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Nature and its “Larger, Darker, Deeper Part” –
Negotiating Transcendentalism in Herman Melville’s
Moby-Dick

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1 Introduction

Even 172 years after its original publication, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) remains an enigma: It is a book which is deeply interested in what things mean, while being unclear in its own meaning. Frequently dealing with the mysteries, ambiguities, and the "larger, darker, deeper part" (Melville 217) shaping the human experience, it pulls readers into an indefinite multiplicity of meanings. Among the myriad of possible interpretations, one of the most divisive discussions concerns the (Anti-)Transcendentalist thoughts conveyed from this work.

By 1850, Transcendentalism was a long-established Romantic movement and Ralph Waldo Emerson its leading spokesperson in America. Above all else, its philosophy suggests that divinity suffuses nature, and that mankind and the universe can be understood by studying nature. Even to contemporary critics of the early 1850s, opinions on the Transcendental currents in *Moby-Dick* were split. In his review in the December 1851 issue of *Harper's*, the Transcendentalist reviewer George Ripley praised *Moby-Dick* for its symbolic value. "Beneath the whole story," Ripley wrote, "the subtle, imaginative reader may perhaps find a pregnant allegory, intended to illustrate the mystery of human life" (137). Conversely, Evert Duyckinck, a friend of Melville and editor of the journal *The Literary World*, criticized portions of the book which attacked established literary conventions with their "conceited indifferentism of Emerson" (404).

More recent critics, too, have regularly attempted to assess *Moby-Dick* as either sympathetic or fiercely in opposition to Transcendentalism – or ultimately determine that its attitude towards the movement remains completely elusive.¹ What I am interested in is how the novel is able to linger in this liminal space, seemingly supporting and critiquing Transcendentalist viewpoints at the same time. While most scholars either consult Melville's personal letters or build their arguments on the analysis of the characterization and eventual fate of the novel's protagonists Ishmael and Ahab, I believe there is just as much to be found in an examination of the very fabric of the text – its symbolism, stylistic

¹ Perry Miller, for instance, evaluates *Moby-Dick* as "implacably, defiantly, unrepentantly, Transcendental" (575). Wenjin Qi similarly interprets the book as an embodiment of Emersonian Transcendentalism, establishing Ahab as a Transcendentalist Hero and Ishmael as an Emersonian Individualist. Michael J. Hoffman takes the exact opposite stance, suggesting "that *Moby-Dick* is an almost totally ironic novel, perhaps a parody", in that, "[t]hough anti-Transcendental, it is written in the Transcendental style" (3). F. O. Matthiessen, Ted Billy, and Michael McLoughlin also observe attacks or criticisms of Transcendental ideas in the text. The arguments of Richard Hardack, John B. Williams, Howard P. Vincent, Ramón Espejo Romero and Benjamin Barber Rose fall somewhere in between, finding in the novel a conflicted response towards Transcendentalism.

techniques, and modes of discourse about nature and its relationship to the human mind. I thus put forward my thesis that *Moby-Dick* invokes some core ideas of Transcendentalism and employs its rhetoric, but in doing so often ends up questioning its philosophical statements. An exploration of the two central symbols of the text – the White Whale and the sea – will provide a fruitful starting point for the investigation of this thesis. This will be followed by a close reading of the chapter “The Mast-Head”, which has been recognized by many scholars as one of the most open engagements with Transcendentalism in the book (Billy 154-5; Hoffman 13-4; Matthiessen 405-7; McLoughlin 61-2; Romero para. 26-8; Rose 11-29; Vincent 158; Williams 145-6).

2 A Preliminary Remark on Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism is difficult to define. The term is alternately used to describe a philosophy of individualism, a spiritual attitude towards nature, or an intuitive understanding of ‘truth’. Writers and philosophers considered to be part of the movement were only loosely bound together in their beliefs and frequently differed in their specific understandings. The philosopher George Santayana sums it up best; stating that Transcendentalism is a method or a point of view from which to approach the world, rather than a system or a particular set of dogmas (41). “Transcendentalism”, he continues, “is systematic subjectivism” (41).

