

“I Love All Men Who Dive”: Herman Melville and Joseph Smith

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Herman Melville and Joseph Smith were two “deep thinkers” linked by time and place. But these men had different experiences that led to different conclusions about life and hope.

“I love all men who *dive*,” wrote Herman Melville to a friend. “Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more; & if he dont attain the bottom, why, all the lead in Galena can’t fashion the plummet that will. I’m not talking of Mr Emerson now—but of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with blood-shot eyes since the world began.”¹ Although Herman Melville probably never met Joseph Smith, he would have loved him as a “thought-diver.” Melville said in his review (1850) of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), “For genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle around.”²

Why might one want to consider Herman Melville and Joseph Smith together? This juxtaposition helps illuminate striking similarities as well as significant differences in the lives and responses to life of two of the nineteenth century’s most remarkable men, both pioneers in their respective fields. What editor James G. Bennett of the *New York Herald* wrote about Joseph Smith could apply to Herman Melville as well: he was “undoubtedly one of the greatest characters of the age.”³ Future generations, observed Josiah Quincy, the mayor of Boston, might well identify Joseph Smith as the American of the nineteenth century who “has exerted the most powerful influence upon the destinies of his countrymen.”⁴ Likewise, Melville’s place today as one of the greatest writers of American literature is undisputed. These two contemporaries have given to the world enduring works in the *Book of Mormon* (1830) and *Moby-Dick* (1851).

Both Melville and Smith pondered the deep questions of existence, such as the relationship of man to God, the nature and degree of agency, and the purpose of life. Their writings range widely in examining problems of mortality and immortality, the brotherhood of man, self-realization, response to either earthly or heavenly authority, deception and hypocrisy,



Joseph Smith, artist unknown, attributed to David W. Rogers, ca. 1842. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.

and good and evil. (By “writings,” I am considering all that came from them: the translations and revelations of Joseph Smith as well as his letters, journals, and recorded sayings; and Herman Melville’s letters and literary works.) They both grew up in New York state—Melville in Albany and Smith in Palmyra, locations separated by more than two hundred miles but connected by the Erie Canal. And while they were misunderstood and harshly judged during their lifetimes, their fame has increased in the twentieth century.

Herman Melville, according to noted literary critic R. W. B. Lewis, was “the one novelist in nineteenth-century America gifted

with a genuinely myth-making imagination.”⁵ Joseph Smith similarly has been considered by the distinguished literary critic Harold Bloom to be “an authentic religious genius [who] surpassed all Americans, before or since, in the possession and expression of what could be called the religion-making imagination.”⁶ Yet Melville belonged to what Lewis called the party of Irony, while Smith could be considered to belong to the party of Hope. Melville had deeply probing questions; Smith, thinking as deeply but also calling on revelation, had answers to many of the very questions Melville posed. Both were willing to examine the questions thoroughly and honestly. Melville surely had himself as well as Hawthorne in mind when he said, “We think that into no recorded mind has the intense feeling of the visible truth ever entered more deeply than into this man’s. By visible truth, we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him.”⁷ Melville engaged, as critic Stan Goldman puts it, in “the painful struggle between the human and the divine. As Jacob wrestled with the angel, as Job wrestled with God—‘but I will maintain mine own ways before him’ (Job 13:15)—Melville also wrestled with ‘contraries.’”⁸ On his part, Smith believed that “‘by proving contraries,’ ‘truth is made manifest,’ and a wise man can search out ‘old paths,[’] wherein righteous men held communion with Jehovah, and were exalted through obedience.”⁹

Melville and the Mormons

While there is no record that he and Joseph Smith ever met, Melville was aware of the Book of Mormon and was informed (or misinformed) about the Latter-day Saints. Probably the nearest Melville ever came to Smith was in 1840, when a twenty-one-year-old Melville took a steamboat from Galena to Cairo, both in Illinois, passing the fledgling Mormon settlement at Nauvoo, where Smith then resided.¹⁰ Melville's one overt reference to the Book of Mormon is in his novel *Pierre* (1852), where he puts the volume in a packet of great books a wealthy admirer has delivered to Plotinus Plinlimmon.

