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### "There is a wisdom that is woe": Knowledge through Narrative in Milton, Coleridge, and Melville

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

“There is a wisdom that is woe”: Knowledge through Narrative in Milton, Coleridge, and  
Melville

submitted by

Bridget Reilly 2016

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2016

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For my sisters whom I love.

## Introduction

Before beginning his account of the war in heaven, Raphael pauses and considers the task at hand. Overwhelmed with the magnitude of his sublime subject and in full awareness that language cannot fully capture the event he seeks to narrate, Raphael exclaims, “Sad task and hard, for how shall I relate/ To human sense th’ invisible exploits/ Of warring spirits [?]” (V.563-566). Indeed, this question is not only Raphael’s, but also John Milton’s. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton grapples with how to communicate the ineffable using an imperfect language, and wonders what this inevitably faulty communication is good for. These problems have resonated for writers who have grappled with the sublime during the centuries following *Paradise Lost*. Milton’s most notable successors, in this regard, have been Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Herman Melville. The Romantic poet and antebellum novelist not only wrestled with the same problems Milton faced: they also built upon and amended the solutions Milton tentatively offered through Raphael. Like Raphael, all three authors wish to describe some sublime thing and to articulate what they feel and think about it. Like Raphael, they know that the language they must use will not perfectly fulfill their task. While Milton hopes to render the wonders of heaven, the bliss of Eden, and the horrors of Hell, Coleridge seeks to describe a surreal act of violence and the supernatural events that ensue as a result of it. Melville, finally, wishes to relate a sublime experience in the natural world. Despite the magnitude of their subjects and the acknowledged imperfection of their medium, all three authors resolve, as Ishmael puts it, to “explain” themselves “in some dim random way” (159). Raphael’s question and the resolution that Milton, Coleridge, and Melville offer in sequence are at the core of this project. In the following thesis, I will examine how each author uses his narrator to grapple with the

inadequacies of language, but also to articulate and define the benefits of telling stories—benefits that emerge not despite the shortcomings of language, but because of them.

Many critics have investigated the connections between Milton and Coleridge, Coleridge and Melville, and Milton and Melville; this scholarship will be discussed in great detail in the chapters that follow. However, no one has addressed all three authors in tandem. Nor has anyone triangulated them in a discussion about a specific rhetorical problem. Milton is the first of my trinity who attempts to tackle this problem, and, indeed, he establishes a baseline regarding the limits of narrative—but also its potential benefits—which his followers generally agree on and build upon. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton explores the benefits and the value of his fallible medium through the angel Raphael. Nostalgically looking back at Eden, Milton examines how narrative must have functioned in a perfect world, and then asks what purpose it might continue to serve after that world has been lost. In the dialogues between Raphael and Adam that occupy most of books V-VIII, Milton demonstrates that the ambiguities endemic to language can shield both teller and audience from the horror of absolute knowledge. For Raphael and Adam the tendency of language to distort its subject is necessary because it saves them from understanding completely the evil of Satan's sin. As an alternative to this knowledge, Raphael provides a narrative that sparks the imagination, generates an exchange that creates community between the speakers, and encourages a discursive thought process in which the mind revisits and revises past assumptions and topics, and then wanders off to find new ones. Although Raphael offers these benefits to the innocent Edenic couple, Milton wants his fallen reader to know that they are still applicable in the postlapsarian world, though to different ends. Within Eden, narrative acts as an alternative to eating the fruit and as a preventative measure against that mistake. After the fall, by

way of contrast, narrative offers a compensation for the trouble of everyday existence. While the exchange of stories cannot help the poet or the reader live perfectly, it can help them live well.

For Milton, living well in the fallen world entailed finding redemption in the scriptures. Through the archangel Michael, with whom Adam converses in books XI-XII, Milton offers an additional way that narrative can ease postlapsarian life. After the fall, the ambiguity endemic to language is no longer extolled for shielding the teller and listener from the knowledge of good and evil; rather, ambiguity enables the fallen human to hope. While Milton clearly establishes the benefits of narrative in the fallen world, all exchanges within *Paradise Lost* are marked by a certain anxiety. No matter how wonderful it might be, narrative fails to prevent the fall, and it cannot help us re-achieve an Edenic State afterwards, without God's help.

This anxiety inevitably bleeds into the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, on whom I focus in the second chapter of this thesis. Initially, in his "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge seems to depart from his predecessor by denying the inherent fallibility of language: he appears to depict the exact and perfect conveyance of knowledge through narrative. Unfortunately, the picture he paints is far from encouraging: the exchange that occurs between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest destroys, rather than creates community, and seems to strip both teller and audience of their volition. Despite this dismal conclusion, Coleridge nonetheless manages to articulate a new benefit—not considered by Milton—to the mediation of language. By placing a highly dubious explanatory gloss in the margin of his poem, Coleridge prompts his reader to engage critically with the text. Coleridge's implied reader freely questions the poem before her. She does not passively absorb the significance of the Mariner's tale, as the Wedding-Guest does; instead, she consciously decides how to make meaning of it. This type of interaction with the text marks a change in the stakes of narrative. In *Paradise Lost*, Raphael encourages

Adam and Eve to consciously align their will with the will of God. Within Paradise, this state of submission is mutually beneficial, and can indeed be seen as embodying a kind of freedom. God has willing subjects and in return those subjects have everything they need and a surprising amount of latitude to do as they please. The one limitation of course is that they cannot eat the fruit of one tree. After the fall, this idyllic state of freedom is completely lost and Milton offers no productive alternative beyond the submission that Michael counsels. Coleridge's depiction of the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest is clearly concerned with the consequences of the fall on human freewill. By deciding how to make meaning of a text Coleridge's reader embraces her ability to make choices as an autonomous individual, a solution that Milton never offers. It is this autonomy that Melville's Ishmael will assert to the fullest in *Moby-Dick*. While Milton and Coleridge look nostalgically back to Eden, Melville most certainly does not. Unconcerned with what has been, and by no means anxious over lost perfection, Melville fully embraces the shortcomings of language and reveals how narrative can help us to live—not just well, but happily.

While Melville, the focus of chapter three, deals with Miltonic conceptions of the divine and the Coleridgian supernatural, he also grapples with the terror of a sublime located in the real world. Like his predecessors, Melville establishes two models for how to grapple with a sublime subject. In Ahab we see one way of dealing with the terrifying and unknown: to violently strike at it. Ishmael, however, offers an alternative. Ishmael, who is both the teller of his own experience and a member of Ahab's audience, employs both the strategies of Coleridge's implied reader and Milton's Raphael to deal with the terrors he has witnessed. That is to say, he critically contemplates the world around him and he acknowledges the value of the sociable benefits that narrative can provide. For Ishmael the shortcomings of language, along with his

acknowledgement of his own imperfect intellect, are finally encouraging. They lead him to happily craft a narrative in which he repeatedly strives to understand what cannot be understood. Ishmael's thought processes and method of narration riff on an idea that Milton subtly hints at and that Coleridge touches upon: that the ambiguity of language does not prevent understanding, but rather encourages the mind to strive constantly for better understanding. Ishmael uses narrative not to shield himself from absolute knowledge, for this does not exist on the Melvillian seas, but to shield himself from earthly trauma. Despite the horrors he has witnessed, Ishmael uses the failings of language to muster something his predecessors never can: laughter. Indeed, Ishmael's comedy is Melville's unique addition the dialogue Milton began in *Paradise Lost*.

**Chapter I**  
**“For while I sit with thee I seem in Heav’n”:**  
**Fellowship and Hope through Narrative in Milton’s *Paradise Lost***

**Introduction:**

In book five of *Paradise Lost*, the poet speaker hands the narrative reins of the poem to the angel Raphael. Raphael descends from heaven under divine orders to warn the Edenic pair of the threat Satan poses and to remind them of their ability to freely reject temptation. In the next three books, Raphael goes above and beyond his didactic orders by indulging in his own creative caprice. First, he embarks on an extended narration of the epic war in heaven. Later, at Adam’s bequest, he relates a fanciful account of creation. Eventually, his narration evolves into a fraught discussion of celestial space and the nature of love in Eden and in Heaven. Raphael’s narrative and conversation with Adam are as problematic as they are imaginative and have often caused great consternation for critics and readers alike. At times, Raphael entertains rather than teaches. His narratives are confusing more than they are helpful, and his comments routinely challenge the reader’s sensibilities and Milton’s own supposed poetic mission “to justify the ways of God to men” (I.26).

In the following chapter, I will discuss the inadequacies of Raphael’s narrative and the scholarship critical of Milton that they have inspired. Scholars have expertly identified Raphael’s faults; however, they have inadequately analyzed Raphael’s motives and have exaggerated the negative consequences of Raphael’s approach to narrative. At the same time, even as many scholars are quick to condemn Raphael, others give him unwarranted credit. I do not agree, for example, with the commonly held perception, popularized by Barbara Lewalski, that Raphael is

an “ideal prophet” or teacher (39).<sup>1</sup> While Raphael is a teacher, he is not a perfect one and it is his role as a *storyteller* that I am more concerned with. I will suggest that Milton employs the flagrant inadequacies of Raphael’s narrative to demonstrate the value of a figurative and fallible language. Indeed, through Raphael, Milton illustrates approvingly the propensity of language to distort its sublime subject. While this distortion proves problematic in some cases, it also helps to shield both audience and narrator from the perils of absolute knowledge. The abstraction endemic to narrative, furthermore, encourages Adam and the reader to use their imagination to fill the inevitable gaps of language. This tendency encourages creativity and a regenerative thought process in which ideas are revisited, modified, and expanded upon, and from which conversations that create community naturally arise.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, through narrative, Milton creates models for living in both a prelapsarian and a postlapsarian world.

### **Confusion and Hierarchy: The Problems of Raphael’s Effluence**

Throughout Books V-VIII, Raphael consistently stresses the potential pitfalls of his narrative and the fallibility of his voice. Before beginning his tale of the war in heaven, Raphael complains, “sad task and hard, for how shall I relate/ to human sense the invisible exploits/ of warring spirits” (V. 564-566). Often, Raphael appears to succumb to the difficulty of his task. His responses to Adam’s questions spin out of control and the figurative realms his narrative enters appear to confuse matters and Raphael’s audience. Even before beginning his narrative,

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<sup>1</sup> In his “Reformed Eloquence: Inability, Questioning, and Correction in *Paradise Lost*” Ronald W. Cooley argues the angels Raphael and Michael offer alternative “rhetorical models that stand against those offered by Satan and the fallen angels” as they work under “topoi of modesty, and inadequacy, and figures of self questioning,” ultimately proving “model instructors” who do “not merely transmit information,” but also by teaching through example (233). Similarly, in her book *Milton’s Paradise Lost: Moral Education*, Margaret Olofson Thickstun argues that Raphael “parallels the position of Puritan educators, among whom we must place Milton” (107). Thickstun asserts that the creative way in which “Raphael chooses to dramatize in detail parts of the rebellion story” (108), and his conscious descriptions of creation provide Adam with “a version of what happened that” Adam “must ponder and determine how to interpret it himself” (113). While I do not disagree with Cooley or Thickstun I would suggest that the inconsistencies in Raphael’s narrative and his self-conscious pronouncement of the fallibility of language are not as intentional on Raphael’s part as assumed nor are such narrative traits employed solely to create a model for teaching.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of economy, throughout the chapter, I will refer to this thought process as “continuous thinking.”

Raphael puts his foot in his mouth during a discussion with Adam about digestion. As they sit down to an Edenic luncheon, Adam praises Raphael for “willingly” eating earthly food even though Raphael usually indulges his appetite “At Heav’n’s High feast ” (V.466-467). Raphael responds by explaining that Eden is filled with fruits “as may compare with Heaven” and thus “to taste/ Think not I shall be nice!” (V. 432-433). While Raphael could have stopped with this polite comment, he goes off on a metaphysical tangent that has been blamed for instilling in Adam a problematic sense of hierarchy. Describing Adam’s relationship to God, Raphael exclaims,

O Adam! One Almighty is, from whom  
 All things proceed and up to him return  
 If not depraved from good, created all  
 Such to perfection, one first matter all  
 Endued with various forms, various degrees  
 Of substance and in things that live of life,  
 But more refined, more spirituous and pure  
 As nearer to Him placed or nearer trending,  
 Each in their several active spheres assigned  
 Till body up to spirit work in bounds  
 Proportioned to each kind. (V. 470-479)

Within this rigid hierarchy Raphael places God at the uppermost level and explains that all created beings are situated below Him in order of their spiritual purity. Raphael explains that the beings “more spirituous and pure” are “nearer to Him placed.” Raphael’s hierarchy suggests there are varying levels of spiritual enlightenment—and within this hierarchy Raphael suggests

man, although more spiritual than some, is ranked below the angels. While humans reside on earth, the angels occupy the heavenly sphere, which is closer to the divine. While Raphael hints at man's spiritual inferiority, he also tells Adam that all things can "proceed and up to Him return." By using inclusive terminology and emphasizing movement, Raphael seems also to imply that Adam and Eve have the ability to ascend this articulated hierarchy.

Raphael continues to hint at the potential fluidity between the levels of spiritual and intellectual being, as he compares the levels of enlightenment to the body of a flower. He explains,

So from the root  
Springs lighter green stalk, from thence the leaves  
More airy, last the bright consummate flower  
Spirits odorous breathes: flowers and their fruit  
Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublimed  
To vital spirits aspire to animal,  
To intellectual, give both life and sense,  
Fancy understanding, whence the soul  
Reason receives, and reason is her being,  
Discursive or intuitive. (V. 479-488)

In this metaphor, Raphael appears to suggest that the progression from human understanding to the divine is continuous and organic. Using a flower to describe levels of spiritual enlightenment, Raphael suggests that the hierarchy of beings is contained within one mutually dependent entity: i.e. the blossom relies on the root, stems, and leaves. All parts partake of the same nutrients and exist within a single biological structure. This metaphor has dangerous implications for the

hierarchical divisions between God and his creations. It suggests that the divine is dependent on the beings below it and that there is a continuous interaction and exchange between all levels of being. Moreover, the metaphor seems to imply that elevating the self is not only possible, but a natural process. Read in this light, Raphael's hierarchy suggests that the divisions, which separate God from the angels, and angels from humans, can be transcended with impunity.

Raphael's floral metaphor has thus been seen as an encouragement to eat the fruit. Scholars like William Empson suggest that Raphael's metaphor and discussion of digestion instill in Adam a sense of inferiority and indicate he can mitigate it by climbing a ladder of spiritual enlightenment. Empson explains that "at lunch the angel practically" offers Adam and Eve "their wings" (156). Such a reading implicates Raphael in the fall of man, and Empson goes so far as to claim that "Adam and Eve would not have fallen unless God had sent Raphael to talk to them" (147).

While Raphael discusses hierarchy in a confusing and complicated manner, however, he does not intend to trick Adam and Eve, nor does he encourage them to disobey God's wishes. The problems in Raphael's discussion spring from the inevitable shortcomings of language. Raphael's extensive digression on enlightenment reveals the tendency of language to organically grow beyond authorial control and assume unintentional meanings. Through the obvious paradoxes and inadequacies of Raphael's metaphor, Milton illustrates a productive way of dealing with such shortcomings. As Karen Edwards explains, Raphael's problematic style encourages the continuous rereading and reevaluation of his text, both by Adam and by the reader (115). The profusion of confusing images and ideas in Raphael's description of enlightenment encourages the reader to re-evaluate the passage. Read in a new light, Raphael's floral metaphor does not describe levels of spiritual enlightenment, which humans can ascend.

Nor does it metaphorize a hierarchy of spiritual being in which God represents the flower and all other creatures occupy lower levels of the organic body. Rather, his image may pertain to a hierarchy of qualities and abilities that exist within man, all of which, when used correctly, will help him achieve knowledge in the correct way. Re-reading the metaphor we can reorient the image we have in our head. God is no longer the flower. God is the sun that shines upon the flower and sustains its life. Man is the plant. Man's body ascends in "various degrees" towards the sun. All the parts of the plant enable the flower to extend its face toward the life-giving sun. In a similar fashion, man's body and physical abilities should serve the head and enable man's gaze and intellectual faculties to contemplate the heavens. Within this metaphoric hierarchy the head is closest to God. Raphael places precedence on the mind and mouth, the vehicles through which dialogue is exchanged and narrative is created.

At the same time, Raphael's reference to the flower demonstrates his desire to tailor his narrative to an earthly audience. Using floral imagery to articulate the abstract concept of achieving spiritual enlightenment, Raphael accommodates his language for the Edenic gardeners. Making his dialogue more understandable, Raphael encourages Adam and Eve to direct their gazes and intellects upwards to some divine truth, so long as it is framed in earthly and figurative terms. Raphael's metaphor suggests that knowledge and appreciation of the sublime must be built from the ground up and discussed in a language that promotes an ambiguity, which in turn enhances creativity and encourages intellectual pursuit through constant re-evaluation. As Lewalski explains, "edenic innocence [...] is not a matter of stasis in perfection but continual growth towards greater perfection" (208). The complications of Raphael's text call Adam (and later, we shall see, the reader) to strive to understand obscured meanings. The strategy for

continuous re-evaluation of the text becomes all the more helpful and necessary as Raphael begins to narrate the War in Heaven.

### **Accommodation and Narrative Shelter in Raphael's War in Heaven**

In his account of the war in heaven, Raphael employs epic conventions to describe the schism between Satan and God. Raphael depicts epic battle scenes between the obedient angelic hosts clad in glimmering armor, and the similarly adorned rebel battalion. The narrative includes a skirmish between Satan and Gabriel, the creation of a cannon, and concludes with the image of a militarized Messiah descending on the rebel hordes. Raphael's narrative proves fantastic and bizarre, entertaining and comical, but it also produces a lot of problems that inevitably cause readers to question Raphael's reliability. Kimberly Johnson notes the problematic qualities of Raphael's narrative in her article "Raphael's 'Potent Tongue': Power and Spectacle in *Paradise Lost*." Building upon Empson's argument, Johnson blames Raphael's use of spectacle as the cause of Adam's and Eve's Edenic woes. Johnson claims that Raphael misrepresents the threat Satan poses by depicting him as a "vaunting and violent enemy straight out of heroic epic" (206), rather than emphasizing his guile. Raphael's misrepresentation of Satan fails to prepare Adam and Eve for the foe with whom they must contend, and instills in them a sense of admiration for rebellious power. In addition, Raphael's depiction of the Son emphasizes a rigid sense of hierarchy and glorifies power. Comparing Raphael's brief report of the Son's submission to the Father with his glorious depiction of the Son in battle, Johnson argues that Raphael places emphasis on the wrong events and values by focusing his epic tale on a show of spectacular action rather than humility.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Kimberly. "Raphael's 'Potent Tongue': Power and Spectacle in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Quarterly* 46.4 (2012): 212.

Johnson's reading of the War in Heaven highlights many of the problematic aspects of Raphael's narrative. However, Johnson, like Empson before her, incorrectly assumes that the inadequacies of Raphael's account contribute to the fall of man. Both critics fail to acknowledge both his beneficent motives for telling his story and the intrinsic shortcomings of his medium. Raphael's language, like all language, is inevitably flawed; thus his translation creates questions and issues of interpretation. Raphael's use of epic imagery does not serve, as Johnson suggests, to "promote" a sense of "heroism, power, and glory at odds with the larger poem's commentary" (207). Nor does it work "directly to counter the practical utility" of the mission God sent him on (207). Rather, Raphael shapes his narrative in order to describe a spiritual war set in an unsubstantial realm in a way that Adam, a corporeal being, can understand. Raphael explicitly notes this strategy explaining that he will proceed to tell his tale "by lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms" (V. 573). By prefacing his narrative in this way Raphael warns Adam not to take his figurative flourishes literally.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the narrative Raphael consciously tailors his language to suit his human audience. Raphael describes the hordes of angels with "upright beams innumerable" and "rigid spears and helmets thronged" (VI.82-83), as they "plucked the seated hills/ [and...] Uplifting bore them in their hands" (VI. 644-646). Raphael emphasizes the physicality of a spiritual battle in order to offer Adam a perspective on the heavenly conflict. Similarly, in his description of the noise and tumult created by the battling angelic host, Raphael recounts that "All Heav'n/ Resounded and had earth been then, all earth/ Had her center shook" (VI. 217-219). By describing heaven in earthly terms, Raphael forces Adam to imagine the possible destruction of

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<sup>4</sup> Raphael's strategy of accommodation has long been noted. In her article "Cosmology" Karen Edwards explains that Raphael creates a dialogue and narrative "deliberately adjusted" to be "intelligible to the human intellect" (111). While Edwards is explicitly concerned with the Raphael's description of the Cosmos her articulation of the principle of accommodation can be easily applied to the war in heaven.

Eden. Comparing a heavenly event to an earthly phenomenon, Raphael enables Adam to glean some understanding of the magnitude of the war and to imagine the replication of its consequences on earth. By doing so, Raphael attempts to warn Adam that Satan's trespass has the potential to be repeated.

Adam demonstrates that he understands the significance and general gist of Raphael's tangential warning. At the end of Raphael's account, Adam thanks the "Divine Interpreter" (VII.72) for "forwarn[ing]/ Us timely of what might else have been our loss,/ Unknown, which human knowledge could not reach,/ For which to th' Infinitely Good we owe/ Immortal thanks" (VII.74-77). Of course, Raphael's translation of divine events is imperfect. However, as the narrative continues, Milton seems to imply that such imperfection is not only endemic to language but also *beneficial*. After all, Adam cannot know of the undiluted nature of Satan's sin, for he cannot understand the essence of evil without falling himself. Raphael, moreover, though obviously experienced, is also a sinless being who cannot fully comprehend or articulate the extent of Satan's trespass. With this in mind, Raphael must accommodate his text not only so that Adam can understand it but also to shield both himself and Adam from the magnitude of the knowledge the narrative deals with. While the failures of language cause Raphael to skirt his sublime subject, and perhaps lead to confusion and misinterpretation, the abstraction and distance that result from the imperfect medium, also positively shield both teller and audience from that which is either too great or too terrible to be known. Raphael's narrative creates a fictionalized lens through which he and Adam can contemplate Satan's sin and consider its repercussions without suffering from the absolute knowledge of good and evil.

