The Unshored, Harborless Immensities of Time:
Seeking Truth Across Eras in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*

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I would like to acknowledge the impact of my high school English teacher, Tracy Garcia-LaVigne, on my love of *Moby-Dick* and my reading of the novel.
1. Introduction

*Moby-Dick* contains, among its encyclopedic descriptions of whales and voluminous meditations on existence, a subtle truth about the nature of time and its relation to knowledge. For many of its readers, the novel can seem like an overwhelming jumble of methods of investigation from all times and sources. Composed during an important moment of transition in the United States, a time when the practice of whaling was already dying out and “modern” innovations were changing the nature of everyday life, its treatment of such changes was not always clear. To attempt to pin Melville’s leviathan of a novel down and “label” it, to classify it as “modern” or not, is to miss the point. As Andrew Delbanco notes in his book, *Melville, His World and Work*, the beginning of the Melville revival occurred when, from a critical point of view, the idea of Melville as an “affable travel writer gave way to a writer who had anticipated James Joyce’s literary innovations...This was the beginning of Melville’s reclamation as a protomodernist writer” (11). We seem to value Melville’s work to the extent that we can claim him as one of our own, as a writer who belongs, in some deep sense, to our time. However, *Moby-Dick*’s true insight and innovation was actually far greater than simply its anticipation of a modern style of narration.

Melville seems to have recognized something Ernst Bloch would express years later in the famous phrase “the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous,” referring paradoxically to the way that characteristics of different “time periods” can exist in the same moment in time (Wollaeger, 11). The ideas and modes of thought we have labeled as belonging to different eras in time do not simply fade
away; they continue to inform us. Eras do not begin and end, allowing humanity to start anew at periodic intervals; yet the world changes drastically. It is tempting to talk about this process of change as though we entered the modern era around the nineteenth century and left the past behind. However, *Moby-Dick* helps its reader realize that there is a place for the traditional in the modern and the modern in the traditional, precisely because change happens gradually. Furthermore, though methods of inquiry may evolve, men are motivated throughout history by their desire to seek the same goal: an understanding of the hidden pattern by which the universe works. Considering these two ideas, this essay claims that while Melville's novel acknowledges a changing world and uses characters like Ahab and Ishmael to express that change, it does not simply mark Ishmael as the herald of modernity and ask us to forget about Ahab, the doomed Captain who seems unable to survive in this new world. Rather, the novel leaves room to value both “modern” and “traditional” characteristics in the future because it acknowledges that knowledge-seeking throughout eras has the same goal and that no era exists completely separately from other eras. This essay will discuss these two issues mainly by focusing on Ahab and Ishmael.

Critics like Bryan, Seyle, and Milder map the two central characters of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael and Ahab, onto this modern/traditional dichotomy. In particular, they encourage reading Ahab and Ishmael as characters with separate ideologies and outlooks. In his essay “*Moby-Dick* as Revolution” John Bryant posits that there are two essential narratives in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael's and Ahab's, that it has a “lub-dub heartbeat,” and that Melville's “oscillating literary structure is a mapping of the
artist's ontological condition, his physical struggle to experience Being" (68). Like myself, Bryant sees *Moby-Dick* as a negotiation between different methods of gathering knowledge, as a consistent revolution: "A book is most like revolution when it places the reader in the condition of one caught between two deeply felt but conflicting ideologies" (71). However, unlike Bryant, I do not see this revolution as a shift between two ideologies alone, because neither Ahab nor Ishmael represents a single ideology. What Bryant calls Narrative A consists of Ishmael's quest to transcend "nothingness" and understand being. It follows that Narrative B consists of Ahab's quest to deny a fear of nothingness by piling meaning onto one being (72). Bryant describes Ahab's and Ishmael's respective goals this way: "Ishmael takes to the sea democratically to confront his fear of nothingness, just as Ahab takes to the sea autocratically to kill that fear in the form of the white whale" (74). Ishmael approaches understanding with comedy and interconnectedness, and Ahab approaches understanding with a tragic focus of aggression onto one being.

Other critics label the difference between Ahab and Ishmael in other ways. Seelye claims that Ahab's method of discovering truth is akin to a line representing the narrative elements that drive the story toward its conclusion, while Ishmael's method deals with the scientific, "cetological," elements of the novel and can be conceptualized as a circle. Mildler makes a similar point, saying that Ishmael sees the world from a Victorian perspective as a place of deep uncertainty, whereas Ahab sees it from a Romantic perspective as a place containing readable truth. Their formulations of these characters are complicated, and I cannot review all of their claims. But, it seems that, for each critic, Ahab represents an older tradition, a
classical spirit of unflinching nobility. They imply that his attitude is not adaptive, that he cannot survive as well as Ishmael in the modern world. Ishmael represents the modern man; he is skeptical, humorous and profound, but he cannot be the hero Ahab is. Perhaps this formulation is correct. Ishmael is generally modern, and Ahab generally is not. His death is the death of a type, a spirit, and an era. However, the critics who make these claims fail to note that neither character perfectly conforms to the characteristics of his “time.” Ishmael contains subtle elements of tradition, and Ahab contains subtle elements of modernity. This observation is crucial because it means recognizing that eras are not completely separate bundles of time. It means giving Ahab’s heroics space and value (albeit a smaller space and value) in a future beginning to look radically different from the past.

