ambiguity of not knowing where he stood regarding the question of belief in God.

Why did Melville have a running argument (as Lawrance Thompson indicated) with God? The empirical data of Melville's own life reveals that he had a whale of a time in confronting the ominous, overwhelming, unwinnable battle against circumstances, the universe, and/or God. In Herman's youth his father went bankrupt, insane, and then died. Also the boy Melville was unsuccessful at a miscellany of jobs. Later, one of Melville's sons committed suicide and the younger one died of TB (as did Herman's brother) and Melville himself struggled against a siege of works, illnesses, and injuries. And his magnum opus (*Moby-Dick*) was a financial flop. Everywhere Melville turned the universe's woodwork

seemed to have splinters. Life seemed but a litany of lamentations. What was this massive, mysterious, seemingly malignant force Melville had to contend with? If the all-predestinating God of his Calvinistic youth was the animus behind all these adversities, then Melville had a bone to pick with this defiant deity. Like Captain Ahab in his monomaniacal scavenger hunt for the white whale, Melville was drawn to, yet defied by, this anything-but-cooperative, ever-thwarting deity. His questions and his quest produced one of the world's greatest novels, yet his empirical search after God only left him in ambiguity and angst.

II. LITERARY LAURELS

Herman Melville assuredly teeters near the top in ranking among American writers, even if *Moby-Dick* had been the only novel he ever wrote. Darrel Abel announced that Melville's "is the most crucial achievement in American literature...at the most critical and decisive time in our history."¹ *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851, the kickoff date of America's Civil War. Also Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850 and *The House of Seven Gables* in 1851. Additionally Henry David Thoreau issued *Walden* in 1854, and Walt Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, causing Edwin Miller to label this productive period "the greatest decade in American literary history."² And of those five titles just cited, Melville's is certainly the greatest.

Melville's importance quickly went under a cloud cover toward the end of his life. Nevertheless, since 1963 "there have been more scholarly studies of Melville [done] than any other American author."³ This factor alone is demonstrative of Melville's merit in the literary firmament.

III. A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Herman Melville's mother was the "only daughter of 'the richest man in Albany,' the respected...General Peter Gansevoort, hero...during the American Revolution."⁴ It is obvious that his mother's name, Maria Gansevoort, is reproduced in the first three letters of the name Mary and

¹ Darrel Abel, *American Literature*, Vol. 2 (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1963), 366.

² Edwin H. Miller, *Melville*, Vol. 1 (New York: Geroge Braziller, Inc., 1975), 23.

³ Tyrus Hillway, *Herman Melville* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

the first letter of the last name of Mary Glendinning in Melville's book *Pierre*. The character Mary Glendinning (whom scholars agree is unquestionably a partial portrait of Melville's mother) is haughty and controlling of her son.

Melville's father, Allan, seems to have been somewhat like Charles Dickens' Mr. Micawber when it came to financial reliability—forever borrowing. In 1830 he went bankrupt, in the aftermath he went insane, and in 1832 he died. This left Melville's mother a widow with eight children to raise. She must've felt like a lone sailor steering her ship against overwhelming odds, as if she were up against a great white whale.

Within the historical omnibus of Melville's ancestry were a number of Presbyterian ministers. His mother had grown up within the context of Dutch Reformed Calvinism. His father's father was educated at Princeton University to become a Calvinist minister, but he balked at rigorous Calvinism there and settled for Unitarianism instead. It is obvious from the profusion of biblical quotation and allusion in his writings that the young Melville was steeped in the early study of Scripture. In fact, Nathalia Wright claims: "On average, every seventh page of [Melville's] prose has some biblical allusion."⁵ More explicitly, *Moby-Dick* has 250 biblical references and *Billy Budd* about 100.⁶

Repeatedly in his younger years Melville encountered a universe that seemed to bristle toward him with porcupine quills. His father had failed financially, psychologically, and then physically when Herman was a pre-teen. This debt and death must've been a devastating blow to the struggling family. Undoubtedly it was aggravated by the elevated economic expectations derived from his mother's heritage. Five years later (in 1837) Herman's brother's business also failed. Melville must have felt like he was always up against something vastly greater than his capability could handle, and no matter how determined a person might be, an overwhelming world would win out. Within his psyche was already being formed an unremitting opponent, which would eventuate in the form of a great white whale.

Herman tried his hand at being a bank clerk, sales person, farmhand, and school teacher without any significant success from 1832 to 1837. He never attended college.

⁵ Nathalia Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible* (New York: Octagon, 1969), 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Then finally the ominous ocean came calling him. His matriculation as a sea hand would constitute, as he pithily put it, “my Yale College and my Harvard.”⁷ First he was a cabin boy on the *St. Lawrence* in 1839 and was shocked by the sailors’ morals. In 1841 he sailed for the South Seas aboard the whaler called the *Acushnet*, where he eventually jumped ship with Richard Tobias Greene and lived for a month among cannibals. In 1842 he escaped on board an Australian trading ship where the crew mutinied, so he abandoned ship in Tahiti. Next, he boarded another whaler for Hawaii, enlisting as a sailor in Honolulu on the frigate *United States* in 1842, which eventually brought him back to Boston in 1844. Naturally all these adventures became grist for the mill of one who had ink circulating in his blood stream.

In the mid-1840s Melville launched a new career, using his writing pen as a steersman’s helm. Melville (amazingly) “published ten works of fiction in eleven years,” including one world-class novel.⁸ His first five works all took the form of “fictionalized autobiography.”⁹ Melville’s eight major novels were *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), *White-Jacket* (1850), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), and *Israel Potter* (1855).

In 1847 Melville got married, and in 1850 he met his much-admired authorial friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. However, life (or God) kept thwarting his happiness, for 1) Hawthorne moved away (which seemed to Melville like desertion); 2) in 1853 a fire destroyed his book plates; and 3) in 1867 his son Malcolm committed suicide at age 18. Also 4) in 1867 his wife and her minister sought to declare Melville insane; as well as 5) he underwent an assortment of injuries and illnesses inflicted upon him. Finally, 6) in 1886 his son Stanwix died of tuberculosis at age 35.

From 1866 onward until official retirement Melville served as a paid customs inspector in New York City for nineteen years. As in the case of Thomas Hardy, the literary critics and a misunderstanding reading public drove Herman Melville from his writing desk into relative obscurity during what still might have been highly productive years for one of the world’s great novelists.

⁷ Abel, *American Literature*, Vol. 2, 371.

⁸ Elizabeth Hardwick, *Herman Melville* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2000), 7.

