

Salvation/Damnation: The Ambiguous Faust in Melville's *Moby-Dick*

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Introduction

The word "intertextual" hardly prepares us for the complex literary web within which Herman Melville suspends his metaphysical adventure story about a great whale and a man obsessed with the meaning of his own striving to capture it. Melville's allusions are ostentatious – to the Bible, including the Book of Jonah, Shakespeare's tragedies, countless accounts of whales and whaling, philosophers such as Plato, Locke, and Kant, and dozens of what Melville call "higgledy-piggledy" bits of ocean lore. The effect is to make what is on one hand a very flashy adventure story into something equally as engaged with books and the stories of the past. The Faust story, whose hero indulges his desire for knowledge to the point of losing his soul, is an apt precursor for Melville's Captain Ahab, who turns a routine whaling voyage into a quest for transcendence. Is the white whale a divine "agent or principle," or just meaningless "pasteboard mask"? Ahab, like Faust, is willing to lose everything in order to know.

-Dr. Bruce Greenfield

In a contemporary review of Herman Melville's nineteenth-century American masterpiece, *Moby Dick*, Evert Duyckinck describes Ahab as the sombre and obsessive sea captain around whom Ishmael's narrative revolves. Encapsulating a central theme of the novel in his characterization, Duyckinck writes: "Captain Ahab is a striking conception, firmly planted on the wild deck of the Pequod – a dark disturbed soul arraying itself with every ingenuity of material resources for a conflict at once natural and supernatural."¹ Ahab's monomaniacal obsession with the "White Whale," Duyckinck suggests, reveals an essential dialectic in the text between the subjective, inherently-limited, and unsatisfactory reality of worldly experience and Ahab's self-consuming desire for an objective, metaphysical truth. In his ultimately tragic quest to slay the "White Whale" and pierce the veil dividing the natural world from the supernatural, Ahab resembles, as Duyckinck puts it, "the Faust of the quarter-deck."² Ahab's contribution to the novel as a thematic agent is tied to this conceptualization of his character: the textual significance of Ahab's unrepentant striving which results in his death, is illuminated when considered in relation to traditional Faustian narratives.

Much like his legendary counterpart, Ahab appears to relinquish his human soul in exchange for a glimpse of eternal order. For the sake of knowledge, it seems, Ahab wagers – and loses – his very life. I argue that it only "seems" or "appears" this way because, throughout *Moby Dick*, the only interpretive certainty is that Ishmael *cannot* decipher his captain's striving. Ishmael's lengthy dissertations and noticeably-ambiguous conclusions about the meaning of the White Whale only emphasize his failure to provide a definitive epistemological framework by which we may comprehend the destruction of Ahab and his ship. From Ishmael's opening collection of extracts, those "random allusions to whales he could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane,"³ through to the tale's conclusion in which the devouring "vortex" silently and suddenly ends the Pequod's journey,⁴ the White Whale defies definition. As Ishmael explains in the "The Whiteness of the Whale," *Moby Dick*'s horrifying 'colouring'

represents at once the totality of meaning – “Christian” as well as “atheist” – and its complete absence. Just as one finds oneself lost in the endless stream of allusions at the novel’s beginning, “so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him.”⁵ Gustaaf Van Cromphout explains: “Having been reduced to a medley of interpretations, the whale can no longer provide a meaning transcending individual perception.”⁶ Limited as we are by the first-person perspective of our narrator, it ultimately remains unclear whether Ahab’s death reveals the hidden meaning of his much-troubled existence, or if his inglorious end is merely the result of an industrial accident, as it superficially appears to be. Expanding upon Duyckinck’s comparison, I believe that if we are to answer the fundamental ambiguity of Ahab’s end, we must first look towards those conceptions of the Faustian enterprise that inform the novel.⁷

In contrast to *Moby Dick*, Marlowe and Goethe offer different yet complete epistemological systems in their respective dramatizations of the Faust story; through their works we may come to a better understanding of Ahab’s epic conflict and its inconclusive resolution. Ahab offers us several points of comparison with Marlowe and Goethe’s precedent texts, beginning with a Faustian manifesto. The reality of experience, Ahab claims, does little more than obstruct one from the truth. In response to Starbuck, who criticizes him for demanding “[v]engeance on a dumb brute,”⁸ Ahab explains the twofold conception of reality that drives him unceasingly onwards. He instructs his first mate: “All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks” behind which exists some unknown but still reasoning thing.”⁹ Whether *Moby Dick* is the agent of some divine force or the physical embodiment of divinity itself, Ahab’s hunt for the whale is an attempt to “strike through the mask”¹⁰ – to punish the “reasoning” being he believes to be responsible for his physical and spiritual suffering. Ahab conceives of himself as a prisoner in this world, trapped within the confines of an inadequate physical *unreality* and constantly confronted by the “walls” that bind him. What Starbuck, Ishmael, and perhaps even what we suppose to be “Madness!”¹¹ or “monomania”¹² on the part of Ahab is, for the captain, an intense desire to exceed the prescribed boundaries of human understanding and confront whatever essential truth may lie hidden beyond.

