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Playing with Leviathan

Job and the Aesthetic Turn in Biblical Exegesis

But if, in the face of all this, you still declare that whaling has no aesthetically noble associations connected with it, then am I ready to shiver fifty lances with you there, and unhorse you with a split helmet every time. The whale has no famous author, and whaling no famous chronicler, you will say. *The whale no famous author, and whaling no famous chronicler?* Who wrote the first account of our Leviathan? Who but mighty Job!

“The Advocate” (111)

In regarding Job as an admirable founding author whose representation of Leviathan proves beyond doubt the “aesthetically noble” heritage of whales, Ishmael not only extols whaling with the passion of a hot-tempered, stubborn advocate but also endorses the new, ever-growing perception of the Bible as a whole and the Book of Job in particular as the grand aesthetic touchstone for all times. Ishmael, indeed, strives throughout the text to model his obsessive whale meditations on Job’s Leviathan. But as the above passage from “The Advocate” indicates, persuading readers that the chronicle of whales should be treated with the same kind of aesthetic veneration one would feel for the book of “mighty Job” is not a simple task. Rhetoric, as Ishmael playfully suggests, may need to be supplemented (as it all too often is) by the threat of physical might.

Of the various biblical texts Melville evokes in *Moby-Dick*, Job is the one text that received considerable attention in the heyday of New Criticism. Lawrence Thompson chooses to open his classic reading of *Moby-Dick* in *Melville’s Quarrel with God* with Job. In his quest to liberate himself from the tyrannies of Calvinism and God, writes

Thompson, Melville “turned to the Bible for inspiration, particularly to the book of Job. Without any difficulty he could identify himself with the suffering Job, and could join Job in blaming God for the sorrows, woes, and evils which distressed and perplexed him.”¹ Though, he hastens to add, Melville could not take part “in the final tableau of abject submission and acceptance of God’s inscrutable ways.”² Other critics—C. Hugh Holman and Janis Stout—attempted to determine whether the defiant Ahab or the reflective Ishmael who ruminates about the wonders of Leviathan should be regarded as the primary Joban character in the text.³ What remains beyond the scope of these New Critical studies is the aesthetic-exegetical shift that looms behind Melville’s evocation of “mighty Job.”

If the New Critics ignored Melville’s part in advancing the literary Bible, the Americanists, who did consider his exegetical milieu, ignored Job. Speaking of “literary scripturism” as the hallmark of New England’s culture, Lawrence Buell regards Melville, along with Emerson, Dickinson, Stowe, Whitman, and Thoreau, as a primary advocate of the new redefinition of boundaries between sacred writing and belles lettres in antebellum America.⁴ And yet his influential discussion of the ways in which antebellum writers construe Scripture as “a form of poesis” and see themselves as the ultimate interpreters of such an inspired vision remains panoramic. Job is not mentioned at all.

To begin to fathom Melville’s grand homage to Job in *Moby-Dick*, I want to argue, requires a consideration of Melville’s response to the aesthetic turn in biblical exegesis. More specifically, I read Melville’s Job in relation to a whole genealogy of continental scholars and writers who regarded the Book of Job as an exemplary code of art within the great work of art. Melville is as committed as his New England contemporaries to fashioning a new, quintessentially American, literary Bible that would rekindle the poetic power of the ancient text in unknown ways. But his commitment to such “literary independence” does not preclude the passion with which he aligns himself with continental genealogies.⁵ Melville oscillates between European and American traditions, deeply committed to both, shunning any mode of parochialism.⁶ Melville’s Job, accordingly, is a work of translation that hovers between the two continents as it introduces the European preoccupation with Job’s aesthetic heritage—above all, with Joban perceptions of sublimity—into American landscapes and inscapes.

But my goal is not merely to show that Melville’s commentary and metacommentary are embedded in each other. I spell out Melville’s

unparalleled exegetical imagination as it is revealed in the details of his aesthetic-hermeneutic project. I explore Melville's all-encompassing response to the textures, rhetoric, cries, and metaphors of the Book of Job alongside his obsessive juggling of previous literary readings of Job. To understand why the encounter with Melville's Job changes our perception of the biblical Job as it changes our perception of the aesthetic, requires, I believe, plunging precisely into such details.

THE LITERARY JOB AND THE SUBLIME

The Bible, Jonathan Sheehan reminds us, was not always venerated as a founding text of Western literature.⁷ The literary Bible emerges in the eighteenth century both in England and in Germany as the invention of scholars and literati who tried to rejuvenate the Bible by transforming it from a book justified by theology into one justified by culture. The aim of this posttheological project was not quite to secularize the Bible—though it was now construed as the product of human imagination—but rather to reconstitute its authority in aesthetic terms. The Book of Job had a vital role in enhancing this transformation. Sheehan goes so far as to trace what he calls a “Job revival” in the context of the English and German Enlightenment, a revival that included numerous new translations and scholarly studies of the text. Among the leading scholars of this trend was Robert Lowth, a prominent forerunner of the literary approach to the Bible, whose book on biblical poetry, *De Poesi Sacrae Hebraeorum* (1753)—known primarily for its groundbreaking study of biblical parallelism—includes a substantive comparison of the poetic form of Job with that of Greek tragedy.⁸ Indeed, the Book of Job acquired so prominent a position as an aesthetic touchstone that it was evoked in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) as an exemplary text for the exploration of the sublime experience in its relation to power and terror.⁹

But the aesthetic revival of Job continues beyond the age of Enlightenment. It becomes even more prominent in Romantic thought and literature, though its poetic grandeur is now colored by Romantic aesthetic ideals. J. G. Herder, another important forerunner of the literary approach to the Bible, devotes an entire section of his renowned *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782–83, translated into English by 1833) to Job. Setting his work against the dry technical study of Lowth, he transfers Job into the realms of the heart, vision, and vivid Oriental imagination.¹⁰ God's whirlwind poem is the poetic epitome of Job, for like the

Oriental descriptions of nature “it awakens a love, an interest, and a sympathy for all that lives”:

What wretch, in the greatest tumult of his passions, in walking under a starry heaven, would not experience imperceptibly and even against his will a soothing influence from the elevating contemplation of its silent, unchangeable, and everlasting splendors. Suppose at such a moment there occurs to his thoughts the simple language of God, “Canst thou bind together the bands of the Pleiades,” etc.—is it not as if God Himself addressed the words to him from the starry firmament? Such an effect has the true poetry of nature, the fair interpreter of the nature of God. A hint, a single word, in the spirit of such poetry often suggests to the mind extended scenes; nor does it merely bring their quiet pictures before the eye in their outward lineaments, but brings them home to the sympathies of the heart.¹¹