Raphael's depiction of the warlord Messiah functions in a similar manner.<sup>5</sup> When introducing the Messiah, Raphael pays close attention to his physical actions and appearance: "beside Him hung his bow/ And quiver with three-bolted thunder stored/ And from about Him fierce effusion rolled/ Of smoke and bickering flame and sparkles dire" (VI. 763-766). Raphael later describes the Son "grasping ten thousand thunders" and hurling them on Satan's army (VI. 836). The depiction of Jesus firing lightning bolts at the rebel hordes appears more cartoonish than terrifying, and ultimately the description is insufficient to capture the horror and magnitude of Satan's expulsion from grace. Just as the rebel angels' "idle weapons dropped" (VI.839) at the sight of the Son's wrathful charge, so too do Raphael's words fail him when he is confronted with how to represent the Son's furious and unimaginable power.

Raphael's laughable description of the Messiah not only reveals the failures of language to satisfactorily describe such a sublime subject; it also reflects the necessity to shield Adam from the horror of the wrath of God. By emphasizing Jesus' military accoutrements and war-like visage, Raphael reduces his subject to familiar human confines. As an epic figure, the "Vengeance" that "is his or whose He sole appoints" (VI.808) can be managed within the narrative as a personified character. Likewise, Adam can conceptually manage the fictionalized image of the warlord Messiah, without experiencing the ire of his God. Just as the rebel angels "wished the mountains now might be again/ Thrown on them as shelter from his ire" (VI. 841-842), language distorts the essence of the subject, providing both Adam and Raphael with narrative shelter.

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<sup>5</sup> In his "The Archangel Raphael: Narrative Authority in Milton's War in Heaven," Marc D Cayr claims that the absurdities of the war in heaven derive from the fact that they parodies of the epic genre. He argues that Milton's consciously employs the narrative failings of these epic conventions in order to stress the magnitude of his heavenly subject matter and suggest that traditional epic forms cannot do his sublime Christian subject justice.

Raphael continues to positively distort his Messiah by describing him through a series of conflicting images. When Raphael first refers to the Son, he describes him cast in a “dreadful shade” riding “onward/ [...] Gloomy as night” into battle (VI. 828-832). In this instance, Raphael places great emphasis on the darkness and shadow that appear simultaneously to accompany and derive from the Son as he rides into battle. Yet, as he continues, Raphael quickly shifts his focus to the “burning wheels” of the Son’s chariot, which later “glare lighting and shoot forth pernicious fire” (VI. 833-849). Raphael’s depiction leaps from images of profound darkness to images of glaring light. In his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Edmund Burke extols Milton’s ability to cause the mind to be “hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great confused images” and to create an image “of the obscure kind” that has a more “powerful dominion over the passions” (57). While the obscured images Raphael creates shield Adam from the *essence* of sublime horror, they also produce an ambiguity that encourages creativity and continuous thinking. Adam must closely consider the depiction of the Messiah in order to internally reconcile the paradoxical qualities that accompany the figure, i.e. shadow and glaring light, into one fictional entity. Raphael’s depiction of the Messiah encourages his listeners to use their imaginations to fill the gaps that language inevitably creates.

While Raphael’s language creates a removal between his subject and his audience, it does not diminish the intellectually elevating capacity of his narrative. Raphael’s depiction of the Son offers Adam and Eve a new perspective on their God and enables them to imagine the universe before their own beginning. Raphael’s account provides “a version of what happened” that the Edenic pair “must ponder and determine how to interpret [themselves]” (Thickstun 113). By doing so, Raphael fosters Adam’s and Eve’s “spiritual and intellectual growth,” while also “transmit[ing] information” (Thickstun 108). In addition, narrative allows the teller to

continuously amend his depiction and encourages the audience to participate in a similar interpretive exercise. Through his descriptions of the Messiah, Raphael suggests that “to arrive at a fixed interpretation” is not only impossible, but also inadvisable (Edwards 114).

### **Adam’s Assault on the Narrative Shield: Exacting Language and Inevitable Fallacy**

In book eight, Adam begins to desire a more fixed explanation of the heavens as he wonders why the universe appears to revolve around the earth. He says to Raphael,

When I behold this goodly frame, this world

Of heav’n and earth consisting and compute

Their magnitudes, this earth a spot, a grain,

An atom with the firmament compared

And all her numbered stars that seem to roll

Spaces incomprehensible (for such

Their distance argues and their swift return

Diurnal) merely to officiate light

Round this opacous earth, this punctual spot

One day and night, in all their vast survey

Useless besides, reasoning I oft admire [...] (VIII. 15-25)

Adam’s comment marks a shift in his conversation with Raphael, as he departs from his open-ended requests and asks for the explanation of a very specific phenomenon. The language Adam uses to raise this problem reveals his narrowed focus, increased ambition, and more calculating purpose. No longer content to wonder in awe at the planets and stars around him, Adam must now “compute their magnitudes” and understand their motions with precision. His evolving

modification of the word “earth” microscopically reveals his evolving attitude to his perception of space. First he envisions the earth as a “spot,” then as a “grain,” and finally in clinical and scientific terms as an “atom.” Adam’s corrective diction narrows and specifies his language just as he attempts to narrow and specify his vision. In this instance, language ceases to function as an imaginative medium or as means for creative endeavor. Instead, it is used as a clinical tool aimed at achieving precision (and accuracy). Adam’s exacting treatment of the word “earth” and his subsequent interest in the distances between the planets and the “diurnal” lengths of their orbits suggests that Adam wishes to use language to measure the sky’s precise movements and to articulate a totalizing vision of the universe. The content of Adam’s speech appears to disregard, or show an unawareness of, the tendency of language to distort and abstract. The diction and syntax Adam uses reveals his burgeoning desire to use language as a tool for defining a limited reality, rather than as an imperfect medium through which he might theoretically contemplate some great truth.

In his response, Raphael emphasizes the potential dangers of Adam’s reductive thought process and his misuse of language. In a cautionary tone, Raphael tells Adam that “to ask or search I blame thee not for heav’n/ Is as the book of God before thee set/ Wherein to read his wondrous works and learn/ His seasons” (VIII.66-69). However, he hints at the futility of Adam’s positivistic thought, explaining that in many instances “the Great Architect/ Did wisely to conceal and not divulge/ His secrets to be scanned” (72-74). Despite his hint, however, Raphael temporarily indulges Adam by providing a myriad of possible answers to his question. First, Raphael amends Adam’s geocentric conception of the universe by suggesting that the “sun” might “be the center to the world” and that all “other stars [...] dance about him” (VIII.123-125). By proposing a Copernican model of the universe, Raphael reveals the most

flagrant misstep of Adam's question; it presupposes a theory that is inherently wrong. The gap between Adam's overly precise language and the actual reality reveals his tendency to presuppose a fallacy and leave no room for reinterpretation.

However, Raphael does not explicitly endorse a heliocentric vision of the universe. In fact, he offers many alternative compositions for Adam to consider. In one instance, Raphael proposes that the moon might be "by night/ this earth's reciprocal" and "if land be there / fields and inhabitants" may too abound (VIII.143-145). Later, Raphael hints that Adam's universe might be one of many. He suggests that "other suns perhaps/ with their attendant moons" might exist (VIII.149-150). Framing each proposal as a question, Raphael emphasizes the uncertainty of each potential explanation. By proposing a series of imaginative possibilities, Raphael provides Adam with a more appropriate model for contemplating the heavens. He suggests that Adam should consider the universe through a series of hypothetical questions rather than attempting to measure it exactly. As Lewalski explains, by declining "to provide an answer" to Adam's question, Raphael "invents a form that will not resolve the issue but that will provide a model for scientific inquiry, then and later" (46). While Raphael is not the budding scientist Lewalski makes him out to be, his refusal to provide Adam with a satisfying answer illustrates the importance of continuous thinking; a mode of thought found in genuine scientific inquiry and in narrative. Raphael's response hints that any definite idea Adam might light upon will more than likely be flawed, for Adam can never grasp the totality of the universe. Raphael's response attempts to dissuade Adam from reducing a multifaceted truth into one inaccurate fact. Raphael does not seek to diminish Adam's intellectual curiosity; rather, he attempts to guide it into the realm of the imaginative. Raphael's inventive explanations emphasize the way in which Adam can use a fallible language to consider a sublime truth without reducing it or striking dangerously

at its heart. Within Eden, narrative is not only a safer means than Adam's dry speculation through which to consider the mysteries of the universe, it is also better equipped. Its ambiguity requires constant reevaluation and propagates inquisitive thought.

Despite Raphael's promotion of imaginative liberty, at the end of his response he delivers one of the most problematic lines in the epic: he tells Adam that "Heav'n is for thee too high/ To know what passes there. Be lowly wise:/ think only what concerns thee and thy being" (VIII.172-174). In one line, Raphael contradicts his previous imaginative ponderings, and refutes Milton's purported poetic mission. Raphael's admonishment is admittedly harsh; nevertheless, when contextualized as a response to the positivistic language of Adam's remark, it becomes less intellectually repressive. Raphael revolts against Adam's tendency "to model the heav'n/And calculate the stars" (VIII.79-80). Anxiously foreseeing man's future indulgence in the pure and fatal fruit of knowledge, Raphael attempts to derail man's desire to strive for absolute knowledge defined in absolute terms. Despite Raphael's benevolent motivations, upon reading his admonishment the reader naturally recoils. In this line, I would suggest that Milton is dissociating himself from Raphael and likewise is encouraging the reader to dissociate herself from Adam. Milton does not intend the disconnect between Raphael's comment and the reader to illuminate the latter's lack of grace. Rather, Milton creates two levels of interaction: one between Raphael and Adam and one between the postlapsarian poet and reader. By doing so, Milton simultaneously outlines the positive consequences of the shortcomings of language, both in Eden and in the postlapsarian world. At times, these benefits align, as we shall see shortly. In other instances, however, they diverge. Raphael's line "be lowly wise" is one of the most obvious instances in which the values Raphael imparts to Adam depart from the values Milton wishes to relay to the reader.

Within Paradise, Raphael's advice is permissible because Adam is innocent and Eden "may of solid good contain/ more plenty than the sun that barren shines" (VIII. 94-95). However, outside of Eden, Raphael's words are intellectually repressive. As fallen individuals we must know "good by evil" and thus we must "discover onward things more remote from our knowledge" (*Areopagitica* 31). The fallen reader cannot accept Raphael's admonishment as Adam does; rather, she must doggedly contest it. Milton provides the reader with this problematic line in order to prompt her to contest what Raphael imparts. Milton creates a "war of truth" (*Areopagitica* 37), both within Raphael's narrative and without, as the reader rebels against Raphael's admonishment. Through this interaction the reader sharpens her intellect and gleans the same lesson Raphael conveys to Adam: one must perpetually question a language of certainty and creatively imagine other avenues through which to consider an indefinable truth.

According to one's state of being, however, the extent of the application of that lesson varies. Edenic Adam can internalize Raphael's advice, as he does when he thanks the angel for informing him of the importance "not to know at large of things remote/ from uses, obscure and subtle, but to know/ that which before us lies in daily life" (VIII. 191-193). The postlapsarian reader, on the other hand, has the responsibility of critically intervening in Raphael's narrative. This does not mean that the benefits of ambiguous language are no longer applicable in the postlapsarian state. On the contrary, these tools must simply be used with a more critical bent. As Milton explains in *Areopagitica*, because the fallen human must know "good by evil [...] so necessary" is the "scanning of error [...] to the confirmation of truth" (13).

With this distinction in mind, consider Raphael's list of possible explanations for the composition of the universe. Raphael's hypothetical explanations demonstrate to Adam the value of broadly contemplating a sublime idea, rather than reductively defining it. While this lesson is

clearly applicable to the postlapsarian reader, she also has access to scientific knowledge that Adam does not. In addition, she does not have Adam's privilege of only imagining what could be without consequence. Thus, she has the responsibility of applying Raphael's lesson and her knowledge of science to critically review the variety of models Raphael provides and to consider which one is most likely to be accurate. At the same time, the reader, like Adam, is called to acknowledge that no one explanation will ever encompass the totality of truth. In short, the postlapsarian reader can use Raphael's hypothetical language and model of imaginative contemplation to generate new questions, and evaluate old answers. Through Raphael, Milton illustrates how narrative helps humans to freely stand and live as best they can after the fall.

### **Narrative's Creative and Communal Compensation**

While the reader naturally contests Raphael's admonishment, Milton does not attempt to discredit the imaginative and abstract way in which Raphael discusses and contemplates the sublimity of the universe. In Raphael's account of creation, Milton continues to emphasize the creative capacity of narrative to enrich both prelapsarian and postlapsarian life. In his creation story, Raphael demonstrates the ability of figurative and imperfect language to prompt creativity and to encourage an exchange that creates a sense of community and fellowship. By weaving familiar biblical verses into original text, Milton purposely includes the reader in an exchange that runs parallel to the dialogue in Eden. As Jeffrey Shoulson points out, "Raphael's hexameral account of creation in book 7 is the site of many [...] of the poem's most explicit and direct quotations from the Bible" (71). The biblical allusions create two levels of narrative exchange, one on the page between Raphael and the Edenic pair and one off the page between Milton and the reader.

In Eden, where the Bible of course does not exist, Raphael's creation story functions almost as revelation. Raphael relays to Adam and Eve the words God speaks and subsequently describes the events that result. Since the Edenic couple has no access to the Bible, Raphael's description of creation functions as a kind of unmediated scripture. As we shall see shortly, Raphael renders his version of creation in stunning detail and creates many imaginative images. By doing so, Raphael endows the creative capacity of figurative language with religious and spiritual significance. The reader, however, is aware of the biblical precedents that Milton is riffing on through his angelic speaker. The obvious biblical references and Raphael's deviations from them force the reader to consciously acknowledge the imaginative heights figurative language can achieve and the value and benefits of such lyricism in the postlapsarian world. By coding the creation accounts in biblical terms that the reader will surely recognize, Milton suggests that the creative compensation Raphael offers to Adam and Eve is also applicable to the postlapsarian world. This said, the stark contrast between the Edenic pair's experience of creation stories and our own shadows Raphael's imaginative account with nostalgia and anxiety. We as readers know that despite the wonderful entertainment and instruction Raphael's narrative provides, Adam and Eve will still fall and narrative, however delightful, will be unable to preventing them from doing so.

When Raphael begins his description of creation, he claims that he is simply acquiescing to his "commission from above" (VII.118). However, once he starts talking, Raphael goes above and beyond what is requested and required of him as his narrative reaches lyrical and imaginative heights. While Raphael's account of creation clearly retains its biblical roots, his descriptions far exceed their precedent. Often he uses biblical verse as a template that he expands upon by adding figurative flourishes. Within Raphael's narrative, God's speech often echoes

biblical text. Raphael prefaces his vivid description of the creation of wild beasts, for example, with God's order to "Let th' Earth bring forth foul living in her kind" (VII. 451). However, instead of simply mentioning the appearance of animals, Raphael provides his audience with the image of earth "Op'ning her fertile womb" (VII/ 453). He explains that "Out of the ground uprose [...] Innumerable living creatures [...] Limbed and full-grown" (VII.454-456). Raphael's deviations from biblical precedent demonstrate that in Eden creativity and imagination go hand in hand with religious truth. For the postlapsarian reader, deviations from biblical precedent reveal the value of narrative for the sake of narrative and the freedom that can be gleaned by creatively extrapolating from old models. When compared to the starkness of the biblical account, Raphael's description becomes all the more unique and interesting. By juxtaposing the stark biblical lines with an outpouring of Raphael's lyricism, Milton illustrates the regenerative quality of poetic language and calls the reader to see the recreational and artistic value of figuration.

In Eden, Raphael too delights in the reproductive nature of his story. The further Raphael gets into his account the more and more he exaggerates and builds upon his images. In his first description of the origins of sea creatures, Raphael reports, "God said 'Let the waters generate/ Reptile with spawn abundant'" (VII.387-388). Raphael expands upon God's orders by explaining in further detail that "God created the great whales and each/ soul living, each crept, which plenteously/ the waters generated" (VII.390-391). About twenty lines later, Raphael continues to develop his narrative as he dives into poetic description of the whale floating in the newly created sea. He says, "there the Leviathan,/ Hugest of living creatures, on the deep/ stretched like a promontory sleeps or swims/ and seems a moving land and at his gills/ draws in and at his trunk spouts out a sea" (VII. 411-415). Raphael's imaginative digression illustrates the

malleability and versatility of his medium. It is the malleability of language that permits Raphael to constantly amend and develop his existing descriptions. The imaginative way in which Raphael relates his account of creation endows his narrative with a subjective quality that encourages Adam to relay his own experience of creation. The exchange of stories that ensues creates a sense of fellowship between Raphael and Adam.

When considering the entertaining extravagancies found in books 5 and 7, Kimberly Johnson faults Raphael for being “too much the ‘social spirit’” (206). I would argue that Milton emphasizes the social aspect of Raphael’s character precisely to demonstrate the communal value of his narrative. By having God assert that Raphael’s sociality is imperative to his mission, Milton illustrates the importance of fellowship that the exchange of narrative provides. Deciding on who to send on the warning mission, God explicitly calls upon “Raphael the sociable spirit” (V. 221), and instructs him not severely to warn Adam of impending doom but “as friend with a friend/ Converse” (V. 229-230). Adam himself stresses the importance of Raphael’s story-telling ability. He compares Raphael’s discussion to the edenic fruits, exclaiming, “sweeter thy discourse is to my ear/ Than fruits of palm tree” (VIII.210-211). In this instance, narrative is not only supplementary, but also a necessary form of sustenance in Eden. Adam’s praise not only demonstrates his appreciation for Raphael’s narrative, but also suggests an alternative mode for living. Conversation and the exchange of narrative not only entertain Adam and make him happy, they seem to elevate his life. Raphael’s narrative enables Adam to catch glimpses of heavenly sublimity and creates an environment of heavenly bliss on earth. Adam acknowledges the power of Raphael’s narrative, explaining that “while I sit with thee I seem in Heav’n” (VIII.210).

Conversation and the exchange of stories are not restricted to Raphael and Adam. Through Adam's account of creation, Milton illustrates the innately beneficial impact that narrative exchange has on the human condition. When Adam awakens in Eden he is struck by the animals as "they rejoice/ Each with their kind, lion with lioness" (VIII.391-392). Adam objects to his lack of a fitting partner. Concerned with his apparent loss, Adam asks God "In solitude/What happiness?" (VIII.364-365). Adam suggests that the "the cause of his desire" (VIII. 417) is what God "seek'st not[,] Social communication" (VIII.428-429). Adam stresses the importance of the communion that derives from conversation and severely feels its lack. By making Adam yearn for social communication almost as soon as he arrives in Eden, Milton emphasizes the universality of the desire for communion and suggests it extends to all states of being: fallen and innocent.

When advocating for the creation of a suitable companion, Adam argues that man needs "conversation with his like [...] to help/ or solace his defects" (VIII.417-419). The mention of prelapsarian man's need for help and solace supports Lewalski's claim that even "Edenic innocence" requires "continual growth towards greater perfection" (208). At the same time, the diction used in Adam's statement seems to be more applicable to the postlapsarian state. By mentioning defects and the necessity to solace and mitigate them, Milton calls his reader to acknowledge that, like Adam, she needs the communion that narrative can provide. If Adam sees the necessity for narrative exchange in Eden, Milton suggests that narrative is all the more essential in the fallen world. Adam's self-identified remedy for his Edenic loneliness simultaneously functions as a Miltonic prescription for the postlapsarian life. Milton articulates the benefits of his remedy for human loneliness and imperfection through the exchange between Adam and Raphael, and between Adam and Eve. Within the epic, God himself commends

Adam's innate human desire for communication first by creating Eve and later by sending Raphael.

When Eve does arrive in Eden, narrative exchange continues to play an important role in Adam's conception of their marital relationship. Eve, too, appears to appreciate the qualities Adam admires in Raphael, as the poet speaker explains: "her husband the relater she preferred" (VIII. 53). Eve's preference becomes apparent as she departs from the conversation with Raphael. The speaker stresses that Eve does not leave because she "not with such discourse delighted or not capable her ear/ Of what was high" (VIII. 48-49), but because apparently "she knew, [Adam] would intermix/ Grateful digressions and solve high dispute/ With conjugal caresses" (VIII.54-56). In this instance, the exchange of conversation is as integral to Adam's and Eve's interaction as their physical correspondence. By linking the two, the poet speaker stresses the vital role that the continuous creation of narrative plays in Edenic life and equates the communion created by the exchange of narrative with the union of marriage. The two forms of communion appear equally vital. Adam observes "Heav'n in her[Eve's] eye" (VIII.488), just as he "seems in Heav'n" when engaging in discourse with Raphael. In both instances, earthly conversation directs Adam's focus upwards to the heavens in a safe and joyful manner.

### **Language fails, Humans fall: Regeneration through Narrative**

In the end, however, the communion and safe contemplation that narrative provides fall short. Adam and Eve eat the fruit. It appears that the joys and benefits of narrative are not enough to sustain Edenic life. Indeed, at times it seems that man's failings derive from the failures of language. Towards the end of Raphael's visit, Adam begins to talk about his feelings for Eve. He describes his first interaction with Eve: "Here passion first I felt, Commotion

strange!” (VIII.530-531), and later claims that “All higher knowledge in her presence falls/  
 Degraded [...] Authority and reason on her wait” (VIII. 551-554). Listening to Adam, Raphael  
 stands “with contracted brow” (VIII.560). He is unable to understand Adam’s feelings, just as  
 Adam cannot satisfactorily articulate their extent and power. The failure of language to transmit  
 the magnitude of Adam’s feelings has dire consequences, and the conversation quickly spins out  
 of Raphael’s control. Raphael cannot understand what Adam admits, “half abashed” (VIII.595);  
 he and Eve share “both one soul” (VIII. 604). Raphael quickly admonishes Adam, telling him to  
 “Take heed lest passion sway/ Thy judgment to do aught which else free will/ Would not admit!”  
 (VIII.635-637). The back and forth between the pair demonstrates the failure of both parties to  
 understand what the other has to impart and to formulate an adequate response. Unable to  
 understand Adam’s feelings, Raphael shuts Adam down, and flies away. In the end, these  
 feelings that Adam cannot fully articulate, nor Raphael fully understand, contribute to Adam’s  
 downfall. Before eating the fruit Adam addresses Eve, saying that “If death/ Consort with thee  
 death is to me life [...] To lose thee were to lose myself” (IX. 953-959). For Adam, the potential  
 loss of Eve outweighs the benefits Edenic narrative can offer him. Eve, in turn, eats the fruit  
 because Satan offers her what Raphael’s narratives fail to provide: the promise of pure,  
 unadulterated, and unmediated knowledge.

