

# The Many Masks of Melville's God<sup>1</sup>

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O God (I prayed), come through  
The cloud; hard task Thou settest man  
To know Thee.

—*Clarel* 2.18.133–35

## I. "A Pondering Man"

On Sunday, December 9, 1849, when considering what awaited him in "this antiquated gable-ended old town" in Germany, Herman Melville scribbled an off-handed self-portrait. He was not thinking of himself as a world traveler or a famous author. Instead, in the privacy of his journal he simply anticipated that Cologne would offer "much to interest a pondering man like me" (*Journals* 35). Sophia Hawthorne, Nathaniel's wife, experienced firsthand the epistolary and conversational energy of this "pondering man." In a letter to her sister Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Mrs. Hawthorne copied "a very remarkable quotation" from the mid-April 1851 letter Melville had written to Hawthorne describing the tragic reach of *The House of the Seven Gables*. She also described her pleasure in listening to "this growing man dash his tumultuous waves of thought up against Mr. Hawthorne's great, genial, comprehending silences." In this high tide of discourse, Melville "speaks his innermost about GOD, the Devil & Life" (qtd. in Leyda 926; uppercase in original).

Melville's letters to Hawthorne also contain "tumultuous waves of thought" that he did not always control: "I could rip an hour. You see, I began with a little criticism . . . and here I have landed in Africa" (*Correspondence* 187). In the process of praising Hawthorne's novel, Melville discusses "the visable [*sic*] truth," "the absolute condition of present things," and the deification of the "sovereign" self (186). In a surprising passage, he announces that "the Problem of the Universe" is really not so mysterious after all. But then he complicates matters:

We incline to think that God cannot explain His own secrets, and that He would like a little information upon certain points Himself. We mortals astonish Him as much as He us. But it is this *Being* of the matter; there lies the knot with which we choke ourselves. As soon as you say *Me*, a *God*, a *Nature*, so soon you jump off from your stool and hang from the beam. Yes, that word is the hangman. Take God out of the dictionary, and you would have Him in the street. (186; italics in original)<sup>2</sup>

What Melville actually means here—is he decrying the danger that comes with limiting one’s understanding of God to a dictionary definition?—is of less import to the present discussion than recognizing that any mention of “the Problem of the Universe” could not be dissociated from the continually reconceived problem of God and the attending relationship between physical and spiritual, phenomenal and numinous realms of existence.<sup>3</sup>

Melville rejected what he took to be the pedestrian achievements of *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), his first two books, in favor of exploring what he calls in *Mardi* (1849) “the world of mind” (557). By embarking on a lifelong literary voyage replete with theological intensities, Melville takes “God out of the dictionary” and pursues Him across the widening expanse of many written pages. This chapter will explore how Melville dramatizes the nature and agency of various deific entities. In such works as *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick* (1851), and *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852), he generates a conflicting range of reference that includes highly conventional figurations of the orthodox Judeo-Christian God; comedic, often profane, delineations of pagan gods; iconoclastic, even blasphemous, interrogations of a frightening, unknowable God; allusions to a pantheon of mythic gods; a multitude of incidental rhetorical tropes referencing God and the gods; and even the paradoxical notion that God’s “Voice” is “profound Silence” (*Pierre* 208). God and the gods are at once attentive to human affairs and indifferent to human affairs. God is a companionate presence immanent within human beings, at times even a beneficent, democratizing muse; God is a

tyrannical oppressor of human beings, at times the deaf progenitor of indifferent natural forces. In *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, Melville advances this endeavor by creating narrators who reveal the workings of their minds in the activity of thinking, a version of the seemingly spontaneous process that animated his conversational and epistolary interactions with Hawthorne. Indeed, Sophia Hawthorne noted the tireless energies Melville expended to “get at the Truth . . . having settled nothing as yet” (Leyda 926). The many masks of Melville’s God give shifting, provisional form to whatever transcendent divinity exists beyond the verbal reach of narrators and characters. Melville’s approach to writing about God was continually exploratory and open-ended rather than fixed and doctrinal. He never settled anything. He was concerned more with dramatizing circumstances faced by narrators and characters in their unfolding, experiential moments than with adumbrating the intricacies of theological dogma.

