

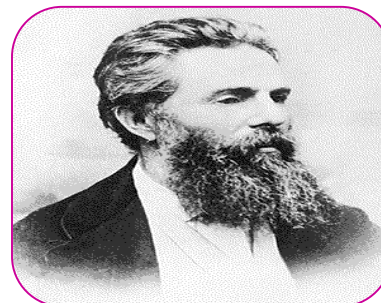


MELVILLE'S QUEST FOR CERTAINTY: QUESTING AND SPIRITUAL STABILITY IN HERMAN MELVILLE

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates Herman Melville's quest for spiritual stability and certainty in his novel Moby-Dick. The analysis establishes a philosophical tradition of doubt towards the Bible, outlining the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes, Benedict de Spinoza, David Hume, Thomas Paine and John Henry Newman. This historical survey of spiritual uncertainty establishes the issue of uncertainty that Melville writes about in the nineteenth century. Having assessed the issue of doubt, I then analyze Melville's use of metaphorical charts, which his characters use to resolve this issue. Finally, I present Melville's philosophical findings as he expresses them through the metaphor of whaling. Here, I also scrutinize Melville's depiction of nature, as well as his presentation of the dichotomy between contemplative and active questing, as represented by the characters Ishmael and Ahab.

KEYWORDS : Herman Melville, certainty, uncertainty, doubt, questing, nineteenth century philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades scholars have been particularly concerned with theological themes in Herman Melville's Moby-Dick. The interpretations of Melville's religious allusions have been as multifaceted as the crew's interpretations of the doubloon in the novel. However, none of these approaches deals with Melville's inquiry of spiritual uncertainty in the novel. For instance, Thomas Vargish claims in his essay "Gnostic Mythos in MobyDick" (1966) that Melville distinguishes between the inferior creator god of the physical world (Demiurgus) and the spiritual realm (Pleroma) in his theological system. According to Vargish, Melville's cognizance of this Gnostic dualism allows him to depict God as "an inferior and imperfect" and therefore assailable creator in the form of the white whale (273). Thus Vargish delivers an Arminian 1 reading, claiming that man is not entirely dependent on God. Three years later, Walter Herbert claims more pessimistically in "Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in Moby-Dick" (1969) that Melville did not have a specific religious agenda, but rather tried to display "an actual cosmic evil which challenges the validity of Christian theology altogether" (1619). Herbert is especially interested in the idea of Ahab's "maddened madness" as an expression of individual "defiance against the monster God," which is still in keeping with Vargish's Arminian reading (1618, 19). In the same year, Helen Trimpi surveys the individual characters and their connection to the topic of diabolic possession, as she explores "Melville's Use of Demonology and Witchcraft in Moby-Dick." In contrast, Mark Lloyd Taylor rather traditionally considers Melville's Christian allusions in his essay "Ishmael's (m)Other: Gender, Jesus, and God in Melville's Moby-Dick" (1992). Taylor suggests that Ishmael embodies Christlike character traits of compassion, passiveness, and feminine love. Therefore, Taylor argues that Ishmael contrasts "associations of God, power, and masculinity" employed by Melville in his description of nature's cannibalistic character (Taylor 349). A decade later, popular journal author Gary Sloan evokes Herbert's notion of the Calvinist "God-bully" in his short essay "Moby Dick: Broiled in Hellfire"

(2002), claiming that Ahab's monomaniac quest is Melville's coping with the early death of his father and his childhood (62). This cycle—and recycling—of religious analyses culminates in most recent collection of religious elements in Melville's writings by Gail Coffler in her book *Melville's Allusions to Religion: A Comprehensive Index and Glossary* (2004).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, Eliza New seizes on Vaught and Grenberg's suggestion of the different representations of questing in Melville's characters in her essay "Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville's *Moby-Dick*" (1998). New vividly illustrates the pressing issue of "unification of the disjointed scripture" in the nineteenth century by assessing Ishmael and Ahab as representatives of opposed textual principles (288). However, she also reintroduces Yu's concept of Ishmael as a passive quester who is respectful to nature and its boundaries as the primary reason for his survival.