For Herder, God’s rhetorical questions, the aesthetic hallmark of the divine response from the whirlwind—“Canst thou bind together the bands of the Pleiades?” (Job 38:31)—hold the power of an irresistible address that no one can ignore. He marvels at the sublimity of God’s depiction of nature, at the power of the “simple language of God,” with its minute hints, to interpret the starry firmament so that it becomes tangible to the observing eye. The experience of this vision is even richer: the external natural sights do not remain animate only “in their outward lineaments,” but rather seep inward, bringing heavenly scenes into the inmost spheres, to the “sympathies of the heart.” “It is as *effect*, then, that theodicy is redeemed. Not through knowledge of, nor through insight into, the workings of God, but rather in the *power* that these workings exert over our imaginations.”¹²

The impact of Herder’s reading is evident in Thomas Carlyle’s evocation of the Oriental sublimity of Job’s visionary rendition of natural sights in his discussion of Islamic culture in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840). Carlyle may not have been a prominent advocate of the literary Bible, but his brief comment on the Book of Job (he too focuses on the divine rhetorical questions) succinctly captures the Romantic adoration for the text as one of exceptional literary merit whose nature descriptions have an unparalleled impact on the eye and the heart. Job, he declares, is

A noble Book . . . our first oldest statement of the never-ending Problem,—man’s Destiny, and God’s ways with him here in this earth. And all with such free flowing outlines; grand in its sincerity, in its simplicity; in its epic melody, and repose of reconciliation. There is the seeing eye, the mildly understanding heart. So *true* every way; true eyesight

and vision for all things; material things no less than spiritual: the Horse,—‘hast thou clothed his neck with *thunder?*’—he ‘laughs at the shaking of the spear!’ Such living likenesses were never since drawn. Sublime sorrow, sublime reconciliation; oldest choral melody as of the heart of mankind;—so soft, and great; as the summer midnight, as the world with its seas and stars! There is nothing written I think, in the Bible or out of it, of equal literary merit.¹³

English and German Romantic literary and artistic exegesis followed suit. Blake and Goethe carved out their respective Jobs—Blake in his *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825) and Goethe in *Faust* (1832)—but in contradistinction to the scholarly studies of Lowth, Burke, and Herder, they defined the book’s sublimity as inseparable from its predominant antitheodician character. To modern readers, Job’s acute protest against the arbitrariness of divine conduct is the thrust of the book, but until the Romantic period the prevailing interpretive tendency was to read the Book of Job as theodicy and to prefer the patient pious Job of the folkloric Prologue to the rebellious Job of the poetic Dialogues.¹⁴ Romantic writers and artists were, in fact, the first to put forth the radical possibility of reading both God and Job as imperfect.¹⁵ Instead of seeing the book as a confirmation of normative faith, they treated it as an inspiring point of departure for a critique of institutional modes of religion.

In Blake’s *Illustrations* the patient Job of the Prologue lives in a mode of error under the auspices of institutional churches. His erroneous mode of being is poignantly conveyed by the first illustration, in which musical instruments hang, unused, on the tree under which Job sits, all too drowsy, with his family. It takes a crisis to free him from clinging to the false God of conventional faith and find the way to the true God of imagination, the mirror image of his poetic self. In shaping the contours of the spiritual transformation Job undergoes, Blake relies on Burke, but his notion of “fearful symmetry” modifies the latter’s definition of sublime experience by combining horror with wonder, mystery, and the infinite power of imagination.¹⁶

Goethe, who was the first to superimpose a Joban dimension upon the drama of *Faust*, offers yet another version of an imperfect Job and an imperfect God.¹⁷ *Faust* is not a righteous Job who knows no evil. He roams about with Mephistopheles, taking advantage of the latter’s devilish powers. Similarly, the Lord’s ways are rather dubious. The wager between God and the Adversary in the Prologue is turned into a parody of divine vigilance in *Faust*. Indifferent to the potential

suffering that may be inflicted upon Faust, the Lord readily allows Mephistopheles (a court jester of sorts) to lure the doctor without restricting his moves.

In contradistinction to the central position of Job in European Romanticism, it had but little resonance in the American Romantic milieu. Job did not lend itself to the optimism of leading literary figures such as Emerson or Whitman. But even Hawthorne and Dickinson—whose biblical poetics were of a darker hue—offered only dim echoes of Job rather than elaborate interpretations of the text. Melville filled this lacuna in American literary biblicism with a splash. While joining the above distinguished genealogy of continental advocates of Job he carved out a Job no European could have imagined.

If Melville were asked to single out the most sublime moment in Job he undoubtedly would have pointed to the whirlwind poem, as do Herder and Carlyle. Neither the starry sky nor the wild horse, however, would have led him to do so. The ultimate source of inspiration for Melville is located in the climactic closing lines of the poem, where Leviathan is presented as the inscrutable, ungraspable epitome of creation:

Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook?
 Or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down?
 Canst thou put an hook into his nose?
 Or bore his jaw through with a thorn?
 Will he make many supplications unto thee?
 Will he speak soft words unto thee?
 Will he make a covenant with thee?
 Wilt thou take him for a servant for ever?
 Wilt thou play with him as with a bird? . . .
 Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons?
 Or his head with fish spears? . . .
 Behold, the hope of him is in vain. . . .
 Who can open the doors of his face?
 His teeth are terrible round about.
 His scales are his pride, shut up together as with a close seal. . . .
 By his neesings a light doth shine,
 And his eyes are like the eyelids of the morning.
 Out of his mouth go burning lamps,
 And sparks of fire leap out.
 Out of his nostrils goeth smoke,
 As out of a seething pot or caldron. . . .
 He maketh the deep to boil like a pot:
 He maketh the sea like a pot of ointment.
 He maketh a path to shine after him;

One would think the deep to be hoary.
 Upon earth there is not his like,
 Who is made without fear.
 He beholdeth all high things:
 He is a king over all the children of pride

(Job 41:1–34)

Nothing is more exhilaratingly sublime within the framework of Melvillean aesthetics than exploring the seething path of the wondrous monster who can make the deep boil. Nor is it accidental that this path is evoked already in the opening “Extracts.” But Melville’s distinct exegetical brilliance does not lie in foregrounding Leviathan’s sublimity (a distinct poetic feat in itself) but in the unexpected projection of this poem onto the world of American whaling. Leviathan in *Moby-Dick* is at once an imaginary demonic-divine phantom—“the overwhelming idea of the great whale”—and a concrete marine mammal, caught, dissected, and sold as a commodity in one of America’s largest industries. With unique Romantic irony and humor (rather dark at times), Melville situates Joban sublimity between the metaphysical and the physical in ways that offer a decisive departure from his continental precursors. If the Bible can count as “aesthetically noble” (to return to “The Advocate”), so can the supposedly “unpoetic” business of whaling, with its infamous butchering. The refreshing redefinition of the boundaries between sacred writing and belles lettres that the aesthetic turn in biblical exegesis brought about should, Melville proposes, lead to an even more radical opening of concepts such as aesthetic and sublime.

I see this aesthetic sacrilegious position as indebted to Job’s insistence on taking no acceptable belief for granted. Job, for Melville, is a work whose power lies in its unparalleled capacity to probe the limits of the imagination, of faith, justice, power, sanity, nature, and life itself. No Romantic was as eager as Melville to try out Joban impatience in every imaginable realm.