This foreign scholar has sent Plinlimmon "a very fine set of volumes,—Cardan, Epictetus, the Book of Mormon, Abraham Tucker, Condorcet and the Zend-Avesta."¹¹ As Robert Rees has pointed out, one characteristic these books have in common is their emphasis on benevolence.¹² But selfish Plinlimmon leaves the books untouched. Rather than accepting the wine contained in the new bottle of the Book of Mormon, Plinlimmon tells the scholar he would have preferred "some choice Curaçoa from a nobleman like you." After the scholar probes him, saying, "I thought that the society of which you are the head, excluded all things of that sort," Plinlimmon responds hypocritically, "Dear Count, so they do; but Mohammed hath his own dispensation."¹³

That Melville found something commendatory in the Book of Mormon is also suggested, as Rees argues quite persuasively, by his use of the name Alma for his prophet-Christ figure in *Mardi* (1849). Melville's Alma "was an illustrious prophet, and teacher divine," who came to instruct the Mardians "in the ways of truth, virtue, and happiness; to allure them to good by promises of beatitude hereafter; and to restrain them from evil by denunciations of woe."¹⁴ Melville also identified his misunderstood novel *Mardi* with Mormons:

Again: (as the divines say) political republics should be the asylum for the persecuted of all nations; so, if *Mardi* be admitted to your shelves, your bibliographical Republic of Letters may find some contentment in the thought, that it has afforded refuge to a work, which almost everywhere else has been driven forth like a wild, mystic Mormon into shelterless exile.¹⁵



Herman Melville, 1861.
Courtesy Berkshire Athenæum.

Melville alluded to Mormons again in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). One of the passengers on the steamboat *Fidèle* supposes that the lamblike man in cream colors is a “Green prophet from Utah.”¹⁶ At one point in the novel, the swindling confidence man tries to interest a collegian in the New Jerusalem, which he says is “the new and thriving city, so called, in northern Minnesota. It was originally founded by certain fugitive Mormons. Hence the name.”¹⁷ This “new and thriving” city founded by the Mormons calls to mind Nauvoo, although the northerly location and the reference to “fugitive” Mormons may also have reference to an apostate colony at Beaver Island, Wisconsin, once designated the New Jerusalem by colony leader James J. Strang, whose assassination in 1856 received national attention. The narrator of the novel implies skepticism about the city’s “perpetual fountain” and “lignum-vitæ rostrums”—that is, “the fountain of the water of life” and the tree of life in the New Jerusalem as described in the book of Revelation (see Rev. 21:1–6). Melville might have had in mind as well the New Jerusalem and the tree of life described in the Book of Mormon. And the narrator includes “Mormons and Papists” in his catalog of the “Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man.” After listing “happiness-hunters” and “truth-hunters,” he probably thought of himself as belonging to the category of “still keener hunters after all these hunters.”¹⁸

Backgrounds

There was much about the backgrounds of Melville and Smith that significantly colored their approaches to life. “Call me Ishmael,” Melville begins his most famous novel, *Moby-Dick*, presenting a character with a number of parallels to himself, just as he had previously done in the title characters of his novels *Redburn* (1849) and *White Jacket* (1850). An orphan (one who, judging by his name, had been cast out by his father), Ishmael goes to sea as a substitute for suicide. Even then, conditioned by his Calvinistic training, he considers his voyage fated. The writer behind the character was also bereft of his father, who had died raving when Melville was twelve. One analysis of Melville supposes that he first knew the punitive Calvinist God “chiefly through the image of his own father.”¹⁹ Melville had a difficult relationship with his mother, Marie Gansevoort Melville, a member of the neo-Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church. In fact, Herman Melville said that she hated him.²⁰

The opening of the Book of Mormon, which Joseph Smith translated, is both roughly parallel to “Call me Ishmael” and significantly different from it. It starts, “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents . . .” (1 Ne. 1:1), declaring that Nephi is the narrator’s real name and not just a name to be used on the occasion, and emphasizing the closeness of parents and son. Joseph Smith continually affirmed that he, too, had been born of

goodly parents. His father, Joseph Smith Sr., was his confidant and friend, and his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, provided the constant support of love and belief. “Blessed of the Lord is my father,” said Joseph,

for he shall stand in the midst of his posterity and shall be comforted by their blessings when he is old and bowed down with years, and shall be called a prince over them, and shall be numbered among those who hold the right of Patriarchal Priesthood. . . .

And blessed also, is my mother, . . .

. . . for her soul is ever filled with benevolence and philanthropy; and notwithstanding her age, she shall yet receive strength and be comforted in the midst of her house: and thus saith the Lord. She shall have eternal life.²¹

Heavenly knowledge began for Joseph Smith at age fourteen, when he earnestly prayed vocally for the first time to ask God for wisdom—and received it directly from the Deity. When he was fourteen, the boy Melville worked in a bank in Albany and then briefly on his uncle’s farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. But his major learning experiences came later. “Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all,” Melville confided to Hawthorne. “From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself.”²² At that point he had just returned from the sea with a store of whaling and naval experiences that he would use in his fiction and poetry to the end of his life. As with Ishmael, the whaling ship had been his “Yale College and [his] Harvard.”²³ In his twenty-fifth year, Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon and organized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One could say that Joseph Smith’s most important “Harvard” experience was the instruction he received from heavenly visitants.