As these previous surveys of theology and questing show, Herman Melville describes both a literal and spiritual quest for certainty in *Moby-Dick*. The crew of the Pequod utilizes various means by which they make sense of their environment, evaluate the world within their own religious system (Queequeg), and analyze their encounters with the divinity in nature, as Melville illustrates the dichotomy of unprecedented economic expansion and decreasing grounds for spirituality that American society faces in the wake of the Enlightenment.

Moby-Dick thus accurately displays the public mindset of Melville's age. Melville appears to stay true to Emerson's comment that "the temper of the age becomes a cultural determinant of the themes and style of great literature" (qtd. in Reynolds 5). The plot poses as a metaphor for the author's own quest for religious certainty and mysticism in an age dominated by reason. Melville toys with man's search for an anthropomorphic God in an unrelenting struggle with nature. To put it quite simply, Melville poses several questions: Is human perception capable of attaining true insight into the nature of God? Is God synonymous with nature, or does he weave—to borrow from Goethe's *Faust*—the fabric of the universe from a realm beyond physical reality and operate in the world by means of agents? Seeing that nature is depicted as being treacherous and violent; is man faced with a malignant or a benign God? And if God is nature, can he indeed be tamed and be made assailable by hunting and taming the whale?

In my analysis, I will show how Melville negotiates his own quest through his characters. The verb "negotiate" here illustrates the nature of the discourse—both Melville's and the reader's—as the author addresses questions that obviously cannot be answered with decisive closure. The act of addressing them remains a continuous process of negotiation through time. If nothing else, Melville's discourse exhibits the questions and the rationalist tools with which the citizens of Post-Enlightenment society negotiate their reality, as well as the mindset of an age in which it became increasingly hard for the author to simply believe. As I have said in my survey of the existing body of literature on the topic, I do not intend simply to account for Melville's incorporation of Bible passages and Judeo-Christian symbols in *Moby-Dick*. My aim is to demonstrate Melville's use of the text as a tool in his own spiritual quest for certainty and to show what, if anything, this inquiry brings forth. Throughout his professional career, Melville tried to balance the conflict between writing popular literature to make a living and communicating his philosophical knowledge to create a monumental work. He loathed the fact that he had to comply with popular demands and economic constraints in his profession. Through *Moby-Dick* Melville seeks to transcend popular literature and enter into the realm of philosophic inquiry. For Melville then, *Moby-Dick* was more than just another novel; it was more than "the culmination of Melville's early permutations of the dark reform mode" (Reynolds 152); it was his finest attempt yet to explore his own need for certainty at a time when the concept itself seemed hopelessly lost in his eternal "If" (Melville 373). Finally, I want to establish that Melville's negotiation of certainty is both a timely expression of his zeitgeist and a psychological endeavor to regain his mental stability.

Herman Melville was born in New York City on August 1, 1819, the third child of Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melvill. The day after Herman Melville's birth, in a letter to his brother-in-law Peter Gansevoort, Allan Melvill referred to his newborn son as the "little Stranger." "This "little Stranger," grew up in the shadow

of his older brother Gansevoort who was favored by his parents. Herman, at an early age, sensed from his parents actions and comments that he was considered intellectually inferior and physically less graceful than his older brother Gansevoort. In an attempt to win his parent's affection and admiration Melville began to assume a demeanor that was docile and amiable.

II. THE ISSUE OF DOUBT AND THE LOSS OF FAITH IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY:

"Controversy, at least in this age, does not lie between the hosts of heaven [...] and the powers of evil [...]; but it is a sort of night battle, where each fights for himself, and friends and foe stand together. When men understand what each other mean, they see [...] that controversy is either superfluous or hopeless." (201)

– John Henry Newman, Fifteen Sermons.

The age in which Herman Melville was writing was marked by fundamental changes in both Christian faith and the natural science. I have principally relied on Herbert Hovenkamp's *Science and Religion in America 1800-1860* as a proverbial chart through the voluminous discourses of the time period in question. Hovenkamp provides a thorough discussion of the strongly contested issues of genealogy, geology, and textual criticism on the Bible in the nineteenth century, and manages to turn the renegotiation of ground between religion, philosophy and science into a fascinating narrative.