It therefore seems necessary to note that, for reasons of clarity and comprehensibility, I will base my analysis exclusively on the philosophical² writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In 1836, he published a book-length essay entitled *Nature*, illustrating how a sensitized approach to nature will lead a person to the discover spirit in the world and in themselves, thus aiding their development of self-reliance. As it gives a beautiful statement of Emersonian Transcendentalism, this essay shall serve as the basis for my discussion of the (Anti-)Transcendentalism in Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.

² While primarily being a philosophical and literary movement, Transcendentalism also encompassed certain political, cultural, and sociological assumptions about its era (which Hardack includes in his evaluation of the work of Melville and Emerson). I will discuss the *Moby-Dick*-Transcendentalism-relationship free of those assumptions.

3 Symbolism in *Moby-Dick*: The White Whale and the Sea

3.1 Nature is Benign

The foundation for Emerson's Transcendentalism was his faith in a divine and benevolent universe. In *Nature*, he identifies the purpose of the natural world as serving the commodity, beauty, language, and discipline of humanity. From this notion that the world is designed to be of use to man, he draws the conclusion that "[n]othing we see, but means our good" (Emerson, *Nature* 41). As the narrator of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael rejects the Transcendentalist idea of absolute innocence and benignity of nature, for instance in side remarks on the "wolfish world" (Melville 60) or the "horrible vulturism of earth" (360). He expands upon this somber impression midway through the book, when he dedicates a whole chapter to the aboriginal horrors of the ocean. The chapter "Brit" emphasizes society's brittleness in the face of the gigantic restless power of the sea:

however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make ... (320)

In the passage's penultimate paragraph, Ishmael goes on to note that if the sea is not blatantly brutal and murderous, then it is delusory:

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. (321)

Emerson writes that "Nature never wears a mean appearance" (*Nature* 3) but never dwells on the potential contrast between external appearance and hidden fact. Ishmael, on the other hand, does consider this possibility: In his analysis, the outward beauty of the sea (its "loveliest tints of azure") is concealing an inner horror (an ongoing "cannibalism" and a "war"). Throughout the book, nature is constantly presented as something which hides its own wickedness,³ as in the last sentence before the epilogue, where the ocean

³ This also becomes strikingly clear in the final sentences of chapter forty-two, where Ishmael contemplates the possibility that "all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within" (Melville 228).

shrouds the death of an entire crew. Cruelly leaving Ishmael shipwrecked and his fellow sailors drowned, “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (Melville 662). Next to nature’s deceitfulness, what this sentence also highlights is the indifference of the vast and eternal ocean to the crew’s fate: Hoffman notes how quickly and quietly the sea swallows the microcosm of humanity aboard the *Pequod* that readers have been made to take so seriously for so many pages (15-6).

Still, *Moby-Dick* does not pit itself completely against idealistic faith. Its narrator portrays the ocean not only as dangerous and cunning, but also as a place of alluring mystery and higher truth (Lingo 15), much akin to Emerson’s Transcendentalism. In “The Lee Shore”, for example, Ishmael points out that its spiritual and revelatory quality constitutes the superiority of the sea over the land: Though the port is safe and comfortable, it must be „pitiful”, since “in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God“ (Melville 125-6). Indeed, the sea will give rise to some of the narrator’s deepest philosophical contemplations throughout the book (one of which will receive further consideration in the second half of this paper). It will also rouse his most tranquil, dreamlike thoughts. Like a Transcendentalist, Ishmael can enjoy the contemplation of a serene sea: “The waves, too, nodded their indolent crests; and across the wide trance of the sea, east nodded to west, and the sun over all” (329). But then again, this peacefulness may be illusory, since “the calm is but the wrapper and envelope of the storm; and contains it in itself” (328). Thus, the symbol of the sea expands “from indicated analogies into the closely wrought experience of whole chapters” (Matthiessen 290), taking on different interpretations at different times (or even at the same time), standing for glory *and* cruelty.

This complex understanding of reality is also impressively exhibited in Ishmael’s many descriptions of the White Whale – the primary symbol for nature throughout *Moby-Dick*. Much like his views regarding the sea, Ishmael’s opinions of whales in general and Moby Dick in particular are in constant flux. Two subsequent chapters, “Moby-Dick” and “The Whiteness of the Whale”, work to imbue readers with a “natural terror” of the animal because he has seemingly evinced “unexampled, intelligent malignity” in his assaults of different whaleships (Melville 214). The narrator stresses how the superstitions of whalers go even further in accepting him as ubiquitous, if not immortal. What follows is a philosophic meditation on the whale’s indefinite whiteness, leading up to the conclusion that the color – despite conventional connotations of purity and mildness – “shadows

forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation” (227).

