

MELVILLE'S WHITE WHALE:

PRAGMATISM'S ROLE

IN *MOBY DICK*

By

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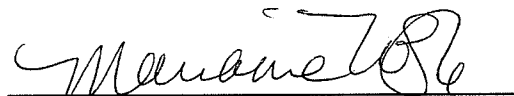
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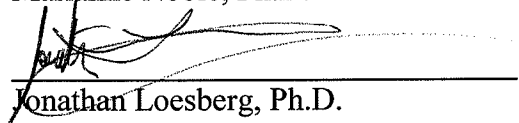
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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have broached the subject of Melville's relation to pragmatism, but in most cases, they have merely grazed it. This thesis unpacks this complex relationship in detail. I begin by giving a basic overview of pragmatism, including its history and its methodology. Next, I show how Melville was well read in Emerson, who is also considered a proto-pragmatist. And then, through a close analysis of *Moby Dick*, I show how Melville illuminates the main tenets of this philosophy before it was even created. Through the characters of Ishmael and Ahab, Melville provides the archetypes for empiricism and absolutism, and yet he gives each character pragmatic values and vices. Ultimately, I also show how Melville grapples with pragmatism's most frustrating qualities, which brings his own philosophical beliefs to light, and shows how Melville leaves his unanswered relation to truth to the reader to decide.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In November of 1856, Herman Melville visited his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. In the journal entry he writes about the visit, Hawthorne remarks on the character of his guest:

[He] 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 sandhills amid which we are 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. 231

Here, Hawthorne characterizes Melville’s attitude toward beliefs. Melville feels the need to believe in something definite, and yet he has spent his entire life looking for something definite to believe in. And even though it seems hopeless, he will not give up the quest because “he is too honest and courageous.” He will never be at rest because he is always searching for the belief that will provide him with stasis, but at the same time, he knows that he will never reach a point of stability. Melville was clearly uncomfortable in this position between belief and unbelief, and because of this, he could not pry himself from his quest for a determinate belief. If we take Melville’s frustration out of the equation for

a moment, we can see that his perspective on beliefs is quite similar to the pragmatic conception of truth. Pragmatism is a philosophy that was born in the late nineteenth century, decades after Melville's authorial peak. Its founders believed truth is always in a state of flux—that one day we can believe in one thing, but that our beliefs could change tomorrow. So while we may grasp one truth today, it can never be considered definite or absolute. They also believed that try as we might, we will never know if we have achieved the realization of an absolute truth or an absolute belief, and that even if we did achieve it, we are likely to move onto a different belief anyway. But still, pragmatists retain the faith that absolute truth is out there, even if they will never know if they have found it. The point is that we keep trying and that we keep allowing our truths to evolve and grow. Only then can we come closer to something true.

Like the pragmatists, Melville will “never rest.” He is constantly searching and probing for a more definite belief. Hawthorne calls his persistence to keep searching for a definite truth “strange,” but it is highly pragmatic. Melville “can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief.” So, he cannot believe that he has achieved something definite or absolute, but he is not comfortable in a state of unbelief. This implies that Melville has beliefs, but that he is hesitant to commit himself to his beliefs because he cannot claim they are definite. He has to believe something, but he hasn't found the absolute he is looking for. And, he keeps trying because he is “honest and courageous.” He does not give up the hunt.

But what are we to do with Melville's frustration with this very pragmatic approach to beliefs? Well, first, we must admit that Melville has a firm grasp of the overarching components of pragmatism. But we must also admit that Melville feels

“uncomfortable” with them. He is uncomfortable with the idea that he will never have a definite belief, and he cannot shed his frustration that comes from not pinning down an absolute truth. Where the pragmatists are able to accept and revel in contingency, Melville cannot. He is determined to find an absolute truth, and yet he knows that he is condemned to come up short. His attitude toward his inability to achieve absolute truth is what separates him from the pragmatists, but his methodology is, in fact, very pragmatic.

The goal of my thesis is, in part, to prove that Melville grappled with the ideas of pragmatism. I also hope to show how an analysis of *Moby Dick* with pragmatism in mind allows see that Melville was frustrated with pragmatic ideals, and yet he was forced into accepting them. Through a close analysis of Melville’s characters, we will see his battle with the way he perceives of truth. His characterization of Ahab and Ishmael, we are able to see conflicting points of Melville’s pragmatic outlook at work. Ishmael accepts contingency and chance and the other pragmatic values that go with them, but he is reduced to the role of a spectator in his own life and never acts on his beliefs. Ahab is willing to act on his beliefs, but he is violently against the world’s proclivity to change, and as such, he is unable to alter his beliefs when they are proven wrong. Both characters possess traits that pragmatists would value, but they also possess those they deplore. In the end, with the aid of pragmatism, we are able to see that *Moby Dick* is the epic conflict of Melville’s own battle with truth. Once we assess the wide range of possible interpretations that Melville’s narrative structure affords, we are able to conclude that Melville presents his own pragmatic challenge to his readers: by leaving his novel ambiguous and with a sense of incompleteness, Melville challenges his readers to become

empiricists. He forces his readers to select an interpretation while admitting that their choice may be wrong.

I will start by providing an extended definition of the pragmatist philosophy. Then I will identify the relationship that Melville had with Emerson, who inspired the first pragmatists. Next, I will delve into the novel and highlight the continuous undercurrent of pragmatism throughout. I will depict how the ambiguities within Melville's narrative structure and throughout the novel as a whole show his own inability to feel comfortable within pragmatic beliefs. Finally, I will show how the pragmatic tensions within the novel allow us to view *Moby Dick* as an embodiment of Hawthorne's description of Melville, illuminating his own contentious and turbulent pragmatic beliefs; Melville's attempt to convey these tensions to his audience forces the reader to reason pragmatically.

CHAPTER 2

PRAGMATISM

Pragmatism is a term coined by Charles Peirce, but it wasn't popularized until William James introduced the idea in a lecture entitled "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" delivered at the University of California at Berkeley in 1898. In this lecture, James attributes "the principle of pragmatism" to Peirce while expounding his own ideas on the subject (Menand xv). The origins of pragmatism can actually be traced back to the 1870's. Peirce claims that he, James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Joseph Warner, Nicholas St. John Green, Chauncy Wright, Kohn Fiske, and Francis Ellingwood Abbot gathered for meetings of what they called the "The Metaphysical Club" when they were all at Cambridge together (Menand xvi). Evidence for the existence of this group is shaky at best—Peirce's memory of their meetings has been questioned. It is undeniable, however, that at least some of the men listed by Peirce participated in several philosophical discussions, and that the idea of pragmatism was born within them (Menand "An Introduction...").

The so-called "first generation" of pragmatists consists of Charles Peirce, William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Dewey, Jane Addams, and George Herbert Mead. The work of the first four has a basis in general human nature, while the latter two were

more political. After Dewey, however, pragmatism went dormant. Until Rorty published *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, there is an historical absence of self-identified pragmatists. This does not mean it disappeared completely; rather it means that most “twentieth-century intellectuals have been more likely to identify themselves with other schools of thought [...] than to think of themselves as pragmatists” (Menand xxv). Some well-known contemporary pragmatists that arose after this period of absence include Richard Rorty, Hilary Putman, Steven Knapp, Walter Benn Michaels, Richard Bernstein, Cornel West, Richard Posner, Richard Poirier, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. While I will refer to several pragmatists from this generation, I will spend most of my time on James and Dewey for reasons that will become relevant as the paper goes on.

What is Pragmatism?

Pragmatism is an anti-philosophical philosophy. It claims that “how we think we think” is wrong, and that in order to understand how the mind works we must first disregard other philosophies that are responsible for “a large number of conceptual puzzles” (Menand xi). In his lecture “What Pragmatism Means,” William James provides us with an example of a metaphysical question. His anecdote describes a squirrel on a tree trunk. The squirrel is on one side of the tree, and on the opposite side, there is a person:

This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught. The resultant metaphysical problem is now this: *Does*

the man go round the squirrel or not? He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? 93

James allows us to simplify this question. He shows that this isn't a leveled, metaphysical dispute. It is actually quite simple. After a lively debate, James determines:

Which party is right [...] depends on what you *practically mean* by "going round" the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any further dispute. 94

This example provides us with a pragmatic answer to a metaphysical problem. The people involved in the debate wanted to insinuate that this riddle rests on fixed foundations—that there is only one meaning of "going round." The problem comes from whether or not it is possible to go around the squirrel or not based on the one definition of the term. James uproots the idea that there are fixed definitions for the language of the question and therefore simplifies it. He disregards the metaphysical implications of the question in favor of simple logic. Pragmatists do not believe that anything has fixed foundations—even language. So, he solves the problem by providing two possibilities. For metaphysicians, this is incredibly frustrating; metaphysics calls for an underlying theoretical principles at the base of universals that provides a unity of ideas. For pragmatists, this is as practical an answer as any, even though it indicates that there are no foundations within language. Pragmatists also acknowledge that the answer to the squirrel question does not really matter. They say, "Does it really matter if I go around the squirrel? Will determining if I have achieved this spherical feat in any way benefit the

way I perceive the world?” Their answer is “no.” By simplifying the question, James is able to determine its practical value. This is not to say that metaphysics can be diminished solely to the question of the squirrel. Nor is this to say that pragmatists ridicule other philosophies. They in fact depend on them to illustrate their point—that everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, so long as they are open to change.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The method entailed in distinguishing the importance of the squirrel question is called the pragmatic method. The pragmatic method, James describes, is “a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable” (“What Pragmatism Means” 94). To answer these disputes is “to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences” (94). In other words, this method has us ask if the conclusion made at the end of this dispute will matter to us—“What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?” (94). To do this, we must attempt to visualize an answer before we tackle the question in order to foresee the answer’s importance. With the squirrel, we come to the conclusion that deciding whether or not we believe we have gone around the squirrel or not is inconsequential, because coming to a decision on this metaphysical dispute will not affect our lives one way or the other. But if the question is something that is important to us—if it is what James calls “momentous”—then we ought to pursue coming to a conclusion (“The Will to Believe” 70). If we come to an impasse in a debate in which we decide the answer to the question will affect our overall opinions, then “we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other’s being right” (“What Pragmatism Means” 94). Take, for example, the question of God. Does God exist? There are many reasons for one to say that this question must be

answered. There are risks in saying that God does not exist. If you're wrong, then some say you will go to hell. If you say that God does exist, then you also risk the error of choosing the wrong god to believe in. All of this depends upon whether or not you believe in hell, which is another debate in itself. More on God as an example will come later. The importance now is to show pragmatism's way of approaching a problem. The first priority is establishing the importance of the issue at hand. If you can foresee that coming to a conclusion will have no affect on you whatsoever, then the answer is to discard the issue and move on. If the answer matters to you—if there are practical consequences if the issue is resolved on one side or the other—than you should proceed in answering it. Pragmatism is there to help us end conversations that have no end—it does this by emphasizing the importance of a subjective form of truth. We have to find our own answers to the questions we deem momentous enough to challenge, and these answers will become our own individual forms of truth.

The question of truth is at the center of pragmatist philosophy. As the first recognized pragmatist, Peirce opened the door for a new conception of philosophic truth. Richard Bernstein says that Peirce's work "sought to exorcise what Dewey later called 'the quest for certainty'" (386). He uprooted the idea that there is such a thing as an absolute truth, and therefore declared war on philosophy. Philosophy sets out to declare what is True, and Peirce decided that we will be interminably unable to know when we have reached the Truth. To say we know when we have realized an absolute—when we have pinned down something universal and applicable to everyone—would be foolish to pragmatists. They live life by the belief that no one can pin down absolute truth even if it may be out there, and to do so and then live by it would be irrational, because that would

deny the undeniable existence of chance. This is not to say that there are no answers at all but rather that these answers will vary from person to person—there is no one “right” answer, but rather many right answers at different moments in the life of one individual. Everyone experiences life differently, and therefore, our individual perspectives will provide us with different forms of the truth.

There are many examples of how individuals or even entire nations decided that one particular truth was wrong, and they had to change their perspective. The only way this change can occur is if the truth of the past was not an absolute truth. If something is considered absolute, nothing will ever influence the person holding that belief to change their minds. If we had never changed our minds, we would condone slavery, women would be confined to the kitchen, and states wouldn't be actively considering allowing homosexuals to marry or legalizing marijuana. But the flexibility of truth can also be seen on the level of the individual. At one moment, you could be a staunch Democrat, and a few years later you could be Republican. But be careful: this does not mean that the new truth you adopt is absolute either. While you have reached this truth through the acquisition of knowledge that made you change your mind, this does not mean that it is now impervious. You will live as if that truth is fixed, but just as this truth evolved from an old truth, so can this truth become old in the face of new experience. Pragmatists believe that we gain truth through experience. You act on your current version of the truth, and this action will eventually lead you to question that belief. The process of adopting a new truth through experience comes about when an individual “meets a new experience that puts strain” on his old opinions (“What Pragmatism Means” 101). “The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from

which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions,” and eventually, “some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter” (101). So, when your current truth conflicts with your experience, you work out how to integrate the new knowledge in with your previous opinions, eventually creating a balance that works. And a new truth is born! That truth will survive until the next conflicting experience, and the cycle continues.