By age thirty, Melville was writing *Moby-Dick*; at that age, Smith had organized the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and dedicated the Kirtland Temple, among other accomplishments. Just eight years later, Joseph Smith was cruelly cut down at the height of his creativity. With the appearance of his skeptical work *The Confidence-Man*, in his thirty-eighth year Melville ended his career of writing fiction for publication.

During that year, 1857, with the support of his family, Melville went abroad to the Mediterranean and the Holy Land to recoup his health and to see if he could regain some faith. The book-length poem *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876) is an imaginative account of that experience, featuring a variety of characters expressing diverse views on religion and other topics. Though no single character fully represents Melville, Clarel’s question seems to be at the heart of Melville’s quest: “‘Christ lived a Jew: and in Judaea / May linger any breath of Him?’”²⁴ Subsequently, thinking of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Clarel

expresses a longing for divine counsel: “I too, I too; could *I* but meet / Some stranger of a lore replete, / Who, marking how my looks betray / The dumb thoughts clogging here my feet, / Would question me, expound and prove, / And make my heart to burn with love— / Emmaus were no dream to-day!”²⁵

On his way to the Holy Land, Melville told Hawthorne of his “noble doubts” and desires. In his journal account of their visit near Liverpool in November 1856, Hawthorne muses:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated”; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us.²⁶

Likewise an honest and courageous person, Joseph Smith at age thirty-eight was solidly sure in his belief. As he announced in his masterful King Follett discourse, he intended to edify his audience “with the simple truths from heaven.”²⁷

While their family relations and background were different, Herman Melville and Joseph Smith were alike in their thirst for knowledge. Merton M. Sealts’s *Melville’s Reading* and Mary K. Bercaw’s *Melville’s Sources* show that Melville, like Ishmael, “swam through libraries.”²⁸ The journals of Joseph Smith transcribed in the *History of the Church* and *The Papers of Joseph Smith* show a man who, despite enormous demands on his time, was constantly learning new languages (such as German, Greek, and Hebrew), engaging in extended discussions such as took place in the School of the Prophets, and receiving revelation upon revelation. In their desire for truth, both men gained ever-expanding knowledge.

The search for truth is a theme found throughout Melville’s writings. “You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in,” he said in his review of Hawthorne’s *Mosses*, and in that review he implicitly includes himself with Hawthorne and Shakespeare as a master “of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches.”²⁹ Identifying Hawthorne in that review as “a seeker, not a finder yet,” Melville allies with him, proclaiming, “I seek for Truth.”³⁰ Nearly the same age as Melville’s friend Hawthorne, Joseph Smith, too, prized truth. He subscribed to the prophet Jacob’s view in the Book of Mormon: the righteous “love the truth and are not shaken” (2 Ne. 9:40).

Diving out of Sight and Coming into View

Both during and after their lives, these forthright and genuine men were seriously misunderstood, their true characters unknown to many. One review of Melville's novel *Pierre* bore the bold headline, "HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY"!³¹ In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville acknowledged that "the acutest sage [is] often at his wits' ends to understand living character."³² Only the most eagle-eyed readers, Melville said, could come close to understanding him. Even his family hardly knew his inner life. This point is made somewhat humorously in the sketch "I and My Chimney" (1856) in which the narrator protects the base of his chimney—symbolically, his ego—from being threatened or exposed.³³ Isabel's last words concerning *Pierre* could well apply to Melville: "'All's o'er, and ye know him not!'"³⁴ Similarly, Joseph Smith stated, "You don't know me; you never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot tell it: I shall never undertake it. I don't blame any one for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself."³⁵ Nor could he tell it all. "I have handled, heard, seen and known things which I have not yet told," he revealed.³⁶ Melville lamented, "What a madness & anguish it is, that an author can never—under no conceivable circumstances—be at all frank with his readers."³⁷

Yet both Melville and Smith left significant bodies of writings from which one can approach their personal histories. I grant that Melville is complex and ambiguous and that no one character in his fiction represents him in any direct way. I also acknowledge that during his lifetime he stated or implied changing and sometimes conflicting views on religious and other matters. Still, it could be said that Melville wrote out his life in his works, from his Polynesian adventures in *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) through his anguished experiences as an author in *Pierre* to his examination of the relationships of a father and son in *Billy Budd* (1924; posthumous). As noted frequently, Melville's works involve some form of a journey with a quest—for beauty in *Mardi*, for truth in *Moby-Dick*, for virtue in *Pierre*.