Bryant comes closest to the heart of the novel when he says that the differences between Ahab and Ishmael are not irreconcilable, that there is in fact a revolution going on between them that gives *Moby-Dick* its energy. The novel acknowledges that different modes of understanding can, and do, exist side by side in the same time. At its deepest level, this is a reminder that some progressions and innovations throughout history are just new ways of expressing or approaching truth we have known or sought before. The current essay argues that we cannot dismiss Ahab or Ishmael as easily as critics who associate them with different time periods do. If both characters are seeking answers to the same large epistemological questions, and neither has an ideology that truly belongs to the past or modernity, we can take something valuable from each into the future.
Bruno Latour’s *We have Never Been Modern* highlights the problem with making the claim that a specific character embodies a particular time period, especially one as elusive and inconsistently defined as “modernity.” Latour begins by asking his reader to question whether there is a modern era significantly different from pre-modern society. He points out that we no longer believe history moves like an “arrow:” “In the countless quarrels between Ancients and Moderns, the former come out as winners as often as the latter now” (10). *Moby-Dick* is a study in this nuance. As a whole, the novel neither champions progress nor laments a lost “romantic” past. It presents some of Ahab’s and Ishmael’s traits as both modern and traditional, allowing the modes of thinking that seem to belong to each era to intertwine as a result of their simultaneous presence in a single character. As Latour points out, this is necessary because we cannot draw simple lines between eras. They bleed into one another. Their ideas are recycled and reused. The question “When are we?” has no simple answer. *Moby-Dick* challenges its readers to push this concept even farther, revealing that, although investigation seems to change radically between eras, its goals remain similar.

The first chapter of *We Have Never Been Modern* suggests that if the modern world exists, it is characterized by artificially separating knowledge into three main categories: natural, social, and discursive. Latour and his colleagues believe we need to work beneath these boundaries and discuss all three types of knowledge together to arrive at an understanding of the world and the links between disciplines like biology, political theory, and philosophy (15). Latour also identifies a distinction between understanding the world as a place made up of two irreconcilable
categories (natural science and political science) and understanding the world as a place of "hybrid connections" where all knowledge and events are dependent upon one another. He continues with an attempt to trace how the artificial, modern separation of knowledge occurs. *Moby-Dick* presents both a modern form of knowledge, that of "purification," which separates entities into categories and defines them clearly (the largest categories being "human" and "non-human"), and "translation," which sees the world as a system of hybrid networks in which all categories are related (Latour, 11). *Moby-Dick* is about the tension between these ways of understanding the world. Ahab has a rigid, "iron" (143) understanding of the universe that evokes Latour's "purification," whereas Ishmael is associated with woven materials more fluid than iron. The title of the first chapter, "Loomings," gestures towards the intertwined nature of Ishmael's manner of relating knowledge and events, evoking Latour's "translation." For Ishmael, all things are connected; each investigation leads to further inquiry and the introduction of another subject. Perhaps as eras go by, we focus, alternately (like Ahab and Ishmael) on isolating and categorizing things in order to understand them and broadening our vision to use information about their connections in order to understand them. However, the goal always involves arriving at an understanding of the object's core, attempting to penetrate beyond its immediately observable traits to the patterns by which it operates. This is why we cannot attach value judgments to either character's attitude towards the universe. The desires driving them both to action are more similar than they initially appear.
2. The Goals of Inquiry

*Moby-Dick*'s assertion that the quest for truth is relatively consistent overtime finds appropriate expression through powerful allusions to ancient literature that has defined our culture. Nowhere is this clearer than in Ishmael's allusion to Ecclesiastes. In the process of proving that the Sperm Whale can, and has maliciously destroyed ships, Ishmael comments: “these marvels (like all marvels) are mere repetitions of the ages; so that for the millionth time we say amen with Solomon—Verily there is nothing new under the sun” (176). When we look at time on the scale of “ages,” it begins to seem quite repetitive. Even the things we consider “marvels” because they occur so rarely are reiterations, not truly new. In fact, the world is so filled with repetition that the statement is an illustration of itself: even the revelation that nothing new exists is not new; it can only be said “for the millionth time.” Even Ishmael’s revelation is a repetition of a revelation that belonged to a different era. The scale of such repetition is baffling, which is why we don’t always see it and realize the similarity of truth seeking throughout time.

*Melville’s novel emphasizes the fact that it is a compilation of older knowledge and allusions, that it contains “nothing new.” In fact, before Chapter 1, Melville frames *Moby-Dick* as an exploration through libraries hosted by a “Late Consumptive Usher to a Grammar School,” who “appears to have gone through the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth, picking up whatever random allusions to whales he could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane” (8). The narrator acquires a slightly mocking tone in matters concerning this “usher,” but he takes his project seriously enough to list over fifty extracts from these whale books.
The narrator’s declaration that the “usher” includes both the “sacred” and “profane,” books from the “Vaticans” (sacred spaces) of the earth, and its “street-stalls,” is actually a declaration by which the entire novel operates. The narrator suggests that the statuses of various sources of information about the whale are irrelevant. What matters is their substance. What matters is recognizing, as does the usher, that they all want to shed light on the mysterious “leviathan.”