## II. Orthodox and Heterodox

On August 19, 1819, Herman Melvill (as the name was originally spelled) was baptized into the Dutch Reformed Church. He was raised in a household steeped in the Bible-centered Reformation Protestantism that found the fallen human being helpless to attain salvation without God’s freely bestowed irresistible grace. The more dire, damnation-tinged implications of the Dutch Reformed mindset were softened by an insistent faith in the nurturing, restorative agency of Divine Providence, the belief that a watchful, merciful God authors the unfolding human story.<sup>4</sup>

Allan Melvill, Herman’s father, was a highly conventional religious man whose liberal Unitarian sensibilities seemed to balance his wife’s more stringent Dutch Reformed convictions (Sherrill 488). Allan Melvill was prone to administering pietistic advice. For example, in his letter of October 27, 1824, to his nephew Guert Gansevoort, who was about to take his first voyage as a midshipman, Melvill offers the sort of pieties he later served his children—Gansevoort, Helen, and Her-

man—once they were old enough to understand him: “But above all, my little sailor Boy, let me conjure you, *forget not your Creator* in the dawn of youth . . . neglect not the *Bible*, regard it as *your polar star*, its religious precepts & moral doctrines are alike pure & sublime” (Leyda 19; italics in original). Although his father died in 1832, when Herman was twelve years old, Allan’s voice continued to resonate within his imagination. Hershel Parker describes the ineradicable influence Allan Melville had on his loving and devoted eldest children: “No matter that his pronouncements were conventional opinions elegantly couched, they sounded in his children’s ears as if they were products of his unique hard-won philosophical comprehension of the workings of the universe”(60). Only later would Melville perceive such utterances not as determinate conclusions of a magisterial order, but as materials to adapt to specific narrative purposes. Indeed, his parents’ religious traditions served Melville as fertile resources for the many deeply felt orthodox dramatizations that appear throughout four and a half decades of literary activity.

Following the publication of *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville became a target of religious conservatives for his scathing, polemical attacks on Christian missionaries in sunny Polynesia (*Typee* 124–27, 195–99; *Omoo* 122–26, 172–76, 184–92). Melville’s special focus was the hegemonic imperatives that led these missionaries to colonize and debase indigenous populations. In *Mardi*, Melville turned his polemical impulses to the service of religious satire. Melville’s narrator parodies those decidedly mortal beings that turn themselves into cartoonish demigods. The narrator himself adopts the self-serving fiction that he is “some gentle demi-god” (140). In fact, many islands of Mardi’s archipelago are cluttered with a proliferating retinue of self-ordained “strolling divinities” (166). During his travels on Maramma, the narrator also satirizes the luxurious excesses of Roman Catholicism. While criticizing the perversions of organized Christianity in *Typee* and *Omoo* and mocking them in *Mardi*, Melville does not attack the Judeo-Christian God. However much he excoriated the missionaries and their

conquering, codependent military operatives, he remained fully capable of separating the specific rhetorical demands of polemics and satire from narrative occasions that called for powerful, celebratory depictions of a conventional Judeo-Christian God. This God, whether existing as a rhetorical trope or as an article of belief, remained a touchstone presence throughout his creative life. For example, Melville's narrator demonstrates nothing but reverence for Oro, Mardi's sovereign God above all other gods. A distant and mysterious being, Oro remains beyond the reach of satire and parody. He is one version of Melville's true God, and Alma is his Christ-like son. In fact, when the philosopher Babbalanja renounces his wayward, self-defeating skepticism, he humbly accepts epistemological limitation: "Some things there are, we must not think of. Beyond one obvious mark, all human lore is vain. . . . All I have said ere this, that wars with Alma's precepts, I here recant. Here I kneel, and own great Oro and his sovereign son" (630).

The point is not that Melville himself ever sees religious orthodoxy as a final resolution to "the universal problem of all things" (*Moby-Dick* 293), but that he recognizes the abiding power of Christian orthodoxy to give legitimate shape and value to select passages in the human story. At the very least, the orthodox God of Melville's childhood remains a readily available source for a kind of in-text pulpit oratory. In *White-Jacket* (1850), when discussing Jesus' admonition "to turn the left cheek if the right be smitten," the narrator contends, "That passage embodies the soul and substance of the Christian faith. . . . And that passage will yet, by the blessing of God, turn the world" (321). Near the end of *White-Jacket*, the narrator evokes the Christian God to establish a determinate macrocosmic metaphor of the world-ship built and commanded by God: "We mortals are all on board a fast-sailing, neversinking world-frigate, of which God was the shipwright; and she is but one craft in a Milky-Way fleet of which God is the Lord High Admiral" (398).