The blasphemous bent of this quest, however, does not preclude a desperate craving for the divine. In Job, more than in any other biblical character, Melville finds an admirable model for his own tantalizingly paradoxical position as a blasphemous believer. Thompson’s focus on the defiant skeptical aspects of *Moby-Dick* does not do justice to what Jenny Franchot has defined as the “recurrent movement between belief and unbelief” in Melville’s restless spiritual world.¹⁸

Hermeneutic projects become vast in Melville's hands. His attempt to redefine the aesthetic heritage of Job is no exception. There are many Jobs aboard the *Pequod* (there is no need to limit the scope to Ahab and Ishmael). They seem, indeed, to proliferate at the rate of the different leviathans that crop up in the text. The splitting of Job among the various crew members allows Melville to explore the different genres that intersect in Job—theophany (the whirlwind poem), dialogues, tragedy, folkloric tales, and sermons. Indeed, the multiplicity of genres in Job (and by extension, in the Bible as a whole) never ceases to compel Melville as a liberating aesthetic possibility.¹⁹

I devote the bulk of the following discussion to Ishmael, whose ongoing meditations on Leviathan as a “whale author” underscore the aesthetic questions at stake. But I also take into account the ways in which Ahab captures the tragic antitheodician line in Job, Stubb and Flask act out a parody of the folkloric Prologue, and Fleece—with his sermon to the sharks—highlights Job's scathing depiction of the thriving of the wicked.

ISHMAEL'S RESPONSE TO GOD'S RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

That Ishmael is a Job underscores the predominant Romantic identification of Job as an Oriental, evident in the readings of Herder and Carlyle.²⁰ In the age of Romanticism the Bible as a whole was considered the product of Oriental imagination, but the Book of Job was regarded as exemplary of this given that Job allegedly lived in the land of Uz, which according to biblical geography was located in the arid land of Idumea. Travelers to the Holy Land in the nineteenth century often found traces of Joban verses in this zone. On seeing a sheik on an admirable horse in the desert of Idumea, John Lloyd Stephens comments, “I could almost imagine I saw the ancient warhorse of Idumea, so finely described by Job—‘His neck clothed with thunder. Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper?’”²¹

But what kind of guidance does Ishmael provide to those who seek to fathom Joban aesthetics? Does he too perceive God's whirlwind poem as animating the heart and the eye, evoking what Herder calls “sympathy”? Leviathan, the “portentous and mysterious” monster who rolls his “island bulk,” never remains solely in his outward lineaments. As Ishmael embarks on his voyage, opening the “flood-gates” of the “wonder-world,” “endless processions of whales” float two by

two into his “inmost soul . . . and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air” (7). The movement of sublime Joban sights inward, toward the heart or the inmost soul, is dramatized as an actual event, happening in real time and space.

To follow Leviathan in distant or internal seas is not something everyone would venture to do. The “undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale” are likely to appall most travelers. But for Ishmael, who is willing to “be social” with horror, the inscrutable monster is the chief reason for going to sea. Like Blake, Ishmael combines horror, wonder, and imagination in his definition of Joban sublimity, though he adds a peculiar touch of solemn humor to the picture. Horror does not prevent him from “being on friendly terms,” he claims, even with such “inmates” (7).

Most of Ishmael’s reflections on Leviathan revolve around the divine rhetorical questions that open the depiction of the creature in Job 41. He first evokes these questions in “Cetology” on setting out to map the anatomies of whales:

To grope down into the bottom of the sea after them; to have one’s hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing. What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan! The awful tauntings in Job might well appal me. “Will he (the leviathan) make a covenant with thee? Behold the hope of him is vain!” But I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans; I have had to do with whales with these visible hands; I am in earnest; and I will try. (136)

God’s rhetorical questions are “awful tauntings” rather than an address. Or if they are a heavenly address their impact is not a soothing one. In their poignant ridicule of human abilities they are as violent as the rhetoric that is mocked in “The Advocate.” But Ishmael does not hesitate to pick up the gauntlet. To God’s “Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? . . . Canst thou put an hook into his nose?” Ishmael seems to respond: Watch me! Instead of being paralyzed by God’s bullying, he regards the divine questions as if they were literal and sets out to capture Leviathan with his pen and “visible hands.” As a whaler-author, he holds all the gifts that are necessary for this hunt. He can swim through oceans and libraries, between the concrete bodies of whales and an unending sea of texts, in a defiant quest of the fearful creature.

If Job becomes reticent on hearing God’s Voice from the whirlwind, Ishmael continues the momentous, mythical quarrel of the biblical rebel

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

FIGURE 2. “Behemoth and Leviathan,” from William Blake’s *Illustrations of the Book of Job*. Print 1868-8-22-3962, © The British Museum.

with God where it ended. Questioning the divine questions, he refuses to accept the Voice as the final note.²² Reading against the grain, with remarkable attention to the underlying seduction at stake, he construes the whirlwind poem as an alluring invitation to engage in a daring *imitatio dei*. God may underscore the evasiveness of Leviathan, but while doing so, he provides (wittingly or unwittingly) a detailed representation of the creature. For Ishmael, this unexpected partial unveiling of divine secrets, this teasing gift of vision, is an intimate call to explore further the sublimity of Leviathan, using the divine account as a point of departure.²³ With the obsessive fervor of a lover, Ishmael

depicts each and every body part of Leviathan. In “Cetology” he does so by means of a parody of scientific discourse, but *Moby-Dick* as a whole offers unending poetic commentaries on every aspect of the creature’s anatomy.²⁴ Sure enough, the features God chose to render do not suffice. Ishmael probes the limits of human imagination in peeking at what was declared beyond human sight altogether. “Who can open the door of his face?” God asks. But given that Ishmael is a whaler, he spends many hours precisely behind such doors, eagerly exploring the forbidden sights that lie in the heads and bellies of whales.

To God’s “Wilt thou play with him as with a bird?” Ishmael would reply that the creature is by no means God’s pet alone.²⁵ Playing with Leviathan is the ever-alluring, risky, sublime game one needs to pursue in order to write.

