As he was writing *Moby-Dick*, from February 1850 to November 1851, as he composed the book he felt certain was his greatest work, Herman Melville understood himself to be inspired. This understanding – one might call it an insight – is evident wherever during that period Melville catches himself in the act of composition, whether in his barely containable excitement at the prospect of the novel’s achievement, or as a metaphor articulating the writing state. Here, for instance, is a passage from a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, whom he had met for the first time in August 1850, and whose work and presence he experienced as a spur:

My development has been all within a few years past. I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids, which, after having been three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, it developed itself, grew to greenness, and then fell to mould. So I. Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself. But I feel that I am now come to the inmost leaf of the bulb, and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould.1

The same note of inspiration is apparent in ‘Hawthorne and his Mosses’, the review of Hawthorne’s *Mosses from an Old Manse* that Melville wrote shortly after their first meeting. Signing himself ‘A Virginian Spending July in Vermont’, which is as much as to say ‘Call me Ishmael’, Melville finds Hawthorne – and here we have to keep an eye on the anatomy – ‘content with the still, rich utterances of a great intellect in repose ... which sends few thoughts into circulation, except they be arterialized at his large warm lungs, and expanded in his honest heart.’2 The lungs and the heart here are, as we shall see, borrowed from a whale. Elsewhere in the review Melville borrows from Plato, ‘Ion’ in particular, urging contemporary American readers to ensure Hawthorne’s transmission, ‘For genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round’.3 Hawthorne – as who wouldn’t be? — was delighted by Melville’s review, as
was his wife, Sophia, who wrote about it to Evert Duyckinck: ‘I keep constantly reading over & over the inspired utterances ... There is such a generous, noble enthusiasm as I have not found in any critic of my writer.’

The phrase is right: ‘inspired utterance’. Few writers ever, probably, have felt as capable of the inspired utterance as Herman Melville did when he was writing *Moby-Dick*. The evidence is all through the novel, but here’s a passage that seems particularly to the point:

My hypothesis is this: that the spout is nothing but mist. And besides other reasons, to this conclusion I am impelled, by considerations touching the great inherent dignity and sublimity of the Sperm Whale; I account him no common, shallow being, inasmuch as it is an undisputed fact that he is never found on soundings, or near shores: all other whales sometimes are. He is both ponderous and profound. And I am convinced that from the heads of all ponderous profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, Dante, and so on, there always goes up a certain semi-visible stream, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts. While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me: and ere long saw reflected there, a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head. The invariable moisture of my hair, while plunged in deep thought, after six cups of hot tea in my thin shingled attic, of an August afternoon; this seems an additional argument for the above supposition.

The passage comes from the chapter called ‘The Fountain’. The question on Melville’s mind has to do with how the whale breathes, with what it takes in and what it pushes back out, except that as he composes the question gets caught up with the act of thinking, with the circulation of thought. Writing about the whale, Melville wants us to understand, has given him a way of thinking about thinking: or to put it another way, writing about the whale has led him to an understanding, or at least a way of articulating, the process by which composition occurs. And the spout is the key, the author, here, figuring himself precisely as spouting. *Moby-Dick*, as Melville understood it, was written in a fit of enthusiasm.

The enthusiasm of *Moby-Dick* is a complicated matter. There is, as we have already begun to see, a generalized Romantic sense of enthusiasm surrounding the composition of the novel, as that is discussed in contemporaneous reports and in the novel itself. It is part of Melville’s understanding of himself as a writer during this period that he presents himself as inspired, and to that degree, at least, his thinking has an affinity with the Transcendentalists. Indeed a Transcendental enthusiasm (its headline, Emersonian sense at any rate) surfaces in all of Melville’s intellectually ambitious novels. *Mardi*, his
Rabelasian tour of social and political possibilities, makes its penultimate island stop at Serenia, ‘that land of enthusiasts ... where Mardians pretend to the unnatural conjunction of reason with things revealed, where Alma, they say, is restored to his divine original’. For the Serenians ‘Love is a fervent fire’, and they ‘care not for men’s words’, but look instead

for creeds in actions; which are the truthful symbols of the things within.
He who hourly prays to Alma, but lives not up to world-wide love and charity — that man is more an unbeliever than he who verbally rejects the Master, but does his bidding.6

These are careful formulations, catching both the essentialism of Emersonian symbolism and the enthusiast’s defining disregard for the sacraments. *Mardi*, however, is a series of enquiries, and so the novel’s account of Emersonian enthusiasm cannot be thought its end point. *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*, on the other hand, written out of the acute disappointment Melville experienced at the immediate commercial and critical failure of *Moby-Dick*, is a self-portrait of the artist as an ardent young man whose coming of age consists precisely in his first-hand acquaintance with the ruinous implications of literary enthusiasm. Pierre is cast as an enthusiast from the beginning – ‘To a less enthusiastic heart than Pierre’s the foremost question in respect of Isabel... would have been, *What must I do?’* – and chief among the ambiguities the novel’s subtitle points towards is whether or not in light of Pierre’s (which is to say Melville’s) disappointments, enthusiasm is a sustainable mode of existence. Whether, that is, advanced minds should risk ‘those hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought.’7

The question posed throughout *Pierre*, and ultimately with appalling intensity, is whether, given the worldly devastation, born of intellectual marginalization, to which it can lead, an enthusiastic epistemology is advisable, or bearable, to the individual. The question by the time of *The Confidence-Man*, Melville’s most exacting argument with Transcendentalism, is whether enthusiasm, and the confident ontology on which it is founded, the underlying belief in the possibility of a non-alienated relation with people and the world, isn’t in fact flawed at its root. Enthusiasm is thus among the several concepts probed by the novel’s unrelenting irony. It is first endorsed by the Confidence-Man himself:

‘I fear you are too enthusiastic.’
‘A philanthropist is necessarily an enthusiast; for without enthusiasm what was ever achieved but commonplace?’

This is a sort of joke: the sentiment itself is by now plainly commonplace, that which can or cannot be achieved by enthusiasm recalling Emerson, who
recalled Kant. Later in the novel, however, enthusiasm is shown to be fragile, susceptible to mood and fortune: ‘If a drunkard in a sober fit is the dullest of mortals, an enthusiast in a reason-fit is not the most lively ... for, if his elation was the height of his madness, his despondency is but the extreme of his sanity’. Finally, as with all concepts of human interaction, enthusiasm in *The Confidence-Man* is rendered fundamentally corruptible: ‘“You deceived me,” smiled the cosmopolitan ... “you roguishly took advantage of my simplicity; you archly played upon my enthusiasm.”’

There are significant questions arising from these samplings of Melville, questions that will be addressed later: why, for instance, and with what degree of interest, does Melville press at enthusiasm’s indifference to the sacraments in *Mardi*? What might it mean, in his case, to speak of an enthusiastic epistemology? The object for the moment, however, is to picture a body of work pivotal on and for the American mid-nineteenth century, as having, among its major themes, a fascination with enthusiasm: which returns to the theme and reconvenes there, which tests it from all the narrative angles its sets up for itself, and which figures enthusiasm throughout as a culturally defining force. And nowhere more so than in *Moby-Dick*, without which there would barely be a body of work to speak of, and in which Melville, as elsewhere, through Ishmael not least, shows himself to be wary of the headline sense of enthusiasm he found in Transcendentalism. As, for example, at the masthead, where, as Ishmael describes the sensation, ‘lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant unconscious reverie’, in ‘this enchanted mood’ in which ‘thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came’,

> There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea ... from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. (MD, 257)