⁹ Hyatt H. Waggoner, “MELVILLE, Herman,” in *Encyclopedia of American Biography*, ed. John A. Garraty (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974), 751.

IV. MELVILLE'S MAJOR BOOKS

All five of Melville's parade of early novels (from 1846-1850) were semi-autobiographical sea-stories. His first, *Typee* (1846), was sensationalist stuff, announcing himself as one who'd lived among cannibals! This novel reflected upon Melville's second stint as a seaman (in 1842).

Despite the fact that Melville declared *Typee* to contain "the unvarnished truth," Melville's stint in the Marquesas Islands was actually four weeks rather than the novel's fictionalized four months.¹⁰ Also, despite the reality that the narrator settled temporarily among cannibals, he represents the scene as a paradise island.

One of the early tipoffs to Melville's opposition to orthodoxy is seen in his anti-missionary animus. The following statement by Melville is not in itself condemnatory, yet throughout the novel runs an undertone and numerous barbs are launched about the bad side-effects of Christian missions. Melville opined:

Better will it be for [the islanders] for ever to remain the happy and innocent heathens and barbarians that they now are, than, like the wretched inhabitants of the Sandwich Islands, to enjoy the mere name of Christians without experiencing any of the vital operations of true religion, whilst at the same time, they are made the victims of the worst vices and evils of civilized life.¹¹

It is undeniable, of course, that the in bringing of before-unknown diseases is not a benefice, yet Melville seems to lump missions in together with, say, the drunkenness-inducing liquors of so-called "civilized" Westerners. Furthermore, "better" being "happy and innocent heathens and barbarians" is not necessarily the polar opposite to mere *nominal* Christianity. Also any Christian critic would wish to ask someone who only spent four weeks among cannibals (and escaped with his head!), are "heathens" actually and biblically "happy and innocent"?

Melville did grudgingly acknowledge (in the novel's next chapter): "against the cause of missions in the abstract no Christian can possibly be opposed; it is in truth a just and holy cause."¹² Yet he raised the alarm against its abuses. And, beside Melville's glowing account of these

¹⁰ Abel, *American Literature*, Vol. 2, 372.

¹¹ Herman Melville, *Typee, Omoo, Mardi* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 215.

¹² *Ibid.*, 233.

uncivilized islanders, “Melville saw ‘white civilized man’ as ‘the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth,’” so with tongue-in-cheek he suggested that “four or five Marquesan islanders sent to the United States as missionaries might be quite as useful as an equal number of Americans dispatched to the islands in a similar capacity.”¹³

Tyrus Hillway stated that *Omoo*, Melville’s second novel, “must have been during his lifetime the most widely read of all his books.”¹⁴ *Omoo* took up where *Typee* left off. Tahiti, to which the narrator had escaped in *Omoo*, “seems a fairy world, all fresh...from the hand of the Creator” like “the Garden of Eden” and “nominally many of these people are now Christians.”¹⁵ Though Melville viewed the Tahitians as constitutionally indisposed to the Christian gospel, he did acknowledge that “the greatest achievement” of Western Christian missions proved to be that “they have translated the entire Bible into the language of the island.”¹⁶

Melville properly excoriated the missionaries he saw on the ground of racism. He observed that “the two races are kept as far apart as possible from associating; the avowed reason being to preserve the young whites from moral contamination.”¹⁷ The telltale adjective “avowed” in the preceding sentence informs us that Melville strongly suspected a more covert reason. In the next paragraph he added, “They went even further at the Sandwich Islands, where a few years ago a playground for the children of the missionaries was enclosed with a fence many feet high, the more effectually to exclude the wicked little Hawaiians.”¹⁸

In a gut-wrenching exposé Melville tugs at the readers’ heart-strings as he relates the following incident:

Distracted with their sufferings, [the islanders] brought forth their sick before the missionaries, when they were preaching, and cried out, “Lies, lies! You tell us of salvation, and behold, we are dying. We want no other salvation than to live in this world. Where are there any saved through your speech?”

¹³ Edward Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1952), 61.

¹⁴ Hillway, *Herman Melville*, 71.

¹⁵ Melville, *Typee, Omoo, Mardi*, 391, 393-94.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 511.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 514.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Pomaree is dead; and we are all dying with your cursed diseases. When will you give over?"¹⁹

It is, of course, hard to argue with such an emotionally laden scenario. Yet, despite Melville's stacking the deck emotionally, the question must still be raised: is there an eternity and (if so) how will one be prepared to face it?

Mardi was Melville's third South Seas-oriented book. *Mardi* is conspicuously more allegorical than Melville's two previous novels. Darrell Abel asserted: "*Mardi* is an allegory of the quest of the human mind for the meaning of life—for beauty, happiness, truth, virtue."²⁰ The characters are allegorical embodiments. Babbalanja stands for philosophy, Yoomy for poetry, and Mardi for the human soul. Taji and the girl Yillah visit the utopia of Serenia "where all things are regulated with the teachings of Alma (Christ)."²¹ Tyrus Hillway summarized the novel's heart:

All the searchers in the party, excepting Taji, finally give up the pursuit and find safe harbor at Serenia, the island of Christian love (or primitive Christianity), whose inhabitants have set aside their desire to know the secrets of God and are satisfied to live together peacefully under the Golden Rule.²²

Yet Melville never really relinquished the quest himself.

Melville's fourth novel was *Redburn*. Darrel Abel offered the condensed summary: "*Redburn* is a boy's first voyage as a sailor; its theme is initiation into evil."²³ Melville's lead character mirrored its author in *Redburn* when he wrote: "Cold, bitter cold as December...seemed the world to me; there is no misanthrope like a boy disappointed; and such was I, with the warm soul of me flogged out by adversity."²⁴

There is undoubtedly symbolical significance in the fact that the neophyte sailor begins his voyage on Sunday, reading a ponderous passage from the Bible, and "it was a mystery that no one could explain, not even a parson..."²⁵ This novel's opening parallels the opening of

¹⁹ Ibid., 518.

²⁰ Abel, *American Literature*, Vol. 2, 380.

²¹ Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 66.

²² Hillway, *Herman Melville*, 80.

²³ Abel, *American Literature*, Vol. 2, 387.

²⁴ Hardwick, *Herman Melville*, 20-21.

²⁵ Herman Melville, *Redburn* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 94-95.

Moby-Dick—with a younger sailor setting sail with the Bible reverberating in his mind’s ears and enshrouded in mystery.