It may be important to take a deeper look into what pragmatists mean by “experience.” They do not mean the mundane experiences we have every day—we wake up, brush our teeth, comb our hair, get dressed, go to work. In order to influence our ideas about truth, the experience must be something more substantial. In John Dewey’s book *The Art of Experience*, he writes a chapter titled “Having an experience,” which designates the differences between experience and *an* experience. Dewey makes a point to differentiate between mundane experiences and influential ones. *An* experience is something that “is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation” (35). For example, walking to the store would not be “an experience” because it is completed only because you have traveled from the house to the store. It ends because it must—it’s a cessation. *An* experience is a fulfillment or “the consummation of a movement” (38). It is “complete in itself, standing out because [it is] marked out from what went before and what came after” (36). Most importantly, after an experience there is a period of “taking in,” which is “more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known. It involves reconstruction which may be painful” (41). In other words, an experience eventually reconstructs the way you think. An experience is an event which makes you change an idea you had previously, and for

this reason it must be monumental. This does not mean that the experience will be something traumatic. It can certainly be something subtle, but not subtle enough that upon recollection you would not be able to notice the change. Whether it be something as small as a meal that makes you reconsider how good food can be or as great as a falling out with a spouse that makes you reevaluate your independence, an experience is something that will impact the way you view the world and your place in it. Pragmatists believe that this type of experience that will bring about a change in one's ideas of the truth. William James says, "we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true" (The Will...79).

So, now that we understand exactly what types of experience the pragmatists had in mind in relation to altering truths, we must ask what they mean by "truth" in general. In his lecture "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," William James says that he agrees with the dictionary definition of truth that what is true is something that is in agreement with reality (113). But like many philosophers before him, James points out the difficulties in deciding "what may precisely be meant by the term 'agreement,' and what by the term 'reality,' when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with" (113). In other words, we probably do not know everything about any one thing, so in reality, we cannot ever know the complete truth of that thing. James uses the example of imagining the image of a familiar clock on the wall. If you close your eyes and visualize it, you will have a clear picture of what that clock looks like in your mind. The clock you imagine, therefore, seems like a true copy of reality. The image is in agreement with reality and therefore it becomes true. But as James points out, "your idea of its 'works' (unless you are a clock-maker) is much less of a copy, yet it passes muster, for it in no

way clashes with the reality” (113). Here you get into the question of how real the clock you imagine is if you cannot imagine how it works beneath the surface. The clock on the wall is certainly real, because if you took it apart you would see the cogs turning inside it. The clock in your head is an image of what is real, but not the real thing. It does not entirely agree with reality, and therefore it is not factually true. Also, we consider the clock on the wall to be a clock even though we haven’t scientifically verified this fact. We assume it is a clock because we are accustomed to do so. James points out that these unverified truths “form the overwhelmingly large number of truths we live by” (116). They should not be discounted because they are unverified assumptions.

There are also some truths that James designates as “eternal” such as “1 and 1 make 2, that 2 and 1 make three [...] that white differs less from gray than it does from black; that when the cause begins to act the effect also commences” (118). This sounds as though James is admitting the existence of absolute truth, but there is a difference between eternal truths and absolute truths, which will be clarified later. He does not deny that some things are always true, but he does contend with the meaning of truth. Up until now, he and the “intellectualists” are in agreement (119). But it is within the definition of the word “agreement” within the aforementioned definition of truth that they begin to differ. For James, to “agree” with reality “can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or into its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed” (119). What he means here is that what we perceive as real will agree with reality by our own terms. In order to be in agreement with reality, our truths will come as close to what is exactly real as we are able to imagine so that we will be able to put these truths to work in our lives. I believe that

the clock on the wall is a clock, and that the image of the clock in my imagination is real because it serves as an accurate copy of what I perceive a clock to be. My application of truth in this matter is in direct connection to how I will practically use it. It benefits me to believe that the clock is a clock. James asks that if we were to “grant an idea or believe to be true [...] what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false?” (113-4). James boils this down to one concrete statement—“True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify” (114). Pragmatists believe that “philosophy must be reconceived *as* ethics: that philosophy must turn away from the traditional concept of truth as accurately or objectively naming the ultimate nature of reality, and towards the practice of judging beliefs based on whether they direct our conduct in ways that yield beneficial outcomes” (Albrecht 390). The process of verification and validation is based on your ability to verify a truth with your experiences and the practical consequences of holding this belief—not with objective or scientific evidence. I don’t need to open the clock to determine that it is a clock. So, certain things are taken for granted as true; we assume that they are because these assumptions benefit the way we live. But once a new idea conflicts with our perceptions of truth, then we must consider adapting to a new truth.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the pragmatist truth is that it is not a capital “T” truth. Pragmatists do not believe in the use of absolutes. There is a difference between absolute truths and eternal truths. Here, absolutes do not refer to concepts like $1+1=2$. Absolutes refer to concepts that are not assumed but adopted. We take for granted that the clock is a clock, but we have to adopt truths that are more philosophical in nature.

These truths are adopted for moral or personal reasons, like a belief in God or prescribing some activity as “wrong.” Because we gather these truths from our personal experiences, we must acknowledge that these truths are subjective. In some cases, a truth may only apply to one person. While there are some truths that can apply to many, pragmatists believe that it is foolish to assume that any truth is universal. In “The Will to Believe,” James identifies two ways of viewing truth—the absolutist and the empiricist (Jamesian empiricism is different from other philosophical uses of the term). The absolutists “say that we not only can attain to knowing truth, but we can *know when* we have attained to knowing it,” while the empiricists “think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when” (77). To put this another way, absolutists are people who can say with certainty whether one thing is True or not and choose to live their lives by this truth unquestioningly. Empiricists hope to reach Truth, but they acknowledge that it is impossible to know whether or not they can or if they have already. Empiricists can find that one truth applies to many people, but they will never acknowledge that this truth is universal. Pragmatists are empiricists. They acknowledge that the truths they find through experience are subjective and therefore non-universal.

So, what is so important about the pragmatic sense of the truth? Many scholars have asked this question, and many rebelled against pragmatism. This idea can be seen as anti-rationalistic. James points out that this view of the truth has been “ferociously attacked by rationalistic philosophers” (112). Menand points out that from its inception, pragmatism has attracted “hostility” (xii). He quotes one critic who denounces pragmatism as an “abandonment of traditional standards of objectivity, truth, and rationality” (xii). To decide an idea’s truth-value through experience is an extremely

subjective process, which would therefore place any ideas generated from this method outside of objectivity and science. Pragmatists believe that the only way to come to truth is through experiencing the world around us and learning from that experience. In a way, this form of truth can be relegated to mere opinion, since one person's truth is often different from another's. Menand also points out that, "Pragmatists—and this, to their critics, may be the most irritating thing about them—love these objections [...] They confirm what the pragmatist has always claimed, which is that what people believe to be true is just what they think is good to believe to be true" (xii). In other words, when people critique pragmatism for its refusal to allow for overarching truths, they end up reinforcing pragmatic beliefs—that we choose to believe in something because the consequences of that belief place us in a better relation to the world. Critics of pragmatism shun it precisely because they believe that adopting it would "lead to despair, war, illiberalism, or political correctness" (xii). The fact that critics measure the consequences of pragmatism shows that they are thinking pragmatically and measuring how the issue will affect their personal beliefs. The very idea of refuting pragmatism bolsters it even more.

Admittedly, this is frustrating. You simply cannot escape from the fact that pragmatism is a way of thinking that eradicates the ability to find absolute truth and therefore it shows that we live in a world that is structured around change—in other words, because our lives are in constant flux, there can be no overarching answers for us to live by. We must accept that we cannot measure the world. Pragmatism forces us to admit that nothing is unwavering and that anything can change. In a way, pragmatism refutes itself—it is just one belief that we may choose to adopt or not as our system of

truth. And if we do adopt it, who is to say that we may not change our minds tomorrow? Pragmatists are aware of this fact. The idea that pragmatist truth can be relegated to the realm of opinion is actually not far from the mark. What I say is true may not be true to you, and therefore it cannot actually be pinned down as a universal fact. However, there is one significant difference between pragmatist truth and opinion, which can be seen through James's assertion that "True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify" (Pragmatism's...114). For something to become true, we must test it in our own lives. So while one idea may only be true to one person, it becomes more than mere opinion by its ability to be tested through its application in our own experiences. Pragmatists are also aware that there are questions in the world that demand absolute truth as an answer. Instead of tackling these questions, they realize that it is impossible to answer them concretely. We can come up with a personal truth in response to these questions that suits us specifically, but it will never be universal. Pragmatists simply set out a way in which people can gain solace through truth on an individual basis so that one can have a better personal relationship with the world around him/her.

The question of the existence or belief in God provides us with a good example of how pragmatists deal with absolute truth. For example, one person may believe wholeheartedly in the existence of God. Presumably, that person would have seen that there are specific beneficial consequences to believing in God, and therefore they chose to believe. A belief in God may be therapeutic to someone who is particularly vexed by the tendency of life to be disordered. However, it is a belief worth questioning because there is no specific objective evidence of the existence of God, and yet we must acknowledge that it may be true—the number of believers in the world is substantial, and

it would be silly to disregard a community as large as this one. And yet there are many people who do not believe in God. A belief in God is not universal, no matter which God is used in this equation. Pragmatists would say that the believers must acknowledge that their belief is not absolute. The belief in God—this truth—is not a capital “T” truth. There is a distinct problem with this position, however, because many religions decree that one must have an unquestioning faith in God. First-generation pragmatist Chauncey Wright argued that faith in God was “beyond argument” because it is “personal and unconditional,” but that “no one had the right to impose his or her religion on anyone else” (*Metaphysical Club* 212). To do so would be committing the pragmatic sin of absolutism—the assumption that your truth is undeniable and therefore applicable to others. At the same time, however, religious people also deny that their truth may be wrong. This is an aspect of religion that pragmatists have a problem with. This is why James says that “a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule” (“The Will...” 90). In believing absolutely in God, you thereby refuse to question whether you may be wrong; you restrict the availability of other possible truths for a belief in one truth. This is not to say that pragmatists dismiss belief in God. James, the optimist, says that “we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will” (“The Will...” 90). This means that we can believe whatever we choose, as long as the belief is practical—we accept the practical consequences of this belief—and if we admit the possibility that we are wrong. This way, we guard ourselves against being closed-off from other possibilities of truth that come our way.

Now that we have pieced together the skeleton of pragmatism, it is time to explore the ideas that put meat on its bones. In his lecture “Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds,” Richard Bernstein designates five themes of pragmatism, each of which is founded on the pragmatist version of truth based in subjectivity and experience. These five themes are anti-foundationalism, fallibilism, communalism, chance, and pluralism (385-9). The first theme—anti-foundationalism—is an idea that I have briefly mentioned previously. Pragmatists are against “the idea that knowledge rests upon fixed foundations” (385). In other words, pragmatists recognize that we tend to base our ideas and thoughts on other foundational ideas from philosophy. We come to new conclusions based on Descartes’ theory that identity lies in thought, or, “I think therefore I am,” because we take it as a foundation for new thoughts. Foundations do not have to be as complex as Descartes, of course. They can be as simple as little phrases we have grown up with, such as “life is hard” or “you don’t always get what you want.” The problem of foundationalism is that we begin to base new ideas on old ones, which gets us into trouble. These foundations are ideas that have been ingrained in us as true, and so we don’t bother to question them. Pragmatists say that this is wrong. We have to purge old aphorisms and philosophies from our minds so that we can come up with our own beliefs free from previous conception. We should not take any idea as true just because everyone says it is. In this way, pragmatism is actually quite therapeutic. In an interview for *Philosophy and Literature*, Richard Rorty says, “I think of pragmatism as a primarily therapeutic philosophy—therapy conducted on certain mind-sets created by previous philosophers [...] It’s supposed to be a medicine which dissolves the old medicines but doesn’t in fact leave its own trace in the bloodstream” (374-5). In other words,

pragmatism helps us flush out old, outdated philosophies from our systems so that we can view the world with a fresh perspective free from infection by outside, foundational ideas. Pragmatists believe that we shouldn't rely on what others tell us we can know or how we should view the world. We should simply rely on ourselves. This is ultimately why pragmatism is both ground-breaking and redundant at the same time—it aims to destroy philosophy by providing a philosophy of how we think without it.

This, of course, is contradictory. Pragmatists are against the idea of foundations, and yet they have several foundational ways of thinking themselves. If you remember, I also said that pragmatism is the anti-philosophical philosophy. It is still a philosophy, no matter how much it hopes it isn't. Bernstein addresses this problem as well. He says that while some may think the absence of foundations may lead to relativism or skepticism, the pragmatists find an alternative in a “thoroughgoing fallibilism where we realize that although we must begin any inquiry with prejudgments and can never call anything into question at once, nevertheless there is no belief or thesis—no matter how fundamental—that is not open to further interpretation or criticism” (387). So, through fallibilism, pragmatists are able to admit prejudgments or foundations as the beginnings of a truth; but they are also lead to the fact that because we cannot get rid of these prejudgments, all of the truths we reach cannot be deemed certain.

