2007-10-01

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October 2007

In Partial Fulfillment of a
Harold B. Lee Library Research Grant

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"And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all."

Herman Melville

Introduction

In *Moby-Dick*'s famous opening line, "Call me Ishmael," Melville establishes the creation of identity as one of the core purposes of the narrator and central themes of the subsequent narrative. The narrator does not say whether "Ishmael" is his real name only that this and the accompanying connotations are the identity by which he wants to be known and perhaps through which he sees himself. In these first three words, Ishmael immediately suggests that he wants to shape and control how he is perceived by himself and others.

Ishmael further acknowledges this desire to control his identity by saying that when life becomes grim or boring he goes to sea as a kind of suicide, his "substitute for pistol and ball" (Melville 18). Here Ishmael suggests that suicide is a means of leaving the consequences and suffering of the past and that by going to sea Ishmael can escape who he is and enter a "new world" where he is unknown and undefined and can therefore recreate himself. He then universalizes this desire to all men at some time or another because we are all "inmates" of this world-prison, trapped in identities and occupations that bring sorrow and suffering (Melville 18, 22). But even as Ishmael mixes humor with his allusions and meditations, the narrative maintains an anxious tension and gravitas as though the shadow which Ishmael is personally trying to escape constantly looms on the horizon of the past. What precisely Ishmael wants to escape or how many times he has pursued this course of action he does not say. Through this anxious tension, his musings maintain a seriousness of purpose even when they seem rambling and disconnected, and this seriousness invests his allusions with an urgency and mysteriousness that draws the reader into Ishmael's meditations.

The central allusion of Ishmael's musings, the one with the "still deeper meaning," is the Greek myth of Narcissus (Melville 20). This myth centers on a young man of alluring physical beauty who "becomes his own god," reflected in his falling in love with his own image and his staring at it until he eventually loses the desire and ability to do anything else (Barkan 49). Although Ishmael says he is telling the tragedy of Ahab and thereby frames Ahab's characterization as a Narcissus figure, Ishmael's retelling of this tragedy to others suggests that Ahab and Narcissus have a universal application to all men. Ishmael hints that this "image of the ungraspable phantom of life" which attracts Narcissus's intentions so profoundly, is "the key to it all," apparently referring not only to events in the novel but to the "same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans" (20). That Ishmael places this statement at the climax of his musings and in the center of the first chapter further emphasizes the importance of this theme within the novel.[2]

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[1] This article is derived from my master's thesis, "'The Key to It All': Narcissus and the Search for Meaning and Identity in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*," published by Brigham Young University in August 2007. The thesis is available in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

[2] Suzanne Stein notes that the Narcissus allusion is both the climax of the chapter as well as of the passage; "The passage climaxes, and this is the climax of the chapter as well, in the reference to Narcissus" (32).

Melville Scholarship and Narcissism

Yet, Melville scholarship has largely overlooked the importance of the Narcissus myth within *Moby-Dick* and not addressed the specific framework available to Melville for making the Narcissus allusions. The central role of narcissism in *Moby-Dick* has largely gone unexamined and those which have addressed the issue in some degree or another have not thoroughly centered their discussion in the myth of Narcissus. For example, Arimichi Makino has recently noted that "the Narcissus myth plays a key role" throughout the novel but moves from alluding to the myth to how Melville's use of "phantom," "projects Melville's sense of the impending modern age" (19). Makino identifies the white phantom as the ambiguous nature of a hypocritical Christianity which professes love at home, but is oppressive abroad. Moreover, she suggests Commodore Perry, whose fleet forced the opening of Japan in 1853–54, is a representation of this Christianity (24). Though an intriguing argument, she imagines Melville as a foreteller of events which had not occurred before the writing of the novel and she provides little examination of Melville's understanding of the myth.

Gerard Sweeney has provided the most thorough examination of the Narcissus allusions in his work *Melville's Use of Classical Mythology*. He highlights specific allusions to the myth within the novel, the sources from which Melville may have drawn his general understanding of the myth, and the specific changes he made to it. But Sweeney focuses on how the Narcissus allusions illustrate Ahab's self-delusion and self-ignorance as an accent to what Sweeney sees as the more important Prometheus allusions. Although Sweeney seems correct that Ahab does not ultimately appropriate the wisdom and power of the gods and remains in his solipsism, to say that he remains ignorant of himself and of the universe seems somewhat inaccurate. The common interpretation of Ahab as a static and ignorant character because he continues to pursue his quest misses the Narcissus parallels which suggest that like the youth, Ahab *chooses* to remain self-deluded.

Moreover, references to narcissism in Melville scholarship frequently identify Ahab's megalomania as narcissistic but merely rely on a proverbial sense of "narcissism" as excessive self-love which results in selfishness and self-centeredness. Although some critics invoke a Freudian (or quasi-Freudian) concept of "secondary narcissism" in seeing Ahab as psychotically obsessed with himself, the more common usage of "narcissism" is a kind of moral judgment that labels someone else's actions as thoughtless and offensive. But narcissism has lost the nuance of its original meanings and of the myth to which it alludes. The term's complexity has become flattened in its familiarity. And in flattening the term, narcissism loses its sense of being a fundamental problem of existence, not just an attitude we ascribe to those individuals we dislike or believe should be in mental institutions.

Freud introduced his sense of "narcissism" in his famous essay on the subject, "On Narcissism: An Introduction." Here Freud describes two categories of narcissism: "primary narcissism" which is the fundamental condition in which human existence begins and, thus, "normal"; and "secondary narcissism," a particular perversion of the norm. He argues that "primary and normal narcissism" is not a perversion but "the libidinal complement to the egotism of the instinct of self-preservation" (Freud 4). Primary narcissism represents the matrix through which we enter life and in which we exist in the world. For when a baby is born into the world, the energies of itself, its parents, and others are focused on preserving the child from harm and on fulfilling its needs, particularly its physical needs. As such narcissism becomes the means by which we interpret the world, for it is the effort to preserve the self. In a sense, Freud also

suggests that we can only interpret the world through our own perspective, never fully capable of escaping our own subjectivity.

Freud suggests that secondary narcissism is a perversion of the norm in which "the libido that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism" (Freud 5). But the resulting megalomania or delusion of grandeur is simply "a magnification and plainer manifestation of a condition which had already existed previously" (5). Having enjoyed the "narcissistic perfection of his childhood" and being disturbed "by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgment, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal" (24). In this sense, the narcissist establishes "an *ideal* in himself by which he measures his actual ego" (Freud 23). If this state persists too long and too extensively the individual's narcissism becomes perverse as it stymies normal psychological development.