To learn about Joseph Smith's life, one turns primarily to his journals and sermons; indeed, his 1839 history with the account of his First Vision is the core story of his life—which, as he puts it, is inextricably related to "the rise and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (Joseph Smith—History 1:1). As with Melville's life story, Smith's is a repeated account of journeys: the migrations of the Smith family and the Latter-day Saints as a people. These journeys replicate those found within the Book of Mormon: the journeys of the Jaredites, of the people of Lehi, and of Alma's people. Experiencing and writing about the journey archetype, both Melville and Smith could consider themselves wanderers.

In his journeyings, Smith could affirm, “Go forward and not backward. Courage, brethren; and on, on to the victory!” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:22). Melville, though, wrote about a series of incomplete or failed journeys and placed elements of himself in Redburn, who felt “in early youth . . . the pangs which should be reserved for the stout time of manhood,”³⁸ and in Ishmael, who at times had “a damp, drizzly November” in his soul.³⁹

Experiencing Darkness and Light

The emotional cloud over Melville is often represented as blackness. What Melville found in Hawthorne certainly was true of himself: “This great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin.”⁴⁰ As Melville biographer Edwin Haviland Miller believes:

Only a man who himself had experienced the despair that accompanies the blackness of depressions, where grievances or hurts are magnified against the background of overwhelming feelings of helplessness, could have created Ahab, Pierre, and Bartleby. These characters, in overwrought rhetoric or in its opposite, silence, are imprisoned in despair, feelings of ineffectuality, self-destructive rages, teetering on the brink of complete loss of control. If they are poised perilously at the abyss, Melville had preceded them there.⁴¹

Yet Melville found that “profoundest gloom” sometimes allows one to discover “deeper truths in man.” “Utter darkness is then his light,” he says, “and cat-like he distinctly sees all objects through a medium which is mere blindness to common vision.”⁴² “Every night, when the curtain falls,” he says in “The Piazza” (1856), “truth comes in with darkness.”⁴³ As with the tortoise of the Enchanted Isles with its bright yellow underside and dark back, Melville believed that one should “enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can, but be honest and don’t deny the black.”⁴⁴

Joseph Smith knew darkness. Regarding the Sacred Grove experience, he writes, “Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction” (JS-H 1:15). Yet Satan’s darkness is superseded in Smith’s first vision by “a pillar of light . . . above the brightness of the sun” (JS-H 1:16). As there is a power of darkness in Melville, there could be called a power of light in Smith. Despite his persecutions, Joseph Smith prophesied that he would “stand and shine like the sun in the firmament.”⁴⁵ He was like Gazelem’s stone, “which shall shine forth in darkness unto light” (Alma 37:23). “That which is of God is light,” he wrote, “and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24). Conversely, “He that will not receive the greater light, must have taken away from him all the light which he hath; and if the light which is in you become darkness, behold, how great is that darkness!”⁴⁶

These perspectives of Melville and Smith regarding darkness and light correlate with their views on human agency. The blighted Melville with his early Calvinistic training struggled with matters of fate and free will. Surely there were times in his life when he felt the plight of a Pierre who “was not arguing Fixed Fate and Free Will, now; Fixed Fate and Free Will were arguing him, and Fixed Fate got the better in the debate.”⁴⁷ Acknowledging a parallel between Melville and Ishmael, literary scholar Paul Brodtkorb says, “Whenever Ishmael contemplates time, fatality is the aspect of it that is most apt to concern him.”⁴⁸ In contrast, Joseph Smith’s position was that of Lehi in the Book of Mormon, who said:

And because that [the children of men] are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon. . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil. (2 Ne. 2:26–27)

Smith found through divine instruction that Presbyterianism with its Calvinistic base was wrong. And while living in the world of time, Smith “let the solemnities of eternity” rest upon his mind (D&C 43:34).

Whether they were dominantly pessimistic or optimistic, both men understood evil. Melville describes Ishmael at the tiller at night, perceiving that “the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul.”⁴⁹ Transfixed into a doze in which he nearly capsizes the vessel, Ishmael gives himself this admonition: “Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man!”⁵⁰ Smith, too, had a sight of what Ishmael calls “fiend shapes.”⁵¹ An angel showed him “the prince of darkness, surrounded by his innumerable train of associates.” The heavenly messenger then said, “‘All this is shown, the good and the evill [*sic*], the holy and impure, the glory of God and the power of darkness, that you may know hereafter the two powers and never be influenced or overcome by that wicked one.’”⁵² At another time, Smith beheld “Satan, that old serpent,” and saw “a vision of the sufferings of those with whom he made war and overcame” (D&C 76:28–30). In the Book of Moses, translated by Joseph Smith, Enoch had a similar experience: he “beheld Satan; and he had a great chain in his hand, and it veiled the whole face of the earth with darkness; and he looked up and laughed, and his angels rejoiced” (Moses 7:26).