What this famous burlesque on Emersonian abandonment should not be taken to mean is that in questioning enthusiasm – Melville questions everything – he rejects its potential as mode of being and writing. Rather, the novel transfigures the idea, the transfiguration taking two distinct and equally exacting forms. In the first place, then, Melville presses back through the idea of enthusiasm he picks up from American Romanticism, to the religious enthusiasm out of which it partly emerged, and which was foundational, at least in the ongoing controversies it provoked, for American culture right up to the middle of the nineteenth century. The best way to access this element in *Moby-Dick* is through the novel’s Quakers, a glance back through the history of Quakerism exposing the cultural resources Melville had available to
him as he pushed and probed at the implications of enthusiasm. One end of the argument through Quakerism, through the novel’s shuddering sense of revelation, is Ahab, Ahab being an enthusiast whose conviction has become, to set the parlance running again, antinomian, and whose antinomianism is so driven that his actions have become those of a fanatic. But Ahab is not the end of the argument. The end of the argument – And I only am escaped alone to tell thee’ – is Ishmael, and it is through Ishmael and his narrative that Melville’s second transfiguration of enthusiasm occurs. Melville, Charles Olson said, ‘went back, to discover us, to come forward’ and this is true not least in his commentary on enthusiasm. Ahab casts back, to the wilder fringes of early American religion. Ishmael cast forwards, his constant circulating of other voices, his sense of writing as citation, serving to draft a modern enthusiasm – a profoundly forward-looking sense of how an individual relates to language.

And also to literature – to books, to texts — because what Moby-Dick represents, above all things perhaps, is a radical and searching adventure in reading. This goes to the heart of the novel’s enthusiasm. Thus when, in his letter to Hawthorne, he dated his life from his twenty-fifth year, he was referring to the beginning of his career as a serious and adventurous reader. An autodidact – ‘a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard’ – he did not begin to acquaint with the world’s great literature until after he had started to write, borrowing books, in the first instance, chiefly from his editor, the leader of the Young America Movement, Evert Duyckinck (MD, 208). From this point he read voraciously, finally getting round to Shakespeare at roughly the moment he began work on Moby-Dick. Which is to say that as he sat down to write the novel, he was swollen with other people’s words, was full to the brim with the world’s literature. He was also aware, however – Emerson’s essays having been on his reading list – of an anxiety, one might call it a crisis, in American reading. ‘Books,’ as Emerson had told an audience of American academics, ‘are for the scholar’s idle times’. It was a sentiment in Emerson that pointed back, again, to Quakerism, to the Journal of George Fox, which Emerson had read with ‘a rising of joyful surprise at the correspondence of facts and expressions to states of thought and feeling, which are very familiar’. Thus The American Scholar’, as critics have observed it, in the relation to textual authority it proposes, rehearses the experimentalism which characterized the Quaker relation to scripture, which found in scripture an incomplete statement of divine authority, which required the supplement of religious experience. To read Moby-Dick through its mid-century enthusiasm – and especially in the light of Quakerism, which was the background to that enthusiasm – is to bring to the fore the nature of its reading. Ahab and Ishmael are both demonstrably enthusiasts of sorts, but Ishmael, crucially, is also a
reader. And what *Moby-Dick* explores, among other things, is the possibility of an enthusiastic relation with books.

**Quaking**

Critics have long since understood *Moby-Dick* in terms of American religion. In *American Renaissance* Peter Matthiessen understood its presentation of the ongoing crisis in American religion to be central to the novel's achievement. ‘The severe, bleak, and uninspired Presbyterian Church of Melville’s experience had driven him inevitably,’ Matthiessen reckoned, ‘into questioning even the goodness of the Biblical God’.

On the other hand, he could find no security in throwing over all the restraints of dogma, and exalting the God-like man. If the will was free, as the new faith insisted, Melville knew that it was free to do evil as well as to do good ... He had also seen in Ahab the destruction that must overtake the Man-God, the self-appointed Messiah ... Without deliberately intending it, but by virtue of his intense concern with the precariously maintained virtues of democratic Christianity, which he saw everywhere being threatened or broken down, Melville created in Ahab’s tragedy a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that, carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is part.11

The argument of Ahab, in other words, is rooted in contemporary (but also historic) crises of dogma in American Christianity, and out of which it comes to test Emersonian thinking to its implied Nietzschean limit. Laurence Buell has made a comparable observation, arguing that: ‘One of the major intellectual forces behind the whole so-called literary renaissance to which Melville’s work contributed was a religious ferment and anxiety resulting from the breakdown of consensual dogmatic structures and particularly the breakdown of biblical authority in Protestant America’. Emphasizing the relativist implications of this, Buell pushes the argument forward, finding in *Moby-Dick* both a ‘document in the history of the clash in American and specifically northeastern post- Puritanism between Reformist Calvinist and Enlightenment Unitarian cross-currents’, and a ‘full literary efflorescence’ of ‘comparative religion as a discipline and as a literary force’.12

This is both affirmative of and true to the novel, but it shouldn’t obscure the depth of the contemporary anxiety both Buell and Matthiessen point to, and which the book helped flush to the surface of American literary culture when it was first published. So here’s Evert Duyckinck, Melville’s editor and, if you like, friend – leader of the Young America movement and literary gate-keeper – reviewing *Moby-Dick* and finding it impossible not to voice the
religious position with which, as he no doubt rightly understood it, the novel variously and fundamentally came into collision:

This piratical running down of creeds and opinions, the conceited indifferentism of Emerson, or the run-a-muck style of Carlyle is, we will not say dangerous in such cases ... but it is out of place and uncomfortable. We do not like to see what, under any view, must be to the world the most sacred associations of life violated and defaced.

This is in substance the same point as Matthiessen and Buell make, though Duyckinck’s tone shows a writer for whom something is really at stake, and except that for him the violating presence is not Ahab’s, but Ishmael’s. Thus,

Here is Ishmael... going down on his knees with a cannibal to a piece of wood ... Surely Ishmael, who is a scholar, might have spoken respectfully of the Archangel Gabriel, out of consideration, if not for the Bible {which might be asking too much of the school}, at least for one John Milton.

Nor is the Bible the only authority at issue, because,

Nor is it fair to inveigh against the terrors of priestcraft.... It is a curious fact that there are no more bilious people in the world, more completely filled with megrims and head shakings, than some of those very people who are constantly inveighing against the religious melancholy.13

The issue raised by Moby-Dick, as Duyckinck saw it, was biblical authority, and with it priestcraft, and among the most significant and enduring challenges to such forces in American religious history, as his ‘megrimas and head shakings’ acknowledge, was the never satisfactorily quelled phenomenon of enthusiasm.

Possibly Melville already had it in mind to write a novel which would disturb existing religious anxieties before he read and reviewed Hawthorne’s Mosses from an Old Manse. Scholarly wisdom, however, is that Melville’s conception of his novel, and of Ahab especially, altered radically upon reading Hawthorne, and in the appendix to his review of the book he documents the influence he already senses Hawthorne to have had on him. That influence has to do with the sense of what American writing should now aim for, and tangled up with that sense is the necessity to the American cultural imagination of religion:

Whether Hawthorne has simply availed himself of this mystical blackness as a means to the wondrous effects he makes it to produce in his lights and shades; or whether there really lurks in him, perhaps unknown to himself, a touch of Puritanic gloom, — this, I cannot altogether tell. Certain it is, however, that this great power of blackness
in him derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or another, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free.\textsuperscript{14}

What Hawthorne showed Melville, in other words, or at least confirmed in him – the enthusiasm in the review of Hawthorne’s work is at least in part enthusiasm for his own – is that if an American writer was to speak with real scope and force, he would do well to conduct the forces of the American religious personality into the fabric of his work. The prevailing religious temperament in \textit{Moby-Dick} is not Puritan but Quaker, a fact which, in the main, criticism has tended to disregard. The intention here is to explore its meaning.

Nantucket was home to hundreds of ‘Friends’ in the first half of the nineteenth-century, and so it is simply a naturalistic detail perhaps – in the sense that you can’t pin anything on it – that when Ishmael sets out to sign up for a whaling voyage, he should run into a couple of Quakers.