Most Melville scholarship which addresses narcissism in the novel follows either the proverbial or psychoanalytical connotations. For example, Kim Long and David Leverenz both provide important insight in their separate works into Melville's representation of Ahab's quest as a search for manhood and a will to power and examine the social ramifications of personal and cultural narcissism. Both essentially identify Ahab as a narcissist in the proverbial sense that he selfishly uses the other for the pursuit of his own manhood. Suzanne Stein explicitly says that she followed the psychoanalytic approach in her work, *The Pusher and the Sufferer: An Unsentimental Reading of Moby-Dick*, in which she juxtaposed "Freudian concepts of narcissism to Ahab and Ishmael to see what would happen" (44). Stein offers an engaging analysis of not only Ahab's narcissism but Ishmael's as well. Though she tackles her topic exceptionally, the question should still be raised: how might *Melville* have thought about the myth in his pre-Freudian, pre-psychoanalytic world.[3]

Moreover, to call either Narcissus or Ahab a "narcissist" poses an anachronistic and therefore hermeneutic problem. The term, "narcissism," was not developed until well after Melville wrote the novel in 1850–51. Sigmund Freud credits Paul Näcke and Havelock Ellis for having coined the term at the end of the nineteenth century, and most scholars credit Freud for having introduced the term into popular consciousness (Freud 3). Thus, Melville formed his understanding of the myth and of the impulses it illustrates outside of the critical construct through which we have developed the concept of "narcissism."

Like Freud, Melville sees narcissism as the fundamental state of being into which we are born. But Melville did not have Freudian or Lacanian terminology to frame his discussion or his sense of narcissism. Melville's sense of narcissism has striking similarities to Freud's sense, but it is also expectedly different. Although Freudian and Lacanian thought can help frame the fundamental issues at stake in Melville's argument, this study will focus on how Melville may have conceived of "narcissism" and how this interpretation is portrayed in the novel.

[3] Dennis Williams says that "Ever since Henry A. Murray's groundbreaking 'In Nomine Diaboli' and Newton Arvin's seminal reading of *Moby-Dick*, the use of specific psychoanalytic concepts or a hermeneutic frame at least partially indebted to psychoanalytic thinking has proven crucial in exploring, among other things, the symbolic, mythic, and oneiric dimensions of the novel" (Williams 62). My arguments will also suggest individual and social psychology should play a vital role in understanding Ahab and Ishmael, but will focus on Melville's understanding of the Narcissus myth as a framework for that discussion.

Although surprisingly little Melville scholarship addresses the myth of Narcissus in depth, Melville suggests that it provides the primary framework for understanding his view of life and the themes of the novel by calling it "the key to it all" (Melville 20). Melville's interpretation of the Narcissus myth focuses on the youth's inability to "grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain" but adds to Ovid's version that this inability leads Narcissus to "[plunge] into it and [drown]" (20). In describing Narcissus's efforts to embrace the image, Melville illustrates the universal impulse to imagine a new, meaningful identity and the desire to become like that imagined identity. Seen through the framework of this allusion in the first chapter, Captain Ahab merely represents an extreme form of this universal impulse. Together Narcissus and Ahab demonstrate how the attempt to acquire the "beautiful" to escape and overcome one's fear of impotence and insignificance becomes a self-worship. And Melville makes this sense of narcissism as self-worship explicit by interweaving Captain Ahab with both Narcissus and the idolatrous King Ahab of the Old Testament.

To understand Melville's interpretation and use of the Narcissus myth, I first examine the myth itself and what it suggests about narcissism. I specifically analyze the version which Melville read because there are multiple translations of the myth which change significant details and issues. I interweave this examination with how Melville parallels and extrapolates upon various issues and insights from the myth within *Moby-Dick* and what his interpretation of the myth adds to our understanding of both narcissism and of the novel. Because not all references and allusions to Narcissus and narcissism within the novel can be adequately explored within the scope of this paper, I primarily focus on Captain Ahab as a Narcissus character because Ahab is arguably the central character and driving force of the novel's plot and philosophical explorations. In the second portion of the paper, I explore how Melville's changes the myth in Chapter One by explicitly ascribing the impulse of narcissism to all men and by having Narcissus plunge into the fountain as a last attempt to escape his impotence and insignificance.

The Myth of Narcissus

There are several versions of the myth of Narcissus which have survived through the ages. Although normally viewed as an example of excessive and selfish self-love, in arguably the most commonly accepted classical version, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the myth of Narcissus actually identifies self-knowledge as the fundamental issue leading to Narcissus's death. This disconnect between the common interpretation and the issues addressed in the myth suggests that other aspects may be overlooked as well when simply identifying Narcissus with self-love and selfishness. For example, one detail generally glanced over is that of Narcissus's reaching for the beautiful image in the water. His love of a beauty which is outside of himself and which he does not recognize as himself further problematizes the view that he loves himself exclusively. Because the beauty is outside of Narcissus, the myth interrogates why we desire beauty and how we use it to create meaning. To say that Narcissus represents self-love is not necessarily inaccurate but does not acknowledge the multiple allegorical levels interwoven throughout the narrative which must be explored to understand why Narcissus loves himself, as well as how Melville may have interpreted the myth.

In the 1773 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from which Melville drew his allusions to Narcissus,[4] the narrator briefly describes Narcissus's parentage before relating how Teiresias the seer prophesies that the child will live to an old age *si se non noverit*, if he does not know

[4] This is based on Gerard Sweeney's work in explains that although there are multiple versions of the Narcissus myth, Melville drew primarily from the 1773 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (89-90).

himself (Gildenhard, Zissos 132). Teiresias's prophecy foreshadows the end of the story and provides the framework for interpreting the subsequent narrative. As the boy becomes a man and grows in beauty, many desire him but none could approach him and develop an amorous relationship. The narrative specifically notes that Narcissus permitted and created this relational distance between himself and others because of his pride and insensitivity. Narcissus mocks and scorns Echo and his other suitors before one admirer prays to the gods that Narcissus might "love like me, and love like me in vain!" (*Ovid's Metamorphoses* 102).

The gods answer the suitor's prayer. As Narcissus drinks from a still and isolated pool, he falls in love with his reflection but does not know that "it was himself he lov'd" (103). His attempts to kiss and embrace the image are thwarted because the image disappears whenever his lips disturb the water. He grievingly laments his unrequited love and asks the trees nearby if "e'er within your Shades did lie A youth so tortur'd, so perplexed as I?" (103). In his lament, Narcissus says he believes that the image must love him as much as he loves it because it responds with similar gestures. As Narcissus realizes that the image mouths his same words but makes no sound, he recognizes the image as merely his reflection. In self-recognition, Narcissus exclaims, "It is myself I love, myself I see," thereby fulfilling Teiresias's prophecy (105).