Ironically, the current essay warns readers about the problem of classifying characters like Ahab and Ishmael because this can lead to a reading of the novel that attaches value to each based on whether they seem to represent the future or the past. Unfortunately, in order to prove that neither character fits neatly into a classifiable time period, I must employ the very method I want to reject. I must use classification warily as the novel itself seems to. To a certain extent, Ahab and Ishmael are classifiable as “traditional” and “modern,” but there are important ways in which they defy these categories. Their methods of gathering information about the universe seem exactly opposite from the era with which each character is generally associated. However, in the end, even this difference doesn’t seem important because they both have the same goals, they just disagree on the best way to achieve them.

To explain this, I will use a critic who believed very seriously in modernity and the significant changes it brought to the world: Michel Foucault. In The Order of Things, he identifies a sixteenth century method of scientific inquiry remarkably similar to the method Ishmael generally employs throughout Moby-Dick. According to Foucault, sixteenth century scientists believed that knowledge lay in a secret
system of analogies written into physical bodies and text, and that both held the key
to knowing an object and the principles that ruled its behavior. Foucault observes:
"To know an animal or a plant...is to gather together the whole dense layer of signs
with which it or they may have been covered" (40). This is an uncanny description
of the way Ishmael approaches the Sperm Whale. Strikingly, Foucault's example of
"Renaissance science," Aldrovandi's discussion of the serpent, is remarkably close to
Ishmael's discussion of the whale. Melville was familiar with this name and the
scientific practice associated with it; Ishmael mentions Aldrovandi as an example of
a natural scientist who has studied the whale in "Cetology" (115). For such
scientists, acquiring knowledge meant "reading" (observing) natural bodies and
reconciling the information they presented with a thing's literary history:
"knowledge therefore consisted in relating one form of language to another form of
language; in restoring the great, unbroken plain of words and things; in making
everything speak" (40). Foucault contrasts this sixteenth century attitude with a
post sixteenth century attitude that has persisted into the present, in which
acquiring knowledge means focusing exclusively on direct observation of a living
thing and ignoring its literary and cultural significance. Scientists like Linnaeus and
Buffon focused on classifying the natural world according to how things looked and
behaved, they privileged this type of information over another, more literary type of
information. Foucault suggests that post-sixteenth century scientists have deluded
themselves into thinking they have found a way to express a thing in its "pure form."
But, this expression requires translation into language, itself a type of classification
that dilutes the purity of what they want to communicate. The developers of modern
science were no closer to the objective "truth" of living things than their predecessors; they simply came to prefer one type of language to another.

Ishmael makes a point of discussing artistic representations of the whale in an effort to help his reader examine what the whale is and means, just as a natural scientist of the sixteenth century might have done. These representations are an important part of our experience of the majestic creature, particularly since most people do not have the opportunity to see the whale up close. He names several places where pictures of whales appear in a chapter entitled "Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales," with a pun on the "monstrous" nature of both whales and the quality of their depictions. Deliberately or not, the simple inclusion of such chapters is redolent of sixteenth century investigation. Whales can be found "among the oldest Hindoo, Egyptian, and Grecian sculptures," in early Christian paintings, in Bible prints, in plates in Dutch adventure tales circa 1671, and in natural history books, such as "Goldsmith's Animated Nature," intended to teach children. Ishmael denounces all of these representations as terrible because they are modeled after "stranded fish." He claims:

The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters; and afloat the vast bulk of him is out of sight...and out of that element (water) it is a thing eternally impossible for mortal man to hoist him bodily into the air, so as to preserve all his mighty swells and undulations. (217)

Ishmael acknowledges that these pictures have become the whale's identity in the popular imagination. In spite of their inadequacy, these pictures are nevertheless important to him because the difficulty of creating a representation of the whale comes to express the difficulty of understanding what it is, the goal of all
investigation. The whale is un-paintable not simply because the majority of his bulk is “out of sight,” but because he exists on an “unfathomable” plain. The whale and the water become one; he is as “unfathomable” as the substance he swims in, and his body takes on the “mighty swells and undulations” of the ocean itself. Melville merges context and subject to show that the time and place in which we view something are as important to what it is as the thing itself. Like a sixteenth century scientist, Ishmael does not isolate the whale from its associations because these are part of its “language.” Even bad representations tell us something about the nature of the whale’s life when we think about why they are inadequate.

Ishmael opens “The Honor and glory of Whaling” like a true connoisseur of literary information. He claims as whalemen “many great demi-gods and heroes, prophets of all sorts,” among whom are Perseus, St. George (whose dragon Ishmael “maintains to have been a whale”), Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnoo. As Ishmael enthusiastically comments “there’s a member roll for you” (286). He humorously pushes the boundaries of knowledge that can be considered as actually having to do with the whale in order to show that all knowledge relates to each other and all great subjects. He muses somewhat absurdly that Hercules was “swallowed down and thrown up by a whale; still whether that strictly makes a whaleman of him, that might be mooted” (286). Ishmael is willing to include all knowledge in his discussion of whales, not to trick the reader into believing they are more pervasive and all-important than they truly are, his tone is too whimsical and lacks the earnestness for that; but to show us that the study of anything inevitably leads to the study of
everything. Ishmael suggests that the world is a web of analogies leading from one idea to the next.