White-Jacket was Melville’s fifth novel of ponderous length—all five of them written in a span of five years (1846-1850). Darrel Abel indicated that *White-Jacket* “is perhaps more documentary than any other book of Melville’s...”²⁶

The story of *White-Jacket* became the preface or corridor to the white whale. Also in 1850 Melville met his greatest of friends, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Melville was lyrical in his praise of Hawthorne. In reviewing Hawthorne’s work, Melville referred to the “great power of blackness [or depth] in him.”²⁷ While speaking of the ocean-depth of “blackness” in Hawthorne in 1850, Melville was writing of the whiteness of the unfathomable whale (to be published in 1851).

Bruce Lockerbie called *Moby-Dick* “a very great Christian novel.”²⁸ However, Melville was not a Christian according to literary expert Harold Bloom, so *Moby-Dick* really can’t be labeled a “Christian novel,” though it may be of compelling interest to many Christians.²⁹ “When W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) was asked to select the ten greatest novels ever written, he chose...[only] one American [novel, which was] *Moby-Dick*.”³⁰ Edward Wagenknecht paid *Moby-Dick* the ultimate compliment when he claimed that “the book is great enough to create its own category...”³¹ George Steiner declared: “Nowhere, in language, did the nineteenth century come nearer the great mirror of tragedy than in *Moby-Dick* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.”³²

An ongoing jousting match has been waged by critics over the symbolic meaning in *Moby-Dick*. Wagenknecht alleged: “The book has been interpreted as a parable of man’s struggle against nature, against evil, against ‘the accidental malice of the universe,’ and even against God.”³³

²⁶ Abel, *American Literature*, Vol. 2, 391.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 397.

²⁸ Bruce Lockerbie, “The Greatest Sermon in Literature,” *Christianity Today* (November 8, 1963), 9ff.

²⁹ Harold Bloom, *How To Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 237.

³⁰ David L. Larsen, *The Company of the Creative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 382.

³¹ Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 68.

³² George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 136.

³³ Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 66.

Tyrus Hillway proposed that both *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* handle “essentially the same philosophical problem: the search for a true explanation of man’s relationship to God in the universe.”³⁴ Harold Bloom dogmatized: “the white whale is not God, nor even God’s surrogate...you cannot deny the God of this world...any triumph over your innermost self.”³⁵

Despite Bloom’s disclaimer, Melville forever thrashed about (like the agnostic Thomas Hardy) against God or whatever-was-out-there defying his smooth sailing on life’s seas. Melville was raised within the confines of belief in an all-sovereign, all-encompassingly decreeing Calvinistic God, yet his life was regularly pocked with tragedy—the family bankruptcy, his father’s insanity and death, his mother’s financial pinch-edness, his own two sons’ early and untimely deaths, etc. There always seemed to be someone or something ominously and oppressively opposed to Melville’s welfare. So, if God was all-controlling and this world was forever menacing, would it not make sense to take on this defiant, ever-squelching power?

Ishmael and Captain Ahab seem to be the Jekyll and Hyde aspects of Melville—one person objectively observing and surviving and the other one defying what is ominous and overwhelming. Tyrus Hillway announced: “Ahab is—as Melville once...described...Hawthorne—‘a man who...declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven, hell and earth.’”³⁶ After he finished writing *Moby-Dick* Melville admitted to Hawthorne: “I have written a wicked book and feel spotless as a lamb.”³⁷ By today’s trashy standards of sexual promiscuity, stale profanity, and savage brutality, few readers would have thought *Moby-Dick* “a wicked book.” Nevertheless, through the aperture of the allegorical Ahab, Melville has—as it were—attacked what is more massive and mysterious and (to him) malignant than himself. Who can survive such an onslaught?

Certainly much of the character-naming within the novel is biblically borrowed. Ishmael is the outcast, onlooker, and survivor (as in Scripture). Ahab is obviously borrowed from the name of Israel’s famous villainous king. Elijah is the prophet who warns of Ahab.

³⁴ Hillway, *Herman Melville*, 83.

³⁵ Harold Bloom, *Ahab* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991), 5.

³⁶ Hillway, *Herman Melville*, 89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

Father Mapple's opening sermon on Jonah has been called "the greatest sermon in fiction."³⁸ The novel is pimentoed with biblical allusions such as "the angel Gabriel," "the blackness of darkness and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing," "thou young Hittite," "the Anak of the tribe," "Belshazzar's awful writing," "Rachel weeping for her children," etc. Melville's mind was marinated in the characters and content of Scripture.

If Melville aggravated conservative readers with his "wicked book" of *Moby-Dick*, he further alienated them with still more abrasive topics in his seventh novel, *Pierre*. *Pierre* delves into "such controversial matters as incest, suicide, the Oedipal theme, and the love triangle."³⁹ Pierre, engaged to Lucy Tartan, is the son of the haughty Mary Glendenning (modeled after Melville's mother, Maria Gansevoort). He is shocked to learn that he has a half-sister (by his father and a French mistress) named Isabel. Pierre relinquishes Lucy and pretends to marry Isabel so his mother disowns him. Pierre murders his cousin. Lucy dies out of shock. He is sexually attracted to his half-sister. They end up ingesting poison and dying. Naturally Melville got a public backlash from this shocker. (One marvels that such a harum-scarum classic with a risqué theme has not been transmitted into a modern movie!)

Novel number eight, *Israel Potter*, is "the least regarded of Melville's books..."⁴⁰ Just as Redburn's voyage launched on Sunday and Ishmael's voyage (in *Moby-Dick*) got underway on Christmas Day, so Israel Potter made his getaway while his family was at church on Sunday. (In other words, in three of his novels it was as if Melville was playing hooky from Christianity, launching into a wider world.) The book features the historical John Paul Jones, and Israel's adventures finally wind him up back in America on the Fourth of July.

Darrel Abel noted that after Melville's *Piazza Tales* in 1856, he published only one more fictional work before he lapsed into silent obscurity of almost forty years...⁴¹

Melville could never quite exorcise Christianity and his quest for meaning from his system, for in 1856 he made a trip to the Holy Land. The long-range authorial outcome of that trip was his 18,000-plus line

³⁸ Lockerbie, "The Greatest Sermon in Fiction," 9ff.

³⁹ Waggoner, "MELVILLE, Herman," in *Encyclopedia of American Biography*, 750.