Narcissus knows now that the object of his love is insubstantial and impotent, and thus, that his love of it is in vain. But faced with his solipsism and self-delusion, Narcissus would rather perpetuate the illusion than accept the true natures of both his reflection and his self, and the subsequent despair this acknowledgement would bring. As his tears disturb the water and his image disappears in the ripples, he cries out, "Ah whither . . . dost thou fly? Let me still feed the Flame by which I die; Let me still see, tho' I'm no further blest" (106). Here Narcissus is more afraid of the pain of the unknown, of living life without his paradigm, than of perpetuating the image; "Death will the Sorrows of my Heart relieve . . . Oh might the visionary Youth survive, I should with Joy my lastest Breath resign!" (*Ovid's Metamorphoses* 105). In despair he rends his cloak and strikes himself as though mourning the pain of his loved one.[5] When the reflection becomes clear again and Narcissus sees that he has hurt the reflection/himself he melts away consumed by desire for himself. Even in death, however, Narcissus continues to stare at his image in the river Styx.

The Reflection as Both the Self and the Imagined Self

The myth problematizes interpretation because the reflection represents multiple levels of meaning at the same time. For example, because the object of Narcissus's desire is the self as reflected in the water, the reflection becomes a means of interrogating and knowing the self. But because of the inverted and transient nature of the reflection, the image also becomes a means of exploring the other, in this case the imagined self. Frequently, the interplay among these multiple meanings provides the myth's most important insights.

Both the myth and *Moby-Dick* rely on water as a figurative representation of the mind and imagination to portray these multiple layers of meaning. Ishmael parallels the myth's implicit logic by explicitly locating "the image of the ungraspable phantom of life" which men "see in all rivers and oceans" in the mirror of the mind through his statement that "meditation and water are wedded for ever" (Melville 19-20). If water represents the imagination and the thoughts of the mind, then in reaching for the image Narcissus manifests a desire to hold onto his thoughts and imaginings, as though by disappearing they would lose their meaning and he lose the power manifested by his imagination. Narcissus illustrates that men want to be able to think

[5] Claire Nouvet notes that these two gestures are identified as signs of mourning. See Claire Nouvet, "An Impossible Response: The Disaster of Narcissus," *Yale French Studies* 79, Literature and the Ethical Question (1991), 125.

about something and actually understand it, or imagine life in a certain way and be able to realize it, rather than be "turned round and round in this world" fruitlessly "by those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts" (Melville 140, 196).

On a deeper level, if "meditation and water are wedded for ever," then Narcissus's reflection in the water, which he wants so badly to embrace, corresponds with his self-image or the desired identity he imagines for himself (19). In chasing the "ungraspable phantom," or his imagined self, he reveals his realization that he lacks something (20). Both Narcissus and Ahab see an image of themselves, which to them seems "mild" and pleasant, but "tormenting" because they do not believe they have it, else they would not reach for it, and because they can not seem to attain it (20). In the narrative, Narcissus's desire to embrace and love his reflection figuratively represents that Narcissus wants to love his real self. On this particular level of interpretation, the reflection represents the real self. But his inability to embrace the image or make it embraceable means that figuratively he cannot love or embrace himself because he lacks the quality he seeks which the beautiful reflection, now representing his imagined self, possesses.

Here Narcissus effort to embrace the image becomes an attempt to make himself beautiful, and therefore, more complete. But the physical qualities which Narcissus finds attractive and beautiful are relative to his particular tastes. Taken on face value, the myth would thus have only relative application because the definition of "beauty" is relative to the individual, culture, time, place, and perspective in question. However, when we perceive "beauty" as an absolute it becomes our paradigm and the measure of judging the worth of the self and the other. For Narcissus, to be loved by one who fits his paradigm of beauty validates his sense of self and self-worth, as well as his paradigm. To obtain beauty or associate with it is to either fill his lack, something that was not there before, at least in degree if not also in kind, or to validate that which he does have. In either case, beauty validates in the truest sense of that word—it makes it valid, thereby giving it worth and significance. Consequently, the effort to imitate beauty becomes an effort to escape one's insignificance and become "beautiful," not because beauty is the end-all but because it represents meaning, power, and significance as possessed by the beautiful.

Melville also discusses this issue of objects of desire being merely means to an end. Ahab explains that "all visible objects . . . are but as pasteboard masks" (140). He says that only "by thrusting through the wall" can the prisoner escape the punishments inflicted by others and gain the freedom to act as they imagine. To Ahab "the white whale is that wall" representing "outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it." Although Ahab wants to kill the white whale, this too is merely to appropriate the whale's strength and demonstrate that he has power over the "unknown but still reasoning thing" behind the whale (140). So too, beauty, although not merely limited to visible objects such as physical attractiveness, is always a means to something beyond itself.

Read allegorically in both the myth and the novel, Narcissus's effort to grasp the image becomes an attempt to "realize" the imagined self, or in other words to make it real and give it substance. This attempt represents his desire to make his imagined self significant in the real world by demonstrating that it has the means of affecting the real world. Making the self-image real, in turn also means the self is real, since on a different figurative level, the reflection represents his literal self. The futility of Narcissus's efforts, however, only reinforces his sense of impotence which in turn drives his obsession to reach for the image in order to reaffirm his self-image as real.

Narcissus does not have to recognize the nature of the reflection to try and embrace its beauty; in fact, the allegory requires that he not understand its true nature when he first sees the reflection. On one allegorical level, his inability to understand the nature of the image represents his inability to understand the other. Thus, the episode reflects Narcissus's unwillingness and inability to respond to others in the narrative. Since, however, the image is also a reflection of his true self, the image takes on the additional allegorical meaning that he is unable to understand himself. In this way, Ovid makes Narcissus not only guilty of self-love but "equally culpable for the feebleness of his perception and intelligence" (Barkan 50).

As Teiresias's prophecy foreshadowed, however, Narcissus gains self-knowledge and consequently, does not live to an old age. To know himself here has multiple meanings. Teiresias's prophecy is partially fulfilled when Narcissus sees himself, even though he is unaware it is his reflection. In this sense, Narcissus knows himself by falling in love with the beauty of the image and obsessively trying to embrace it. But once he knows the image is merely his reflection, Narcissus senses that the image mirrors the superficiality, insubstantiality, and insignificance of his true self and of his efforts to make that self substantive. Here the water literally reflects his beauty and self, but the reflection's literal lack of substance figuratively suggests that the nature of his beauty and his self is just as superficial and transient as the reflection he sees. Thus, by knowing the reflection and then knowing himself, he sacrifices his life to embrace the image and make it real.

Escaping Impotence by Perpetuating the Image

The central conflict of the myth is Narcissus's inability to grasp the image that he sees of himself, both literally and figuratively. The tragedy is that he continues to pursue his desire even after he recognizes the reflection's true nature. Though Narcissus does not seem conscious of his motivations, his effort to perpetuate the illusion throughout the narrative emphasizes how strongly he fears his incompleteness and impotence. Narcissus desperately strives to embrace the image and have it reciprocate not because he loves himself but because he fears his self is incomplete and therefore insignificant.