Ahab, on the other hand, privileges a certain kind of information about the whale based on data and observation over literary knowledge. His focused approach to gathering knowledge is sometimes ideologically similar to the practices of modern biology. His understanding of what the whale is and his goals for Moby Dick inform the type of knowledge he seeks. For example, Ahab studies log-books and charts every night in an attempt to determine Moby Dick’s whereabouts: he “knew the sets of all tides and currents; and thereby calculating the driftings of the sperm whale’s food; and, also, calling to mind the regular ascertained seasons for hunting him in particular latitudes; could arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching to certainties” (167) regarding Moby Dick’s location. Ahab uses observed information that has been recorded in charts and log-books to arrive at his goal. He also reveals his expertise and reliance on modern science when he fixes the Pequod’s compass, which has been reversed by a violent storm: “Men...my men, the thunder turned old Ahab’s needles; but out of this bit of steel Ahab can make one of his own, that will point as true as any” (389). Ahab speaks of himself in the third person, investing himself with a sense of natural power. He hides his use of modern knowledge behind a veneer of the supernatural because he seeks knowledge in order to gain control over the world around him. Although we do not generally associate the supernatural with modernity, Ahab’s attitude reflects a modern desire for control.
The most important thing to realize about these two methods of acquiring knowledge is that as different as the ideologies behind them may seem, they both work towards the same goal. Sixteenth century knowledge sought to “make things speak” (40), to discover their source, to find a pattern behind the information they offered immediately available to the senses. Because this quest was rooted in a belief in the divine, modern biology considers itself to be totally different. But, it actually seeks the same thing. Even though it focuses on the observable, it tries to find patterns underlying immediate sensory information. It also seeks the “sources” or “causes” of processes. Both methods of inquiry attempt to discover a hidden order by which the universe works. Similarly, Ahab and Ishmael both seek this hidden order. As different as their ideologies and methods of acquiring knowledge may seem, they both work towards confronting truth in the universe. Furthermore, as Foucault says, “To search for a meaning is to bring to light a resemblance. To search for the law governing signs is to discover the things that are alike” (29). As Ahab and Ishmael penetrate deeper into their respective “quests,” they discover more and more analogies in the world. They come closer and closer to what is, in fact, the same. This is what Moby-Dick reveals, not that its characters and their quests are different, but that as they move closer to knowledge and the climax of the novel, they move closer to each other as well. This is one reason why the future has a place for both Ahab and Ishmael: modern inquiry pursues, and will probably continue to pursue, the same goal they both have. This is the meaning of true consistency across history and the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.”
3. Traditional and Modern Ideologies; What Does the Whale Mean?

So far, I have described how Ahab can be seen as "modern" and Ishmael can be identified with the sixteenth century. However, as I explained, readers generally associate Ishmael with modernity and Ahab with the past. Indeed, this formulation is appealing. There are many ways to associated Ishmael with modernity and Ahab with tradition. Upon initial analysis, each character's core beliefs regarding religion and/or the presence of a divine force in the universe offers support for the way they are generally read. In this respect, Ahab seems less modern; he has a traditional faith in a single entity of universal control, even though it is embodied in Moby Dick. When compared with such intense faith, Ishmael's unspecific musings on the divine seem skeptical and modern. And yet, even these associations are not as simple as they appear. Close readings of the passages regarding their respective faiths reveal that Ahab's has modern elements, and Ishmael's has traditional elements. Both types of faith have their place in the future, even that of the dead Captain Ahab. It doesn't make sense to argue that his death means there is no place for his attitude in the modern world, because part of that attitude is, itself, modern. Furthermore, as Latour pointed out, the modern world is built from the past.

Bryant argues that Ishmael survives because, as a "modern man," he uses his knowledge of the universe more "adaptively" than Ahab; he sees it as a place of joy rather than a force to fight. However, once we see that some of Ahab's notions are "modern" too, we can no longer use a label like "traditional" to understand Ahab's faith. We can no longer easily dismiss him as a figure Melville condemns, nor can we see him purely as an allegorical figure, an "endangered species" of sorts, a type of
man disappearing from the earth. As this discussion about Ahab and Ishmael's potential faith in the divine will show, neither Ahab nor Ishmael is straightforward enough to represent such a thing. This is why each character is so compelling.

How is faith in a potentially divine entity or belief about how the universe works related to classifying Ishmael and Ahab as “modern” or not? As Foucault explains in *The Order of Things*, scientists traditionally believed there were secrets written into the bodies of natural phenomena. Essentially, if one could decipher the “code,” one could discover the law or truth by which all things worked. This belief was built on the idea that a universal force, God, existed, and that He and His truth of nature could be read, discovered, and “known” in the deepest sense through observation (26). Since Ahab seems to have faith in a single, universal force, his ideology can be considered “traditional.”

Interestingly, the language Foucault uses to discuss the potential existence of a discernable truth and order in the universe is very similar to Ahab’s language. He says that traditional scientific investigation “assume(s) the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to that which was already there, the very same of an image of primordial truth fully adequate to its nature, and it necessitates the removal of every mask to ultimately disclose an original identity” (371). Melville’s Ahab speaks of “striking through the mask” to master the supposed force behind Moby Dick (140, emphasis mine). He believes there is some truth behind the whale not immediately visible that he can discover and control. The similarity of the language reflects the similarity of
the two attitudes. Ahab approaches the world with the desire to reveal and read the natural code behind God’s “mask.”