Such highly charged affirmations provide foundational points of departure for Ishmael's wide-ranging, divided interrogations of the nature and meaning of disparate divine entities. Within *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael

appears both as a tyro actor in the reconstructed past-tense narrative and as the present-tense composer of the unfolding text. Ishmael's narrative voice comes into being through the emergent energies of his expansive, often digressive, compositional process.<sup>5</sup> The exigencies of any given situation create conditions to which Ishmael responds. Any affirmation of the orthodox God, therefore, becomes contextually true, or applicable, to the specific moment, rather than ultimately true, or applicable, for the entire text. In considering *Moby-Dick's* complicated narrative form, one must recognize how the professed truth of one moment might contradict or displace the professed truth of a subsequent moment. A foolish consistency, to borrow Emerson's phrase, is not only the hobgoblin of little minds: In *Moby-Dick*, a search for mere consistency imposes arbitrary criteria on the protean adaptations of Ishmael's present-tense narrative. For example, Ishmael celebrates the pulpit as a synecdoche for the primacy of Christian orthodoxy: "The pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow" (40).

These heartfelt sentiments prepare the reader for one of the great set pieces in *Moby-Dick*. Father Mapple's sermon redacts in a sailor's vernacular the biblical tale of Jonah and the whale.<sup>6</sup> In the sermon, Jonah's whale behaves as a completely subservient instrument of God's vengeance. Mapple's assertion that "God is everywhere" reflects his abiding faith in the ubiquitous presence of Divine Providence (47). The whale swallows Jonah whole, and, following the wayward prophet's repentance, releases Jonah to actualize God's purpose—"to preach the Truth in the face of Falsehood!" (48). Ishmael presents the Mapple sermon without postscript commentary, although Mapple's warning to the "pilot of the Living God" (47) might well serve as an implicit countercontext and possible corrective to Captain Ahab's heterodox, insurrectionist repudiations of the moral rectitude of Jonah's God. Mapple's

sermon remains an iconic delineation of one man's faith in "this sure Keel of the Ages" (48). Like Jonah's whale, the figure of Moby Dick that appears in Ishmael's retelling of the *Town Ho's* story operates as an instrument of Divine vengeance—a circumstance that makes the White Whale subservient here to God's interruptive divine plan. The resolution of the conflict between Steelkilt and Radney "seemed obscurely to involve with the whale a certain wondrous, inverted visitation of one of those so called judgments of God which at times are said to overtake some men" (242). Indeed, as Ishmael notes, "Heaven itself seemed" to commission the whale to slaughter Radney and thus prevent Steelkilt from enacting "the damning thing he would have done" (255–56).

In these instances, Ishmael depicts the power of the sovereign Christian God, but he is by no means confined by a single creed. The same Ishmael who proclaims the pulpit as the center of the Christian faith soon gets down on his knees to worship cannibal Queequeg's wooden idol Yojo. Using a mock-syllogism to justify a blatantly blasphemous act, Ishmael satirizes his own capacity for self-serving rationalization: "Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth—pagans and all included—can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood? . . . Ergo, I must turn idolator" (52). By having Ishmael identify himself as a good Presbyterian, Melville overtly baits the righteous avengers of the Presbyterian press. Not for too little did Melville earn the ire of reviewers, who had not forgotten his caustic treatment of Christianity's holy mission in the South Seas. Their Presbyterian God could never be construed as a "magnanimous God," and these Cromwellian reviewers did not spare the ax.<sup>7</sup> Through the irreverent power of comic burlesque, Melville decenters the reigning ideology of Christian orthodoxy. By celebrating the humanity of pagan Queequeg, Melville embraces the radical principle of cultural and theological relativism. In a similar vein, Ishmael mocks "the grand Programme of Providence" (7) and later uses Queequeg's "great confidence in the excellence of Yojo's judgment" to satirize this "rather good sort of god, who . . . in all cases did not succeed in his benevolent designs" (68).