In discerning the good and the evil, both men were exceptionally honest; they were maskless men in a world too often appearing as a masquerade.⁵³ As such, they were totally committed to seeking for and speaking the truth. “I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this,” Melville wrote to a friend.⁵⁴ Yet he knew only too well how little the world rewarded

truth-tellers: “Try to get a living by the Truth—and go to the Soup Societies,” Melville commented to Hawthorne.⁵⁵ For his part, Smith affirmed, “Water, fire, truth and God are all realities. Truth is ‘Mormonism.’ God is the author of it.”⁵⁶

Doubt and Faith

While seeking for the truth, Melville pondered how one can be sure of it, especially as pertains to the unseen world. The degree to which he worked out his own questionings and grapplings in his fiction is evident in his novels. He has Pierre lamenting “the everlasting elusiveness of Truth.”⁵⁷ In varying degrees through his life, Melville struggled with questions of doubt and faith.⁵⁸ “Own, own with me, and spare to feign,” he has Clarel say; “‘Doubt bleeds, nor Faith is free from pain!’”⁵⁹ “Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination . . . makes a man who regards them both with equal eye,” Melville’s narrator says in *Moby-Dick*.⁶⁰ One can easily see Melville’s alignment with this position expressed in *Mardi*: “‘I am dumb with doubt; yet, ‘tis not doubt, but worse: I doubt my doubt. . . . Would, would that mine were a settled doubt, like that wild boy’s, who without faith, seems full of it. The undoubting doubter believes the most. Oh! that I were he.’”⁶¹ Doubting his doubt, Melville was never bound to just one position. As he puts it in *Moby-Dick*:

There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:—through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’ doubt (the common doom), then skepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally. Where lies the final harbor, whence we unmoor no more?⁶²

A critical difference in Joseph Smith’s life was personal revelation. For him, revelation was new wine in new bottles. Smith’s response to objections of Latter-day Saints

not admitting the validity of sectarian baptism, [was that] . . . to do otherwise would be like putting new wine into old bottles, and putting old wine into new bottles. What! new revelations in the old churches? New revelations would knock out the bottom of their bottomless pit. New wine into old bottles! The bottles burst and the wine runs out!⁶³

As for the benefit of new revelations, he said, “Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject [of a future state].”⁶⁴ And he spoke from experience. “The heavens were opened upon us,” he testified on another occasion, “and I beheld the celestial kingdom of God, and the glory thereof, whether in the body or out I cannot tell.”⁶⁵

Heights and Depths

This searching out the things of God is often presented in images of descent and ascent. For instance, Smith said:

A fanciful and flowery and heated imagination beware of; because the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.⁶⁶

Joseph experienced the abyss in the jail at Liberty, Missouri, where, in his anguish, he was told by the Lord:

And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he? (D&C 122:7–8)

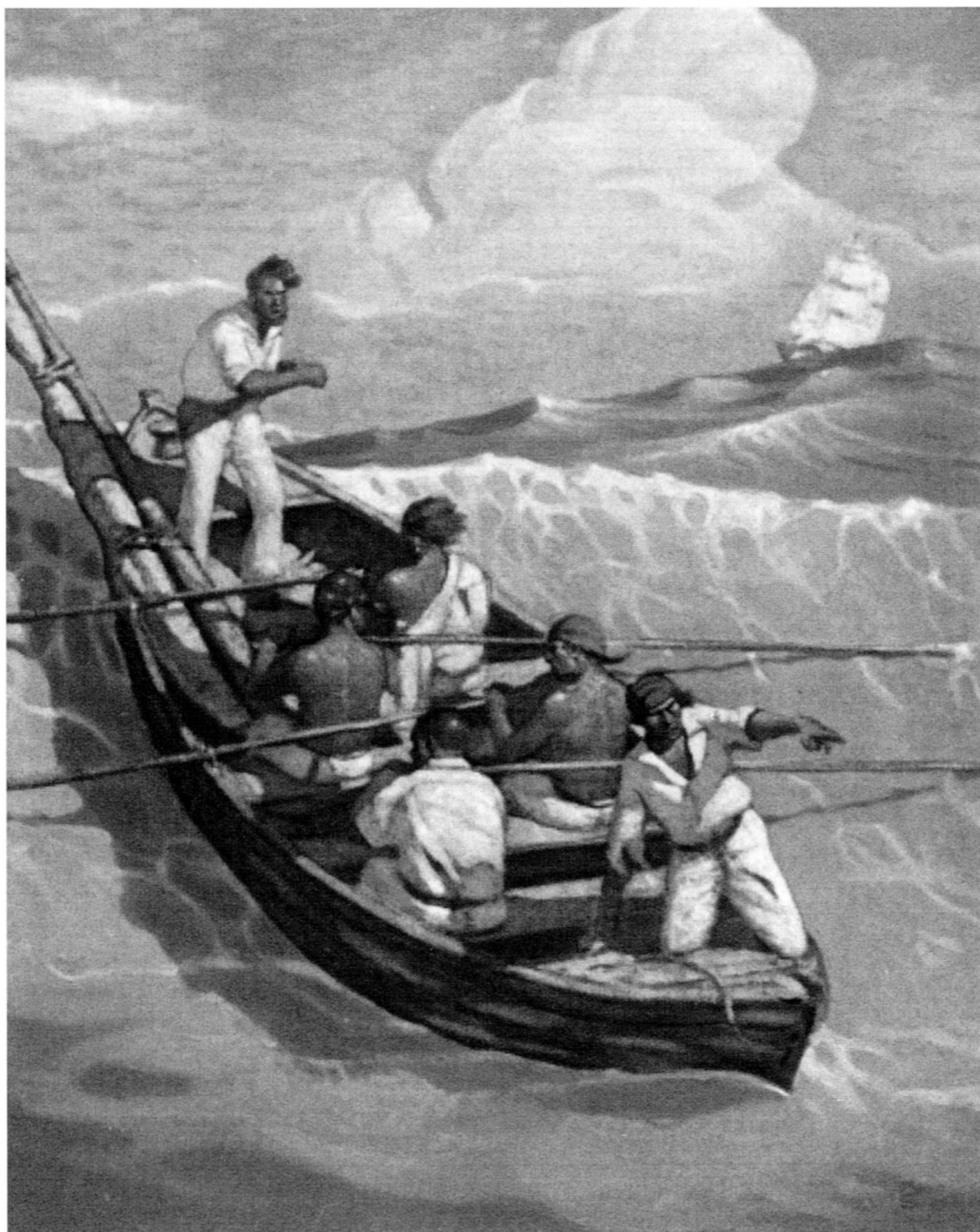
Melville experienced and described adversity too. Like Wellingborough Redburn, Melville lamented that “there is no misanthrope like a boy disappointed; and such was I, with the warm soul of me flogged out by adversity.”⁶⁷ Through his character Babbalanja in *Mardi* he says:

