

# Sophia and Philosophia

---

Volume 1  
Issue 3 *The Ever-Expanding Issue*

Article 3

---

10-1-2018

## Call Thee Ishmael

Mark Backus  
Backusm@harboret.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/sph>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), [Logic and Foundations of Mathematics Commons](#), and the [Metaphysics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Backus, Mark (2018) "Call Thee Ishmael," *Sophia and Philosophia*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/sph/vol1/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Belmont Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Sophia and Philosophia* by an authorized editor of Belmont Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [repository@belmont.edu](mailto:repository@belmont.edu).

## Call Thee Ishmael

Mark Backus

“*Moby-Dick* is a strangely compelling book.”<sup>1</sup> Scholarship and commentary help the reader understand why Ishmael’s tale is so compelling, but not always why it is *strangely* so. The perennial search for a master key to unlock the strangeness of *Moby-Dick* beneath its infinite layers has added more mesmerizing layers, but if many of the proposed keys fit into the lock of *Moby-Dick*, why is there yet a sense that none have completely opened “the great flood-gates?” (*Moby-Dick* 22, hereafter “MD”). Is it because none of them are right, or that they are only partly right, or that Melville himself was confused?

The answer to these questions requires a new and different hermeneutics. We need a new Melville to understand Melville, someone who has gone where he has gone—though where he has gone is a place no one *can* go. The final frontier isn’t space, as Captain Kirk’s voice-over in the *Star Trek* series states. It’s spacelessness. It’s the “heartless voids” (MD 165) that lie beyond all frontiers. We need to “order a complete man after a desirable pattern. Imprimis, fifty feet high in his socks, and put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards” (MD 359). We need Mary Shelley’s monster who, ultimately disabused of all illusion, jumps ship. We need a hero who can plunge into the Void at the center of *Moby-Dick*. We need an Ahab.

The reason *Moby-Dick* is strange is that it is a version of the perennial philosophy. *Moby-Dick* is fiction, of course. But the perennial philosophy goes on to assert that the reader of the book and the universe in which the book is read are also fictions. The perennial philosophy, which denies the existence of the self and the universe, is strange. Therefore *Moby-Dick*, a version of the perennial philosophy, is strange too.

The intent of this essay is to show that *Moby-Dick* is a version of the hero’s inner journey of exile and return, and that the key to both the book and the journey is the perennial philosophy. At the center of the perennial philosophy lies Truth, which is nothing but a voidless Void. The hero, becoming soul-sick, goes into exile from an everyday world which has become woefully unsatisfying. Plunging into the Void he finds Truth, which is liberating, and returns as a messenger.

Professor Robert Zoellner acknowledges that “it is a critical truism that *Moby-Dick* is a mass of interpretive knots” (Zoellner xi). Such knots in *Moby-Dick* have led many to look among its multitude of sources for a coherent understanding of the book. Taking a cue from Ishmael, Hershel Parker, Merton M. Sealts Jr., and Mary Bercaw, among others, have provided invaluable “Cetology”-like research into Melville’s sources, including the allegory of Plato’s cave, Jonah, Ecclesiastes, Job, the Bible as a whole, Dante, Milton, Cervantes, Carlyle, Montaigne, Goethe, Coleridge, Browne, and Emerson, just to list a few. Shakespeare, no doubt a perennial philosopher, is recognized as “an immense, unnamed presence in *Moby-Dick*” (Bezanson 172).

When reviewers are not quite satisfied despite the enormous list of Melville’s Western sources, they look eastward. After considering Bruce Franklin’s argument in favor of Egyptian mythology for a solution to the “many-layered design” of *Moby-Dick* (Franklin), and noting Dorothee Metlisky Finkelstein’s focus on the mythology of the Middle East in *Melville’s Orienda* (Finkelstein), H. B. Kulkarni makes a compelling case for Hinduism as the key to the book (Kulkarni). In *Zen and the White Whale*, Daniel Herman suggests that Melville, who read Pierre Bayle’s *An Historical and Critical Dictionary* (Parker), used Buddhism as an important source for his writing; and Professor Herman shows many similarities between Buddhism and *Moby-Dick* (Herman). Indeed, the front-on view of the whale is nearly identical to the *Heart Sutra* of the Buddhist canon: “you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face” (MD 274).<sup>2</sup>

Reviewers even find potential keys to *Moby-Dick* in sources that were likely unknown to Melville. Mr. Herman is surprised by his discovery of “synchronicities between *Moby-Dick* and Zen literature that test the conceivable limits of mere coincidence” (Herman Kindle location 137). He wonders how such a Zen book could have been written by Melville when “historical scholars can prove that American knowledge of Zen Buddhism was virtually nonexistent when Melville composed *Moby-Dick*, and only imaginative leaps and educated guesses can point to possible encounters and interactions on Melville’s peripatetic global journeys” (Admirand 140).

Hershel Parker emphasizes that Melville’s “wondrous book would itself be the original product of the assimilation of many other books” (MD 435). Indeed, *Moby-Dick*, in an original way, makes remarkable use of specific elements from many of its sources. But even more remarkable is what is shared by, but not *original* to, both the sources and *Moby-Dick*. That shared commonality is the perennial philosophy—a philosophy-destroying philosophy at the center of the hero’s journey. The over-arching Truth in

*Moby-Dick*, like many of Melville's sources, is the Void. The Void at the center of the perennial philosophy unties all interpretive knots in *Moby-Dick*, and unlocks all flood-gates.