Before recognizing its true nature, Narcissus literally grasps for the reflection because he believes it is real and that it can empower him with the characteristics that he imagines that it has. But his belief is in an object which has neither actual substance nor the actual power to realize his faith. That the image can affect the real self is uncontestable but only because Narcissus imagines it as having real agency, not because it has real agency. After recognizing the true nature of the image and thereby "knowing" himself, Narcissus apparently fears disturbing his paradigm. Narcissus chooses to live in this "gay Delusion" rather than in a sense of impotence and insignificance: he continues to speak to the image, mourn for its pain, and fixes his gaze upon the image, even in death, as though he were trying to keep it "alive" (*Ovid's Metamorphoses* 105).

His willingness to live in a self-deluding fantasy illustrates just how difficult it is to accept the self's incompleteness and impotence in the world. To turn away and leave the reflection would admit that his paradigm is incomplete and thus worth less than the complete form of beauty it is meant to represent. Having incorrectly perceived reality, Narcissus's admission of the image's true nature would, in turn, suggest that his intelligence and perception are incomplete. As long as the reflection remains, he can live in the illusion that he is beautiful, and therefore, significant because the one who loves him fits his paradigm and therefore reaffirms his own life.

Moby-Dick also highlights this struggle with incompleteness, impotence, and insignificance. Ishmael not only suggests that we are all Narcissus grasping for "the ungraspable phantom of life," but adds that all men are slaves, "one way or other served . . . in a physical or metaphysical point of view" with sorrow and the "universal thump" (Melville 20-21). Later, Ishmael makes man's impotent nature explicit when he suggests that "no man can ever feel his own identity aright except his eyes be closed; as if darkness were indeed the proper element of our essences, though light be more congenial to our clayey part" (58). Perhaps the "clayey part" leads men to seek light because of its ability to illuminate mysteries and add understanding of the terrifying unknown. But Ishmael bleakly suggests that the essence of men's identities is darkness with its accompanying connotations of emptiness, nothingness, and meaninglessness.

Captain Ahab actually identifies himself with that darkness, that void of light, when in his purposely blasphemous speech in Chapter 119, "The Candles," he rails against God or whatever force is the personified impersonal: "Light though thou be, thou leapest out of darkness; but I am darkness leaping out of light, leaping out of thee!" (383). Ahab may have been created by that "light," but darkness is his essence. Ahab is such an intriguing and compelling character because he not only knows darkness is his essence, but rhetorically tries to make his darkness equal with and a means to power over the "light."

This chapter in particular illustrates Ahab's constant efforts throughout the novel to erase the distance between God and himself. Ahab challenges God's omniscience and omnipotence claiming he knows from whom he is born while God does not since He is "unbegotten." In so doing, he mocks God's omnipotence, first challenging it, "I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself," and then finishing the statement by oxymoronically addressing Him with "oh, thou omnipotent" (383). He anthropomorphizes God by suggesting that He, like Ahab, is a "hermit immemorial" who has His own "incommunicable riddle" and "unparticipated grief" (Melville 383). Although Ahab does not say what the riddle and grief are, he implies that since God does not know from whence He was begotten, He, like Ahab and mankind, does not know the source and nature of His own identity. In so doing, Ahab projects his own issues onto God, seeing God as the sense of beauty that he wants for himself but which will not merge with his self and thereby becomes his enemy.

Narcissism as Self-Worship

Ahab's blasphemous defiance against the personified impersonal represents an attempt to make himself equal with that force. As a Narcissus character, Ahab here illustrates how in trying to create their real selves in the image of their imagined selves, Narcissus and Ahab essentially worship their imagined selves. If "worship" in essence means to revere and emulate something because it is has worth, then the effort to emulate one's self-image means narcissism is effectively a worship of the self-image and an effort to affirm its worth. Sensing the self's lack, the self envisions a self-image which it can look to as the end and means of becoming more complete, powerful, and significant. Within the imagery of the narrative, to embrace the imagined self is, in a figurative sense, to embrace its beauty and create a more powerful and significant identity. Since the image on the water is literally a reflection of the self, the reflection illustrates that the love of the self-image becomes a love of the self.

In essence, as Narcissus, and by extension Ahab, worships and believes his self-image will redeem him from his impotence and insignificance, he "becomes his own god, and from that substitution comes not only his woe but also the emptiness of his experience" (Barkan 48).[6] He

[6] The myth explicitly supports this worship of the beautiful self-image as an idol. In the 1773 translation, Narcissus's beauty is described in terms of the gods, Bacchus and Apollo, as though Narcissus had fallen in love

has essentially put his faith in the way he sees himself, but since he is unable to embrace the reflection, his effort perpetuates his fears by illustrating that his faith is misplaced in an object that is without substance or power.

Narcissus Sacrificing the Other to Worship the Self

Consequently, Narcissus's rejection of the other becomes an attempt to affirm the self, an effort to separate the sacred self from the profane other. Rather than admit his weakness, when Narcissus finds that which reflects his own vision of himself, in which he is powerful enough and perceptive enough to understand the world and be loved, he fixes his gaze and holds to this source of meaning religiously lest he become meaningless in a chaotic world.[7] Narcissus protects himself and his paradigm from defilement by controlling what he will accept as "other" and limiting it to that which reinforces his paradigm. He accepts the flattery and praise of the suitors because these support his image of superiority without requiring him to give something in return. Narcissus is attracted to Echo's words, which are his own repeated, until he realizes that although the words fit his paradigm of beauty, the source does not. Even his love for his reflection, which he first believes is another person, represents this need for reinforcement of his paradigm and self-worth by the other. However, even the true nature of the reflection is rejected when discovered, and Narcissus clings to the paradigm which he has created.

Narcissus's definition of beauty and personal meaning depends on those attributes which establish his individuality, or in other words, give his particular self a worth that distinguishes him from others. That others desire Narcissus could suggest to him that he is significant. But to accept the entreaties of the other would be to place himself under their influence, thereby undermining his imagined position of superiority with its sense of power and significance. Thus, to love another would require him to submit himself, which he is apparently unwilling to do unless what he receives in return fits his paradigm. Therefore, Narcissus scorns the suitors to reassert his paradigm by demonstrating that they do not have power over him while he is significant enough to them that he has the power to hurt them by his rejection. In this way, his fear of impotence and meaninglessness motivates his pride and his pride motivates his efforts to maintain his paradigm of being separate and individual, something of worth.

Further manifesting his self-aggrandizing pride, Narcissus tries to demonstrate that he has gone through more pain than any other lover. To suffer both reaffirms his existence and his sense of meaning. That someone makes him suffer means someone or some power considers him meaningful enough to them to make him suffer, although the source of his suffering must fit his paradigm of beauty for him to acknowledge the pain. When Narcissus asks the trees if anyone has suffered as much as he has, he is essentially attempting to give his self meaning by asserting the individuality and superiority of his suffering. For if his suffering is individual and superior, then this means he has power over everything else in at least one way. Thus, even his pain becomes a means of creating and preserving the paradigm he imagines for himself.