⁴⁰ Abel, *American Literature*, 423.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 427.

poem, *Clarel*. The term *Clarel* is undoubtedly from the Latin root for “clear,” but if this work was to “clear” things up finally for Melville, it fell short of the mark. Clarel, a theological student, “is, like his author, a person of religious disposition who lacks religious faith...”⁴² *Clarel* involves a group of Holy Landers, such as Derwent (a liberal Anglican clergyman), Ungar (a Roman Catholic), Margoth (representing science), Nehemiah (a fanatical Bible conservative who’s looking for Christ’s imminent return and passing out tracts), Vine (partially modeled upon Hawthorne who is a source of invigoration), etc. The editor of one edition of *Clarel* commented: “Although questions of belief continue throughout the poem,...the inner movement defined by Clarel’s experience is away from theology towards a kind of pragmatic humanism, or speculative psychology.”⁴³ The same editor concluded: “The loss of faith is the basic assumed fact of the poem, and its largest problem is how to endure the overwhelming sense of a shattered vision.”⁴⁴

Melville’s *Billy Budd* was Melville’s shorter finale. It is heavily sculpted by a Christ-theme. Billy Budd is the innocent figure, loved by his father-figure (Captain Vere, with a name carrying the Latinate form of “truth” or “verity”). Billy is not spared death by this just father figure who blesses the captain with his very last words. As Tyrus Hillway said, “Within the act of [Billy Budd’s] sacrifice, a symbol of expiation for all the sins of mankind, burns the spark of hope for eventual moral regeneration.”⁴⁵ Hence, even here it seems as if the Christ-figure or best-loved character (Billy) got a raw deal, even as Melville forever seemed to have life down on him. Billy “looked like one impaled” and his expression was “as a crucifixion to behold,” the narrator of *Billy Budd* informs us.⁴⁶

When Billy Budd utters his climactic line (“God bless Captain Vere”) before death, it is almost as if Melville is reversing Christ’s “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Instead, the seemingly innocent human (Billy) is blessing (or forgiving) the unbending God-figure (Captain Vere). For Melville it’s as if the too-staunch God needed forgiving (rather than sinning humanity needing forgiveness).

⁴² Ibid., 439.

⁴³ Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, ed. Walter E. Bezanson (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1960), lxix.

⁴⁴ Ibid., cix.

⁴⁵ Hillway, *Herman Melville*, 141.

⁴⁶ Herman Melville, *Complete Shorter Fiction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 449-50.

Melville also wrote a significant amount of poetry, and “in the last poem of *John Marr*...Melville offered his mature conclusion about man’s fate,” namely, that “the universe is an order of necessity inscrutable to man.”⁴⁷ This conclusion is a seamless garment with the outraged younger Melville who’d been bombarded by “the slings of outrageous fortune” (as Shakespeare had it).

V. MELVILLE’S THEOLOGY

In seeking to encapsulate Melville’s overall theological framework, certain distinctions must be clarified at the outset (which Melville does not necessarily clarify in his novels). In the Melville corpus there are at least three types of theological affirmations and allusions: 1) those enunciated through his characters and narrators which are merely accurate summations of what individuals of one given persuasion would believe; 2) similar statements by characters which are a mask for Melville’s own views; and 3) outside-his-novels theological reflections (such as in his letters) by Melville (which, naturally, are most authentically Melvillian in terms of personalized belief). Therefore, much of the theological material marshaled below from his novels will fall into the first of the three categories named above rather than betray Melville’s own private convictions.

A. THE BIBLE

Nathalia Wright’s *Melville’s Use of the Bible* is the classic locus for researchers on this subject. The Bible’s plots, people, and passages were intricately interwoven into the fabric of Melville’s thought-texture. While Melville may have felt like Jacob wrestling with the angel of his Calvinistic upbringing, he owed to that circulation of Bible background in his bloodstream an immense debt in terms of his own future literary output.

In Melville’s massive poem *Clarel* the Anglican character Derwent urges:

“The Scriptures—drama, precept fine;
Verse and philosophy divine,

⁴⁷ Abel, *American Literature*, 444.

All best. Believe again, O son,
 God's revelation, Holy Writ..."⁴⁸

Here (in the quote) is a kind of inbuilt question: will one accept "the Scriptures" as the "best" amalgam of literature's literary genres, or as "God's revelation" and "Holy Writ"?

That Melville did not elevate Scripture to a status summited above other inspiring writings is seen in a letter in 1849 written to a literary friend, Evert Duyckinck: "Dolt and ass that I am, I have lived more than 29 years, and until a few days ago [I] never made close acquaintance with the divine William [that is, Shakespeare]. Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle...almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired..."⁴⁹ Such a statement seems to put Scripture and Shakespeare on the same level, if both are to be called "inspired." (Evangelicals would distinguish between "inspired" and "inspiring" literature, for some of Scripture is *uninspiring* though it is all *inspired*.) Melville also wrote to Hawthorne in 1851: "Knowing you persuades me more than the Bible of our immortality."⁵⁰ Such a comment inadvertently shows that Melville placed human experience above biblical revelation. Once a person moves away from the rock of biblical revelation, one is left to an up-for-grabs philosophy of life.

B. GOD

All in all, Melville seemed to be a theist, although there is considerable ambiguity about his stance. Tyrus Hillway said: "To Melville [an] atheistic image [of the world] looked like a cadaver...Melville's intellectual state may be described as a tentatively optimistic skepticism."⁵¹ In another place Hillway states: "...in his flight from religious faith, [Melville] went as far as tentative agnosticism."⁵²

In November of 1856 Melville met Henry Arthur Bright (1830–1884) at Hawthorne's, and "being an ardent Unitarian [Bright] took [Melville] to the Unitarian Church [at] Horsford..."⁵³ After Melville wrote in 1891 about Billy Budd dying, he died in the same year.

⁴⁸ Melville, *Clarel*, 369.

⁴⁹ *The Letters of Herman Melville*, eds. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960), 77.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵¹ Hillway, *Herman Melville*, 144.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵³ *The Letters of Herman Melville*, 186.

Reverend Theodore Williams of All Souls [Unitarian] Church was the officiating minister.

In yet another more figurative mood, Melville wrote admiringly to and of Hawthorne:

I felt pantheistic then—your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both in God’s.

...I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the [Last] Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling.⁵⁴

Melville’s eulogistic and emotional surge toward Hawthorne (in the first sentence quoted above) is reminiscent of what theologians call interpenetration. (Interpenetration refers to God the Son’s intimate language of “I in You” and “You in Me” with reference to God the Father.)