This leads us to the second pragmatic theme—fallibilism—which is the recognition that our beliefs and ideas may be wrong. There is no belief that can be considered absolute—no truth that can apply to everyone. Pragmatism shows that while one person's idea of truth may work for him or her, it is impossible to expect that this truth can apply to all others. It is also wrong to assume that your subjective truth is

infallible—we have to be adaptable and evolve as our experiences continue to inform our opinions. Remember, truth is gained through experience and is therefore subjective. The rule of fallibilism dictates that it is wrong to assume that this truth is impervious—if you gained this truth through experience, it shows that you had to adapt to achieve it. It would be counter-productive to stop yourself from adapting into new truths. Fallibilism also tells us that it is wrong to assume that your truth is valid for everyone else. Everyone experiences the world differently, and everyone’s version of the truth is different, even if it is only on a microscopic level. This may lead one to ask the glaring question, “Why believe in anything if we must always acknowledge our belief can be wrong?” In other words, the worry becomes that once beliefs and personal truths are diminished to passing fancies, they may lose their intellectual cash-value. William James addresses this concern in “The Will to Believe.” James says that there are points when arguments are “just one volition against another,—we willing to go in for life upon a trust or assumption which he, for his part, does not care to make” (75). But he also says that we have come to our beliefs through rationality. Our beliefs are founded upon experience, and only through “experiencing and thinking over our experience [...] can our opinions grow more true” (79). Therefore, we can choose to believe in a certain truth once we have assessed its practical consequences and tested it in our own lives, but we also must remain open to new ideas and allow them to influence our beliefs. We have to be able to admit we may be wrong in order to progress onto new truths.

Fallibilism leads to the next pragmatist theme—communalism. Since we cannot feel comfortable that our own personal truths are correct, the best method of attaining truth in any form is to have a group Bernstein calls a “community of inquirers” (387). We

must recognize that our own individual subjectivities are just that—individual. It follows that if we're fallible and "always limited in our perspectives then 'we individually cannot reasonably hope to attain the ultimate philosophy which we pursue; we can only seek it, therefore, for the community of philosophers'" (Peirce as quoted in...387). We must attempt to understand the perspectives of others, and to do so, we must remove our subjectivity from the spotlight and attempt to penetrate others. We cannot expect others to understand our beliefs let alone adopt them for their own. Bernstein says that the "decentering of the subject is integral to the pragmatic project" (388). The ideas of one must be checked against the ideas of another in order to create a truer version of truth. Bernstein says:

It is only by submitting our hypothesis to public critical discussion that we become aware of what is valid in our claims and what fails to withstand critical scrutiny. It is only by the serious encounter with what is other, different, and alien that we can hope to determine what is idiosyncratic, limited, and partial.
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Without a community, therefore, it becomes impossible to reach a greater understanding of truth. We must reach outside of our subjectivities and attempt to penetrate others in order to make a step towards universal truths, while at the same time acknowledging that there is no such thing as an attainable universal truth. This is a paradox, to be sure. We must look for truth to reach Truth, but we must acknowledge that even though it is out there, we will never reach it. One might ask why we should look at all. Well, William James puts it best when he says, "when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence" (Will to Believe 81). So, even when it is clear that Truth is unattainable, pragmatists believe that it is out there, and that with each new conception of

truth we get closer to the absolute. It should be noted here that while James is inherently optimistic, his optimism is colored with pragmatic skepticism. Pragmatic skepticism is the belief that our ideas can never be considered absolute, that we can never truly reach Truth, and that while we can reach out to others for an affirmation of truths, they may never truly understand our perspective. So, even though pragmatists have the faith that Truth exists, they are still skeptical of our capability to know when we have attained it or if we ever can.

Some of this skepticism is based in the next pragmatic theme—chance.

Pragmatists, unlike other philosophers, embrace the idea of chance. Bernstein says, “In the concern with universality and necessity, there has been a deep desire to master, contain, and repress contingency—to assign it to its ‘proper’ restricted place” (388). Pragmatists, however, are not interested in mastering or containing anything. Instead, pragmatists simply want to elucidate a way in which to exist in a world that does not support certainty. Contingency represents just another way in which the pragmatists can enforce the ideas of anti-foundationalism, fallibilism, and communalism. Instead of trying to make sense of the world, pragmatists embrace the idea of change as a way to enforce its other beliefs. If the world is in constant flux, how can we say that anything is fixed? If we cannot deny that we change, how can our ideas remain stationary?

Contingency provides us with obstacles that give us the opportunity to experience, learn, and grow. For pragmatists, the concept of chance becomes more than just a sign of our inability to understand the world; chance pervades pragmatism because it is a sign of our inability to create “mechanical necessity” (Bernstein 388). Chance plays into pragmatism

because it intervenes in everyday life to prove that there cannot be absolutes. Through the existence of chance, one is able to see how nothing is permanent.

The final pragmatic theme is pluralism. Bernstein says, “what is best in our pragmatic tradition,” however, “is an *engaged fallibalistic pluralism*” (397). Within this type of pluralism, one does more than simply listen to the ideas of others. One attempts wholeheartedly to understand that idea, no matter how opposing or unlikable it may be. In fact, one goes so far as to attempt to strengthen the other’s argument. Why? Well to participate in this engaged fallibalistic pluralism, one must attempt to bridge to fully understand another’s perspective or another’s subjectivity. While this isn’t entirely possible, it is important to try in order to understand the other’s point fully. In order to solve a dispute, it is essential to try to understand the opposing side as stringently as possible. We have to “listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other” (397). In other words, when a conflict of opinion arises, we have to attempt to fully understand the other side—“where we genuinely seek to achieve a mutual reciprocal understanding—an understanding that does not preclude disagreement” (398). We have to remain open to all outcomes within this process. In the attempt to understand another’s point of view, it is certainly possible that your own opinion will change. And on the contrary, your own opinion can become stronger. It is important to note here that the outcome of this process is not necessarily to change your ideas, just to “clarify our disagreements” (399). It is only through this type of active understanding that pragmatists believe disputes can be dealt with properly.

Emersonian Pragmatism

It is agreed upon by the general scholarly community that Emerson influenced the founders of pragmatism. Stanley Cavell goes so far as to call him “a forerunner of pragmatism” and goes on to say that “no one can deny that Emerson was a muse of pragmatism” (7). Emerson’s relation to pragmatism is great enough for scholars like Randy Friedman to call him “the head of the family tree,” with James and Dewey branching from him (155). Maurice Lee remarks, “though for most professional philosophers he remains on the margins of the field, he directly influenced Nietzsche and the pragmatists” (*Slavery, Philosophy...*165). The main reason for Emerson’s links to pragmatism, aside from what is directly relevant within his writing, is the fact that both William James and John Dewey read and absorbed his works. Both James and Dewey gave an address at Emerson’s centennial, which “constitute[s] their most explicit public pronouncements on their great American precursor” (Albrecht 388). Emerson was, in fact, a friend of William James’s father, Henry James Sr. He “made occasional visits to the James household” and James was introduced to Emerson’s writings at an early age “through his father’s library (Albrecht 396). “In his personal copies of Emerson’s works [...] James marked numerous passages, made marginal notes, and compiled indexed lists of quotes” (396). Within these indexed lists of quotes, James makes a distinction between what he deems “against my philosophy” and the second category, “pragmatism” (397). Above all, this indicates that James “identified a strong pragmatic strain in Emerson’s thought” and also “wrestled with the question of how to reconcile Emerson’s pragmatic

attitudes with the presence of passages that suggest a more abstract or monistic idealism” (397).

In his essay “What’s the Use of Reading Emerson Pragmatically? The Example of William James,” James Albrecht details the debate that persists today over “whether Emerson is a monist, viewing reality as suffused by an absolute, ideal unity, or a pluralist, viewing reality as characterized by real diversity, particularity, and contingency” (390). Clearly, this distinction is central to pragmatist philosophy. There are many conflicting ideas in Emerson’s essays. On the one hand, Emerson seems to believe in the universality of one God and the sense that the universe is governed by a specific, defined absolute power; and he uses this absolute as an underlying truth that defines parts of his philosophy, which is meant to be universal. Pragmatists, as we have learned, oppose this type of absolutism because it presents us with a foundation on which other truths are defined, and it implicitly suggests that everyone shares the same foundational belief. It “intolerably frustrates two fundamental aspects of human nature: our need actively to engage our world, and the moral sentiments that motivate our acts by judging some results to be better than others” (Albrecht 404). While James notes these combating conceptions of truth within Emerson’s writings, he ultimately decides that Emerson was a pluralist. In his speech at Emerson’s centennial celebration, James praises Emerson’s ability to be both religious and accepting of other possibilities. He emphasizes that for Emerson, universal divinity was “‘housed’ in ‘mortal men and passing hours [...] and further, insists that this divinity can be accessed or engaged ‘only’ by embracing one’s partiality, by ‘being true’ to the ‘angle’ of reality that one’s self embodies” (Albrecht 406).

Through Albrecht's Jamsian reading of Emerson, which I happen to agree with, one can see that while Emerson holds onto his religious beliefs, he also is a pluralist. It is for this reason that I will discuss Emerson's monist leanings as truths that are understood to be lower case "t" truths. But this can be seen more clearly through an example. Within his essays, Emerson contradicts himself enough for us to know that the truths he expresses are flexible. In "Self Reliance," Emerson says, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius" (132). In other words, Emerson says that it is genius to believe in something that is universal—one that is true for all men. This is a very monist belief. Emerson believes there are such things as truths that apply for all men unchangingly. But later in "Self Reliance," Emerson contradicts himself, implying that truth is relative and individualized. He says, "the only right is what is after my constitution the only wrong what is against it" (135). Here, he implies "that truth and morality are relative, individualized matters of following the promptings of one's own talents or 'genius'" (Albrecht 410). And furthermore, Emerson proves his fallibilism when he says "Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day" (138). As Albrecht notes, if Emerson were really a monist or an absolutist, why would he encourage nonconformity and individualization instead of seeking "communal solidarity in a shared vision of the absolute?" (411). In other words, the inherent contradictions within this essay show that Emerson's more monist moments are simply Emerson's personal truths, while the underlying philosophy is pragmatic in its plurality.

James, like many scholars after him, picks up on “Emerson’s antifoundational tendencies,” to see the underlying pragmatic message within his works (Deming 76). This is not to say that James didn’t see parts within Emerson that were not pragmatic. In fact, he did find many ideas in Emerson’s writings that he disagreed with. But regardless of these differences, James still identified Emerson as partially pragmatic, which is why he is so important to the background of pragmatic philosophy (Albrecht 413). In his centennial address, James quotes from “Self-Reliance” in order to highlight Emerson’s emphasis on individuality as a proto-pragmatic idea. He celebrates Emerson’s writings on nonconformity as a version of what he later denotes as the pragmatic method of purifying oneself from fixed foundations: “In seeing freshly, and not in hearing of what others saw, shall a man find what truth is” (309). It is only through a certain security of self—or Emerson’s self-reliance—that we will be able to abandon foundational tendencies and approach the world pragmatically. Because of Emerson’s adherence to the idea of nonconformity—what James calls “the hottest side of him”—one can see how Emerson’s religious absolutism is not a prescription but rather a personal truth he chooses to believe in (309). James’s pragmatic reading of Emerson highlights his pluralism rather than his monism, and shows how Emerson influenced pragmatism.

Emerson’s “Experience” illuminates several ideas that are central to pragmatic philosophy. This essay highlights pragmatic traits such as experience, chance and fallibilism, which makes it integral to our discussion of Emerson’s proto-pragmatism. “Experience” was written two years after the death of Emerson’s son, and he feels somewhat dejected by the unsubstantial emotional response it has evoked from him. He says, “I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature”

(309). By “real nature,” Emerson means the reality of things, or the Truth of things. He is dejected because his experience of extreme grief does not jolt him into a new realm of Truth or provide him with the realization of Truth. What he craves here is the type of experience that Dewey enumerates—one that will change him and the way he views the world. But along with this desire comes the desire for permanence—for something absolute. He hoped that grief would lead him to the real or the absolute, but “like all the rest, [it] plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers [...] Well, souls never touch their objects” (309). What he says here is that we can never truly connect with anything real or true. No matter what experiences we have, they will never shove us into Truth, but merely the surface of it. It is as if there is some unspoken barrier that he cannot cross. This is perhaps the most pessimistic moment in Emerson’s writings. “All our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and causal” (309). Not only does our quest for the absolute fail to provide us with an answer, but our relationships never pierce the metaphorical surface either. We can never truly be intimate with each other because we are also made up of impenetrable surfaces, which implies that we are individual to the point of being solitary. We are doomed to live our lives in frustration—knowing that there is a depth we cannot penetrate both in regard to Truth and relationships.

Emerson ties seven elements together—he calls them the “lords of life”—within this essay to illuminate the ways in which we experience the world—Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, and Subjectivism (307). He starts by combining the ideas of illusion and temperament, saying that our temperament causes

us to view the world in a way that is colored by our moods, which produces illusion.