In a stark contrast, several chapters are devoted to the “imposingly beautiful” anatomy of the leviathan, likening his tail to a “fairy’s arm” which is “invariably marked by exceeding grace” (Melville 437). As McLoughlin observes, the whale even turns into a “Transcendental symbol” suggesting the – from a Transcendental perspective – apparent unity of the spiritual with the visible world (63). When the *Pequod* finally catches sight of “the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam”, he is overtly introduced as a deity: “the grand god revealed himself“ (Melville 633). It thus becomes difficult to distinguish whether the great whale is a marvelously divine creature linking heaven and earth – or a brutal monster.

Its wide array of interpretations has led both Hoffman and McLoughlin to the rather blatant conclusion that the whale ultimately symbolizes nothing (Hoffman 3; McLoughlin 62). I however believe that *Moby Dick* and the sea are better comprehended as floating signifiers, absorbing rather than emitting meaning. As such, they inseparably unite in themselves conflicting meanings of both goodness and evil. This tension is never resolved. What nevertheless arises from these symbols is a far more complex worldview than Transcendental idealism; with the narrator expressing an awareness that the beauty of nature that borders on godliness does not limit the existence of natural violence, deceitfulness, and indifference. In contrast with Emerson's optimistic perception of nature, Ishmael upholds not a pessimistic one, as some critics have suggested,⁴ but presents the reader a nature that is ambiguous⁵ – both sweet and savage, both the source of meaning and proof of its absence.

3.2 No Question is Unanswerable

In his ambivalent descriptions of the ocean and the White Whale, Ishmael deconstructs Emerson’s certainty that there is no such thing as an unanswerable question; that “the world shall be to us an open book” (*Nature* 20) and nature its “universal tablet” (34). Emerson goes even further in his belief in the knowability of nature, stating that one can ascend to the level of the divine: “man has access to the entire mind of the Creator” (38). In the spirit of Emerson, Ishmael seeks to be “admitted to behold the absolute natures of

⁴ For example, Williams finds a “compensatory pessimism” (135) to Emersonian optimism in the book, and Matthiessen a “preponderating stress on evil” (436).

⁵ Lingo, too, notes that “ambiguity exists in several objects: the sea, the whale, and Ahab” (2).

justice and truth” (37-8), but must ultimately come to terms with the unattainability of such an aspiration.

In his search for a universal truth, Ishmael clearly *wants* to believe that the world can be treated like a book. He frequently encounters things which obviously puzzle and confuse him, and in turn analyzes them as though they were a text. This method of ‘reading’ nature is reflected best in the narrator’s grappling with the complexity of Moby Dick. The chapter “The Whiteness of the Whale” showcases him desperately trying to bestow meaning onto the whale’s color; he refuses to believe that its whiteness is simply without any deeper significance. Likewise, the detailed categorization and description of whales in the cetological chapters reflect the narrator as an insistent interpreter who records his attempt at comprehension. Many critics even discern that his relentless pursuit of understanding and his meticulous recording of every detail, no matter how minute, borders on obsessive (Lingo 5; Romero para. 23).

Still, Ishmael never arrives at a full understanding of the whale. He can only present a collection of his observations and must recognize the impossibility of drawing from it any clear and compelling final word: “Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will” (Melville 440). That he never pretends to have all the answers can also be seen in how he ends many chapters on an ambiguous note. Sometimes he asks his readers to finish the task of interpretation he began: “how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can” (404). He must also admit that he cannot uncover what the White Whale was to his shipmates: “all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go” (219). And even his own interpretations of the animal put forward in “The Whiteness of the Whale” remain obscure; he can only hope to explain himself “in some dim, random way” (220).⁶ The more knowledge Ishmael gathers and the more he writes of Moby Dick, the more he ends up mystifying the animal, leading both himself and his readers into deeper and darker confusion. If even Ishmael, with all his whaling experience and scientific knowledge, is only ever capable of the approximation of an answer, then the text seems doubtful about the prospect of man being able to comprehend a nature that is “shoreless, indefinite as God” (125-6).