Throughout the Raphael dialogues, Milton foresees the fatal consequences of the failures  
 of language. For this reason, Raphael’s text is accommodated as much for the reader as it is for  
 Adam. While previous critics have not explicitly recognized that the Raphael dialogues are  
 accommodated for the fallen reader, they have regularly noted how easily Raphael’s narrative  
 and lessons can be applied to postlapsarian life. Discussing Raphael’s response to Adam’s  
 exacting questions about the universe, Lewalski suggests that Raphael “provides a model for

scientific inquiry, then [in Eden] and later [after the fall]” (46). Similarly, Margaret Thickstun notes that Raphael—an ideal teacher in her eyes—provides Adam and Eve with the necessary skills to lay “the ground work that will lead to their renovation” (107). I would suggest that Milton is hyper-aware that Raphael has two audiences, both Adam and the reader, and that he uses Raphael to delineate the benefits of narrative both in the prelapsarian and the postlapsarian world. In Eden, the creativity and community that narrative encourages offer Adam and Eve a way to live perfectly in Edenic bliss. In addition, narrative offers an alternative to eating the apple by providing the couple with a way of safely considering what they do not know. As Raphael converses with Adam, he offers narrative as a preventative measure against the fall. While the reader need not be shielded from knowledge of good and evil in the fallen world, narrative still encourages creativity and community; however, these benefits are now compensations. Narrative cannot help the fallen reader live perfectly, but it can help her live well.

In the war in heaven sequence, Raphael’s references to armor and cannons are instances in which the Miltonic bard winks at his fallen audience. After all, Adam has no conception of what armor or cannons are; he must be informed of what war looks like later, by Michael. Within Eden, the armor and cannons, to the extent that they are corporeal images, make a spiritual battle more understandable for the Edenic couple. They also serve to shield them from the magnitude of Satan’s sin and the wrath of their God. By performing both these functions, these figurative methods help extend Adam’s and Eve’s intellects upwards and consider things beyond their reach (in a safe fashion). In the fallen world, these narrative extravagancies no longer serve to shield the reader from sin. What then is their function? The reasonable explanation is that the references to armor make the reader hyper-aware of the fallibility of Raphael’s, and by

extension, Milton's medium. The workings of the sublime heavens can only be discussed in earthly terms, because they are all the human mind can comprehend. The failings of language force the reader and the poet to circumambulate the subject, rather than strike directly at its heart. However, even in the postlapsarian state, this is beneficial. While the reader has obtained the knowledge of good and evil, she has not obtained all knowledge. Therefore, a medium that forces the reader to acknowledge that the subject at hand can never be fully comprehended, and encourages her mind to tangentially wander off and then to double back and reevaluate its initial assumptions is innately conducive to learning. It is this value of imperfect language that later Melville embraces and takes to the extent in Ishmael.

By accommodating the reader throughout the Raphael dialogues, Milton illustrates the equalizing capacity of narrative. It is a mode of communication that links the pre- and postlapsarian experiences. Both the fallen reader and the innocent Adam experience the same words. While these words vary in significance for the two different audiences, the intellectual and communal activities they spark are applicable to both states of being. Milton establishes certain aspects of the narrative exchange between Raphael and Adam as achievable models that the fallen reader can strive to replicate, a point that will not be lost on Miltonic successors like Coleridge or Melville. While Milton does not suggest that the reader can reclaim Adam's innocence, Raphael's narratives illustrate that the reader can still preform the same creative and imaginative intellectual exercises that Adam and Eve perform in Eden. If anything, the reader has more of an opportunity to flex her intellectual muscle, for she—unlike Adam—has the added responsibility of critically examining Raphael's language. Even after the fall, narrative provides a means for considering the sublime and thus elevates the intellect and spirit, and encourages a communion this time between poet and reader, rather than the angel and Adam.

For Milton, although humans may be diminished after the fall, the value of narrative and figurative language remains high. Through the contest between the fallen reader's sensibilities and Raphael's admonishment to "be lowly wise," Milton notes the altered relationship postlapsarian human beings have with narrative, but he does not negate the general benefits it provide. If anything, the benefits and values of narrative expand to accommodate the now flawed human intellect and spirit. Through the interaction between Michael and Adam, Milton outlines the vital necessity of narrative in a postlapsarian world. After the fall, God sends Michael to "reveal/ to Adam what shall come in future days" (XI.113-116). If initially the communication between man and angel is nonverbal, in book eleven, Michael projects onto Adam's interior vision images of human pain and suffering, culminating in the flood. The visions seem to be as much a form of punishment as they are a prophecy of the horror to come. Adam must sit and watch as a "bloody fray" leaves "the ensanguined field/ deserted" and littered only with "carcasses and arms" (XI. 650-655). He must watch "rape and adultery" become "passing fair" (XI.717). He must see his children laboring with "massy clods of iron and brass" at the forge (XI 565), and witness them die "of maladies/ of ghastly spasm and racking torture" (XI.480). The fusillade of "visions ill foreseen" (XI. 765) torments Adam—and by book twelve, Michael finally notices. As the speaker notes, the "archangel paused" (XII.2). Michael acknowledges the horror Adam has seen saying, "thus thou hast seen one world begin and end" (XII.6). Despite how much Adam has seen, Michael notes, "much thou hast yet to see, but I perceive/ Thy mortal sight to fail" (XII.9-8). As Adam's sight begins to wane under the duress of pain and fatigue, Michael makes the executive decision to "henceforth [...] relate" his prophesy *verbally* (XII.11). From this moment forward, Michael's "sweet new speech" (XII.5) serves as a respite from the horrible visions of human suffering and death. After Michael relates the story of Abraham, Adam

interjects in a tone of relief and thankfulness. He says that he now finds his “eyes true op’ning and [his] heart much eased” (XII. 274).

While Michael’s decision to narrate the rest of his prophecy provides Adam with relief, his shift to language purposefully coincides with the evolution of his subject matter. As the poet speaker notes, Michael pauses the projection of vision “Betwixt the world destroyed and world restored” (XII. 2). While vision is sufficient to relay future earthly horrors and human crimes, *narrative* is required to convey the sublime and lofty idea of salvation by godly sacrifice.

Michael does not simply transition to narrative because Adam is suffering: he switches because he predicts that “mortal sight” might “fail [...] objects divine” (XII. 9). In this instance, Michael uses narrative for the same reason Raphael does: it is a better medium through which to communicate a sublime subject. Salvation and the incarnation of God cannot be reduced to a satisfying visual image. The abstraction of narrative enables the audience’s imagination to stitch bits of images together without completely diminishing the value of the idea. Language inevitably opens gaps in understanding that the imagination can fill. Even, or especially, in the postlapsarian setting, these gaps are beneficial, for they allow for the capacity to hope.

Michael’s section is often cited as a moment in the poem in which the quality of Milton’s language begins to diminish.<sup>6</sup> However, during the passages in which Michael articulates the salvation of man through the coming of the Messiah, his language enters the realm of abstraction and reaches a lyrical height that his account of biblical history preceding Jesus never does. When discussing the consequences of the Messiah’s death, Michael employs many of the same strategies Raphael had used throughout books V-VIII. Michael explains that “this act/ shall bruise the head of Satan, crush his strength,/ defeating Sin and Death, his two main

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<sup>6</sup> See Wittreich’s *Visionary Poetics: Milton’s tradition and His Legacy* quoted on page 249 of Cooley’s article “Reformed Eloquence: Inability, Questioning, and Correction in *Paradise Lost*.”

arms,/ And fix far deeper in his head their stings/ Than temporal death shall bruise the victor's heel" (XII. 429-433). Like Raphael before him, Michael exaggerates biblical verse and employs a corporeal metaphor to depict the end of sin and death. Again the medium does not do justice to the essential truth of its subject. However, in this instance the distortion of figurative language does not serve primarily to shield Adam as it did in Eden. The exaggerated figurative battle allows Adam to imagine an event momentous enough to dispel the horrors he has witnessed, permitting him to hope in the future.

Before departing, Michael leaves Adam with one last account of the salvation to come. He explains to Adam that "Him so lately promised" will come to "thy aid" (XII.541). This "Savior and thy Lord [...] Last from the clouds of Heaven to be revealed" will "dissolve Satan with his perverted world, then raise/ From the conflagrant mass, purged and refined, / New Heav'ns, new earth" (XII.544-549). The vague quality of Michael's description creates an ambiguity and uncertainty that leaves his audience, the reader included, with the capacity to hope. The inadequacies of Michael's language allow Adam to imagine a salvation and grace that contradict the horrors he witnessed and to combat the knowledge of evil he gleaned when he ate the fruit. After the fall, Michael's narrative and the tools provided by Raphael's exchange enable Adam to enter postlapsarian life "though sorrowing, yet in peace" (XI. 116).

## Chapter II

### “He cannot choose but hear”: The Critical Compensation of Narrative in Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

#### Introduction:

In his “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge grapples with how narrative should function in the world Milton has left us with at the end of book twelve. Coleridge’s interest in what Agneta Lindgren calls “The Fallen World” has long been documented. In her dissertation, she outlines the various instances in which Coleridge appears to deal with the consequences of man’s loss of innocence and suggests they are in part responses to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Lucy Newlyn, similarly, argues that Coleridge symbolically reworks Milton’s fall narrative in the “Rime” by positing “a thoughtless act of violence [...] as the origin of evil” (123). While I do not think Coleridge’s poem is a new adaptation of an old plot, I will argue that he is deeply invested in the consequences of the fall from grace. More specifically, he examines how the fall affected language and how language functions in narrative.

Through the interaction between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, Coleridge amends and complicates the model of gleaning knowledge through narrative that Milton had established in the Raphael dialogues and later developed with Michael. Coleridge makes two dramatic departures from the Miltonic model. First, Coleridge’s characterization of the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest suggests that the obtaining and exchange of absolute knowledge is as *admirable* as it is tragic. Second, he depicts language as having the ability to transmit that knowledge perfectly from one individual to another. Through these deviations, Coleridge imagines the destruction of the Miltonic model, and seems to suggest that, within the postlapsarian world,

attaining and conveying absolute knowledge is not only possible, but heroic. Within the poem, Coleridge depicts narrative as an effective means of achieving this end.

However, Coleridge's new model of narrative exchange does *not* sit well in the mind of the reader. In addition, the intricacies of poem—by this I mean the peripheral characters and details that surround and underlie the interaction between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest—and the poem's complicated narrative framework undermine the interaction between that poetic pair. The dissonance between the conflicting parts of the poem creates a productive ambiguity through which Coleridge in fact denies that exact conveyance of *absolute knowledge is either possible or desirable*. By surrounding the "Rime" with a haze of ambiguity and inconclusiveness, Coleridge demonstrates the necessity and the value of critical mediation, not only between the reader and the text, but also between the individual and the world. The critical mediation Coleridge finally endorses reaffirms the Miltonic narrative model, with which the interaction between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest tampers. The tension between the multiple layers of the poem and the ambiguity that pervades each layer reveals Coleridge's desire to imagine a model of narrative that completely departs from his predecessor and his subsequent inability to do so.

### **The Superficial Elevation of the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest**

Before the poem even starts, Coleridge prefaces his "Rime" with an excerpt from Thomas Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae*. In the excerpt, Burnet claims that "there are more invisible than visible Natures in the universe" and that the "human mind has always sought the knowledge of these things, but never attained it" (68). Despite the infeasibility of understanding the invisible entities of the world, Burnet admits that "it is helpful sometimes to contemplate in

the mind [...] the image of a greater and better world, lest the intellect, habituated to the petty things of daily life, narrows itself wholly to daily life” (68). The events the Mariner witnesses serve as Coleridge’s poetic depiction of the invisible natures of the world. The subsequent exchange between the Wedding-Guest and the Mariner dramatically represents the mind’s attempt to contemplate the ineffable. The epigraph grounds the poem as a quest for unattainable knowledge and glorifies the pursuit.

Within the first line of the poem, the poet speaker establishes the Ancient Mariner as an enlightened individual by simply stating, “It is an ancient Mariner” (1). The word “ancient” endows him with a time worn and tested quality, while his profession identifies him as an individual with knowledge of the world. The description of the Mariner’s physical appearance bolsters the impressions of wisdom and experience evoked by his name. The Wedding-Guest himself recognizes the Mariner’s interesting demeanor as he observes his “long grey beard and glittering eye” (3). The description of the Mariner’s beard, a conventional image of wisdom, and his eye hints that the Mariner possesses some interior knowledge, and perhaps some malignant quality. Within the first three lines of the poem, the speaker dresses the Mariner in the trappings of a mysterious and possibly heroic figure. As Angenta Lindgren explains, “the mariner may be said to constitute a representation of the [...] Romantic hero in the broadest sense” (68). Coleridge depicts the Mariner as an uncanny figure, who is in possession of awe-inspiring qualities, and surrounded by an irresistible aura of mystery and intrigue (much like Ahab, as we will later see). As a result, before the poem even really begins, Coleridge suggests that the Mariner and the knowledge he possesses could be admired and respected.

Almost immediately, it becomes obvious not only that the Mariner possesses mysterious knowledge, but that he also has an urge to divulge it to some unwitting individual. While the

Mariner's choice of listeners seems arbitrary at first, it is not. The speaker explains that the Mariner "stoppeth *one* of three" (my italics 2) guests on their way to a wedding. The emphasis the speaker places on the Mariner's selection hints that the Mariner has not arbitrarily grabbed a random passerby. Rather, he has consciously chosen the Wedding-Guest out of a group for some specific unknown reason. The Mariner says as much himself, claiming that the "moment that his face I see/ I know the man that must hear me" (588-589). In this instance, the Mariner suggests that the Wedding-Guest has some notable qualities that make him an appropriate audience. While the Mariner can observe these qualities simply by looking at the Wedding-Guest's face, the reader is left in the dark as to why the Mariner picks him. Perhaps the Wedding-Guest is easily influenced by the will of others, or has some quality of genius, or a tendency to passively absorb the world around him? Whatever the case, the Wedding-Guest appears predisposed to absorb the significance of the Mariner's sublime experience.

As the Mariner begins to tell his tale, it becomes evident that the Mariner's selectivity has paid off. Starting his account, the Mariner describes shooting the albatross and the fantastic and horrible events that ensue. The Mariner provides the Wedding-Guest with an image of a skeleton ship at the command of a personification of death, and a vision of "a thousand slimy things [...] upon the rotting sea" (238-240). These are just a few examples of the bizarre events that the Mariner relates in his tale. He barrages the Wedding-Guest with a chaotic flurry of supernatural images that cannot be logically parsed, at least not by the reader. In order to "guide" the reader, Coleridge adds the poem's famous marginal voice. The marginal voice attempts to make sense of the tale. However, his reductive explanations of events and images are flagrantly inadequate.<sup>7</sup> The Wedding-Guest, on the other hand, *seemingly* has the privilege of "understanding" what the Mariner relates completely.

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<sup>7</sup> The marginal voice will be discussed in greater detail at the close of the chapter.

Although the tale affects the Wedding-Guest and changes him forever, he does not, so far as we can tell, *understand* the tale, in the traditional sense of the word. Unlike the marginal voice, the Wedding-Guest does not actively attempt to make meaning of the tale; rather, he involuntarily internalizes the significance of the sublime experience that the Mariner relates. The distinction between the Wedding-Guest and the readerly audience suggests that Coleridge intends to emphasize the Wedding-Guest's capacity to passively absorb the momentous and indescribable truth of the world around him. By endowing the Wedding-Guest with the ability to internalize the Mariner's "Rime," Coleridge establishes the Wedding-Guest as a unique individual with a distinguished position both within and without the poem. This distinction seems to elevate both the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest by establishing them as individuals in touch with some knowledge or wisdom that the marginal voice, the other characters of the poem, and the actual reader are inevitably unable to comprehend. Yet, whether or not the poetic pair's position should be envied is uncertain, and this tension shapes the tenor of the poem.<sup>8</sup>

If the reader examines the interaction between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest in isolation, she might assume that Coleridge endorses what Raphael could never support or achieve: the conveyance of exact and absolute knowledge through narrative. The dialogue between Raphael and Adam is characterized and driven by both parties' failure to fully articulate their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. In Eden, the inexactitude of their conversation provides Raphael and Adam with communal and creative compensations. After the fall, the gaps in Michael's language prevent absolute understanding and create an uncertainty that ultimately provides Adam with the capacity to hope. The Mariner's narrative, on the other hand, appears to

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<sup>8</sup> The Wedding-Guest does not only differ from the marginal reader and the actual reader of the poem because of his particular disposition. His experience of the tale is also affected by tangible and quantifiable differences. The Wedding-Guest is told the tale verbally in the presence of the Mariner. The effect of extralinguistic factors on the Wedding-Guest's experience of the tale and the reader's experience will be discussed in further detail in the last section of the chapter.

convey whatever horrors he experienced exactly, leaving no room for the Wedding-Guest to hope. Whatever the Wedding-Guest internalizes from the Mariner's tale permanently changes him as he rises "the morrow morn" in the same state of melancholic contemplation that the Mariner left him in (625). The Wedding-Guest appears to suffer just as Adam suffers from Michael's vision of death and destruction. He goes "like one that hath been stunned, and is of sense forlorn: A sadder and a wiser man" (624-625), just like Adam and Eve who with "wand'ring steps and slow" take "their solitary way" (XII. 647-468).

While the effect of the Mariner's tale mimics the effect of Michael's vision, his subject matter resembles the sublimity of Raphael's narrative. Michael does not show Adam images of the sublime; rather, he projects images of human history and the "sinfulness of men" (XI. 360). The Mariner, on the other hand, verbally relays an account of supernatural intervention. As the Mariner flits from one bizarre supernatural image to the next he, like Raphael, appears to use figurative language that distorts his experience and obscures the knowledge he has received from it. Despite the torrent of supernatural events, the Wedding-Guest participates in and feels the import of the Mariner's experience, whatever it might mean. Yet the poem does not affect the reader as it does the Wedding-Guest. After the reader has finished the poem, she is more likely to be puzzled by its bizarre supernatural events than horrified.

Admittedly, the extralinguistic factors of the exchange affect the Wedding-Guest's experience of the narrative and also perhaps the effectiveness of the tale itself. Unlike the reader, the Wedding-Guest is in the Mariner's presence. The Mariner's grip and glittering eye affect the Wedding-Guest in a way they cannot affect the reader. This distinction suggests that Coleridge, unlike Milton, was concerned with how the situation of narrative can affect the conveyance of knowledge and experience. As we shall see shortly, the Mariner's physical presence retains and

captivates the Wedding-Guest before he even begins his tale. While the reader and the Wedding-Guest receive the same words, they receive them in two very different ways. These differences will be discussed in greater detail in the final section of the chapter. The discrepancy between the reader's reaction to the Mariner's tale and the Wedding-guest's reaction reveals Coleridge's inability, and perhaps his unwillingness, to communicate perfectly in the same way that the Mariner does.

That said, through the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, Coleridge appears to redefine how narrative should function in the postlapsarian world. Narrative no longer makes possible a safe contemplation of the sublime as it had with Raphael. Nor does it provide solace and hope as it had in the exchange between Michael and Adam. Instead, Coleridge appears to depict language as a medium through which an individual can convey exactly some terrible sublime experience to a chosen audience, no matter the emotional cost. As a compensation for the loss of blissful ignorance, Coleridge distinguishes the storyteller and his audience and endows them with a tragic nobility. However, the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest does not exist within a poetic vacuum. Coleridge purposely frames the Mariner's tale alongside the boisterous celebration of a wedding. By doing so, Coleridge highlights the detriments of the poetically privileged exchange and undermines the elevation of this transmission.

### **Forfeiting Community for Knowledge**

While Coleridge places the interaction between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest in the privileged foreground of the poem, by juxtaposing the Mariner's tale with the wedding narrative occurring in the background, he hints at the price the pair must pay for whatever

knowledge they possess. The wedding ceremony and later the wedding feast symbolize communion with fellow man and function as a happy and superficially ideal microcosm of society. While the Miltonic model establishes that fellowship and the pursuit of knowledge are not only compatible, but inextricably conjoined, the dynamic between the Mariner and Wedding-Guest suggests that one must be forfeited to achieve the other. Even before the Mariner begins his tale, he retards the Wedding-Guest's participation in the communal celebration of the wedding. The Wedding-Guest notices this, saying, "The bridegroom's doors are opened wide,/ And I am next of kin;/ The guest are met, the feast is set:/ May'st hear the merry din" (5-8). In his complaint, the Wedding-Guest stresses his familial obligation to attend the wedding, and notes the welcome and joy he will inevitably be excluded from if he listens to the Mariner. At this point, the Mariner simply detains the Wedding-Guest physically, but it becomes clear as the poem progresses that the knowledge the Mariner imparts leaves the Wedding-Guest mentally and emotionally estranged from the community.

As the Mariner proceeds to tell his tale, the conflicting natures of the wedding celebration and the narrative become more and more apparent. Setting the scene for his tale, the Mariner describes the ship leaving the harbor and the sun climbing "Higher and higher every day" until it sits "over the mast at noon—" (29-30). Before the Mariner can continue, the Wedding-Guest, prompted by the sound of the "loud bassoon" at the ceremony, interrupts him, exclaiming, "the bride hath paced into the hall/ red as a rose is she" (32-33). This mid-stanza interjection emphasizes the incompatibility of the two narratives as they spar over poetic space. The stories cannot be told simultaneously, just as the Wedding-Guest cannot participate in both. This poetic detail microcosmically represents one of Coleridge's apparent departures from Miltonic precedent. In Eden, the discussion and narration of sublime exploits had brought Milton's

characters together. In the “Rime,” Coleridge intentionally juxtaposes the Mariner’s tale with a marriage that celebrates the union of two individuals and culminates in a community gathering.