In a more serious vein, Melville recognizes that the concept of Providence can be contorted into the very human attempt to construe one's own behavior as reflecting providential approbation. In his story "Benito Cereno," for example, the captain of a Spanish slave ship marvels at how the American captain Amasa Delano "had the Prince of Heaven's safe conduct through all ambuscades"; with complacent self-congratulation, Delano professes that "all is owing to Providence" (115). In his smug way, Delano cannot see that his "Providence" is nothing more than a self-generated fiction justifying slavery, colonial domination, and an imperial legal system that exacts a savage brand of justice.

These contrastive moments constitute interpretive acts that are true to the demands of their respective narrative situations, but they do not possess hermeneutical priority. Indeed, they do not offer anything like a single paradigmatic expression of Melville's view of God. In another passage seemingly designed to inflame Christian conservatives, Ishmael affects the tone of oratorical self-righteousness and rejects the supremacy of *any* single theological system: "I say, we good Presbyterian Christians should be charitable in these things, and not fancy ourselves so vastly superior to other mortals, pagans and what not, because of their half-crazy conceits on these subjects. . . . And Heaven have mercy on us all—Presbyterians and Pagans alike—for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head and sadly need mending" (81). Like Melville, Ishmael is "a pondering man" of expansive, flexible, accommodating sensibility. Ishmael does not approach the mysterious, masked deity convinced of the unassailable correctness of any creed, but through open-minded speculations regarding the putative efficacy of none, some or all of these "half-crazy conceits." As a narrator, Ishmael presents himself through the ever accumulating sum of dialectically divergent points of view. Even the heterodox Ahab, a "grand, ungodly god-like man" (79), has his rare moments of orthodox expression. Holding the musket to Starbuck, Ahab exclaims, "There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod.—On deck!" (474). Like Ishmael, Ahab articulates an expansive

range of deific figures, from the most conventional to the most profane and blasphemous. As Captain Peleg notes, “Ahab’s been in colleges, as well as ’mong the cannibals” (79). Like Ishmael, Ahab’s deific tropes are frequently products of specific intellectual or emotional responses. Ishmael dramatizes Ahab as he lives through many moods.

Melville applies conventional delineations of the God image not only to matters of theology and cultural ideology, but also to very distinct, celebratory political purposes. In *White-Jacket*, for example, the narrator launches a chauvinistic affirmation of America as the redeemer nation fueled by the determinate principle of Manifest Destiny. In fervent tropes reflective of contemporary political oratory, the narrator proclaims, “And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time. . . . God has given to us, for a future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans. . . . God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race” (151). In this case, a conventional God supports the most conventional of political platitudes. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael applies a politically motivated deific figuration to a more complex celebration of the workers’ democratic world. Ishmael adapts the hyperbolic tones of contemporary political oratory to describe a God who sanctions and sustains the egalitarian world of work. Gone is *Mardi*’s distant, sovereign Oro or Father Mapple’s jealous, exacting Jehovah. Arrived is an Everyman’s God who rejects the aristocratic privilege of “robed investiture” in favor of “that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!” (117). Ishmael taps into energies that animate the contemporary transcendentalist insistence on the divinity of man. In fact, this democratic God sanctifies Ishmael’s unfolding creative venture. He calls on God—“Thou just Spirit of Equality”—to infuse his literary performance and thus connect him with such predecessors as John Bunyon, Miguel de Cervantes, and Andrew Jackson. This paean reinvents the Puritan God as a populist advocate of the “kingly commons” (117).

### III. Ishmael, Ahab, and Pierre: “The Interlinked Terrors and Wonders of God”

Ishmael’s evocations of God and the gods often erupt as sudden rhetorical tropes. One finds an abundance of cautionary moments—“God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!” (*Moby-Dick* 274)—as well as numerous iconoclastic displacements of orthodox Christianity—“Long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e., what is called savagery” (222). The deity might make a cameo appearance as Ishmael’s companionate muse of artistic incompleteness: “God keep me from ever completing anything” (145). The reign of Providence covers “the inscrutable tides of God” (159) and extends to the migratory patterns of sperm whales: “Besides, when making a passage from one feeding-ground to another, the sperm whales, guided by infallible instinct—nay, rather, secret intelligence from the Deity—mostly swim in *veins*” (199; italics in original). Ishmael writes of “sea-gods” (303), “the hands of [Queequeg’s] gods” (321), Pip’s “big white God” (178), and those “gods [who] shipwrecked [Captain Pollard] again upon unknown rocks and breakers” (206).