He knows himself, and all that’s in him, who knows adversity. To scale great heights, we must come out of lowermost depths. The way to heaven is through hell. We need fiery baptisms in the fiercest flames of our own bosoms.⁶⁸

In *Mardi* Melville further affirms, “If after all these fearful, fainting trances, the verdict be, the golden haven was not gained;—yet in bold quest thereof, better to sink in boundless deeps, than float on vulgar shoals.”⁶⁹

Melville’s movement through heights and depths is perhaps best illustrated in *Moby-Dick* by the “Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.”⁷⁰ “All truth is profound,” he further expounds in the same novel. “Winding far down from within the very heart of this spiked Hotel de Cluny where we here stand. . . . Wind ye down there, ye prouder, sadder souls! question that proud, sad king!”⁷¹ In its extreme, this plunging into the depths takes a person from sanity to insanity: witness Pip, the black boy aboard the *Pequod*, who, left alone on the sea, has his soul

carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and



“Pull, pull, my fine hearts alive; pull, my children; pull, my little ones!” by Mead Schaeffer. Illustration for Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or The White Whale* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1923).

the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.⁷²

Melville's spiritual quest to see "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" is most fully developed in his poem *Clarel*, which follows the pattern of his excursion to the Holy Land and culminates—to that point—a lifetime of questioning. As Stan Goldman shows, Melville's religious outlook in *Clarel* paradoxically combines doubt and faith, despair and hope, anger and love, seriousness and scathing irony in an attempt to find or to establish the limits within which faith is possible, within which life endures and has meaning. Melville's characters in the poem have a full range of views on these matters. One character, the Anglican churchman Derwent, thinks that Clarel struggles with these issues too much. "Alas, too deep you dive," he says. "But hear me yet for little space: / This shaft you sink shall strike no bloom: / The surface, ah, heaven keeps *that* green; / Green, sunny: nature's active scene, / For man appointed, man's true home."⁷³

Voyaging in Deep Water

Yet Melville finally had little sympathy with surfaces or land-based security. In *Mardi* he identifies himself as one who has "chartless voyaged" and who says, "Those who boldly launch, cast off all cables; and turning from the common breeze, that's fair for all, with their own breath, fill their own sails."⁷⁴ In *Moby-Dick* he admires Bulkington, who sees "that mortally intolerable truth; that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea."⁷⁵ "Of all divers," Ahab recognizes, the whale "hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams," he says, "has moved amid this world's foundations."⁷⁶ The end of that great novel is descent with no compensating ascent: the ship and all but one of its crew sink to "one common pool."⁷⁷ And Ishmael—with Melville standing behind him—sees himself as a bereft Job, the one "who wrote the first account of our Leviathan."⁷⁸ The epigraph to the epilogue of *Moby-Dick* is the sad message repeatedly brought to Job by the four persons announcing the loss of his possessions and family: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee."⁷⁹