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with his beauty because it was god-like (*Ovid's Metamorphoses* 103). Because the gods represent the highest forms of power and beauty, invoking them to represent Narcissus's reflection's beauty suggests Narcissus would have seen the image as the paragon of beauty. And its power over Narcissus would then represent the attendant power of ultimate beauty which Narcissus imagines for himself.

[7] This notion of the sacred and profane comes from the work of Mircea Eliade. Eliade found in comparing various religious traditions that most believed that establishing and then holding to a "center" was a means of distinguishing and differentiating the sacred from the profane in order to transcend the chaotic incomprehensibility and meaninglessness of the profane. Eliade uses these concepts extensively throughout his writings, but his most important works on the subject are *The Myth of the Eternal Return* and *The Sacred and Profane*.

Narcissus also transmutes the other into a means for obtaining his own purposes. Echo and the other suitors support Narcissus's self-image of separateness and superiority and even Narcissus's reflection becomes a means of fulfilling his desire and validating his self-worth. He actually senses the other as another being when he begins to think about its frustrations. However, even after recognizing the nature of the reflection, the self-image as other still becomes a means of perpetuating Narcissus's self-deception and sense of reality.

Yet, by showing that others are worth less than he is, Narcissus unknowingly and ironically relies on the other for his self-worth. Trying to remain separate from that which is not his paradigm becomes not only a reaction to but an indirect acknowledgment of the other. And in fearing the other, he demonstrates that he fears that to accept the other which does not fit his sense of beauty would diminish his self by not living up to his paradigm.

Ironically, Narcissus's turning to the trees to have his pain validated illustrates that the self requires a relationship to the world outside the self to make meaning. Similarly, Narcissus's reaching for his image demonstrates that the self can only be validated and sense that validity by comparison with the other. For example, Narcissus cannot understand his own pain without contrasting his own with that of other lovers. Likewise, Narcissus literally cannot know himself until he finally sees the other (even though it is merely his reflection) as the other. That the acceptable other is himself illustrates, however, that his reality has only been himself. In his solipsism, he has rejected the other because it is not like his worshipped self-image, but subsequently has rejected the only real possibility to meaning and significance. Thus the image's insubstantiality literally illustrates that his obsession with himself means that his self has no connection to the real world and therefore no real substance.

Ahab Sacrificing the Other to Worship the Self

The novel's allusions to King Ahab, the worst and most notorious idolater in the Bible, make clear the characterization of Captain Ahab as an idolater and highlight how King Ahab and Captain Ahab parallel Narcissus's rejection of the other as the other and sacrificing others to his imagined self. Melville scholars have long seen similarities in the two Ahabs' rebellion against the Judeo-Christian God,[8] noting for example, that both Ahabs defy and blaspheme deity and are tyrants over their stewardships: one a captain of a ship, the other a king of a nation. And these parallels between the two would have been obvious to Melville's contemporary readers since "most Americans knew these biblical stories just as they knew classical mythology, so that names like Ahab and Ishmael immediately translated meaning" (Coffler 109). Yet, the relationship between Captain Ahab's narcissistic impulses and his namesake has, however, been overlooked.

The Old Testament says that King Ahab did "more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him," an editorial summary made after describing Ahab's taking a wife from outside of the covenant, worshipping Baal, and encouraging idolatry among the Israelites by setting up altars and groves to false gods (1 Kings 16:33). Each sin in this list refers in some way to idolatry, and Melville was not only an astute reader who would have seen these parallels, but he invokes the idea of idolatry in various ways throughout the novel. Certainly the rebellion inherent in King Ahab's rebuffing Jehovah's command to relinquish Naboth's vineyard; seeking to kill his agent, Elijah; and engaging in and spreading idol worshipping parallels Captain Ahab's rejecting God's assertion of power over him; seeking to kill his agent, Moby Dick; and engaging in a maniacal self-worship.

[8] Two of the most famous examinations of the biblical allusions in *Moby-Dick* are Lawrance Thompson's *Melville's Quarrel with God* and Nathalia Wright's *Melville's Use of the Bible*.

The Problem with Jezebel

King Ahab's wife, however, represents a potential problem in comparing King Ahab with Captain Ahab because the biblical text portrays Queen Jezebel as a stronger character than King Ahab and the instigator of the more heinous crimes in the narrative.[9] She "stirred up" Ahab to idolatry such that he invited the worship of Baal and of groves into Israel (1 Kings 21:25-26).[10] It is Jezebel who primarily opposes Elijah the Tishbite, the prophet of Jehovah, and orders the murder of Jehovah's prophets. King Ahab follows Elijah's instructions after he kills the prophets of Baal while Jezebel is the one who threatens to murder Elijah, and the narrative even depicts Elijah as somewhat frightened by her threats.[11] Finally, while the narrative represents Ahab as whiny and incompetent because Naboth will not sell him his vineyard, Jezebel is the one who conceives the plan to take Naboth's vineyard and arranges for the witnesses to falsely testify against Naboth. As Jerome Walsh notes, "Only when the two [false witnesses] send their report to the queen does all come clear to the reader: she must have engineered the entire operation" (198).

Despite Jezebel's influence the Old Testament writers curiously state that King Ahab "did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him" and "did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him" (1 Kings 16:30, 34). These are significant statements seeing that Saul, David, and Solomon each incurred Jehovah's wrath, and Jeroboam and his descendents extend their personal unrighteousness into the social sphere by "[making] Israel to sin" through the establishment of idols (see 1 Kings 12:25-33, 14:16, 16:19). Perhaps Ahab's sin was primarily in consenting to the marriage which led to these sins or conceding to his wife's demands and letting her run the country in a society where patriarchy is not only the norm but part of the religious code. Or perhaps Ahab's evil was to increase the worship of pagan idols in Israel by adding Baal and the groves and the fertility rites associated with these. Ultimately, the Old Testament narrative says that the curse upon Ahab and his household and dynasty comes from Ahab's doing "very abominably in following idols" and selling "himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kings 21:25-26). What is clear is that Melville centers his allusions on King Ahab's being responsible for his own sins and for the sins of Israel, the core component of which was inviting idolatry into the kingdom.

Transmuting the Other

The biblical Ahab worships several gods; however, he does not reject Jehovah and even appeals to him at times for prophetic inspiration or fasts to prevent Jehovah from killing him (1 Kings 21:27). King Ahab even names his son Ahaziah after a variation of Jehovah.[12] But King Ahab's worshipping multiple gods does not stem from a belief in these gods, merely a desire to maintain a public image of piety, to protect his interests against the wrath of any one god, and to appease them so that he can accomplish his own desires, like marrying a Phoenecian princess, building an ivory palace, releasing the Syrian King, or taking Naboth's vineyard. Consequently

[9] Robert Cohn also suggests that Jezebel "is the real power behind the throne" (341).