It is difficult to find any Melville scholar who argues that the perennial philosophy is the key to unlocking the strangeness of *Moby-Dick*. Conversely, in fishing through the innumerable expressions and vast scholarship of the perennial philosophy, it is even more difficult to find anyone who includes *Moby-Dick* as one of its many versions, if not one of the best. Joseph Campbell, to take one notable authority, even titles a chapter "The Belly of the Whale" in his book about the hero's journey (Campbell). Yet *Moby-Dick* is not discussed in his ocean of examples. Neither is the white whale found by fishing through Aldous Huxley's anthology, *The Perennial Philosophy* (Huxley).

To clarify the perennial philosophy it may help to turn to its oldest extant expression, found in the vast literature of Hinduism and succinctly summarized by Ramana Maharshi in an echo of Shankara: "*The world is illusory; Brahman alone is real; Brahman is the World*" (Wilber 202).<sup>3</sup> Ahab uses the word Truth instead of Brahman, which gives: *The world is illusory; Truth alone is real; Truth is the World*.

Truly, for the hero, the world is illusory, "an utter blank" (MD 348) and nothing but "deadly voids" (MD 45). Life is "a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself" (MD 170). Reality is a deck of "air beneath the feet" (MD 192), a "silent ship" manned by "painted sailors in wax" (MD 194). It is a "blanket or counterpane; or, still better, an Indian poncho" (MD 246); or a "robed investiture" (MD 103) which veils ("mobles") the Truth. The universe not only lies diseased, it *lies*, in the hero's awakening consciousness: "The palsied universe lies before us a leper," covering over "the charnel house" with "deceits, allurements, the mystical cosmetic," and the "monumental white shroud" under which there is nothing to see. The hero "gazes himself blind," which is to say, he can see nothing but the Void (MD 165), the only Truth.

The white whale, Leviathan, is a symbol of the deceitful universe, the illusion of reality. It is a "grand hooded phantom," no more real than a "snow hill in the air" (MD 22). The readers of *Moby-Dick* have been completely bamboozled by Ishmael's layers of signs, symbols, and words. Professor Nina Baym, sounding delightfully like Ishmael, writes:

His voice, taking up all other voices in turn but resting in none of them, is analog yet opposite to the whale's whiteness: although it is the sum of all voices, as white is the sum of all colors, it leads to fullness rather than to absence. If there is a void at the center of the universe, there is no void at the center of *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael's voice creates the illusion of divine plenitude. But if there really is a void at the center of the universe, then Ishmael's voice is fraudulent and the structures that permit the creation of such a voice are mendacious." (Baym 918).

Professor Baym's conditional is cosmically reversed, according to the perennial philosophy. If there is a universe, it's at the center of the Void, not the other way around. Despite Ishmael's weaving of a multilayered reality, it is all a "fabric," a fabrication. Ishmael is ironically pointing to what *is* by pointing to a "divine plenitude" of what *isn't*. Ultimately, the perennial philosopher's answer to the question of reality is, "No. There is no universe at the center of the Void." And then, maddeningly, he declares there is no Void either.

Ishmael kindly alerts us to the mendacity of his catalogue of reality. Do not take the "Extracts" for "veritable gospel cetology," he says, and we might infer that the rest of his narrative is not veritable either. To emphasize the untruth of reality, he even tells a whopper of a fish story. It is not possible to believe that Ishmael, with all his careful description of the whale's (mammalian) anatomy, believes the whale to be a fish. Both his story, he says in effect, and the universe for which it is a symbol are fictional. *Moby-Dick* and its analogue, the universe, are the big one that got away. If Ishmael is fraudulent, it's because the universe is fraudulent, and like everyone else Ishmael is forced to use fraudulent universe-language in his attempt to explain himself.

If *Moby Dick* is a symbol for the universe, his whiteness stands for the emptiness behind it, and it both attracts and repels, "at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet" is "the intensifying agent in things most appalling to mankind." Truth—emptiness or blankness—is appalling, but Truth is what the hero is after, even if "by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation." (MD 165). In an exact expression of the perennial philosophy, we then read "in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour and at the same time the concrete of all colours." It is a paradox only on one side of the perennial philosophy that there is a "dumb blankness" on the one hand, that is

“full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snow” on the other—a “colourless, all-colour of atheism” (MD 165). To put it in the form of the perennial philosophy, *Colors are illusory; Whiteness alone is real; Whiteness is all-colors*.

Ishmael enters the Plato’s cave of the Spouter Inn, and the first thing he sees are Plato’s “shades and shadows” in an obscure painting on the wall. But to the hero, “reality” is nothing *but* shades and shadows. Again in a Platonic vein, Ishmael thinks, “Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air” (MD 45). That which is taken to be real is not real.