Emerson says, “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus” (309). What he means here is that our life is governed by arbitrary moods, and these moods are what prevent us from seeing farther than the surface of things. Moods act like rose-colored glasses, shading our perceptions to fit our momentary impulses. To put this more simply, our emotions affect the way in which we perceive situations, coloring them in different manners. Then later, Emerson continues to say that “Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung” (310). The iron wire symbolizes our sense of self and individuality. In this case, the self is constantly under the influence of our changing moods. Depending on how we are feeling one day, our perception of the world will change. Again, the only thing we can believe to be constant is the fact that our perception of the world will change. Contingency is the only thing we can rely on—this is quite pragmatic. The pragmatists, as you will remember, recognize that the world is governed by chance, which enforces their beliefs in fallibilism and anti-foundationalism. Emerson illuminates his thoughts on contingency by comparing it to a child who asks his mother “why don’t I like the story as well as when you told it me yesterday?” (312). The way you feel about the story one day changes to the next because you have changed—you are looking at the world with a different lens than the day before.

Temperament, therefore, produces an illusion. “There is an optical illusion about every person we meet” (310). All people are “creatures of given temperament, which will appear in a given character, whose boundaries they will never pass” (310). Temperament

is a method of characterization that is continuously affected by our changing moods and perceptions. It makes our vision of the world and those around us a contaminated image that we cannot disinfect. It is an illusion that we cannot escape because we cannot unhinge our moods from the iron wire. We cannot take off the rose-colored glasses because they are an integral part of us.

Succession is also a part of human nature that adds to our unclear reading of the universe. He says, “Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects” (312). In other words, Emerson says that we need change in our ideas and in our lives in general in order to live healthy lives. We would like to stick to one idea, but we cannot avoid change. In one example, Emerson discusses how he greatly dislikes the ideas of phrenologists and doctors who live “in a sty of sensualism and would soon come to suicide” (312). But because of humankind’s innate adherence to succession, “the intellect, seeker of absolute truth, or the heart, lover of absolute good, intervenes for our succor” (312). In other words, our quest to get closer to absolutes makes us move on from one idea onto another.

These previous “lords of life” are all elements of pragmatism, even though they are negatively related. Emerson yearns for knowledge of reality beyond the knowledge that is humanly possible—he wants an absolute. His tone, therefore, is one of dejection. He recognizes that we will never reach absolute truth because our perceptions create illusions that prevent us from reaching underneath the surface of reality. We can never penetrate the depths of one idea because our nature prevents us from staying with one belief for too long—our empiricism gets in the way of knowledge.

Once he begins discussing the element of surface, however, Emerson becomes more optimistic. He says, “Do not craze yourself with thinking, but go about your business anywhere. Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy” (314). He recognizes that if we spend our lives consumed with thinking it will take us nowhere. Because we are imbued with illusion, temperament, and succession, we cannot rely on a life of intellectual pursuit to be worthwhile. “Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity,” he says (313). “We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them (314). In order to experience life to the fullest, “we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances (314). What he means here is that we should accept the fact that we will never truly understand anything deeper than our own perceptions. We may recognize that there is something more behind our ideas, but we will probably never know it. Once we accept this, life becomes much more fulfilling. Like the pragmatists, Emerson believes in the existence of the Truth beneath the surface; he recognizes that we cannot reach it, but he knows that this shouldn’t stop us from experiencing life and reaching new “surface” truths. It is true wisdom to “finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours” (314). So, we must keep on experiencing in order to have several complete journeys or several complete experiences in the Dewey sense of the word, so that we can reach endings or truths. He says:

I settle myself ever the firmer in the creed that we should not postpone and refer and wish, but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances, however humble or odious, as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us. 314-5

Emerson says that we should not hope things will suddenly change, but that we should accept our circumstances and make the best of them, because only then can we finally go out into the world and have experiences and lead fulfilling lives.

Emerson coincides even more with Dewey in his discussion of surprise. He says, “But ah! Presently comes a day, or is it only a half-hour, with its angel-whispering—which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years! [...] Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping if it were not” (317-8). It is in these moments of surprise that we have what Emerson calls moments of genius. He says that “our chief experiences have been casual,” and furthermore that “man lives by pulses [...] and never prospers but by fits” (318). Within these fits comes the type of experience that Dewey describes. We only have these moments of genius or moments when we are struck with a new idea when we have an experience unprompted by our daily routine. “Experience is hands and feet to every enterprise” (318). Emerson, therefore, embraces the element of chance to provide inspiration.

Finally, Emerson discusses subjectivism or what he deems the “subject-lenses” and the intermediary way we view the world (322). We view the world through the lens of our own unique subjectivity. It is because we are each individuals with our own perspectives that we will never be able to understand what is going on within the minds of others. He says, “There will be the same gulf between every me and thee as between the original and the picture” (322). There is a divide between each individual mind that cannot be bridged. He goes on:

Two human beings are like globes, which can touch only in a point, and whilst they remain in contact all other points of each of the spheres are inert; their turn

must also come, and the longer a particular union lasts the more energy of appetency the parts not in union acquire. 322-3

We can only connect with each other on the surface, and only then at one particular point. While this connection remains, the other points are neglected and gain an appetite for this sort of connection. So, even when we can connect with others, we cannot connect fully.

Emerson ends his essay on an optimistic note, which is akin to the optimism within James's writings. He says, "patience and patience, we shall win at the last...It takes a good deal of time to eat or sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life" (76). The hope he speaks of is the hope that we will be able to—one day—penetrate a surface, be it the surface of an idea or the surface of another's subjectivity. But in order to do so, we must continue to live our lives outside of our studies—we must have experiences, be surprised, embrace chance, and attempt to dig deeper past our own subject lenses into the subject lenses of others. Emerson says, "I have learned that I cannot dispose of other people's facts; but I possess such a key to my own as persuades me, against all their denials, that they also have a key to theirs" (324). He notices that "the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I think," and he yearns for a day when the two can be combined. He ends his essay with the faith that our experiences will bring us closer and closer to being able to narrow down what "the world exists to realize," (326). For Emerson, the world exists to realize "the transformation of genius into

practical power” (326). In other words, Emerson holds onto the belief that one day we will be able to connect the realms of thought and experience and produce some sort of practical knowledge of the world—that we will be able to penetrate the surface of our thoughts and match them with our experiences. Once this happens, perhaps we can achieve some sense of permanence. So, much as for James, it is the hope that absolute truth exists that keeps us going. This essay begins in pessimism because, like Melville, Emerson mourns the absence of fixed and essential knowledge, and it ends in optimism because it has given over to pragmatism. Throughout the whole, Emerson maps out several key aspects of pragmatism—the impossibility of absolutes, the nature of empiricism, the dominance of chance and the nature of surprise, and finally the significance of experience towards generating meaning in life.

Emerson and Melville

It is well known that Melville read Emerson. We have the marginalia to prove it. How he felt about him is another story. In this section, we will begin to see how Melville’s relation to Emerson—who both James and Dewey credit as inhabiting pragmatic thought before the advent of pragmatism—is a contentious relationship. Melville’s first direct encounter with Emerson occurred when he attended a lecture of his. In a letter written to his friend Evert Duyckinck on March 3, 1849, Melville says, “I had heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths & oracular gibberish [...] To my

surprise, I found him quite intelligible, tho' to say truth, they told me that that night he was unusually plain" (Portable Melville 378). As Melville became more familiar with Emerson, his opinion became more nuanced. It is clear that Melville disagreed with several of Emerson's ideas, and as Melville matured as a writer, he began to react against transcendentalists in general. However, like many other readers of Emerson, Melville found a fair share of Emerson that he agreed with. Within the marginalia of his copy of Emerson's essays, Melville writes:

This is admirable, as many other thoughts of Mr. Emerson's are. His gross and astonishing errors & illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson's errors, or rather, blindness, proceeds from a defect in the region of the heart. 601

Melville finds fault in Emerson when he speaks from the heart or when he is getting particularly personal. Melville finds Emerson the most admirable when he is being the least personal. From this, we can see that Melville, much like James after him, finds Emerson to be the most agreeable to his own ideas when he is less personal and therefore separate from the moments when he resorts to illusions sprung from an individual point of view. It is at these points that Emerson seems monistic or reliant on a single, overarching principle that underlies and reinforces his claims—when there is a specific idea at the heart of his perception of reality that colors his other opinions. In Emerson's case, his religious beliefs take on this specific monistic tone. Emerson makes many statements in which the divine is viewed as the force behind everything, and this divine presence is used to dictate his philosophy. At times, he cannot separate his religion—which is personal—from his philosophy—which implicates all of humanity. The moments when Melville recognizes Emerson's intelligence are those in which he is being

pluralistic or in which his philosophy is indicative of the existence of more than one essential reality. When Emerson steps out of the realm of his religious beliefs, he begins to put forth philosophy that is applicable to people of all faiths and of all beliefs, because it does not rely on a religious base-line of reality. So, Melville is in agreement with Emerson at the moments he is the least monistic and the most pluralistic, just as James was.

Melville didn't actually own a copy of Emerson's essays until 1862, several years after Melville retired from writing (Williams 47). If he had read any Emerson, it was from a copy we do not know about—perhaps he borrowed a friend's copy or a library copy. Since this thesis focuses on *Moby Dick*, which comes earlier in his career, we will have to piece together Melville's contact with Emerson through less direct means. And there are several instances in which Melville came into contact with Emerson through other channels. As stated above, his first direct encounter with Emerson was probably through a lecture given in 1849, two years before *Moby Dick* was published. But historical evidence also suggests that Melville had probably already heard of Emerson from "lengthy reviews of Emerson's writings in *The New York Library World* at the time that Melville was working on *Mardi*" (Williams xi). John B. Williams writes that Emerson made his way into Melville's vocabulary through other lectures, newspapers, and acquaintances familiar with Emerson's thought (ix). Furthermore, the Emerson that Melville was introduced to in his lectures was in transition into what Williams calls "the darker side of human nature," and that this initial introduction to Emerson influenced his future encounters with him (47). For example, one scholar observed that the specific lecture series that Melville attended discussed how "metaphysical notions are treated as if

they were poetical images, which it would be useless and impertinent to explain” (Cabot as quoted in Williams 48). Williams goes on to mention that “these are precisely the kinds of notions that would have attracted Melville” (48). These are also notions that are extremely pragmatic—specifically the anti-foundationalism within pragmatism. Within anti-foundationalism, we are able to see that most metaphysical debates are useless and without what James called “practical consequences.” So, when Melville was first introduced to Emerson, he was intrigued by Emerson’s particularly pragmatic outlook on metaphysical notions.

Williams goes on to closely analyze Emerson’s underlying influence within *Moby Dick*, and it is here that we will begin to see Melville’s contentious relationship to Emerson. Williams says that Ishmael comes to represent what Emerson would consider the “balanced soul” because he criticizes extremes and is the representative of “an intellect questing for moral equilibrium” (145-6). At the other end, Ahab “is in opposition to Emerson’s overriding conception of the active soul seeking harmony with the forces that created him” (147). In this reading, Ahab’s desire to kill Moby Dick is considered Ahab’s war with nature. Emerson’s ideal man, as described in his lecture series of 1849, was “portrayed as a ‘man diver’ seeking a ‘commanding insight’ while facing the danger of ‘shipwreck’ or ‘ruin’ of the inquiring mind on the vices of egotism, fatalism, and practicality” (143). Ahab represents this idea run amuck—he cannot control his egotism, which is what ultimately “upsets the balance between man and nature through dissociation of the inward and outward senses” (147). You will remember that in his letter to Duyckinck, Melville writes that Emerson was “self-conceited.” Melville believes that Emerson was conceited or egotistic because he believes that the personal truths that

underscore his philosophy will be true for everyone, and it is this “crack that Melville, in hearing Emerson lecture, applied to thought divers like Emerson and proceeded to mold into Ahab’s character.” (147). In other words, the problem that Melville identifies in Emerson is elucidated within Ahab. So, Ishmael represents the Emersonian ideas that Melville agrees with, while Ahab represents the ones he disagrees with.

The specific examples of how Ishmael and Ahab represent Emersonian balance and unbalance are also pragmatic opposites as well. The idea of the “balanced soul” can be likened to the empiricist’s relation to truth. Ishmael is considered balanced because his “attack on idealism detached from visible truth is really a criticism of extremes” (Williams 145). Empiricists, while they don’t necessarily “attack” anything, do indeed detach themselves from the idea of visible truth because they do not believe that they can attain the extreme versions of truth, or, in other words, absolute truth. And conversely, Ahab’s imbalance represents the absolutist end of the spectrum. Because he is “cracked” and represents the idea of a divided or imbalanced stance toward nature, Ahab “has condemned himself to find in the real white whale only the evil he has heaped on the image in his mind” (Williams 149). So, Ahab has wrongly provided nature with a meaning that it cannot possibly maintain. Emerson says that men of the nineteenth century have become introverted; “they turn ‘not to the cheerful world full of work, and the fraternity of a thousand laborers, but inward, and farther inward, to revolve the matter overmuch” (Emerson quoted in Williams 150). Melville gives these same qualities to Ahab. Ahab lets the evil of the whale fester inside him, and he becomes the embodiment of what Emerson abhors in nineteenth century men; but at the same time, Ahab also represents the egotism of those who project their beliefs onto others, which is what

Melville thinks of Emerson during parts of his lecture. Ahab embodies the parts of Emerson that Melville disagrees with.