The pause in the motion of both bride and sun dramatically freezes the poem in a moment when both narratives are suspended in an early climax. Both the bride and the sun have the potential to naturally progress; the sun will continue to meander across the sky and the bride will slowly glide down the aisle to meet the groom. In theory, the Wedding-Guest has the opportunity to “choose” between returning to the wedding and watching his soon to be sister-in-law get married, or continuing to listen to the Mariner’s tale. Whichever he chooses he must do so at the cost of truncating the other narrative’s progression. As Tim Fulford explains, in order “to stay and listen” to the Mariner’s dreadful tale, the Wedding-Guest must forfeit “the loving social union” waiting inside the church (52). In frustration over the apparent choice he is presented with, the Wedding-Guest “beat[s] his breast,/ Yet he cannot choose but hear” (37-38). When the Mariner resumes his tale, he does not return to narrating the sun’s natural progression. Instead, he immediately immerses the Wedding-Guest with the image of a storm “tyrannous and strong” (42). The rapid alternation of imagery jars the reader, just as the storm strikes the ship with “o’ertaking wings” (43). The alteration from sunlight to dark tumultuous skies serves as warning of what is to come, and hints that what the Mariner has to relate is not necessarily desirable to know. By *apparently* deciding to listen to the Mariner, the Wedding-Guest abandons the communion of fellow man on shore and ventures imaginatively onto the treacherous sea, a gesture that we shall see again in *Moby-Dick*. However, as the poem progresses, the reader begins to wonder if the Wedding-Guest has had any choice in the matter at all.

## Freedom and Narrative

While the Wedding-Guest does not end up joining the wedding feast, it is not entirely certain that he *consciously decides* to stay and listen to the Mariner. By hinting that the Wedding-Guest, and later, the Mariner, lack volition, Coleridge subtly questions the value of their exchange. Coleridge initially characterizes the pair as unique individuals with access to a sublime experience and the knowledge that accompanies it. However, as Coleridge begins to suggest that the two are neither aware, nor in control, of their insight, he undermines the appeal of the perfect exchange of knowledge and hints at the potential danger of the interaction.

The speaker describes the Mariner's attempt to convince the Wedding-Guest to listen to his tale and the Wedding-Guest's apparent decision to do so in great detail. By repeating words and phrases that emphasize volition, the speaker hints at the important and potentially problematic role choice plays in the narrative exchange. As the lines add up, it becomes apparent that the emphasis the speaker places on words like "choose" serves not to stress the Wedding-Guest's choice, but his lack thereof. In some instances, the Wedding-Guest's inability to tear himself away from the Mariner and rejoin the feast can be explained by the fact that he is engrossed by the stimulating story. As the speaker explains, the Mariner sits "still, /And listens like a three year's child," almost as if he is entertained by the story being told to him (13-14).<sup>9</sup> If this were the case throughout, the dynamic between the Mariner and Wedding-Guest would more closely resemble the relationship between Adam and Raphael. The Wedding-Guest, like Adam, would assume the role of a naïve but intellectually curious being who finds the individual standing before him "so charming" that he stands "fixed to hear" what he has to say (VIII.2-3).

However, the dynamic between Mariner and Wedding-Guest morbidly departs from the free and

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly these lines, which depict the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest as a benign interaction, were written by Wordsworth. See page 19 of Stephen Prickett's book *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Lyrical Ballads*. He cites a letter in which Wordsworth takes credit for the two lines quoted.

easy discourse between Raphael and Adam, as well as from the discourse of redemption provided later by Michael. In fact, both the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest appear unable to refrain from telling and listening to the tale.

In Eden, Adam delights in the conversation and drives it himself with his inquiries. Even after the fall, Adam consciously decides to hear what Michael has to impart; he says, “I follow thee, safe guide, the path/ thou ledest me, and to the hand of Heav’n [I] submit” (XI. 371-373). The same cannot be said for the Wedding-Guest, who often appears physically tethered to a stone, as the Mariner impresses his story upon him. The narrator stresses the physicality of the Wedding-Guest’s bondage, explaining, “He [the Mariner] holds him with his skinny hand” (8). The Mariner’s skeletal grip not only resembles a manacle: it also has the same effect on the Wedding-Guest. Even after the Mariner ceases to physically restrain the Wedding-Guest as “his hand dropt he” (12), the Mariner continues to restrain the guest mentally with the trance-like hold of “his glittering eye—” (13). In the next line, the speaker clearly illustrates the effect of the Mariner’s gaze: “the Wedding-Guest stood still” and “the Mariner [had] his will” (14-16). Despite his protestations the Wedding-Guest “cannot choose but hear” (38). The second iteration of this line suggests that listening to the Mariner strips the Wedding-Guest entirely of his volition.

The stakes of the perfect exchange are thrown into perspective when considered in part as a response to Wordsworth’s “Expostulation and Reply.” The two poems, both published in *Lyrical Ballads*, share a conspicuous number of words and phrases. In “Expostulation and Reply,” the speaker, William, boasts of his ability to receive the powers of the universe by simply sitting on a stone and taking in the wonders of the natural world. When asked by a friend why he sits on a stone all day, William responds

The eye—it *cannot choose but see*;  
*We cannot bid the ear be still*;  
 Our bodies feel, where'er they be,  
 Against or with our will. (my italics 17-20)

In his explanation, which shares key phrases with the “Rime,” William notes his lack of *conscious* engagement with the world around him and portrays his absorption of the forces of nature as an unthinking act. Unlike Coleridge, who sees this sacrifice of volition as problematic, William whole-heartedly extols his unthinking receptivity. By forfeiting his conscious will, William believes he can achieve a state of “wise passiveness,” during which his mind can be “impress[ed]” and fed by the “Powers” of the universe (21-24). William accepts sitting on a stone alone in the wilderness as a necessary step to achieve profound insights.

Coleridge’s treatment of the same language Wordsworth uses to promote passive absorption suggests that, although he admired Wordsworth’s abilities as a poet, he also found the full application of Wordsworth’s philosophy to be potentially dangerous. Coleridge’s depiction of the Mariner’s and the Wedding-Guest’s fate poses a question that Wordsworth fails to consider: what happens when the lessons that the unidentified “Powers” impart on the mind and the senses are horrifying? Coleridge’s Wedding-Guest seems an echo of Wordsworth’s William. Both men sit passively on a stone and unconsciously absorb the words and the world around them. While William gleans some benign wisdom from the vernal wood, the Wedding-Guest is detrimentally affected by the tale he un-willfully absorbs. His ties to the community are severed and he loses his free will. The Wedding-Guest’s mind may very well have been fed like William’s; however, as a consequence, he seems to enter a state of permanent and debilitating melancholy. The Wedding-Guest’s sad and lonely exit reveals that Coleridge found the effects of

a perfect transfer of sublime knowledge to be potentially more costly than beneficial. In his response to “Expostulation and Reply,” Coleridge appears to draw from Miltonic precedent by suggesting that mediated knowledge is perhaps a more desirable alternative to the passive receptiveness that Wordsworth recommends.

The Wedding-Guest is not the only character whose conscious will fails him. Although the Mariner physically retains the Wedding-Guest at first, Coleridge does not intend to portray the Mariner as an actively repressive agent throughout the entire poem. Despite the Mariner’s hold on the Wedding-Guest, he himself does not appear free; his will seems equally compromised. Whatever the Mariner experienced, it has not only driven him a bit mad, but it has also compelled him to continuously and compulsively tell his story.<sup>10</sup> He explains this phenomenon himself: “Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched/ With a woeful agony,/ Which *forced* me to begin my tale” (my italics 578-580). Like the Wedding-Guest who is both physically and mentally subdued by the Mariner’s narrative, the Mariner too appears physically and emotionally coerced into telling it. His tale appears to enslave both its audience and narrator within its own supernatural construction.

The Mariner’s lack of freedom is emphasized when one juxtaposes him to Raphael who, though under orders from the absolute rule of God, appears freer than the Mariner, who answers to no one. Raphael and Adam participate in an idealized version of what Isaiah Berlin calls “positive liberty.” In his essay “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin distinguishes between two distinct types of freedom: positive liberty and negative liberty. In the latter state, one is uninhibited by outside constraints and is able to do whatever one desires. Positive liberty, on the

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<sup>10</sup> Cathy Caruth and Geoffrey Hartman are two of the most prominent scholars that have accredited the Mariner’s compulsive story telling to the trauma he experiences at sea. For them the Mariner’s urge to tell his story is symptomatic of the psychological damage akin to post-traumatic stress disorder. The Mariner repeatedly tells the tale in attempt to cathartically purge his experience. See Hartman’s “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies” and Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*.

other hand, requires one to consciously align one's will with some greater agreed-upon rule set and to act within it.<sup>11</sup> The dynamics and power structure of Milton's Eden epitomize positive freedom, and find their secular counterpart in Rousseau's Social Contract. Raphael appears freer than the Mariner when considered as a proponent of, and participant in, positive liberty. While submitting to a higher power or will might nominally limit what Raphael and Adam can do (e.g. what fruits they can eat), they willingly and consciously accept such laws. In books 5-8, Milton creates a poetic environment in which Raphael and prelapsarian Adam and Eve function within the limits established by the absolute rule of God. For Milton, perfect freedom entails aligning one's will with the will of God. Milton considered this act not one of bondage, but rather a necessary step to achieve true freedom.

Even within this model, both Raphael and Adam have room to do as they please. Raphael asserts his freedom by taking creative liberties when he tells his narrative. Although sent on a mission to warn man, Raphael delights himself and his audience with his imaginative descriptions and exaggerated exploits. Raphael most obviously delights in his task when he tangentially describes his own excursion to the gates of hell. He begins to tell his tale until he remembers it is Adam's turn to speak. Sheepishly, Raphael says, "But thy relation now! For I attend/ Pleased with thy words no less than thou with mine" (VIII. 247-248). While Raphael does at times get swept up in his own narrative, he never appears forced to tell it.

Although Adam and Raphael are constrained within the roles that Milton and his God deem appropriate, they are more positively free than Coleridge's Mariner and Wedding-guest, the former of whom is driven by some interior compulsion to tell his story, while the latter has no control over how the story is impressed upon him. Moreover, Raphael uses his narrative to

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<sup>11</sup> Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty." *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University, 1958. 1-32. Print.

explicitly illustrate the extent of Adam's positive freedom. Before Raphael ascends to heaven, he pointedly tells Adam: "To stand or fall/ Free in thine own arbitrement it lies." (VIII.640-641). Raphael suggests that while Adam, like Satan, has the ability to freely choose to disobey, to do so would forfeit a higher freedom. He would reject the "golden scepter" and submit himself to "an iron rod" that would "bruise and break" (V.886-887). When Raphael and the Edenic pair willingly forfeit their right to do whatever they want, they accept a set of laws and expectations that are beneficial for all parties involved. For Raphael, narrative provides a delightful way for him to live excellently free under God's "indulgent laws" (V.883), while abstractly contemplating the trespass of Satan.

In his exchange with Adam, Michael notes the loss of the ideal freedom that Raphael articulated. He explains to Adam that "Since thy original lapse true liberty/ Is lost which always with right reason dwells" (XII. 84-85). As a result of this loss, Michael informs Adam that "inordinate desire/And upstart passions catch the government" of "man [who] till then [was] free" (XII. 87-90). While Michael clearly articulates how the fallen nature of humans affects them on the individual level, he also delineates the societal repercussions of the destruction of the positive freedom that existed in Eden. Michael shows Adam scenes of the tyranny of Nimrod and the subsequent enslavement of Adam's children. Shocked and horrified, Adam protests, saying, "man over men/ He [God] made not lord" (XII. 69-70). Michael accredits the disregard of man's "outward freedom" to his internal perversion. He explains that because man permits "unworthy pow'rs to reign/ over free reason [...] God in Judgement just/ Subjects him from without to violent lords" (XII. 92-94). Admittedly, Michael does not provide Adam with a truly reassuring or practical solution to the perversion of freedom on either the individual or societal level. Michael tells Adam that the best he can do is to submit to the will of God and take solace

in the hope that Michael's narrative, which will later be embodied in scripture, provides. Because of the fall Michael notes that humans will never regain the positive liberty they experienced in Eden. Coleridge appears to be hyper-aware of this loss, unsatisfied with the half "solution" Michael offers.

While Raphael's narrative emphasizes Adam's own ability to choose, and preferably choose a happy communion with God and others, the Mariner's tale appears to enslave both its audience and narrator within its own supernatural construction. However, although the Mariner may be "forced" to tell his tale, when he does tell it, he also claims that telling the story "[leaves him] free" (580-581). While the Mariner and Wedding-Guest may have become shackled by whatever knowledge the Mariner's story imparts, it perhaps binds them to a higher plane of existence. That is to say, whatever the Mariner experienced, and later transmitted exactly to the Wedding-Guest, provides the pair with access to a state of enlightenment, which, though not Edenic, is nonetheless insulated and separate from the workings of the fallen world. Through this interior enlightenment, the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest can see beyond the base habits of existence and the tyrannical governance of other men, and therefore not be tethered by them. In his *Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, Coleridge explains that "man is indeed a slave, who is a slave to his own sense, and whose mind and imagination cannot carry him beyond the distance which his hand can touch or even his reach" (79). By this definition, the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest are anything but slaves. Through a narrative that defies any earthly sense, they both imaginatively ponder what lies beyond their intellectual reach and exemplify Coleridge's definition of the poet as "one who, with a soul un-subdued by habit, unshackled by custom, contemplates all things" (80). In this instance, the experience of the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest is akin, though not equivalent, to the experience of Raphael and Adam under the laws of

Milton's God. However, while the pair may be intellectually liberated, such freedom has a high cost. While the pair may be uninhibited by the narrow customs of society, they are also barred from its benefits, i.e. happy communion with fellow humans. In addition, both are stripped of the *conscious ability* to act outside or contrary to the feelings that the Mariner's experience has afflicted them with.

The Mariner's and the Wedding-Guest's lack of volition and their subsequent removal from society could simply be a product of the fall. In a letter to his brother George, Coleridge wrote:

I believe most steadfastly [sic] in Original Sin; that from out mother's wombs our understandings are darkened; and even where our understandings are in the Light, that our organization is depraved, & our *volitions imperfect*. (Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge I: 242, my italics)

Through the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-guest, Coleridge demonstrates the inability of narrative to function as an exercise of freedom as it did in Eden, or to provide the solace it had in book twelve. Although the Mariner's and the Wedding-Guest's "understanding" may be in the "light," their "volitions" are most definitely "imperfect." The question still remains: what knowledge does the enlightened pair share? While the Wedding-Guest apparently finds something profound and life changing in the Mariner's tale, the reader is left in the dark. Not only does the reader not understand what the Mariner has to impart, she is also not entirely sure what to make of the narrative exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest: is it a model to be emulated, or not? The poem never fully answers these questions; in fact as the poem draws to a close the potential answers become all the more muddled.

### **“Sweeter than the marriage-feast”: An Attempt to Reconcile Narrative with Community**

Whether Coleridge intended the sacrifice of community for the sake of knowledge to be admired or lamented is uncertain. In some instances, the “loud uproar” (591) and boisterous frivolity of the wedding celebration appear to represent the “custom” and “habit” Coleridge finds unconducive to poetry. However, Coleridge also believed that poetry could “prevent men from confining their attention solely, or chiefly, to their own narrow sphere of action, and their own individual circumstances” (Lecs on Shakespeare and Milton 78). Coleridge’s prose suggests that he did not perceive the isolation of the poet from community to be a good thing. However, while the normal wedding guests enjoy happiness and a sense of communion, they do so only because they remain ignorant of the seemingly important, albeit terrible, knowledge that the Mariner has to impart.

At the poem’s close, the Mariner attempts to mitigate the chasm he has opened between the community and the knowledge his narrative imparts. As the wedding-guests begin to gather in “the garden-bower” for the wedding feast (593), the Mariner notes “the little vesper bell” ringing in the background of the celebratory din (595). The Mariner explains that the bell “biddeth” him “to prayer” (596). He then addresses the Wedding-Guest saying, “O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been/ Alone on a wide wide sea;/ So lonely twas, that God himself/ Scarced there seemed to be” (597-600). While the Mariner acknowledges his loneliness and depicts it as an undesirable consequence of his experience, he does not endorse the frivolities of the wedding feast. Instead, he offers the Wedding-Guest something he sees as “sweeter than the marriage-feast: [...] To walk together to the kirk/ With a goodly company!” (601-604). The Mariner proposes that despite the terrible wisdom he has imparted, the Wedding-Guest can still participate in communal worship, which will replace the community found at the wedding feast.

At first, this moral endorsement seems to resolve the issue of how the reader should perceive the interaction between the Mariner, the Wedding-Guest, and the community gaily celebrating in the background. The Mariner's closing remarks superficially reconcile his sublime experience with community and thus negate the need for the kind of fellowship found at the wedding feast. However, upon closer inspection, the reader finds the Mariner's moral riddled with inconsistencies. While the Mariner extols the value of "all together pray[ing], [...] old men, and babes, and loving friends/ And youths and maidens gay!" (605-608), he is never once associated with any of these characters. Throughout the poem, the Mariner is cut off from society and social communion. After shooting the Albatross, the Mariner's crew shuns him. The Mariner himself admits this, saying, "each [crewmember] turned his face with a ghastly pang, / and cursed me with his eye" (214-215). Even the people who rescue the Mariner find him repulsive and off-putting. When the Mariner attempts to speak the "the Pilot shriek[s]/ and [falls] down in a fit"(561-562). The Mariner's presence causes the Pilot's boy to "crazy go" because he believes the Mariner is the "Devil" (565-569).

Even the Hermit who "loves to talk with mariners/ that come from a far countree" (517-518) cannot understand the Mariner. While the Mariner turns to the Hermit for solace and advice, all the Hermit can say is: "what manner of man art thou?" (577). In reply, the Mariner tells his tale, but confiding in the Hermit far from solves the Mariner's problem, nor does it create any sense of camaraderie between the two. After telling his tale to the Hermit, the Mariner leaves and continues to "pass, like night, from land to land" as a solitary wanderer detached from a specific place or an established community (586). The Mariner's poor communal track record begs the question: what "goodly company" does he intend to pray with? Even the individuals with whom the Mariner connects, like the Wedding-Guest, are soon left behind. The Mariner's

solitary nature makes the community he alludes to seem more phantasmal and improbable than the supernatural spirits and creatures he describes earlier. The contradiction between the Mariner's concluding advice and the way Coleridge portrays him throughout the poem undermines the final moral he offers.

In addition, the Mariner disregards the fact that that "the bridal couple would have participated in a nuptial mass or [...] taken communion" (Kathryn Wall 56). By failing to acknowledge the religious element of the wedding ceremony, the Mariner contradicts himself and discredits the advice he offers. Had the Mariner not told his tale, the Wedding-Guest would have participated in the communal religious worship the Mariner endorses. Instead, the Mariner's tale leaves the Wedding-Guest unable to participate in either communal activity. The Wedding-Guest does not go to the "kirk" as the Mariner recommends, and he also turns "from the bridegroom's door" (621). Indeed, the use of the word "garden-bower" to describe the wedding feast suggests that the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest are somehow excluded from some kind of communal Edenic bliss. Unlike Raphael and the first couple who converse in the bower, the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest are exiled from it. The exchange between them seems the opposite of the leisurely and loved- filled communal exercise that occurs in Eden and that is being weirdly echoed in the background of the "Rime." In addition, the Mariner excludes married couples from his list of fellow communicants. Even when attempting to reconcile his sublime experience with a communal activity, the Mariner cannot fathom including the pair that symbolically represents the binding union of two disparate individuals. Despite the Mariner's concluding remarks, community and the knowledge the Mariner imparts remain incompatible.

The poem does not end with a positive and assured moral; rather, it concludes with a despondent summation of the Mariner's and the Wedding-Guest's states of being. The narrator explains, "The Mariner whose eye is bright [...] Is gone" (618-620). The Wedding-Guest leaves

Like one that hath been stunned

And is of sense forlorn:

A sadder and a wiser man,

He rose the morrow morn. (622-625)

The Wedding-Guest recognizes the inadequacy of the final moral, or in the very least is unaffected by it. Not only does the final image illustrate the inadequacy of the previous moral to explain the complexity of the Mariner's tale, it also frames the tragic pair one last time. At the poem's close the narrator describes the Mariner's eyes as "bright" (618) rather than with the more malignant modifier "glittering" (3), and although the Wedding-Guest is "sadder," he also is "wiser" (624), although the reader is left in the dark as to why. The poem ends with the reader, a witness, but outsider, to the pair's experience, watching in confusion and awe as the Mariner goes one way, and the Wedding-Guest goes the other.

The last few stanzas of the poem are perhaps more confusing than the Mariner's supernatural tale. The Mariner's moral not only fails to reconcile the gap his narrative creates between the Wedding-Guest and the community, it also fails to adequately resolve his confusing tale. The didactic message does not sufficiently address what Lucy Newlyn calls the "improbability of the poem's supernatural machinery" (127). It functions as a forced and artificial conclusion rather than a natural resolution. Newlyn notes the poem is "more open-ended than its moral would suggest" because it "raises differing and competing narrative expectations" (127). Coleridge illustrates this, as he ends the poem with the Wedding-Guest

unable to abide by the insufficient moral the Mariner offers and unable to rejoin the community. While the Wedding-Guest leaves stunned by his knowledge, the reader is still unsure what that knowledge might be. Is it acknowledgement and acceptance of some Christian moral order, as the Mariner's final didactic message suggests, or is it wrapped up in the sublime supernatural occurrence that the Mariner has experienced at sea? In either case, how exactly the Mariner's experience can be parsed completely eludes the reader.

### **The Marginal Voice, The Reader's Response, and Coleridge's Critical Compensation**

In 1817, nineteen years after the "Rime's" initial publication in *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge republished it in his own collection called *Sibylline Leaves*. In its final iteration, Coleridge added one of the poem's most distinctive and unique elements, the marginal voice (Brett and Jones 273). Between the "Rime's" debut in 1798 and its final publication, Coleridge fielded many complaints and critiques on his now iconic work. Wordsworth thought the "old words and the strangeness" of the poem were distasteful.<sup>12</sup> While Coleridge himself believed its moral was too overt, others, like Mrs. Barbauld thought it was "improbable and, had no moral," (Table Talks, 91).

It is reasonable to wonder why, after so many years, Coleridge chose to add the marginal voice, and what he hoped to achieve by doing so. Many scholars believe that the marginal voice is intentionally reductive and that Coleridge added it to act as visual representation of a poor reader.<sup>13</sup> A less popular interpretation of the gloss suggests that it is genuine and that Coleridge

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<sup>12</sup> As quoted on pg. 259 of "Notes to the Poems." *Wordsworth and Coleridge Lyrical Ballads*, edited by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones.