For the hero, “the truest of all men was The Man of Sorrows.” “‘All is vanity’ ALL. This wilful world hath not got hold of unchristian Solomon’s wisdom yet” (MD 328). “Vanity” means not only self-absorbed and egotistical, but also empty, worthless, or hollow. Reality is vain both because it is self-created and also because it is empty of the self as well as everything else. Trees, trunks, courtesy, tone, voices, eyes, ears, cheeks, cerebelli, sails, bubbles, hulls, and coffins are all hollow in *Moby-Dick*. And vacant too, suspects Stubb, is Ahab’s chest: “methinks it rings most vast, but hollow” (MD 139). Leviathan, the symbol of the universe, and Ahab, the symbol of the self, are both superficial “super fishies,” with nothing beneath all the layers of the fish story:

Yet now, forsooth, because Pierre began to see through the first superficiality of the world, he fondly weens he has come to the unlayered substance. But, far as any geologist has yet gone down into the world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we espy the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and no body is there!—appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man! (Pierre 285).

Ishmael shows that the universe is created out of nothing by creating it himself, as we all do, and mocks it at the same time, knowing that “nothing will come of nothing,” as King Lear said in an echo of Parmenides (Shakespeare 42). Ishmael creates a fraudulent thread of letters and words and concepts. The thread forms lines, cables, hawsers, cords, weavings, and loomings out of which a prison is made, as Ahab is imprisoned in a “nest of basketed bowlines” (MD 402), the Pequod in “a wilderness of running rigging” (MD 402), the white whale and whaleboats in “the mazes of the line”

(MD 416), “the whole boat in its complicated coils,” six men with “a halter around every neck” (MD 229), the skeleton in the Arsacides “all woven over with the vines” (MD 345), and the hero himself imprisoned in a web called *Moby-Dick*.

Like the three “looming” Fates who spin, measure, and cut the thread of life, the narrator Ishmael begins *Moby-Dick* with a strand of “extracts.” He weaves them into a fictional tapestry of all existence, measures and catalogs the tapestry, and then cuts the line. The line of text titled *Moby-Dick* and symbolized by a Leviathan named Moby Dick is effectively severed by the perennial philosophy. Then the hero’s epiphany: there was never anything created and nothing to measure or to cut to begin with.

If the “line” or “thread” of the text of *Moby-Dick* weaves and entangles, it can also liberate, although liberation is not for the faint of heart, being “a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair” (MD 229). *Moby-Dick* creates an illusory “Cretan labyrinth” (MD 37, 290) out of the thread and line of text, but the thread and line, like Ariadne’s and Ahab’s, can also be used to escape the labyrinth. Ishmael himself uses the labyrinth as a symbol of the hero’s journey of exile and return, even “thrusting through the wall” (MD 140). “To and fro I paced before this skeleton—brushed the vines aside—broke through the ribs—and with a ball of Arsacidean twine, wandered, eddied long amid its many winding, shaded colonnades and arbors. But soon my line was out; and following it back, I emerged from the opening where I entered” (MD 346). So too do the whalers enter and exit the labyrinth of “vast irregular circles” of the herd of whales in “The Grand Armada” (MD 301).

“The pale Usher—threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain, (MD 7),” has escaped the labyrinthine prison of the leviathanic universe, is “bare” of threads out of which a false reality is woven. He looks over his guidebooks fondly, no longer in need of them. He is the aging and now mellow survivor in the epilogue of *Moby-Dick*, who comes to show us the way to our true place, which “is not down on any map. True places never are” (MD 59).

The perennial philosophy is an agonizing and liberating process of self-destruction. It resembles the “upper lightning” that “tearingly darts down the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom” (MD 109). The perennial philosophy is self-consuming, a shark whose “entrails seemed swallowed over and over again by the same mouth, to be oppositely voided by the gaping wound” (MD 243), or “a plethoric burning martyr, or a self-consuming misanthrope,” or “once ignited,” a whale that “supplies his own fuel and burns by his own body” (MD 326). But what is it that’s consumed by the fire, and

what is left after the annihilation? What remains, cannibalistically speaking, if the Void consumes the Void? The Void. Truth. That which has no confines. The perennial philosophy annihilates everything it touches, including the erroneous belief that there was anything to annihilate in the first place. So does *Moby-Dick*.

The perennial philosophy undoes all philosophy, all religion, and all science. It declares that there is no such thing as philosophy, none to philosophize, no space for philosophizing, and no time for any perennial funny business. It empties the universe of all its layers, and then empties the emptiness that is left. Even the Void has to go. For the hero, this is liberating.

The only thing that can be said in favor of the perennial philosophy is that it is true, no matter how insane it sounds. Such “insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God” (MD 431). Without the perennial philosophy, little in *Moby-Dick* really makes any sense. With it, *everything* makes sense. The perennial philosophy is a search for bedrock truth, beneath the layers and layers of a dualistic, illusory universe, and a search for liberation from all illusion. The hero of *Moby-Dick* is a perennial philosopher.

The hero’s journey and the perennial philosophy, being perennial, can be found in the world’s wisdom literature in all times and places, as well as by a direct and unblinking investigation of “reality” itself. The perennial philosophy reveals the same Truth, whether expressed in Greek philosophy, Hinduism, Zen, Buddhism, Christian mysticism, the Tao Te Ching, a Shakespeare play, a Coleridge poem, or a bildungsroman by Goethe. No doubt, Melville’s vast reading of sources ancient and modern contributed to his knowledge of the perennial philosophy, but all he had to do was bring a radical skepticism to all assumptions, and then look. Thus, Professor Herman’s synchronicities between Zen and *Moby-Dick* need not surprise, even though Melville likely had no knowledge of Zen. Thomas Merton explains, “Like all forms of Buddhism, Zen seeks an ‘enlightenment’ which results from the resolution of all subject-object relationships and opposition in a pure void” (Merton 13). The same is true of *Moby-Dick*.