[10] Cohn believes that the prophets of the groves who eat at Jezebel's table (1 Kings 18:19) serve Asherah. Generally considered the queen of heaven, Asherah would seem likely since Baal means lord and was frequently worshiped by pagan communities as the lord of heaven. There is the possibility however, that Ashtoreth is invoked here since she is both a pagan goddess mentioned frequently in the Old Testament and since "Ashtoreth was the goddess generally worshipped along with Baal" ("Bible Dictionary" 618). Moreover, her fertility rites were frequently performed in groves.

[11] See Cohn (345).

[12] *Ahaziah* means "the Lord upholds"; in this case Lord being the English translation for Jehovah ("Bible Dictionary" 605).

King Ahab believes that he can defy Jehovah at times because he has enlisted the aid of multiple other gods. Conceptually, Ahab blasphemes Jehovah and the other gods he worships by transmuting them into pawns of his own desires. Like Narcissus, King Ahab uses the ideal other, in this case images of the god represented by physical idols, to support his own paradigm and achieve his own self-interests. Just as the physical representations of the gods are typically a means to the real power of the gods, the gods become means to the beautiful self which King Ahab sees in his imagination.

The Old Testament sense of idolatry which Melville invokes through the allusion to King Ahab thus illustrates that all idolatry stems from a desire to emulate one's own self-image and desires, a form of self-idolatry. While Captain Ahab could be seen as worshipping fire in Chapter 119, "The Candles," Ishmael's comments about Narcissus suggest it is a worship of himself through the worship of his beautiful self. And here the Old Testament sins of blasphemy and idolatry intertwine. In the Old Testament, to blaspheme Jehovah essentially means to place one's self in God's position, by subverting Jehovah's will by essentially assuming that one's own will is more salient than God's. Both Ahabs blaspheme Jehovah by seeking to bring to life the image they see of themselves, pursuing their own desires and becoming, like Narcissus, gods unto themselves. Thus, Captain Ahab is a "grand, ungodly, god-like man" because he is not godly, but tries to become his own god just like Narcissus (Melville 78).

A Lord Needs Subjects

Captain Ahab makes explicit his blasphemous desire to compare himself to and become like God when he exclaims to Starbuck that "'There is one God that is Lord over the earth, and one Captain that is lord over the Pequod" (Melville 362). But Ahab also suggests in his statement that he recognizes that a lord must have subjects in order to be a lord. Like King Ahab, Captain Ahab transmutes the other for his own personal pursuits. But Ishmael also notes that as the crew of the Pequod draws nearer in its pursuit of Moby Dick, "all the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear; guilt and guiltlessness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to" (415).

But this unification does not happen by chance. Ishmael suggests that "[t]he hand of Fate had snatched all their souls," but he also illustrates time and again throughout the novel that Captain Ahab knows that he must persuade the crew and allow them their fancies, so that when the time comes for his one purpose, his "fatal goal," they will be under his command (415). For most of the crew, Ahab is able to play on their own narcissistic tendencies by baiting them with the wealth of the doubloon; thus, using money, the most commonly desired means to a stronger self, as an idol. In a way, just as King Ahab invited idolatry into the Israel, Captain Ahab invites it onto the Pequod. The crew all sell themselves essentially for their idol, the doubloon, "to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord" just as Captain Ahab has; a curious act, as Ishmael notes, "considering that we so earnestly believe money to be the root of all earthly ills, and that on no account can a monied man enter heaven" (21). What seems a humorous statement to conclude that thought—"Ah! how cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition!"—instead, resonates as a tragic undertone for the rest of the novel (Melville 21).

But Starbuck presents a potential problem to Ahab's personal pursuit. When Starbuck does not fall prey to Ahab's first efforts, Ahab keeps playing off of Starbuck's reactions until he finds the self-idolatrous chink in Starbuck's armor. Like Shakespeare's Iago, who is not what he is, Ahab constantly changes his argument in order to persuade Starbuck to join the quest and thereby protect his quest against the constant threat of mutiny (I.i.65). When Ahab realizes that Starbuck's sensibilities cannot be appealed to through the typical idol of money, he appeals to

Starbuck's intelligence and position as second in command by sharing some of his deeper personal intentions and metaphysical concerns. When the heat and blasphemous nature of Ahab's zeal makes Starbuck redden and grow pale, Ahab moves away from discussing the personal and metaphysical nature of his quest. He contradicts his previously stated deeper personal purposes by merely enlisting Starbuck "to help strike a fin" and flatters him that this is "no wondrous feat for Starbuck" (Melville 140). It is after Ahab's appeal to Starbuck's personal vision of himself as courageous, part of the crew, and "the best lance out of all Nantucket" that Ahab learns what moves Starbuck to yield: his ideal ego. In essence, Ahab appeals to Starbuck's personal efforts to realize his self-image in order to achieve his own, but Ahab reveals his self-centered will to power and his transmuting Starbuck into his personal tool when he proclaims that "Starbuck is now mine" (140).

Ahab Gains Self-Knowledge

In one of the novel's clearest allusions to Narcissus, as Chapter 132, "The Symphony," opens, Ahab "lean[s] over the side, and watch[es] how his shadow in the water [sinks] and [sinks] to his gaze, the more and the more that he [strives] to pierce the profundity" (405). Here Ahab gains self-knowledge as he reflects upon his life and his identity. He turns to Starbuck and laments that his life has been a "desolation of solitude" as he has made "war on the horrors of the deep." As he thinks of his wife and the pain he has caused her, he realizes he's been "more a demon than a man," a "forty years' fool—fool—old fool." As he looks in "the magic glass" of Starbuck's eye, Ahab begins to see the other as the other instead of merely as a means to himself.

Instead of Narcissus who says he knows himself after contemplating his reflection's frustrations, Ahab's true self-knowledge comes when he asks, "Is Ahab, Ahab?" thereby noting the very difference which separates Narcissus from his image (406). Here in his moment of self-recognition Ahab verbalizes the fundamental problem of identity and the theme of Narcissus: is who I am, the "I" which I imagine, anticipate, and know? In other words, Ahab wants to know if the Ahab that he is now, in this moment, is the Ahab he imagines. But Ahab cannot answer the question. The water and the globe, "to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self . . . [and] great pains, small gains for those who ask the world to solve them; it cannot solve itself" (332). The world cannot solve the problem of identity, at least not as Ahab perceives it, because it merely reflects back his own self; he sees himself in everything, and therefore everything becomes his self. Unlike Ishmael who tells the reader to call him Ishmael, Ahab did not name himself but has sought to create his identity in the image he desires. He has spent his life trying to find answers, to solve himself, and now realizes he cannot. But like Narcissus, Ahab is not self-ignorant—he knows himself by realizing that he does not know himself, and he finds himself just as lost as before.

Ahab's question acknowledges that even the verbal silence between the speaking of the first Ahab and second Ahab in his question represents the physical distance and fundamental difference between the two: the impossibility of creating what he imagines. Like Narcissus who rejects this self-knowledge, Ahab chooses to maintain the illusion rather than adapt after so many lost years. Ahab fights past his question and in the midst of the chase tells Starbuck not to show him his eye, lest Ahab see the other as the other again. Instead, Ahab asserts that "Ahab is for ever, Ahab" and that his crew "are not other men, but [his] arms and [his] legs" (418, 423). Thus, like Narcissus, by reasserting the illusion, Ahab proclaims that there is no disconnect between what he is and what he wants to be (Melville 423).