In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” Foucault points out that modern investigators of truth do not operate according to this same basic understanding. Instead, they believe the universe presents itself as it is; it is not controlled by a single divine force, and even processes which seem “secret” reveal themselves with close observation: “if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is something altogether different behind things: not a timeless and essential secret but the secret that they have no essence, or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (371). Perhaps the things of this world have been assembled by chance; perhaps there is no divine plan or discernable truth behind them. Perhaps “what we know and what we are (is) but the exteriority of accidents” (374). According to Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” modernity is characterized partially by the loss of faith in a central, divine truth, and the rise of a suspicion that the universe contains no truth and was built according to no coherent plan. At the very least, modernity is characterized by losing faith in the idea that humanity could ever know this plan if it exists. Foucault’s description of modern ideology is closely aligned with Ishmael’s skepticism.

“Thing Theorist” Bill Brown can help us examine Ishmael’s and Ahab’s ideologies by providing a frame for exploring their attitudes towards the whale, a central aspect of each one’s faith. He writes that the term “thing,” has come to mean the aura surrounding an object before, after, and beyond its physical existence and
participation in the world as we experience it. He explains: "The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). To understand Moby Dick as a "thing" is to understand not simply what the whale actually, physically is, but to understand what he is and comes to mean through time in his relation to Ishmael, Ahab, and any other subject that considers him. Moby Dick, the object, is simply a whale; but Moby Dick, the thing, is so much more. From Ahab's traditional perspective, Moby Dick represents the one, divine force controlling nature. Yet the relationship is complicated because Ahab seems to be aware of Moby Dick's thingness, of the peculiarity and particularity of his relationship with the whale, even as he persists in feeding the attitudes that fuel that relationship. From Ishmael's modern perspective, Moby Dick offers a chance to explore and express the interconnectedness of all types of knowledge. For both, Moby Dick as a thing is the anchor from which they explore what the universe means, the truth or divine force that exists behind it all. The whale is a cornerstone; it gives readers access to various characters' reflections on a single entity, allowing them to explore how these reflections are substantively different.

Ahab seems to represent an "older" America. The reader is tempted to believe that his death signifies the death of an older age and the beginning of a new one. Everything about him appears antiquated. In "The Sphinx," Ahab asks the sperm whale head tied to the side of the ship to speak and reveal "the secret thing that is in thee" (249), betraying a superstitious tendency to invest animals and
symbols with mysterious power. His Quaker vocabulary ("thee") points to his traditional roots. He displays all the signs of a classical tragic hero. In fact, Ishmael invites the reader to consider him as such: he has "in his face...all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe" (109). Furthermore, as Ishmael describes the official hierarchy of officers and mates on the Pequod, he labels Ahab as a majestic figure, implying that he could have been an important historical personality: "I must not conceal that I have only to do with a poor old whale-hunter like him; and, therefore, all outward majestical trappings and housings are denied me. Oh, Ahab! What shall be grand in thee, it must needs be plucked at from the skies!" (127). Even as Ishmael deplores his lack of "trappings," there is no doubt about Ahab's dramatic role. Ahab seems all the more majestic because the indications of his nobility come from the very air and don't simply represent the potentially undeserved honors of sycophantic men. When Starbuck protests that revenge against a dumb brute seems "blasphemous," Ahab explains:

> 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 buts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! (140)

Ahab believes that everything in the world reflects the will of an "unknown but still reasoning" entity that controls them. All of the events and processes of life simply mask the principle or force that truly moves them. These lines transform faith in divine control, often considered comforting, into pathological paranoia. The "reasoning thing" is a relentless, sinister, haunting presence. Ahab's instinct is to respond to the idea of fate with violence, not reassurance. His fear and rage reveal how deeply he believes in a universal order of fate—another, more subtle sign that
the foundation of his belief is not modern. The whale isn't the object “whale” at all; it is a mask hiding universal maliciousness. Ahab's long, eloquent soliloquies, exclamations of intent, and deep understanding that entities are not necessarily what they appear to be, are distinctly Shakespearian, a stylistic marker of the past.

Ahab sees a universal truth or force in Moby Dick. The whale becomes a symbol of his lack of freedom, a reminder that he doesn't have complete control over his life. As I have said, Ahab's belief in the existence of a divine force that convinces him he is not free is itself a sign that he is not modern. However, Ahab's attitude towards the whale isn't as opposed to the modern attitude as I may have suggested. Ahab has both modern and traditional ideas. He is not just a symbol of the past, so we cannot use this claim to justify his death at the end of the novel. A close look at Ahab's dialogue reveals that he struggles with his belief in a divine force and with justifying his monomaniacal behavior. In fact, at times, his attitude begins to appear contradictorily “modern.” The closer Ahab gets to his goal, the more he seems to sense its futility, the more he indicates an understanding that he might be throwing himself away in a desperate act of revenge that will not truly mean anything. Perhaps Moby Dick is just a whale. His relationship with the object begins to shift.