Hovenkamp illustrates the struggle natural theology—science that proves biblical accounts—faces, as it tries to make finite statements about God and his perpetual influence on the universe. The author identifies an increased need to explain God amongst discerning minds of the nineteenth century, a need that is expressed by the rise of German Higher Criticism. Higher criticism, as Hovenkamp notes, questioned the formerly predominant orthodox assumption that "truth stands still," and debauched assumptions made it possible for scientists to refer to natural developments in geology, genealogy and paleontology without having to refer to God directly.

Melville's studies at the Albany Academy terminated with his father's death. Thereafter, he was largely self-educated and for a while something of a drifter (like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, who asserted that "a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard"). He tried various occupations—bank clerk, clerk in the family business, country schoolmaster—and he studied surveying before becoming a sailor.

At 18 Melville made his first voyage as a crew member on a New York-Liverpool packet ship. At 22 he shipped on the whaler *Acushnet*. Returning four years later, he almost immediately began writing novels derived from his adventures. At this time Polynesia was a romantic and little-known region. Furthermore, maritime affairs were a matter of public interest. Also, there was a market for authentic personal narratives as opposed to fictional "romances."

In this paper, I am going to explore Faustian Myth in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) which is an outstanding work of American Renaissance and Romanticism. This novel is about an irrevocable quest of Ahab, captain of the whaler *Pequod*, to seek revenge on Moby Dick, a whale which has destroyed his ship on his previous voyage that severed his leg from the knee. Here, in this paper I am not relating Faust's story to this novel in a traditional way by talking about devil, pact and damnation but regarding this novel Faustian by the characteristics that it shares with the character of Faust by examining its boundless aspirations, its expansionism, its identification of knowledge with power, its attempt to subdue nature, its yearning for control over its own destiny.

III. THE DOUBLOON AND MELVILLE'S CHARTS TO CERTAINTY

"The Doubloon" is one of the central chapters of *Moby-Dick*, one through which Melville first communicates his methodology of obtaining certainty. Ahab nails a Spanish coin to the main mast of the *Pequod*, proclaiming that whosoever raises the white whale may obtain the golden prize. The doubloon becomes the object of various interpretations provided by the different characters as they pass by the mast.

By providing a close reading of the coin's meaning, each character projects his personality onto the object and thus infuses it with meaning. In light of the personal construction of meaning, the doubloon thus transforms into a multivalent cipher. Melville thus uses the doubloon as a prism of interpretation that refracts each character's strategy of making sense of the human experience and thus of obtaining certainty.

However, the doubloon does not remain the only postmodernist stage prop that Melville uses in the text. The crew of the *Pequod* uses various objects as a means to bridge the void of uncertainty that existence places before them. These objects are visual representations of meaning, i.e. Melville's "charts" on his quest for certainty. Charts appear in various forms in the text: Ahab's whale charts, the doubloon, and even Queequeg's tattoos—all represent tools that aid the characters to deduce meaning from phenomena that they cannot explain; in nautical terms, these implements are compasses through the uncharted waters of existence.

Melville's "charts" represent signifiers for the characters that utilize them to navigate through a hostile natural environment and to counteract the feelings of instability and isolation that existence brings forth in them. Following Martin Heidegger's concept of "being thrown into the world,"³³ many characters in *Moby-Dick* convey an air of displacement and disorientation. For example, Ishmael learns that the owners of the *Pequod* are mostly "widows and orphans" (Melville 76). In fact, Ishmael himself sets out to escape a "November" in his soul that makes him wish to knock "people's hats off," which indicates that he experiences strong feelings of unsociability and isolation ashore that he strives to shed off on the ocean. These minor plot details also establish dislocation as a fundamental theme in the novel.