Williams' research details Melville's introduction to Emerson before he wrote *Moby Dick*, but he spends most of his book attempting to find the congruencies between Melville and Emerson, and so he does account for the many examples of Melville's disagreements with Emerson's philosophy. Williams suggests that Melville's relationship with Emerson was harmonious, but this is not the case. While his first works may be seen in this light, *Moby Dick* changes that outlook and actually takes a "darker and increasingly anti-Transcendental philosophical position" (McLoughlin, 11). This novel is the seminal work in a list of novels in which Melville begins to break from Emersonian Transcendentalism. In fact, there is a "well-studied thematic critique...of transcendental self-reliance as embodied in Ahab's story and character" throughout Melville scholarship (Baym 915).

In a letter he writes to Hawthorne just after finishing *Moby Dick*, Melville says: My dear Hawthorne, the atmospheric skepticisms steal into me now, and make me doubtful of my sanity in writing to you thus. But, believe me, I am not mad, most noble Festus! But truth is ever incoherent, and when the big hearts strike together, the concussion is a little stunning [...] Lord, when shall we be done changing?
Melville 546

Here, we get the sense that Melville recognizes that truth is incoherent, but we are also given a "frank confession of inconsistency" in relation to Emerson's "Self Reliance" (McLoughlin 35). Truths clash against truths because they are inconsistent with each other, and the result stuns Melville. He asks God when we will stop changing—he does not want to be stunned by different ideas clashing against one another. He wants consistency and stability. Emerson, on the other hand, embraces the concept of

inconsistency. In “Self Reliance,” he says that “foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds...With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do” (138). Consistency, therefore, is a sign of mediocrity, while inconsistency is the marker for a great soul. This is not to say that Melville is not a great soul, but that he cannot accept this idea as easily as Emerson can—he does not want to be inconsistent. He desires stability.

Emerson is considered a proto-pragmatist. Melville’s relationship to Emerson can be seen as his introduction to pragmatism, and we can see that it was not an easy concept for Melville to accept. He found many faults in Emerson’s ideas, and it is clear that he reacts against them in his own writing. In many ways, Melville and James disagree at similar moments. Both men find fault with Emerson when he allows his personal truths to dictate his larger ideas. But Melville’s disagreement goes farther than that. Melville finds it difficult to accept that nothing can be consistent or fixed, especially one’s beliefs.

CHAPTER 3

PRAGMATISM IN *MOBY DICK*

Now that we have established the connections Melville had with Emerson, we can now turn to *Moby Dick* and see if his contentious relationship to Emerson and the pragmatists translated into his fiction. *Moby Dick* is, in large part, a book that attempts to tell the truth about whales. In a letter to Richard H. Dana Jr. written in the midst of writing *Moby Dick*, Melville says that he has to “throw in a little fancy” to his book, but that he “mean[s] to give the truth of the thing, in spite of this” (533). But at the time he was writing, Melville was battling with his own conceptions of truth. He was having such a hard time telling the truth through fiction that he “could only conclude that someone or something in the realm of the Absolute was preventing him from attaining his goal. Hence Melville conceived of truth as in the possession of a taunter, a withholder, an opponent. He could not tell the truth because someone, a little bit ahead of him, was keeping it from him” (Baym 913). This section will begin by looking at Melville’s characterization of Ahab and Ishmael, and how they oppose each other’s ideas on truth. If we take a close look at these characters, we can see that each possess certain traits that make them seem pragmatic but also possess traits that pragmatists don’t value. Once we fully flesh out these pragmatic issues within these characters, we will begin to see how Melville uses them to indicate a contentious relationship with pragmatism. We will see that Melville values qualities in Ahab that make him seem to desire absolute truth in an

unpragmatic way, but that he also believes it is foolish to believe so wholly in one truth. Through Ishmael, we will see how Melville is equally uncomfortable with the alternative—believing in many things without acting on them. But because Melville values each character’s pragmatic traits over their non-pragmatic ones, it is clear that Melville generally understands the benefits of pragmatism. At the same time, however, we can also see that Melville cannot envision a working pragmatic model that he can see himself functioning in, and therefore he cannot envision a way in which to sanely or comfortably embody a pragmatic outlook on life.

Ahab

Ahab’s non-pragmatic traits outweigh his pragmatic ones, so this is where we will start. Ahab represents pragmatic absolutism. His monomania can be seen as an obsessive desire with his Truth, regardless of its practical consequences. Even when he learns of his Truth’s impracticality, his stubbornness will not allow him to give it up. This is the crux of his anti-pragmatic qualities—he will not let go of his belief. The first time Ahab addresses the crew, we can see that he has a one-track mind, which evolves into his singular belief. He announces his purpose with added incentive:

Whosoever of ye raises me a white-headed whale with a wrinkled brow and a crooked jaw; whosoever of ye raises me that white-headed whale, with three holes punctured in his starboard fluke—look ye, whosoever of ye raises me that same white whale, he shall have this gold ounce, my boys! 138

Then, it is made clear that Moby Dick is responsible for Ahab’s missing leg—“it was Moby Dick that dismasted me” (139). Ahab continues, making his intentions plain:

Aye, aye! and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. 139

Starbuck becomes suspicious of Ahab's motives, believing that he is only out for revenge. "Vengeance on a dumb brute!" cried Starbuck, "that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous" (139). Starbuck recognizes that Ahab has done something wrong—he has attached blame onto the whale. But Ahab's encounter with the whale has done more than simply cripple him. The whale has asserted power over him in a way no beast should. Moby Dick's instinctual act has reversed Ahab's sense of normalcy—the hunter became the hunted. And this is partially why Ahab must destroy the white whale. As Mitchell Breitweiser points out, Ahab is "determined to deny that each individual is inescapably knower and known, eater and eaten, writer and written upon and [...] his determination threatens to destroy what true freedom he might otherwise find" (19). So, instead of accepting that his place in the world is tenuous—that he can kill whales and be crippled by them all in the same plain of existence—Ahab chooses to deny it, and ultimately destroys all possibilities of feeling free in the world, because the world does not conform to Ahab's sense of what is right and wrong. This view, as Starbuck points out, is ridiculous. Moby Dick simply fought back on instinct, and it is pointless to take his assault as a personal insult. So, Starbuck presents Ahab with a reasonable point of view that makes sense. Instead of engaging in fallibilistic pluralism and trying to solve the dispute through the attempt of putting on a new perspective, Ahab ignores Starbuck's

opinion and won't admit that this could be a bad idea. This is the first inclination that Ahab may be an absolutist. He does not consider Starbuck's point of view, so he may consider his belief infallible.

Ahab continues to reveal his philosophy on truth's position in reality, which complicates his relation to pragmatism. He likens the whale to the barrier between truth and perception. He says:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? 140

Now, this deserves a closer look. In this passage, Ahab puts forth his philosophy. What he says is that man is separated from reality by a barrier—that we can never actually see the true form of things. This logic is somewhat similar to Emerson's moods guided by temperament. For Emerson, our perception of reality is tainted by our moods, which act as lenses that obscure our vision. We can see how Ahab's philosophy is similar to Emerson's. In Ahab's case, it is not that moods stand in the way of seeing clearly, but rather there is an outside force that separates our perceptions from what is truly there. But Melville goes beyond Emerson here "in his realization that what you find in nature, whether you consider a phenomenon angelic or diabolic, depends [...] greatly on your own mood" (Mattheissen 406). So, everything you see in nature or in the world around you becomes either good or bad or right or wrong depending on how you're feeling the moment you see it. Furthermore, Ahab says there that this barrier has agency. Someone or something put it there. By providing this force with agency, Ahab implies that the

instigator itself can be destroyed—it reasons, it acts, and therefore it can be manipulated, because we can see it occasionally behind this mask. Ahab wants to thrust through the wall and annihilate this being, whatever it is, to destroy the force that stands in our way of truly seeing the world without obscurity and therefore unmask the truth.

Ahab's philosophy does seem pragmatic if we were to think about pragmatism's views on experience. For Ahab, there is hope because in each act or experience, some unknown factor intervenes to "put forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask." So, we can see something true once we experience it. Ahab believes that experience provides us with a bridge into truth. We are able to gain truth with each experience, because experience gives us the opportunity to unsettle our opinions—it allows us to look at things from new angles. The only way one can get at the truth is to try to break these barriers—"strike through the mask!" We are all prisoners to these barriers, and the only way we can be free is to forcefully strike at the wall between perception and truth through experience. If, as Ahab says, the only way one can break down the barrier is through "events, living acts, or undoubted deeds," then we can begin to see how Ahab's views on experience are pragmatic. If we were to take the metaphor of the "pasteboard masks" to stand in for the obstacles in the way of truth, and that these obstacles can only be surpassed through experience, then this seems even more pragmatic. The pragmatists believed that the only way to reach a truth is through experience.

Ahab's philosophy soon becomes belief, which illuminates how he plans to act on his version of pragmatic truth. His next words illuminate a particular belief that he assigns to the whale:

To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. 140

Ahab believes that the whale symbolizes the evil force behind the pasteboard masks. The white whale embodies the wall that Ahab mentioned, and more than that, it is "shoved near" to him. The whale presents an immediate threat to Ahab as well as an immediate answer. First, as the force that puts up the wall or barrier between truth and reality, Moby Dick threatens Ahab's powers of perception. Once Ahab is able to name Moby Dick as the agent acting to obscure reality, he becomes the representation of the agent behind all that is "inscrutable" about the world. But at the same time, Moby Dick becomes an opportunity—because he is "near" or because it is possible to reach him, Ahab has the chance to destroy him and all he represents. Ahab's vendetta becomes much more than a simple quest to kill what maimed him; he aims to kill what stands between him and the truth, and nothing can persuade him to give up his quest. He doesn't even know what capacity the whale plays in masking the truth—if it's "agent" or "principle." The whale could be the one responsible for obscuring reality, or it could be the barrier itself. Either way, he knows that it must be destroyed.

Now, at this point we cannot count this belief as an absolute. Ahab has not put the belief into action yet, and therefore we cannot be sure that he won't change his mind once

it is contradicted. So, at this point, Ahab is still pragmatic. He realizes a truth—that the whale is what stands between him and the true forms of things. He believes in it enough to put it into practice. This is what the pragmatists believe is the correct course of action. The truth is put into practice in your everyday life, and until an experience comes along that refutes it or forces you to rethink it, the truth will remain true.

But later, we see that Ahab has no intention of allowing his truth to change, no matter what the circumstances. In “Ahab and the Carpenter,” we are given a glimpse into Ahab’s inability to accept the world’s basis in contingency—the concept at the core of pragmatism. As the carpenter fits Ahab for a new leg, Ahab places his hand into a vice that is strong enough to break bones, but he says, “No fear; I like a good grip; I like to feel something in this slippery world that can hold, man” (359). Here, Ahab shows that he is aware that the world is “slippery” or has a tendency to change. But he also shows his fatalistic desire to stop anything from changing. He will grip a vice that could break his hand just to remind himself that there are ways to hold onto things in this world. Later, as he muses about the type of man he would create if he had the chance, he gives his fictional man “legs with roots to ’em, to stay in one place” (359). Ahab resists change and this abhorrence of contingency becomes the basis of his inability to change his truth about the whale. He recognizes that things in life hardly ever stay the same, but it becomes his mission to find something “that can hold.” Ahab is determined to prevent change, including any change within himself. No matter what is thrown in his path to destroy Moby Dick, he will find a way to get around it because he cannot abandon his

cause. Doing so would only prove that he is not immune to the slipperiness of the world and that he too is a victim of inconsistency.

Since Ahab cannot allow himself or his belief to change, he is incapable of being a fallibilist and therefore becomes an absolutist. For example, in “The Cabin,” Ahab reveals that his hatred of contingency spreads to his desire to remain secure in his belief, even once this belief proves to be direly impractical. We know that Ahab has recognized that in acting on his belief, he will endanger himself and the crew. He knows that this truth does not have practical consequences—in fact, it will have disastrous consequences. He tells Pip, “God for ever save thee, let what will befall,” indicating that he has enough foresight to know that the chase for Moby Dick may well kill them all (399). Ahab sends Pip away because he knows that his presence may direct him off his course. He says, “my malady becomes my most desired health” (399). He tells Pip—whom he has grown to love for the resemblance of their madness—to leave his side because his love for him stays his lust to kill the whale. His “desired health” lies within his belief, which he now knows to be mad. So, Ahab’s madness is “deliberate and in essence logically motivated,” and so even though they seem insane, Ahab is actually lucidly arguing for his own madness (Brentano 152). He believes that he is healthy when he is secure in his mad desire to kill Moby Dick, even though his sanity tells him that this truth is no longer true. In other words, health becomes synonymous with a stability of belief, and the only way he can be healthy and maintain stability is to retain his insane truth. Ahab’s adherence to his truth not only proves him to be infallible or unable to change his mind, but it also proves that he is an absolutist. He upholds his belief no matter what the consequences.