As the novel's action builds to a climax and Starbuck arrives at Ahab's cabin to report leaks in the oil barrels, Ahab exclaims: "I'm all a-leak myself. Aye! Leaks in leaks!...Yet I don't stop to plug my leak; for who can find it in the deep-loaded hull; or how hope to plug it, even if found, in this life's howling gale?" (362). Ahab symbolically acknowledges his madness in his recognition of himself as a “leaky"
vessel. He even implies that healing (or "plugging") is possible, but he despairs of ever finding the source of his madness. He calls life a "howling gale," suggesting that it is chaotic and perhaps no force has charge of its violent randomness after all.

Furthermore, after befriending the mad, half-drowned, black cabin boy, Pip, Ahab tells him: "Lad, lad, I tell thee thou must not follow Ahab now. The hour is coming when Ahab would not scare thee from him, yet would not have thee by him. There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like" (399). Maybe Ahab has found a way to "plug" himself up using his sympathy for Pip, but he rejects it. Regardless, he comes to believe that he has a way out. Indeed, in "The Symphony," Ahab calls himself a fool and asks "Why this strife of the chase? Why weary, and palsy the arm at the ear, and the iron, and the lance?" (406). He reveals his own modern skepticism, apparently abandoning the idea of a universal truth or reason and embracing the notion of the futility of action.

Ahab re-enacts the fall in his desire to gain knowledge from the divinity he believes exists. This conviction leads Ahab to ask what, for him, is the most pressing and terrifying question a man can: "Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (406). This is his paradox: in the end, Ahab doesn't believe he is free to perform his own actions. He feels compelled to attack the white whale, and yet, his attack is meant to show that he refuses to be controlled or "enslaved" by any universal force. There is something noble about his desire to gain his freedom, to fight for true autonomy or die trying. He calls himself a "prisoner," (by definition, one lacking freedom), asking:

How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me...I see in him outrageous
strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principle, I'll wreak that hate upon him. (140)

From his distorted perspective, the “wall” hiding the divine and keeping him from seeing the source of his fate mocks him with its proximity. And yet, Ahab begins to feel uncertain about Moby Dick’s power. He does not insist that Moby Dick is the source of the divine force controlling him; he wonders whether the white whale is the “agent” or the “principle” of his misfortune.

Ahab’s tragedy is that his fight to be free of universal control condemns him to the very fate he seeks to avoid. He exclaims defiantly: “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!” (143). This very condition of unthinking abandonment of control to a prefixed iron road, the very circumstance that gives Ahab his strength, is also the behavior he seeks to fight. He cries: “But if the great sun move not of himself; but is as an errand-boy in heaven; nor one single star can revolve, but by some invisible power; how then can this one small heart beat; this one small brain think thoughts; unless God does that beating, does that thinking, does that living” (407). He has a deep sense of his own insignificance and powerlessness.

Against this last, Ahab becomes a modern man who decides to perform an action of his own volition. This decision is “modern” because it suggests that he no longer believes a divine force has total control over him. He decides to kill the whale, not necessarily because he believes it must be done, but because he wants to do it. In embracing his freedom, he embraces the idea that he might have control over his
life; he entertains the modern notion that the universe might simply be a random series of causes and effects with no malicious, reasoning “thing” lurking behind the mask of appearances. Towards the end of the novel, he acts on his own, rejecting help, rejecting alternatives that he is actually able to entertain. In the assumption of the autonomy he seeks throughout the novel, he becomes, ironically, a hero. In fact, the questions Ahab poses in “The Symphony” speak directly to the glorified language of “The Lee Shore.” We know why Ahab endures the strife of the chase, because safety is the “ship’s direst jeopardy” (97), and because the chase leads to an “apotheosis” (“elevation to divine status”), (Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary). This is what Ahab seeks. He wants to be his own God, the entity that controls his life. When we realize that Ahab could conceivably represent several approaches to knowledge and attitudes towards the divine, we can read him as more than just the symbol of a dying attitude that is “unadaptable” in modern society. We can celebrate Ahab’s fierce, romantic determination without claiming that his death means the novel condemns such an attitude in modern times.

Ishmael, on the other hand, seems to be easily categorizable as a symbol of the “modern man.” He is a young, humorous sailor open to fresh ideas about religion: “I’ll try a pagan friend, thought I, since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy” (56), sleeping with cannibals: “Thus, then, in ours hearts’ honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair” (57), and other unorthodox practices. In particular, his humor gives him a youthful vivacity and cynical edge that suggest a radical attitude. One of the reasons readers might be tempted to think of Ishmael as “modern” also has to do with his attitude towards divinity or the
existence of a discernable principle of truth in the universe. Remember, Foucault suggests that the "modern" man does not believe patterns in nature and the study of genealogy are the result of anything more than chance accumulation. Occasionally Ishmael adopts this attitude that Foucault has called "modern" by expressing credulity with regard to the notion that the world is controlled by a single force or truth. Even when he does speculate about the existence of such a thing, he acknowledges that humans may never understand it. He believes himself to be free, the master of his own actions.