Like other Romantic poets, Melville/Ishmael assumes a heavenly posture in regarding his art as approaching the divine. But there is a good deal of irony in his approach. Whereas Blake’s Job ultimately merges with the image of the true sublime god of imagination and Blake’s tiger (another Leviathan of sorts) remains in the invincible hands of the poet, Ishmael is well aware of the limits of his poetic game. The great Leviathan, he claims in “Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales,” “is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness” (264). Melville’s aesthetic-hermeneutic position is ultimately a paradoxical one: he both challenges the divine rhetorical questions and admits the validity of the divine portrait of Leviathan as ungraspable. He is both an omnipotent “whale author” and a perplexed author for whom Leviathan is synonymous with the fracturing of authorship; it is, in Eyal Peretz’s terms, “that which is associated in the novel with the crisis of authority; it is that which interrupts, which calls into question, any stabilizing attempt of authoritative mastery.”²⁶

Ishmael’s double reading of God’s rhetorical questions becomes more apparent in his depiction of the literal task of catching whales. Observing the suspended body of a huge sperm whale in “The Pequod Meets the Virgin,” he asks:

Suspended? and to what? To three bits of board. Is this the creature of whom it was once so triumphantly said—“Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? or his head with fish-spears? . . . the arrow cannot make him flee; darts are counted as stubble; he laugheth at the shaking of a spear!” This the creature? this he? Oh! that unfulfilments should

follow the prophets. For with the strength of a thousand thighs in his tail, Leviathan had run his head under the mountains of the sea, to hide him from the Pequod's fish-spears! (356)

The renowned creature is suspended by three mundane bits of board to the *Pequod*, making the divine rendition of its invincibility seem ridiculous. Ishmael adds his own rhetorical questions—"Suspended?" "This he?"—to mock the "unfulfilments" of divine discourse. Despite Leviathan's legendary bodily strength, the monstrous creature cannot but hide from the *Pequod*'s spears. But then the victory over Leviathan is short-lived. Sinking with its gigantic weight, the dead whale ultimately forces the crew to slash the fluke-chains and release the ties to avoid sinking with it to the bottom of the sea. "'Hold on, hold on, won't ye?' cried Stubb to the body, 'don't be in such a devil of a hurry to sink!'" (359). His cry was of no avail.

The most elusive of all whales, the closest to the divine Leviathan, is Moby Dick. "Though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks, he would still swim away unharmed." Ubiquitous in space and in time, Moby Dick can appear at all sites, defying all spears, springing unexpectedly back to life. No one can stop the creature from "gliding at high noon through a dark blue sea, leaving a milky-way wake of creamy foam, all spangled with golden gleamings" (183). The memorable path Job's Leviathan leaves behind becomes a take-off lane leading to a remarkable alliterative blend of sounds and sights, textures and tastes: "milky-way wake," "gliding . . . golden gleamings." Ishmael imagines Leviathan as carrying the vast expanses of the sea in his wake up to the sky, or rather as transferring the galaxy of the Milky Way to the dark blue sea with a sweep that turns the deep into a gleaming heaven. No one, it seems, can stop Ishmael from pursuing the creature's grand dreamy creamy wake. "Hoary" and shiny, it lures him to dare approach the exuberant monsters of the deep time and again, however impossible such a game may be.

VISIONS OF THE NIGHT

While he explores Leviathan's natural sublimity, Ishmael is no less concerned with its position as commodity. In a mock-Romantic gesture, he offers meticulous accounts not only of the ways in which the wondrous epitome of Creation is caught but also of the methods by which it is thoroughly dissected and processed on whaling ships. If Carlyle

marvels at the equal attention given to the spiritual and material aspects of nature in the whirlwind poem, Melville ventures to extend the material pole so that it includes industrial materiality.

The juxtaposition of Leviathan's transcendence and industrial use is especially amusing in "The Squeeze of the Hand," in which the crew engages in a prolonged squeezing of spermaceti. Every bodily element of the whale is processed, even its spermaceti—related in appearance and through a mistaken etymology to "sperm" (as Ishmael explains in "Cetology"). Although others would consider this transformation of spermaceti into a marketable cultural artifact as the very antithesis of the sublime, Ishmael is unwilling to curb the contours of sublimity. True vision may lie not only in the renowned natural features of Leviathan but also in its human consumption:

Would that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally. In thoughts of the visions of the night, I saw long rows of angels in paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti. (416)

It is the earthly, even pragmatic aspects of objects—be they spermaceti, tables, beds, or countries—Ishmael asserts, that may (far more than the intellect or the fancy) end up leading to heavenly sights and insights. He goes so far as to envision paradise as a place where rows of angels happily place their hands in jars of spermaceti, imitating the nocturnal pleasures of mere whalers. The row of asterisks that follows his description adds a visual correlate of angelic stars while hinting at what remains inexplicable in the "inexpressible sperm." Commodities no less than natural objects are cryptic texts that demand interpretation. What is more, the demarcation between the two is never clear-cut. Something about the sensuous mystical immersion in spermaceti in the course of commodity creation seems to bring the crew closer to Leviathan's primary natural core.

The paradisiacal "visions of the night" lead us to the Dialogues. "Visions of the night" is an expression used by Eliphaz, one of Job's comforters, in his account of God's horrifying oneiric interventions: "In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth on men/ Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up/It

stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof” (Job 4:13–16). Edmund Burke quotes this passage as an exemplary sublime moment. “We are first prepared with the outmost solemnity for the vision,” he writes, “we are . . . terrified, before we are let even into the obscure cause of our emotion; but when this grand cause of terror makes its appearance, what is it? Is it not, wrapt up in the shades of its own incomprehensible darkness, more awful, more striking, more terrible, than the liveliest description, than the clearest painting could possibly represent it?”²⁷

Melville scoffs at Burke in inverting the nightmarish quality of the nocturnal visions into a pleasurable erotic fraternal squeezing of spermaceti on board a whaler. He certainly introduces modes of sublimity unaccounted for in Burke’s *Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*.

But the primary target of Ishmael’s critical reading is the normative religion of Job’s friends. The quest for sublimity is inextricably connected with an exploration of the radical social critique of the Book of Job. Ishmael would have agreed with René Girard that Job’s so-called friends are not merely erroneous in their mode of faith. Rather, they are violent persecutors who are infuriated by Job’s refusal to admit his guilt. Their piety serves, more than anything else, as a way to sanctify their violence and to cover up their indifference to the suffering of innocents.²⁸

Eliphaz’s visions serve as a prelude to a speech about the ways of God. The terrifying divine spirit that passed before his face had a revelatory quality. It made him realize that no mortal can be more just than God and that even if humanity was “born unto trouble” (5:7), one must accept the human condition with equanimity. Job, in response, mocks Eliphaz’s self-righteous speech, claiming that when God appoints him “wearisome nights” it is only to increase his torments. He likens his life (and that of humanity as a whole) to the agonizing life of a hireling or a slave who “desireth the shadow” (7:2–3) to rest from taxing work, but can find no rest. “When I say, My bed shall comfort me, my couch shall ease my complaint; Then thou scarest me with dreams, and terrifiest me through visions” (7:13–14). Only one who is blind, Job asserts, would yield to such a merciless deity and regard him as just.

Joining Job’s audacious struggle against the oppressively conforming views of the friends, Ishmael ridicules Eliphaz’s manipulative use of divine terror. Instead of fear and trembling, he puts forth a very different concept of divine vision that is based on a more fluid and playful crossing between the heavenly and earthly spheres. His angels do not scare mortals but rather, like them, place their hands in jars of spermaceti.

Behind the mirthful nocturnal visions of Ishmael, however, lies a darker Joban cry on behalf of human misery. The crew's squeezing of spermaceti at night attests to the dire working conditions aboard the "sweatshops of the Pacific," to use Charles Olson's definition for whalers, to the endless work demanded day and night from the hirelings of the whaling industry. Leviathan has an ominous dimension not only as untamed Nature but also as a commodity in an untamed American industry, the nineteenth-century precursor of the globalized industries of today.