Marlowe’s *Faustus* expresses a similar sense of dissatisfaction about the limits of earthly knowledge. The Chorus first introduces Dr. Faustus, a too-successful academic who, “glutted [now] with learning’s golden gifts, / [...] surfeits upon cursed necromancy. / Nothing so sweet as magic is to him, / Which he prefers before his chiefest bliss.”¹³ For Dr. Faustus, traditional fields of scholarship no longer offer the satisfaction of a philosophical resolution, nor do they contain any further mystery to be uncovered and explained. Having “attain’d the end”¹⁴ of logic in Aristotle’s *Analytics*, of medicine in the works of Galen, Law in Justinian, and theology in “Jerome’s Bible,” Faustus contends that only in the metaphysics of the magicians can one find true and significant form of knowledge.¹⁵ As he rapidly summarizes and dismisses the ‘entirety’ of human learning, spouting catchphrases in Latin to emphasize his proficiency in all subjects, Faustus reveals a distinction between the natural and supernatural that is crucial to his worldview (and reminiscent of Ahab’s), implicitly expressing his distaste for the insufficiencies of

established knowledge. Turning instead to the “concealed arts,”¹⁶ Faustus conjures the demon Mephistophilis and exchanges his eternal soul for twenty-four years of demonic servitude and access to knowledge hitherto denied to him as a mortal man.¹⁷ Mephistophilis brings the Doctor a new set of books to replace his old ones. These metaphysical spell-books encapsulate the secrets of weather, the spirits, the planets of the heavens, and more;¹⁸ they represent Faustus’ desire for a God-like understanding of the world – a desire for which he suffers eternal damnation in Hell.

Goethe’s theory begins in much the same way as Marlowe’s. We first find Faust contemplating the value of extensive learning. “Hard studies all, that have cost me dear,” he laments, “And so I sit, poor silly man,/ No wiser now than when I began.”¹⁹ Distracted that he may know nothing that is essentially real, Faust turns to magic and conjured spirits for education. Like Ahab and Faustus, Goethe’s Faust constructs a dualistic notion of reality, frustrated at the deceptive nature of the physical. Magic, he hopes, will reveal the “secret sights” of the world and “grant [him] a vision of Nature’s forces/ That bind the world, all its seeds and sources.”²⁰ Flipping through his book of “magic lore,”²¹ Faust summons the mysterious Earth Spirit, whom he believes will offer him understanding and the ability to pierce those “pasteboard masks” that constitute the boundaries of experience. Unfortunately, as the spirit tells a cowering Faust before vanishing from sight, such knowledge is not freely available: “You match the spirit you can comprehend: / I am not he.”²² Faust is quickly forced to admit that Nature’s secrets are indecipherable to a mere human being. “We snatch in vain at Nature’s veil,” he says, “No screws or levers can compel her to reveal / The secrets she has hidden from our sight.”²³ Like Ahab and Dr. Faustus, Faust must first give up an essential part of his humanity – his soul – if he is to confront the Earth Spirit on equal ground; the Faustian cannot exceed the epistemological bounds of human existence without first sacrificing the very thing that binds him to humanity.

Ahab’s sacrifice is the product of his first encounter with the White Whale. Through the loss of his leg, an entirely physical transformation, Ahab is spiritually prepared to make his Faustian wager. Ishmael postulates that at the time of his dismemberment Ahab was engaged in a primal expression of the conflict between man and his natural surrounding by playing the hunter to Moby Dick’s leviathan. Far from associating the White Whale with a malicious tormentor in this pre-narrative moment, Ahab’s concern would most likely have been his own bodily pain. It is only later, during the long journey homewards, that Ahab’s mental anguish and contemplation of the event consume him: he becomes overtaken and corrupted by his obsession with the intangible nature of causality. It is only then that Moby Dick assumes the sinister role of the embodiment of evil for Ahab, a newly ‘enlightened’ lunatic. Ishmael explains that, “[i]n his frantic morbidness [Ahab] at last came to identify with him [Moby Dick], not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations.”²⁴ Ahab’s belief in an undiscovered supernatural realm of objective truth and, with it, his quest to “strike through the mask,” emerge only as he loses hold of the rational self that normally ties one to empirical reality. According to Ishmael, Ahab acknowledges the irrationality of his monomania: “in his heart, Ahab had some glimpse of this, namely: all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad.”²⁵ This