Whether Melville can be pinned down to being labeled a theist, pantheist, agnostic or whatever with reference to God, the literary analysts are in little doubt that Melville engaged in a lifelong conflict with reference to the idea of God itself. (In fact, Melville epitomizes the age-old question: if God is all-good and all-powerful, why do I experience so much evil?) Lawrance Thompson of Princeton University held that Melville “was obsessed with one theme: God is to blame for creating an unjust world.”⁵⁵ Thompson accused Melville of being “an inverted transcendentalist” who “needed a scapegoat,” so “he spent his life...sneering at God, accusing God...blaming God...”⁵⁶

Despite Melville’s ongoing God-conflict, he seemed to speak positively on a number of occasions about God in the role of Creator and tended to be negative about Darwinianism. David Larsen claimed that Melville “was thoroughly disgusted with the radical ideas trumpeted by Charles Darwin (1809–1882), Karl Marx (1818–1874), Ernst Renan (1823–1892), and David Strauss (1808–1874),” all of whom were his contemporaries.⁵⁷

In *White-Jacket* Melville wrote picturesquely,

We mortals are all on board a fast-sailing, never-sinking world-frigate, of which God was the shipwright, and she is but

⁵⁴ Ibid., 142.

⁵⁵ Lawrance Thompson, *Readings on Herman Melville* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1997), 55.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 53, 56.

⁵⁷ Larsen, *The Company of the Creative*, 383.

one craft in a Milky-Way fleet, of which God is the Lord High Admiral [and while] our last destination remains a secret to ourselves...yet our final haven was predestinated 'ere we slipped from the stocks at Creation.⁵⁸

In the same novel Melville speaks of one human in “this image of his Creator.”⁵⁹ If Melville were a Unitarian theist, he could still hold to the doctrine of a Creator. Laurie Robertson-Lorant indicated that during Melville’s later years “he joined All Soul’s Unitarian Church, which had become notorious when its pastor, Horatio Alger, was dismissed for molesting young boys.”⁶⁰ Other quotations from Melville appear to endorse belief in a Creator.

In *Redburn* the Melvillian narrator remarked that though some sailors run riot, “we feel and we know that God is the true Father of all, and that none of his children are without his care.”⁶¹ In *Mardi* he says: “All things form but one whole; the universe a Judea, and God Jehovah its head.”⁶²

Some of God’s attributes are highlighted in the various novels. In *Moby-Dick* in reference to humanity’s “august dignity,” the narrator indicates that it “radiates without end from God; Himself. The great God absolute!...His omnipresence, our divine equality!”⁶³ Also in *Moby-Dick* Melville alludes to “the unearthly conceit that *Moby-Dick* was ubiquitous [or omnipresent as to space]” and “not only ubiquitous, but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time)...”⁶⁴

However, despite having spoken earlier of God’s care for all people, the narrator of *Moby-Dick* also announces: “Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright,” and the whiteness of the whale is the “symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian’s deity.”⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Hillway, *Herman Melville*, 77.

⁵⁹ Herman Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick* (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 496.

⁶⁰ Laurie Robertson-Lorant, *Melville: A Biography* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1996), 510.

⁶¹ Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*, 154.

⁶² Melville, *Typee, Omoo, Mardi*, 673.

⁶³ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or the Whale* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1996), 121-22.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 192-93.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

Subsumed under the doctrinal category of theology proper is the biblical doctrine of predestination. Because Melville grew up within a Calvinistic church, naturally he comments upon this teaching. No doubt Melville autobiographically relates his own early experience when (through the mouth of Ishmael) he speaks of being “born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church.”⁶⁶

In *Mardi* Babbalanja sounds something like a South Seas philosophy professor when he asserts:

Confound not [what is] distinct. Fatalism presumes express and irrevocable edicts of heaven concerning particular events. Whereas, Necessity holds that all events are naturally linked, and inevitably follow each other, without providential interposition, though by the eternal letting of Providence.⁶⁷

Indeed, Babbalanja sounds like a South Seas John Calvin in saying that

in times past the future was foreknown of Oro; hence, in times past the future must have been foreordained. But in all things Oro is immutable. Wherefore our own future is foreknown and foreordained.⁶⁸

In his ultra-long poem *Clarel* he wrote:

The master ever spurned at fate,
Calvin's or Zeno's. Always still
Man-like he stood by man's free will
And power to effect each thing he would,
Did reason but pronounce it good.⁶⁹

Three vital observations emerge through this poetic spokesperson: 1) Calvinism seems to be categorized as one form of fatalism; 2) to be authentically human seems to be in possession of “free will;” and 3) “free will” needs to operate within the framework of “reason” if what humans do is to turn out “good.”

⁶⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁷ Melville, *Typee, Omoo, Mardi*, 1081.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1082-83.

⁶⁹ Melville, *Clarel*, 120.

In the same poem we read:

...in old Gnostic page blurred,
 Jehovah was construed to be
 Author of evil, yea, its god;
 and Christ divine his contrary:
 A god was held against a god,
 But Christ revered alone...⁷⁰

In other words, in ancient Gnosticism Jehovah was pitted against Christ, and Jehovah was regarded as the "Author of evil," making God the predestinator and creator of every evil.

In the quest after the white whale, Captain Ahab dogmatizes to Starbuck: "This whole act's immutably decreed."⁷¹ In the next chapter *Moby-Dick* is said to have a "predestinating head."⁷² In a line in one of Melville's poems he speaks of "code corroborating Calvin's creed."⁷³ Thus, in both poetry and novel it is apparent that the later Melville can never quite escape the tormenting whale of Calvinism fostered in and foisted upon the earlier Melville's upbringing.

C. HUMANITY

Any serious religious philosophy has to come to terms with both the excellence and evil within humanity. Wagenknecht speaks of Hawthorne and Melville's concurrence on "the inborn dignity of humanity."⁷⁴ The same literary critic remarked: "Like Hawthorne, [Melville] found Emersonian optimism unconvincing and felt the psychological truth of the doctrine of original sin even while he rejected it as dogma."⁷⁵

In *Moby-Dick* Melville penned:

Men may seem detestable...but man, in the ideal, is so noble
 and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature...That
 immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves...that it
 remains intact though all the outer character seems gone...

⁷⁰ Ibid., 291.

⁷¹ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 591.

⁷² Ibid., 602.

⁷³ *Collected Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Chicago: Packard & Co., 1947), 57.

⁷⁴ Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 64.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 75.

This august dignity...radiates without end from God; Himself!⁷⁶

The initial feel the reader gets of South Sea islanders (from Melville's perspective) is that of Edenic paradise and untainted islanders like Rousseau's "noble savages"—though in the end he acknowledges that they are cannibals! Yet Melville presented *Typee* as "a Paradise of innocent, unfallen Barbarians..."⁷⁷

Kerry McSweeney stated that in Melville's article on "Hawthorne and His Mosses" Herman Melville explained that his dark power "derives its force from its appeal to that Calvinistic sense of innate depravity and original sin, from whose visitation, in some sense or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free."⁷⁸ A considerable admission!