Besides such frequent deific eruptions, Ishmael mounts extended explorations of the nature and agency of God and the gods that propel the reader far beyond the narrow contours of orthodox Christian theology. Ishmael exemplifies how the human mind, rather than remaining imprisoned within unrelieved servitude, can stand in a defiant state of intellectual rebellion. In “The Lee Shore” chapter, Ishmael describes an intransigent conflict between the liberating powers of human thought and the conspiratorial antagonism of natural and deific forces: “Glimpses do ye seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea, while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore?” (107). For Ishmael, Ahab, and Pierre, to pursue freedom of mind and soul is to stand as Promethean figures—defiant romantic rebels who wish to

usurp the proprietary exclusion of the God realm. Empowered by intellectual energies uncontained by orthodoxy, Ishmael depicts how the most august and powerful aspects of the natural world—in this case, the sperm whale’s “vast tail”—provide “comprehensible” metaphorical and symbolic forms that permit him to reach *toward* a distant, incomprehensible, and terrifying God: “For what are the comprehensible terrors of man compared with the interlinked terrors and wonders of God!” (109). Ishmael’s whale is not simply a magnificent “god-like” (346) being, but he is also an inscrutable object that evokes without containing or specifying the dreadful mysteries of God’s hidden nature. The brow of the whale constitutes a fit emblem of how surfaces might suggest the teasing presence of indecipherable forms: “Human or animal, the mystical brow is as that great golden seal affixed by the German emperors to their decrees. It signifies—‘God: done this day by my hand’ . . . . But in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it . . . you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature” (346). The brow of the whale, unreadable and overwhelming though it remains, is a living sign of the transcendent God’s displaced grandeur and mystery.

The divine attributes of any sperm whale are only intensified when Ishmael ponders the specific godlike attributes of the “ubiquitous” Moby Dick (183). In “The Whiteness of the Whale” chapter, Ishmael reads the divine intimations stirred by the whale’s pallor. The language of orthodox Christianity is simply not adequate to express the expansiveness and terror of this God. He incorporates references to disparate religious mythologies—Zoroastrian, Hellenic, Native American—and thereby suggests that a fit conception of God can be achieved not with-in any specific doctrine per se, but only by accumulating an ever expanding range of eclectic configurations:

Though even in the higher mysteries of the most august religions [whiteness] has been made the symbol of divine spotlessness and power; by the Persian fire-worshippers, the white-forked flame being held the holiest on the altar; and in the Greek mythologies, Great Jove himself being made incarnate in the snow-white bull, and though to the noble Iroquois, the midwinter sacrifice of the sacred White Dog was by far the holiest festival of their theology. . . . Yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood. (189)

“The Whiteness of the Whale” constitutes Ishmael’s most penetrating attempt to suggest the doubleness that exists in nature and the absolute. God seems pure love; God seems terrifying; God seems enticing and beneficent; God seems frightening and malevolent. Indeed, in an image that depicts natural force as a compressed symbol of the beauty and horror of the displaced divinity, Ishmael concludes that “all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within” (195).

Only by plunging through the quotidian forms of social existence can one look behind the masks of God and achieve a direct vision of the deity’s vexing doubleness—a vision that ironically excludes one from the company of sane, reasonable mortals. The cabin boy Pip experiences just such a transit. When abandoned by Stubb in the midst of the sea’s “heartless immensity,” Pip undergoes a traumatic transfiguration and thereby attains a privileged view of creation: His soul, while “not drowned entirely” is “carried down alive to wondrous depths.” He visits “the unwarped primal world” and there sees “God’s foot on 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” (414). In this extreme formulation, the