Existence is puzzling to all characters that attempt any form of critical contemplation of reality. The significance of the chapter "the Doubloon" thus arises from the fact that it displays the various characters' associative and contemplative assets. Metaphorical charts are used in various ways throughout the novel: While Flask—and to a certain extent Stubb—see the doubloon as a material means to pleasure, Queequeg consults the stars and his tattoos in the process of making decisions. Meanwhile Captain Ahab initially relies on a sextant and an actual chart to obtain certainty about the course of the whale. Ultimately he disregards every tool and completely relies on his instinct to chase the whale. Ahab's emancipation from all "charts" represents the climax of Melville's experimentation with charts. While I do not believe that Melville suggests for the reader to abandon all charts and to rely solely on instinct, the novel, especially through Ahab, explores the ramifications of complete isolation from reason and society for the individual.

IV. DISSECTING THE WHALE

Herman Melville's assessment of the issue of uncertainty in the nineteenth century, as well as the examination of his technique of charting with which he attempts to resolve this issue, leads us to the third part of the discussion of uncertainty. Melville presents multiple potential approaches to solve the problem of attaining certainty in a treacherous and hostile world. I have demonstrated how Melville has assessed the issue of uncertainty as a psychological deficiency of his age and how charting presents the strategy to resolve these issues. The act of regaining certainty from nature marks the last step of Melville's quest.

I argue that Melville restores faith through his description of nature and the metaphor of whaling. These two factors form the basis for Melville's characters to negotiate faith. Ishmael and Ahab form the two prevalent approaches to the task: activity and contemplation. Melville seems to set up an experiment in *Moby-Dick*. He establishes two major agents, whom he moves like chess figures over the world map in pursuit of religious certainty. Ahab represents the active quester while Ishmael's role throughout the novel remains that of the contemplative measurer.⁴⁹ Melville thus has the luxury of watching his two antipodean questers come face to face with God. Since Ahab represents the physical act of whaling in the plot, while Ishmael focuses on the theoretical evaluation of the profession, I will focus on Ahab's character development to see how his methodology and faith develop and how Melville's notions of spiritual uncertainty are expressed by Hobbes, Spinoza, and Newman.

Ultimately, I suggest that Melville performs a constructive quest rather than a subversive attack on the zeitgeist of his age, in spite of his negative assessment of nature and the nature of God.

CONCLUSION:

Melville's assessment of the problem of certainty in his time as well as the literary tradition of spiritual doubt in which he wrote is as multifaceted as the doubloon itself. He invents the process of charting with which his characters seek to penetrate the veil of uncertainty in nature and in their own spiritual disposition. Ultimately, Melville's quest for certainty does not appear to answer his question for absolute empirical certainty about God. His quest rather manages to establish that empirical knowledge of God is unattainable simply because faith in God is a creative faculty that cannot be derived from empirical data. Throughout my discussion of uncertainty in *Moby-Dick*, I have shown that Melville writes in a literary tradition of spiritual doubt with its roots in the seventeenth century. Although not having explicitly consulted these texts, the ideas of Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, Thomas Paine, and John Henry Newman formed the zeitgeist of Melville's age.

The ideology of perpetual learning is represented by Melville's narrator, Ishmael, as well as Melville's strategy of using charts in various representations. Activity and the perpetual act of questing are the tools with which the author seeks to combat his inner urge to ascertain the nature of God with empirical certainty. However, as both characters Ishmael and Ahab illustrate, Melville walks a thin line between contemplation and monomania. Nevertheless Melville pursues his various quests to the last. Andrew Delbanco agrees in *Herman Melville: His World and Work* (2005) that Melville, while suffering a decline in his career after *Moby-Dick*, never gave up being an author, nor did he fall into "a long silence" (288). Melville's ideology of activity defied his own spiritual uncertainty, as well as the physical limitations of his latter life (he was "suffering from recurrent skin and lung infections"), granting him the will to pursue his quest for certainty even beyond *Moby-Dick* (Delbanco 288). I therefore disagree with both Reynolds and Stein, who postulate that in his writings, Melville either expresses his disdain for society in an attack on faith or is a bitter author who has retreated from society and takes revenge for his commercial failure by adopting a pessimistic mode of reform in his writing. I believe that Melville performs a constructive task in playing out his quest for certainty in *Moby-Dick*. As Robert Sattelmeyer notes, Melville "struggled to complete" the text, not because of his writer's block, but because of the inner struggle

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