In *Pierre* the troubled reader "refers to his Bible, and there he reads most explicitly, that this world is unconditionally depraved and accursed; and that at all hazards [people] must come out of it."⁷⁹ Of course, Melville would have acknowledged that the expression "unconditionally depraved" is extra-biblical theological language. Also, we'd have to define what is meant by "come out of [the world]." Irrespective of these quibbles on our part, Melville shows that he is familiar with biblico-theological rootage.

Even though Melville did not accept the theological reality of original sin, he owned (through his travelers in *Mardi*) "that evil is after all a part of the human condition everywhere."⁸⁰ In fact, in *Redburn* the narrator appears to acknowledge that "the true calling of the reverend clergy...[is] to bring...sinners to repentance," thereby granting the reality of the hard datum of sin.⁸¹ When Melville closed out his characterization of the infamously stubborn, unbendable, incorrigible Bartleby, he wrote, "Ah, Bartelby. Ah, Humanity."⁸²

⁷⁶ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 121-22.

⁷⁷ Abel, *American Literature*, 374.

⁷⁸ Kerry McSweeney, *Moby Dick: Ishmael's Mighty Book* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 8.

⁷⁹ Herman Melville, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* (New York: Hendricks House, 1949), 244.

⁸⁰ Abel, *American Literature*, 383.

⁸¹ Melville, *Redburn*, 194.

⁸² Melville, *Complete Shorter Fiction*, 51.

D. THE DEVIL AND DEMONISM

In *Moby-Dick* Melville formed a lineup of “ponderous profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, Dante, and so on...”⁸³ Stubb tells a shipmate that Captain Ahab’s “the devil...The reason why you don’t see his tail is because...he carries it coiled away in his pocket.”⁸⁴ A piece of sailor’s superstition.

In *Pierre* Mrs. Glendenning tells the clergyman that it’s not for him to condemn her “son, though he were Lucifer, simmering in Hell!”⁸⁵ In *Israel Potter* John Paul Jones “hung like Apollyon...over the fated abyss of the hatchway.”⁸⁶

In *Moby-Dick* Captain Ahab announces in soliloquy: “I’m demoniac. I am madness maddened!”⁸⁷ Also in *Moby-Dick* Melville referred to “fallen angels.”⁸⁸ Additionally, alluding to Revelation 12, Melville compared the doomed Captain Ahab (in the last chapter of the book) to “Satan [who] would not sink to hell till [he] had dragged a living part of heaven along [too]...”⁸⁹ Alluding to James 2, Melville said (in *Billy Budd*) that “the scriptural devils...‘believe and tremble’...”⁹⁰ Once again Melville has shown himself to be steeped in the literature and language of Scripture on this subject.

E. CHRIST

One of Melville’s characters in his poem *Clarel* calls Christ “the human God Who dwelt among us...Shared all of man except the sin and mirth.”⁹¹ In the same poem Melville sounded orthodox when he wrote of the angel Gabriel who bore news: “To Mary, kneeling her before, Announcing a God, the mother she...”⁹²

Melville appeared to confirm Christ’s sinlessness when (in *Pierre*) someone asserts that Christ “did remain throughout [life] entirely without folly or sin.”⁹³ Indeed, Melville seemed to attest to Christ’s deity when

⁸³ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 396.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁸⁵ Melville, *Pierre*, 235.

⁸⁶ Melville, *Israel Potter*, 569.

⁸⁷ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 177.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 483.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 604.

⁹⁰ Melville, *Complete Shorter Fiction*, 435.

⁹¹ Melville, *Clarel*, 12.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 388.

⁹³ Melville, *Pierre*, 249.

(in *White-Jacket*) he noted that “Burnet and the best theologians demonstrate, that [Jesus’] nature was not merely human—was not that of a mere man of the world.”⁹⁴ In his first major novel Melville referred to “the divine and gentle Jesus.”⁹⁵

In *Pierre* Isabel wrote of “the world, for which the dear Saviour died.”⁹⁶ The last chapter in *Moby-Dick* is partially entitled “Third Day.”⁹⁷ The title alludes to the last time Moby Dick arose from the depths to conquer his foe, Captain Ahab. Ahab had urged his sailors to drive their nails into the whale. As a parody on Christ’s cry of dereliction (“Why hast thou forsaken me?”), Ahab pleaded: “My God, stand by me now!”⁹⁸ Yet Ahab was finally left, as it were, pinioned to his cross, the conquering whale.

Melville alluded to the traditional ascension of Christ when, on his trip to the Holy Land, he penned: “Found it...hard to realize...on Mount Olivet that from there Christ rose [in His ascension].”⁹⁹

Despite Melville’s extensive references to Christ and His sinlessness, we must remember that Melville adopted a position in the Unitarian Church, so (like Dickens) he regarded Jesus principally as a sinless human being, saying, “The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows.”¹⁰⁰ Tyrus Hillway summarized: “Melville’s concept of Christ...in *Clarel* seems to be this: he was a being who brought mankind the gift of an ideal and of hope that the ideal might be achieved. He blessed mankind with the dream of eventual perfection.”¹⁰¹ This view of Christ is rather on the order of traditional liberalism.

F. SALVATION

F. O. Matthiessen wrote that Melville

had been responsive...to [the] alteration from belief in the salvation of man through the mercy and grace of a sovereign God

⁹⁴ Melville, *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*, 692.

⁹⁵ Melville, *Typee, Omoo, Mardi*, 238.

⁹⁶ Melville, *Pierre*, 74.

⁹⁷ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 592.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 602.

⁹⁹ Melville, *Clarel*, xv.

¹⁰⁰ Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 76.