<sup>13</sup> In his *Irony and Authority*, David Simpson says "It can be argued that the prose commentary stands as a conscious, albeit, gentle, parody of the habit of over inscription and reductive explanation which the poem undoubtedly attracted from its first readers" (100). Similarly, in her *The Creative Mind in Coleridge's Poetry*, Katherine Wheeler explains that "the preoccupations in the gloss with causality, and spatial dimensions seem

added it to provide an example of how he wanted the poem to be interpreted.<sup>14</sup> I agree with the former. Perhaps after nineteen years of being misunderstood, Coleridge added the marginal voice in resigned acknowledgement that the exact transfer of experience and knowledge that occurs between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest could never occur between himself and his actual readers. Alternatively, Coleridge could have added the gloss in order to emphasize an idea that he had always intended to convey in the original poem: the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest is impossible in reality, but that is not a bad thing. Given that Coleridge wrote the initial version of the poem with archaic spellings and that the Mariner's rime has always been framed by a narrative voice, which distances the actual reader from the Mariner's tale, I believe that Coleridge always intended to stress the impossibility of perfectly communicating some sublime experience or knowledge.

However, whether Coleridge came to this conclusion in 1798 or in 1817 does not matter. Coleridge chose to leave his readers with a marginal gloss that highlights the impossibility of conveying the mysteries of the sublime exactly. As some scholars have noted, the marginal voice draws one's attention to the act of reading and the subsequent act of interpretation.<sup>15</sup> By gesturing to the reader's critical engagement with the text, Coleridge resolves the problems that the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-guest creates, and delineates the benefits of *imperfect* communication. Through the marginal voice, Coleridge suggests that reading and critically engaging with a text bridges the schism between the pursuit of a sublime knowledge

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contrary to the imaginative spirit explicitly free of the ordinary laws of time, space, and causality, both as it is exemplified in the verse's imaginative language" (52).

<sup>14</sup> In his "Irrationality and Christianity," Christopher Stokes suggests that Coleridge added the gloss to bring the poem under a more rigid Anglican belief system, which he fervently adopted later in life.

<sup>15</sup> See Wendy Wall's "Interpreting Poetic Shadows: The Gloss of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.'" And Tom Fulford's "Slavery and Superstition in the Supernatural Poems."

and human fellowship, and resolves the issues of volition created by the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest.

By placing a reductive and at times inaccurate gloss in the margin, Coleridge dramatically illustrates the impossibility of parsing the Mariner's tale. On most occasions, the marginal voice happily paraphrases the Mariner's words. However, several times throughout the poem, he makes interpretive decisions that stand at odds with the events and sentiments embedded in the verse. One such moment occurs in the middle of the poem, after the crew has died. The Mariner looks out at the deck that is strewn with bodies and exclaims,

	The many men, so beautiful!
<i>He dispiseth</i>	And they all dead did lie:
<i>the creatures</i>	And a thousand slimy things
<i>of the calm</i>	
	Lived on; and so did I. (236-239)

The Mariner's exclamation seems laced with sorrow and despair; however, the marginal voice has a vastly different take on the Mariner's words. In the gloss of the stanza, the voice concludes that the Mariner "dispiseth the creatures of the calm," and later explains that the Mariner "envieth that they should live [while] so many lie dead." The marginal voice fails to connect with the Mariner on an emotional level. As a consequence, he discredits the Mariner's genuine sadness and maintains that the Mariner is hateful and envious.

By examining the instances in which the marginal voice simply summarizes the verse, one can conclude that the gloss's inevitable failure to glean the knowledge the Mariner has to impart occurs, to a significant extent, on the linguistic level. One of the most obvious instances in which the interaction between the gloss and the poem's verse emphasizes the fallibility of

language occurs as the Mariner's ship glides into his home harbor after his journey. In a tone of disbelief and astonishment, the Mariner exclaims,

	Oh! Dream of Joy! Is this indeed
<i>And the ancient</i>	The light-house top I see?
<i>Mariner beholdeth</i>	
<i>His native country.</i>	Is this the hill? Is this the kirk?
	Is this mine own countree? (464-468).

The marginal voice makes sense of the Mariner's words by gesturing to other words that are generally synonymous. He translates the Mariner's "see" into "beholdeth," and converts the phrase "this mine own countree" into "native country." Although the marginal voice sums up what happens in the stanza relatively accurately, his summary obviously saps the verse of lyrical and figurative grace. He also raises the lexical level of the poem, translating the poignant plainness of the Mariner's speech into a pompous outpouring.

The gloss's tendency to replace the Mariner's words with superficially complex diction dramatizes the possibility of extrapolating from a text something that is not actually present. It also illustrates the violence that can be rendered on a text by a reader preoccupied with his own point of view and unconcerned with interpreting what is actually in front of him. In his hackneyed summation, the marginal voice drains the scene of its emotional charge. As Wendy Wall explains, "the figurative language [of the verse] is [often] literalized" in the gloss (182). By juxtaposing the Mariner's outpouring with the marginal summary, Coleridge poetically illustrates the phenomenon he describes in *Biographia Literaria* as the "untranslatableness" of words into "the same language without injury to the meaning" (536).

With the addition of the marginal voice, Coleridge seems to offer us two possible models of how language could function. The exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest

depicts language as an appropriate medium through which to convey some sublime experience and the knowledge, whatever that may be, that accompanies it. However, such an exchange is plagued by complications and sorrow. The second model that Coleridge offers suggests that language completely fails to convey any significance and only generates isolating misinterpretations. However, the marginal voice does not simply indicate a failure to understand: it also illustrates a dogged and *genuine effort to understand*, to find meaning in something that is incomprehensible. While the gloss's effort to understand is not entirely fruitful, the effort of the actual reader need not be so unsuccessful. While misinterpreting language may be inevitable, it does not need to be permanent or unproductive. If the actual reader earnestly engages with the Mariner's rime, the inability to understand or perfectly translate words and experiences becomes an opportunity. When critically engaging with the Mariner's rime, the reader considers an ineffable experience without being debilitated by the exercise, contemplates the human aspects of sublime knowledge, and thoughtfully and purposely makes interpretive choices.

Although the gloss may be reductive, it is essential for the purpose of distinguishing *how* and *why* critical engagement with the text solves the problems created by the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest creates. First of all, by inscribing the margin with a poor reading of the poem, Coleridge provides the reader with an example of what not to do. Through the marginal voice, Coleridge shows the reader that an inflexible adherence to one way of seeing deters deep thought and results in a reductive and unsubstantial interpretation. Coleridge encourages the reader to embark on a more nuanced and thoughtful critical examination of not only the "Rime," but all texts, a pursuit to which Coleridge himself eventually dedicated his life.

In addition, by placing a highly reductive interpretation firmly at the margins of the page, Coleridge practically eggs the actual reader on to write over the marginal gloss and

inscribe the text with her own meaning. Yet, unlike the gloss, she should not make the mistake of believing that her first and initial interpretation of the poem should remain fixed. By creating a baseline interpretation, Coleridge invites the reader not only to write over the gloss but also to write over her own interpretations again and again, each time adding something new. Although critical engagement with a narrative does not exclude the ability to passively absorb the sentiment of the Mariner's words as the Wedding-Guest does, it also requires something more. It requires a mind that challenges and questions the words and world before it. Such a process requires time, thought, distance, and thus the ability to return to the text, which, although it remains fixed on the page, need not remain fixed in the mind. The act of reading naturally prompts such critical engagement.

As Fulford explains, the marginal gloss “foreground[s] the poem's existence as a written text by making us conscious of the act of reading” (52). By gesturing to the act of reading, Coleridge hints that the Wedding-Guest's propensity for passive absorption is not the only thing that distinguishes him from the reader of the “Rime.” Unlike the reader who carefully and slowly contemplates the Mariner's words and has the ability to revisit them, the Wedding-Guest is told the story by the Mariner standing directly before him. The Mariner's voice, glittering eye, and grip—in short, the physical situation of transmission—all affect the Wedding-Guest's experience of the tale. However, the reader remains unaffected by these extra-linguistic factors, because she engages with a more mediated version of the Mariner's story. The marginal voice amplifies the separation between the subject of a written text and its audience. As Wendy Wall explains, the gloss “sets up a distance between the reader and the narrative action” (185). When the reader momentarily stops reading the verse to glance at the gloss, she is drawn away from the “narrative momentum” of the Mariner's tale (183). In this instance the marginal voice functions in the same

way the narrative frame of the poem does: both make the reader acknowledge that she is reading two stories: the Mariner's tale, and the story of the Mariner telling his tale. Within this Russian doll-like structure, the reader becomes hyper-aware she is reading a fiction and thus can do exactly what Coleridge wants her to do: "willingly suspend [her] disbelief" (*Biographia Literaria* 490). Although mediation and distance are endemic to the written word, Coleridge uses the marginal voice to dramatize this mediation and distance and thus call the reader to recognize it as a desirable alternative to exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest.

The marginal voice makes the actual reader aware that what she is reading is a fiction and the stakes for her are less high than they are for the Wedding-Guest. Safe with pen in hand, the reader is not held by the Mariner's grasp or by the allure of his glittering eye; rather, she has the privilege of analyzing their effect on the Wedding-Guest. In this instance, Coleridge hints that written texts cannot convey experience, sublime or otherwise, perfectly; however, he also illustrates that they provide ample compensation. The textual mediation of the "Rime" enables the reader to think about the inexplicable and terrifying sea journey without being debilitated by whatever it has to impart. Through this critical role, Coleridge finally reconciles the contemplation of the sublime with living a full and enriched life within the community. The reader can consider the Mariner's terrifying experience and raise her thoughts beyond the constraints and habits of everyday life; unlike the Wedding-Guest, however, she can always return back, informed by the reading but not debilitated by the exercise.

By critically engaging with the text, the reader bridges the chasm between an ineffable knowledge or experience and the community. The critical reader not only contemplates the sublime elements of the Mariner's tale: she also considers the human aspects of his story. As she reads the Mariner's tale, the reader considers his motives and his inexplicable agony. She

attempts not only to understand the Mariner, but also the Wedding-Guest, the marginal voice, and ultimately Coleridge. The reader's critical engagement constitutes an effort to understand, and feel in tandem, with another individual, even if she can never fully do these things. Although the process of critical analysis requires the reader to, at least for a moment, separate herself from her equivalent of the boisterous wedding festivities, she is still inextricably involved with the community because she wrestles with the ideas and questions that concern all humanity.

In a sense, the marginal voice functions as a communal gesture: it serves as Coleridge's invitation to the reader to enter a dialogue. Rather than figuratively sitting his reader on a stone and imposing his ideas upon her, Coleridge provides the reader with a model, albeit a bad one, that suggests that she has the opportunity and ability to respond to the "Rime." While the Wedding-Guest for the most part remains silent, the reader should not. For Coleridge, the critical dialogue the "Rime" generates, which he initiates through the marginal voice, serves as the ideal alternative between two extremes: the debilitating exchange the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest participate in, and the boisterous celebration of the wedding-feast.

Through this critical middle ground, Coleridge illustrates that the intellectual contemplation of sublime experience coincides, rather than conflicts, with freewill. Coleridge suggests that, through critically engaging with a text the reader has the opportunity to consciously free herself from societal constraints. The reader has the intellectual freedom to think or write or say anything about the text and by extension the sublime elements of the Mariner's tale and the social comedy of the wedding feast. When critically engaging with a text the reader questions and analyzes the language that comprises the text and the time and culture from which it derives. Coleridge stresses this readerly responsibility by adding a gloss that is overtly informed by Anglican ideology and archaic literary tropes. He prompts the reader to

exercise her analytical and investigative muscles in order to strengthen her ability to make conscious and informed decisions.

The decisions that Coleridge calls the reader to make within the text microcosmically illustrate the freedom that Coleridge invites the reader to assert in reality. Through the marginal voice, Coleridge encourages the reader to actively and consciously choose how to make meaning out of the Mariner's rime. The reader makes the conscious and thoughtful choices that the Wedding-Guest never had the opportunity to make. For starters, she can choose to accept the reductive reading the gloss provides or to generate her own interpretation. She can choose to continue reading the Mariner's tale or to simply put the poem down. Although Michael suggests that, after the fall, perfect positive liberty has been lost, Coleridge's implied reader enjoys negative liberty, which is the ability to choose and act as an autonomous individual. While Coleridge considered "our volitions to be imperfect," he offers critical reading as a way to exercise what volition we do have.

When considering the "Rime" as part of greater collection, *Lyrical Ballads*, the choices the reader can make increase. Coleridge's initial audience would have likely read the "Rime" and "Expostulation and Reply" in the same sitting. They would have picked up on the obvious dialogue between the two poems and the two distinct points of view each poem respectively endorses. These readers were given a low stakes *decision*: either to endorse the passive absorption Wordsworth promotes, or to acknowledge the difficulties and detriments of such a world view, which Coleridge subtly illustrates through his depiction of the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest.

Wordsworth clearly saw and felt threatened by the value judgment that his readers were free to make between the conflicting philosophies (his and Coleridge's). While the first edition

of *Lyrical Ballads* was a collaborative creative project, as the years passed the collection became increasingly dominated and directed by Wordsworth.<sup>16</sup> By 1800 Wordsworth had acquired the sole copyright ownership of the collection and had decided to publish a second edition.<sup>17</sup> In the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth demoted the “Rime,” removing it from its first-place position in the collection and burying it at the end of the first volume. He placed “Expostulation and Reply” in the Rime’s previous lead-off position. In a letter to Joseph Cottle in 1799, Wordsworth wrote that the poem was “an injury to the volume,” for it “deterred readers from going on” to read Wordsworth own poems.<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth’s choice to replace the “Rime” with “Expostulation and Reply” reveals that he not only saw Coleridge’s poem as a threat to the marketability and success of the collection, but also as an inconvenient critique of his creative process and world vision that would best be hidden from the reader. By tampering with and diminishing the reader’s accessibility to the “Rime,” Wordsworth unconsciously acknowledges the value of Coleridge’s alternative to passive receptivity: the reader’s careful and deliberate critical examination of a text.

The true reconciliation between the sublime experience of the Mariner’s narrative and community and freedom comes occurs within the margins of the poem. The reader has the privilege of both extending her mind beyond what preoccupies her, by considering the Mariner’s sublime experience, and entering a communal dialogue within which she actively asserts her right to choose. Through her critical engagement with the text, the reader uses her imagination in a way that carries her “beyond the distance which [her] hand can touch or even reach” (*Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton* 79), without being torn from the fabric of society. The critical

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<sup>16</sup> See Prickett, Stephen *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Lyrical Ballads*. New York: Edward Arnold, 1975. Print. Pg. 20.

<sup>17</sup> See Edwards Adam’s “The Publication of the Lyrical Ballads, 1800” pg. 43

<sup>18</sup> As quoted from “Notes to the Poems.” *Lyrical Ballads*. By William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones. London: Taylor Francis, 1968. 259-317. Print. pg. 259.

reader's interaction with the text not only functions as an antithetical model to the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, it also acts as Coleridge's postlapsarian version of the Edenic dialogues and his alternative to Adam's blind acceptance of the scriptures that Michael endorses.

### Chapter III

#### “For my humor’s sake”: Ishmael’s Sociable, Critical, and Comical Narrative

#### Introduction:

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton is confronted with a problem: language does not always express things perfectly, and in fact it can be as faulty and fallible as the human beings who use it. In book five, Milton deploys Raphael to demonstrate the benefits of the medium despite its shortcomings. The affable archangel provides the Edenic pair with a narrative that shields them from terrible knowledge, encourages creativity, and creates community. Raphael offers the benefits of narrative as a way for the couple to avoid the fall. After the fall, these benefits are the main consolation Milton gives his reader. However, through Michael, Milton also illustrates the main purpose of narrative in the postlapsarian world: to provide hope through the scriptures. While the failure of language does not cause the fall, it language does not prevent it either, despite Raphael’s best efforts. As a result, the exchange of narrative, though always beneficial, is also always marked by anxiety.

Anxiety pervades Coleridge’s “Rime” too. Through the interaction between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, Coleridge seems to depart from his predecessor by depicting a perfect exchange of knowledge through narrative. However, the discrepancy between the reader’s response to the Mariner’s tale and the Wedding-Guest’s reveals that such an exchange is neither possible nor desirable. Coleridge provides an alternative to the exchange *within* the poem, and a partial solution to the failures of language, by hinting at how he wants his reader to engage with his text. The ideal reader of Coleridge’s “Rime” carefully considers the text and constantly amends hers and others’ past interpretations of it. Through the interaction between the reader and

the text, Coleridge illustrates not only the need for a discursive approach to the word and the world, but the value of it.

Fifty-plus years after the “Rime,” Melville writes *Moby-Dick* and adds his two cents to a dialogue started by Milton’s Raphael two centuries earlier. Although separated by large expanses of time and ocean and writing in another genre, Melville was as interested as his predecessors were in language’s imperfection and the consequences of that imperfection. As a nineteenth-century American who was as concerned with realism as he was with Romanticism, Melville contributes a unique perspective to a conversation on the value of narrative. At the same time, Melville read the work of his predecessors closely. When articulating what language is good for, he builds upon the foundations that Coleridge and Milton laid. Within *Moby-Dick*, the sublimity of Milton’s heaven and Coleridge’s supernatural sea meet the real wonders of the natural world. The novel marks a transition point in literary history as Melville carries the concerns of the past into the present. Unlike his predecessors, Melville does not anchor his narrative in religion. Religion is marched out as one of many possible explanations for the mysteries of the sea; however, religion, like every other belief system, is finally inadequate to describe the magnitude of *Moby-Dick*’s subject matter. Melville regards God, like science or philosophy, with great skepticism. Despite his differences from his predecessors, however, Melville is still concerned with the same questions they struggled to answer: how do we talk about this portentous something? And how do we live with it?

Like Milton and Coleridge before him, Melville gives us two models for dealing with the unknowable and perhaps dangerous mysteries of the universe. While Ahab inevitably evokes both Satan and the Mariner, Ishmael embodies a social and discursive model antithetical to Ahab’s violence that is strikingly similar to the model Milton articulates through Raphael and the

role Coleridge wants his reader to assume. However, unlike Coleridge, Melville is not interested in depicting a perfect exchange of knowledge through an imperfect medium. Through Ishmael, Melville demonstrates that no absolute knowledge exists, and that one should not aspire to convey it. Like Raphael, Ishmael acknowledges the flaws of language. However, unlike Raphael's stories, Ishmael's narrative is not marked with anxiety over the potentially dire consequences of imperfect communication. This enables Ishmael to indulge in a level of playfulness and levity that neither of his predecessors quite manage to achieve. Now firmly in the postlapsarian world, Ishmael uses narrative to assert his own freedom and to encourage his audience to do the same. Ishmael does this by creating a narrative that is driven by his readerly attempt to understand the inexplicable, an attempt he undertakes in full awareness that he shall never succeed. While Ahab attempts to deal with Moby-Dick through an act of physical violence, Ishmael grapples with the whale by creating narrative. Ahab's track leads to destruction; Ishmael's does not.

We know that when he wrote *Moby-Dick*, both the "Rime" and Milton's Raphael were on Melville's mind. As Robin Grey explains, "while the English Romantics—particularly Coleridge, Lamb, and Keats—were partly responsible for introducing nineteenth-century American writers to seventeenth-century English culture," not all knowledge of seventeenth-century English writers was "exclusively refracted through the English Romantic[s]" (5-6). Milton would have been one of those writers with whom Melville was simply familiar from a very young age. Milton's works saturated Antebellum American life, particularly in New England where a strong Calvinist ideology had left its imprint on the people and the culture. *Paradise Lost* was such a literary staple in nineteenth-century America that sections of it were

placed in school text books, some of which Melville used as a child.<sup>19</sup> Not only was Melville deeply familiar with Milton's epic: he was also interested in Raphael. In his copy of *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, Melville placed three large check marks next to the speech Raphael makes before narrating the war in heaven.<sup>20</sup> The editors of Melville's marginalia have determined that there are at least three specific dated occasions during which Melville annotated the text, the first being in 1849 just as he was starting work on his novel.<sup>21</sup> While the year that Melville placed the check marks next to Raphael's speech is uncertain, he does mention the angel Raphael in a letter he wrote to a friend in 1849. This suggests that he was thinking about the affable archangel as he wrote *Moby-Dick*.<sup>22</sup>

Melville was also extensively familiar with the "Rime." In "The Whiteness of the Whale," a chapter in which Ishmael grapples with the paradoxical significance of whiteness, Melville adds a footnote that refers directly to the poem. Melville recalls, "I remember the first albatross I saw" (160). He describes the albatross as a "feathery thing of unspotted whiteness" with "vast archangel wings" (161). As he gazed at the bird, Melville says he was "darted through" with feelings that he "cannot tell, can only hint at" (160), which might have been akin to those the Mariner had felt in "Coleridge's wild Rhyme" (161). However, Melville quickly explains that the poem had "[n]aught to do with those mystical impressions that were mine" (161). He stresses that at the time he had "neither [...] read the Rhyme, nor knew the bird to be an albatross" (161). Melville's choice to footnote a substantial amount of text that would easily

<sup>19</sup> See: *Milton and Melville*, by Henry F. Pommer pages 7-8.

<sup>20</sup> See: *Melville's Milton: A Transcription of Melville's Marginalia in His Copy of the Poetical Works of John Milton*, edited by Robin Grey, Douglas Robillard, and Hershel Parker (pg. 138).

<sup>21</sup> In his "The Composition of *Moby-Dick*" James Barbour suggest the novel was written in three stages, the first of which he began in February 1850. See page 358.

<sup>22</sup> In the letter Melville says, "Shakespeare in heaven ranks with Gabriel, Raphael, and Michael." Pommer admits that Melville could have been referring to the biblical versions of Gabriel and Michael. However, the Raphael Melville refers to is most likely Milton's. He explains, "Raphael [...] has no Biblical existence outside the apocryphal Book of Tobit" (71).

fit in the body of the chapter reveals that he was somewhat anxious about the extent of Coleridge's influence on his own creative project or the perception that there might be such an influence.