Now, Bildad, like Peleg, and indeed many other Nantucketers, was a Quaker, the island having been originally settled by that sect; and to this day its inhabitants in general retain in an uncommon measure the peculiarities of the Quaker, only variously and anomalously modified by things altogether alien and heterogeneous. For some of these same Quakers are the most sanguinary of all sailors and whale-hunters. They are fighting Quakers; they are Quakers with a vengeance. (MD, 169)

Here, as elsewhere, Melville has done his research, their evolved ‘peculiarities’ being how Quakers, in the absence of a binding doctrine, characterized their way of life, religious and otherwise. Ishmael himself is not a Quaker, but, as he says, ‘born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church’. Except that as he has come to see it, and in the spirit of the relativism which matures through the novel into his defining intellectual quality, the Presbyterian Church is not infallible, or at least, so he concludes as he settles down to worship with Queequeg:

\begin{quote}
How then could I unite with this wild idolater in worshipping his piece of wood? ... But what is worship? – to do the will of God – \textit{that} is worship. And what is the will of God? – to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me \textit{-that} is the will of God. (MD, 147)
\end{quote}

This is one of the passages Duyckinck, an Episcopalian, objected to in particular. The objection was that here Melville showed a disregard for the forms of religion. Numerous American sects, emerging from the ferment of the English Civil War, demonstrated a disregard for the forms and procedures of religion. Unitarianism, the tradition out of which Transcendentalism developed – with its own insistence on the spirit over the text – is a good
instance of such a practice. Denominationally, however, it wasn’t
Unitarianism but Quakerism that Emerson himself felt closest to, hence his
‘frequent remark that he felt more kinship with the inner light of the Quakers
than with any formal creed’.15 Ishmael, this is likewise to suggest, as a
sceptical Presbyterian, is a would-be religious relativist who in his disregard
for the textual and sacramental trappings of religion approached the
sometimes doctrinally neutral commitment of Quakerism. Much more
significant in this respect, however, is Ahab, himself also a Nantucketer and
also a Quaker, and whose relationship to his faith, his investment in it and his
departure from it, is nothing less than the novel’s dramatic premise:

So that there are instances among them of men, who, named with
Scripture names ... and in childhood naturally imbibing the stately
dramatic thee and thou of the Quaker idiom; still, from the audacious,
daring, and boundless adventure of their subsequent lives, strangely blend
with those unoutgrown peculiarities, a thousand bold dashes of
color, not unworthy a Scandinavian sea-king, or a poetical Pagan
Roman. And when these things unite in a man of greatly superior natural
force, with a globular brain and a ponderous heart; who has also by the
stillness and seclusion of many long night-watches in the remotest
waters, and beneath constellations never seen here at the north, been led
to think untraditionally and independently; receiving all nature’s sweet
or savage impressions fresh from her own virgin voluntary and confiding
breast, and thereby chiefly, but with some help from accidental
advantages, to learn a bold and nervous lofty language – that man makes
one in a whole nation’s census – a mighty pageant creature, formed for
noble tragedies. (MD, 169-70)

And so there’s Ahab, the character whose presence the novel means us to be
gripped by, ‘the mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies’
Hawthorne had put Melville in mind of, whose ‘bold and nervous lofty
language’ means to resemble and equal Shakespeare, and for whom, crucially,
Quakerism is an essential part of the mix, the strange blend, its ‘peculiarities’
in him being – most emphatic word — ‘unoutgrown’. Quakerism, in other
words, was central to the formation of Ahab, in whose fate we are to
understand a version of America’s own, and so not only can you make
something of Quakerism in Moby-Dick – not only are you entitled – but
probably it is a mistake not to, Ahab emerging from that enthusiastic mould.

To build on the story sketched out in the introduction, Quakerism, from
its inception, was understood as one form among many of religious
enthusiasm, religious enthusiasts — whether Anabaptists, or Familists, or
Ranters, or Quakers, or any of the many fervent sects that emerged in Britain
and Europe in the period after the Reformation — showing a desire for a more
direct acquaintance with God than conventional Protestantism, or even
Puritanism, permitted. Such acquaintance was to be unmediated by either priests and priestcraft or even, in some cases, texts. Implicit in this anti-formalism was, in some cases anyway, and in Quakerism certainly, an extension of the franchise, all people being judged equally capable of receiving and acting upon the divine spirit. A further point of commonality was a strong attraction to the New World, where the religious constraints that contained and thwarted enthusiastic worship, so it was felt, need not apply. And so enthusiasts made the journey, from which adventure it followed that at moments of crisis in American religious history, enthusiasm, the belief in the possibility of a greater nearness to God, was invariably, in some sense or another, at issue. Whether in the antinomian crisis triggered by Anne Hutchinson’s prophesying, in the Great Awakening, or in the Great Revival of the second half of the nineteenth century, the enthusiastic voice sounds loud through American history.

Quakerism was a pure strain. Perplexed and unconvinced by the many reformist Christian sects available to him in the 1640s, George Fox determined, or was led to the conviction, that God was available to him only through personal revelations, ‘openings’ as he termed the experience, which is to say by a process of spiritual intuition. It followed that all people, nonbelievers and believers alike – Pagans for instance, Queequeg for instance – were capable of divine revelation, from which it also followed that in the government of Quaker belief, religious experience, the individual’s experience of the promptings of the divine spirit, took precedence over scripture. Thus, as the historian of American religious enthusiasm David Lovejoy puts it, for Fox, ‘God’s truths in the Scripture were universal, but they were not complete, and from them new truths were discoverable with God’s help’. What was called for, theologically speaking, was an ‘experimental spirit’, and so as Lovejoy has suggested it, ‘Fox read the Bible only to discover ... truths he already knew “experimentally”, a key word he frequently used and one which became central to enthusiasts’ understanding of spiritual life’. The Bible being judged incomplete, Quakerism was, by definition, unbound by a text-based doctrine, evolving instead, out of its forms of devotion and way of life, the ‘peculiarities’ Quakers in Britain and America became identifiable with: a repudiation of priestcraft and predetermined liturgy or ritual, in favour of a relatively freeform worship acknowledging the possibility that anybody present might be moved by the divine spirit to speak; a rejection of physical sacraments, communion being held to be a purely spiritual affair; and a commitment to social equality, flowing from spiritual equality, hence the ‘stately dramatic’, but also socially levelling, ‘thee and thou of the Quaker religion’.

Two aspects of Quakerism suggest themselves in this context in particular, seem ‘unoutgrown’, as it were, by Moby-Dick. The first is
prophesying, the spiritual mechanism by which radical Protestants generally, but early Quakers in particular, sought to avail themselves of, and to communicate, the further light. To ‘prophesy’, in this sense, meant ‘to interpret and expound upon Scripture, to discuss and explain to others the Word of God, the divine mysteries, from experience with divine prompting, even inspiration, and usually at public meetings and services’. This makes it sound like a relatively measured procedure, though non-Quakers did not typically view it as such, Francis Higginson reporting of the phenomenon of prophesying that,

many of them, sometimes men, but more frequently women and children, fall into quaking fits ... Those who are taken with these fits fall suddenly down, as it were into a swoon, as though they were surprised with an epilepsy or apoplexy, and lie groveling on the earth, and struggling as if it were for life ... While the agony of the fit is upon them their lips quiver, their flesh and joints tremble, their bellies swell as though blown up with wind, they foam at the mouth, and sometimes purge as they had taken physic. In this fit they continue sometimes an hour or two, sometimes longer, before they roar out horribly with a voice greater than the voice of a man ... greater sometimes than a bull can make.