human realm of normative, rational consciousness remains inimical to the supernatural order of an “indifferent God.” To see and speak the ways of this God is to be seen and understood as mad. Ishmael posits an irreconcilable split between earthly and divine spheres—a position later developed in *Pierre*. Plotinus Plinlimmon’s pamphlet argues for the complete incompatibility of earthly, or “horological,” wisdom, and heavenly, or “chronometrical,” wisdom (*Pierre* 210–15).<sup>8</sup> In describing Pip, Ishmael has moved well beyond those conventional depictions of the providential God in favor of a silent God detached from the realm of human affairs. Indeed, shortly thereafter, Ishmael paints a portrait of a deaf and distant God: “The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice” (450). Ishmael not only tries to contain God within the language of conventional religious orthodoxy, but he also delineates the dialectical counterpoint to this endeavor when suggesting that God remains implacably beyond the contextual world of human beings and their tenuous semiotic constructs.

Ahab and Pierre resist the notion that God is distant and unreachable. In the fiery monomania that fuels his complicated, purposeful vengeance, Ahab depicts how the indigent human self can act and speak in terms of Promethean, God-assaulting defiance. In “The Quarter-deck” chapter, Ahab’s “pasteboard masks” speech offers *the* foundational paradigm expressing the theological basis animating Ahab’s quest. He is not interested, as Starbuck claims, in inflicting “vengeance on a dumb brute . . . that simply smote [Ahab] from blindest instinct” (163–64). Ahab rejects Starbuck’s premise and proceeds with his crucial “little lower layer” of explanation. To Ahab, all things are infused with the divine purpose:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the

prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. (164)<sup>9</sup>

Ahab reverses the Platonic and transcendental insistence on the absolute benevolence of Divine forms and forces and replaces it with a God that orchestrates the “inscrutable malice” of *Moby Dick* (164). According to Ahab, there may be “naught beyond” the “pasteboard masks” of material forms; there may be nothing other than a blank, godless realm of spiritual nullity and physical force, but for Ahab, the thought of defeating God’s purposeful evil is “enough” (164). Ahab hates a God-ordained cosmology that perpetuates and condones willful evil. Ahab, therefore, anoints himself a Promethean antagonist of these malignant entities. Essentially, Ahab blames God for the consequences of the fall and sees Providence as a tyrannical force tormenting indigent mortals.

At the center of Ahab’s antagonism to the God realm resides his compensatory, self-deifying rhetoric. He would “strike the sun if it insulted [him]” (164). Through his fevered tropes, Ahab attempts to make the absent gods assume vicarious presence. His words attempt to bring the gods down to fighting size: “Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one. That’s more than ye, ye great gods, ever were. I laugh and hoot at ye, ye cricket-players, ye pugilists, ye deaf Burkes and blinded Bendigoes! . . . Come forth from behind your cotton bags! I have no long gun to reach ye” (143). Repeatedly, Ahab deprecates the God-realm. Pip’s madness especially infuriates Ahab: “There can be no hearts above the snow-line. Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye did beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines” (522). What Starbuck calls Ahab’s “heaven-insulting purpose” (169) extends to Ahab’s attitude toward pagan and mythic divinities. “The Candles” chapter presents an extreme manifestation of Ahab’s self-empowering rhetoric. He is Prometheus tortured and chained to a rock, but remaining the unrepentant, and highly vocal, rebel: “Oh, thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that

to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. . . . I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here” (507).<sup>10</sup>

However frenzied, blasphemous, and self-defeating Ahab’s rhetoric may be, he nevertheless retains what Captain Peleg calls “his humanities” (79). When he speaks with Starbuck in “The Symphony” chapter, Ahab presents himself as a chastened tragic figure burdened by the weight of impossible tasks:

I feel deadly faint, bowed, and humped, as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise. God! God! God!—crack my heart!—stave my brain!—mockery! mockery! bitter, biting mockery of grey hairs, have I lived enough joy to wear ye; and seem and feel thus intolerably old? Close! stand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God (544).

This climactic moment celebrates human federation and fealty, even as it directly precipitates Ahab’s final rejection of the contextual, nurturing sphere of human felicity. Ultimately, Ahab is no match for “the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam” (548). Indeed, Moby Dick’s divine attributes surpass Jupiter and Jove. When Moby Dick finally appears within the dramatic action and initiates the sequence that ends with the *Pequod*’s destruction, Ishmael tears away the masks of God and simply notes that “the grand god revealed himself, sounded, and went out of sight” (549).