Ahab is aware that his absolutism will eventually lead to disaster, but he is so afraid of change at this point that he cannot possibly change his mind. He puts his belief before the opinions of his crew because keeping this belief means retaining stasis. Ultimately, his refusal to change his belief when reasonable evidence is provided contrary to that belief is what makes him anti-pragmatist.

So, Ahab begins the novel following the pragmatic method. He has an experience that provides him with a new conception of truth. The white whale cripples him, and so he changes his truth to match his circumstances. He is forced to question the meaning behind this experience, and when he realizes that he cannot provide it with meaning, he diagnoses his new belief. The whale becomes the representation of hidden meanings—the truth behind the mask. He creates this new truth and decides that his next voyage will help him act on it. He pragmatically allows his experience to influence his perception of truth, and then he acts on it. He also believes that his experience—and experience in general—allows us to break the boundaries of the force that obscures reality. Through experience, in other words, we come closer to the truth. Once the voyage is underway, however, Ahab's fear of change and his refusal to recognize chance as an unavoidable feature in life pushes him into absolutism. He no longer allows his experience to inform his beliefs, and so he is no longer pragmatic. His pragmatic beginnings devolve into a monomaniacal obsession with his truth, and his fear of change does not allow him to adopt new truths when the situation calls for it.

Ishmael

If Ahab exemplifies the limits of an absolutist attitude towards truth, Ishmael exemplifies Jamesian empiricism. Throughout the novel, Ishmael's ideas or philosophies are constantly in flux, thereby showing that Ishmael acknowledges that he cannot know when one belief may be an absolute and also that he is able to admit when he is wrong. He allows his surroundings to alter his beliefs, and he allows experience to dictate his ideas. Like Ahab, Ishmael ascribes meanings onto things, but he does so with the knowledge that these meanings are fluid and flexible. He accepts the idea that his beliefs can change as easily as he accepts that the world operates on the basis of chance. In large part, Ishmael possesses many traits that pragmatists value.

Ishmael's Pragmatic Reasoning

Ishmael's manner of reasoning is quite similar to James's pragmatic method. In the chapter "The Spouter Inn," Ishmael attempts to interpret an oil painting he sees hanging on the wall of the inn. His interpretation can be seen as a metaphor for pragmatic reasoning at its best. It is important to mention at the outset that the entire description of the painting is written in the second person, dragging the reader into Ishmael's own reasoning to make it seem as though you are interpreting the painting along with him. In using this style, Melville attempts to ground the reader in what happens to be the pragmatic method. He makes us experience pragmatic reasoning along with Ishmael,

thereby giving us the opportunity to decide whether it is something we can also implement.

First, Ishmael picks out the element that “most puzzled and confounded you” about the inn, which is the oil painting (26). If you remember James’s pragmatic method, before you begin to analyze any problem or situation, you must first decide whether the problem presented is worth solving—what is the cash-value of the exercise? Here, Ishmael explains that this was a particularly puzzling painting. It is an object of wonder, and it would be worthwhile to unravel the puzzle. He explains that there was an “unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous painting meant” (26). Again, he cannot drag himself away from the painting until he solves the riddle within it, which shows the personal value the interpretation has to Ishmael. Several ideas occur to Ishmael as he attempts to decipher the painting’s meaning. His lengthy list of allusions include references to *Paradise Lost*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, the Black Sea, a “Hyperborean winter scene,” “the breaking up of the ice-bound stream of Time” (26). In the end, Ishmael reaches “a final theory of my own” which he comes to with the help of the “aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom [he] conversed upon the subject” (26). He switches back to the first person, which indicates that he has reached a personal conclusion. The abrupt change in point of view allows the reader to see the individuality of the conclusion about the painting, thereby showing that it is unique to Ishmael and perhaps different from our own. This way, Melville is able to indicate that while Ishmael’s interpretation fits for him, it may not fit for us. We must reach conclusions on

our own in order to come to our own beliefs. To reach his own interpretation, Ishmael makes use of what Bernstein calls a “community of inquirers,” in this case the elderly people in the inn, to reach his decision. He checks his ideas against the ideas of others in order to garner the validity of his interpretation. So, after this process, Ishmael is able to assess the picture and come to a conclusion that he is pleased with. Ishmael uses this pragmatic method early on, and he continues to use it as the novel progresses, but with the knowledge that the conclusions this brings him to may change. He doesn’t say anything here about how his interpretation of the picture may change over time, but through a close analysis of several chapters, we can see that he is always willing to admit that a belief is wrong and change his mind.

Ishmael’s intense study of whales is also indicative of the pragmatic method. Ishmael does all he can to define what whales are and what whales may mean symbolically, including the famous Moby Dick. He classifies, catalogues, allegorizes, symbolizes, and dissects whales. He details the whale’s biology, the different types of whales, whales in art, whale sperm, old whale stories, how whales are captured and killed, how whales reproduce; the list goes on and on. By the end of *Moby Dick*, any reader will find that they know more about whales than they ever expected or even wanted to know. What Ishmael is really doing is attempting to penetrate the question of the whale from multiple angles. In doing so, he gathers a pluralistic vision of what a whale really is, and by the end of the novel, we can get a sense of what he has come up with. When viewed through pragmatism, we can see that Ishmael’s entire narration can be viewed as one grand attempt to employ the pragmatic method to decipher a specific

problem—the mystery of the leviathan, but also the mystery of how much we can ever truly know about one thing, or a study of epistemology. His conclusion becomes the basis of pragmatism—that we can never know if we have reached the Truth or if we’ve ever reached it in the past. *Moby Dick* upsets any definition that Ishmael is able to come up with. The white whale teaches him that some mysteries can never be solved, no matter how hard you try to puzzle them out, thereby proving that there is no such thing as an absolute.

Ishmael’s attempt to classify and categorize whales from multiple angles indicates his pragmatic sense of fallibility. For pragmatists, nothing is classifiable, at least not definitely. You can classify something, yes, but you must be open to the possibility that your classification may change. Ishmael’s copious ways of defining the whale show that he is constantly changing his mind, and that he can view the whale biologically one day and figuratively the next without the worry that his inconsistency makes his ideas any less valuable. But in the end, *Moby Dick* reveals that there is only one truth—that there is no Truth and there is no way to pin anything down with a sense of certainty, because the world operates on inconsistency ruled by chance.

In “Cetology,” Ishmael provides a pragmatic rationale for classification, identifying both the importance of the attempt to classify and that any classification will be subject to change. He shows that his grand effort to classify the whale is necessary, even though he knows it is probably worthless. He reasons that “it is but well to attend to a matter almost indispensable to a thorough appreciative understanding of the more special leviathanic revelations and allusions of all sorts which are to follow” (115). He

recognizes that he has to educate his audience about whales before the story moves forward and we encounter one first-hand. He understands that this is “no easy task” (115). In fact, “The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed” (115). The whale for Ishmael begins as “chaos” or as something completely disordered and incomprehensible. He also says that he promises “nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete must for that very reason infallibly be faulty” (116). So, he begins his task of defining the whale with the knowledge that it is an endeavor equal to the task of defining chaos, and that his classification will not be complete because nothing is ever complete. Anyone who says that something is complete is always wrong. This is a very pragmatic response to a problem. First, he recognizes the need for an answer, but then he also makes it clear that the answer he will provide will not necessarily be correct. Ishmael says, “I am the architect, not the builder” (116). He knows that all he can do is provide the design for the whale to fit into; he does not possess the power to make the pieces fit or to ensure that it won’t topple over when it’s done. And at the end of the chapter, Ishmael hopes that he never falls victim to the error of completion—“God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught” (125). Here, Ishmael—or Melville, for that matter—makes it clear that even the book itself is incomplete, because to complete something is to make it “faulty” (116). The grandest structures, he says, “ever leave the copingstone to posterity” (125). The copingstone is the final stone at the top of a building, or the one stone that makes the structure complete. If the book were complete, it would be bound in its own structure. By leaving the book unfinished, both Ishmael and Melville are

able to leave it open to posterity—the novel itself becomes pragmatic because it resists a clear cut interpretation by remaining incomplete. *Moby Dick* does not end in a way that provides a clear-cut message, and its ambiguity gives the reader room to interpret it in countless different ways. Indeed, Milton Millhauser states that there are several ways to interpret the novel, and that these different interpretations “admit of the impression that Melville charged his work with several distinct currents of meaning...which, while they support one another aesthetically, retain considerable independence of character and effect” (527). The book is structured around the creation of several different, independent interpretations. Melville pragmatically wrote in a way that makes the novel pragmatically resist categorization.

The end of the novel reinforces Ishmael’s belief in the unclassifiable nature of the whale and therefore reinstates the pragmatic message that everything will resist stability, and nothing can be considered absolute. It has been noted that *Moby Dick* was no ordinary whale, but the final chase proves it. Ahab manages to spear the whale, but the line, which is previously described as capable of “bear[ing] a strain nearly equal to three tons,” breaks from *Moby Dick*’s strength (226). *Moby Dick* is also more aggressive than other whales, attacking his pursuers rather than running away. It was often the case that when men were in pursuit of him, he would “turn round suddenly, and, bearing down upon them, either stave their boats to splinters, or drive them back in consternation to their ship” (155). So, *Moby Dick* typically would attack the whale boats or cause enough damage to make them return to the ship. But the destruction of the *Pequod* was something that none of the crew were prepared for. When the whale boats are damaged, Ahab orders

them back to the ship for repair before they can rejoin the hunt, driving them back to the ship and to safety. Because whales ordinarily attempt to run away from their pursuers rather than annihilate them, this was considered a valid order to give. But Moby Dick is not ordinary, and he does not fit into a pattern. He is unique, and therefore he is an element that does not follow general guidelines of behavior. This is why “in spite of all that mortal man could do, the solid white buttress of his forehead smote the ship’s starboard bow” (425). In spite of mankind’s efforts to understand the whale, the whale resists definition and continues to surprise those who endeavor to comprehend it. Moby Dick defies classification, which is made clear from his behavior on the final day of the chase. Ishmael is proven right—those who attempt to close the book on the whale will only be at fault, because life is made up of surprises and is governed by chance. In this case, Moby Dick stands as the exception to Ishmael’s classifications, and as such, he proves Ishmael’s theory that nothing can be definite.

Ishmael’s Adoption of Pragmatic Themes

Ishmael employs a method of reasoning that is quite like James’s pragmatic method, but he also employs several of what Bernstein would later describe as pragmatic “themes” in regard to his beliefs. Let us start with Ishmael’s underlying anti-foundationalism. At the beginning of the novel, Ishmael states, “So soon as I hear that such or such a man gives himself out for a philosopher, I conclude that, like the dyspeptic old woman, he must have ‘broken his digester’” (55). From the outset, we can see that

Ishmael has a problem with philosophers. The simile he uses suggests that philosophers have a problem with digesting the world around them, and that they take in data in such a way that is unnatural to them. Ishmael says that philosophers should not attempt to live or strive to be “entirely at [their] ease; preserving the utmost serenity; content with [their] own companionship,” as Queequeg is (55). In other words, to be a philosopher would mean that one would not be able to be at peace or to be happy with one’s self. In this somewhat offhand comment, Ishmael critiques the type of people who subscribe to typical foundational philosophies—who attempt to condense the way the world works under one heading and keep it that way. These types of people—Ishmael’s philosophers—are so concerned with making the world fit into their mold that they cannot digest it properly, and so they have a constant philosophical stomachache. The way in which philosophers digest the world is broken—the way they filter information is out of order. Because they attempt to fit everything into a specific mold, philosophers end up with leftover information they cannot process because it won’t fit in. In this way, they are always frustrated, and therefore cannot be at peace. In practice, Ishmael is actually quite the philosopher, but he philosophizes in such a way as to move from one idea to another quite fluidly. To follow the metaphor, he allows his body to take in what it needs in the moment, and his stomach is able to process it with ease. He changes his worldviews like he changes his diet. This is what makes him an anti-foundationalist. He finds philosophers reprehensible, but like the pragmatists, he is able to set forth his own philosophies without falling into the philosopher’s trap of confined belief systems.

Even before he sets foot on the *Pequod*, we can see how Ishmael allows his opinions and ideas to be changed by his surroundings, from which we can gather that Ishmael is a fallibilist. There are several points at which we can see Ishmael's philosophies changing. At first, Ishmael actually believes as Ahab does—that the white whale must die. After Ahab announces the *Pequod*'s mission, Ishmael recounts that “my shouts had gone up with the rest, my oath had been welded with theirs [...] Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine” (152). Since Ishmael narrates the novel with hindsight, however, comments following this statement reveal that this was only a momentary feeling and that he changed his mind since that day on the quarterdeck. In the chapter following this statement, Ishmael remarks that “What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid” (159). We can see here that Ishmael separates himself from Ahab, making it clear that his beliefs about the whale are different from Ahab's, and that he has his own evolving opinions. Before, he and Ahab were of the same mind. Now, he marks that his ideas have yet to be said, thereby implying that they are different. Ishmael also remarks that the entire quest is out of his hands. The captain is in charge, and he can't do anything to stop Ahab. It is also impossible for Ishmael to know why the rest of the crew followed his lead with such vigor—“all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go” (158). So, instead of fighting against fate, he decides to give into its control. He makes several analogies for fate, including the subterranean miner's shaft and the feel of “the irresistible arm drag[ing]” in the direction that fate leads it. Ishmael decides to go wherever fate may take him. He “gave myself up to the abandonment of the time and the place; but while yet

all a-rush to encounter the whale, could see naught in that brute but the deadliest ill” (158). At this moment, we begin to see that Ishmael may change his mind about the pursuit of the whale. He can see at the beginning that this is dangerous, but he can also see that the decision to hunt Moby Dick is out of his control. We get the sense that Ishmael believes that he couldn’t stop Ahab if he wanted to.