In summary, the narrator is clearly interested in learning what Emerson seems to know: how to make meaning, and what meaning to make. But he deviates from him by

⁶ Franz Stanzel makes a similar observation about Ishmael’s restriction of knowledge in certain contexts. Of the same chapter mentioned here he writes that it “reveal[s] anything but an enlightened observer” (88).

also recognizing the ever-present mystery of nature and the impossibility of a fixed and final answer. Where Emerson believed that “[u]ndoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable” (*Nature* 1), Ishmael discerns that the underlying secret of nature, if such a thing even exists, is too profound to be grasped – as symbolically shown through his literal inability to perceive the living whale in his entirety, although a limited view might be possible. I thus come to the same conclusion as McLoughlin: “a sense of the limitation of human comprehension” is implicit in *Moby-Dick*, which is “a concept foreign to the Emersonian philosophy” (59).⁷

3.3 Nature is the Symbol of Spirit

Elevating the sea and *Moby Dick* to symbols reflects one key-position held in common among the Transcendentalists, namely that every natural fact is a symbol transcribing a truth about the inner workings of the natural world and specifically the human soul:

It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. (Emerson, *Nature* 14-5)

Ishmael seems to be lured by this statement as Transcendental allegories suffuse his narration. He often finds his psychic states represented in nature, especially in the waterscape. For example, he asks his reader to

consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. (Melville 321)

Even in the symbol of *Moby Dick*, Emerson’s notion that “Nature is the symbol of spirit” (*Nature* 14) prevails: In his different and distinct meanings to the *Pequod*’s crewmembers, the White Whale can certainly be comprehended in terms of this conception of nature as a mirror, as he reflects each whaleman back to himself (Williams 134).⁸ In the first

⁷ In like manner, Lingo states that the whale and the sea (among other objects) present “semiotic challenge[s]” to their interpreter Ishmael, who, when faced with these objects, is “reminded of the insufficiency of his senses” (2). See also Romero para. 24.

⁸ This projection and subjective relativism run deep through *Moby-Dick* in general. One might point out the famous “Doubloon”-chapter, which presents the characters’ widely varying reactions and readings of the cryptic gold coin, with each of the crewmembers projecting their own beliefs and desires onto it – underscoring the inherent subjectivism in all matters of looking, reading, and interpreting.

chapter for example, he surfaces in Ishmael's imagination as a "grand hooded phantom" (Melville 9), mirroring his description of the human reflection in all rivers and oceans as the "image of the ungraspable phantom of life" (5). In his view, both the whale and the human being (specifically the *Pequod's* captain) are imposing, masked, mysterious, and unknowable. This "symbolistic view of nature as a reflector of the self" (Williams 135) is also distinctive for Ahab. For just as he recognizes strength in himself, he acknowledges it in his enemy: "I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it" (Melville 192). Most notably though, he projects onto the blank canvas that is the whale all the hate and rage he feels in his own soul:

Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. (215)

Moby-Dick seems to take Emerson's idea that the external world symbolizes the human soul as its basis. It even agrees to the epitome of this statement, which is that man is incapable of seeing in nature anything *but* himself: "What we are, that only can we see" (Emerson, *Nature* 45). Matthiessen even argues that in *Moby-Dick*, Melville "had gone farther than Emerson in his realization that what you find in nature, whether you consider a phenomenon angelic or diabolic, depends ... greatly on your own mood" (406). But there are also moments in the book in which this precept is treated ironically, as shall be seen in my subsequent analysis of "The Mast-Head".

4. "The Mast-Head"

4.1 Transcendental Rhetoric

Moby-Dick's engagement with American Transcendentalism becomes most apparent in "The Mast-Head". In fact, Emerson's essay *Nature* appears as though it could be an intertext for this scene,⁹ both regarding the contents and the distinctive phrasing and imagery. In this passage, Ishmael sits atop the masthead and becomes enveloped by a feeling of intimate communion with nature and everything outside himself, just like Emerson

⁹ In his paper *A Parody of Nature or the Nature of Parody: Melville as Critic of Emerson and Darwin*, Benjamin Barber Rose follows exactly this proposition, arguing that "The Mast-Head" chapter in *Moby-Dick* offers a critical reading of Emerson's *Nature*.

proposed was possible. However, this enchanting sensation not only leads to a neglect of his responsibility of watching for whales and perils, but also nearly to his fatal fall from the elevated state.