Joseph Smith, too, kept the open independence of his sea. "Deep water is what I am wont to swim in," he said.⁸⁰ He was familiar with sea stories from the Book of Mormon accounts of the voyages of the Lehites and the

Jaredites. In the latter narrative is even recorded the potential danger of a destructive whale:

And it came to pass that they were many times buried in the depths of the sea, because of the mountain waves which broke upon them, and also the great and terrible tempests which were caused by the fierceness of the wind. . . . And thus they were driven forth; and no monster of the sea could break them, neither whale that could mar them; and they did have light continually, whether it was above the water or under the water. (Ether 6:6, 10)

The significant difference between the *Pequod* and the Jaredite barges is that the latter emerge unscathed. As well, in contrast to Ahab's fire-ship plunging into a "blackness of darkness,"⁸¹ divine help to the Jaredites includes light for their vessels when they are "swallowed up in the depths of the sea" (Ether 2:25).

Melville and Smith differ in their comprehensions of Job, however. When the Prophet cries in anguish, "O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?" (D&C 121:1), he is comforted with this revelation:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment. . . . Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands. Thou art not yet as Job; thy friends do not contend against thee, neither charge thee with transgression, as they did Job. (D&C 121:7, 9–10)

Smith's suffering is not useless, for God speaks with and comforts man. Melville's Ishmael alone emerges to tell his lonely tale of plummeting Job's depths. Smith's loneliness is arrested in the voice of God, foreshortening his suffering.

A Voice out of Silence?

A thought-diver along with Melville, Smith nevertheless affirmed much more the clear path to ascent—which, in Smith's writings and thought, invariably comes after the descent. This is often paradoxically so, as in the repeated accounts in the Book of Mormon of the condescension of the Savior in coming down to the level of humanity and then suffering ignominy on the cross so that his people could be lifted up. "My Father sent me," he said, "that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works" (3 Ne. 27:14; see also 1 Ne. 11:16–33).

As far as the narrator in *Pierre* represents the author, Melville holds a bleaker view of communications with God. "Silence," the narrator says, "is the general consecration of the universe. Silence is the invisible laying on of the Divine Pontiff's hands upon the world. Silence is at once the most

harmless and the most awful thing in all nature. It speaks of the Reserved Forces of Fate. Silence is the only Voice of our God.”⁸² “How can a man get a Voice out of Silence?” he asks later.⁸³ Yet written scripture had great importance for him. The Bible, he says, is “the truest book in the world” and the Sermon on the Mount the “greatest real miracle of all religions. . . . This is of God! cries the heart, and in that cry ceases all inquisition.”⁸⁴

Silence is found in Joseph Smith’s world, too, but with this profound difference: a divine voice emerges from that silence.⁸⁵ In a grove of trees near his father’s farm, Joseph hears, as did John the Baptist, the voice of God the Father testifying, “This is My Beloved Son” (JS-H 1:17). Subsequently, he is commanded to “listen to the voice of Jesus Christ, your Lord, your God, and your Redeemer, whose word is quick and powerful” (D&C 27:1). Reflecting back on the early history of the latter-day Church, Smith affirms: “Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received? A voice of gladness!—A voice of mercy from heaven; and a voice of truth out of the earth; glad tidings for the dead; a voice of gladness for the living and the dead; glad tidings of great joy” (D&C 128:19)!

Again, this response from heaven points to the most essential difference in the outlook of Melville, with his noble doubts, and that of Smith, who knew what he had seen of heavenly matters—and who knew God knew it (see JS-H 1:25).

Melville’s fullest exploration of matters of faith is in *Clarel*, discussed earlier. The epilogue to that poem merits some attention in an examination of Herman Melville’s religious explorations, especially as defined by juxtaposition with Joseph Smith’s. Responding in part to Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859), which came out two years after Melville returned from the Holy Land, he says:

If Luther’s day expand to Darwin’s year,
Shall that exclude the hope—foreclose the fear?

Unmoved by all the claims our times avow,
The ancient Sphinx still keeps the porch of shade;
And comes Despair, whom not her calm may cow,
And coldly on that adamant brow
Scrawls undeterred his bitter pasquinade.
But Faith (who from the scrawl indignant turns)
With blood warm oozing from her wounded trust,
Inscribes even on her shards of broken urns
The sign o’ the cross—the spirit above the dust!

Yea, ape and angel, strife and old debate—
The harps of heaven and dreary gongs of hell;
Science the feud can only aggravate—
No umpire she betwixt the chimes and knell:
The running battle of the star and clod
Shall run forever—if there be no God.⁸⁶

Yet with all his questionings, Melville here expresses his belief that there is a God and that

Even death may prove unreal at the last,
And stoics be astounded into heaven.