awareness is necessary to the Faustian enterprise in general. Facing an emotional crisis after the loss of his leg, Ahab *wilfully* surrenders to his monomaniacal lunacy, simultaneously relinquishing his rational human soul and opening himself up to the discovery of truth in a world beyond his own subjectivity.

Ahab's choice to submit to his obsession is represented in his pact with the crew of the Pequod. Ahab gathers his sailors on the quarter-deck and, after having them all drink from the same pewter mug and swear before the mast to find and kill the White Whale, he cries: "Advance, ye mates! Cross you lances full before me. Well done! Let me touch the axis."²⁶ Separating his officers and harpooners from the crowd, Ahab's request brings to mind the classical imagery in David's *Horatii*.²⁷ He then instructs his harpooners to drink from the overturned sockets of their weapons, saying to the group: "Bestow them, ye who are now made parties to this indissoluble league."²⁸ Ahab defends this unusual ceremony as a loosely-based revival of the "noble" customs of his fisherman forefathers.²⁹ Yet, the chilling mixture of secular imagery with the baptism by "fiery waters"³⁰ of the three pagan participants makes this a confused and sordid rite of passage; it is driven as much as by Ahab's infectious fanatical fervour as it is by the free will of his crew. Before Starbuck can raise more than a note of dissent, we are told, Ahab has enchanted everyone onboard the ship with promises of gold, glory, and in some cases the sheer power of his influence. Ahab notes to himself: "Starbuck now is mine."³¹ Far from being an exemplar of democracy onboard the Pequod, the oath is a definitive moment for Captain Ahab alone. Here on the Pequod's quarter-deck his monomania is permanently ratified in his own mind by public contractual declaration. This moment offers insight into Ahab's later declaration: "Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed."³²

The democratic pact is a familiar element in the Faustian narrative. In Marlowe's tale, Dr. Faustus is required to "write a deed of gift with [his] own blood,"³³ promising his immortal soul in return for the services of Mephistophilis. Like Ahab, Faustus willingly accepts the devilish terms of the contract, and he, too, is responsible for its conditions. Unlike *Moby Dick*, however, *Dr. Faustus* lacks the moral ambiguity so indispensable to Melville's novel. Faustus sells his soul to the fiendish Lucifer³⁴ to be taken only upon the expiration of a twenty-four year period. Within the seventeenth-century Christian theological framework of *Dr. Faustus*, the doctor's death at the end of the drama is easily understood. Marlowe characterizes his essential conception of good and evil as a pair of angels who surface periodically and attempt to influence the doctor. The advice of a good angel is simple and in line with a Christian conception of virtue: "O Faustus! Lay that damned book aside [...] Read, read the Scriptures: that is blasphemy."³⁵ The evil angel is equally straightforward. He advises: "*Go forward*, Faustus, in that famous art."³⁶ Repentance is the key to Marlowe's theology. Based on this inconclusive notion of right and wrong, we condemn Faustus for his repeated failure to repent. Of course, Marlowe's drama is often perceived as conveying an intended cautionary message against Faustus's evil "going forward," and so Faustus necessarily finds that forgiveness is impossible. In his final hour, Faustus can only pray for more time or a place to hide. "O, I'll leap up to my God!" he cries, "Who pulls me down?" As the devils claw him down into the gaping maw of hell he shouts, "I'll

burn my books! – Ah Mephistophilis.”³⁷ Those books, which gave him access to a most divine knowledge, are the reason he must suffer eternity in Hell. As the Chorus aptly concludes, one should not seek “[t]o practise more than heavenly power permits.”³⁸