On his journey, the hero is transformed through a series of fixed stages and transitions, concluding with his liberation in a transcendent realization of Truth. Ishmael points out that Nantucketers at first catch “crabs and quohogs in the sand,” proceed through a series of fishy stages, and at last declare “everlasting war with that Himmalehan, salt-sea Mastodon” (MD 65). The “modern standers-of-mast-heads”

stand for ages and stages as “stone, iron, and bronze men” (MD 132). In “The Gilder,” stages begin with “infancy’s unconscious spell” and proceed through “manhood’s pondering repose of If” (MD 373). The number of “fixed gradations” on the journey can be condensed or expanded in various ways, but here the focus will be on 5 stages, represented by Starbuck, Ishmael the exile, Ahab, Truth (the Void, No-Self), and Ishmael the returning messenger. As his “substitute for pistol and ball” (MD 18), the hero goes into exile from his culture, “realizes” the perennial philosophy by the dereification of the self and universe, and then returns as the messenger and narrator of the journey.

In epic fashion, *Moby-Dick* begins *in medias res* with Ishmael, but the first stage of the hero’s journey is that of Starbuck who is “an honest, upright man” (MD 386). As a devout husband, father, and first mate, he takes his responsibility to his family and his work seriously, “duty and profit hand in hand” (MD 183). He is a “staid, steadfast man” and “uncommonly conscientious” (MD 102). He believes in the world as it is presented to him. What seems to be, is, and reality has only one layer. He has no reason to embark on a suicide run for the truth, and ought not to be disturbed.

One day, though, the hero *is* disturbed. Starbuck has a looming sense that something is wrong, a sense of being “morally enfeebled also, by the incompetence of mere unaided virtue or right-mindedness” (MD 158). Despite his physical courage and belief that “God girds us round, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon,” his doubt declares “the great sun is no fixture. At midnight, we gaze for him in vain! I will quit it, lest Truth shake me falsely” (MD 333). His “faith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs” (MD 45). It is the fear of the tomb, of no-self, of the Void that compels a faith in things untrue, and all things are untrue. Although life is a dream, according to the perennial philosophy, it is a stubborn one. “For again Starbuck’s downcast eyes lighted up with the stubbornness of life; the subterranean laugh died away; the winds blew on; the sails filled out; the ship heaved and rolled as before” (MD 140-41). For the hero, though, such measures have ceased to work. Because of a certain context or constitution, he is unwilling or unable to look away. His thoughts, “the foregoing things within” and “the innermost necessities in our being, these still drive” the hero on his journey (MD 141). The steady, respectable, good and upright man has the terrible, unlooked-for misfortune of becoming a seeker.

The hero begins a compulsive investigation of the world’s wisdom literature in the attempt to find an answer to the misery of existence. He becomes a “Sub-Sub Librarian” searching “through the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth” (MD 8).

He is completely open to any source that might have answers to questions that “mangle” (MD 50): Who am I? What the hell is going on here? Why is there suffering? “He bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible, never mind how knobby; as an ostrich of potent digestion gobbles down bullets and gun flints” (MD 188). He measures, researches, classifies, catalogues, differentiates, and integrates. Yet, despite having searched all the world’s wisdom literature, the hero despairs. It is the failure of conventional knowledge.

Somewhere in the cocoon of street-stalls or libraries, the hero as a “grubworm” enters the “dark night of the soul,” as it’s called by St. John of the Cross. Ishmael calls it “a dark and dismal night, biting cold and cheerless” (MD 25), and “a damp, drizzly November in my soul” (MD 19). What makes the hero miserable is the inability to see a way out of the “man-killing round” (MD 331) other than suicide. But all is not yet lost. The investigation turns inward and enters “the world of mind” (Mardi 557), becoming the text and “line” of *Moby-Dick*. The hero enters a new stage by going on an *inner* journey. Now the hero, call him Ishmael, becomes a soul-sick exile from the world and sets sail on the ocean of his own consciousness.

Ishmael the exile has “adolescence’ doubt (the common doom)”. The word “doubt” has the same root as “double,” “doubloon,” “duplicate,” and “duplicitous.” All manifestation is dual, but the hero has doubt about this twoness of things. The white whale is a symbol of the dualistic universe: “He’s all a magnet” (MD 340) with north and south poles. Everything comes in opposites: “...for refuge’s sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe” (MD 97), “ungodly, god-like man” (MD 78), “gloomy-jolly” (MD 319), “dejected Delight” (MD 404), or Stubb and Starbuck, who “are the opposite poles of one thing; Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind” (p. 413). The opposite of something isn’t nothing. It’s something else. Only nothing has no opposite and there isn’t any something. Pick one thing and two arise. From the two come “the ten thousand things” of the Tao Te Ching (Lao Tzu 1). In this sense, the universe is duplicitous and mankind is “a mob of unnecessary duplicates” (MD 356).