Ishmael appreciates what things are and the chance connections between them, but wonders if something more lies behind them. He indicates several times that he feels the universe is potentially unreadable, that there may be nothing behind its secrets. As he tries to trace the source of the terror behind Moby Dick, he explains "not only do fabulous rumors naturally grow out of the very body of all surprising terrible events, -as the smitten tree gives birth to its fungi; but in maritime life, far more than in that of terra firma, wild rumors abound, wherever there is any adequate reality for them to cling to" (153). The "growing," and evolving process he describes is similar to an earlier genealogical process of chance accumulation described by Foucault. We also find the notion of powerful chance accumulation in Ishmael's description of the evolution of the whale's persona:

No wonder then, that ever gathering volume from the mere transit over the widest watery spaces, the outblown rumors of the White Whale did in the end incorporate with themselves all manner of morbid hints, and half-formed foetal suggestions of supernatural agencies, which eventually invested Moby Dick with new terrors unborrowed from anything that visibly appears. (153)
Ishmael doesn't truly see the whale as a God-like embodiment of divinity, nor does he see it even as a representation of some universal principle. Moby Dick is simply the chance accumulation of rumors that have been picked up throughout his long life in the mysterious substance of the ocean. They have no basis in fact, in what Moby Dick is, in his independent "objectness." With the skepticism of the modern man, Ishmael dismisses illogical "supernatural agencies" and "terrors" as explanations of the powers the whale seems to possess. He describes rumors as "half-formed fetuses," subduing otherworldly superstition with biological vocabulary. If a universal force exists, it isn't the White Whale, it is exactly what it has always been, and we cannot know it. This suspended belief is what Foucault considers the mark of modernity.

Even if Ishmael does believe that a singular, universal truth exists, he doesn't seem to think humans can discover it. He suggests that "to analyze" what is behind the terror of Moby Dick's whiteness and presence "would seem impossible" (162). He also says that to explain the magic by which Ahab recruits the crew to serve his monomaniacal purpose is to "dive deeper than Ishmael can go. The subterranean miner that works in us all, how can one tell whither leads his shaft by the ever shifting, muffled sound of his pick?" (158). Ishmael is not confident in his ability to "read" the language of symbols and clues that a universal truth or order would provide. He cannot even "read" what lies deepest in himself; he describes this as a "subterranean miner," a being with a foreign consciousness. Furthermore, occasionally Ishmael assumes a discouraged, overwhelmed tone that reveals his suspicion regarding the futility of action in a random universe. For example, when
the Pequod encounters The Albatross, a ship weary of traveling and searching for whales, Ishmael observes: "Round the world! There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings; but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through numberless perils to the very point whence we started" (195-196). Humans take pride in their discoveries and actions, as evidenced by the nobility they believe to be in the sentiment "Round the World!" because they believe they have accomplished something in a world that has meaning. Otherwise, why would men endure "numberless perils?" only to arrive where they "started?" In the world lacking meaning that Ishmael imagines, human accomplishment would be futile: "in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed" (196). We cannot win. Our chase after "far mysteries" will either end with exhaustion or abandonment.

And yet, even in Ishmael's discouragement, the way he feels about the existence of a universal truth isn't at all clear. If we chase it through eternity, this implies that it exists somewhere. It may be a "demon phantom," but as long as it exists, "circumnavigation" is still worthwhile. The only circumstance that could completely deprive us of the hope of finding it would be its non-existence. As Ishmael humorously remarks: "clear Truth is a thing for salamander giants only to encounter; how small the chances for the provincials then?" (268). Perhaps Ishmael's assertion that truth is only for absurd mythical creatures betrays the flippancy with which he regards the entire possibility of truth. Then again, if humans
can be considered “the provincials,” our chance of encountering truth is small, but real. The differences between Ahab and Ishmael's attitudes towards knowledge and the universe are not as irreconcilable as they appear on first glance. Yet, there is another way of understanding what it would mean if no truth or divine force existed beyond the universe, a method that emphasizes freedom and leads to joy.

Ishmael expresses this joy in his consistent humor. He is caught between wanting to believe in and trying to find a truth behind things and being unsure of whether that truth is discoverable or even exists. However, the possibility that it doesn't makes him the master of his own life and destiny in a way Ahab cannot be. This confidence in himself and the universe consistently shows through Ishmael's spirit of reacting to what comes with acceptance and a smile. This is particularly true of Chapter 49, entitled “The Hyena,” in which Ishmael notes: “There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange and mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody’s expense but his own” (188). Life is a “strange, mixed affair” that doesn’t seem to have any point. However, *Moby-Dick* is a novel, which, like Herman Melville himself, can “neither believe, nor be comfortable in (it’s) unbelief” (“Concerning Herman Melville”). The only way to react to this suspicion is to try to laugh along with the universe. Although the joke is on us, it is after all a joke, not a tragedy. Notice that while the supposition that the universe is a practical joke treats experience flippantly, it simultaneously suggests that something or someone is behind life “pulling the
strings" and that humans simply don't have access to this force. Perhaps this statement shows more reverence for a universal truth than it initially seems to.

In fact, the closer we look at Ishmael's statements about the universe, the more difficult it becomes to call him a "modern skeptic." He does have a sense of a goal or fate pervading life; it just isn't nearly as concretely represented as Ahab's. For example, after Ishmael discusses the monstrous pictures of whales, he speaks of the "great whales in the starry heavens" and exclaims: "would I could mount that whale and leap the topmost skies, to see whether the fabled heavens with all their countless tents really lie encamped beyond my mortal sight!" (223). Ishmael isn't sure whether the heavens exist or not, but he seems more than willing to believe that they do. Like Ahab, he is eager to understand the secrets of the universe, but unlike Ahab, he does not allow this desire to destroy him. He seems to take it for granted that mortal men cannot see or strike at a universal truth, but he acknowledges that it might exist. Furthermore, like Ahab, he offers the reader an image of the whale as a guide to that truth. The whale's image in the stars is what he pictures riding to a place beyond mortality.