In *Nature*, Emerson advocates that every Transcendentalist should be able to experience moments of completely sinking into uninhabited nature to the point where “the soul has completely transcended the limits of individuality and becomes part of the Over-soul” (Qi 276) – the supreme spirit in which all souls are believed to be united. This union begins with solitude: “a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society” (Emerson, *Nature* 3). Ishmael finds himself in a similar initial position on the masthead, “being left completely to [himself] at such a thought-engendering altitude” (Melville 184). In their respective seclusions, both Emerson and Ishmael experience a moment of absolute unity with the nature surrounding them. Where Ishmael feels at one the ocean, Emerson feels the same with the forest:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. ... Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (Emerson, *Nature* 4)

Ishmael’s experience on the *Pequod*’s lookout closely resembles Emerson’s “intoxicating euphoria of transcendence” (Rose 25). The passage is so significant that I would like to quote it here in full:

Perhaps they [whales] were [scarce]; or perhaps there might have been shoals of them in the far horizon; but lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absentminded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Wickliff’s sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over.

There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. (Melville 185)

Ishmael is enthralled with the atmosphere and the water as the ship and all the drudgeries of his life as a sailor shrink into insignificance. In keeping with Emerson’s vision, Ishmael is figuratively “uplifted into infinite space” as he is transcended high above the deck and

the sea. Rose notes how in his task of looking out for whales, he becomes the sole eye or “transparent eye-ball” of the *Pequod* (25). Emerson’s assertion that “the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind” (*Nature* 18) finds its parallel in how Ishmael matches natural signs – the ocean and the rising fins of fish – to human ones – the soul and its elusive thoughts. Ishmael then feels his spirit fading and becoming “diffused through time and space”, corresponding to Emerson’s assumption that “time and space relations vanish” (22) in moments of Transcendence. Ishmael even mentions a loss of identity, mirroring Emerson’s vanished ego who proclaims: “I am nothing”. The only life in him is that imparted by the sea, which also appears to him as the “soul, pervading mankind and nature”, seemingly referencing the Emersonian concept of the Oversoul (Romero para. 26; Qi 277), as well as the “inscrutable tides of God”, a phrasing which suggests the same divinity of nature Transcendentalists believe in.

4.2 (Self-)Irony

On the surface, Ishmael’s writing so closely parallels Emerson’s that it seems like a page lifted right out of *Nature*. But upon closer inspection, it becomes noticeable that prevalent in this chapter is also a tone of irony. The joke here is evidently on the spectator of nature. More specifically, the ironic commentary is not only concerned with Ishmael as an individual but also a representative of a certain type of viewer who, like the younger Ishmael, becomes carried away by his tendency to find symbols everywhere. This bridge between Ishmael the character and the representative recipient figure is grammatically imposed. For Ishmael chooses to recount the passage not in the first person, but instead utilizes the third person singular. He then inconspicuously switches to the second-person pronoun ‘thee’, then providing a grammatical link between himself as the recipient figure and the reader. The reason for the change in reference is that the narrating Ishmael wants to avoid any confusion between his present (narrating) self and his past (experiencing) self.¹⁰ After the events documented in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael seems to have evolved in some manner from his initial Transcendentalist standpoint, thus ‘objectifying’ his past self to a representative figure by referring to himself in the third person. In then changing to a direct address, the actual audience of the novel is asked to identify with the experiencing self.

¹⁰ Franz Stanzel has famously elaborated on *Moby-Dick*’s narrative situation. The terms “narrating self” and “experiencing self” are derived from him (61 and throughout).

In either case, the narrating self cuts himself off from his earlier experiences, allowing for an encounter with skeptical irony.¹¹

The focalizing character in this passage, simultaneously representing the experiencing Ishmael, a representative figure, and the reader, is described as a “lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditateness; and who offers to ship with the Phaedon instead of Bowditch in his head” (Melville 184). He is then made to join the ranks of a series of “many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the carking cares of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber” (184), alternately described as “sunken-eyed young Platonist[s]”¹² (184) and “absent-minded young philosophers” (185). In each of these lines of interest, the character serves as a comic model of attitudes and orientations prevalent among people (and possibly readers) of a certain twist. Furthermore, they demonstrate Ishmael’s self-irony. For what better ironic description of Ishmael’s character is there than a “romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young [man]”?