To prophesy was to speak with another voice, ‘a voice greater than the voice of a man’; it was to avail oneself of, and to make oneself available to, words and agencies not one’s own. Quaking and roaring was part of it, but so too, and especially as Quakerism developed, was silence or quietism, revelation of the divine will coming also ‘through introspection, silence, emptying their minds of all distractions, and totally crucifying and eradicating any evidence of human will, or what Friends called “creaturely activity”’. From this emptying a second significant element of Quakerism follows, that in its rejection of conventional modes of mediation, it became known, and sometimes seemed to assert itself, as an anti-intellectual faith. This is arguable, and has historically divided Quakers, was dividing them in fact as Melville was writing, in the guise of the Hicksite controversy: Elias Hicks casting back to the original freedom Fox’s inner light had secured for Quakers from ‘dependence upon Scripture, book learning, ordinances, church discipline and magistrates’ and all practices deemed to get ‘in the way of the Spirit’. Whether properly understood as anti-intellectual or not, what is at very least the case is that Quakerism was a textually anti-bureaucratic movement, its enthusiasm, as with all forms of religious enthusiasm, having its original dispute with the alienating consequences of interpretive and organizational apparatus.

This is not the place for a history of Quakerism, for an account of its transition from the early enthusiasm of Fox, to the quietism – where silence and retreat became the emphasis rather than transmission – under the
leadership in Philadelphia of William Penn, to Quaker involvement in political reformism, especially the anti-slavery movement, as led by John Woolman and as rooted in the Quaker sense of religious equality. What do need to be drawn out are the elements of what one might call Quaker sensibility: a commitment to revelation, a faith in the possibility of immediate contact with the divine, an experimental spirit, an opening of the self to other words and voices. As Quakerism – and then as Quakerism overlapped with other manifestations of religious enthusiasm, including, on occasion, the suicidalism of the martyr – this sensibility can be thought variously critical to the emergence of major American writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, and to avail oneself of it in relation to *Moby-Dick* is to release in the novel its wilder, more ruinous, but also more forward-looking forces.

**Raving**

It is a feature of *Moby-Dick* that just when everything seems like it might settle down, somebody, somewhere, starts to rant and rave. No sooner, then, have Ishmael and Queequeg successfully signed up for a voyage with the *Pequod* (chosen by Ishmael as dictated by Queequeg’s idol Yojo) than they encounter Elijah, ‘The Prophet’ as the chapter heading names him. Ishmael’s word for Elijah’s talk is ‘jabbering’, or ‘gibberish’, and he advises Queequeg that ‘this fellow has broken loose from somewhere’ (MD, 189). Even so, he can’t quite dispel Elijah’s words as nonsense, reflecting subsequently that, ‘This circumstance, coupled with his ambiguous, half-hinting, half-revealing, shrouded sort of talk, now begat in me all kinds of vague wonderments and half-apprehensions’ (MD, 191). Nor can the reader dispel Elijah’s words, both because as they are spoken they appear to have genuine prophetic force within the narrative, and also because the narrative generally takes prophecy seriously, a function in part of IshmaelPs experimental religious sensibility. As with Queequeg’s idol, so with Elijah’s jabbering, his first thought is to pronounce the procedure as humbug. Ishmael, however, is on a spiritual journey all of his own in *Moby-Dick*, away from the infallible prescriptions of Presbyterianism, and so lacks the conviction whereby he might outright reject another’s commitments or claims. Queequeg and Ishmael meet Elijah again, more ominously this time just before they go on board, at which point his ranting is more extreme:

‘Morning to ye! morning to ye!’ he rejoined, again moving off. ‘Oh! I was going to warn ye against — but never mind, never mind – it’s all one, all in the family too;—sharp frost this morning, ain’t it? Good bye to ye. Shan’t see ye again very soon, I guess, unless it’s before the Grand Jury.’
And with these cracked words he finally departed, leaving me, for the moment, in no small wonderment at this frantic impudence. [MD, 195]

There are a lot of ‘cracked words’ in *Moby-Dick*, a lot of jabberings, a lot of gibberish, many occasions when a speaker is speaking words not entirely his own. Often the words are associated with prophecy, which is to say they are a speaking before, or are spoken before; and often with such utterances – ‘inspirational utterance’ Sophia Hawthorne called it – there is, or there is claimed to be, a movement of the spirit. From one point of view, in fact, *Moby-Dick* is an investigation of such states, a cataloguing and assessing of modes of delirium, of supernatural serenities and fits and flurries, of enthusiastic articulations of all sorts.

The *Jeroboam*’s story is a case in point. Gabriel, who first appears with ‘a deep, settled, fanatic delirium’ in his eyes, and who had been ‘originally nurtured among the crazy society of the Neskyeuna Shakers, where he had been a great prophet’, has had a career straight out of the annals of early American religious history [MD, 420]. He left Neskyeuna for Nantucket on ‘a strange, apostolic whim’, the same kind of whim, say, that took Anne Hutchinson to Massachusetts or which drove the early Quaker Mary Dyer to her martyrdom at the hands of the Puritans. Thereafter, once having joined the *Jeroboam*, and once the ship’s journey was under way, he announced himself as the archangel Gabriel, successfully recruiting disciples and generally investing himself with an air of sacredness through the ‘dark, daring play of his sleepless, excited imagination, and all the preternatural terrors of real delirium’ (420). Gabriel is a warning. ‘Nor,’ as the narrative points out, ‘is the history of fanatics half so striking in respect to the measureless self-deception of the fanatic himself, as his measureless power of deceiving ... others’ [MD, 421]. The phrase which draws one in here, which makes Gabriel’s case-history exemplary rather than anomalous, is ‘the history of fanatics’. The novel itself is a history of fanatics, the unravelling of Ahab’s governing fanaticism occurring against a background of numerous walk-on and cameo fanaticisms, with the whole crew – even, ultimately, Starbuck – eventually getting caught up in the central fanatical quest. But the novel is also *predicated* on the history of fanatics, as Gabriel’s carefully outlined background suggests, drawing on and drawing in the history of American enthusiastic religious traits and practices, showing and using the culture’s capacity for extremism. Witness the novel’s speech, its cracked words, which point, in the automatic speech of the carpenter, say, to twentieth-century developments in the presentation of language, but which are unimaginable in the context of the novel without the inspired utterances, the rantings and ravings, of religious enthusiasts. Melville mentions the Shakers as an instance of this, but perhaps a purer form is to be found among the Ranters, the Ranters.
being a relatively short-lived seventeenth-century sect best characterized here as extreme Quakers. Thus, while for Quakers the divine spirit ‘justified and, according to some, perfected ... it did not deify; possessed with it Quakers did not equate themselves with God’. And so, ‘While Quakers reduced the Scriptures and human reason to externals, they still believed them aids of a sort to religious life ... Ranters denied this, accepted the Spirit as all there was, and as perfectionists in spiritual things lived as they pleased.’

In America the Ranters hovered at the fringes of Quakerism, doubtful Ranters sometimes being drawn back within the limits of Quakerism, extreme Quakers sometimes being attracted to the antinomian freedoms of the Ranters. Antinomianism is the extreme view that Christians are released by grace from observance of the moral law, and is as such a form of perfectionism; perfectionism holding that as it is possible for a human being to know the spirit of God on earth, therefore it is possible for a human being to be as God. The possibility of the Ranter was always implicit in the inward light of Quakerism, ranting being an extreme freedom of speech that flowed from an unquestioning investment in the motions of the Spirit. Once privilege the inner light, in other words, the extremes of the Ranter become possible. The person who rants, from the point of view of orthodoxy, is the Quaker overdeveloped, the Quaker gone wrong. *Moby-Dick* is a ranting novel, not in the sense that Melville identified the Ranters, of all sects in the history of fanaticism, as an explicit model for his more extreme characters, but in the sense that ranting is one of its modes, and because the novel’s ranting is identified with and understood through the religious background out of which such forms of utterance most spectacularly entered American culture. To rant, as the dictionary has it: to speak or shout in a wild, impassioned way: from Du. *ranten* ‘talk nonsense, rave’.