It comes as no surprise that the owner of the *Pequod*, who under the guise of piety exploits his crew with no qualms, is named after another of Job's comforters, Bildad. Earning close to nothing, "his crew, upon arriving home, were mostly all carried ashore to the hospital, sore exhausted and worn out" (74). Normative religion, Melville seems to suggest, terrorizes innocent sufferers in the name of God. It may speak of divine visions but offers none.

"AND I ONLY AM ESCAPED ALONE TO TELL THEE"

Melville cannot accept the legendary Epilogue of the Book of Job, according to which Job's ending was more prosperous than his beginning (42:12). Such a happy ending would be false in its implicit affirmation that the righteous are ultimately rewarded—the mistaken agenda of Job's friends (though one should bear in mind that even in the Epilogue the comforters' approach is condemned: "And my servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept: lest I deal with you after your folly, in that ye have not spoken of me the thing which is right, like my servant Job"; 42:8). Inventing another conclusion to the tale, closer to the disturbing truths that Job of the Dialogues ventures to unveil, Melville has all the *Pequod* Jobs drown, with one exception: Ishmael.

The happiest ending Melville could fashion for Ishmael is that of assuming the role of Job's messenger, escaping from the site of catastrophe to tell the tale. The verse which serves as epigraph to Ishmael's "Epilogue"—"And I only am escaped alone to tell thee"—appears four times in Job 1 as the somber concluding remark of each one of the four harbingers of evil tidings. In Job the messengers' verse is part of the Prologue, the opening note of the catastrophe. In *Moby-Dick* it is at once an ending and a beginning. This is where the "drama ends," but it is also a poetic point of departure, the point at which Ishmael assumes the position of narrator.

Job's messenger—a marginal figure most readers of the text overlook—thus becomes in *Moby-Dick* a pivotal poetic model inseparable from that of Job. The messengers in Job are brief: they come in rapid succession, one after another, announcing the various disasters in few words, bearing witness to the sudden overwhelming collapse of Job's world—from the demolition of his flocks to the death of his children, struck during a feast by a mighty wind. In Ishmael's tale testifying cannot be brief. To begin to respond to anything as unassimilable and ineffable as a disaster demands a certain excess. The final fall of the *Pequod* opens up in retrospect a whole chain of earlier disasters that need to be recorded: from the “hypos” that drives Ishmael to go to sea and seek Leviathan to Ahab's wound, the one inflicted upon him by Moby Dick, and the daily agonies of the hirelings of the whaling industry. In turning Ishmael into a witness, Melville underscores the change Job undergoes in the course of the Dialogues. If at first Job is wholly concerned with his own agony, he gradually realizes, as Gustavo Gutiérrez points out, that innocent suffering is all too pervasive.²⁹ His cry accordingly becomes more than a solitary cry over a particular pain: it strives to bear witness to the unjust wounds of many other innocent sufferers whose voices remain unheard.

Ishmael's aesthetics, then, rely on two inextricably connected notions of Joban sublimity: the first revolves around an experience of transcendence, entailing a momentous, exuberant game with the ungraspable Leviathan, the monstrous and wondrous epitome of creation whose shiny wake is unending; the second revolves around catastrophic events, around the fissures of pain and melancholy, in which the unspeakable becomes dark, maddening, and deadly.³⁰ The latter mode prevails in Ishmael's account of Ahab's wounds and cries.

TRAGIC AHAB: “CHASING WITH CURSES A JOB'S WHALE ROUND THE WORLD”

Robert Lowth compared the Book of Job with the tragedies of Sophocles, reaching the conclusion that despite certain similarities, the former did not rely on the kind of plot that would make it tragic. The definition of the Book of Job as tragedy was, however, common in nineteenth-century biblical criticism. Thus De Wette, whose *Einleitung* was translated into English by Theodore Parker in 1843, regarded the Book of Job as a “Hebrew tragedy,” which unlike Greek tragedy represents “the tragic idea by words and thoughts, rather than by action.”³¹

Neither Lowth nor De Wette linked the tragic in Job to the question of impatience. Only in twentieth-century criticism does one find a consideration of Job as an impious tragic figure, most notably in Richard B. Sewall's reading of Job in *The Vision of Tragedy*, a reading that, interestingly, relies on Melville's Ahab.³²

Ahab is indeed Melville's tragic Job, the one whaler through whom he extensively explores the potential of the biblical rebel to serve as an exemplary tragic hero. While maintaining language as a primary medium for expressing Ahab's tragic vision, Melville adds a Greek touch to the scene by allowing the *Pequod's* captain to spell out his hubris by means of action as well. Melville's tragic Job does not sit by an ash heap but rather rushes through oceanic space, fervently "chasing with curses a Job's whale round the world" (186). Unlike Starbuck, who regards the hunt for the "dumb brute" as a blasphemous "ill voyage," Ahab ventures to cross all boundaries and chase the monster, with Satanic maddened fervor, "round the world," "round perdition's flames," seeking vengeance upon his "dismemberer" to death.

"Am I a sea, or a whale?" (7:12) asks Job (Job too is a master of rhetorical questions), crying against God's ongoing persecution of him. Ahab's chase changes the tenor of the metaphor. God here is the one who is regarded as a mythological primordial sea monster, a titanic rival that needs to be pursued at all costs, at all times. With unabashed hubris, "the grand, ungodly, god-like" Ahab aspires to crush Moby Dick much as the Creator crushed the monstrous sea rebels in primeval times.³³ He craves to reverse the chase, to hunt his hunter rather than be chased by him. He is willing to go so low as to approach the flames of hell in his pursuit of Moby Dick, as he is willing to ascend to the heavenly sphere and "strike the sun" that insulted him.

But as Melville adds Greek qualities to his Joban tragedy, he also savors the ways in which the Bible can offer vital departures from Aristotelian principles, above all, the Aristotelian supposition that nobility is a necessary tragic trait. Job was neither a king nor a noble but simply a "man" who lived in the land of Uz. Through Job, Melville can thus change not only the definition of which topics count as "aesthetically noble" but also the definition of who counts as a suitable character for "noble tragedies." In accordance with the democratic spirit of his biblical typologies, Melville's Jobs are mean mariners and outcasts endowed with "tragic graces," bearing quintessential tragic attributes: a "ponderous heart," a "globular brain," and "nervous lofty language."