Far from a harsh mockery of himself and of others with a comparably Transcendental imagination, these characterizations present themselves more so as a light-hearted teasing. They do however reflect some concrete points of criticism that I would like to point out. Since the adjective “young” appears in all descriptions (or at least is implied in the word “lad”), their experience of Transcendence – though dreamy and delightful – is identified as a juvenile symptom of inexperience, naivety, and sentimentality.¹³ Ishmael the narrator thus reveals a counter-romantic development away from the idealistic tendencies of his youth and toward more rationality. Rose points out that he also likens the Transcendental mind to a head filled exclusively with Platonic philosophy (the *Phaedo*), leaving no room for mathematical reason (indicated by the mathematician Bowditch, who worked on maritime navigation) (27). This unbalanced perspective becomes literal in

¹¹ Stanzel also writes that “the narrating self distinguishes itself from the experiencing self by greater insight and maturity” and that “between the experiencing self’s experience of an event and the narrative re-creation of the same event at the hands of the narrating self there are therefore differences of valuation and interpretation” (70-1). McLoughlin similarly notes that the irony in this novel comes from Ishmael’s self-conscious “ironic detachment” (69).

¹² Transcendentalist thinkers, such as Emerson, took recourse to Platonism, defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “the philosophy of Plato stressing especially that actual things are copies of transcendent ideas and that these ideas are the objects of true knowledge apprehended by reminiscence” (“Platonism,” def. 1.a). Platonism and Transcendentalism have certain points of overlap, which is further evidence that Ishmael’s teasing is aimed at thinkers in the Platonist/Transcendentalist realm.

¹³ There is another characteristic of Transcendentalists that Ishmael links to youthful naivety, namely unrestricted optimism: “that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true – not true, or undeveloped” (Melville 494).

phrasings like “hollow eye”, “sunken-eyed”, and “absent-minded”. That the passage centers not on Ishmael’s actual task of looking out for whales but on his emotions exemplifies this limited view: Blinded by “the problem of the universe revolving in [him]”, Ishmael takes his obligations lightly: “Let me make a clean breast of it here, and frankly admit that I kept but sorry guard” (Melville 184). Thus, this visual disruption is indicative of an excess of imagination and a lack of foresight. As if to emphasize this point, Ishmael asks the reader: “they are short-sighted; what use, then, to strain the visual nerve? They have left their opera-glasses at home” (185).

What then results from telling the passage in the third and second person is, firstly, that the narrator detaches himself from his own younger version sitting on the masthead. The ironic treatment of his own personality is a form of skeptically reassessing the romantic and idealistic tendencies of his youth. Secondly, he conceives of his personal experience as analogous to that of many young men, including the actual audience of the text. In other words, the commentaries are simultaneously an ironic form of Ishmael’s self-criticism, and a way of poking fun at a person with a Transcendental approach to the world – specifically their naivety and lack of perspective. Rose draws a similar inference, stating that the narrator’s irony works as a two-way mirror; it provides a platform for criticism but also demonstrates his own identification with and understanding of those he makes fun of (51).

4.3 Twist of the Transcendental Metaphor

Not only is irony evident in the use of pronouns and the characterizing descriptions, but also in the central metaphor. As has already been established, the passage does not present itself as a portrayal of a masthead sitter’s duty. What it also does not focus on is a depiction of nature, though it may initially seem that way. Instead, the concentration is intensely fixed on the description of a viewer’s *reaction* towards nature. Ishmael’s response consists of an imaginative search for a profound, personal meaning, which finds expression in a Transcendental metaphor. In Transcendental literary convention, “Nature served as a mirror that reflected or externalized the denied aspects of white male subjectivity” (Hardack 3). In precisely that vein, the ocean becomes an externalization of Ishmael’s soul and the fins of fish reflections of individual thoughts. Designed to express a sense of unity with nature, this analogy simultaneously leads to a separation from it. Though apparently reaching out beyond himself, Ishmael disregards the actual sea and instead

concentrates on his own state of mind. What may seem like a fusion with nature quickly becomes (male) self-representation – nature becomes an occasion for the *projection* of oneself rather than a *reflection* of something ‘real’ or ‘true’. In the larger context of the entire novel, Lingo makes a related observation, noting that Ishmael’s “interpretive eye simultaneously helps and hinders the reader’s understanding. We are distanced from the initial objects of interpretation” (Lingo 19). If the pure act of perception does not exist and we can only ever see ourselves in nature, as Emerson assumes when he writes that “[w]hat we are, that only can we see” (*Nature* 45), then a connection to that nature must have its limits.