Ahab’s ‘transfiguration’ (the word is Melville’s) is explicitly the result of a psychological process made the more possible and imaginable because of the ‘unoutgrown peculiarities’ of his Quaker inheritance. Thus it is through and over the mechanisms of Quaker revelation and conversion – the glimpse of the inner light and the gradual unfolding thereafter – that Ahab’s monomania is able to grip and take hold. The process, as Melville is careful to describe it, is not sudden, not the instantaneous consequence of his injury at the jaws of the whale, but the result, rather, of a protracted and painful spiritual rebirth. Thus, and necessarily to recall the transfiguration at length:

> When by this collision forced to turn towards home, and for long months of days and weeks, Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock, rounding in mid winter that dreary, howling Patagonian Cape; then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad. That it was only then, on the homeward
voyage, after the encounter, that the final monomania seized him, seems all but certain from the fact that, at intervals during the passage, he was a raving lunatic; and, though unlimbed of a leg, yet such vital strength yet lurked in his Egyptian chest, and was moreover intensified by his delirium, that his mates were forced to lace him fast, even there, as he sailed, raving in his hammock. In a straitjacket, he swung to the mad rockings of the gales. And, when running into more sufferable latitudes, the ship, with mild stun'sails spread, floated across the tranquil tropics, and, to all appearances, the old man’s delirium seemed left behind him with the Cape Horn swells, and he came forth from his dark den into the blessed light and air, even then, when he bore that firm, collected front, however pale, and issued his calm orders once again; and his mates thanked God the direful madness was now gone; even then, Ahab, in his hidden self, raved on. (MD, 283—4)

Beyond this, in one sense, beyond the ravings of the transfiguration, it isn’t necessary to press, other commentators having observed perfectionism in Ahab; that, having shed all vestige of moral orthodoxy, he demonstrates a tendency to identify a divinity in man. What matters, rather, from the point of view of enthusiasm is the process whereby such an overestimation of his powers occurs. Quaker revelation, as Thomas D. Hamm reports it, did not come in ‘a single, transforming experience’. Rather, ‘the Inward light constituted a kind of seed’ – the same kind of seed, perhaps, with which Melville understood his own transformation into a writer to have begun. A seed that would, if observed, gradually flourish, the process being ‘strengthened by experiences that Friends called baptisms, seasons of divine visitation that often took the form of suffering or depression’. And so there’s Ahab, victim unquestionably of an ‘opening’, condemned by his isolation to look deeper and deeper inwards, raving so extremely his shipmates had to lace him down, his strength, apparently, intensified by his delirium. From which state he emerges, finally, converted to a new belief, baptized, as he says later, not in the name of the Father, but in the name of the Devil, apparently calm but inwardly ‘raving on’, always capable, as the novel shows us, of speaking with a voice greater than a man. This is the psychological process whereby ‘torn body and gashed soul bled into one another’, a process which, in its structural similarity to the enthusiast’s conversion, would seem to confirm that Quaker ‘peculiarities’, if by no means observed to the letter, also remain ‘unoutgrown’. And it is out of this process that, as he hoped in ‘Hawthorne and his Mosses’, ‘a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies’ emerges, with his ‘nervous, lofty language’, his ranting and raving.

Ahab emerges from his transfiguration an enthusiast in a strict sense of the term, in that, having breathed in the God he proceeds to breathe it out into others, a capacity which is crucial to the plot of the novel. Pip, likewise,
becomes an enthusiast in the strictest, which is to say the etymologically informed, sense of the term, following the abandonment at sea from which he emerges raving. His transfiguration, more explicitly even than Ahab’s, is presented in terms of an enthusiastic engagement with God:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes ... He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. [MD, 525-6]

And so Pip emerges, out of ‘all mortal reason’, a babbling idiot or a divine, depending on the point of view, jabbering ceaselessly, ranting and raving through the final quarter of the novel. The narrator’s point of view, it should be noticed, is qualified or held back here, Pip’s enthusiasm, his cracked speech, though unquestionably frantic and absurd, being held open for consideration as ‘heaven’s sense’. Ishmael’s reluctance to judge is continuous with this toleration for the varieties of religious experience, but it is predicated also, as he promptly observes, on an affinity he necessarily feels with Pip’s condition. ‘The thing is common in that fishery; and in the sequel of the narrative, it will then be seen what like abandonment befell myself’ [MD, 526]. This is true, of course, Ishmael drifting for two days after the Pequod was destroyed by the whale before he was picked up. The question is, what is meant by ‘like abandonment’? What does it mean in this context, for Ishmael to compare himself with Pip? One implication, perhaps, is that his own utterance – the book we are just now reading – was likewise the product of abandonment, that in some sense or other the narrative itself, Melville’s own cracked speech, is the product of enthusiasm.

Writing

One way of thinking about enthusiasm against the religious background being sketched into this chapter is as a coming or speaking through. *Walden* was construed in these terms. Thoreau’s language, it was argued, can be thought of as revelatory in manner, his recourse to etymologies, brought out by careful reinflection, designed to show old, unused and, in his view, valuable meanings, coming or speaking through familiar words. Melville’s language, likewise, can be thought of in terms of a coming through, his writing itself as being, in some sense, enthusiastic; in two senses, actually, Romantic and
proto-Modern, the divergence having to do with reading, and with the ways
words can be thought of as originating somewhere else.

It is axiomatic to Quakerism that, in the act of worship at least, the
individual’s words come from elsewhere, Quakers historically desiring that, in
the act of worship, they would never speak ‘according to their own
inclination, wisdom, or inspiration’, but under ‘a divine leading’. At the time
of writing Moby-Dick, Melville thought of the act of composition like this, or
at least he figured it like this, his presentation of writing in review and in
letters being according to the idea of something passing through the writer.
The clearest statement of this is in ‘Hawthorne and his Mosses’, beginning, as
it does, with a testimony to literary genius:

I know not what would be the right name to put on the title-page of an
excellent book, but this I feel, that the names of all fine authors are
fictitious ones, far more so than that of Junius, – simply standing, as they
do, for the mystical ever-eluding Spirit of all Beauty, which ubiquitously
possesses men of genius.

This is August 1850. The basic figuration had not changed much by the
summer of 1851, Melville observing to Hawthorne:

This most persuasive season has now for weeks recalled me from certain
crotchety and over doleful chimearas the like of which men like you and me
and some others, forming a chain of God’s posts around the world, must be
content to encounter now and then, and fight them the best way we can.

The coming through thus pictured in the commentary surrounding the
composition and completion of Moby-Dick — the image of enthusiasm or
inspiration whereby the writing self opens up to the operations of another
agency – is also, crucially in Melville, almost always a passing on, a
circulation. The images presented are of transmission, continuity and
fellowship, and as such, as a mode of circulation, the theme of inspiration
spills into the texture of the novel itself, Melville in Moby-Dick, much more
than in any other of his works, being obsessed, like Thoreau, by the processes
whereby one thing passes through or turns into another.