Ishmael’s narrative voice gets lost as we get deeper into the novel, and because of this, we get few indications on his opinion of the whale and their chase of him until the end. What we do receive from the subjectivity of Ishmael are bits of his changing philosophies that don’t necessarily have to do with the whale. These changing philosophies are indicative of Ishmael’s underlying fallibilism and adherence to the dominion of chance, which are two key elements of pragmatism and help prove that Ishmael is a pragmatist.

In “The Mat-Maker,” Ishmael sets forth one rather important aspect of his philosophy that will influence our reading of his empiricism. He depicts a world ruled by chance. Here, Ishmael creates an allegory for fate out of the process of weaving a mat with Queequeg. The mat making process becomes the “Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates” (179). Here, Ishmael describes how there is some overarching influence on how life turns out—that even though one may believe that agency belongs to him or her alone, there is something greater that guides the shuttle along the loom. His movements are mechanical because the motion along the loom does not change—it is a preset action determined by the maker of your specific machine. There are “fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single,

ever returning, unchanging vibration, and that vibration merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending of other threads with its own” (179). In other words, all of one’s decisions are made along a specific, predetermined path. Ishmael, however, becomes the agent of his own destiny—“with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads” (179). His free will plays a part in his individual shuttle’s movements, so that even when the threads are unalterable, he decides how they are threaded. The sword represents chance. It is an “impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric” (179). He says that these three aspects—“chance, free will, and necessity”—all work together to produce a final product. But both free will and necessity are ruled over by chance. It “by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events” (179). So, what Ishmael describes here is a universe that is made up of these three parts. No matter how hard we attempt to mould our lives by our own free will, and no matter how often necessity takes over and pushes us in one direction, there is always chance to disrupt their movements and change our course.

What is important to note in this chapter is Ishmael’s outlook on the idea of chance and how it is connected with change. Ishmael understands that there are impulses in the world that cannot be planned for. As Emerson said before him, surprise will always intervene. It is no coincidence that directly following this philosophy comes the surprise of their first whale-sighting and the frenzy that ensues. And from this premier introduction of chance, we can see how Ishmael’s empirical nature is set forth. Rather

than combating the idea of chance, Ishmael decides to accept it as an undeniable fact of life. And if he recognizes the existence chance and that life or destiny cannot be pinned down because of it, it is only logical to see that he also understands that change must come from chance. One moment, you are peacefully weaving a mat, and the next you are in pursuit of a whale. Moments change just as ideas do, and this is only the beginning of Ishmael's changing philosophies.

Another instance of Ishmael's awareness of chance can be seen in "The Monkey-Rope." In this chapter, Ishmael acknowledges that he "strongly and metaphysically" perceived of his situation as he and Queequeg were attached together by the monkey-rope. So dangerous was the situation, that Ishmael begins to read it philosophically, saying that his "own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death" (255). In other words, Ishmael is astounded at the current state of his individuality—that at this moment, he cannot be secure in his safety because he is attached to another whose jerky movements could lead to his death. But shortly after his realization, Ishmael realizes that there is a similar danger in trusting people on land—that all men have "this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills you die" (255-6). In other words, no matter how outright the realization of one's control of her his or her life may be, it is a reality that affects us all—we are all dependent on others to keep us from being eaten by sharks. We are all like Queequeg—living in the space "between sharks and spades" which puts us "in

a sad pickle and peril” (256). Ishmael’s realization of his utter dependence on others is also linked to chance. While he depends on his pharmacist to give him the correct pills, it is by chance that the pharmacist mixes up medicine with poison. While he depends on Queequeg to remain steady on his end of the rope, it is chance that the sharks may upset Queequeg’s position over the side of the boat, cause him to drown, and draw Ishmael in after him. At any moment, we may be the victims of chance. The only difference in Ishmael’s relationship to chance in this chapter is that he is acutely aware of this fact and its imminent implications for his survival.

In “The Hyena,” we are given an example of a philosophy that Ishmael knows is fleeting, and says so outright. Because of this, we are able to see that Ishmael is overtly fallibilistic, since he is aware of the fluid nature of beliefs. He begins the chapter saying, “There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody’s expense but his own” (188). What is important here is that Ishmael mentions that these moments of insight into the way the world works are fleeting. But nonetheless, he recounts one such moment when he felt this way. He takes the time to explain this one moment because he recognizes that life is made up of momentary beliefs, and that this one is as important as any other. He even goes so far as to say that this is a philosophy. He says, “There is nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy sort of genial desperado philosophy; and with it I now regarded this whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object” (188). The philosophy is bred by this particular environment,

which indicates that it is subject to change with a change of environment. Because this philosophy is particularly indigenous to the crew of a whaling ship, it is likely that Ishmael acquires it. But it is just as likely that once he leaves the ship, the philosophy will leave with him. He recognizes that he has taken on a specific perspective of the world in this moment, and that he wants to see where it goes as he regards the voyage. Here, we see that Ishmael embraces the idea of fallibilism—that he recognizes that his belief is momentary and therefore has the potential to be wrong in the future. He is aware that his beliefs will change based on his own evolving ideas of what is right or wrong for himself, but while he believes in them, he embraces them until something else comes along. And most importantly, this doesn't scare him the way it scares Ahab. Ahab is aware that there are so few things “in this slippery world that can hold,” so he holds onto what he can and refuses to let it go. The whale is the ultimate sticking point for Ahab, which when seen in contrast to Ishmael, highlights the captain's absolutism and Ishmael's empiricism.

Each of these examples shows how Ishmael easily changes from one belief to another, thereby acknowledging his fallibilism and his acceptance of contingency. But James describes that this shouldn't be an easy thing to do. Our minds resist such changes, because our beliefs are supposed to be more than just things we say we believe in—they are things we must test through experience. It is only when experience tells us a belief is wrong that we will change it, and this process is difficult. When something happens to contradict a truth, “the result is an inward trouble to which [one's] mind till then had been a stranger, and from which [one] seeks to escape by modifying [one's] previous mass of opinions. [One] saves as much as [one] can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme

conservatives” (What Pragmatism Means 101). There is also the matter of acting on one’s beliefs to test their validity. Without action, one cannot be aware of the practical consequences of the belief.

In the beginning of the novel, we see Ishmael acting on his beliefs in pragmatic fashion. He has preconceived notions about Queequeg—the savage he is meant to share a bed with. But once he gets to know Queequeg, he changes his mind, forms a new truth, and begins to put this belief into action. When he first sees Queequeg, Ishmael is so frightened of his appearance that he considers “slipping out of the window” to get away (34). He knows that this is only “his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin,” but he cannot avoid the feelings of fear he has at the sight of him (34). He becomes “as much afraid of him as if it was the devil himself” (34). But after this initial meeting, Ishmael is forced to change his mind. He describes this change as a realization of “strange feelings” within him (56). He feels “a melting in [him]. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it” (56). Queequeg is able to remind him that there are things in the world that exist outside of “civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits” (56). Ishmael is forced to acknowledge that he is unhappy with what his “Christian kindness” has afforded him, so he decides to begin a friendship with an unlikely candidate—a pagan (56). What happens here is very pragmatic. Ishmael recognizes that his conception of the world may be wrong—that a pagan savage may help him escape from the Christian world’s hypocrisy. He breaks from his what Christianity tells him to do—that pagans are sinners and can only do you harm—in order to test a theory that Queequeg may be able to enlighten him

rather than debase him. And he acts on this belief. He goes so far as to participate in Queequeg's form of worship, because he retains the belief that his Presbyterian Church gave him that one must "do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do me," including the participation in different worshiping practices. So, he alters a former set of beliefs in order to conform to a new truth. This is how new truth is achieved.

Ishmael recognizes a change in his beliefs, alters them by adapting his previous beliefs to fit with his new belief, and acts on it. In the beginning of the novel, Ishmael proves that he is capable of pragmatically changing his beliefs and then acting on them.

But the moment the Pequod leaves land, Ishmael does not act on a single belief again, and he loses the pragmatic virtues he had in the beginning of the novel because of this lack of action. We see from the preceeding examples that Ishmael has many ideas and possible truths, but they never evolve into real truths because he never acts on them. The most illuminating example can be seen when Ishmael changes his mind about Ahab's mission and decides he no longer believes the way that Ahab believes. Instead of detailing how he incorporates this new truth into his old beliefs and then acting on it, Ishmael decides to leave everything that happens after this moment to fate. He thinks that acting on his belief wouldn't make a difference. Maybe he is right, since he is just a lowly crew member, but pragmatism does not leave room for such circumstantial obstacles. The only obstacle in the way of truth is yourself, because the only way you can avoid finding truth is if you avoid action. Through action comes experience, and through experience comes new truths. Ishmael avoids action because he decides to become completely relative. If his life is now in fate's hands, he does not have to take any

responsibility for his actions, and his response is not to act at all. Because of this, he avoids true realization of personal truths that can only come by acquiring new truths from experience. In this sense, Ishmael is not pragmatic. Even though he accepts contingency—which, you’ll remember, was the basis for Ahab’s anti-pragmatism—Ishmael is not a pragmatist, though he seems close to it; just as Ahab is not completely anti-pragmatist, even though he is close to it.

Ishmael’s narrative finally returns in the “Epilogue,” where we are given further evidence of his relativism as opposed to his pragmatism. Here, we see that Ishmael credits fate with his survival, and it is clear that this is another instance in which we can see Ishmael’s overall philosophy based in inaction; this shows how Ishmael is, in fact, not pragmatist. Ishmael narrates that it was he “whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab’s bowsman, when that bowsman assumed the vacant post; the same, who, when on the last day the three men were tossed from out the rocking boat, was dropped astern” (427). After he decides that the chase of Moby Dick would most likely end in destruction, Ishmael decides to give himself up to fate, and therefore he gives up all of his agency. While Ishmael possesses many of the pragmatic themes such as anti-foundationalism, fallibilism, communalism, pluralism, and chance, these are all put into question through his relationship with fate. Yes, there are things in the world that cannot be planned for or prevented. The pragmatists agree on this, and they embrace contingency’s ability to provide experiences in our lives where we are forced into new truths based on our failed efforts, contradicted beliefs, or disrupted plans. But they do not say that we should be completely relative. We should not simply float by from belief to belief, because no

belief can be real without action, and no truth can change without experience. Because Ishmael gives up his agency, we can see that he gives up his ability to act on his beliefs. Fate provides him with the opportunity to put his life on cruise-control. He hops from one philosophy to the next and from one categorization of the whale to another without ever really believing in anything. Because he never puts his philosophies into practice, he never truly believes in any of them. He offers them up as concepts, but they are never tested or verified.

On the surface, it seems as if Ishmael possesses many traits that pragmatists revere, but because of his inability to test his truths, he is actually more of a relativist than a pragmatist. For Ishmael, the truth is relative. For the pragmatists, this is hardly the case. Pragmatists believe that truth is subjective, yes, but it is also concrete. You cannot simply believe in something just because you want to. James says that “the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite assignable reasons” (What Pragmatism Means 109). James indicates that “good” is in reference to whether we “believe it is profitable to our lives” (108). So, a truth is good if we believe that it will benefit us, but this must be shown through “definite assignable reasons” (109). A truth cannot be adopted without acknowledging these factors. Ishmael’s philosophies and classifications are developed without considering their practical consequences. They are merely offered up as suggestions; Ishmael provides no rationale for their use or practicality.

CHAPTER 4

HOW PRAGMATIC IS MELVILLE, REALLY?

In the end, Ishmael believes he survives because he was destined to survive. But the question is, is he right? Does Ishmael's survival indicate some partiality on behalf of Melville? Does Melville want us to believe that Ishmael's way is right—that we should all become relativists, jumping from one idea to the next without putting them into practice? Should we all attempt to “go with the flow” and float along wherever life takes us? I do not believe that it was Melville's intention to designate Ishmael as a role model. This is why he has him break from certain pragmatic values. But Melville also did not intend to promote Ahab's perspective on life, even though he possesses a boldness of action that Ishmael lacks. So, what can reading *Moby Dick* with a pragmatic eye tell us of Melville's intentions? Through pragmatism, we are able to see the blurred dichotomy of empiricism and absolutism that Melville sets up in his most famous novel. Ishmael and Ahab show an affinity for empiricism or absolutism, but they each fail to meet each categorization's criteria to the letter. From this, we can deduce that Melville has provided us with characteristics from each end of the spectrum that he disagrees with. Ultimately, through these two characters, Melville shows us both his awareness of pragmatic virtues as well as his contentious relationship to them.