This is why the narrator makes sure to express that seeing oneself in nature is not a true communion, but merely a superficial impression. Where Emerson believed he could actually *merge* into divine nature,¹⁴ the young idealist “takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul” and every fin “seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts” (Melville 185, emphasis added). The musings are hence shifted from the realm of physical reality and into the realm of individual imagination. In this regard, Transcendence is nothing more than an “enchanted mood” (185) – a spontaneous and poetic overflow of feelings.

Emerson on the other hand tends to take his metaphors extremely literal (Hardack 126), turning his analogies into assertions of reality. For him, moments of seeing oneself in nature were the path towards insight and reason; they were instances in which “we behold unveiled the nature of justice and truth ... We apprehend the absolute. As it were, for the first time, *we exist*” (Emerson, *Nature* 33, emphasis in original). In “The Oversoul”, Emerson goes on to state that it is the divine itself which directly communicates truth to an individual in such a moment of “*Revelation*”, writing that “this communication is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind” (57, emphasis in original). The Oversoul then not only inspires and enlightens but possesses and ‘speaks’ through the individual. Although Ishmael does become dispossessed in this passage, the use of sensory perception verbs such as ‘to take for’ and ‘to seem’ discloses that his loss of identity is not a communication with nature or spirit, but a subjective projection incapable of revealing any kind of universal ‘truth’. Quite the opposite: The Transcendental daydream has a

¹⁴ Though also implicit throughout *Nature*, this conviction is conveyed most clearly in his essay “The Oversoul”, where Emerson writes that “the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one” (52); and that the “individual soul ... mingles with the universal soul” (58). Hardack has the same impression of Emerson’s belief in an actual merger with nature (4-5), and Rose, too, remarks that “Emerson speaks not of feelings, but of an actual transcendence” (19).

habit of *disconnecting* its subject from reality, making one “short-sighted” and “absent-minded” (Melville 185). The narrating Ishmael seems to still cherish the feeling of merging with nature but is reluctant to acknowledge faith in actual Transcendence.

4.4 Explicit Warning

In “The Mast-Head”, young people with a Transcendentalist disposition not only receive an ironic treatment and are made aware of the split between their perception and reality, but are also plainly warned. The narrating Ishmael realizes that the trance he experienced on the masthead could have quickly become dangerous as he might have lost his grip on physical reality and fell from his vantage point. The chapter ends as follows:

But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!¹⁵ (Melville 185-6)

In these closing sentences, Ishmael’s disconnection from reality – which is still presented as the readers’ – culminates, leading to near-death experience. The blissful reverie turns out to be ephemeral; the temporary felicity is reversed into horror; ‘Transcendence’ of the body ends in a loss of self-control. Moreover, the chapter ends with a direct warning to the masthead sitter, be that the young Ishmael, a young man with a similar mentality, or ‘you’. Because he is both an insider and an outsider to Transcendentalist thought, identifying with its principles but also critical of them, Ishmael can provide a unique perspective. Though Transcendence may be temporarily valid and rewarding, he warns against the dangers of such excessive meditation and urges to therefore remember the “validity of sensory experience” (McLoughlin 61). According to Rose, “The Mast-Head” puts Emerson’s philosophical ideas to the test in a physical context, and in doing so reveals that

¹⁵ Having previously been characterized as “Platonists,” here the masthead sitters are categorized as “Pantheists”. Much like the philosophy of Plato, Pantheism was a deep influence on Transcendentalist thought. Consequently, Transcendentalism is largely congruent with Pantheism, “a doctrine that equates God with the forces and laws of the universe” (Merriam-Webster, “Pantheism,” def. 1.a). The main difference is that Transcendentalist thought is a particular brand of philosophy that arose in America at a particular time, whereas Pantheism has arisen in countless different cultures at different times. For Hoffman and Romero, too, Pantheist seems translatable to Transcendentalist in the context of Ishmael’s warning (Hoffman 14; Romero para. 26).