Often these processes are physical, Moby-Dick being, among other things, a
natural history of the whale, the novel repeatedly turning its attention to gases
and fluids, to breath, to blood, to excreta of all kinds. Thus the preamble to the
story, its various pre-texts and premonitions, brings to the fore all manner of
modes of circulation. On the opening page, for instance, as Harold Beaver is
delighted to observe, the first of the etymological entries comes from Hackluyt:

While you take in hand to school others, and to teach them by what
name a whale-fish is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through
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And so the fun begins. The letter H ‘maketh up the whole signification of the word’ because it is as the ‘H’ is aspirated that breath enters the word ‘whale’, which delivery of breath is an essential part of the truth of the whale; how the whale breathes, as Melville is careful (comically) to note in ‘Cetology’, being, after all, core to its being. The fictional usher who supplies the etymologies is likewise breathless, being consumptive and therefore tubercular, suffering from the growth of nodules on tissue – as the dictionary has it, most likely the lungs. The usher’s entries contribute to the novel, but in themselves are dry as dust. What they want, in order to be animated, is the writer’s breath. In ‘Loomings’ it is in the interest of ‘circulation’ that Ishmael decides to go to sea: ‘It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation’ (MD, 93). And then in ‘The Sermon’ – which takes as its text ‘Jonah’, the pre-text for the novel as a whole, and an allegory whose theme is, in multiple ways, the passage through – Jonah, when he is out of favour with God, is himself described, by Father Mapple, as breathless. Jonah throws himself into his berth to find ‘the little state-room ceiling almost resting on his forehead’. ‘The air is close, and Jonah gasps’ (MD, 138). ‘But God,’ as Father Mapple notes, is everywhere, and so as Jonah, ‘the prophet’, repents:

God spake unto the fish; and from the shuddering cold and blackness of the sea, the whale came breeching up towards the warm and pleasant sun, and all the delights of air and earth; and ‘vomited out Jonah upon the dry land’ ... Jonah did the Almighty’s bidding. And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falseshood! (MD, 142)

These are suggestive processes – Melville arriving at the idea of utterance he wants in *Moby-Dick* in part through the repeated attention the novel pays to forms of circulation – but none more so than the act of spouting.

Of all the unknowable aspects of the whale, the spout, Melville points out, has proved least available to analysis. It is a noteworthy thing, surely, that ‘for six thousand years – and no one knows how many millions of ages before that – the great whales should have been spouting all over the sea’, and yet,

down to this blessed minute (fifteen and a quarter minutes past one o’clock P.M. of this sixteenth day of December, A.D. 1850), it should still remain a problem, whether these spoutings are, after all, really water, or nothing but vapor. (MD, 477)

And the point is that in the spout, in the whale’s characteristic ‘spoutings’, Melville finds an archetype for writerly enthusiasm:
And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. (MD, 482)

With spoutings come intuitions, you could call them revelations, the revelation here being that as he contemplates the spout Melville finds an analogy for the processes of his own thought.

Nor is it only as it repeatedly details circulatory processes that the fabric of *Moby-Dick* is structured by the idea of one agency passing into and through another. In its devices also, in its characteristic rhetorical manoeuvres, the novel reads like an enthusiastic text. This claim made in relation to *Walden* emphasized Thoreau’s investment in etymology, his inclination towards derivation releasing meanings such that otherwise unnoticed and neglected senses and inflections came through familiar words. Melville, for all his debt to the usher, is not an etymological writer. His defining devices, rather, are metaphor and simile, but used such that always the thing being described comes to bear the presence of some other, or previous formal incarnation. The whale often appears like this:

> mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air (MD, 98)

But so too other phenomena, as when

> faith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope. (MD, 131)

The point about simile and metaphor in *Moby-Dick* has to do with the relation between the subject of the comparison and the thing to which it is compared – between, as it were, the tenor and the vehicle. And the point about this is that, invariably in this relationship, the tenor is overwhelmed by the vehicle; that what comes through is not a sharper sense of the subject but a graphic and often quite overpowering image of what it is likened to, which is, by definition, something it is not. This epic tendency — because what this describes is epic simile — is underwritten by the novel’s other most characteristic rhetorical move, its continuous reaching after genealogy as a mode of explanation, whether what’s at issue is the genealogy of cetologists, or of monstrous pictures of whales, or, most famously, of the tradition of ‘standing mastheads’, to which Melville admits the builders of the pyramids, the tower of Babel, Simon Stylites, Napoleon ‘upon the top of the tower of Vendome’, George Washington and Admiral Nelson. The implication with each of Melville’s genealogies is of an infinite series, the effect of the act of
associating being to have one thing show through another, so that finally the form of each particular instance is lost, substituted by the likening feature, the continuous element.

There are various words one can bring to this process, to this sense, variously presented, of one thing coming through another. One of Melville’s is metempsychosis, being the supposed transmigration after death of the soul into a new body:

Oh! the metempsychosis! Oh! Pythagoras, that in bright Greece, two thousand years ago, did die, so good, so wise, so mild; I sailed with thee along the Peruvian coast last voyage – and, foolish as I am, taught thee, a green simple boy, how to splice a rope! [MD, 539]

This is thrillingly put, Melville using the idea of metempsychosis both to render the past immediate – the immediacy of things being a dominating concern in the last quarter of the novel – and to further explore the enthusiastic process whereby one agency passes into and through another. Another word for that process, however, is Ishmael. ‘Call me Ishmael’, Melville’s narrator insists, in one of the most devastating openings in all literature, thereby investing in his own identity just precisely in so far as to ascribe to it a name. Implicit in that opening, however, is the fact that the narrator may or may not be Ishmael; that’s just what we’ll be calling him for the time being. Ishmael, as far as we can be certain, is just Melville’s persona’s persona, the form that the novel is speaking through. Which is to say that he is the form of writing, Melville’s view being that ‘the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones ... standing, as they do, for the mystical ever-eluding Spirit of all Beauty, which ubiquitously possesses men of genius’. ‘Call me Ishmael’ in other words, in the manner of its address, introduces but also exemplifies an enthusiastic text.

To which point, as we consider the writing of Moby-Dick, the novel would seem to be pursuing a broadly Romantic sense of literary enthusiasm, pushing it, perhaps, to its ultimate statement, but even so, and in its excess, holding to an Emersonian sense of self-abandonment. It is a view of writing, however, significantly tempered and countered by Melville’s reading, and by his sense of how reading relates to the process of composition; how to read, and more precisely, what to do with one’s reading, being central questions in Moby-Dick. The question is implicit in the presence of the ‘consumptive usher to a grammar school’ on the opening page of the novel, ‘threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain’, who ‘loved to dust his old grammars’ [MD, 75]. It is posed also by (and to) the sub-sub-librarian, who belongs to the ‘hopeless, sallow tribe which no wine of this world will ever warm’. The question is present, also, in the novel’s satire on scholarship. This is ongoing, even as
Melville openly borrows from the whaling manuals and histories, but is most apparent in his presentation of ‘cetology’, the chapter itself being a highly scholarly anatomy of whaling, the scholarship emphasized and satirized by the use of book-formats (folios, quartos, octavos and duodecimos) as categories for the cataloguing of whales according to size. There is an enthusiasm in this, an enthusiasm of the order implied by modern usage – a usage which, later in this book, Marianne Moore will be seen to bring into play – the enthusiasm of the antiquarian, or the collector, or the specialist, or, even, the statistician. It is not, however, an enthusiasm the novel looks to endorse, even as it indulges in it. The question being posed by the cetology, as elsewhere, is whether such bureaucracy of scholarship adds to knowledge and understanding, or whether the person who wants to know the whale shouldn’t instead cut to the chase.

Thus, ‘Some pretend to see a difference between the Greenland whale of the English and the right whale of the Americans. ... It is by endless subdivisions based upon the most inconclusive differences, that some departments of natural history become so repellingly intricate’ (MD, 233).