Ahab, however, towers above all the other *Pequod* mariners in his tragic Joban grandeur. Job's wounds are spelled out large in the captain's body and soul. It is in his blasphemous and scarred language that Job's cry breaks forth with unique force. Roaming, unbound, at the limits of the mind and space, Ahab dramatizes those sections in Job where darkness, pain, and sorrow reign, where cursing is the only mode of speech conceivable, the only mode of speech with which one can respond to an overwhelming inexplicable catastrophe. In cursing while chasing Leviathan, he sets in motion one of the most exquisite poems in the Book of Job, the opening note of the Dialogues, where Job, no longer willing to bear his pain with equanimity, "opens his mouth" and curses:³⁴

Let the day perish wherein I was born,
 And the night in which it was said,
 There is a man child conceived.
 Let that day be darkness;
 Let not God regard it from above,
 Neither let the light shine upon it;
 Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it;
 Let a cloud dwell upon it;
 Let the blackness of the day terrify it. . . .
 Lo, let that night be solitary,
 Let no joyful voice come therein.
 Let them curse it that curse the day. . . .
 Let the stars of the twilight thereof be dark;
 Let it look for light but have none;
 Neither let it see the dawning of the day:
 Because it shut not up the doors of my mother's womb,
 Nor hid sorrow from mine eyes.
 Why died I not from the womb?
 Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? . . .
 For now should I have lain still and been quiet,
 I should have slept:
 Then had I been at rest,
 With kings and counsellors of the earth. . . .
 Why is light given to a man whose way is hid,
 And whom God hath hedged in?
 For my sighing cometh before I eat,
 And my roarings are poured out like the waters.

(3:3–24)

Job does not actually curse God, as the Adversary had predicted he would, but comes close to doing so in cursing the day of his birth,

the divinely ordained gift of life. He summons up darkness, blackness, and clouds to hide the light of that cursed day, even its first twilight stars, and wishes that his cursing be reinforced by expert cursers, who have the power to blot out days from the calendar.³⁵ His cursing is a powerful cry of anguish and rage. If only the womb were a tomb, if only no breasts had welcomed him into the world. Death, the ultimate rest, is preferable. He abhors the thought of living in a world in which sorrows, sighs, and catastrophes pile up ceaselessly, in a world whose Creator provides light and life only to “hedge in” mortals.

The punishment for cursing God, according to biblical law, is death.³⁶ Approaching such a speech act thus means coming close to the brink of the abyss. But it is precisely this desperate defiant move that is the prerequisite for Job’s poetry. As long as Job insists on blessing God despite the calamities that befall him—“the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21)—his agony and despair remain untold, but once he ventures to deliver a flow of curses, he can finally suspend belief and call divine justice into question in long, painful responses to the conforming position of his friends.

Strictly speaking, Job does not proceed in a rhetoric of cursing beyond chapter 3, but there is an ongoing blasphemous, or semiblasphemous, line in his poetic discourse that is a direct continuation of the opening curses. “God,” he ventures to assert, “destroyeth the perfect and the wicked. If the scourge slay suddenly, he will laugh at the trial of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked: he covereth the faces of the judges thereof; if not, where, and who is he?” (9:22–24).

The power and beauty of Job’s initial outburst did not escape Blake. In his illustration of the opening curse of chapter 3, “Let the day perish wherein I was born,” he renders a scene of spiritual awakening. Job no longer sits beneath the stone cross of institutional religion, as he did initially. He raises his arms toward a cloudy dark sky, with an agonized face and open mouth, allowing his wrath to break forth, making the first step in his search for a truer God. Only his friends remain by the conforming cross in a state of error.³⁷

Goethe was equally attuned to the importance of Job’s cursing. Faust curses every basic aspect of human existence, from love, family, and labor to the primary Christian virtues of faith, hope, and patience (*spes, fides, patientia*), in his initial dialogue with Mephistopheles: “Cursed be the balsam of the grape!/Cursed, highest prize of lovers’ thrall!/A

curse on faith! A curse on hope! / A curse on patience, above all!"³⁸ It is indeed the doctor's cursing that summons up devilry, paving the road to the following wager and setting the drama in motion.

The maddened Ahab, a Yankee Faust of sorts, in F. O. Matthiessen's words, magnifies Job's blasphemous wrath.³⁹ Never ceasing to curse, he rages restlessly, in a continual storm, as he wages war against the White Whale that inflicted unforgivable pain on him. In a famous monologue in "The Quarter-Deck" he pours out his grievances against his "accursed" opponent:

Aye, aye! it was that accursed white whale that razeed me; made a poor pegging lubber of me for ever and a day!. . . Aye, aye! and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn . . . and round perdition's flames before I give him up. . . . All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. . . . He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. (163–64)

Setting out to "strike through the mask," Ahab seeks to lay bare the arbitrary malevolence that lies behind the impenetrable overbearing wall of the deity—be it Moby Dick or God. Blasphemy does not scare him. Quite the contrary, it is closer to the bleak Truth ("Truth has no confines") and serves as a means to unmask divine injustice. It is an indispensable weapon in the struggle against the walls that make mortals prisoners. The theodocian problematic was succinctly formulated by Epicurus:

God either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If he is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? or why does He not remove them?⁴⁰

Ahab is determined to leave these questions bluntly open. More precisely, he sees God as the source of all evils but finds no justification for God's unwillingness to remove them. "Inscrutable malice" is at the very core of divine rule, which means that any attempt to deny divine

evil or to see it as deserved or redemptive is nothing but a refusal to speak “the sane madness of vital truth.”⁴¹

And yet there is something about Ahab’s obsessive, blasphemous chase of the White Whale that seems to disclose, beneath the intense hate, the same kind of metaphysical passion evident in Job. Job aspires against all odds to approach God, to converse with him, to make him listen, to summon him to a trial, to appeal to his Persecutor against his Persecutor. He knows only too well that no one in his right mind would dare seek an impossibly terrifying encounter with an opponent who has trampled many a sea monster, not to mention mere mortals. But he insists on trying, even if God would only “multiply” his wounds and sorrows in response to this demand (Job 9:13–19). “Though he slay me,” Job declares, “yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him” (13:15).⁴²

“I now know that thy right worship is defiance” (507), exclaims Ahab on watching the strange white fire that lights up the *Pequod* one stormy night.⁴³ His quest for Moby Dick is likewise a defiant mode of worship, an uncompromising passionate monomaniacal attempt to grasp the inscrutable grand white whale/deity/demon, “to lay the world’s grievances before the bar,” to find some kind of answer to the question of evil. With a “torn body” and a “gashed soul” bleeding “into one another” (185), he never ceases to seek the ever-alluring, omnipresent, demonic creature that embodies all his desires, longings, hatred, and rage, “all that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things” (184).

However different, Melville’s antitheodician stance intersects at points with the Kantian perception of Job’s “authentic theodicy.” For Kant, Job is a text that endorses a system of “unconditional divine decision,” according to which confession of ignorance is unmistakably preferable to any pretense of knowledge. In the end “sincerity of heart[;] . . . honesty in openly admitting one’s doubts; repugnance to pretending conviction where one feels none, especially before God[,] . . . these are the attributes which . . . have decided the preeminence of the honest man over the religious flatterer.”⁴⁴

That Ahab’s chase ends with a momentous encounter with the one whale that injured him is as unimaginable as God’s sudden revelation at the end of the Book of Job. But whereas God’s whirlwind speech ultimately leads Job back to life, Moby Dick offers Ahab no relief or consolation. Like Faust, Ahab is doomed to face the limits and fragility of human aspirations. Unlike Faust, he dies unredeemed.