Ishmael, now the polymath and exile, is open to all things and finds that all things will not do. The universe has been atomized and then resolved into an all-inclusive unity of dualities, trinities, “folios,” and “cetology” with no internal boundaries, but the universe itself remains a prison of dissatisfaction and woe. Instead of “knocking peoples’ hats off” (MD 18), Ishmael learns “it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in” (MD 22), but the “lodge” remains a prison.

Ishmael sees in his fellow human beings “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!” (MD 103). But the equality is the equality of elements of a dream. Each element is equally unreal, nothing more or less divine or important than anything else. The dream, though often entertaining, is neither true nor ultimately satisfying. It has a circumference, and a circumference is a prison.

Still, Ishmael the exile is not yet an Ahab ready for annihilation. “Give not thyself up, then, to fire” (MD 328), he advises. He is not eager to “drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever” (MD 136). Stuck within the confinement of his own worldview he celebrates Spinoza’s pantheism, not seeing it as merely another illusion. On the other hand, Ahab, the man of sorrows, smells something fishy about the universe.

In the hero’s next metamorphosis, the doubting exile and seeker Ishmael becomes the disbelieving prisoner Ahab. He is no longer an Ishmael since “all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go” (MD 158). As the stage of the soul-sick Ishmael fades from view in *Moby-Dick*, finally lost altogether in Chapter 37, Ahab increasingly takes his place. The still-dissatisfied hero who has researched the world’s wisdom from east to west somehow stumbles on the perennial philosophy during his exile. How it happens is not clearly stated. Was it from his reading “in colleges” or travels “among the cannibals?” (MD 78). Perhaps the door was opened by the ever-curious hero’s participation in rites and rituals, guided by various Fedallah-like mentors and teachings in the East, or perhaps it had to do with whatever caused Ahab’s “lividly whitish” scar (MD 108). We don’t get to see much of this “transition state” (MD 38, 393) when the hero is “neither caterpillar nor butterfly.” But now the hero is completely *fed up*.

The transition from Ishmael to Ahab begins with a fury-driven plunge into the ocean of consciousness to try to kill an ontological whale with a little knife, and is completed in the cocoon of a strait jacket and hammock in which Ahab swings “to the mad rockings of the gales,” (MD 157). After the metamorphosis, the previously uncontrolled fury of the hero is harnessed. He realizes it’s going to take more than a little knife and a single wild act to do what he needs to do. The loss of his leg and “mast” to Moby Dick is only the beginning of the sacrifice of the self that is required for liberation.

Ahab knows a plunge into the Void is seen by humankind as madness. “They think me mad—Starbuck does; but I’m demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild

madness that's only calm to comprehend itself!" (MD 143). But in order to continue his journey, the hero puts on his former responsible and "sane" Ahab costume and uses the insanity of everyday life to find his way to the only true sanity there is. "Now, in his heart, Ahab had some glimpse of this, namely: all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad." "To mankind he did now long dissemble" (MD 157). He uses delusion to escape delusion.

Once a conventional Starbuck, then a suffering and seeking Ishmael in exile, now an outraged but madly methodical Ahab, the hero knows his problem is one of confinement. Wherever Ahab looks he sees prison bars. *Moby-Dick*, the text, is an epic symbol of the universe. And Moby Dick the whale—leviathan—"is the text" (MD 349), amusingly categorized into "books" by Ishmael as though there is a point to categorizing the contents of a dream. Here is the explanation for his mocking "Cetology," an epic inclusive categorizing of reality that is at the same time all "sound and fury, full of Leviathanism, signifying nothing" (MD 124). Ahab suffers from leviathanism. He is literally trapped in both the text and the universe. He is locked up in a leviathan of all time, all space, and all things, and he cannot abide it.

Even though we aren't told how, a great secret is then revealed to Ahab: the prison is an illusion. Leviathan, both the text and the universe, is a "tremendous apparition" (MD 410). The universe is a collection of visible objects and "all visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks." Ahab is "the prisoner" trapped behind an illusory wall, and "the White Whale is that wall, shoved near to me" (MD 140). Here is the defining paragraph of Ahab's hunt, where it is seen that Truth, *not* the white whale, is the object of the mad chase. The whale is a barrier, the "wall" of a nonexistent universe in which the hero is a prisoner. He hates the barrier because he desperately seeks a truth beyond or behind it. Leviathan is a symbol of two fictional worlds, one in the book and one the reader is sitting in as he reads.

If Moby Dick is an ontological symbol, a "fictitious monster" (MD 186), the universe it stands for is nothing but a mask, and Ahab wants to strike through it. A big part of his problem is that the universe in which he is confined includes the self, a prison that is very difficult to escape indeed. He is hunting a Leviathan in which, like Jonah, he is also trapped. To add more paradox, Leviathan, "the rounder globe," in which he is trapped is only a projection of his own consciousness. The hero is his own jailor, Ahab his own warden. Meditating on the doubloon nailed to the mast, Ahab soliloquizes, "The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of

the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self" (MD 332). Truth and liberation mean, finally, escaping the illusion of himself.

What will the hero find if he escapes? First, he guesses that "there's naught beyond." Then he apophatically declares, in the central affirmation/negation of the book, "Truth hath no confines" (MD 140). Perhaps "all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher" (MD 331). Deep down, in the layerlessness below the lowest "lower layer," Ahab suspects there is a void behind the mask of the visible universe.