The repellingly intricate subdivisions of scholarship, the intrusive overlay of apparatus designed to categorize and measure, the procrustean formalization of knowledge and understanding go to the heart of this book. Which is also to say this book, this being a moment after all, 25 August 2005, as the whole machinery of British academia steams headlong into the maw of the RAE, when the forms and procedures of academic reading threaten constantly to overwhelm its content. But it goes to the heart of this book also because, as was observed earlier, enthusiasm, and especially religious enthusiasm, is born of a suspicion of the overweening form. Quakerism was precisely a departure from the prevailing apparatus of worship, risking, as a consequence, anti-intellectualism. Equally, and oppositely, however, and this is why Moby-Dick is so important in this respect, Melville was a voluminous and insatiable reader, and in particular a reader who considered his reading continuous with writing, with the process of composition. As Olson says, ‘Melville’s reading is a gauge of him, at all points of his life. He was a skald, and knew how to appropriate the work of others. He read to write.’ Nor, of course, is this process submerged. The extracts, the quotations, with which the novel opens are obviously sources, matter influential on the novel being directly passed on. Similarly there is little disguising the use of whaling histories and scholarship, Melville not so much passing words off as his own as, from time to time, simply giving his text over to others.

The matter of reading, as conducted through the tradition of enthusiasm, brings one to a central question posed in and by Moby-Dick; the question being – and I mean to present Melville as having been in the fullest sense conscious of this – how should a novel, in a cultural tradition founded, in part,
on a suspicion of textual authority, handle and communicate reading? The answer, in various ways, and in a decisive development in the term’s meaning, is that Melville communicates reading enthusiastically. There are three ways this might be thought true, three senses of enthusiasm at play here. In the first place, reading sometimes passes through writing in *Moby-Dick* in such a way that it is kept intact, word for word often, as when Melville is re-presenting his sources. A word for this is citation, but another word for it, as Thoreau might have thought, is prophecy: that which is said before, that which has before been said. Writing as agency, in other words, is like the enthusiastic self as agency; or, writing, as Melville shapes it, is an enthusiastic medium. A second sense in which Melville presents reading enthusiastically comes out of the readerly tradition of writing that Melville was keen to identify himself with, a tradition which might be thought to begin with Rabelais – whom Melville first read with an excitement critics usually associate with his reading of Shakespeare – and which continued through another work that featured prominently on his reading list, Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. In both Rabelais and Burton, both of whom tease the scholar, the presentation of reading matter is charged with excitement, the purpose of the text being very much a means of accommodating other writing. Burton’s metaphors for this are familiar [the passages in brackets being translations]:

> The matter is theirs most part, and yet mine, *apparet unde sumptum sit* [it is plain whence it was taken] [which Seneca approves], *aliudtamen quam unde sumptum sit apparat* [yet it becomes something different in its new setting]; which nature doth with the aliment of our bodies incorporate, digest, assimilate, I do *concoquere quod hausi* [assimilate what I have swallowed], dispose of what I take. I make them pay tribute to set out this my *Macaronicon*, the method only is mine own ... Our poets steal from Homer; he spews, saith Aelian, they lick it up.27

Burton’s method is the collage, the text as presentation of others’ words, a mode of writing through reading implicit in Thoreau but made more apparent in Melville, and which Marianne Moore, a student of seventeenth-century prose stylists, would make unmistakably Modern.

There is, however, a third, no less important but more naive sense of enthusiastic reading at work in *Moby-Dick*: the simple sense that Melville is audibly excited about reading. He had had, as Hershel Parker points out, an irregular education, and so was not, as a consequence, a trained reader. Nor did he come to reading early, but when he did it was with all the enthusiasm of the autodidact, with the sense that his reading had inaugurated a new life. There are numerous revivals in *Moby-Dick*: Lazarus, Jonah, Queequeg, Tashtego, Pip and Ishmael, all presented as experiencing something akin to
rebirth. Melville thought of the composition of the novel itself in comparable terms. ‘From my twenty-fifth year,’ he told Hawthorne, ‘I date my life.’ The writing of *Moby-Dick*, he thought, was the final unfolding of the process which that date had seemed to him to inaugurate; and what that date marks is Melville’s life as a serious reader, a process through which he was, as he suggests, reborn. Or as he puts it in the novel, ‘I have swam through libraries, and sailed through oceans,’ both media altering him decisively as he passed through *(MD, 230)*. And then, of course, the book itself nearly died. As the editors of the Newberry and Northwestern edition tell the story, it is possible *Moby-Dick* would have slipped completely from view, following bad reviews and poor sales, and Melville’s own disillusioned disappearance from the literary scene, but for the fact that in the second half of the nineteenth century British working-class readers took it up, circulating it through their societies and institutions. The question arising is why the novel should have found such a committed readership in this social group, and one answer, no doubt, would have to with Melville’s focus in the book on working life and practices. Another answer, however, has to do with the book’s enthusiasm. Hayford, Parker and Tanselle identify among the novel’s British readers a network of secret sharers, in which the novel served as ‘a self-identifying and other-identifying token’. It is a historically grounded claim. ‘We gather,’ *The Nation and Atheneum* reported of such secretly sharing readers, ‘[that] they had been in the habit of hinting the book to friends they could trust, so that *Moby-Dick* became a sort of cunning test by which genuineness of another man’s response to literature could be proved’.28

*Moby-Dick*, in its autodidactic enthusiasm for literature, contained its own means of circulation – and especially, perhaps, among a class of reader who appreciated in that enthusiasm a non-institutionalized means of transmission and address. *Moby-Dick*, this is to suggest, continued to circulate, in the face of such orthodox disapproval as Duyckinck articulated, in part because of the enthusiasm with which it circulated other people’s books; because it understood the ceaseless passing on of words and values that is an essential function and feature of literature. What Melville teaches is that literary work is never complete, both in the sense that one work always leads back to, and on from, another, but also in that the work itself has its meaning in being passed on. Like *Walden*, like *The Cantos*, like O’Hara’s *Collected Poems*, Melville’s novel is an engine for the ceaseless circulation of culture; a circulation out of which, historically, communities of readers have formed. To read *Moby-Dick*, in other words, is to read an argument for the enthusiastic passing on of books, for the ceaseless and unlimited circulation that bureaucracy, with its whole lexicon of foreclosing, with its outcomes as endpoints, operates to prevent.
Thoreau went to Walden Pond because, among other things, he was ‘determined to know beans’. Asked by Captain Peleg why he wants to go ‘awhaling’, Ishmael can offer no better reason than that, ‘I want to see what whaling is’. *Walden* and *Moby-Dick* have a good deal structurally in common. In each book a narrative presence – Thoreau’s ‘I’, Melville’s ‘Ishmael’ – steps away from a circumstance with which they are familiar into a world they do not yet know. Each book, also, goes to unusual, sometimes self-parodying lengths, to document the experience in question, both writers being much more insistent on the value of fact, more dependent in their presentation of things on hard information, than had been any of their immediate predecessors, and perhaps more than any literary authors before them. Among the things that *Moby-Dick* and *Walden* have in common, in other words, is a dissatisfaction with how Romantic and before that Enlightenment writers had claimed to know the world.