LEVIATHAN'S JAWS

When Moby Dick appears one day, out of the blue, Ahab is granted a vision of the creature he has so desperately longed to see. The vision is a close-up of the tremendous horrors that lie within the creature's gigantic, predatory jaws.

But suddenly as he peered down and down into its depths, he profoundly saw a white living spot no bigger than a white weasel, with wonderful celerity uprising, and magnifying as it rose, till it turned, and then there were plainly revealed two long crooked rows of white, glistening teeth, floating up from the undiscoverable bottom. It was Moby Dick's open mouth and scrolled jaw; his vast, shadowed bulk still half blending with the blue of the sea. The glittering mouth yawned beneath the boat like an open-doored marble tomb; and giving one sidelong sweep with his steering oar, Ahab whirled the craft aside from this tremendous apparition. (549)

The "glittering mouth" of Moby Dick, with its "crooked rows of white, glistening teeth"—Melville's vivid variation on Leviathan's "terrible teeth" (Job 41:14)—yawning beneath the ship, seems to promise only death, bestowing nothing but the light of an "open-doored marble tomb." The apparition does not lack sublimity in its exceptional celerity and magnified power. Ultimately it cannot but seduce Ahab to join the underworld from which it momentarily emerged.

In *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Robert Alter, a prominent twentieth-century advocate of the literary approach to the Bible, suggests that God's whirlwind poem offers a superb poetic response to the themes and images with which Job unfolds his agonies in the course of the Dialogues. It provides, above all, an affirmation of life against Job's recurrent yearning for death and darkness. "The remarkable and celebrated phrase 'eyelids of dawn' which Job in Chapter 3 wanted never to be seen again," writes Alter, recurs in the divine poem to depict the dazzling vital light flashing from Leviathan's eyes.⁴⁵

Ahab is a Job who is unwilling to see light and life in divine revelation or to move beyond disaster. He is a Job whose worse fantasies and nightmares come true. Much as the defiant Bartleby ends up "sleeping" in the "Tombs" "with kings and counsellors," calling to mind Job's death wish in chapter 3:14, so Ahab finds a tomb in the mouth of Moby Dick whose door—unlike the uterine doors of Job's mother—remains shut.⁴⁶

In his tragic, lonely grandeur, Ahab defies death until the very end, cursing and chasing the White Whale with his very last breath: "Oh,

lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. . . . Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! *Thus*, I give up the spear!" (571–72). His spear-hurling at Moby Dick on the brink of the abyss may be futile—the “damned whale” seems to “[laugh] at the shaking of a spear” (Job 41:29)—but the relentless heretical drive to proceed in the struggle against the “unconquering whale” serves as his ultimate source of inspiration, even in the face of failure and death.⁴⁷ Ahab ends up realizing the blasphemous, desperate proposal of Job's Wife. He curses God and dies.

THE FOLKLORIC VERSION:
THE GOVERNOR AND THE DEVIL

Although Melville rejects the patient Job of the Prologue, other aspects of this section—primarily the lively folkloric tale about the wager between God and Satan (the Adversary)—compel Melville toward yet another aesthetic route. For Herder, among others, the Bible's poetic grandeur was in fact indebted to its folkloric origin. Melville underscores the folkloric qualities of the wager scene by inserting it, in modified form, as a spicy tale told by Stubb to Flask in the course of their conversation about the dubious bond between Ahab and Fedallah:

“Why, do ye see, the old man is hard bent after that White Whale, and the devil there is trying to come round him, and get him to swap away his silver watch, or his soul, or something of that sort, and then he'll surrender Moby Dick.”

“Pooh! Stubb, you are skylarking; how can Fedallah do that?”

“I don't know, Flask, but the devil is a curious chap, and a wicked one, I tell ye. Why, they say as how he went a sauntering into the old flag-ship once, switching his tail about devilish easy and gentlemanlike, and inquiring if the old governor was at home. Well, he was at home, and asked the devil what he wanted. The devil, switching his hoofs, up and says, ‘I want John.’ ‘What for?’ says the old governor. ‘What business is that of yours,’ says the devil, getting mad,—‘I want to use him.’ ‘Take him,’ says the governor—and by the Lord, Flask, if the devil didn't give John the Asiatic cholera before he got through with him, I'll eat this whale in one mouthful.” (325–26)

Stubb does not refer to Job explicitly, but the tale about the governor and the devil is an unmistakable travesty of the wager in Job 1.⁴⁸ Fedallah, the *Pequod's* devil in disguise, is eager to draw a pact with Ahab, whether it entails swapping away the latter's soul or watch (the spiritual and the material are jovially interchangeable in a parodic metacommentary on the wager in *Faust*).⁴⁹ The tale seems to suggest that the God who does not rescue Job or Ahab is as indifferent as the old governor who yields to the devil's request and allows him to "take" "John" (note the phonetic affinity with "Job") without asking too many questions.

The folkloric tale, Melville realizes, is not as naive as many readers assume. It has the potential to serve as a sharp critique of the concept of divine justice and vigilance. Martin Buber's reading of Job 1 goes so far as to suggest that "here God's acts are questioned more critically than in any of Job's accusations, because here we are informed of the true motive, which is one not befitting a deity."⁵⁰ The story of the Adversary's enticing of God to test Job "gratuitously" poses a challenge to any attempt to read Job as theodicy.

The critique of divine rule is forever intertwined with a critique of human rule in *Moby-Dick*. The governor is also analogous to the *Pequod's* captain. Ahab, Stubb intimates, is no innocent suffering in the devil's hands. Obsessively immersed in his own wound and vengeance, he turns a deaf ear to the reservations and suffering of his crew and would send them off with the devil if asked to. He may assume the role of one who suffers and rages on behalf of "his whole race from Adam down" (160), but in many ways he is incapable of hearing any cry but his own.

Ahab is not quite the governor Hobbes had in mind in *Leviathan*. "Hitherto," writes Hobbes,

I have set forth the nature of man, whose pride and other passions have compelled him to submit himself to government: together with the great power of his governor, whom I compared to *Leviathan*, taking that comparison out of the two last verses of the one-and-fortieth of Job; where God having set forth the great power of *Leviathan*, calleth him King of the Proud. There is nothing, saith he, on earth, to be compared with him. He is made so as not to be afraid. He seeth every high thing below him; and is king of all the children of pride.⁵¹

Hobbes's governor, whose force is comparable to that of Leviathan, rises to power by the people's consent in an attempt to promise the commonwealth's peace. That is, he is the sovereign to whom the people

submit themselves in order to set limits to their natural brutish state and to tame the potential for war embedded in their pride. Ahab too holds tremendous power, but nothing is farther from his thoughts than peace. He unites his crew under one keel for the purpose of revenge. And although initially he manages to acquire the consent of his crew (“The Quarter-Deck” scene), his chase after Moby Dick does not depend on it. He is determined to proceed with Fedallah even when the resentment of the crew grows. Mitigating the pride of those below him, he never limits his own grand hubris. As Starbuck puts it, “Horrible old man! Who’s over him he cries—ay, he would be a democrat to all above; look how he lords it over all below!” Ahab may be the product of a nation that prides itself on being the epitome of democratic rule, but his rule is as arbitrary and tyrannical as the overlords of the past—or, for that matter, of God.