Melville's anxiety was due to more than just shared subject matter, i.e. inexplicable things happening on ocean voyages. In the footnote, Melville explains that, unlike in the "Rime," the albatross he had encountered was not shot. Instead, "the Captain made a post man of it; tying a lettered, leathern tally round its neck" (161). Melville says that he "doubt[s] not, that leathern tally, meant for man, was taken off to Heaven, when the white fowl flew to join the wing-folding, the invoking, and adoring cherubim" (161). Melville's decision to add the detail of his captain using the albatross as a postman suggests that he, like his predecessors, grappled with how to communicate when dealing with the sublime.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the description of a bird as an archangel and Melville's reference to its role as a messenger between man and heaven possibly evokes the image of Raphael.

Most of the criticism written about the link between Coleridge and Melville focuses on the influence of Coleridge's philosophical and critical work on Melville's novels.<sup>24</sup> The parallels between "The Rime" and *Moby-Dick* are so apparent and seemingly reside so much on the surface of the two works that many scholars have *not* bothered to investigate the connection in

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<sup>23</sup> By placing this discussion in a footnote, Melville, speaking as his own person, distinguishes how he as a writer contributes to the dialogue started by Raphael in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He makes the reader note his involvement in the ideas and challenges that his predecessors grappled with, and suggests that he is adding something new to the discussion. The way Melville narrates this past encounter suggests what kind of contribution Ishmael might make under similar circumstances. Depicting the great albatross as it lifts off into sky, Melville gives his reader an image of sublime and awe inspiring beauty. Yet, in the scene preceding it he offers the comical image of his captain catching the albatross and tying letters to its leg. Melville mixes profundity with levity a strategy Ishmael employs throughout the novel. This playful quality is a mode that his two predecessors have not seemed to master. In the immense world that is unordered by religion or any concrete system of understanding, Melville suggests that narrative can help make light of the horrors of the sublime and provide a means through which we can playfully try to understand that which what can never be understood.

<sup>24</sup> See Christopher Dyer's *Herman Melville Romantic and Prophet: A Study of Romantic Sensibility and his Relation to European Romanticism* (10). In his *Herman Melville, A Biography*, Leon Howard discusses the influence of Coleridge's analysis of Hamlet in *His Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton* on Melville's depiction of Ahab (165-171). Also see "Ishmael's development as narrator: Melville's Synthesizing Process" by John W. Young.

great detail.<sup>25</sup> While scholars regularly compare the two works, they do so in an offhanded and often inaccurate manner. One of the most common one-sentence parallels scholars like to draw is between Ishmael and the Mariner. In his *Ishmael's White World*, Paul Brodtkorb notes that Ishmael, like the Mariner, is compelled “by something in him [...] to tell the whole long story over and over again” (82). Similarly, Grant McMillan draws an analogy between Ishmael and the Mariner claiming that both “are struggling to understand an experience which depends on, and fluctuates between, the material and the spiritual” (214).<sup>26</sup>

However, any close examination of the two texts will reveal that scholars consistently draw the wrong comparisons. Only on a superficial level do Ishmael and the Mariner resemble one another. They both experience a terrifying adventure at sea, survive, and return to tell their tale. That is as far as the comparison extends. In fact, the ways that Ishmael and the Mariner perceive their experiences and tell their tales could not be more different. In addition, the Mariner's violent need to impress his experience on another individual (not to mention his tendency to shoot white animals) is a trait he shares with Ahab, not Ishmael. On the other hand, Ishmael's desire to understand his experience and his tendency constantly to revise his interpretation of events are traits he shares with the ideal reader of Coleridge's “Rime.” While Ishmael is indeed a storyteller, his sociable nature, his preoccupation with the failings of language, and his method of telling stories makes him ultimately Raphael's heir. Ishmael's readerly mentality and his adoption of Raphael's narrative strategies enable him to avoid the Mariner's fate and to offer a positive alternative to Ahab's violence.

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<sup>25</sup> One exception to this rule is Richard Gravil. In his “The Whale and the Albatross” he discusses the connection to the work in greater detail.

<sup>26</sup> For similar comments see Elmer E. Stoll's “Symbolism in *Moby Dick*” Stoll notes “as in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* it is by stages that we leave every day reality and enter a world where not so unplausibly one particular whale in the whole world can be caught or sought” (451).

### The Quarter-Deck and Ishmael's Readerly Response

After having been cloaked from the reader's scrutiny for the first portion of the novel, Ahab arrives in "The Quarter-Deck" as a formidable force who bears an uncanny resemblance to the Mariner. In the chapter, Ahab finally reveals his ulterior motives for captaining the Pequod and attempts to convince the crew to join his mission. Although he first tries to co-opt the crew by providing them with a monetary incentive, he soon realizes that he must try another method. Ahab does not simply wish to earn the crew's begrudging support; rather, he wishes to induce in them his own desire to kill the whale. Ahab does this by telling the crew about his encounter with Moby-Dick in the same manner that the Mariner recounts his experience to the Wedding-Guest. Ahab "*grasp[s]* the three [harpooners] level" and "*glancing intently* from Starbuck to Stubb; from Stubb to Flask" he attempts to "shock into them the same fiery emotion [...] of his own magnetic life" (my italics 141). Like the Mariner, in short, Ahab employs both hand and eye to physically restrain and mentally retain his audience. Ahab's coercive strategies are successful and the crew gets so wrapped up in his account of Moby-Dick that they commit themselves to his vengeful mission.<sup>27</sup>

While Ahab's performance on the quarter-deck and the reaction of crew resembles the interaction between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, there are nevertheless important distinctions between the two exchanges. Like the Mariner, Ahab is driven by a "nameless, interior volition." However, he also seems to be somewhat in control of it. His telling of his tale is not compulsive or repeated; rather, he unleashes the burning fire within him when it suits his purpose. Although the crew is deeply affected by Ahab's story, moreover, they do have the time to contemplate their actions before giving their oath to kill the white whale. Ahab's extended thought process and the crew's decision to take an oath suggests that they have more freedom

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<sup>27</sup> See Gravid page 9.

than the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, both of whose actions are depicted as involuntary. In fact, when the crew swears their oath they enter into a state of positive liberty. That is to say, they forfeit a certain amount of personal autonomy by aligning their wills with some greater purpose, which in this case is Ahab's mission.<sup>28</sup>

Immediately following Ahab's sermon the crew is drastically altered. However, instead of becoming "sadder and wiser" like the Wedding-Guest (who by the end of the poem seems to mirror the Mariner), the crew is whipped up into fury that seems to replicate the interior tumult of Ahab's soul. During this time, Ishmael disappears entirely and the next four chapters read like a play. Nowhere in these chapters does Ishmael appear either as a distinct character or as a narrative voice. The only narrative directions the reader is given are the stage directions that preface each chapter. In chapter 37, Ahab soliloquizes about how nothing will swerve him from his course. After Ahab finishes his speech, Starbuck appears on the scene to recite his own dramatic monologue. Starbuck is cut off from his musings when he hears the uproar of the "heathen crew" as they begin their "infernal orgies" (144). In chapter 40 "Midnight, Forecastle" Melville gives us a glimpse of the ruckus gathering. In this dramatic scene, each sailor speaks for himself. Many sailors get a say, for example "4<sup>th</sup> Nantucket Sailor," "Tahitian Sailor (reclining on a mat)," "Long-Island Sailor," all of whom never appear again. Although the scene is composed of the dialogue of individual members of the crew, all of their contributions seem to blend together and create a homogenous voice of madness. This chaotic jumbled voice energetically clamors for the "blood!" of "his [Ahab's] whale!" (149). The forecastle scene presents an example of a perversion of positive liberty and stands in stark contrast to the state of

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<sup>28</sup> C.L.R James thinks that the crew does not have free will; rather, they are under Ahab's totalitarian control see chapter 1 of his *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville* (5-31). Wai-Chee Dimock argues that Melville asserts his authorial freedom by creating a realm in which freedom functions as a "disciplinary postulate" an organizing principle that makes his character's fates inevitable and deserved. He does this by having his characters possess "negative individualism" (186).

positive freedom that occurs in Milton's Eden. Adam and Eve accept God's rule and as a result they live in peaceful harmony. Within Eden, Adam and Eve's willingness to submit to God's rule benefits both human and divine parties. However, the crew's submission to Ahab's will leads to their and his destruction. In this sense, the crew resembles the fallen angels who willingly decide to fight with Satan in a war against God. The crew's decision to make Ahab's mission their own throws them into a state of hateful madness similar to the state of the fallen angels.

In the following chapter, "Moby-Dick," Ishmael suddenly repossesses the narrative saying, "I, Ishmael was one of that crew" (152). With this emphatic statement, Ishmael disrupts the gathering and asserts his negative liberty. That is to say, he reclaims his ability to act as an autonomous individual who thinks outside of the mob. Although Ishmael separates himself from the crew and disassociates himself from Ahab's mission, he admits that at the time "a wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (152). In this instance, Ishmael's separate personalities come into play. Ishmael the character had, like the crew, resembled the mesmerized Wedding-Guest. In hindsight, however, the older Ishmael reads his own past and asserts the negative freedom that he had failed to achieve during the voyage.<sup>29</sup> He does this by doing what neither the Wedding-Guest nor the rest of the crew think to do: step back and attempt to *understand* what has occurred. Ishmael, like Coleridge's reader, has the freedom to decide how to make meaning from his experience.

While Ishmael spends the whole novel mulling over his terrifying adventure, he refuses, in the chapter directly following the forecastle scene, "Moby-Dick," to talk about his own past

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<sup>29</sup> The idea that there are two Ishmaels is not my own; rather, it is a belief commonly held by many scholars who examine Ishmael's function within the novel closely. Bezanson was the first to clearly articulate this distinction. In "Moby-Dick: Work of Art" he explains that there are two distinct Ishmaels: Ishmael the character, and Ishmael the narrator who acts as the "enfolding sensibility of the novel" (36). For Bezanson the two are the same person just at different points in time. They have the same temperament and vary only in experience.

experiences. Instead, he begins to parse what Ahab's mission, and his own involvement in it, meant by analyzing how other people's stories about Moby-Dick had affected him and his companions. It is unclear if the stories Ishmael discusses in "Moby-Dick" are stories told by his shipmates directly after the quarter-deck moment or if they are the stories he heard when the Pequod met other ships. In either case, Ishmael begins the process of reclaiming his personal autonomy and understanding his past through the mediated exercise of analyzing other narratives. Ishmael explains that the "morbid hints, and half formed foetal suggestions of supernatural agenc[y]" that he heard had "invested Moby Dick with new terrors" (153). In his first analysis of the stories, Ishmael stresses how the possibility that the whale was a supernatural being greatly affected him and the crew; however, the readerly Ishmael does not stop there. He goes on to analyze how descriptions of Moby-Dick's physical appearance had contributed to his hatred for an animal. Ishmael finally concludes that the most disturbing thing about the whale that he had gathered from "specific accounts" was the idea that Moby-Dick possessed some kind of "intelligent malignity" (155).

Ishmael, as narrator, is so moved by this idea that, within the chapter, he begins to retell the most powerful account of the whale's apparently intelligent malignity. He explains how, once, "one captain" had seized a "line-knife" and attempted to "dash" out "the fathom-deep life of the whale" (156). In response, Moby-Dick swept his "sickle-shaped lower jaw beneath him [the captain]" and "reaped away" his leg (156). Ishmael then informs the reader: "that captain was Ahab" (156). This is the first time the reader hears exactly what happened to Ahab. Ahab never tells the story of his maiming himself, so we can assume that Ishmael has heard it from one of his fellow crewmembers and has decided now to recount it. Within the order of narration,

Ahab is a generic captain before he is Ahab. In this odd aside, Ishmael relegates Ahab, the chief cause of all his problems, to a character in one of many stories about Moby-Dick.

After telling this and other stories about Moby-Dick, Ishmael stops considering how stories affected him and begins to examine how the whale affected Ahab. Ishmael analyzes Ahab not as human being that he has met, lived with, and labored under, but as a *character* in a story he has heard. Like Coleridge's reader, who attempts to understand the Mariner's inexplicable violent action, so too does Ishmael try to decipher Ahab's motives for returning to sea to kill the whale. Ishmael surmises that "all truth with malice in it" and "all evil, to crazy Ahab were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby-Dick" (156). As result, Ahab "piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down" (156). Ishmael not only depicts Ahab as a tortured Miltonic Adam figure: he also suggests that Ahab saw the whale as an incarnation of evil. Ishmael's interpretation of what the whale meant to Ahab has been one of the main grounds upon which scholars have labeled Ahab an allegorist or in Wai-chee Dimock's terms, "a monstrous reader" (188).

Ishmael makes this reduction, as any reader naturally would, in order to make sense of Ahab's character. However, an astute reader of *Moby-Dick* will note that Ishmael's summary reduces Ahab's actual and constantly evolving thoughts on the whale. The previous quarter-deck scene is the only moment within the text during which Ahab attempts to explain exactly why he hates Moby-Dick. When Starbuck accuses him of "taking vengeance on a dumb brute" (139), Ahab responds saying:

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 a prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? 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.(140)

Although Ahab gives his audience some idea of what the elusive white creature means to him, his ideas continuously oscillate. At first, the whale is the “pasteboard mask” of some “reasoning thing” (140). However, as Ahab's metaphor evolves the whale that was once a mask becomes a “wall,” which imprisons Ahab and restricts him from a reality that is exterior to himself.<sup>30</sup> What that reality might be is unclear even to Ahab, who admits that sometimes he thinks there is “naught beyond” the wall. While Ahab says he is disturbed by the whale's malice, he never suggests that the whale is evil incarnate. In fact in his final declaration, Ahab says that it is the “*inscrutable thing*” about the whale that he chiefly hates (my italics 140).

Ahab stresses that it is the whale's *unknown* quality, the thing that he cannot determine, that primarily bothers him. This is a far cry from the semi-allegorical reading that Ishmael ascribes to Ahab's thoughts in “Moby-Dick.” Ishmael does not intend to skew or misrepresent Ahab's character; rather, he has a *readerly* desire to understand and unify the meaning of Ahab's speech. Ishmael takes some of the terms and phrases Ahab uses, like “heaps” and “malice,” and reworks them into a more cohesive and organized explanation of Ahab's complex thoughts and constantly evolving feelings. Ishmael's take on Ahab's interpretation of the whale is by no

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<sup>30</sup> See Sharron Cameron's “Identity and Disembodiment in *Moby-Dick*.” Cameron examines the functions of bodies throughout Herman Melville's novel. Ultimately, Cameron concludes that Melville uses the bodies of his characters to literalize the endemic question of identity. For Cameron, the characterization of Pip and Ahab and the dynamic between them exemplifies Melville's preoccupation with the incompleteness of the individual and the struggle to be both of the self and of the great, thriving, sublime world from which all humans originate.

means reductive, but it is a simplification and a more allegorical reading of what Ahab actually says. With this in mind, Ahab's primary fault is not that he allegorizes reality, or even, as Brodhead suggests, that he, unlike Ishmael, is unable to understand that the meanings he imposes on reality are "products of his imagination" (156), but that his response to the "inscrutable thing" is to physically and literally strike at it.

The comparison between Ahab's thoughts on the whale and Ishmael's interpretation of those thoughts reveals another telling difference between them. Ahab does not care about understanding why the whale makes him feel the way he feels. He has a strong emotional reaction to Moby-Dick and he acts on it. For Ahab, understanding those feelings is an afterthought, an exercise he half-heartedly engages in when challenged by Starbuck. Ishmael, on the other hand, is more interested in discerning the reasons behind his feelings and the feelings of others. As a result, he is constantly amending and reworking what he thinks the whale means to him and to Ahab.<sup>31</sup> Ishmael's discursiveness and his process of understanding offer an alternative to Ahab's violence.

### **Ishmael: a Reader of the Mariner's Rime**

To repeat: unlike the Mariner or Ahab, Ishmael is not absorbed by his experience. In the two chapters directly following "The Quarter-Deck," Ishmael does not return to his past experiences at all. Instead, he focuses on analyzing the stories he has heard about Moby-Dick, on considering Ahab's character, and on contemplating the strange and paradoxical feelings he associates with whiteness (Chapter 42 "The Whiteness of the Whale"). After these chapters, Ishmael seems to postpone his discussion of the albino leviathan by delving into an account of

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<sup>31</sup> Many have noted Ishmael's tendency to never land on a fixed interpretation or emphatically present one absolute truth or claim certainly. See: pg. 152 in *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel* by Richard Brodhead. Similarly, in his "Moby-Dick: Work of Art," Walter E. Bezanson notes that Ishmael "delights in incongruities" (38).

the Pequod's first whale chase. When the readerly Ishmael does decide to talk about his own experience with Moby-Dick, he leans heavily on another text for support. Not coincidentally, this text is "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Chapters 51-54 give us, perhaps, Melville's most substantial and sustained engagement with Coleridge's poem. It seems as if, after writing his long footnote in chapter 42, Melville decided to revisit the "Rime" in more extensive manner through a pattern of allusions that few have investigated sufficiently.<sup>32</sup> In Chapter 51, the "Spirit-Spout," it is uncertain if Melville's references are intentional or not. In some instances, it seems as if Melville has so immersed himself in Coleridge's text that he ends up almost subconsciously regenerating its language and its feeling. However, by Chapter 52, Melville is consciously alluding to the "Rime." He cues his reader to recognize his purposeful engagement with the poem by titling the chapter "The Albatross." Within the chapter, Ishmael challenges the exchange that occurs in the "Rime" and draws parallels between Coleridge's title character and Ahab. In the two chapters that follow, "The Gam" and the "The Town-Ho's Story," Ishmael pinpoints why Ahab and the Mariner meet their tragic ends, defines his solution to their problem, and then dramatically enacts it. In these chapters, Ishmael's discursiveness and his readerly mentality are strongly contrasted against the Mariner's and Ahab's violent acts.

In "The Spirit-Spout," Ishmael recounts how a "silvery jet" began to accompany the Pequod as it made its journey into the south Atlantic ocean (193). Ishmael's description of the scene echoes the Mariner's description of his journey in same polar waters. In the "Rime," a

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<sup>32</sup> Both McMillian and Richard Brodhead have acknowledged the Coleridgian feel in "Spirit Spout." In his *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel*, Brodhead claims that within the chapter "A supernatural force reveals itself in nature, seemingly to guide the Pequod on to its appointed end as the Polar Spirits of 'The Ancient Mariner' do" (141). Grivil also notes the similarities between the two Chapters and Coleridge's "Rime." See pages 2-3 of "The Whale and the Albatross."

“storm-blast [...] tyrannous and strong” comes and drives the ship with “sloping masts and dipping prow” southward into Antarctic seas that “cracked and growled, and roared and howled” (45-61). In “The Spirit-Spout,” the “winds [begin] howling” around the Pequod causing the ship to “r[i]se and f[a]ll upon the long, troubled seas” that “heaved and heaved, still unresistingly heaved” (193). In Ishmael’s iteration of the tale, a jet lures the seafarers southward. In the same way that the albatross that flies “round and round” the Mariner’s ship (68), the jet follows the Pequod appearing and reappearing at unexpected times. Although Ishmael and the crew never come close enough to strike at the jet, “every eye, like arrows,” shot “eager glances” at it (192). The environments and situations that the Mariner and Ishmael find themselves in are strikingly similar. However, the way young Ishmael and the Mariner behave within these situations, and how they decide to retell their experiences afterwards, could not be more different.

In his tale of supernatural visitation, the Mariner reports actions and events without illustrating their effect on his mental and emotional state. The Mariner describes the albatross as it followed the ship “every day [...] in mist or cloud, on mast or shroud” (73-75). While the Mariner’s description hints at the eeriness of the bird’s appearance and behavior, he never explicitly says how the bird affected him personally. All he tells his audience is that “with my cross-bow/ I shot the albatross” (82). The Mariner’s act seems sudden and unwarranted—particularly to the marginal voice, who had thought that the albatross had been received “with great joy and hospitality” and had “prove[n] a bird of good omen” (pg. 65). In his description of a similar scene, by way of contrast, Ishmael spends a lot of time discussing how the jet affected him and his shipmates. He explains that “for a time, there reigned,” over himself and the crew “a sense of a particular *dread* at this flitting *apparition*, as if it were *treacherously* beckoning us on and on” (my italics 193). The crew thinks that the “unnerable spout was cast by one self-same

whale; and that whale, Moby-Dick” (193). While Ishmael does not explicitly say where he falls in this debate, he does admit that “these temporary apprehensions, so vague, but so awful” had a potent effect on him and the Pequod’s crew (193). Ishmael’s concern with the source of the spout and effect it has on the crew reveals his discursive mentality. Unlike the Mariner, and Ahab for that matter, Ishmael concerns himself as much with the interpretation of his experience as he does with recounting it.

The similarity between the Mariner’s account and Ishmael’s chapter suggests that Ishmael’s description of the spout’s influence over the crew could easily be used by the reader of the “Rime” as a possible explanation of how the albatross affected the Mariner. Supposing that the albatross filled the Mariner with “a particular dread” and that he saw the bird as a demonic “apparition,” his violent act is more understandable. However, even this explanation, or any that Coleridge’s reader or Ishmael might provide, falls short of satisfactorily explaining or rationalizing the Mariner’s violence. In Chapter 52, “The Albatross,” Ishmael continues to engage with the “Rime.” After the Mariner shoots the albatross, he and his crew round Cape Horn and “burst/ into that silent sea [the Pacific]” (105-106). The Pequod goes in the opposite direction and rounds the Cape of Good Hope. However, Ishmael describes the experience in similar terms. He explains that the Pequod was “launched into this tormented sea [the Indian Ocean]” (193). In both works, the moment of entering into a new ocean marks a new phase in each narrative.<sup>33</sup> While the Pequod remains in the Indian Ocean for the next thirty-six chapters, the “Rime” quickly jumps in time and covers a vast geographic distance. Although the Mariner never explicitly says the ship has sailed on into the Indian ocean, he mentions that “there passed

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<sup>33</sup> While the ships sail in opposite directions, they encounter similar things. Ishmael and the Mariner depict their environments in comparable terms. The Mariner is taunted by the “slimy things” that “did crawl with legs/ Upon the slimy sea” (pg. 9). Similarly, Ishmael notes the “guilty beings [...] those fowls and these fish” that “seemed condemned to swim on everlastingly” around the Pequod’s bow (194).

a weary time” till eventually “when looking *westward*,” he beheld a skeleton ship with “ribs through which the Sun/ did peer” (185-186). The Mariner’s description suggests that his craft has entered the same Indian Ocean that the Pequod has entered at the end of the “Spirit-Spout.” It is in this ocean that the Pequod encounters the Albatross, a ship of “spectral appearance,” with sides “bleached like the skeleton of a stranded walrus” (195). When introducing the Albatross, Ishmael practically replicates the Mariner’s description of the skeleton bark, which is crewed by “The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH” (193), and “DEATH that woman’s mate” (189). In the “Rime,” the Night-mare and Death play a game of dice for the lives of the crew; shortly after all die except the Mariner. By placing a spectral craft on the Pequod’s course, Ishmael hints at the Pequod’s tragic fate. As in the “Rime,” the skeleton ship acts as an image of death and serves as a warning of what is to come.