True to the myth, Goethe’s *Faust* also enters into a demonic pact. He wagers with Mephistopheles, “If ever to the moment I shall say: / Beautiful moment, do not pass away! / Then you may forge your chains to bind me, / Then I will put my life behind me.”³⁹ He, too, is required to sign with a drop of his own blood.⁴⁰ But Goethe intentionally moves away from the theological moralising which damns Faustus at the very moment of his signing. Goethe’s text, as David Luke argues, suggests an “anthropocentric” and Romantic epistemological framework that considers human action by human standards as opposed to religious ones.⁴¹ The “Prologue in Heaven” does invoke the biblical story of Job, as Mephistopheles and The Lord bet on the demon’s ability to capture Faust’s immortal soul,⁴² but, Luke continues, neither characterization is typically Christian: both God and the devil are “de-theologized.”⁴³ Mephistopheles approaches The Lord in the prologue as one of his servants, The Lord having “been quite pleased to meet [him] now and then.”⁴⁴ The indication here is not that they are adversaries but rather that Mephistopheles in fact serves God by tempting Faust.

At the end of Part Two, Faust dies an old man, and, in a radical break from tradition, he is saved from eternal damnation. According to the Angels who carry Faust’s “immortal part” up to heaven, “This noble spirit saved alive/ Has foiled the Devil’s will!/ *He who strives on and lives o strives/ Can earn redemption still.*”⁴⁵ As opposed to damning him, as in Marlowe’s text, Faust’s striving is for Goethe the very reason he deserves to be saved. With this inversion, as Luke puts it: “Goethe has thus completely surmounted the literalistic modes of belief which are presupposed by the traditional Faust story.”⁴⁶ The Faustian desire for knowledge at last sheds its connection to evil.

Ahab, for all his striving, cannot be said to be saved any more than he is damned. His physical death resembles that of Marlowe’s *Faust* more than that of Goethe’s, but this brings us no closer to resolving the meaning of Ahab’s quest. Neither Marlowe’s nor Goethe’s text offers a definitive epistemological framework to apply to Melville’s novel. Their combined perspective, however, is revealing. Goethe’s *Faust* strives to know Nature and to become worthy of the Earth Spirit’s knowledge; Ahab’s goal is very much the same. *Faust* also shows us that the modern Faustian narrative is a “de-theologized” one, and so, in order to understand Ahab’s quest, we must look for a standard of judgement that coincides with the values of physical reality. Christian morality does not explicitly delimit the boundaries of right and wrong in *Moby Dick* as it does in Marlowe’s play, and so we cannot judge Ahab’s striving precisely as we would that of Dr. Faustus. Ahab’s death must then be interpreted in accordance with what we know of Ahab’s mission from *within* the novel itself.

The hunt for something like the Earth Spirit in the *White Whale* brings Ahab into direct contact with a powerful and dangerous natural being. Whatever happens to his immortal soul, and indeed we do not know, Ahab’s confrontation with *Moby Dick* proves to be overwhelming and catastrophic. If we are to pass a moral judgement on Ahab’s Faustian enterprise, our

standard must emanate from the result of this titanic collision. The awe-inspiring force of Nature must serve as our epistemology. The undeniable laws of the natural world – witnessed through the sheer force of the whale itself – demand that we condemn the captain for his violent quest to oppose them.

Notes

¹Evert Duyckinck, “A Friend Does His Christian Duty,” *Moby-Dick: A Norton Critical Edition*, eds. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 611.

²*Ibid.*

³Herman Melville, *Moby Dick: A Norton Critical Edition*, eds. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 8.

⁴*Ibid.*, 426.

⁵*Ibid.*, 165.

⁶Gustaaf Van Cromphout, “*Moby Dick*: The Transformation of the Faustian Ethos,” *American Literature* 51 (1979): 27.

⁷Hershel Parker, “Melville’s Reading and *Moby Dick*,” in *Moby Dick: A Norton Critical Edition*, 434.

⁸Melville, 139.

⁹*Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*, 139.

¹²*Ibid.*, 156.

¹³Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 1.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁹Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Part One*, trans. David Luke, 1987 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 15.

²¹*Ibid.*, 16.

²²*Ibid.*, 19.

²³*Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴Melville, 156.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 157.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 141.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*, 142.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 141.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 142

³¹*Ibid.*, 140.

³²*Ibid.*, 418.

³³Marlowe, 20.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 22.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*,

³⁹ Goethe, 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴¹ David Luke, "Introduction," *Faust: Part One*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxx.

⁴² Goethe, 11.

⁴³ Luke, xxx.

⁴⁴ Goethe, 10.

⁴⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Faust: Part Two," *Foundation Year Programme Handbook* (Halifax: University of King's College, 2005), 47.

⁴⁶ Luke, xxx.