How does the hero escape the illusion? One way is to commit suicide, like Cato. The other way is for the hero to die *before* he dies, but it isn't easy: "The agony of breaking through personal limitations is the agony of spiritual growth... Finally, the mind breaks the bounding sphere of the cosmos to a realization transcending all experiences of form—all symbolizations, all divinities: a realization of the ineluctable void" (Campbell 163). The prison break requires a purity of intent to bear the "vast pains" and "horrible gropings" of the escape: the hero will not be satisfied until he is either free or dead. "Meditate like your hair is on fire," is the Zen recommendation, and Ahab follows it. He will not be swayed. "Come, Ahab's compliments to ye; come and see if ye can swerve me. Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! man has ye there. Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!" (MD 143). Ahab piles "upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick" (MD 156). Ahab gathers every part of himself—every sailor and element on the Pequod since "all are Ahab" (MD 332)—and through a sheer act of indomitable will commands himself to "strike through the mask!" (MD 140).

The process of liberation is a staggering one of peeling away one layer of the self after another as a whale's blubber is "stripped off from the body precisely as an orange is sometimes stripped by spiralizing it" (MD 244), and for which the loss of an arm or a leg is just the beginning. Seen in itself, Stubb's killing of a whale is a horrifying act, physically, ethically, and spiritually. But in the wider context of the book, it is a symbol of the agonizing die-before-dying process required for liberation.

Ahab blows "out the last fear," the fear of no-self. "And with one blast of his breath he extinguished the flame" (MD 383). Once again, the language echoes the description of *nirvana* (Sanskrit: "to blow out, to be extinguished") in the *Heart Sutra*. "Therefore,

O Sariputra, in emptiness there is no form nor feeling, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; no mind-consciousness element. In the absence of thought-coverings he has not been made to tremble, he has overcome what can upset, and in the end he attains to Nirvana” (Humphreys 114-115). This is not the state of cosmic bliss that nirvana is sometimes popularly taken to be. It is all the light, heat, and flame that is left when the candle is extinguished, which is to say none. It is a state of statelessness.

In the light of the perennial philosophy, the dramatic sinking of the Pequod is not even a little toy boat drifting to the bottom of a homely washtub. Anticipating *Moby-Dick*, the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Sufi Al-Ghazali wrote “You possess only what cannot be lost in a shipwreck” (Shah). The end of *Moby-Dick* reads like a magnificent Apocalypse, but it is really no more than the blowing out of a candle. The line picked up out of nowhere by Ishmael, propagated and woven into an intricate cloth of a universe symbolized by the White Whale, snaps Ahab out of himself. He tears a hole in “the final aspect of the completed fabric” (MD 179) of the universe and plunges through. The hero as prisoner is whipped out of a non-existent self by a non-existent line hooked to a non-existent ontological whale. He becomes free.

What does the hero find? The Void. Where is the symbol of the universe, Moby Dick, and where is the symbol of the self, Ahab? Gone. No self, no other, no mind, no consciousness, no universe, and no hero. This stage of the hero’s journey is the unconfined Truth. The only thing that has no confines is the Void, and it’s not a thing. On the other side of the prison gates, the hero is no more. There is nothing but Truth, empty and vast, and liberation. It is a shimmering, radiant emptiness, but who can realize it requiring, as it does, the loss of all things—especially the self and its must-have universe? It is too much to ask. Only an *Ahab* can do it. Only one who is driven by a hatred of the false, by an obsessive insistence on the truth, and by an unwavering demand for freedom, no matter the cost. The loss of a leg or a “mast” is nothing when the prison is suffocating.

The liberated hero now enters the final stage of his journey. Previously exiled from the conventional world on a quest for truth and freedom and now satisfied in his quest, the hero has another choice to make. He can be what is called in the East an *arhat*, one who has escaped the prison and doesn’t return, like Bulkington. Or the hero can become a *bodhisattva*, the messenger who returns to the illusory world in an attempt to explain his journey, like Pip or the messenger who narrates *Moby-Dick*. Finding himself to be absent—dead to the self—the hero can choose to put on a costume once again and

return to the prison. There is a resurrection, not to the former self or to heaven, but to a character in a play. The hero himself, the underlying actor, doesn't exist.

Everywhere the hero looks, while enjoying the multiplicity of manifestation, he sees the truth within and beyond it all. Truly, he knows, since it is all an illusion, there really is no one to set free, and there never has been. There never was a prison in the first place, and no gate through which to pass. It was all a projection, a dream, a play, a movie, Plato's cave. Even so, there is nothing to prevent the hero from playing an imaginary role in an imaginary world. No longer taken seriously, the illusion can be enjoyed, "and as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker" (MD 188). The hero now gets the joke. He was always vast, infinite, and unconfined, but he had forgotten who he really was. He was always the Old Joker, Brahman, Truth, the Void.