This said, the dominant ways of knowing in *Moby-Dick* are, of course, Ahab’s, the Pequod’s quest and the novel’s plot being equally determined by the iron rails of Ahab’s fixed purpose. Ahab’s knowledge is complex. He knows what he claims to know about the whale, and the malign principle it reveals in nature, through a process of reflection. Left to dwell on the incident which has altered his life, and unable to accept its accidental quality, Ahab has attributed meaning to a meaningless event, has come to ‘identify’ with the whale ‘all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations’, ‘all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them’. The process is not unreasonable, in that the process whereby meaning is attributed is not, internally, against reason. It is, however, a reasoning process unchecked, and ultimately in Ahab’s case uncheckable, by externals. Depending on one’s chosen lexicon, therefore, Ahab’s conviction is the result of an intellectual process giving priority to inwardness, insight or the runaway capacity of pure reason; each or all of these, in his case, coupled with an indomitable will. Matthiessen was right to identify in Ahab an argument with Emersonianism, Emerson’s Transcendentalism being quite precisely a Romanticization of the Kantian *a priori*. Which is not to say, however, at least as the novel shows it, that Ahab is without knowledge. He is knowledgeable from a narrative point of view in that the whale does, eventually, demonstrate something not unlike a malign intelligence. Less spectacularly, Ahab knows enough to locate the whale in the first place. This knowledge, the knowledge that drives the plot rather than the quest, is practical and technological, Ahab several times showing himself master of the ship’s instruments, and willing always, where necessary, to make use of accumulated wisdom. Thus, as ‘The Chart’ has it,
to any one not fully acquainted with the ways of the leviathans, it might seem an absurdly hopeless task thus to seek out one solitary creature in the unhooped oceans of this planet. But not so did it seem to Ahab, who knew the sets of all tides and currents; and thereby calculating the driftings of the sperm whale’s food; and, also, calling to mind the regular, ascertained seasons for hunting him in particular latitudes: could arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching to certainties, concerning the timeliest day to be upon this or that ground in search of prey. [MD, 298]

It is not a digression to observe that in *Moby-Dick* — especially, perhaps, as viewed through the idea of enthusiasm – one finds exemplified the modes of knowledge that currently govern American’s relations with the external world. Thus if, plainly – in a book which has as part of its intellectual apparatus ‘the history of fanatics’ – one has presented the mode of intuition and conviction that can drive a religious enthusiast to fly a plane into the side of a building, one has the counterknowledge presented also, the reasoned but unreasonable quest against an axis of evil facilitated by a technology capable of mapping the globe. There is a play of the sublime and the empirical here. You might no more think it possible to track down a given whale in all the waters of the globe than to track down a given, elusive Islamic fundamentalist – though actually, as it turns out, sometimes it is. But the point is, epistemologically speaking, that what Ahab knows is how to hunt down and catch whales. He doesn’t, in the novel at least — perhaps he did before – know whales the way Thoreau knows beans.

Ishmael does; or at least, he means to. Like Thoreau, Ishmael is an empiricist of sorts, frequently reminding us that the only way to know the whale is to gain direct acquaintance with it. His authority rests, therefore, not only in the fact that he has swum through libraries, but also, as he immediately qualifies, in the fact that he has ‘had to do with whales with these visible hands’ [MD, 230]. Similarly, he advises, if the reader wants to derive even a tolerable idea of what the whale looks like, the only way is to go ‘a whaling yourself’. As with the determination to know beans, this can sound like an epistemologically simple-minded injunction, but as with Thoreau, what Melville offers is a thoughtful, subtle, rigorous and, I would suggest, enthusiastic epistemology. The enthusiasm rests in part in the image of the text Ishmael offers, and the relation he has to it as a person seeking knowledge. His cetology is ‘a draught of a draught’, his ‘cetological System standing thus unfinished’, which is just, he considers, as it should be, grand erections ever leaving ‘their copestone to posterity’ [MD, 241]. ‘God keep me,’ Ishmael exhorts himself [and his God], from completing everything. Ishmael, in other words, is neither, religiously speaking, a literalist nor a perfectionist, believing in neither the completion of his system or himself. And his cetology,
as a consequence, is in just the state an authoritative text ought to be, offering
guidance to the experimental spirit – Ishmael is nothing if not an
experimental spirit – but leaving room for and requiring further light.

What the cetology, the book within the book, requires by way of
supplement, and which Ishmael’s narrative sets out to supply, is immediate
acquaintance. What the novel is moving towards, in other words, from
Ishmael’s point of view, is an ideal of acquaintance, a state in which things are
present. He achieves this, or wants to be thought of as achieving this, in two
ways or moods. Thus at times the novel achieves immediacy, or, at least, the
impression of immediacy, in the midst of action – Melville, as Lawrence
pointed out, being a great poet of action. Of all the pictures of whales he
considers, monstrous and less erroneous, it is the action paintings Ishmael
most admires, the paintings where the artist is most inside the event. This
aspect of Moby-Dick, the sense of immediacy that comes through action,
through the various deliriums of trashing and flailing, is among its most
significant contributions to the American sensibility, which in the figure of,
say, Jackson Pollock – as the chapter, here, on Frank O’Hara will observe –
came greatly to prize the intimacy of the event. Serenity equally, however, is
held by the novel to be conducive to immediacy, periods of imagined calm
permitting in the writing a state of self seemingly conducive to the
presentation of things. Thus, late in the novel, Ishmael restates his ambition
to ‘see what whaling is’, only this time in the manner of the book’s mature
poetry. Speaking of the lamp, Ishmael notes, it is the whaleman’s great
privilege that.

He burns, too, the purest of oil, in its unmanufactured, and therefore
unvitiated state; a fluid unknown to solar, lunar, or astral contrivances
ashore. It is sweet as early grass butter in April. He goes and hunts for his
oil, so as to be sure of its freshness and genuineness, even as the traveller
on the prairie hunts up his own supper of gain. (MD, 536)

There is a phase towards the end of Moby-Dick when the writing
achieves something like ‘freshness and genuineness’. The conclusion of the
book, dominated by Ahab’s sensibility, is a violent fit, the last thirty pages or
so being consumed by the fatal chase. For a period prior to that, however –
from, say, Chapter 93, ‘The Castaway’, to Chapter 114, ‘The Gilder’, as the
Pequod drifts towards the South Pacific — the prevailing mood is one of
supernatural calm. That something approaching an ideal state has been
reached at this point is apparent from the higher lyrical charge in the writing.
The burlesque is all but left behind, as are the more intrusive elements of
scholarship, the novel approaching the immediate acquaintance with the
world that has been one of its ambitions all through. And that there is a
determination to know things immediately during this phase in the novel is apparent from chapters 103, ‘The Measurement of the Whale’s Skeleton’, and 104, ‘The Fossil Whale’, which respectively address the whale in terms, as Kant had it, of the ‘two pure forms of sensible intuition, serving as principles of a priori knowledge, namely, space and time’. But Ishmael has travelled a long way by this point, well beyond his ken, and so there is little or nothing, by now, he is confident of knowing a priori. So in both chapters the governing category is seen to collapse; the form giving shape to sensible intuition is held to be unsatisfactory. ‘How vain and foolish, then, thought I’, says Ishmael, contemplating the spatial representation of the whale,

for timid, untravelled man to try to comprehend aright this wondrous whale, by merely poring over his dead attenuated skeleton, stretched in this peaceful wood. No. Only in the heart of quickest perils; only when within the eddying of his angry flukes; only on the profound and unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out. (MD, 565)

Likewise, as Ishmael contemplates the chronology of the whale, the time it has spent on earth, so that form of intuition also is understood as ceasing to mediate:

I am, by a flood, borne back to that wondrous period, ere time itself can be said to have begun; for time began with man. Here Saturn’s grey chaos rolls over me, and I obtain dim, shuddering glimpses into those Polar eternities ... I look round to shake hands with Shem. (MD, 569)

For a while, in other words, perhaps writing in the grass-growing mood, Melville can think of himself as stepping away from the apparatus of understanding and into a direct acquaintance with the world, with everything present, immediate and now. The mood in question is the supernatural serenity that Thoreau understood as enthusiasm. It was towards the present tense of this mood that Ezra Pound directed Modern poetry.

Notes

3 Ibid., p. 528.
5 References to the novel are to the 1972 Penguin edition, edited by Harold Beaver, whose commentary threatens to equal the novel itself in bulk, but
which is, even so, an enthusiast’s text. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Harold Beaver, Hamondsworth, Penguin, 1972, pp. 481-2, hereafter referred to in the text as MD.


10 Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p. 58.


14 Ibid., p. 521.


17 Ibid., p. 50.


19 Ibid., p. 30.


21 Ibid., pp. 113, 114.


23 Ibid.

24 Melville, ‘Hawthorne and his Mosses’, p. 517.


26 Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, p. 36.