Like Ahab, Pierre is another self-anointed Promethean figure who can only fail to contain, comprehend, or conquer God. As Melville repeatedly dramatizes, when human beings believe they can *be* and *act* like God, they court, and eventually achieve, disaster for themselves and others. In *Mardi*, the demigod Taji, with “eternity . . . in his eye,” renounces the contextual world of social forms and dooms himself

to seek the Absolute even as he flees indefatigable, vengeful pursuers “over an endless sea” (654). In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab’s God-obsession destroys the ship of the world. Whereas Ahab remains a man of heroic stature and tragic majesty, Pierre becomes little more than an overreaching fool who wrestles the “ambiguities” surrounding his putative half-sister Isabel into a fiction of divine warrant. With a mocking voice, the third person narrator prescribes the inevitable failure of Pierre’s quest to actualize what he feels are those “divine commands upon him to befriend and champion Isabel, through all conceivable contingencies of Time and Chance” (106). Early in the text, the narrator’s sarcasm foreshadows Pierre’s inevitable doom: “We shall yet see . . . whether Fate hath not just a little bit of a word or two to say in this world; we shall see whether this wee scrap of latinity be very far out of the way—*Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse*” (14; italics in original). This “wee scrap” literally translates as “No one against God but God himself,” or more liberally as “Only God can oppose God.” In his foolish innocence and cloying self-righteousness, Pierre is no god. He assumes the existence of his own deific attributes and expresses them through fiercely overheated declamations. He sets conditions for God and the gods, “ye Invisibles,” and proclaims that regardless of whether these divine lights forsake him he will “declare [himself] an equal power with [God and man]” (107). Although voicing the hyperbolic tropes of the self-deifying Prometheus, Pierre remains a “thing” of clay, a human being incapable of containing divine power: “But Pierre, though charged with the fire of all divineness, his containing thing was made of clay. Ah, muskets the gods have made to carry infinite combustions, and yet made them of clay!” (107). *Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse*.

Once again, Melville dramatizes the incompatibility of human and divine realms of existence. Pierre finds nothing but mystery, failure, and the detritus that comes with an obsessively willed self-destruction. According to the narrator, Pierre believes that the unknowable mysteries of life are derived from the unknowable mysteries of God: “He saw that human life doth truly come from that, which all men are agreed to

call by the name of *God*; and that it partakes of the unravelable inscrutableness of God” (141). Thus Pierre casts himself within an impossibly contradictory role. Because Isabel’s mysteries come from God, these mysteries are beyond resolution. By loving Isabel and destroying his social past, he marries confusion and cross-purposes. Pierre is so completely identified as a force of rhetorical self-invention that he implicitly places himself in diametrical opposition to the paradoxical “Voice” of a silent God. The narrator remarks, “Silence is the general consecration of the universe. Silence is the invisible laying on of the Divine Pontiff’s hands upon the world. Silence is at once the most harmless and the most awful thing in all nature. It speaks of the Reserved Forces of Fate. Silence is the only Voice of our God” (204). The extreme declamations of Ahab and Pierre have little effect on the ineffable silence of the remote, utterly transcendent God.

#### IV. “Pyramidical Silence”

With his ten-year career as a fiction writer in a tattered state, Melville left the United States on October 11, 1856, for a protracted tour of Europe, the Middle East, and the Holy Land. In a very real sense, the second half of Melville’s life was beginning. Cut loose from the demands of domesticity and the self-induced weight of commercial failure—a condition that would reach its terminus following the April Fool’s Day publication of *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857)—Melville had the world all before him and nowhere he had to be. He made a point to visit Hawthorne in Southport, England. On November 12, 1856, the two friends took a walk on the beach and engaged in one of their standard sessions of “ontological heroics” (*Correspondence* 196). What Melville describes merely as “good talk” (*Journals* 51) receives an expansive account in Hawthorne’s notebook: “Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had ‘pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated’; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold

of a definite belief.” In a penetrating assessment of Melville’s life as “a pondering man,” Hawthorne concludes that his friend “can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other” (qtd. in Leyda 529). The desire to reach beyond what any human can know fueled Melville’s imagination and informed the creation of his literary works.