Melville's Changes: Asserting the Self and Negating the Other

Despite the many similarities between Narcissus and Captain Ahab, Melville changes the myth in two important ways. First, he explicitly gives it an allegorical meaning through Ishmael ascribing the problem of narcissism to everyone. This establishes the imagery of the myth as Melville's primary heuristic for examining how men use imaginings to escape impotence and meaninglessness. By extending the "ungraspable image of life" to all men, Melville suggests that the Narcissus myth allegorically represents mankind's tendency to imagine and desire images of beauty that are beyond their grasp. Like the "ocean reveries" that Ishmael says thousands of men see in water, the ungraspable phantom represents the seductively elusive fantasies which we use to understand and give meaning to ourselves and the world. Dennis Williams in his Lacanian reading of the novel notes a similar impulse within the novel and real experience:

> From a Lacanian perspective, "reality"—the "facts" of everyday, empirical existence—is subtended by various fantasy projections. That is, fundamental fantasies "frame" our experience and thus determine, in large part, what we will or can consider as meaningfully "real." (75)

As noted earlier, Melville focuses his discussion of the use of fantasies to frame reality on the tension between Narcissus and his reflection, between the self and the imagined self. For Melville "the ungraspable phantom of life" which Narcissus sees in the fountain represents a kind of ideal self that becomes the central means to construct an identity and interpret reality and meaning. Melville thus extends to all mankind the desire to embrace beauty as a means of creating a meaningful identity.

Moreover, by identifying the phantom as something all mankind wants to grasp and possess, but also a reflection of the self, Melville illustrates that a core problem in making meaning and identity has been the tendency to translate being into possession, and possession into power. Dennis Williams also sees *Moby-Dick* questioning core assumptions about identity and suggests it "requires a thinking of the 'self' in terms other than that of 'substance,' its formal categorization in Western culture at least since Descartes (the self as *res cogitans*, a thinking *thing*), and implicitly since Plato and Aristotle" (67). Here Melville's imagery of the "ungraspable phantom" is particularly apt because it questions the notion of identity and self as things. By questioning the "thinginess" of the self, Melville questions translating the self's completeness into a sense of possession where the complete self *possesses* some object, quality, or ability more than the current self. In this logic, one must simply increase one's possessions in order to *be* a certain identity. Whether we seek to possess a certain type or number of qualities and possessions, we imagine that what one possesses is what one is. Consequently, the self wants to escape the being of the current self by possessing the other imagined self. The complete self becomes the paragon of beauty and is invested with a power that the current self does not have. But Melville insightfully notes that the phantom of life is ungraspable: men feel they must grasp some quality in order to feel like they have embraced the being of their desires—but being and identity are not something that one accumulates.

Another problem with translating being into possession is that in increasing one's own possession there is a sense that one must diminish the possessions available to others. Possession typically requires juxtaposition with something else in order for the object in question to have worth. For everyone to have the same possession would be, in the world that has been imagined and which Melville interrogates, to diminish the individuality of what one possesses and therefore make it worth less than desired. Ultimately, rather than accept this worthlessness, we may make one last effort in order to preserve the self.

Here then Melville makes his second important change to Ovid's version of the myth by saying that Narcissus "plunged into [the fountain] and was drowned" instead of incessantly pining for the image and ultimately withering away as found in Ovid (Melville 20). Gerard Sweeney believes this change may have been prompted in part by Melville's reading of Plotinus (90).[13] Melville's acquaintance with Plotinus "can be stated as a strong conjecture" based on his interest in the Eleusinian mysteries and his probable reading of Thomas Taylor whose work on the mysteries addresses Plotinus's interpretation of the myth extensively. In one such reference, Plotinus discusses "the attainment of Platonic Beauty and the perilous attraction of pseudo-realities, of beautiful corporeal forms" (Sweeney 90). Plotinus suggests that:

> For he who rushes to these lower beauties, as if grasping realities when they are only like beautiful images appearing in the water, will, doubtless, like him in the fable, by stretching after the shadow, sink into the lake, and disappear. For, by thus embracing and adhering to corporeal forms, he is precipitated, not so much in his body, as in his soul, into profound and horrid darkness; and thus blind, like those in the infernal regions, converses only with phantoms, deprived of the perception of what is real and true. (Sweeney 90)

Many of the words and concepts here introduced have a strong similarity to those used in the novel. But there are two important differences. First, in Plotinus the corporeal forms are the phantoms, whereas in Melville the phantoms are primarily formed in the imagination. There are instances in the novel where corporeal objects in the water are described as phantoms, but these typically become figurative representations of the dangerous, and often destructive, unknown.

Secondly, Plotinus describes Narcissus's grasping after the image as accidental and unpremeditated. He suggests that since Narcissus loses a kind of spiritual depth perception, he is unable to perceive what is real and true and thereby plunges accidentally into darkness. In Melville's version, however, there is a sense that Narcissus may have consciously chosen to plunge into the water. Suzanne Stein also sees this possibility when she notes that "the syntax of the passage [in *Moby-Dick*] leaves ambiguous whether he drowns in despair of reaching the image or in pursuit of it" (33). If, however, Narcissus and Ahab are doubles, then when juxtaposed with the manner of Ahab's death, Narcissus's plunging into the fountain becomes a choice to die rather than continue to be tormented. In this way, having known his insignificance and his lack of perception and intelligence, Narcissus would rather perpetuate the image than admit its insubstantiality and his impotence.

Ishmael's word choice in the allusion to Narcissus is significant for understanding the obsessive passion driving Ahab's quest and his ultimate decision to die rather than submit to his tormentor. Ishmael specifically notes that Narcissus does not plunge into the fountain because the image would not let him grasp it, but because *he* could not grasp the image. Similarly, Ahab is tormented as he hunts Moby Dick because he chooses to pursue the whale, not because the whale pursues him. Starbuck cries out to Ahab on the third day of the chase, with the white whale "now only intent upon pursuing his own straight path in the sea," that "Moby Dick seeks thee not . . . It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!" (Melville 423). But for Ahab, like Narcissus with the image, the whale must have a meaning and an agency lest Ahab's energies and suffering mean nothing.

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[13] Plotinus is not listed among the writers in Merlon Sealts Jr.'s *Melville's Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed*. However, this listing has been revised several times since its publication and it is presumed that Sealts agreed with Sweeney's findings based on the fact that Sweeney first published them in his dissertation work which was directed by Sealts.