¹⁰¹ Hillway, *Herman Melville*, 130.

to belief in the potential divinity of every man. That alteration centered around the Crucifixion.¹⁰²

In *Moby-Dick* Ishmael says that “Christian kindness...has proved but hollow courtesy” so he tries his pagan friend who is said to have “redeemed” Ishmael’s dismal situation.¹⁰³

In *Omoo* Melville spoke of the London Missionary Society’s attempts with the South Sea islanders “as the most promising subjects for conversion.”¹⁰⁴ When the natives began dying of the Westerners’ diseases, they cried out, “We want no other salvation than to live in this world.”¹⁰⁵

Queequeg (in *Moby-Dick*) is informed by Captain Peleg that “he must show that he is converted.” Then Peleg adds: “Son of darkness,...art thou in communion with my Christian church?”¹⁰⁶ In order to get Queequeg aboard ship, Ishmael tells Peleg that Queequeg is a member of the First Congregational Church (with the result that Peleg believes him not to have been baptized correctly). In response to Peleg’s asking if Ishmael is joshing, Ishmael says that it’s “the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world [to which] we all belong...”¹⁰⁷ Later in *Moby-Dick* the black galley cook is told that swearing is “no way to convert sinners.”¹⁰⁸

In *Pierre* Melville referred to standard Protestantism’s position on salvation by grace when he mentioned “that most true doctrine of the utter nothingness of good works...”¹⁰⁹ Yet in a later chapter of the same novel Melville states that for “the grand condition of acceptance to God, Christianity calls upon men to renounce this world...”¹¹⁰ Melville mobilized this notion in order to rebuke the West for its materialism; and he failed to take into account the condition cited in Acts 16:31 or in a multitude of other NT texts.

Robertson-Levant observed that Herman Melville’s sister, Augusta, was a true believer who taught Sunday school and sought to win her

¹⁰² F. C. Mattiessen quoted by Harold Bloom, *Ahab*, 70.

¹⁰³ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 54.

¹⁰⁴ Melville, *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, 500-501.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 518.

¹⁰⁶ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 93.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹⁰⁹ Melville, *Pierre*, 160.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 243.

brother over. Nevertheless, despite Melville's vast familiarity with the Bible, "his quest *for religious certainty* had floundered in the Holy Land."¹¹¹

Essentially when it came to salvation-related issues, Melville had reduced Christianity to a matter of morality—(like Tolstoy) mooring his ship's anchor in the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule. In *Pierre* the narrator tells about a priest administering the sacramental bread when he was stuck with severe doubts (just as *Pierre* then was). Yet "the imperishable monument of his Holy Catholic Church, the imperishable record of his Holy Bible, the imperishable intuition of the innate truth of Christianity—these were the indestructible anchors which still held the priest"—in contrast with *Pierre*. "With *Pierre* it was a question whether certain vital acts of his were right or wrong."¹¹² In other words, faith's foundation for Melville lay not in doctrine, but in morality.

Melville (also in *Pierre*) spoke of "that greatest real miracle of all religions, the Sermon on the Mount."¹¹³ In *White-Jacket* Melville referred to Christ's enjoining us to "turn the other cheek" before declaring: "that passage [in Matthew] embodies the soul and substance of the Christian faith; without it Christianity were like any other [religious] faith."¹¹⁴

In *Mardi* the islanders "have set aside [like Melville] their desire to know the secrets of God and are satisfied to live together perfectly under the Golden Rule."¹¹⁵ Similarly in *Moby-Dick* Ishmael meets the pagan Queequeg (who worships his wooden statue) and asks: "What is worship—to do the will of God?—to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me [in other words, the Golden Rule]—that is the will of God."¹¹⁶ Consequently, Ishmael decides that he must turn idolater so as to do what Queequeg would want him to do. *Melville, then, reduced soteriology basically to a matter of ethics.* Melville settled for a very tarnished Golden Rule.

G. CHURCH

In his writings Melville mentioned Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Anglicans, and Catholics. He grew up among the Dutch Reformed and

¹¹¹ Robertson-Levant, *Melville: A Biography*, 399, italics added.

¹¹² Melville, *Pierre*, 240.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹¹⁴ Melville, *White-Jacket*, 687.

¹¹⁵ Hillway, *Herman Melville*, 80.

¹¹⁶ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 55.

later landed among Unitarians. In *Moby-Dick* Melville includes a sort of parody on Christian communion when Captain Ahab passes around grog to the sailors while he grasps their lances “at their crossed center.”¹¹⁷ Melville alluded to Communion when he wrote Hawthorne “that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the [Last] Supper...”¹¹⁸

Melville was obviously familiar with arguments over various modes of baptism, when he referred to the Congregational Church’s view in connection with Queequeg and Peleg’s comment that the native hadn’t been “baptized right.”¹¹⁹

Melville’s liberalized leanings inclined him more to “the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world; we all belong to that [group]...”¹²⁰ Melville’s universalism will be dealt with in more detail in the next section.

H. LAST THINGS

Captains Bildad and Peleg (whose names are both found in the Bible) were enlisting recruits for Captain Ahab’s voyage (in *Moby-Dick*). Bildad placed in Queequeg’s hands a tract entitled “The Latter Day Coming [of Christ] or No Time to Lose.” Bildad asked Captain Peleg if, when their last ship had been caught in a typhoon, they would think “of Death and the Judgment then?”¹²¹

In Melville’s poem *Clarel* Nehemiah represents the ardent, evangelistic conservative. Nehemiah announced:

“Yea, friend in Christ, in morning skies
Return he will over [Mount] Olivet:
And we shall greet him.”¹²²

Nehemiah had specifically returned to the Holy Land to be on hand for Christ’s imminent return.

Editor Walter Bezanson called Nehemiah “a millenarian.”¹²³ With tongue-in-cheek the narrator of *White-Jacket* spoke of “those maxims which, in hope of bringing about a Millennium, we [in the Church]

¹¹⁷ Abel, *American Literature*, 405.

¹¹⁸ Hardwick, *Melville*, 56.

¹¹⁹ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 94.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

¹²² Melville, *Clarel*, 37.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, iiv.

busily teach to the heathen, [yet] we Christians ourselves disregard.”¹²⁴ This statement sounds like the rhetoric of postmillennialism.

The warning is sounded in *Moby-Dick* that to take on the Sperm Whale could be the entry to “a quick eternity.”¹²⁵ On Ahab’s ship the second mate Stubb engages the black sea cook in an interchange when the cook says that “some blessed angel will come and fetch him.” In sailorly metaphors Stubb replies, “So, then, you expect to go up into our main-top, do you...when you are dead?” Then in more unmetaphorical language Stubb asks the cook about his “get[ting] into heaven.”¹²⁶

Melville was assuredly versed in the language of the Book of Revelation. In *Moby-Dick* he spoke of “the Vision of St. John, [in which] white robes are given to the redeemed, and the four-and-twenty elders stand clothed in white before the great white throne, and the Holy One that sitteth there [is] white like wool...”¹²⁷ The Shaker prophet whom the crew comes across had been “announcing the speedy opening of the seventh vial” found in the Book of Revelation.¹²⁸

Toward the end of *Moby-Dick* the captain of the misnamed ship, the *Delight*, prepares to lower a corpse into the ocean, beginning with the words, “May the resurrection and the life”—until he is interrupted by Captain Ahab’s brusqueness.¹²⁹ The final resurrection is also referred to in *White-Jacket* (“must rise at the Last Day”).¹³⁰

In *White-Jacket* the incidental comment is made that “all good Christians believe that any minute the last day may come, and the terrible combustion of the entire planet earth.”¹³¹ The statement combines a clear-cut doctrine of imminence with a borrowing of material from 2 Peter 3. Scraps of blubber aboard Captain Ahab’s ship were thrown into a furnace which, the narrator said, “smells like the left wing of the day of judgment; it is an argument for the pit.”¹³²

There are numerous references to hell (or its synonyms) in Melville’s novels. Melville was familiar with the Greek-derived term “tophet,”

¹²⁴ Melville, *White-Jacket*, 691.