“Emerson’s perspective in *Nature* *over-looks* the scientific *facts* of nature, such as gravity” (26, emphasis in original).¹⁶

Focusing on the chapter’s final paragraph, many scholars mention a critical or sarcastic assessment of idealistic communion with nature or the Oversoul (Billy 154-5; Hoffman 13-4; Matthiessen 405-7; McLoughlin 61-2; Vincent 158; Williams 145-6). What they fail to acknowledge is Rose’s conclusion that the criticism of Transcendentalism expressed in “The Mast-Head” is exceptional because it is also an homage (28). In nearly perfectly replicating the style of Emerson, the narrator reveals a deep respect for his language, and admits to sharing a certain poetic intuition with him. However, his imitation is not without caveat: He undercuts Transcendental rhetoric with irony and a direct warning – thus undermining youthful idealism and relinquishing the promise of Transcendence. His relationship to Transcendentalism is perhaps best summarized thus: As a young whaleman, Ishmael exhibited the same faith in the spiritual connection Emerson asserted was possible between soul and nature. As the narrator, he still admires Emerson as a poet but seeks less from him as a philosopher. As Hardack phrases it: “Ishmael often stops short of endorsing Transcendental precepts; he voices and is lured by them, but also tries to warn himself of his impulses, and oscillates between Romantic idealization and skeptical reevaluation” (122).

5 Conclusion

The intricacies of *Moby-Dick*’s relationship to Emersonian Transcendentalism are of course not exhausted by these observations. But in examining the thesis that *Moby-Dick* questions Transcendentalist philosophy via the invocation of its core ideas and employment of its language, it should have become clear that the links between Melville and Emerson are undeniable. Far from being antagonistic to Emersonian idealism – as many critics, from Matthiessen to Hoffman, have contended – Ishmael is strongly influenced by its precepts. As an author, Ishmael fills his story with Transcendentalist symbols, allusions, and self-representations, deriving some of his most captivating and lyrical prose from Transcendental rhetoric. At the same time, a vein of suspicion of its philosophical ideas runs through his text.

¹⁶ This passage also seems to exemplify McLoughlin’s observation that *Moby-Dick* “incorporates some of the Emersonian ideas that initially enchanted Melville, yet at the same time reveals their inadequacies in certain contexts” (60).

In the symbols of the sea and the White Whale, the narrator reveals his doubts of a benign nature and the knowability of the world. He readily accepts the principle of nature as the symbol of spirit, while simultaneously revealing his disillusionment with a genuine connection to nature, as evidenced in “The Mast-Head”. This chapter rejects the possibility of *actual* Transcendence; presenting it instead as the temporary emotion of a naïve youth that will inevitably foster a potentially dangerous disconnection from reality. This skepticism of some of the key tenets of Transcendentalism is achieved rarely in a direct dismissal or mockery. Instead, *Moby-Dick* relativizes and contextualizes its concepts, balances its idealism with complexity, undercuts its metaphors with a subtle irony, and tests its philosophies against real-world experiences.

As with the push and pull of the tides, readers see Ishmael’s word upon nature continually approximating Emerson’s while as continually diverging enough to preclude any notion of followership. His criticism of Transcendentalism is really a criticism of extremes; of any static approach to the world: In its totality, *Moby-Dick* never falls into one-sided statements or oversimplifications as Emerson sometimes does. It is “a thing writ in water” (Melville 641), depending on a fluid as opposed to a fixed approach to the world. Its narrator never fully relies on a single school of thought, such as Transcendentalism. Instead, he balances this philosophical approach with other human endeavors to make meaning of themselves and the world around them, such as science, traditional religion, and mythology. And yet, presenting any kind of ‘meaning’ proves to be an immensely difficult, if at all feasible task, because a clear and compelling answer never tells the whole story. Thus *Moby-Dick*, both the whale and the book, resists absolute interpretation, never providing the sense of something finished and fixed, always suggesting something beyond.

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