Then keep thy heart, though yet but ill-resigned—
Clarel, thy heart, the issues there but mind;
That like the crocus budding through the snow—
That like a swimmer rising from the deep—
That like a burning secret which doth go
Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep;
Emerge thou mayst from the last whelming sea,
And prove that death but routs life into victory.⁸⁷

Seeking the Ultimate

“I love all men who *dive*,” Melville said, and dive he did. “Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper must we go,” he writes in *Pierre*, “if we would find out the heart of a man; descending into which is as descending a spiral stair in a shaft, without any end, and where that endlessness is only concealed by the spiralness of the stair, and the blackness of the shaft.”⁸⁸ Again, speaking in the review of *Mosses*, Melville says: “There is no man in whom humor and love are developed in that high form called genius; no such man can exist without also possessing, as the indispensable complement of these, a great, deep intellect, which drops down into the universe like a plummet.”⁸⁹ “A seeker, not a finder yet,” Melville thought deeply about the divinity of man, marking scriptures on the subject in his Bible. He annotated Jesus’ response to the unbelieving Jews, “Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?” (John 10:34) with the following thought, for which no author is given: “In our idea of man there can be no inconsistency with our idea of God: and if we often feel a certain disagreement with Him and remoteness from Him, it is but the more on that account our duty . . . to seek out every property and beauty, by which our pretension to a similarity with the Divinity may be made good.”⁹⁰

Joseph Smith had an absolute conviction of humanity’s connection with divinity. Speaking of a potential ultimate ascension, he taught:

We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect; and that the nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin; and like the ancients, arrives at that point of faith where he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker and is caught up to dwell with Him.⁹¹

Finally, near the close of his life, this diver, seeker, and finder affirmed in the King Follett discourse his understanding of an upward heavenly movement:

Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.⁹²

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38. *Redburn*, vol. 4, *Writings of Herman Melville*, 11.
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41. Donald Yannella and Hershel Parker, eds., *The Endless, Winding Way in Melville: New Charts by Kring and Carey* (Glassboro, N.J.: Melville Society, 1981), 37.
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45. Smith, *Teachings*, 69–70.
46. Smith, *Teachings*, 95.
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48. Paul Brodtkorb Jr., *Ishmael's White World: A Phenomenological Reading of Moby-Dick* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), 84.
49. *Moby-Dick*, 423.
50. *Moby-Dick*, 424.
51. *Moby-Dick*, 423.
52. Jessee, *Papers*, 1:87. Compare Matthew 6:23.
53. In *Confidence-Man*, Melville ironically says, "Life is a pic-nic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool. To come in plain clothes, with a long face, as a wiseacre, only makes one a discomfort to himself, and a blot upon the scene" (133). Here Melville presents a view he assumed others would have had when he appeared without a costume at a local costume party in the Berkshires (Watson Branch et al., "Historical Note," in *Confidence-Man*, 295). For an extensive treatment of Melville's maskless men, see James Edwin Miller Jr., *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

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58. For critical explorations of Melville's religious struggles, see William Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought: An Essay in Interpretation* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973); Stan Goldman, *Melville's Protest Theism*; Walter Donald Kring, *Herman Melville's Religious Journey* (Raleigh, N.C.: Pentland, 1997); Vincent Kenny, *Herman Melville's Clarel: A Spiritual Autobiography* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1973); Lawrance Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952); and William Hamilton, *Melville and the Gods* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985).
59. *Clarel*, 347.
60. *Moby-Dick*, 374.
61. *Mardi*, 339.
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68. *Mardi*, 594.
69. *Mardi*, 557.
70. *Moby-Dick*, 425.
71. *Moby-Dick*, 185–86.
72. *Moby-Dick*, 414.
73. *Clarel*, 347.
74. *Mardi*, 556.
75. *Moby-Dick*, 107.
76. *Moby-Dick*, 311.
77. *Moby-Dick*, 572.
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80. Jessee, *Papers*, 2:456. Compare Doctrine and Covenants 127:2.
81. *Moby-Dick*, 423.
82. *Pierre*, 204.
83. *Pierre*, 208.
84. *Pierre*, 262, 207–8.
85. The different uses of silence in the arts and in religion has been explored in Jon D. Green, "The Paradox of Silence in the Arts and Religion," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 3 (1995–96): 94–131.
86. *Clarel*, 498.
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88. *Pierre*, 288–89.
89. Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," 242.
90. As quoted in Braswell, *Melville's Religious Thought*, 27.
91. Smith, *Teachings*, 51.
92. Smith, *Teachings*, 346–47.