¹²⁵ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 191.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 316-17.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 333.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 568.

¹³⁰ Melville, *White-Jacket*, 456.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 482.

¹³² Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 447.

using it both in *Moby-Dick*¹³³ and in *Israel Potter*.¹³⁴ Melville drew upon the account of Lazarus, Dives, and “the fiery pit” from Luke 16.¹³⁵ In Father Mapple’s renowned sermon on Jonah, Melville referred to “dreadful punishment” as “just.”¹³⁶ The Quaker Captain Bildad warned Captain Peleg of ending up in “the fiery pit.”¹³⁷ Captain Ahab spoke of being carried “to Hell’s flames.”¹³⁸ Later Ahab argues logically that if he could sense pain without his fleshly (missing) leg, then “why mayst not thou, carpenter, feel the fiery pains of Hell for ever, and without [having] a body?”¹³⁹ Indeed, Melville’s notions of the afterlife become apparent through the mouthpiece of Ishmael who states (to Queequeg): “hell is an idea first born on an undigested apple dumpling; and then perpetuated through the hereditary dyspepsias nurtured by Ramadans [that is, fasts such as Queequeg had just endured].”¹⁴⁰ Rather than seeing hell as some objective biblical reality, then, Melville viewed it as an invention of discomfortable human experience (“dyspepsias”) extrapolated outwardly.

A more orthodox view of hell appears in the mouth of a character in *Pierre* who acknowledges that “in the grave there is no help, no prayer thither may go, no forgiveness thence may come, so that...for that useless penitent his doom is eternal...; with him it is Hell-day...”¹⁴¹

Despite Melville’s awareness of an orthodox doctrine of hell, however, on a number of occasions he spoke as a universalist (undercutting any substantive rationale for Christian missions).

In *Moby-Dick* the character Queequeg brings to the forefront Melville’s universalistic propensities. Through Ishmael’s voice he wrote:

“We good Presbyterian Christians should be charitable in these things, and not fancy ourselves so vastly superior to... pagans...because of their half-crazy conceits [about worshipping wooden images, etc.],” so [says Melville,] “he seemed to

¹³³ Ibid., 9.

¹³⁴ Melville, *Israel Potter*, 589.

¹³⁵ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 10.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 49.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 83.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 465.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 499.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 92.

¹⁴¹ Melville, *Pierre*, 336.

be content, and there [we should] let him rest. All our arguing with him would not avail; let him be, I say..."¹⁴²

Therefore, earlier in *Moby-Dick* Ishmael concluded: "I must...unite with [the idolater] in his [worship]." ¹⁴³ Later Melville opined: "I have no objection to any person's religion...so long as that person does not kill or insult any other person..."¹⁴⁴ Similarly Melville wrote in *Redburn*: "Though the Christian era had not then begun, Socrates died the death of the Christian; and though [David] Hume was not a Christian in theory, yet he, too, died the death of the Christian—humble, composed, without bravado..."¹⁴⁵ Melville made it sound as if a subjective tranquility at the time of death-passage was the same as being a Christian.

His universalism appeared in the same novel when he penned: "We talk of the Turks, and abhor the cannibals; but may not some of them go to heaven before some of us?"¹⁴⁶ A Christian would desire to ask Melville, "Given this position, why only 'some of them'?" and "On what basis do any people 'go to heaven'?"

Melville's equalizing effect is evidenced in *Mardi* when he declared:

In heaven, at last, our...father Adam will greet all alike, and sociality forever prevail. Christian shall join hands between Gentile and Jew; grim Dante forget his Infernos, and shake hands with fat Rabelais; and monk Luther...talk over old times with Pope Leo.¹⁴⁷

To make such a reductionist statement is to flatten all doctrinal distinctions (involving exact positional opposites) into nothingness. One wonders (in light of such universalist declarations) how Melville could speak disparagingly (in *Moby-Dick*) of "solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all?"¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 87.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁴⁵ Melville, *Redburn*, 317.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁴⁷ Melville, *Mardi*, 673.

¹⁴⁸ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 380.

VI. CONCLUSION

Harold Bloom's conclusion that the mature Melville is not a Christian seems well-founded. Indeed, Melville seemed to flounder amid ambiguity. As Melville depicted a doctrine of God in his novels, no especially novel quirks seem to emerge in the area of theology proper. Through his characters he mouthed rather orthodox understandings of creation, angels, the devil, and demons. Though Melville represented evil as globally pervasive, he dispensed with any Christian doctrine of original sin. Although there are references to Christ-as-divine sprinkled amid the pages of his novels, Melville's later Unitarianism evidently prevailed in his treatment of the Savior's personhood. While numerous references to the traditional tenets of orthodox Christian eschatology crop up in the speech balloons of his characters, Melville's liberalism tended to nudge him in the direction of universalism.

With reference to the subject of salvation Melville seemed slanted away from a serious Christian concept of sin and salvation. He praised a Tolstoyanesque treatment of the Sermon on the Mount and therefore operated with an anti-missions animus. Yet Melville couldn't evade what Darrel Abel called "the sharkish facts of life."¹⁴⁹

Like Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, Melville felt tortured by the need to pin down this haunting, massive God-idea, but it proved to him so uncontrollable. Wherever he searched, it seemed to elude him. Like Ishmael in the same book, Melville quested the world-over (in places such as the cannibal islands of the South Seas or later as a pilgrim to the Holy Land) seeking to settle his struggle. His liberalism never landed him at the dock of Emersonian optimism, yet neither did he firmly rest on the Gibraltar rock of biblical revelation.

Nathaniel Hawthorne said of his friend Melville: "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief..."¹⁵⁰ Therefore the famed writer who grew up within the dogmatism of Calvinism wallowed amid the waves of ambiguity and angst.

¹⁴⁹ Abel, *American Literature*, 440.

¹⁵⁰ Wagenknecht, *Cavalcade of the American Novel*, 75.