Fighting For the Self to the End

Melville's version of the Narcissus myth suggests that in spite of the fear of death and the unknown that follows, Ahab as Narcissus is ultimately willing to merge with the image of the self even if it requires death. Ironically, Ahab prophesies his own death when he tells the crew that Moby Dick shall drown; "For ere they drown, drowning things will twice rise to the surface; then rise again, to sink for evermore" (Melville 418). Ahab has sunk twice in his two whale boats and will drown following his third rowing-out to kill the whale.

Ahab knows that the portents foretelling his death have come to pass and even at that point he chooses to fight the whale rather than admit his defeat. Ahab acknowledges to Starbuck that his life has been misdirected and therefore wasted. But he later reasserts his purpose in part to drive out of himself the fear which he "valiantly seek[s] to drive out of others' hearts" (419). He tells the billowing sea to pour in the billows of his "whole foregone life," in this sense all the suffering he has faced, and to "top this one piled comber of [his] death" so that he can prove "the unconquerable captain in [his] soul" (426). Moreover, the "all-destroying but unconquering whale" and its master may destroy everything in his life, but Ahab will not let it conquer him (426). Here Melville portrays Ahab as an inverted Christ figure whose last words mimic Christ's last words but are baptized in the name of the devil. By making Ahab a Christ figure that fights against an "all-destroying but unconquering" beast, Melville may be suggesting that Ahab will try to win by dying (426). Ahab will fight to the end rather than capitulate to the white whale and Heaven, as though seeking to become his own savior, and thus, he would rather make the choice to die than let the whale make that choice for him.

Although Ahab speaks of the ship as though it were another being, it reflects the same qualities that Ahab sees of himself; it's "uncracked keel; and only god-bullied hull . . . firm deck, and haughty helm, and Pole-pointed prow" (426). Like Narcissus, Ahab invests an inanimate object with agency and makes it a double of what he wants to be in order to give himself a meaningful identity. Here the Pequod represents Ahab's reflection, the identity he imagines and desires; its keel unbroken and its prow unswervingly pointing to the pole, just as the Captain's resolve remains unbroken but straight and true to his purpose even though his hull is "god-bullied" (426). Just as Narcissus will only accept his god, the beautiful image he imagines for himself, to torment him, so Ahab will only accept God as his bully. And Ishmael continues this personification of the ship as Ahab's reflection by describing it as a phantom and "gaseous Fata Morgana" or mirage.

Just as Narcissus needed the trees to listen to his grief, Ahab needs the ship to listen to his pain. As Ahab realizes the Pequod will perish, he asks the ship, his last friend ironically made of trees, if he is to be "cut off from the last fond pride of meanest shipwrecked captains" (426). Ahab is essentially asking the personified wood if he is not more persecuted than other captains since he is denied the common right to die with the ship. Like Narcissus who derives meaning from feeling persecuted, Ahab needs to personify the ship so that it can desert him and he see himself as living a "lonely death on lonely life" (426).

Moreover, just as Narcissus holds fast to his image even as he dies, Ishmael's final description of the Pequod finds Tashtego "nailing the flag [of Ahab] faster and yet faster to the subsiding spar" even as the crew and ship are drowning, thus, maintaining the characterization of tragic Ahab, his crew an extension of Ahab's will, holding fast to his purpose in the midst of "destroying billows" (Melville 426). And like Narcissus continuing to stare at the image as he dies, Ishmael notes that "the pagan harpooners still maintained their sinking lookouts on the sea" as everything disappears into the water (426).

Here Ahab's death may also be an effort to negate the power of God. By sacrificing his own life, Ahab can prevent God from working His will on Ahab through the whale, thereby defying God's exercise of will upon him. By taking the whale's life, Ahab, like Satan and Ahab's ship, "would not sink to hell till [he] had dragged a living part of heaven along with [him]" (427). Ahab knows he's going to hell but "from hell's heart" will still stab at the whale (426). In a sense, Ahab as an inverted Christ will still affirm that he can atone for himself and give himself meaning by "giving up the spear" in one final act of defiance (426). Ahab blasphemously tries to make himself a god and therefore dies on the third day of the chase unable to resurrect himself with life, again continuing his characterization as an inverted Christ.

Thus, by changing the myth so that Narcissus drowns because he plunged into the water, Melville foreshadows the ending in which Ahab will also drown. But because Ahab knows that he will die and goes to his death willingly, there is a strong sense that in Melville's version Narcissus makes the choice to drown, which in turn makes Ahab's and Narcissus's efforts to hold onto their self-images more explicit. Rather than pine away, Ahab makes the choice to affirm his will and prevent God from conquering him. By choosing to go to his death, Ahab essentially takes his own life; he will give up the spear, not have it taken from him. And life is the only thing left which Ahab can give to defy deity and sacrifice to his idol. His choice to die is the ultimate example of fear of the void but, paradoxically, the ultimate rebellion against that fear: rather than acknowledge his impotence and insignificance, he will continue fighting to prove the opposite. That Ahab and Narcissus know their impotence and yet still plunge into the fountain, if a conscious suicidal act, becomes an effort to negate the power of the other and a final sacrifice to the god they have imagined: themselves.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has examined the myth of Narcissus as the primary heuristic for interpreting Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In Chapter One of the novel, Melville describes the universal impulse to imagine identities and worlds which can provide one with a greater sense of power, meaning, and worth. But Melville illustrates throughout the novel, particularly through Captain Ahab, how the effort to make meaning for one's self and to realize this self-image and its self-centered paradigm in the real world essentially becomes a worship of the imagined self. Melville uses the allusions to Narcissus throughout *Moby-Dick* to show how the effort to bridge the difference between the real self and the imagined meaning and identity can become so consuming that we sacrifice ourselves and others to the worship of this ideal self.

Ultimately, however, Melville demonstrates that we are faced with a paradox: we want to appropriate power and meaning to ourselves through the emulation of the imagined self, but because of the very impotence we are trying to escape, recreating what we imagine is a fundamental impossibility. And Ahab's sense of his own inability to interpret the world around him, and the implicit idea of a void in the self which men seek to fill, goes beyond Melville's own imaginings. It is embedded deep within Western culture from Christian figures like Augustine and Calvin to 20th century thinkers like Freud. Melville suggests through the novel that the universe as conceived by his culture is a veiled power struggle. He uses Captain Ahab as the logical extreme of one who pushes the limits of that struggle first to understand it, and in understanding, gain power within the struggle. And here Melville's sense of narcissism prefigures a Nietzschean will to power. Through the Narcissus allusions, the novel interrogates the kinds of power that humans impute both to themselves and to God to create a world *for* themselves, and thus reveals the inherent narcissism and solipsism that animates our will to power. The focus of Narcissus's and Ahab's energies on just one idea actually manifests the

intensity of this universal desire to have power and purpose, for their megalomania is only one step removed from anyone who wants something so dearly that they simply won't let go. Thus, through the novel and the allusions to Narcissus, Melville holds up a mirror for readers to confront the ways in which we participate in reducing "[r]eality . . . to the content of one's perceptions" (Van Croumphout 27).

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