This attitude of the liberated explains the amusement and expansive "indifference" of the hero as narrator, call him Ishmael once again, whose descriptions are influenced by a post-Ahab awakening. Though illusory, the world is now a vast playhouse with fascinating sets and characters, with nothing to raise an objection against. He's "as indifferent as his God" (MD 322) because he *is* God, as dangerous as that word is as a substitute for Truth or the Void. Even what is most horrible on one side of liberation is perfection on the other. The hero, like any happy theater-goer, enjoys his favorite characters on the stage, including himself. But he doesn't yell and scream and call 911 when anyone is stabbed during the play. That would be insane, like watching Hamlet and then hiring a lawyer to bring criminal charges against someone because a best friend (spoiler alert!) was stabbed and poisoned on stage. Yet that is the claim of the perennial philosophy, that we are all insane because we respond to a dream world as if it were true. Being Hamlet is a tragedy. Playing Hamlet is a blast. Life need not be taken seriously, because it's only a play.

Joseph Campbell discusses Japanese "Play language," *asobase kotoba*: And this idea is carried even so far that instead of saying to a person, 'I hear that your father has died,' you would say, rather, 'I hear that your father has played at dying.' And now, I submit that this is truly a noble, really glorious way to approach life" (Myths 122). The prison of Leviathan is a great place to be, but it's most fun if it is *known* to be a prison, if it is entered freely and advisedly, and if it can be left anytime. The hero has a badge that says "visitor," not the striped (or orange) pajamas of an inmate. The world is a

playhouse instead of a jailhouse. Now the hero is awake in the dream-weaving of creation, preservation, and destruction; and he knows that no matter how ecstatic or how devastating it seems, birth, life, and death are all illusion. There is nothing to fear. “The unharmed sharks, they glide by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sail with sheathed beaks” (MD 427). The returning hero has been orphaned, not only of parents, but of a self and a universe as well. Awake in the dream, he identifies only with that which is not, and thus has no identity. He is free.

Queequeg’s coffin, floating on the water next to the messenger, is the tomb, the life preserver, and the womb all at once, and an opportunity to start the great round again. The “trebly-hooped” “Hindoo” gods, Brahma the creator, Vishnu the “life” preserver, and Shiva the destroyer, are preparing the next illusory romp with a copy of *Moby-Dick* rescued along with the *Vedas* “lying at the bottom of the waters” (MD 286). If whaling is a metaphor for Truth-seeking, then Ahab and Melville are the consummate whalers. And if whaling is a metaphor for the best Truth-telling wisdom the world has to offer, *Moby-Dick* certainly deserves “the honor and glory” (MD 284) of inclusion in the pantheon next to if not in place of the *Vedas* or anything else.

Some clothes are floating on the water next to the coffin, and the returning hero puts them on. When honorably doing his work, he is Starbuck in Starbuck’s clothes. When soul-sick, he is Ishmael the exile. Breaking out of the prison, he is Ahab. Freed of his illusory self as Starbuck, Ishmael, and Ahab, he is no-self, the unconfined Truth. Returned, he is Ishmael the messenger and the threadbare usher. When writing *Moby-Dick*, he is Herman Melville, sitting at his desk at Arrowhead. *Moby-Dick* is the journal of his own escape from the prison, an instruction manual hidden under the mattress of the next prisoner to crash through the gates. But *Moby-Dick* is not about Starbuck, Ishmael, Ahab, or Melville any longer. They have completed their journey and don’t need an instruction manual. They’ve already escaped.

If the reader sees each of the characters in *Moby-Dick* as projections of his own consciousness, as they once were Melville’s, the true hero of the book comes into view. *Moby-Dick* becomes the reader’s own journey of exile and return. He is conventional Starbuck when reading about Starbuck, soul-sick Ishmael when reading about Ishmael, and imprisoned Ahab when reading about Ahab. The hero dies to all stages and selves of the hero, including Ahab. So too may the reader die to *himself*, since the stages of the hero’s journey in *Moby-Dick* are universal. It is no longer Ishmael, Ahab, or Melville who is liberated in the epilogue. It is the reader. “Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it,” the narrator commands (MD 247).

In the end, we can ask the mangling question that the sea captain asks Jonah in Father Mapple's sermon, that Ahab asks Starbuck as the Pequod starts to leak, that Starbuck asks Ahab in the midst of a gale and that, not incidentally, opens *Hamlet*: "Who's there?" (MD 50, 361, 380). Who is the hero caught in the web of *Moby-Dick*? Who is the metaphysical professor in the caravan who, once placed on his feet, "will infallibly lead you to water?" (MD 19). Who is the dreamer standing on the masthead, ever in peril of falling into "Descartian vortices?" (MD 136). Who is the philosopher at no less risk than Ahab of being torn out of the "whaleboat" of his fireside armchair by the screaming line of *Moby-Dick*? Who is the one dog-eared Melville's instruction manual and planning a prison break? Who is the survivor in the epilogue, now an orphan to the universe? It's the reader. Who else is sitting there with the book?

What now to call this reader, this liberated hero who can no longer be harmed by sharks, sea-hawks, or anything else?

Call thee Ishmael.<sup>4</sup>

Mark Backus  
Backusm@harbornet.com

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Subhuti: personal communication. At her suggestion, I used masculine pronouns. But I hope it will be clear by the end of the paper that in the context of the perennial philosophy there are no women or men, no male or female, no heroes or heroines. Anyone, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, color, location, physical ability, class, or condition is capable of embarking on and completing the hero's journey. Creed, though, can be a serious barrier. According to the perennial philosophy, no creed is true.