Melville's narrative structure provides us with some insight into his frustration with the pragmatic ideal. Sheila Post-Lauria writes that Melville's inconsistencies in narrative style "represent a deliberate attempt to create an orchestrated whole that creates segmental, alternating perceptions of reality" (311). Post-Lauria indicates that Melville deliberately wanted his readers to view his novel from multiple angles, but that this was done because, as a metaphysical writer, Melville attempted to create a "mixed form" novel that drew from many disciplines. Post-Lauria concentrates on questions of content, such as the blending of "science and fiction, philosophy and poetry" (306). But what Post-Lauria fails to note is the changes in perspective throughout the novel. Melville constantly changes the point of view in which the novel is narrated. First, Ishmael narrates the story. Then, he serves as the narrator of episodes he could not have possibly witnessed, signifying a shift from first-person observer to third-person omniscient. Then, Ishmael disappears completely. If we were to view Ishmael as the continuous narrator throughout the novel, we would have to conclude that he is an unreliable narrator. Take, for example, the novel's opening line—"Call me Ishmael" (18). He doesn't say, "my name is Ishmael." We are given a declarative sentence, demanding us to call him by a specific name. Mark Peterson notes that we are even forced to question "whether we are addressed as peers or subordinates" (288). This narrator "purposely blurs the borders between fact and fiction" (Patterson 288). This type of command makes us question his intentions. Is he just telling us to call him Ishmael, when he is really someone else? Is Ishmael really Melville? It is clear that when the narrative perspective is placed under a microscope, Post-Lauria's idea of an "orchestrated whole" underneath the jumpy narrative no longer fits. Instead of providing us with a layered story whose parts equal

one, cohesive whole, Melville actually provides us with a disjointed narrative perspective. He opens the novel in such an ambiguous way in order to make his readers question the novel from the beginning. He immediately puts his audience in an uncomfortable position because he wants his readers to feel the same sort of discomfort he feels. Melville cannot choose one narrative style because, as Hawthorne said, “He can never believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief.” Melville cannot believe in one narrative style to structure his novel, and yet he cannot be comfortable with the multiple styles he provides. It is clear that Melville uses his narrative style as a method to keep the novel from being “complete”—to avoid putting the keystone on top of his architectural masterpiece. Through this narrative ambiguity, we are shown Melville’s own indecision and discomfort in not being able to pin down a single narrative structure that he is content with.

As the novel progresses, Ishmael begins to provide us with information he could not possibly know in several chapters that I will call the dramatic chapters. In these chapters, he presents other character’s thoughts as if he were thinking them himself. For example, in “The Pipe,” Ahab is completely alone, and yet Ishmael is still narrating his actions. Ahab “soliloquized at last” that “this smoking no longer soothes” (113). The term soliloquy implies that Ahab is completely alone, talking to himself. In other chapters like “The Symphony,” we are given a conversation in private between Starbuck and Ahab, and there is no way to assume that Ishmael overheard it. How are we to interpret this shift in narration from first-person observer to third-person omniscient? This question lends itself to many answers—Ishmael could be eavesdropping, he could be making the entire thing up, the narrator could have switched to Melville without our

knowing it, or perhaps we are meant to see this Melville showing us his unique narrative style. The point here isn't to come up with an answer. The point is that we are forced into asking the question.

Melville's change in point of view makes us acknowledge that the novel's narrative structure is unstable, and it makes us question why. When viewed through pragmatism, we can see that Melville's inability to stick to one perspective indicates his inability to stick to an absolute. He cannot remain chained to one narrative structure because he cannot say with certainty that one way is better than another—his sense of fallibilism takes over, and he decides to use multiple points of view because he cannot believe that one is best. He cannot submit to an absolute.

We see this best at the end of the novel, when Melville abruptly reminds us of the first-person narrator after a long period without mentioning him. In the "Epilogue," Ishmael returns to the narrative after twenty-three chapters of absence. We don't get so much as an "I" or a "me" out from Ishmael from chapter one hundred and twelve, "The Blacksmith" through the final chapter, which in the Norton edition spans fifty-nine pages. It is almost as if we'd forgotten Ishmael existed. The absence of Ishmael makes it so the "Epilogue" comes as a surprise. We are finally given what we were promised at the beginning of the book—the final chase for Moby Dick—but in the excitement of the action, we forget our narrator. Perhaps Melville forgot about Ishmael as well. Or maybe he leaves him out of the narrative on purpose. There is no way to know for certain, but what we do know is that Melville has not made his choppy narrative style a secret. He wants the reader to see that it is not fluid or cohesive. He wants his readers to see that his writing style is indecisive and that his novel is indecisive as well. *Moby Dick* does not

stick to one narrative style because Melville is not concerned with presenting the novel as a nicely wrapped package with the message or moral neatly spelled out. This novel does not pin down one message or one angle because Melville cannot pin down one message that he wants the book to stand for. He leaves it incomplete because he is uncomfortable with completion, and he chooses to create this same discomfort in his readers.

In this sense, *Moby Dick* becomes an empiricist book—it has many truths, but it never admits to knowing if one is *the* truth because that is something it cannot know. Instead, Melville leaves this up to the reader to decide. Melville’s ambiguity is “deliberate and it is an integral part of his overall purpose to portray a world of constantly shifting, ambiguous values” (Wright 6). But Melville is doing more than simply making the underlying “meaning” of his novel ambiguous. His incomplete style of writing becomes his “art of telling the truth” (Wright 6). Melville tells the truth by providing multiple angles of interpretation, because he recognizes that the truth comes in many forms, not just as one absolute. In this sense, the novel’s structure is inherently pragmatic. Knowing that everyone will come up with his or her own interpretation, Melville opens up several avenues for readers to choose from—he makes it easy for an audience to pick their own truth. But by making it clear that there are copious different ways to interpret the novel, Melville makes readers acknowledge that their “truth” or interpretive choice is just one of many interpretations, thereby forcing readers into an empirical outlook.

At the same time, it is clear that Melville is unhappy with this conclusion. He craves an absolute, and he cannot pin one down. His book, like Ishmael, doesn’t take any action—the novel doesn’t take a clear stand on one side or the other of the absolutist/empiricist argument. One way to read the novel is to say that it is a book

without meaning—a book that provides a message that ascribing meaning to anything is either useless or dangerous. Ishmael fails to define the whale because, in the end, we realize that the attempt to pin down any sort of definition was a fruitless endeavor. Many scholars point out that *Moby Dick* is the start of a dark period in Melville’s career in which he begins to view the world in a more dismal light. At this point, Melville loses “belief in an Absolute [which] entail[s] the loss...of truth in the universe” (Baym 910). So, through his characterization of Ishmael, we begin to see that Melville has lost faith in the ability to attain an absolute, but through Ahab, we see that he also not lost the desire for absolute truth. Ahab provides a definite meaning but this leads him to disastrous consequences. Melville leaves us with one question: is there a middle ground, and if there is, can we be happy with it? Pragmatism offers us a middle ground, but Melville cannot settle for it. He craves an absolute. Like Hawthorne said, he cannot be “comfortable in his unbelief.”

The short-lived character, Bulkington, provides us with insight into Melville’s position within the pragmatic debate. In this chapter, Melville explains the motivations for Bulkington’s swift return to sea. Bulkington cannot remain on land—it “seemed scorching to his feet” (96). The sea represents the “howling infinite” (97). When you are at sea, there are endless possibilities and endless truths. There is a danger in going to sea, because when we rush to sea we “[rush] into peril” (97). Land is “safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that’s kind to our moralities” (97). Land is not infinite but finite, and this finitude provides security. We are confined on land; there are only so many paths we may choose from. At sea, there are no roads or houses to box us in—there is only open ocean, and you are forced to follow the whims of the sea.

Matthiessen describes the dichotomy of land and sea as the difference between “a life of safety and the search for truth” (417). On land, you are safe because you give into common, absolute, foundational truths rather than pursuing your own individual ones. At sea, you must search for the truths for yourself because you are not given any boundaries or structure to lean on. And Melville points out that it is our soul’s “intrepid effort” to “keep the open independence of her sea” (97). In other words, our souls are compelled to maintain the idea of infinite possibilities. We are naturally drawn to situations that provide us with endless opportunities and therefore endless new truths. But at the same time, we must be aware of one “mortally intolerable truth”: that no matter how hard we try to stay at sea and maintain the sense that anything is possible, the more the “wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast [us] on the treacherous slavish shore” (97). So, while we yearn to remain in the realm of infinitude, there are supernatural forces that work against this goal, pushing us back into the finite world of the shore: “But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!” (97). Melville recognizes that the highest truth is “shoreless, indefinite as God,” but he also knows that we are constantly pulled back by our desire for safety within certitude. We crave something fixed and stable, and absolute truth is the unmovable belief in one thing. It is in our nature to desire to feel something steady beneath our feet. Our soul craves the infinitude of multiple truths, but our baser nature craves absolutes.

As James says, “we are all such absolutists by instinct” (*The Will to Believe* 79). He also says that this is something that we should treat “as a weakness of our nature from

which we must free ourselves” (79). Through the analysis of Ishmael and Ahab through pragmatism, and from the analysis of Melville’s underlying philosophy in Bulkington’s chapter, we can see that Melville is caught at this stage. He recognizes that we are inherently drawn to absolutes. Ahab is comforted by his absolute belief in the whale’s “inscrutable” qualities. Melville explores how an absolute can be medicinal to a man who finds fault with the slipperiness of the world. His absolute belief provides him with a comfort in stability. Through Ahab, we can see that Melville cannot completely purge the weakness of craving absolutes. This is why he gives Ahab admirable pragmatic qualities at first, even though he degenerates into anti-pragmatism in the end. He shows how Ahab had good intentions—pragmatic intentions—in the beginning, but how difficult it is to stick to the pragmatic version of truth. But on the other hand, Melville also shows how the alternative is equally disconcerting. If you can eliminate your desire for absolute truth, you may not be able to truly believe anything at all. Ishmael has many beliefs, but they are not concrete enough for him to act on them. He simply coasts from truth to truth without ever seriously considering them or applying them to his life. Nina Baym says that the “ultimate impression conveyed by *Moby Dick* is that the quest for truth is significant and meaningful even if no truth is attained” (915). This is not actually the case. Through pragmatism, we see that in the end, we are actually left questioning how Melville reconciles the problem of not being able to believe or be comfortable in his unbelief.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

As Hawthorne said, Melville “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.” Melville could not believe in something unless it was an absolute, and yet he was aware that he may never actually obtain an absolute, or know if he ever had before. And yet he could not stop trying to reach it. Statements like this led to the creation of this thesis. It is clear that Melville understood the benefits of pragmatism, and yet he could not be satisfied with its “middle-ground” approach to truth. He could not find a place within the philosophy that he felt comfortable with. So, Melville was a pragmatist, but he was an unwilling pragmatist. Melville was essentially forced into becoming an empiricist—he was forced into the realization that he would never know if he had achieved an absolute, and that he must live with fallible truths. While he could not find comfort in the fact that truth is flexible, he was forced to remain in the realm of flexible truth. But Melville was not given a pragmatic model to guide him. William James invented it years after Melville’s death. All he had to go by were a few basic proto-pragmatic ideas of Emerson’s that were mixed in with non-pragmatic, monistic ideas. As we can see through *Moby Dick*, Melville came up with the same conclusions that James did, but the novel does not provide us with an example of a way to interpret these conclusions.

The truth is that Melville did not have the capacity to envision a pragmatic model. Through *Moby Dick*, we can see what Melville leaves us with in its absence. Melville is unable to expunge his need for an absolute, and yet he knows that claiming one truth as absolute will lead to disaster. Through Ahab, we are shown what can happen when you refuse to admit a belief is wrong. Ahab creates an absolute truth, and he cannot alter it no matter what the circumstances, which eventually leads to his death and the death of his crew. Ishmael, on the other hand, is unable to make his beliefs anything more than momentary fancies. He does not designate them as truths because he does not act on them. In other words, Melville gives us two opposite ends of the spectrum—believe in an absolute truth or don't have any truths at all. He does not give the pragmatic formula that would provide a middle ground.

What Melville does provide is ambiguity, which makes his readers mimic his inherent discomfort with inconsistency—Melville forces his readers into becoming pragmatists. By providing us with a narrative riddled with holes in its structure, Melville opens his novel up to a wide number of interpretations. *He* is unable to choose what message his novel should present, so he leaves that decision for the reader to decide. He makes his readers become empiricists—picking between multiple truths while acknowledging that there are others out there. In his attempt to pull the readers into his own discomfort with multiple truths, he actually forces his audience to deal with what is left—the option of picking one truth with the knowledge that it is not absolute.

Regardless of how much he tried to fight against pragmatism, Melville actually makes us all into pragmatists through *Moby Dick*. Like Ahab, Melville is unable to conquer his white whale. He cannot be comfortable in a system where temporary truths

are acceptable and absolutes are out of reach. But unlike Ahab, he does not force a belief into becoming absolute. Instead, Melville takes a lesson from Ishmael; he writes his novel in a way that affords multiple avenues of interpretation. But unlike Ishmael, Melville forces his readers into action. Through his ambiguity, Melville makes his readers choose one interpretation and defend it, thereby making his audience believe in something and then act on that belief.

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