His travels did not result in popular literary success, but laid building blocks for Melville’s truncated career as a lecturer and his long career as a poet. His travels in the Holy Land and his journal notes were primary sources for the monumental *Clarel* (1876). His time in the Middle East continually brought him to ponder the origin of things—the origin of Christianity; the origin of biblical events; the origin of Jehovah. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael writes of the sperm whale’s “pyramidal silence” (347), but when Melville finally found himself inside an Egyptian pyramid, he experienced not silence but a stifled sense of incipient panic, “[a] feeling of awe & terror,” a dread of “ancient Egyptians. It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah” (*Journals* 75). Melville suggests that the figure of Jehovah was indeed a creation of “terrible inventors, those Egyptian wise men” (*Journals* 78). God is whatever God may be, but it is the office of ancient Egyptian holy men and Promethean literary artists to conjure representations that dare to reflect ostensible aspects of God’s infinite and unknowable identity. From “out of the crude forms of the natural earth,” the Egyptians raised pyramids and thereby “rear[ed] the transcendent conception of a God” (*Journals* 78). The pyramids reflect the unresolved nature of Melville’s ongoing search for God. In this process the artist employs available forms, whether stones or words, to “evoke by art” (78) projected images of an always elusive, always masked divine essence.

## Notes

1. Dedicated to Thomas A. Werge and Milton R. Stern: The Greatest of Teachers.
2. See Marovitz for an expansive discussion of this passage and its relation to the influence of such writers as Sir Thomas Browne on Melville's philosophical development.
3. "The Problem of the Universe" is a recurrent phrase in Melville's letters (*Correspondence* 180, 185, 186, and 452) and *Moby-Dick* (158 and 293). For discussions of Melville's exploration of the relation of the phenomenal and numinous realm of existence, see Stern 1–28; Sealts; and Wenke 112–63.
4. For discussions of Melville's relation to the religious traditions that influenced his life and work, see Goldman; Herbert; Obenzinger; Sherrill, "Melville and Religion" and *The Prophetic Melville*; Thompson; and Werge, "Luther and Melville" and "*Moby-Dick* and the Calvinist Tradition." In *The Prophetic Melville*, Sherrill discusses Melville's relation to the tradition of the hidden God: "The point here is that the encounter with the hidden God does not automatically lead to skepticism or pessimism. Another more deeply committed alternative . . . was to explore the dimensions of the presence of this hidden God in order to calculate its significance for an understanding of human experience" (251).
5. For discussions of Ishmael as narrator, see Brodtkorb; and Wenke 114–31.
6. For Melville's use of biblical materials, see Hutchins; Pardes; and Wright. Hutchins argues, "By writing his wicked book, Melville re-inscribes the Bible, producing a third testament whose form corresponds to that of the Old and New Testaments and whose content provides its readers with a new iteration of and a commentary on the salvific narratives found in those texts" (18). For a seminal discussion of Melville's use of Jonah, see Wright 82–93.
7. For a large selection of contemporary reviews of *Moby-Dick*, see Higgins and Parker 351–416. For a discussion of the harsh treatment Melville received from Christian reviewers prior to the publication of *Moby-Dick*, see Hayford and Parker 57 n. 4 and 465–509. For a sample vitriolic review of *Moby-Dick*, see the piece published by "H." in the New York *Independent* on November 20, 1851, attacking Melville's "primitive formation of profanity and indecency": "The Judgment day will hold [Melville] liable for not turning his talents to better account, when, too, both authors and publishers of injurious books will be conjointly answerable for the influence of those books upon a wide circle of immortal minds on which they have written their mark. The book-maker and the book-publisher had better do their work with a view to the trial it must undergo at the bar of God" (Hayford and Parker 605).
8. For interpretations of Plinlimmon's pamphlet, see Stern 189–95; Higgins and Parker, *Reading Melville's Pierre* 113–19.
9. For a discussion of Martin Luther's possible influence on this passage, see Werge, "Luther and Melville."
10. For discussions of Melville's relation to exotic theologies, see Finkelstein; and Vargish.

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