However, as Ishmael continues to describe the Albatross and her crew, it becomes clear that Melville means for the image to work double time. Instead of crewing the ship with the Night-mare-Life-In-Death, Ishmael populates the Albatross with “long-bearded” and “forlorn-looking fishermen” (195). Just as the Mariner’s ship’s main is covered with “hoar-frost” (268), so too is the Albatross’ rigging “furred over with hoar-frost” (195). At this juncture, in a moment of bizarre intertextuality that was way ahead of its time, Coleridge’s Mariner seems to sail into the text of *Moby-Dick* and encounter the Pequod on the fictive sea. Within this alternate reality, the Mariner’s first audience turns out to be the Pequod and her crew. Although “the strange captain” (196) is *not* a one-to-one stand in for the Mariner, nor is Ishmael’s account a complete retelling of the “Rime,” Ishmael’s heavy-handed allusions prompt his reader to view the captain of the Albatross as a stand in for the Mariner. In this instance, the central figures of both works confront one another.

As soon as the Albatross sails up to the Pequod, Ahab asks the captain if he has seen Moby-Dick. After hearing the question, the strange captain immediately attempts to respond, and his eager gestures suggest that he is well acquainted with the whale. Yet, he never gets a chance to tell his tale. As he raises his trumpet, a strong gust of wind snatches it “from his hand,” plopping it “into the sea,” and “in vain” he “str[i]ves to make himself heard without it” (195). Ahab keeps screaming questions about Moby-Dick over to the strange captain, but his words get lost in the wind and the Albatross sails out of earshot.

The symmetry of the scene equates the two ships and the men sailing in them. Both are whaling vessels from Nantucket. While one ship is heading out to sea, the other is heading home. Both captains fail to communicate effectively. Through this diptych, Melville makes multiple comparisons simultaneously. Firstly, as before mentioned, the Albatross harkens back to the skeleton ship in the “Rime” and conjures premonitions of death. At the same time, by crewing the Albatross with a Mariner-esque figure, Ishmael makes physical the kinship between the Mariner and Ahab and suggests that they share characteristics that contribute to their tragic ends. Lastly, the specific details Ishmael provides on the Albatrosses history—that it is a whaling vessel from Nantucket—suggest that the ship also serves to illustrate the physical consequences of circumnavigating globe in pursuit of Moby-Dick. By drawing parallels between the bleached Albatross and the ivory- inlaid Pequod, Ishmael hints at what the Pequod and her crew might become. The Albatross is at once a projection of the Pequod’s possible fate and an uncanny echo of the Mariner’s past. The Albatross has circumnavigated the globe, been hemmed round by the unfathomable sea, and been irreparably damaged by the experience. By mirroring the Pequod with both the Albatross and the Mariner’s craft, Ishmael aligns the Pequod’s fate with the fate of her predecessors.

For Ishmael, all three personages—the Mariner, Ahab, the captain of the Albatross—represent a failure to *genuinely* communicate. Read in this light, the exchange between Ahab and the foreign captain can be seen as Ishmael’s reworking of the exchange between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest and serves as his commentary on the type of communication that occurs within the “Rime.” At first glance, the inability of both captains to effectively relay their messages seems dissimilar to the exchange that occurs in the “Rime.” The Wedding-Guest, unlike Ahab, most definitely hears the Mariner’s message loud and clear. However, in both fictive exchanges, the participants talk *at* each other, whatever the reactions of their interlocutors. The Wedding-Guest’s protests might as well have been lost in the wind for they most definitely fall on deaf ears. The Mariner is so wrapped up in his own narration that his story functions as a sort of soliloquy. Similarly, in “The Albatross,” both captains bellow on despite the fact that they will never be heard. As they holler into the wind, they speak almost to themselves. In both the “Rime” and “The Albatross,” the conversations that occur, if they can be called that, are not genuine. The participants in each exchange are so wrapped up in some sublime inhuman idea that they fail to achieve a true exchange of thought and feeling from one individual to another.

In this interaction, Ahab is at once like the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest in the sense that he functions as both recipient and conveyer of information. However, Ishmael remains above comparison. In real time, he watches the exchange from his perch on the masthead and later he recounts the scene as the narrator. Ishmael’s position in short resembles that of the reader of the “Rime,” who observes the textual interaction between the poetic pair from without and later decides what to make of it. Like the reader of the “Rime,” Ishmael is confused and baffled by the odd interaction between the two captains. As the narrative continues, he never completely

makes sense of the event or of Ahab's lack of interest in "consort[ing] even for five minutes" with other ships (196).

At first Ishmael only thinks the interaction is odd; however, as the chapter comes to a close, the stakes of failing to genuinely communicate become particularly stark. After his failed conversation with the captain of the Albatross, Ahab orders the crew to "keep [...] off around the world" (195). Ishmael uses Ahab's phrase as a prompt for philosophical contemplation. Ishmael admits that such words "inspire proud feelings" (195), but he also wonders "whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct?" (196). Ishmael concludes that

In pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of the demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave uswhelmed. (196)

Ahab probably would have continued his steadfast hunt of Moby-Dick even if he had heard what the strange captain had to say. However, the fact that Ahab's ultimately fatal order to circumnavigate the globe directly follows the aborted conversation highlights the possible correspondence between failing to communicate and Ahab's futile and destructive mission.

This reading becomes all the more applicable in light of how Ishmael has just redefined what is plaguing Ahab. In the final paragraph of chapter 52, Ishmael reframes Ahab's quest as the physical manifestation of a psychological and emotional hardship. Ahab no longer pursues the incarnation of evil; instead his mission is now presented as a physical reaction to some internal strife. Ahab's flaw stems from his belief that he can personally cure his pain and dispel "the phantom" by performing a physically violent act. Ahab's tragedy then is not that he is aware of some evil or is plagued by some emotional horror that no other character experiences, but that

he cannot cope with it through the discursive strategies that Ishmael delineates in the two chapters immediately following “The Albatross.”

### **Ishmael’s Sociable Solution**

After describing the ceaseless mental and emotional strife, “the demon phantom,” that “swims before all human hearts,” Ishmael immediately jumps into a discussion of “gamming,” which in his words is “a social visit of two or more whale ships” (198). In Chapter 53, titled, appropriately enough, “The Gam,” Ishmael suggests that communing with other human beings can ease the pain and anger that might otherwise lead to violent acts like Ahab’s. In short, Ishmael offers conversation and sociability as an alternative to the interaction between Ahab and the strange captain, and as a way of coping with the existential questions and emotional torments that haunt all human kind. Ishmael’s solution looks forward to the talking cure, but more to the point looks back to Raphael and builds upon the critical experience Coleridge wants his reader to have while trying to understand the “Rime.” Just as Raphael offers narrative as an alternative to indulging in absolute knowledge, so Ishmael offers the sociable exchange of thoughts, feelings, and stories as a plausible alternative to Ahab’s literal pursuit of Moby-Dick.

In “The Gam,” Ishmael provides his audience with an antithetical model to the interaction between the strange captain and Ahab. Ishmael finds Ahab’s interaction with the Albatross and other ships very counter-intuitive. He explains that “if two strangers crossing the Pine Barrens [...] casually” encounter one another “in such inhospitable wilds, these twain, for the life of them, cannot well avoid mutual salutation” (196). Ishmael’s use of the common phrase “for the *life* of them” suggests that, for two travelers walking in a desolate landscape, social engagement, even if it is unwanted, cannot be escaped. However, Ishmael’s description of the physical

landscape somewhat resembles “the barren mazes” of the human heart. This suggests that while mutual salutation cannot be avoided, it also *should not* be. Read in this light, the run of the mill phrase, “for the life of them,” also implies that “resting in concert” with another individual is an essential component of life (196). On the open seas the natural urge to acknowledge a fellow traveler and extend a communal gesture is all the more pressing. In fact most whaling ships do “not only interchange hails, but come into still closer [and] more friendly sociable contact” (197). It is during these meetings that whalers discuss their “common pursuit[s]” and “mutually shared privations and perils” (197). While Ishmael is talking about the physical hardships encountered by whalers, his previous discussion of mental strife suggests that these “privations and perils” also refer to the internal and existential problems shared by humankind.

In the following chapter, “The Town-Ho’s Story,” Ishmael illustrates the value of gamming by turning a brief interaction between the Pequod and the Town-Ho into an extended exercise in narration. After meeting the Albatross, the Pequod crosses paths with the Town-Ho, a ship that has “strong news of Moby-Dick” (199). Instead of simply reporting this news or even depicting the gam in which it was relayed, Ishmael decides to “for [his] humor’s sake [...] preserve the style in which [he] once narrated it at Lima, to a lounging circle of” his “Spanish friends” (200). Through this ornate narrative frame, Ishmael transforms one of Ahab’s short informative gams into a sociable exchange. By doing so, Ishmael emphasizes the value of the telling stories and highlights his own role as a storyteller. Ishmael’s approach to storytelling is drastically different from that of the Mariner. In fact, the circumstance and motives behind Ishmael’s telling closely align to Raphael’s. In Lima as in Eden, both teller and audience are relaxed, the stories told entertain as much they as inform, and the exchange of narrative serves as a communal exercise. Both Raphael and Ishmael offer alternatives to rash violent acts. By

example and through subtle hints, they advise their respective audiences to tell stories, to be social, and to discuss “what concerns thee and thy being” (VIII. 174). By stressing the communal value of narrative and placing an example of a sociable chat in juxtaposition to the exchange between Ahab and the strange captain, a conference that echoes the interaction between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, Ishmael appears to be providing a Miltonic solution to a problem that Coleridge poses in the “Rime.”

Ishmael’s social mentality and his belief in the communal value of narrative are not, of course, restricted to his narrative in “The Town-Ho’s Story.” From the very beginning of the novel, Ishmael has directly addressed his reader, telling her to “call me Ishmael” (18). Some scholars have read the first line of the novel as an instance in which Ishmael, by adopting a pseudonym, isolates himself from his audience.<sup>34</sup> When the lines are read within the context of “Town-Ho’s Story” and “The Gam,” however, it becomes clear that Ishmael’s first words are actually a friendly overture. By using the phrase “call me” (18), Ishmael suggests that he welcomes a response from his audience and expects to interact with them. He sets up the infrastructure for a two-way dialogue, something that the Mariner and Ahab never do. In “The Town-Ho’s Story,” the interaction between teller and audience cannot be ignored. Ishmael’s audience interrupts him; they ask him questions and Ishmael eagerly answers. When Ishmael goes off on tangents, his Peruvian listeners remind him to get on with it by “impetuously exclaiming [...] But the story” (206).

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<sup>34</sup> In his “Godly Gamesomness: Self State in Moby-Dick” Warwick Waldington argues that even though the first line establishes a dependent relationship between the narrator and reader it also masks Ishmael’s “real” identity. Ishmael thus creates a false front that separates him from his audience (see page 58). Similarly, in chapter 4 of *Ishmael’s White World*, Brodtkorb argues that although Ishmael, the narrator, at times extends gestures of friendliness and communion, he ultimately estranges himself from the reader, the other characters in the novel, and himself as a character.

Admittedly, the reader of the novel cannot actually enter into a dialogue with Ishmael the way his audience does in Lima. For this reason, Ishmael's overture in the first line can be seen as an insincere pretense. Nevertheless, Melville provides us with instances in which a voice directly addresses Ishmael and calls him out for his more extravagant claims. Throughout the novel, there are instances in which another authoritative voice that seems akin to Melville's separates from Ishmael, and it is this voice that challenges Ishmael. Like Coleridge, who crafts an ideal role for his reader to fill, Melville attempts to represent a critical audience within the text. Unlike the Mariner, however, Ishmael willingly responds to this questioning voice. The critical voice and Ishmael's desire to appease it come out most noticeably in Chapter 102, "A Bower in the Arsacides." In this chapter, Ishmael travels to an island in the South Pacific and stumbles upon the skeleton of a sperm whale, which the locals have converted into a shrine. Ishmael begins the chapter claiming that he will "now unbutton him [the whale] still further" by "set[ing] him before you [the reader] in his ultimatum; that is to say, in his unconditional skeleton" (344). At this point the critical voice exclaims, "But how now, Ishmael? How is it, that you, a mere oarsman in the fishery, pretend to know aught about the subterranean parts of the whale? [...] Explain thyself, Ishmael" (344). Concerned with his credibility, Ishmael responds by saying, "I confess, that since Jonah, few whalemens have penetrated very far beneath the skin of the adult whale; nevertheless, I have been blessed with an opportunity to dissect him in miniature" (344).

While the audience in Lima wants to be entertained and to delight in the communal act of telling stories, this voice engages with Ishmael's tale in a more thoughtful and critical manner. That said, the engagement between the voice and Ishmael is still a communal exercise: two separate voices listen and respond to one another. The interaction between Ishmael and the critical voice seems reminiscent of the ideal relationship that Coleridge hopes his reader will

have with the “Rime.” That is to say he wants the reader to carefully examine and question what she sees. Ishmael draws on both his predecessor—Milton explicitly, Coleridge less directly—when attempting to define an alternative to Ahab’s violence and a way of dealing with the daemons that plague him and all of humanity. Like Raphael, Ishmael acknowledges the value of camaraderie and stresses the importance of exchanging stories. He also sees the need for a critical engagement with the word and the world that Coleridge endorses. Ishmael employs both sociable exchange and a critical engagement to avoid Ahab’s end and provide his reader with a suitable alternative to it.

### **Reasons and Ways of Telling in the Prelapsarian and Postlapsarian World**

Whether the outcry of the critical voice in the “A Bower in the Arsacides” is actually supposed to be representative of a critical reader is debatable. However, Ishmael’s response reveals that he is hyper-aware of his audience and concerned with how his tale will be received and interpreted. Ishmael’s concern and awareness of his audience in “The Bower” and throughout the novel is reminiscent of Raphael’s concern for Adam and Eve in the Edenic bower. Indeed, the word “bower” suggests that Melville was echoing Milton even if he was not consciously aware of it. Both Ishmael and Raphael tell their stories not only because they delight in doing so, but also because they want their audience to somehow benefit from them. As a result, at times they step back and directly address their audience to ensure they are not to being misunderstood. However, the different circumstances in which each narrator tells his tale makes the stakes of misinterpretation and the reason for telling stories innately different. While Ishmael is indeed influenced by Raphael, he makes changes to Raphael’s Edenic mode of story telling in order to adapt it for an exclusively postlapsarian readership. In the following section, I

will begin by demonstrating how Raphael and Ishmael's ways of telling align. Then I will discuss how Ishmael's fallen state disrupts a strict comparison between the two storytellers.

What exactly Ishmael wants the reader to understand is uncertain and seems to be constantly evolving. However, on rare occasions, he makes his intentions perfectly clear. In Chapter 45, "The Affidavit," Ishmael goes to great pains to convince his landsman reader that the story he is about to tell could in theory have actually happened. Ishmael sets the record straight by reporting verified instances in which sperm whales have attacked and sometimes destroyed whaling vessels. Ishmael has many reasons for convincing the reader of the plausibility of his tale. Primarily, he does not want his audience to consider "Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory" (172). Of course, as the novel progresses, the "reality" of the tale becomes obscured as Ishmael balances realism with the romantic.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, in "The Affidavit," Ishmael clarifies that he does not want his audience to assume there is a one-to-one correspondence between reality and the abstract meanings he at times ascribes to it. This is a premise that Ishmael expects the reader to apply to the whole novel.

Ishmael's concern with how his tale will be interpreted is similar to the preoccupation Raphael articulates before narrating the war in heaven. Raphael stresses that his account is a figurative extrapolation of an event and should be perceived as such. He tells Adam that he will commence by "lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms" (V. 573). While Raphael wants Adam to acknowledge that the story he is about to tell is not entirely accurate, Ishmael, on the other hand, attempts to convince his reader that his tale must be read as an event that could happen. While the two narrators have opposite aims, they both fear that if their audiences misinterpret their tales

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<sup>35</sup> Even Ishmael's narrative style seems to contradict this assertion in "The Affidavit." Throughout the novel he constantly takes a "corporal form" (i.e. a physical object, like the head of a whale' a subject which he devotes many chapters too) and extrapolates some metaphysical significance from it.

there could be dire consequences. In “The Affidavit” and in the war in heaven, each narrator clearly articulates that he is telling his tale not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of others. Raphael’s motives for recounting the war in heaven are moral. He explains that he has “measure[ed] things in heaven by things in Earth” so “that thou [Adam] may’st beware” and not follow in Satan’s footsteps (VI. 893-94). In “The Affidavit,” Ishmael’s motives are moral and civic and the stakes of being misunderstood are less severe. He explains that although “most men have some vague flitting idea of the general perils of the grand fishery,” they do not have a “vivid conception of those perils” (172). The reason for this, Ishmael explains, is that these stories never get set down in the “public record at home,” and as a result are often “immediately forgotten” (172). In this instance, Ishmael hopes his story will bring the trials and tribulations of whaling back into the public consciousness. Ishmael positions himself as storyteller who bears witness in order to effect positive civic change. He drives this point home as he addresses his landsman audience saying, “For God’s sake, be economical with your lamps and candles! not a gallon you burn, but at least one drop of man’s blood was spilled for it” (172). For both Raphael and Ishmael, narrative, if interpreted correctly, has the potential to positively impact the world. Raphael attempts to prevent the fall, while Ishmael attempts to prevent the waste of life in the whaling industry. Narrative does not function as a passive alternative to action; rather, it serves as a tool that encourages civic-minded action in the reader.

While both Raphael and Ishmael want their stories to be interpreted correctly, the main points they wish to get across, and their reasons for making those points, are different. In “The Affidavit,” Ishmael wants his reader to understand that his story is based on reality and could actually happen. With this as a baseline, Ishmael encourages her to interpret the text freely so long as she does *not* ascribe *one fixed* meaning to it. Raphael, on the other hand, fears that if he is

misunderstood, Adam and Eve could fall. Raphael accommodates his tale to Adam and Eve's understanding and delineates how Adam should interpret it in order to prevent this fall from happening. Thus, he tells his tale in order to promote and reinforce that state of positive liberty that exists in Eden. By way of contrast, living in a postlapsarian world, Ishmael has no use for positive liberty and he has experienced its perversion at first hand. For this reason, when telling his story, Ishmael often goes on tangents because he wants to and because he can. At these moments, Ishmael *seemingly* disregards any concern he has for the reader. For instance, in encyclopedic chapters like "Cetology" and "Monstrous Pictures of Whales," Ishmael happily and playfully tries to categorize both the Leviathan and the artistic renderings of him. Yet reading these chapters is anything but a joy-filled experience. Ishmael's writing becomes so dry during these encyclopedic interludes that the reader must exercise her volition and make a conscious decision to keep reading and complete the arduous task. In chapters like this, Ishmael manages to use narrative to assert his negative freedom, his autonomy as a thinking agent, and encourage the reader to do the same. While Ishmael attempts to establish parameters for reading (i.e. do not read the narrative as an allegory or fable), he still leaves the reader considerable interpretative latitude.

### **Raphael's Lesson and Ishmael's Understanding**

Not only do the dry encyclopedic chapters encourage the reader to assert her negative freedom: they also reveal that Ishmael is not primarily interested in his reader completing his story in order to finish the plot. Rather, he wishes to include her in his process of understanding. That is to say, Ishmael does not care if the reader finds out how the novel ends; in fact, several times, he plainly tells her how it will end: badly. Instead, Ishmael wants his reader to engage

with his thought process as he considers what the whale, the sea, and Ahab's mission could possibly mean. Ishmael's fear that a reader might fix his text with one clear meaning stems from his firm philosophical belief that nothing can ever be sufficiently explained, understood, or articulated. For Ishmael the process of understanding is continuous and unending. As a result, Ishmael's narrative is shaped by his preoccupation with the inability of language to fully render the significance of his experience, and his own inability to fully understand what that significance could be.

In "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael begins to tackle what most disturbs him about *Moby-Dick*. As he proceeds to give his account, it is unclear what worries Ishmael more: the horrifying whiteness of the whale or his inability to express that horror and the reason behind it. He says, "so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it that *I almost despair of putting it in comprehensible form*. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But *how can I hope to explain myself* here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must" (my italics 159). Ishmael's acknowledgement of his inability to satisfactorily articulate the significance of the whale's whiteness echoes the speech Raphael gives before he narrates the war in heaven. As I noted previously, this is the same speech that Melville annotated shortly before beginning to write *Moby-Dick*. Like Ishmael, Raphael sees his task as a taxing but worthwhile endeavor. He says "high matter thou enjoin'st me O Prime of Men, / *Sad task and hard, For how shall I relate/* to human sense th' invisible exploits/ of warring spirits" (my italics V. 564-566).

In both cases, the narrators are hyper-aware of their roles as storytellers and they go about their jobs cautiously and self-consciously. Unlike the Mariner who desperately and urgently regurgitates his story to relieve a burden, both Ishmael and Raphael see telling their stories as a burden worth bearing, one they willingly undertake in order to *explain* something to their

audiences and, in Ishmael's case, also to himself. Neither commences his narration in order to replicate a past terror or induce it in his audience, primarily, because they have no desire to, but also because they both understand that language, with all its imperfection, will never permit them to do so.