As further evidence of Ishmael's potential belief in a universal force, it will be helpful to examine his discussion at the end of "The Fountain," a meditation on the substance of the whale's spout. Ishmael thanks "God" that "through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, inkindling my fog with a heavenly ray" (293). To thank God is to presuppose the existence of a divine force, a force Ishmael cannot always believe in or feel, but a force that occasionally makes him aware of its presence nonetheless. In fact, Ishmael suggests
that “Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye” (293). Ishmael himself declares his status with regard to faith in a divine, universal force ambiguous. He is neither “believer” nor “infidel.” He doubts “all things earthly” making it impossible for him to rely on modern biological observation alone for information, but he only has occasional “intuitions” of heavenly things. These “intuitions” keep him swimming through libraries, searching for the divine language that may or may not be written in the combination of literature and the natural world. Ishmael doesn’t know what he’s searching for. He is not exactly the model of a sixteenth century scholar, but he is not modern either. He recognizes his own status as a man outside of societal constructions of time, a concept associated with his biblical namesake.

Not only does Ishmael have an “intuition of some things heavenly,” he also has a strong sense of fate. In the beginning of the novel, he humorously remarks that he feels as if his “whaling voyage formed part of the grand programme of Providence,” sticking it between “Grand contested election for the Presidency of the United States” and “BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN” (22). His hyperbole reveals his discomfort with taking the idea that he was fated to go on a whaling voyage seriously, and his refusal/inability to ignore his sense that this might be true. From a modern point of view, it seems ridiculous to believe that a divine force could have been aware of the activities of one man. And yet, Ishmael repeatedly makes remarks about his fate. He claims that it seems as if Ahab’s crew was “specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge”
(158). He has difficulty deciding whether a universal force would be a mindlessly destructive or beneficial entity if it existed. If it was a malicious entity, could we really consider it a satisfactory answer to our search for truth in the universe? Ishmael’s biting skepticism emerges again.

Yet, in the “Mat-Maker,” Ishmael presents his view of life in the form of a metaphor suggested to him by the circumstance of weaving a mat. In this situation, he speaks of fate as well: “it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration” (179). Ishmael certainly does not dismiss faith, spirituality, or divinity from his understanding of the universe. He treats these entities as parts of a whole, whereas for Ahab, there is no possibility of anything beyond them. Understanding that Ishmael’s speculation about the divine is so complicated and varied shows us that the novel doesn’t necessarily use him to take sides regarding the “right” or “most modern” attitude towards the universe.

Throughout this essay, I have presented the differences between how Ahab and Ishmael each sees the world. To a certain extent, I observed how Moby-Dick uses these differences to comment on two approaches to knowledge and views of the universe, one associated with modernity and another associated with the time beforehand. But, I also showed that these associations are not as simple as some critics have treated them in the past. Bruno Latour brings up a helpful question: What does it actually mean to be “modern?” How do we justify the idea that we are facing a new era of “modernity” when the process of history is actually continuous
movement into the future? The human desire to categorize things can be informative, but limiting. *Moby-Dick* is simultaneously "modern" and not; the novel expresses the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous because it reveals the way being in time truly works. We do not exist in eras, in slices of time that begin and end cleanly. We are always informed by what has come before us, and we anticipate the thoughts of those in the future. Like Bill Brown's "thing," we exist as relationships that reach through time for their definitions. It is important to resist the impulse to characterize Ishmael as a "modern" man who leaves the classic, tragic hero, Ahab, behind. Melville may appear to create this dichotomy, but the wonderful complexity of his language and his characters' understandings of the world undoes it, so that in the end, Ahab has the strange ability to realize and deplore his own madness and Ishmael has the ability to deploy classification and continue searching for a universal truth in spite of the paradox that he believes it is un-discoverable.

Ultimately, we live in a world consistently employing slightly different methods in order to learn as much as possible about the patterns by which things operate. Our desires and methods for achieving our goals throughout history are more similar than we generally believe. Deep into his journey, Ishmael pauses to ask "Does the Whale's Magnitude Diminish? —Will He Perish?" and concludes: "we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents broke water...In Noah's flood he despised Noah's Ark; and if the world is to be again flooded...then the eternal whale will still survive, and rearing upon the top-most crest of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed defiance to the skies" (354). Time flows on. We may be convinced that our
world has changed significantly, but the divinity of the whale remains. His
“thingness,” his relationship with the humans who experience him may change, as
Ahab and Ishmael demonstrate, but he continues, just like the gradual changes of
time.
Notes

1 Note the mix of humor and gravity present in “Cetology,” which recognizes both that classification can help the reader learn about the whale, but also that classification can seem, problematically, more authoritative than it is.

II I am indebted to Olson’s essay (“Lear and Moby-Dick”) for the notion of dramatic progression throughout the novel, particularly Ahab’s progression.


Zwart, H. "What is a Whale? Moby-Dick, Marine Science and the Sublime."