<sup>2</sup> "Sariputra! Form is nothing more than emptiness, emptiness is nothing more than Form. Form is exactly emptiness, and emptiness is exactly Form. The other four aggregates of human existence—feeling, thought, will, and consciousness—are also nothing more than emptiness." "Sariputra! All things are empty: Nothing is born, nothing dies, nothing is pure, nothing is stained, nothing increases and nothing decreases. So, in emptiness, there is no form, no feeling, no thought, no will, no consciousness. There are no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind. There is no seeing, no hearing, no smelling, no tasting, no touching, no imagining. No plane of sight, no plane of thought. There is no ignorance, and no end to ignorance. There is no old age and death, and no end to old age and death. There is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no end to suffering, no path to suffering. There is no attainment of wisdom, and no wisdom to attain." (*Heart Sutra*)

<sup>3</sup> A language problem arises immediately because a word, “*Brahman*,” is used to point to that which is wordless. Ishmael uses “voids,” but this does not solve the problem according to Nagarjuna: “It cannot be called void or not void, or both or neither; but in order to point it out, it is called ‘the Void’” (Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. New York: Pantheon, 1957, p. 63). History is replete with attempts to describe the ineffable in cataphatic terms, but by definition they must fail and the seer has to resort to apophatic language, saying what something is by saying what it is not. Melville uses words with the suffixes “less,” “lessness” or “lessly” to do so: there are over 90 such instances in *Moby-Dick*, including “changeless,” “landlessness” (twice), and “placelessly,” for example. There are other apophatic means too. In the over-foreshadowing chapter, “The Lee Shore,” we read “Wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable,” “no epitaphs,” “stoneless grave,” “the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God,” and “howling infinite” (MD 96, 97). Paradoxical language is also characteristic of the perennial philosophy, which tries to explain a Truth that is not only “beyond belief,” but beyond *all* beliefs.

The subject matter of the Perennial Philosophy is the nature of eternal, spiritual Reality; but the language in which it must be formulated was developed for the purpose of dealing with phenomena in time. That is why, in all these formulations, we find an element of paradox, of verbal extravagance, sometimes even of seeming blasphemy. The nature of Truth-the-Fact cannot be described by means of verbal symbols that do not adequately correspond to it. At best it can be hinted at in terms of *non sequiturs* and contradictions (Huxley, p. 44).

And if the concession were made that the “subject matter” of *Moby-Dick* is the perennial philosophy, it would be hard to deny that it has “an element of paradox, of verbal extravagance, sometimes even of seeming blasphemy.”

<sup>4</sup> No whales were mistreated or killed in the writing of this article.

## Bibliography

Admirand, Peter. "Zen And The White Whale: A Buddhist Rendering of Moby-Dick by Daniel Herman (review)." *American Studies* 54.2 (2015): 140-41. Web.

Baym, Nina. "Melville's Quarrel with Fiction." *PMLA* 94.5 (1979): 909-23. Web.

Bezanson, Walter E., in Bryant, John. *A Companion to Melville Studies*. New York: Greenwood, 1986. Print.

Campbell, Joseph. *Myths to Live By*. New York: Viking, 1972. Print.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Novato: New World Library, 2008. Print.

Finkelstein, Dorothee Metlitsky. *Melville's Orienda*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1961. Print.

Franklin, H. Bruce. *The Wake of the Gods; Melville's Mythology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1963. Print.

Heart Sutra "Translation: Shorter Heart Sutra." *Zodiac Killer Letters - Wikisource, the Free Online Library*, en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Shorter\_Heart\_Sutra.

Herman, Daniel (2014-05-01). *Zen and the White Whale: A Buddhist Rendering of Moby-Dick*. Lehigh University Press. Kindle Edition.

Humphreys, Christmas. *The Wisdom of Buddhism*. New York: Random House, 1961. Print.

Huxley, Aldous, and Anthony R. Hodge. *The Perennial Philosophy*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1947.

Kulkarni, H.B. *Moby-Dick: A Hindu Avatar: A Study of Hindu Myth and Thought in Moby-Dick*. Logan: Utah State U.P., 1970. Web.

Lao-Tzu. "Tao Te Ching, English by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English, Terebess Asia Online (TAO)." N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2016.

Melville, Herman, Hershel Parker, and Harrison Hayford. *Moby-Dick*. New York: Norton, 2002. Print.

Melville, Herman, et al. *Mardi and a Voyage Thither*. Northwestern University Press, 1998.

Melville, Herman. *Pierre, Or, The Ambiguities*. New York: Penguin, 1996. Print.

Merton, Thomas. *Mystics and Zen Masters*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1967. Print.

Parker, Hershel. In MD, p. 434.

Shah, Tahir. *In Arabian Nights: A Caravan of Moroccan Dreams*. N.p., n.d. Print, Ch. 9.

Shakespeare, William, and Russell A. Fraser. *The Tragedy of King Lear*. New York: New American Library, 1963. Print.

Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. New York: Pantheon, 1957, p. 63.

Wilber, Ken. *One Taste: The Journals of Ken Wilber*. Boston: Shambhala, 1999. Print.

Zoellner, Robert. *The Salt-sea Mastodon; a Reading of Moby-Dick*. Berkeley: U of California, 1973. Print.