Stubb and Flask play with the idea of resisting Ahab’s abuse of power by ducking the devilish Fedallah:

“But see here, Stubb, I thought you a little boasted just now, that you meant to give Fedallah a sea-toss, if you got a good chance. Now, if he’s so old as all those hoops of yours come to, and if he is going to live for ever, what good will it do to pitch him overboard—tell me that?”

“Give him a good ducking, anyhow.”

“But he’d crawl back.”

“Duck him again; and keep ducking him.”

“Suppose he should take it into his head to duck you, though—yes, and drown you—what then?”

“I should like to see him try it; I’d give him such a pair of black eyes that he wouldn’t dare to show his face in the admiral’s cabin again for a long while. . . . Damn the devil, Flask; do you suppose I’m afraid of the devil? Who’s afraid of him, except the old governor who daresn’t catch him and put him in double-darbies, as he deserves, but lets him go about kidnapping people; aye, and signed a bond with him, that all the people the devil kidnapped, he’d roast for him? There’s a governor!”
(326–27)

Stubb’s Job is a Job from the bottom up. He imagines himself tossing off the devil, acting out the role God or Ahab would have assumed in a more just world. He assures Flask that unlike the governor he is by no means afraid of the devil, nor would he hesitate to give him a “pair of black eyes.” Governors—whether divine or human—tend to “roast” victims with the devil rather than protect them. It is left to the common people to question devils, governors, and captains if they wish to avoid the brink.⁵²

But neither the jovial Stubb and Flask nor the earnest Starbuck can stop Ahab from following his dark cravings. Nor do they venture to leave the ship. Ahab's charismatic dark charm lures them inexplicably, much as Fedallah lures Ahab. No one is as perfect as the legendary patient Job was said to be.

FLEECE'S SERMON

Being something of a victim of Ahab's mad chase does not stop Stubb from humiliating those who are lower in rank than he is. He too is a democrat only to "those above." In "Stubb's Supper" he summons Fleece, the old black cook, and orders him to deliver a sermon to the sharks. The great noise the sharks make while devouring the body of the whale that is moored to the ship, the very same whale Stubb is busy eating, disturbs him. "Fellow-critters," says Fleece, "I'se ordered here to say dat you must stop that damn noise dare. You hear? Stop dat dam smackin' ob de lip! Massa Stubb say dat you can fill your dam bellies up to de hatchings, but by Gor! you must stop dat dam racket!" (294). Stubb's cruel pranks do not end here. He insists that Fleece avoid swearing and deliver the kind of sermon that would "convert sinners" by coaxing them. Fleece is thus forced to deliver an anti-Joban sermon or a mock-Hobbesian one in which evil and brutishness are presented as "governable." "Your woraciousness, fellow-critters, I don't blame ye so much for; dat is natur, and can't be helped; but to gobern dat wicked natur, dat is de pint. You is sharks, sartin; but if you gobern de shark in you, why den you be angel; for all angel is not'ing more dan de shark well goberned. Now, look here, bred'ren, just try wonst to be cibil, a helping yourselbs from dat whale. Don't be tearin' de blubber out your neighbor's mout, I say" (295).

But soon Fleece gives up the possibility of educating sharks to govern themselves and curses them instead: "Cussed fellow-critters! Kick up de damndest row as ever you can; fill your dam' bellies 'till dey bust—and den die" (295). Ultimately, on leaving, he will curse Stubb too: "Wish, by gor! whale eat him, 'stead of him eat whale. I'm bressed if he ain't more of shark dan Massa Shark hisself" (297). The literal sharks pale in comparison to their metaphorical human counterparts, who know no limits in tormenting their "fellow creatures." Like Job, Fleece finds cursing closer to the bleak truth. Like Job, he regards the world as devoid of divine vigilance, where predators prevail and the privileged only augment the agony of the poor and the oppressed. A speech Fleece would

have wholeheartedly delivered is Job's scathing account of the ways by which the wicked thrive on harassing the outcasts of society: "They drive away the ass of the fatherless, they take the widow's ox for a pledge. . . . They cause the naked to lodge without clothing. . . . Men groan from out of the city, and the soul of the wounded crieth out: yet God layeth not folly to them" (24:3-12).⁵³

KAFKA'S PRECURSORS

In my reading of the various *Pequod* Jobs, I focused on Melville's response to a whole lineage of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century continental advocates of the Book of Job as an exemplary code of art. But Melville's Jobs, it seems to me, also pave the road for the subsequent genealogy of modern and postmodern Jobs. The Book of Job, interestingly enough, has maintained its primary role as an aesthetic touchstone in modern and postmodern literature as well. Indeed, it has been used as a key text by means of which to define the sublime melancholies of modern times by writers as different as Kafka, Paul Celan, and Hanoch Levine.

I see *Moby-Dick* and "Bartleby" primarily as precursors of Kafka's reading of Job in *The Trial*.⁵⁴ To begin with, Melville anticipates Kafka's transfer of the drama of Job into a modern work setting. *Moby-Dick*'s whale-ship and Bartleby's Wall Street office lead to the entangled world of K. within the halls of legal bureaucracy. Thomas Mann's comment on *The Trial* is relevant in this connection. He characterizes Kafka as a religious humorist who depicts the transcendent world "as an Austrian 'department'; as a magnification of a petty, obstinate, inaccessible, unaccountable bureaucracy; a mammoth establishment of documents and procedures, headed by some darkly responsible official hierarchy."⁵⁵ In *Moby-Dick*, as in *The Trial*, the shift to the modern work setting is accompanied by a greater concern with the social critique of Job and the dynamics of human persecution and oppression. But perhaps, above all, Melville anticipates Kafka in foregrounding hermeneutic questions in the course of redefining Joban sublimity. Derrida's renowned essay, "Devant la Loi," positions the parable in the Cathedral as an exemplary text in its insistence on the impossibility of interpretation.⁵⁶ What emerges from the discussion between Joseph K. and the priest on the meaning of the parable is that all readings are necessarily misreadings. We shall never comprehend with certainty what lies behind the succession of guarded doors that

divide us from the “Law.” Following Derrida, Harold Fisch wonders whether the parable in the Cathedral is specifically meant to question the very possibility of interpreting the Book of Job, with its inexplicable trial.

Melville, I believe, is not concerned with misreadings. The profusion of potential readings, as far as he is concerned, does not mean that there are necessarily erroneous readings. But *Moby-Dick* does point to a certain sublime explosion of meaning, an inaccessibility of interpretation that only accentuates the infinitude of Job’s dialogue with a God whose answer is a series of taunting questions. There always seems to crop up another Job chasing another potential Leviathan chasing another potential Job chasing another potential Leviathan to the very end of space.