In chapter one, I examined how Raphael demonstrates the benefits of the failures of language. However, in Eden those imaginative and creative benefits are always overshadowed by anxiety, which stems from an awareness that, even if narrative can provide wonderful benefits, the failings of language can also lead to the fall. While Raphael does indulge in playful creative asides, as in his account of animals being created, he always ends his narratives either with statements that explicitly outline the utility of his stories or with statements that admonish Adam for missing the point (the "be lowly wise" episode). On the postlapsarian seas, Ishmael exaggerates the playful and tangential quality of Raphael's narrative style; however, the anxiety that haunts Raphael's narration is no longer an issue for Ishmael. The failure of language to order the sublimity of the world compels Ishmael constantly to revisit and refine the ideas he does manage to articulate. One gets the sense that Ishmael finds this process as delightful as he finds it difficult. Ishmael appears to have willingly internalized the lesson that Raphael attempts to convey to Adam after he tries to chart the sky: the universe will always remain incomprehensible. Although Ishmael acknowledges, however, that *absolute understanding* of the universe cannot be achieved, he firmly believes that a *deeper understanding* of the whale must be striven for.

Like Milton's reader who realizes that she is excused from Raphael's admonishment to be "lowly wise" and must use everything at her disposal, science included, to attempt to understand the mysteries of the world, Ishmael approaches his subject from a variety of angles.

Ishmael continuously employs scientific methods to help glean a better understanding of the whale. In “The Prairie,” one of many chapters in which Ishmael examines the head of a whale, Ishmael’s efforts to “scientifically” investigate the sperm whale’s head fail. He concludes that “physiognomy like every other human science, is but passing fable” (275). Moving on from the head, in a subsequent chapter, Ishmael attempts to understand the whale by calculating the measurements of its skeleton. However, after taking his “own admeasurement” (346), he acknowledges his calculations are inadequate to assess the physical and metaphysical significance of the beast, for the skeleton only “convey[s] half of that true notion of the living magnitude” of the leviathan (348). In his forays into the natural sciences Ishmael seems to agree with Raphael and Milton that science cannot sufficiently explain the sublimity of the universe. However, he departs from his predecessor by suggesting that no system of human understanding, religion included, can fully render the mysteries of the world or the whale. He explains that “doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither a believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye” (293).

Ahab never seems to understand what Ishmael happily accepts: nothing can fully encompass the whale’s sublimity. Rather than relying on religion or science to glean the significance of the whale, Ahab believes that only he himself can absolutely render Moby-Dick. However, Ahab does use religion and science as tools to help him find and achieve his mission. In order to get the support of Starbuck, his Christian first mate, Ahab frames his mission as a battle against evil. When it comes to actually finding the whale, Ahab uses scientific methods. Ishmael describes Ahab’s process, explaining that “with the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies” (167). By doing so, Ahab “could arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching to certainties, concerning the timeliest day to be upon

this or that ground in search of his prey” (167). In this scene, Ahab charts the seas the same way that Adam had attempted to delineate the absolute composition of the skies.

While such methods may be excellent for finding a physical whale, Ahab’s exacting certitudes are useless when Ishmael attempts to understand the animal’s subterranean significance. In fact, Ishmael’s “scientific” inquires into the whale almost seem to parody the “assured” way Ahab charts the sea (167). Ahab’s error stems from his discontent and discomfort with the unknown and his belief that he personally can chart an exact course through it and completely and physically dominate its essence. Ishmael, on the other hand, is comfortable with not knowing absolutely. He acknowledges that any attempt to “delineate chaos” will eventually fail (26). For Ishmael, this failure is liberating; it allows him to joyfully revisit and amend what he thinks he might know. As a result, his narrative style is marked by his tendency to leap from one object to another, articulate the greater metaphysical significance of that object, and then redouble back again to continue the process all over again.

### **“There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness”: Trauma in the Post- and Prelapsarian World and the Narrative Shield**

Some scholars have suggested that Ishmael’s continuous and repetitive process of storytelling is a result of trauma.<sup>36</sup> From this perspective, Ishmael’s narrative strategy for dealing with trauma can be seen as akin to the Mariner’s. However, Ishmael is not absorbed by his experience and compelled to tell it in the same way that the Mariner is. Nor does Ishmael’s narrative ring with the same kind of urgency as the Mariner’s tale. While Ishmael is eccentric, he

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<sup>36</sup> See *Ishmael Alone Survives*, in it Jenet Reno suggests we must understand Ishmael’s narrative as a product of a post traumatic mind. She suggests that “Ishmael is” repetitive and “digressive because, as a survivor he has to be” (10). Also Grivil unconvincingly suggests that Ishmael like the Mariner “is punished by a life-time of being constrained to tell his interminable tale” (3).

is not mad. As already noted, Ishmael revisits the things he has witnessed because he wishes to make sense of them. The process for Ishmael is continuous because he acknowledges that his intellect, and all systems of understanding, will fail to fully capture the magnitude of his subject matter. I would add that Ishmael's narrative style also functions as a way by which he can distance himself from his horrifying experiences and shield himself from trauma. To put it another way: his tendency to return to the same object and extrapolate new meanings from it and then repeat the process is not a product of trauma but a safeguard against it.

Many scholars have seen Ishmael's narrative process as influenced by Coleridge's theory, as laid out in chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria*, of the secondary imagination, which "dissolves, defuses, [and] dissipates in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, [...] still at all events [...] struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead" (488).<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this definition fittingly describes Ishmael's thought process and narrative style. For example, as I have already mentioned, Ishmael discusses the head of the leviathan in no less than five separate chapters: "The Sperm Whale's Head—Contrasted View," "The Right Whale's Head-Contrasted View," "The Battering-Ram," "The Prairie," and "The Nut." In each of these chapters, Ishmael begins

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<sup>37</sup> In "The Whale and the Albatross" Gravid explains, "Ishmael is also marked by strangely Coleridgean qualities when we consider his narration. It is not merely his strange curious learning, but his imitation of the organizational qualities of *Biographia Literaria*: eschewing the complete and embracing the diasparactive" (229). Similarly, in his *Herman Melville Romantic and Prophet: A Study of Romantic Sensibility and his Relation to European Romantics* Christopher Durer asserts that "Melville's apprehension of the nature and possibilities of the literary imagination, and his conception of the literature in which the governing hand is that of the imagination, are due largely to Melville's reading of Coleridge. When we take stock of Melville's use of the imagination during his [Melville's] Romantic period, it is very likely that numerous passages in *Biographia* focusing on the artist's use of his imaginative power could have exercised a very profound effect on Melville" (10). In his article "Ishmael's development as narrator: Melville's Synthesizing Process" John W. Young describes Ishmael as a "synthesizing narrator" (97), whose mind "blends and fuses his memories in order to recreate them" (98). In a footnote Young credits Ishmael's process of perception and narration to Coleridge saying, "Melville must have been acquainted with Coleridge's theory of the secondary imagination since his literary acquisition in 1848 included *Biographia Literaria*" (110). In his "Melville's Pip and Coleridge's Servant Girl," Edward Stone claims that Starbuck's description of Pip's Madness in "Queequeg in His Coffin" derives from a study of hysteria Coleridge outlines in *Biographia Literaria*.

by describing the physical head in vivid detail. He then begins to riff on the metaphysical significance of the head. Towards the end of Chapter 75, “The Right Whale’s Head,” Ishmael wonders, “does not this whole head seem to speak of an enormous practical resolution in facing death?” (267). However, Ishmael’s concluding thoughts are never stable; one might say that they “defuse” and “dissipate.” In Chapter 76, “The Battering-Ram,” which directly follows Ishmael’s suggestion that the whale’s head functions as a lesson on facing death, Ishmael concludes that beneath the “uninjurible wall” of the whale’s forehead there exists “a mass of tremendous life” (268). Ishmael’s flexible imagination enables him to revisit the head and revise his past hypotheses. In so doing, Ishmael takes a grim image of death and “dissolves” it “in order to recreate” a hopeful symbol of life.

Just by looking at Ishmael’s thoughts on the whale’s head, one can get a good idea of why scholars note a connection between Ishmael’s narrative style and Coleridge’s conception of the imagination. However, these scholars fail to see that Coleridge’s definition in *Biographia Literaria* is indebted to Milton’s Raphael. We know this because Coleridge prefaces the chapter in which he defines the primary and secondary imagination with Raphael’s floral metaphor for spiritual enlightenment, which we examined extensively in chapter one.<sup>38</sup> Just to review, Empson

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<sup>38</sup> O Adam! One Almighty is, from whom  
 All things proceed and up to him return  
 If not depraved from good, created all  
 Such to perfection, one first matter all  
 Endued with various forms, various degrees  
 Of substance and in things that live of life,  
 But more refined, more spirituous and pure  
 As nearer to Him placed or nearer trending,  
 Each in their several active spheres assigned  
 Till body up to spirit work in bounds  
 Proportioned to each kind. So from the root  
 Springs lighter green stalk, from thence the leaves  
 More airy, last the bright consummate flower  
 Spirits odorous breathes: flowers and their fruit  
 Man’s nourishment, by gradual scale sublimed  
 To vital spirits aspire to animal,

thinks that through this metaphor, Raphael misleads the Edenic couple by suggesting that there is a rigid hierarchy that they can climb. For Empson, Raphael is essentially encouraging Adam and Eve to eat the fruit. I suggested, on the other hand, that the metaphor acts as a way through which Raphael accommodates Adam's imperfect understanding and directs Adam and Eve's thoughts safely up towards the sublimity of the heaven. Through his flower metaphor, Raphael suggests that Adam should think and talk about the sublime using figurative terms that are comprised of images rooted in the Edenic world around him.<sup>39</sup> I also argued that the metaphor is intentionally difficult and prompts both Adam and the reader to constantly revisit it and the other things that Raphael relays. Given that Coleridge prefaced his concept of the imagination with Raphael's speech, it is reasonable to assume he read the passage in the same way. With this in mind, Ishmael's tendency to use objects as tangible prompts for metaphysical inquiry has its origins with Raphael.

Ishmael almost exactly replicates the process of intellectual enquiry that Raphael suggests that Adam should use. His thoughts are constantly "proceeding [...] up" and then "return[ing]" back to ground in a continuous organic process (V. 471). Raphael proposes this model to Adam and Eve in order to establish a framework through which the Edenic gardeners might safely consider the sublime without indulging in it absolutely.<sup>40</sup> Not coincidentally, the character in *Moby-Dick* who adopts this method is the only one who is not utterly destroyed by his experience. The way Ishmael jumps from images of death to images of life when considering

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To intellectual, give both life and sense,  
 Fancy understanding, whence the soul  
 Reason receives, and reason is her being,  
 Discursive or intuitive. (V. 470-488)

<sup>39</sup> As we have also seen, this is what Raphael does later as he narrates the war in heaven using "corporal forms" or objects found on earth that "might be essentially fixed or dead."

<sup>40</sup> Perhaps if Raphael thought it was worth his while to talk to Eve as much as he talked to Adam the whole mess could have been avoided. It is all because of the patriarchy...

the whale's head suggests that he employs Raphael's narrative style not only to shield himself from the sublimity of the universe, but also to cope with the regular horrors of the natural world. Thus, Ishmael extends Raphael's strategy and applies it to the trials and tribulations found in the postlapsarian world, something Coleridge's Mariner never does.

In a more obvious way, Ishmael uses language to safely distance himself from the past by placing himself in the role of witness, a role he shares with Raphael. Like Raphael and the Mariner, Ishmael has experienced a terrible event, yet for all intents and purposes he seems unaffected by his experience, or at least less affected by it than the Mariner or Ahab (who is dead). In fact, both Ishmael and Raphael live through strikingly similar experiences. Raphael watches as his angry God hurls his former peers into perdition. Then he is sent to guard the gaping mouth of hell. After listening to noises of "torment and loud lament and furious rage" echoing from within hell, Raphael "glad[ly]" returns "up to the coasts of light" where he recounts what he has witnessed to Adam (VIII. 244-245). Similarly, Ishmael watches his peers drown and is then sucked into the whirlpool the Pequod creates. Like Raphael who goes down to hell in Satan's wake, Ishmael goes "round and round [...] towards [...] the vital center" of the gyre until "the black bubble out upward burst[s]" spitting him onto the surface of the rolling sea where he will soon be picked up to tell his story.

When Ishmael does decide to tell his story, he renders the horrifying final event in language that is strikingly similar to Raphael's account of Satan's expulsion. He describes the Pequod as a demonic craft "which like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her" (427). Similarly, Raphael describes the rebel angels fleeing from the thundering Messiah as "Heav'n running from heav'n" (VI. 868). Satan and his crew hurl themselves through the opening in the "crystal wall of heaven" that had "*rolled* inward" to

permit them passage (my italics VI. 860-862). The rebel angels fall for nine days “into the wasteful deep” (VI. 862), until “hell at last/ *Yawning* receive[s] them whole” (VI. 875). Meanwhile, “heav’n rejoiced and soon repaired/ her mural breach returning whence it *rolled*” (my italics VI. 874- 879). When describing the ocean that swallows the Pequod, Ishmael combines the terms Raphael uses to refer to heaven and hell. He explains that:

“Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet *yawning gulf*; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then collapsed, and the great shroud of the *sea rolled as it rolled* five thousand years ago” (my italics 427).

Perhaps describing the event in the same figurative terms that Raphael has used to describe the war in heaven has helped Ishmael grapple with the horror of his experience without being burned. Using figurative language and discourse he has borrowed from another text, Ishmael filters this past event and turns it into a poetic experience. By doing so, Ishmael minimizes his trauma.

While Ishmael clearly thinks of his experience in terms of the scene Raphael depicts in his narrative, the most interesting similarity between the two accounts is how the narrators depict themselves within their respective scenes. Although both Raphael and Ishmael start in the thick of the action—Ishmael was Ahab’s personal bowsman and Raphael fought the rebel angels—when they retell their tales, they place themselves at the periphery of events. Raphael explains that he was on the outskirts of heaven in a crowd of “saints who silent stood, [...] eye witnesses” of Satan’s expulsion (VI. 882-3). Ishmael, similarly, describes himself on “the margin of the ensuing scene, in full sight of it” (427). Through their retellings the narrators rhetorically separate themselves from their experiences. They position themselves in the physical margins of the action and stress their roles as observant bystanders. As bearers of witnesses, both Ishmael

and Raphael have a vocation, a purpose, and it prevents them from bobbing aimlessly on the sea and floating in limbo. Soon after finishing his account, Raphael quickly brings his audience's attention back to Eden. He addresses Adam directly, saying, "I have revealed/ what might have else to the human race been hid" (VI. 895-896). Raphael illustrates the utility of his experience and emphasizes his important role as witness and teller. While Ishmael is not as clear on the purpose of his narrative, his purpose as a bearer of witness is clearly delineated in the epilogue, which is prefaced by a quote from Job that reads "and I only am escaped to tell thee" (427). Both Raphael and Ishmael have a desire to recount their experience through narrative, but their stories do not spring from some cathartic outburst; rather they are the products of time and contemplation. Their stories are *responses* not reactions to their experience. Taking tricks from Raphael's book Ishmael uses narrative to shield himself from his experience, and ultimately avoid the Mariner's tragic fate.

### **Ishmael: the Comedy to Ahab's Tragedy**

Comedy also helps Ishmael to protect himself from sublime. The idea that Ishmael acts as the main comedic force in the novel is not new.<sup>41</sup> In his "*Moby-Dick*: Work of Art," Walter E. Bezanson analyzes Ishmael's temperament and concludes that one of his most striking features is his ability to laugh. I would suggest that Melville saw comedy working in the "Rime," through the marginal voice, and in *Paradise Lost* and concluded that it was a resource that his predecessors had not fully managed to tap. Through Ishmael, Melville articulates the comedic

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<sup>41</sup> In his article "Ishmael's development as narrator: Melville's Synthesizing Process," John W. Young notes that although Ishmael's mood changes throughout the novel "he always maintains his marvelous sense of humor" in the face of horror (99). Young accredits Ishmael's good humor to "his ability to synthesize the universal significance of things and the events that surround him" (99). Young of course credits this ability to Ishmael's Coleridgian imagination. Joseph Jones writes has written a whole article on the topic. See his "Humor in *Moby-Dick*." Jones talks extensively on the comedic interludes Stubb provides.

benefit narrative can provide. Ishmael's comedy is, finally, Melville's original contribution to the discussion started by Raphael two centuries before.

Compared to *Moby-Dick*, both the "Rime" and *Paradise Lost* seem humorless; however, the moments in which these works have comedic potential are the strains that I believe Melville paid close attention to when creating Ishmael. While the "Rime" itself is not very funny, the accompanying misinterpretations provided by the pompous marginal voice can be quite hilarious, especially when viewed in juxtaposition to the Mariner's bizarre, confusing, and at times gruesome tale. The Raphael dialogues are as funny as *Paradise Lost* gets. Perhaps picturing Satan's descent into the yawning mouth of hell is less horrible when you consider that just moments before angels were playing with old-fashioned cannons and hurling mountains at one another. Indeed, within *Moby-Dick*, Melville's decision to have Ishmael bob up to disrupt the sublime image of the rolling sea is quite comical. While Milton probably did not intend Raphael to be as funny as modern readers now find him, his dialogues are the only books within the epic that are not *entirely* preoccupied with the fall. While the first half of book six is dominated by Satan's sin, the other books celebrate life in Eden, the wonders of creation, and the joy of telling stories.

However, the postlapsarian reader also knows that Raphael's mission will fail. She knows that no matter what Raphael says, the world will end up the way Michael foresees it in book twelve. In compensation, Milton provides a slightly comedic interlude that separates the horrors of hell from the horrors of the fallen world. At the end of the Raphael dialogues, Milton depicts a comic exchange between Raphael and Adam about love. Like Michael who offers Adam the solace of the scriptures, Milton seems to offer this comedic scene as a fleeting solace for the pain and suffering the reader knows is about to occur.

After a stimulating conversation about the sublimity of outer space and creation, Adam and Raphael turn their attention to more Edenic matters. Adam, “half abashed,” begins talking about his feelings for Eve. After he admits that nothing “so much delights” him “as those graceful acts” (VIII.600), Adam becomes overwhelmed with embarrassment. He quickly redirects the conversation by asking Raphael: “Love not the Heav’nly spirits? And how their love/ express they?” (VIII. 615-16). In response to Adam’s probing question, Raphael begins to “glow/ Celestial rosy red” (VIII. 618-19). He briefly explains that because the angels do not have bodies, “if spirits embrace,/ total they mix, in union of pure with pure” (VIII. 626-27). It is on this note that the blushing Raphael suddenly decides to end the lengthy conversation and zip back up to heaven. Although the two participating in the conversation fumble awkwardly, it is hard for the postlapsarian reader not to chuckle over the pair’s prudishness. However, the comedic scene is shadowed by the thought that within the epic, this laughter comes at the expense of Adam’s and later all of humanities’ happiness. While Milton offers a fleeting glimpse of happiness and a chance for momentary laughter, the epic begins and ends with the terrors of the fallen world. By the time Adam and Eve take “their solitary way” (XII. 649), tragedy has sufficiently stifled any chuckles that Raphael’s discourse had provided. While Michael’s scriptural solution might bring the fallen couple hope, it sure does not bring back the laughs.

While comedy has a limited presence in *Paradise Lost*, it is the primary mode in which Ishmael narrates his experiences in *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael takes us out of the murky waters of Miltonic comedy. By offering comedy as an alternative to Ahab’s tragic story line and suggesting that laughter is a necessary safe guard against the sublime horrors of the sea, Ishmael fully endorses what his angelic predecessor never fully or intentionally condones. In *Moby-Dick* tragedy, specifically the catastrophic end of the Pequod, only *enhances* Ishmael’s comedy and

makes it all the more necessary. While Ishmael's comedic interludes are littered throughout the novel, nowhere is comedy's value more apparent than in the "The Monkey Rope." In this chapter, Ishmael watches from the deck as Queequeg, who is attached to him by a rope, "flounders about, half on the whale and half in the sea" (255). While Queequeg slips about on the whale and sharks chomp at his ankles, "Tashtego and Daggoo" flourish "over his head a couple of keen whale spades, wherewith they [slaughter] as many sharks as they [can] reach" (256). Ishmael worriedly considers Queequeg's dire situation, but in true Ishmaelian fashion, he soon zooms out from the scene before him and begins to contemplate its deeper philosophical significance. In a humor-filled tone, he says:

Well, well, my dear comrade and twin-brother, thought I, as I drew in and then slacked off the rope to every swell of the sea—what matters it, after all? Are you not a precious image of each and all us men in this whaling world? That unsounded ocean you gasp in, is life; those sharks, your foes; those spades, your friends; and what between sharks and spades you are in a sad pickle and peril, poor lad. (256)

Ishmael paints us a dismal picture of life and the world we live in; however, he does not dwell on the horrible implications of his conclusion. Directly after Queequeg clambers up from the whale, the Dough-Boy rushes over and hands him a cup of "hot Cogniac? No! hands him, ye gods! hands him a cup of tepid ginger water!" (256). In the scene that ensues, Stubb comes thundering in to admonish Dough-Boy, who we later learn had received the ginger water from Aunt Charity, who had intended to make the Pequod a floating model of temperance. Needless to say, the slapstick scene ends with Stubb reappearing with "a dark flask in one hand, and a sort of tea-caddy in the other. The first contained strong spirits, and was handed to Queequeg; the second was Aunt Charity's gift, and that was given freely to the waves" (257). After sending us down to

contemplate the sharkish world around us, Ishmael yanks us back from hopeless peril and provides us with the one consolation he can: no, not Stubb's cogniac, but laughter.

Ishmael's humor does not simply reside in these slapstick scenes: it is apparent in every event that he relates and it is the defining characteristic of his narrative voice. While the world may be filled with some unknown thing, some danger that he cannot express, Ishmael still laughs. Something neither Milton nor Coleridge manage to do. While they both note the benefits that a fallible language can provide, they always come up against the same wall: while narrative can make us better, it cannot bring us back. Therefore, within Coleridge's and Milton's works, the exchange of narrative is always imbued with a certain amount of anxiety and nostalgia. The Mariner can only convey terrible truths perfectly to one select individual, and Raphael's stories in the end do not prevent the fall. Melville's predecessors are so preoccupied with what has been, the perfect state that has been lost, that they do not fully embrace how wonderful the inadequacies of language can be. Unconcerned with what has been lost, Melville finds something quite amazing: the failures of language are liberating. They can function as springboard for improvisation and humor. They allow him to be funny. With no innocence to lose and no God to disappoint, Ishmael adopts humor as a mode of telling not because he must, but because he *can*. Through Ishmael, Melville suggests that we can laugh not only despite the vast unknown word, but because of it. There we are, with Ishmael, bobbing in the immense sublimity of the sea: how strange, how funny, how true.

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